

BENDING OR BREAKING: AN EDUCATOR'S SELF STUDY ON RESILIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

This self-study explores how one educator understands what it means to be resilient in times of personal and professional while serving in the field of education. I achieved this by examining my own personal experiences through reflective self-study research in conjunction with conversations with co-researchers. We discussed the challenging experiences we have endured while I was navigating daily teaching stressors. Two research questions were addressed in this study: In what ways do I understand support for educators in times of stress in our personal and professional lives as I reflect with co-researchers? Secondly, how does reflecting with co-researchers on our experiences expand my understanding of being resilient? Implications highlight the importance of external supports including trusting relationships with colleagues, a positive culture, and maintaining a healthy work/life balance. Exhibiting a demeanor of resiliency includes the importance of spirituality, a positive mindset, and accepting what is. Overall, this research may be of help to those who are struggling with life's storms while pursuing a career in the field of education, those that are helping colleagues navigate storms, or school leaders who are working to cultivate resiliency for their staff members.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
Introduction.....	1
Problem of Practice.....	4
Purpose Statement	4
Research Questions.....	5
Research Design	5
Significance of the Study.....	6
Chapter II: Review of the Literature.....	8
Introduction.....	8
Stress in the Field of Education.....	8
The Nature of Teacher Stress	8
Contemporary Challenges in Education	9
Impact of Covid 19 and Evolving Student Needs	12
Burnout and Attrition.....	13
Resiliency in the Face of Adversity.....	14
Defining Educational Resilience	14

Components of Teacher Resilience	14
Developing Resilience in Educational Settings	15
Support for Educators	16
Institutional and Administrative Support.....	16
Mental Health and Wellness Resources	17
Collegial Relationships and Mentoring	18
Faith and Spirituality	20
Figure 1	25
Conceptual Framework.....	25
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY.....	29
Overview.....	29
Research Purpose.....	29
Research Questions.....	29
Background Statement.....	30
Viewpoint of the Study.....	36
Research Site	38
Co-Researchers Selection	38
Table 1	39
Co-Researcher Context.....	39
Data Collection	39
Figure 2.....	40

Marco Polo App.....	40
Table 2	42
Discussion Prompts	42
Table 3	44
End of Week Journal Summary Template.....	44
Overview of the Data Collection and Analysis Process	44
Table 4	46
Categories with Corresponding Codes	46
Explanation of Coding Process.....	46
Trustworthiness.....	47
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS	50
Research Question 1: Supports in Times of Personal and Professional Stress.....	52
Figure 3	52
Organization of Initial & New Understanding of Support	52
Relationships.....	52
Culture	56
Work/Life Balance.....	58
Research Question 2: Educator Demeanor of Resilience	60
Figure 4.....	60
Organization of Initial and New Understanding of Proactive Resiliency	60
Spirituality	61
Mindset	63

Acceptance.....	65
Chapter Summary	68
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	69
Introduction.....	69
What I learned: My Journey of Self-Study Discovery	71
Figure 5.....	73
Cycle of Drawing Support.....	73
Figure 6.....	74
New Conceptual Framework.....	74
What this Means: Implications	74
For School Leaders and Districts.....	75
For Those Supporting Colleagues in Times of Stress	76
For Educators in their own storm	77
Strengths and Limitations.....	78
A Quick Note to Educators in the Storm.....	79
REFERENCES	80
Appendix A.....	92
Co-Researcher Introductory Document.....	92

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.....	25
Figure 2. Marco Polo App.....	40
Figure 3. Organization of Initial & New Understanding of Support.....	49
Figure 4. Organization of Initial & New Understanding of Resiliency	57
Figure 5. Cycle of Drawing Support.....	68
Figure 6. New Conceptual Framework.....	69

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Co-Researcher Context	39
Table 2. Discussion Prompts.....	42
Table 3. End of Week Journal Summary Template.....	44
Table 4. Categories with Corresponding Data.....	46

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Keeping quality teachers in the classroom is imperative for student learning and growth, but unfortunately retaining teachers is getting harder and harder to do. “The percentage of teachers leaving the profession has increased substantially over the past two decades” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 3). We know that domestically around 16% of teachers make a change at the end of each school year, whether it be leaving the profession entirely, or going to work at a different school (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In total, around 500,000 educators leave their profession every year, this meaning 20% of the population of teachers exit the classroom (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). The teaching workforce is dwindling, and teachers have many reasons for leaving their vocations.

As more and more teachers are leaving the classroom, understanding teacher turnover is of great importance. Teachers report that the reasons they leave the profession include dissatisfaction with testing, accountability pressures, lack of support from administration, dissatisfaction with their career, and dissatisfaction with their working conditions (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). When teachers are not at their best, the classroom culture deteriorates (Turner & Garvis, 2023). If teachers are struggling to meet the numerous demands of their job, they are more likely to resort to a reactive approach to discipline further perpetuating the negative cycle of disfunction in the classroom setting (Osher et al., 2007). Teachers leave the classroom for many reasons, and those that are unhappy, but still choose to stay, may be negatively impacting students.

Being a teacher is one of the most stressful jobs in the world (Johnson et al. 2005; Travers & Cooper, 1993). According to a literature review on this topic conducted by Turner and Garvis (2023), the most frequent stressors found in the studies they reviewed included the

increasing demands of the workload, ever changing political mandates, finding a healthy work-life balance, and accountability structures. Teaching can be daunting, and the list of reasons seems to grow each school year. Faced with this abundance of stressors, it is no wonder that many educators find it hard to continue to thrive in the classroom.

In addition to a failure to thrive, the impacts of these stressful aspects of teaching can be detrimental to an educator's overall well-being, due to burnout. In fact, Merriam Webster illustrates burnout by using it within context in this sentence: "Teaching can be very stressful, and many teachers eventually suffer burnout" (n.d.). When teachers are the example for the term *burnout*, we know that the risks are real. Due to the emotional strain of the job, and the continued mental stress, the level of quality instruction can suffer and dealing with negative classrooms behaviors can be more difficult than usual (Chang, 2009). The professional stress teachers endure has detrimental impacts managing student behaviors, teaching, student learning, and their wellbeing in general.

It is widely acknowledged that teaching is a tough profession. While many parents of students might show their appreciation through small teacher gifts, social media posts, and end-of-year thank you cards, the public at large doesn't seem to show the profession much respect as a whole. According to *Education Week's* 2024 State of Education Report, 7 out of 10 teachers believe that the public views them in a negative light (Harwin, 2024). It is an emotional job that challenges the best of the best each and every day, and feeling unappreciated does not help matters.

Teachers face numerous challenges, in addition to not feeling valued. Ortan et al. (2021) posits that teachers' efficacy remains one of the number one drivers of job satisfaction. However, even if you feel like you are good at what you do as an educator, having an overabundance of tasks to care for can be detrimental to the teacher's well-being. This is in addition to managing classroom behaviors, staying on top of the latest teaching methods, and dealing with numerous

administrative tasks (Ferguson et al., 2017; Turner & Garvis, 2023). Understanding what helps one make it through it all is key to thriving as a teacher.

When it all becomes too much burnout ensues. Juarez and Becton (2024) define burnout as “a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by long-term involvement in situations that can be deemed emotional demanding” (p. 170). There is a growing body of research that leads us to believe that contextual factors can play a larger role in building resilience for educators as opposed to personal or individual factors. These strategies might include more support for students from counselors and administrators, a positive school climate where collaboration is the norm, and a trusting community where relationships are valued (Kangas-Dick & O’Shaughnessy, 2020). These researchers also add that focusing on individual factors such as therapy, mindfulness, exercise, and social interactions can be somewhat helpful. Implementing these strategies may not address the entire problem when it comes to thriving as a teacher. Understanding all the factors that lead to building resilience and creating environments in which teachers want to stay is imperative for schools to be successful. [REDACTED]

Clearly teaching is a stressful vocation in and of itself, but what happens when teachers are experiencing stress in the workplace as well as in their personal lives? The United States Department of Health and Human Services (n.d.) concludes that most people have experienced some amount of stress in their lives. However, when an event occurs that causes a lot of stress, it is classified as a traumatic event (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003). While many might never experience so much stress that the event is classified as a traumatic event, there are teachers in the profession that have endured a life altering experience.

Resilience in the face of ongoing stress, and perhaps traumatic events, can cultivate strength, thus promoting endurance for teachers in the profession (Beltman, 2020). Given the current retention problems in education, and the growing stressors teachers are facing, it is crucial that we understand resilience and what it means to exhibit resilience as educators.

We can build resilience. We can do this by exploring what it looks like to be resilient. Resilience for educators is defined as a dynamic process in which teachers use multiple resources to achieve overall well-being, in conjunction with professional productivity amid adverse situations (Turner & Garvis, 2023). This often-used word has major impacts for educators in this critical time for the field of education.

Problem of Practice

The complexity of modern teaching emerges from the combination of the daily stressors of teaching in our local districts with the political issues in our country today. These professional challenges may occur simultaneously to traumatic personal events that can come through our lives like raging storms. This study focuses on how we can learn from our experiences and reflect on how we might cultivate resilience. In addition, understanding how teachers successfully maintain effectiveness during periods of overlapping personal and professional crisis is a pressing need.

The challenge of thriving in a stressful profession is especially difficult for educators who face significant personal challenges while maintaining their professional responsibilities. While there is literature to support the numerous challenges that are real and ever present for educators (Agnihortri, 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Chang, 2009) we lack literature that explores how teachers juggle the stress of work and the stress of life.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this self-study was to examine how educators experience resilience while navigating stressful events, or events that could perhaps be classified as traumatic events, in their personal and professional lives. I identified what supports helped maintain teacher resiliency through times of personal trauma. I achieved this by examining my own personal experiences

through reflective self-study research in conjunction with conversations with co-researchers. We discussed the challenging experiences of my past while I was navigating daily teaching stressors.

Research Questions

Given the purpose, there are two research questions that were explored throughout this study. In what ways do I understand support for educators in times of stress in our personal and professional lives as I reflect with co-researchers? Secondly, how does reflecting with co-researchers on our experiences expand my understanding of being resilient?

Research Design

To examine these questions, I used self-study to better understand and reflect on the traumatic events that took place during a tumultuous time in my personal life as an educator. Self-study is defined as “a stance that a researcher takes towards understanding or explaining the physical or social world” (Laboskey, 2004, p. 1173). Co-researchers who were intimately involved in my life events, and experienced similar personal and professional stress, participated in this reflective self-study.

For the purpose of this study, a co-researcher was defined as a collaborative partner that engaged in discussion and participated in reflection on the structured research discussion points (Samaras, 2011). Through these conversations, researchers explored what it means to be resilient by examining how we were able to continue to move forward professionally despite our challenges. We explored how we bounced back from adversity, when applicable, as well as what happened when enough is enough, and we had to make the tough decision to shift professionally.

To gather data, I recorded open-ended conversations with each co-participant to generate new ideas and reflections which were subsequently analyzed. I journaled (Charmaz, 2006) throughout the collaborative conversations to summarize the reflections and consider initial analysis of the data (Samaras, 2011).

Significance of the Study

Teachers face numerous challenges. While facing challenges, resilient teachers thrive more than others. Pretsch et al. (2012) share that in order for teachers to maintain a positive state of well-being, they must be resilient. It is the argument of this study that resiliency is a disposition that allows teachers to better deal with the challenges inherent in the teaching profession, including the conflicts that arise between other individuals they work with whether it be other professionals or community members. In addition, I explored the intersection of professional challenges with personal stresses that made resiliency even more important to understand. Resiliency can support teachers as they work to lower their stress levels at work (Ortan et al., 2021).

From the literature we know that “when stressful life events outweigh the protective factors, even the most resilient can develop problems” (Werner, 1990, p. 11). Thus, stress and resiliency are closely related. Furthermore, Gu and Day (2006) examined the management of the interaction between teachers’ capacity to balance sense of efficacy, both their personal and professional identities, and their various life stages. When they examined resiliency for teachers, they concluded that resiliency is necessary for teachers’ effectiveness. Therefore, the exploration of resiliency in this study was not only important for the lives of teachers but also played a role in the effectiveness of teachers for the students they serve.

Li and Chen (2024) lay out four perspectives regarding resiliency found in literature; these positions have been developed over time. The first is that resiliency is interpersonal and comes from within; it is the ability to bounce back from adversity (Masten et al., 1990; Sammons et al., 2007). The second perspective extends beyond the interpersonal and encompasses a process-oriented lens where resilience is shaped by individuals as well as their contexts and their interactions with others (Castro et al., 2010; Masten, 2001). The third is the context-oriented

perspective that includes not just the interpersonal, but the external circumstances as well (Gu & Day, 2007; Johnson et al., 2014). The fourth is the most recent and integrates not just the interpersonal, but the context and the dynamic between both (Beltman, 2020). This all-encompassing perspective is what must be considered when researching teacher resiliency and the best ways to support one another in schools. This interconnected perspective is the focus of this study because authentic, first-hand accounts offered insight in regard to the various perspectives.

This unique study added to the literature on teacher resiliency because the results of this study uncovered stories of resiliency from veteran educators working in today's educational environment. Through the one-on-one interactions educators provided insight into what it means to be resilient, and how leaders might support resiliency in their staff. In particular, the journals offered a glimpse into the life of a teacher that has explored her life experiences in relationship to her career as a teacher and instructional coach. This study provided implications for educators navigating personal and professional stress, school leadership practices, professional development approaches, school and district support systems and policies.

Summary

In this chapter I shared an introduction to the study which included the growing challenges teachers are facing in today's current climate, impacts of teacher stress and educators' attrition, and the importance of understanding resilience for educators. In addition, I stated the purpose of the study, introduced the research design, and explained the significance of the study.

In the next chapter I will share a review of literature that includes content related to stress in the field of education, resiliency found in teachers, support for educators, and how faith in God can play a pivotal role in teacher's perspectives as it pertains to being resilient in the workplace.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Introduction

This literature review will focus on topics relating to what it means to exhibit resiliency, cultivate overall well-being for educators, and the role supports might play in the workplace for teachers. In addition, other multifaceted influences that negatively affect teachers in today's educational landscape are discussed through the review of literature relevant to this study. Specifically, I will include three main sections: (1) Stress in the field of education; (2) Resiliency in the face of adversity; (3) Finding support during stressful seasons in life. The conceptual framework of the study will conclude the literature review creating a vivid visual that connects these topics.

Stress in the Field of Education

The Nature of Teacher Stress

Kyriacou (2001) defines teacher stress as “the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher” (p. 28). Ongoing stress can culminate in occupational burnout with feelings of emotional exhaustion and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment at play (Turner & Garvis, 2023). Maslach & Leiter (2016) defines burnout as “a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job. It is defined by the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional inefficacy” (p. 1). Everyday problems can only compound the issue, making these overwhelming feelings even worse (Kant & Shanker, 2021). Continual stress can lead to burnout, thus making it difficult for teachers to thrive in the classroom. There are many reasons to take a closer look at teacher burnout.

Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996) provide three major reasons to examine teacher burnout more closely. They conclude that teaching is a visible profession, teachers are expected

to teach more than academics, and lastly, meeting the various needs of students requires a lot of human and financial capital (Maslach et al., 1996). These same researchers created a tool to measure burnout specifically for educators. This tool measures dimensions of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment among teachers. Burnout is commonplace for teachers (Kant & Shanker, 2021). Having a clear way to measure, and then in turn discuss this topic, is valuable.

When one combines the concerns surrounding political pressures and accountability, with workplace demands and burnout, along with the negative retention numbers we see in the field of education, it is imperative that we discover ways to cultivate resiliency for educators. There are systemic factors and policy pressures that greatly contribute to the tumultuous dynamic teachers are dealing with. “Most discouraging is the reality that education reform has led to negative physical and emotional consequences for students and educators” (Croft et al., 2015, p. 84). Stress and burnout, coupled with modern day issues facing the field of education, create a breeding ground for a negative working environment for teachers. These factors are reminiscent of storms that seem to come and go at varying strengths throughout the career of an educator.

Contemporary Challenges in Education

There are numerous challenges for educators. External factors that are much larger than those found in schools and school districts are negatively influencing the stress level of educators. The pressure of federal, state, and local politics and policies have led to stress in the field of education to be a mainstream topic of discussion (Aghnihortri, 2013; Cooper, Dewe, & O’Driscoll, 2001; Hunter & Solomon, 2002; Kitchel et al., 2012). Teachers may find themselves increasingly affected by the ever-changing and pressurized political climate, which includes policy and funding. Changes in government policies, such as standardized testing and accountability, create high stakes climates that compound teacher stress and possible burnout

(Strauss, 2002). The constant political noise surrounding education, topics such as high stakes testing, social justice issues, and political agendas add a whole layer of anxiety and worry for teachers (Brunsting et al., 2014; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Kyriacou, 1998). This dynamic is problematic for those that wish to work in a peaceful vocation.

In addition to wide reaching federal government policies, at the state level we see high stakes testing and accountability demands. These demands can wreak havoc on the well-being of teacher morale. Those in tested subjects know this all too well. High stakes tests are any tests that are connected to graduation rates, teacher evaluation, or administrator evaluation (Menken, 2017). Farvis and Hay (2020) collected data from educational consultants in New York regarding their take on high stakes testing; their findings are discouraging. Because these tests are the most important indicator of student learning, there is a focus on test preparation that drives instruction towards the test as opposed to “substantial analytical or communication skills” (p. 1068). A negative dynamic ensues for both teachers and administrators. It seems as if the pressure from the state level to perform on these tests does more harm than good. They found that there was a decrease in collaboration, creating competition amongst teachers. In addition, test prep type teaching and materials have taken away from conventional instruction that we know is more effective (Farvis & Hay, 2020, p. 1069). These seemingly simple end-of-year tests have wide reaching ramifications for students and staff. Administrators are also greatly affected by these yearly tests.

The stress that teachers feel coming from school administrators in the name of accountability can have unintended consequences. While they are under insurmountable pressure for teachers and students to perform, they can then cause stress and conflict for underperforming teachers that they would like to see improve. Farvis and Harvey state, “Management practices associated with high stakes testing also appeared to be associated with less collegial and productive relationships between teachers and administrators” (2020, p. 1064). Administrators are

climbing an uphill battle as they enforce mandates they may or may not agree with. It is for school leaders to juggle a positive culture with the demands of high stakes testing for teachers and students.

Croft et al. (2015) uses a metaphor throughout their article as they compare a perfect storm to the convergence of neoliberalism influenced educational reform, high stakes testing, and teacher evaluation. Neoliberalism refers to a worldview “grounded in the principles of free markets, limited governmental intervention, meritocracy, and personal responsibility” (Santone, 2024, p. 2). This political philosophy creates a standardized approach to student learning, not taking into account the human aspect of learning and teaching. While the United States government has attempted to salvage multiple failed attempts at raising the bar for student performance across the country with iteration after iteration of federal initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, we continue down the same road that leads to nowhere repeatedly. “Yet historically, we have seen that no matter how idyllic current education reform initiatives appear to be on paper, they are most likely to leave educators and students adrift, feeling consumed overwhelmed, and subjected to political finger pointing, disappointment, disengagement, and shame” (Croft et al., 2015, p. 86). On the surface, a standardized system that holds teachers accountable does not seem like a bad idea; however, there are numerous factors that make this system extremely stressful for all involved.

It is problematic for teachers to be juggling significant political issues and the stress of high stakes testing, while also trying to focus on what called them into the profession to begin with. For most teachers, their draw to the field of education is to make a meaningful impact on young people. Teachers desire to make a positive difference in students’ lives. This is getting harder and harder as student needs are increasing rapidly. Mental health issues, learning disabilities, and socio-economic challenges all contribute to their complex experiences throughout students’ educational careers (Hirshberg et al., 2022). The increasing demand for

individualized support for students including those with disabilities has exacerbated the stress level of teachers (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Christian-Brandt et al., 2014), who many times feel like they do not have the tools or resources to meet the needs of these students.

Impact of Covid 19 and Evolving Student Needs

Simply put, the COVID 19 pandemic exacerbated what was already a really tough situation. Hirshberg, Davidson, and Goldberg (2022) conducted a study during this unprecedented time in history. Through surveying over 600 support staff and certified staff in Wisconsin, they concluded that seventy-eight percent of people working in schools reported meaningful anxiety, and fifty-four percent were found to have depressive symptoms (Hirshberg et al., 2022). Those that fell into a lower income level were found to be at an even higher level of stress; this being mostly support staff. In addition, females were found to be at a higher level of stress based on the results. When we compound the daily stressors of the job with this worldwide health emergency, we have a stressful climate in which teachers are working. This would be classified as a major storm in many educators' lives. Educators that were taking care of someone who became extremely sick with Covid, or became sick themselves, found themselves in a traumatic situation. Juggling work and illness during such a critical time in history compounded the stress role of a teacher exponentially.

The pandemic fallout was, and still is, far reaching. Complicated mental health issues have become a topic of conversation for America's young people. Students' mental health struggles, both emotional and psychological, can erupt in behavior episodes that are prevalent in the classroom setting (Hirshberg et al., 2022; Juarez & Becton 2024; Kush et al., 2022) Helping students be successful in the classroom is a daunting task for teachers when those students are struggling with their mental health and resources are lacking.

Baker et al. (2021) identify numerous sources of stress for educators during this time in history that include high workloads, lack of support from administration, and challenging behaviors students exhibit. Through their study of 454 charter school districts in New Orleans charter schools during the first four months of the pandemic, teachers that believed that they had more stressors reported that their mental health was in decline, and it was harder for them to teach and cope with their stress (Baker et al., 2021).

The teachers in this study responded in text segments to the question, “What has been the most difficult aspect of your job during the pandemic?” (Baker, et al., 2021, p. 498). These segments were then coded into nine themes. The *Lack of connections* theme was present in 43% of the responses, with *Online Teaching Challenges* theme coming next with 31% of the responses. *Lack of Student and Family Resources* theme, along with *Negative Impact on Family/Self* theme were both evident in 18% of teacher responses. The stress that culminated due to the pandemic was palpable.

Researchers indicate that there is a rise in depression and anxiety overall for teachers. A study published by the RAND company was conducted in association with the American Federation of Teachers (2021) found that almost 60% of teachers reported feeling stressed from demands at work, with many of those participants attributing the demands of the COVID-19 epidemic, and the fallout from that worldwide pandemic. Furthermore, Kush et al. (2022) concluded that educators reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression than those that were serving in healthcare or in office settings. What do teachers do when they are at the end of their rope?

Burnout and Attrition

When teachers are bombarded with continual pressure and change, they are more likely to consider other vocational alternatives (Juarez & Becton, 2024). If they choose to stay in the

field of education, it is imperative that we cultivate cultures where teachers can thrive by decreasing factors that cause copious amounts of stress. Lastly, helping teachers build resiliency and empowering them to teach in positive climates is of the utmost importance.

As explained in this section, the pressures facing educators today create complex challenges that can feel overwhelming. From the demands of classroom management to pressures created by growing accountability measures, from personal struggles to professional expectations, teachers navigate a difficult landscape. Like trees facing strong winds, educators must develop the strength to bend without breaking under these forces. These stressors point to the importance of understanding how educators not only survive, but thrive, despite these pressures. One construct from the literature that illuminates how educators withstand pressures from both personal and professional storms is resilience, which provides the foundation for examining the various support systems that, like the roots of a tree, can help to sustain educators through difficult times.

Resiliency in the Face of Adversity

Defining Educational Resilience

Our nation's government defines resiliency as "The ability to successfully adapt to stressors, maintaining psychological wellbeing in the face of adversity. It's the ability to bounce back from difficult experiences" (U.S. Department of State, 2017). The significance of exploring educator resiliency, especially in challenging times, is important for two main reasons. Teacher burnout may negatively impact teacher retention, and teacher well-being impacts daily interactions with students and outcomes relating to the teacher-student dynamic (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Components of Teacher Resilience

Resilient teachers can regulate their emotions and adapt to change. Elena Aguilar works with teachers as an instructional coach and has written numerous books on coaching. In her work,

Coaching for Equity, she articulates the relationship between resiliency and emotional intelligence. Not only do resilient teachers exhibit a high level of emotional intelligence, but instructional coaches must also show a high level of emotional intelligence to be of support to educators that they are working side by side with to improve their instructional practice (2020). Not only must teachers be aware of emotions and tools to deal with these emotions, but mentors and school leaders must possess this knowledge as well.

Aguilar stresses the need to hire new teachers that are resilient. By asking questions about what prospective teachers have struggled with in the past, and how they dealt with those struggles, hiring committees can get a glimpse of their level of resilience. Candidates that can respond with a coping strategy that reflects their ability to deal with adversity in the moment are more likely to exhibit a higher level of resiliency (Aguilar, 2018b). Discussing resiliency in schools is paramount to understanding and identifying this crucial character trait that can be learned and used.

Developing Resilience in Educational Settings

Howard and Johnson asked teachers that were thriving in spite of stressful school placements to share their insights (2004). By questioning what was going right, as opposed to what was going wrong, they identified specific takeaways that are noteworthy for this literature review. “This study suggests that protective factors that can make a real difference in teachers’ lives are often relatively simple to organize, easy to support, and/or are learnable” (Howard & Johnson, 2004, p. 415). They go on to offer the following beneficial implications: teaching teachers to de-personalize stressful incidents, hire for challenging climates by ensuring that applicants desire to work in said challenging atmosphere, build strong school-wide behavior management systems, require that leadership make support of staff in both their professional and personal lives a priority, encourage strong peer support, celebrate staff achievements, value the

importance of classroom management, and train teachers to utilize quality direct instruction strategies and delivery in teacher prep programs and professional development (Howard & Johnson, 2004). These takeaways were all deemed valuable to teachers that exhibited high levels of resiliency.

Support for Educators

A healthy level of stress is unavoidable; however, toxic stress, the type of stress that is ongoing and outpaces our ability to cope can be detrimental to job performance and lead to burnout (Aguilar, 2018, Onward). It is imperative that coping strategies and support systems are offered to educators. Institutional and administrative support in the form of Training, professional development, programs, and universal wellness methods can all be beneficial to the well-being of teachers. In addition, faith can play a key role in the well-being of many teachers.

Institutional and Administrative Support

Training for preservice teachers that contains information on the emotional demands of the job, how to deal with stress, and how to gain access to the resources they need to better handle that stress is recommended (Huang et al., 2019). While offering help sessions in the form of professional development might be the first thing that comes to mind for teachers currently serving in the field, there are numerous strategies that are reviewed in the literature as we dive into ways to support teachers who are engulfed in stressful challenges.

We know that teacher wellbeing is of the utmost importance, especially for new teachers. If school systems expand the capacity of support staff and coaches, they can then support teachers better in their ability to build resilience (Aguilar, 2018b). Building resilience is usually not learned from isolated professional development sessions. However, there are concrete strategies that schools can employ to increase resilience for educators in their buildings. First, matching new teachers with mentors that hold a high level of emotional resilience can better support those

teachers growing in this area. Secondly, offering teacher coaching that includes how to deal with emotions and navigate those emotions is beneficial. Next, administrators should model healthy boundaries while also accepting that emotions can be appreciated and how best to use them in the workplace. Supportive administrators are key relationships that greatly affect the well-being of teachers under their leadership. While working to support teachers both personally and professionally, they can nurture the staff members in their building cultivating their resilience.

It should be noted that the demographics of the teaching workforce is changing. These trends are important to consider when we consider stress in the field of education. Females report a higher level of stress associated with their work as educators (Hirshberg et al., 2022), and veteran educators are lacking to help young teachers in need of experienced mentors. (Ingersoll, et al., 2018). By examining longitudinal data, researchers have learned that between 40-50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within 5 years. (Ingersoll et al., 2018). The necessity of mentors is paramount in supporting individuals that are new to the profession.

School leadership can greatly influence teacher resiliency (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). A positive school environment can reduce stress dramatically. Fostering supportive school climates that contain open communication and a collaborative spirit among staff and administration can decrease feelings of isolation, depression, and burnout (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Ortan et al., 2021).

Mental Health and Wellness Resources

In addition to a positive school culture, resources from within the community can also be of help to teachers who are struggling with their day-to-day well-being. Online groups where educators share their experiences can be beneficial and provide coping strategies. These groups can point those in need of mental health resources to the right place; such as online workshops,

webinars, and provide applicable stress reduction strategies that educators can utilize (Juarez & Becton, 2024).

Those working in schools that are experiencing stress might seek professional mental health support through counseling. School-based mental health support services may give educators counseling options that they might benefit from (Chan et al., 2021). Having access to Employee Assistance Programs, or EAPs, can also offer support that is confidential for counseling support in both personal and professional categories and overall mental well-being; many times, these cost-effective programs are overlooked by systems looking to better support teachers (Superville, 2022).

In addition to counseling, mindfulness practices can increase resilience (Aguilar, 2018b). “Mindfulness is the nonjudgemental cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness” (Aguilar, 2018b, p. 29). Middle school teacher participants in mindfulness training exhibited a more positive classroom dynamic. In addition to dealing with less negative student behaviors, these teachers also experienced a lower level of stress when compared to the control group. Overall teachers experienced less stress and a higher level of empathy and job satisfaction (Roeser et al., 2022).

Through this type of reflective work, we might better understand who we are. “Listening to the inner teacher also offers an answer to one of the most basic questions teachers face: how can I develop the authority to teach, the capacity to stand my ground in the midst of the complex forces of both the classroom and my own life?” (Palmer, 1997, p. 12) Through quiet reflection comes answers to the issues and challenges we are facing everyday as educators.

Collegial Relationships and Mentoring

Supportive relationships are crucial for teachers to thrive when they are dealing with stress. These friendships can be essential to well-being. Castro et al. (2010) sheds light on this

type of support that can come from colleagues, friends, and family members when strengthening educator resiliency. Collegial support networks can provide the sense of community that teachers crave during times of stress (Ragans, 2016). While formal mentor systems can be of value, a mutual mentoring dynamic, relational mentoring, can be mutually beneficial as opposed to one sided. Relational mentoring is more than “work friends.” Ragans explains, “In high quality mentoring relationships, both members are transformed and changed in ways that reflect an entirely different set of psychological processes, norms, and behaviors” (2016, p. 228).

Support system might be formally created through the use of a mentoring system. Mentoring systems that allow newer teachers to be paired with a more experienced educator can be beneficial to those new teachers that are dealing with personal and professional challenges (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Ragans, 2016; Turner et al., 2022). Formal mentoring systems are widely implemented; however, the main ingredient needed for these to truly work is hard to find and easy to lose.

Relational trust is necessary in building the types of relationships needed for collegial support. Bryk and Schneider (2002) maintain that this concept relates to the trust that one might see in a group setting. It is displayed in interpersonal social dynamics. Three key aspects relate to resiliency in their research. First, in schools where there is a low level of relational trust, there is a negative impact on students. Second, in order for there to be a culture of trust, every adult should understand their role and obligations and have complete clarity on roles and duties associated with those roles. Lastly, trust is greatly influenced by the conclusions drawn from the intentions of those we work with. In other words, if we believe that the principal has the best interest of students in mind, we are more likely to trust their decisions surrounding students. Trust is an overused term that is one of the most important traits necessary to lead and relate to others.

Palmer (1997) elaborates on the value of friendship among teachers. In his writings he explores the beauty of dialogue that does not necessarily need to end with a verdict, goal, or plan to be valuable. He states:

Conversation among friends has its own rewards: in the presence of our friends, we have the simple joy of feeling at ease, at home, trusted and able to trust. We attend to the inner teacher not to get fixed but to befriend the deeper self, to cultivate a sense of identity and integrity that allows us to feel at home wherever we are. (p. 12)

Through conversations with friends, we can attune more to our inner teacher, who we are as educators, listening and learning to what we know within to be true about ourselves. Palmer (1997) charges that our task is to create trusting relationships within the profession that allow us to share our most vulnerable weaknesses, enabling us to better listen to the voice within ourselves. He acknowledges, “Not all spaces can be safe, not all relationships trustworthy, but we can surely develop more of them than we now have so that an increase in honesty and healing can happen within us and among us” he adds, “for our own sake, the sake of our teaching, and the sake of our students” (1997, p. 15).

Faith and Spirituality

Spirituality, faith, or the belief in something greater than ourselves, plays a role in many of our lives. Teachers are inherently caring people; many desire to serve others through instruction. Some teachers might describe their career as a calling (Hansen, 1995). For people of Judeo-Christian faith, it is difficult to separate their vocation from what they believe drew them into that vocation in the first place (Eckert, 2011).

Kimball et al. (2009) found that college education majors have the propensity to be religious people more so than other majors, in addition, they stay in their programs more consistently and are likely to become more religious over time. Hartwick (2007) sampled

Wisconsin teachers and discovered that 59.4% of teachers that participated in the survey believed that they were called to teach. Nelson (2010) and White (2010) both found that teachers' spiritual beliefs played a role in their decision to go into the field of education. For many, teaching is a calling and is more than just a job.

Because being a teacher involves both intellect and ethics (Hansen, 2001; Lewis, 1944; Noddings, 1992, 2002), teaching in the absence of morals is impossible. Hill and Paragament (2003) state:

Religion and spirituality are not a set of beliefs and practices divorced from everyday life, to be applied only at special times and on special occasions. Instead, religion and spirituality are ways of life to be sought, experienced, fostered, and sustained consistently. (p.68)

Many teachers rely on their faith to get them through adverse situations or trying times (Pajak & Blasé, 1989; Rushton, 2000; Hartwick & Kang, 2013). Hartwick and Kang (2013) examined how teachers use their spirituality to cope with stressful situations within their work. They share that around 70% of the 850 studies examining the relationship between mental health and religion found that those who are religious do adapt better to stressful situations and do indeed have better mental health overall. These two researchers joined forces and combined their work pertaining to teachers and faith. Hartwick (2007) surveyed Wisconsin teachers regarding spiritual coping as well as other factors. Kang (2008) completed a qualitative research project summarizing teachers' spiritual coping strategies. They summarize that teachers of devout faith "readily draw upon their spiritual beliefs and practices to ameliorate their professional stress" (p.179).

When examining the literature regarding posttraumatic growth, Shaw et al. (2005) posit that spirituality is associated with posttraumatic growth in positive ways. Based on their research of 11 empirical studies, they deduced that "In summary, what the evidence shows is that religious

and spiritual beliefs and behaviors develop through the experience of traumatic events, that religious and spiritual beliefs can be helpful to people in the psychological recovery, and in their personal development and growth following trauma” (Shaw et al., 2005, p.6). In addition, more times than not religion is helpful to those dealing with the fallout from trauma (Shaw et al., 2005). It is possible to grow spiritually during difficult times.

Prayer and meditation are strategies that some teachers turn to during hardships. Benson (1974) found that prayer and meditation bring about a relaxation response, and that those that do pray may perhaps have the ability to then change their view of a stressful event in their lives. Hartwick and Kang (2013) shared specific examples of how teachers rely on prayer as a means of coping. One teacher reported that “I pray a lot during the day; I mean, seriously, I really do. I ask the Lord to give me patience and wisdom” (p. 173). Other teachers in the study shared that they pray for emotional healing for students, for God to give students what they need as it pertains to learning to speak English, or just “to be held” (p. 173).

Not only do teachers in this study pray, but a robust majority believed that it made them better teachers. “Out of the 91% of teachers in Hartwick’s (2007) sample who reported that they prayed, a solid majority (69.9%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘praying makes me a better teacher’” (Hartwick & Kang, 2013, p. 172). These teachers relied on prayer to help them cope with their challenges at work and truly believed that their prayers made them better at what they do.

Phillips (2021) shares stories of faith-filled teachers in her examination of how their Christian beliefs are related to resiliency. The participants shared that their religious lens allowed them to separate from the conflicts they experienced with students, thus avoiding heated interactions that would typically escalate. Not only did teachers in this study share that they could avoid conflicts, but that they were better for it. Their efficacy grew from the challenging

interactions. They shared situations where students had used extremely hurtful language, but they remained calm and in control.

No, of course I didn't lose my temper! I established a dialogue. Being a teacher is my calling-this is what I am meant to do. It is not always easy to deal with the students, but when I go home and spend some time in prayer, I know that it is my vocation-because I can change lives. For the better. And that helps me to endure, to accept conflicts.

(Phillips, 2021, p.314)

While difficult to quantify, some researchers have studied spirituality defining it in broader terms. Cook and Babyak (2019) utilized the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale in conjunction with The Teacher Stress Inventory Scale to measure the degree to which the level of spirituality predicted the level of occupational stress for over one hundred middle grades teachers in Texas. Teachers' spirituality scores significantly predicted time-management stress and work-related stress for the educators included in this study (Cook & Babyak, 2019). However, the results were not in line with the researchers' hypothesis. "Findings from this study provided empirical evidence that as teachers spirituality increases, their time-management stress and their work-related stress increase" (Cook & Babyak, 2019, p.143). In summary, the more teachers feel called to do their job, the more they take on. These researchers acknowledge that there are conflicting findings in this category of literature and recommend that more studies are to better understand how spirituality is related to stress in public education for teachers, and how this compares to other occupations (Cook & Babyak, 2019).

Kinjerski and Skypnek (2008) define workplace spirituality as a positive state that includes many things: physical, affective, cognitive, interpersonal, spiritual, and even mystical aspects (2008). As we broaden the scope and examine workplace spirituality in the organizational research domain, as opposed to education only, Dal Corso et al. (2020) provide research that

sheds light on this topic through two studies that closely relate to leadership, spirituality, and well-being.

In the first study using the Spirit at Work Scale, 315 Italian participants reported their level of workplace spirituality. There was a positive relationship between the supervisor behaviors and the participants level of workplace spirituality in that burnout levels were reduced. It is noteworthy that supervisor's level of integrity was not considered directly, and that perhaps their ability to influence a decrease in burnout is related to their ability to recognize the spiritual needs of their workers (Dal Corso et al., 2020). The second study measured relationships between workplace spirituality and variables that apply to organizational context. "Specifically, individuals falling into the high workplace spirituality profile showed greater positive affectivity, resilience, self-efficacy, and work engagement, if compared with the individuals of the low workplace spirituality profile" (Dal Corso, et al., 2020, p.10).

To summarize, teachers share that a sense of meaning contributes to what enables them to persevere amidst the stressors of their jobs (Hartwick & Kang, 2013; Intrator, 2002; McNally et al., 2008; Nieto, 2003). Palmer states that "teaching holds a mirror to the soul" (1997, p.1). His belief is that "we teach who we are" (1997, p.1). If we teach who we are and we are religious, there can be no separation from our authentic self and our teacher self.

Educators are in a place where there are numerous external factors at play that are making their jobs difficult. In addition to the stress that comes with high stakes testing demands and continual changes, teachers have endured teaching during a pandemic with the fallout that has ensued. These storms swirl around educators at an alarming rate and strength. Resiliency should be cultivated and addressed in schools by offering quality professional development and mentorship programs. Resiliency should be nurtured and addressed in educational institutions through the provision of high-quality professional development and mentorship programs. School leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering teacher resilience. Supportive relationships are

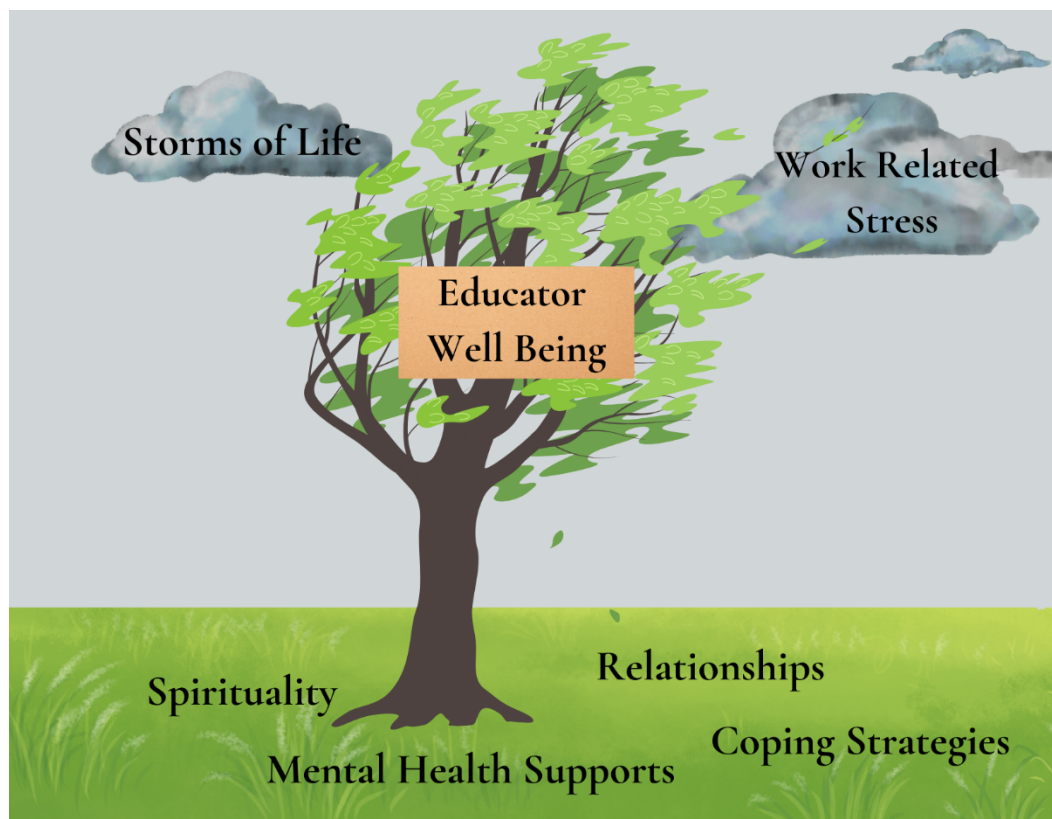
fundamental for teachers' well-being in managing stress. Relational trust is essential for establishing the types of collaborative relationships necessary for professional support.

Spirituality, faith, or the belief in a higher power significantly impact various aspects of our lives.

These nurturing strategies can support teacher wellbeing during the storms that we see in our modern-day educational environment.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1 is a metaphoric image of resiliency represented by a tree. Just as we learn and grow from our hardships, trees grow from the pressure of the wind. "Swaying is a tree's natural method for the dissipation of the energy exerted upon it by the wind, but there exists the dangerous possibility of achieving an amplitude of sway greater

than the tree's elastic capacity to return upright" (Bunce, 2017, p.1). Work related stressors are symbolized through the wind, while the storms of life are seen in the clouds. Why does the tree not break more often than it does?

Just as humans learn to adapt to changing situations, so do trees. Trees develop a capacity to withstand the wind as they experience physical agitations (Jaffe, 1973). Significant hardships, health challenges, family emergencies, and intense conflicts may fall into this category when we use this metaphor found within the conceptual framework. Just as the atmosphere in our world is ever-changing and unpredictable, so are the challenges that we face in life.

The roots of the tree represent the large categories that come to mind when one might consider what supports are needed to create resiliency in times of stress and upheaval. Thigmomorphogenesis is the term that describes this phenomenon; a term that dates to 300 BC when Theophrastus, a Greek philosopher, wrote about trees that were stunted comparing them to those that had grown stronger and taller in forests. Thigmo, or thigma, is Greek for "touch" (Merriam-Webster). When we are touched, or affected, by external stimulation just as trees against the force of the wind, how do we become stronger? What causes us to break? How do we develop wind-firmness, or the capacity to handle the force that works against us (Bunce, 2017), within the storms of life?

These storms of life are inevitable just as real storms are for trees. Research has been brought to life in the book *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, by Peter Wohlleben (2016), a German forester. In this work, Wohlleben explains that trees are communal beings with complex cooperative relationships that are maintained through communication. This is similar to what one might see in an insect colony (Grant, 2018). Scientists were beginning to discover this intricate system that contains the use of pheromones and other signals that are used to help one another. Sinard, a professor at the University of British Columbia, shares that not only do trees help one another, but there also exists a *hub tree*, or

mother tree. These beings support other smaller trees in a nurturing way. Simard explains “They help neighboring trees by sending them nutrients, and when the neighbors are struggling, mother trees detect their distress signals and increase the flow of nutrients accordingly” (Grant, 2018, p. 6). Just as trees help one another survive in the forest, so do those trusted friends we rely on in our teaching profession.

The literature demonstrates that teachers experience stress from many sources ranging from daily classroom demands to systemic pressures, with Croft et al. (2015) describing a “perfect storm” of education reform and accountability measures that threatens teacher well-being. This stress is demonstrated in the conceptual framework’s representation of a tree facing stress created by wind and weather. Just as a tree encounters soft breezes as well as intense storms, teachers navigate challenges from their daily responsibilities to intense pressures such as student mental health needs (Hirshberg et al., 2022) and the results of the Covid-19 pandemic (Baker et al., 2021). This continued exposure to challenging conditions can impact a tree’s ability to thrive.

Supportive friends found in the workplace, or adult-to-adult interactions amongst professionals that can share openly and vulnerably, might be one way that those going through an extremely hard time might best find support when needed. For this study’s intent, relational mentors will be used to categorize this type of friend. Wolgast and Fischer (2017) confirm that teachers that collaborate with one another have a reduced perception of stress in the workplace. Positive teacher-to-teacher relationships create a bond that feeds the well-being of one another.

In addition to relational collegial support, educators might rely on other well-being strategies to cope. Furthermore, teachers that are under stress at home and at work might consider talking to a professional mental health counselor for support. The literature surrounding mental health supports is robust and valuable. Lastly, a faith-based approach might be relevant to the research surrounding resiliency in education. There is a connection between commitment to work

of educators and a sense of calling to the profession, spirituality or religion, and well-being (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012). This foundational piece nurtures well-being for educators in a powerful way.

When comparing the three sections of the image: the sky, the tree, and the ground, one can see the categories reviewed in the literature. The research that has been presented in this chapter articulates the stressors that teachers are facing as evidenced by the changes in the atmosphere, those personal and professional storms that can come and go with varying degrees of strength. The tools that might offer support during challenging situations are illustrated in what one can't see; what is under the surface. The tools under the surface are what offer nutrients to the tree, which is the symbol of resiliency. The key factors that cultivate resiliency for teachers reviewed in the literature include strong relationships, positive leadership, and a healthy mindset.

This study adds to the existing research that relates to resiliency for educators because authentic stories might be helpful to those seeking inspiration during hard times. Exploring how connections are formed between educator well-being, supports that are helpful, conflicts that arise in our personal lives, and resilience while teaching is a valuable pursuit.

There are numerous challenges contributing to work-related stress for teachers. The published research supports the need for the implementation of various strategies to decrease these stressors. These strategies include professional development, mentor programing, counseling, professional collaboration, and administration support of both professional and personal aspects of teachers' well-being. When extreme stress takes place in a teacher's personal life, the compounding nature of the challenges can be daunting. Like raging storms in the ever-changing atmosphere, we must nurture a strong root system to feed the health and well-being of educators as they grow stronger and better sustain the strength of the raging storms. Chapter 3 lays out the methodology and background of the study. In addition, the study is clearly articulated through the self-study protocol provided.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This chapter includes a detailed plan for this self-study. This includes the research purpose and research questions, a detailed background statement, and the viewpoint of the study. In addition to these detailed portions regarding the big picture, I will also share the research design, research site, co-researcher selection, and how data was collected and analyzed. Lastly, I will explain how I included member checking and ensured trustworthiness in this self-study.

Research Purpose

This collaborative self-study was designed to explore what it means for educators to be resilient in times of stress, both in the workplace and in their personal lives. Within this work, I identified what supports helped maintain teacher resiliency through times of personal trauma. I achieved this by examining my own personal experiences through reflective self-study research, in conjunction with reflection through conversations with co-researchers that have also experienced personal and professional stress that might even be considered trauma. This work focused on co-researchers interpreting and making meaning within their social context. I explored the challenging experiences of my past while I was navigating daily work stressors in order to show others how they might find their own path through challenging times.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do I understand support for educators in times of stress in our personal and professional lives as I reflect with co-researchers?
2. How does reflecting with co-researchers on our experiences expand my understanding of being resilient?

Background Statement

As a self-study, understanding my initial understanding of teacher resiliency, and experiences with personal and professional stress are important as they set the foundation for the reader to make sense of my journey of reflection and collaboration as I engage in this research. Therefore, my background experiences that have led to my current understanding is shared next. I am uniquely positioned to explore this topic.

When I think about resilience, I think about having the ability to withstand the storms of life. These storms might take the form of toxic work environments, health struggles, financial stress, or interpersonal conflicts. In my life, I have experienced personal life storms that came back-to-back over four years.

During the 2019-2020 school year I shifted out of the classroom into instructional coaching. This was something I thought I wanted, but it turned out to be much harder than anticipated. Having taken to teaching like a duck to water, I found myself more like a fish out of water as an instructional coach. Looking back, I believe that my identity was closely intertwined with my role as a teacher. There were multiple times that I would run into former students and be brought to tears after exchanging pleasantries. Pulling away from the drive thru one afternoon after such a meeting, my daughter said, “Mama you are going to have to get a hold of yourself or go back into the classroom.” In addition, I was not meshing well with the administration that I had seemed to do so great with the previous 9 years while serving as a teacher in 8th grade ELA. Tensions were high; we had sustained a mass exodus of teachers, and we were rebuilding the school with numerous new hires. I compared myself to the other instructional coaches in our district that seemed to be thriving. I felt very alone and inadequate; however, I knew I needed to keep going for my family. I had received zero training, had no idea what I was doing, and there was a tremendous issue at home that had been escalating for some time.

My husband, an excavation company owner, had hit an extreme rough patch. Through extenuating circumstances out of his control, a large-scale job had gone poorly. Using up all the equity we had amassed through building our homes, and selling twice within 3 years, we then sold again and downsized to a smaller home in the same community. After trying to dig out and make it work on our own, we hit an unsurmountable wall. By the winter of 2020, we had a terrible decision to make. As we sat in the attorney's board room one rainy day that February, we learned that personal bankruptcy was the best option. This had come after two long years of trying to make it work on our own. We had to pull up our bootstraps and start again. My husband dissolved his company and started fresh. Exemplifying resiliency, he adopted the new mantra, "Always moving forward." During this same time, the COVID-19 virus was starting to hit the media, and soon everything would seem to pause in midair.

During the spring of 2020 while we were all at home due to the worldwide pandemic, a teacher friend reached out regarding a better paying position in a neighboring district. This position would allow me to return to the classroom. Having been the rock star teacher turned seemingly non-effective instructional coach, I jumped at the chance to increase my salary substantially and be back in the comfortable setting of the classroom. Little did I know that the 20-21 school year was about to be the hardest on record.

Masked up and ready for a new start, I taught a hybrid virtual model with a staggered schedule. It took hours to upload all the content to the online learning platform. I had to work all day Sunday to keep up. During this time, I had to make changes in my personal life so that I could be successful at work; there was not enough of me to meet the demands of home and my job. My drinking had escalated over the past couple of years, and I found myself in an unhealthy place with alcohol. It was taking up too much of my time and energy. I made the decision to stop drinking completely so that I could be a healthier version of myself. This step was a huge win and helped me get through what was, at the time, the hardest year of my career. For me this was

resiliency at its purest. It took great determination and discipline to go alcohol free in December of 2020.

I had been fortunate enough to work with positive like-minded teachers throughout my career, but on my new team I did not seem to mesh as well. Things had escalated to an unfortunate boiling point by January. I wanted to run for the hills, but I knew that I had made this transition and needed to see this new chapter through. I was devastated my fresh start was going so poorly. I did not understand how I could be in such a stressful place yet again. I turned to my family for support and contemplated trying to go back to my home district. I wanted to give up, but I did not.

At the end of my first year at my new school, I was asked if I wanted to change grade levels. This seemed like an out, so I took it. I looped up with my students and went from 6th grade social studies to 7th grade ELA. The school year seemed to go better in regard to the team dynamic, but the burden of the numerous special education students being placed in two of my four classes, and their high needs, layered with the mental health challenges on the heels of the pandemic my current 7th graders were facing, it was just as hard, but in a different way. Again, I knew I could not give up and was unsure of what in the world I was going to do in the long run.

At the end of the second year at my new better paying school, my old district came calling. They needed an instructional coach for a small rural school, the same school at which I had started my career. I was on the fence about going back, but in the end, I wanted to be closer to home again, on the same schedule as our two children, and back with the coworkers I seemed to have more in common with. Things were better financially, so I took the pay cut and went back.

In my new instructional coach position, I decided to pursue a doctorate degree as it had always been a goal of mine. I knew that this degree would give me more opportunities to grow

personally and professionally. I had no idea how much grit and determination it would take to complete this degree when I began in the fall of 2022.

In this small rural setting, I was more comfortable in my instructional coaching shoes. I felt like I was helping the cause as this school had been identified as needing improvement by the department of education. I found gratification working on district level initiatives and being at the table with the other instructional coaches from the middle schools in our district. The first semester of the 22-23 school year went great. However, there was resentment from staff members that I was not fully aware of. Unbeknownst to me, the job I had been given had been promised to someone else in the building.

Being in a position where I did not have to obtain a substitute to miss work, I was free to make it to routine doctor appointments without hours of preparation for a sub. During a yearly checkup that fall, my family practitioner informed me it was time for a mammogram, so she scheduled one, and I dutifully reported to the appointment. Stage one breast cancer was identified on my right side swiftly; a partial mastectomy was in my near future. Like many others that have experienced this, it did not seem real to me. Needing healthcare now more than ever, and things seeming to be going OK at school, I continued to work as much as I could.

I noticed a shift that spring when I returned from surgery. Administration was unhappy and things were stressful at school. The “needs improvement” status had taken its toll on the staff and leadership. It was hard for me to focus on what was happening at work, because I now had a heavy personal decision to make on top of the cancer diagnosis. My team of doctors did not agree on the treatment plan regarding radiation plus chemotherapy. I had to make the final decision and opted for the more aggressive approach: both. I leaned on my sisters and mother heavily. While many were lifting me up at home during my weekly chemo infusions, things were not going well at work.

One hot Friday in May I attended an outdoor end of year awards ceremony for our child. While on the couch sick and nauseated following the ceremony, I realized that I had not checked the survey responses from the end of year Google form I had sent to the staff the previous Wednesday during PLC. Responses for one of the open-ended questions sent me into a tailspin. When asked what did not go well throughout the year, many responded with my name. The harsh, I would argue, cruel, criticism came fast. Feedback included opinions on my inadequacies regarding consistency, the number of student's names I had memorized, my lack of school spirit attire, and my "job hopping." At this point I had worked in 3 schools in 18 years. One person stated, "I will always be nice to her face, but Ms. Pemberton would be a better fit elsewhere." Clearly the staff had trust issues believing that I talked about them negatively to district level leadership. I was in no shape to weed out the nonsense and focus on the constructive feedback. I was sick and drained; I was far from 100%.

Finding myself in the most vulnerable state both physically and mentally, I could not seem to get my emotions under control. I cried like I had never cried before yet somehow mustered the strength to return to work the following week, the last week of the school year. Most would not look me in the eye, and that was OK, because I could not successfully get through one day that week without getting emotional. I did not understand how a staff could be so cruel to someone going through cancer. There was an air of mistrust; they needed someone to blame for the pressure that our principal was getting from central office. Why did we now have to report on early out days when our principal had historically gotten away with letting us all stay home? Why were we getting more pressure to increase learning outcomes? There seemed to be only one good answer: Mrs. Pemberton, our new instructional coach. I leaned on my fellow instructional coaches from other schools in the district like never before, asking them vulnerable questions and seeking answers to where I went wrong.

When I reflected on the past four years of my career, I asked myself the hardest question of all: Is it me; am I the problem? Throughout the conversations I would cry uncontrollably. The chemotherapy treatment running through my body had pushed everything to the surface. I had never felt so raw and open before. I could not seem to come out of it. I can only compare it to a drowning feeling. I shared this with my oncologist during my weekly treatment the following Thursday. She added an extra medication to my infusion, and I was able to rest peacefully for the first time in over a week. There was no real closure that school year, I had summer classes coming up for my doctoral work, radiation in my future, and was in no shape to look for an out. I had to return the following school year despite the circumstances.

The 23-24 school year started with radiation and the corresponding exhaustion that came with it. My district level supervisor had advised that I lay low this school year. I planned little professional development and did everything in my power to not rock the boat. The principal was in his last and final year. Everyone was waiting to see who the next leader would be. Although I had gone on record many times saying I was not going to apply, my close relationships with district leadership, and my ambitious nature, had convinced many otherwise. In late spring a colleague overheard a conversation the principal was having with another staff member. During this conversation he stated that I was “the worst hire he had ever made” and that if I applied to be principal and got the job that would be the worst thing that could happen to the school. I was furious. I now had a better understanding of why things had been so difficult. Perhaps while he was complimenting me to my face, he was going behind my back saying cruel things about me to others. He had left early that day, so I called him. He had no real response when confronted with his words. After we spoke on the phone, I drafted an email to him requesting that he refrain from making disparaging remarks about me, and we never spoke of it again. There was an end in sight in the form of a new leader. I told myself I would give it one more year. I felt like getting to twenty years and achieving my goal of earning a doctorate degree would be a good place to pause

and reevaluate. I knew I would have to make a positive change eventually. Things had been going poorly for too long. Regardless of whose fault it was, or why it was happening, in May of 2024 I decided I could not continue down this road, and I resigned that summer from my instructional coach position.

Through these experiences I leaned heavily on the women in my life that are also in the field of education. These women consist of a lifelong friend who is a school guidance counselor, three friends I have met through my school settings who are educators, a relational mentor who is currently serving as a district leader, and family members that were educators. In addition, I have pursued professional support through coaching for my physical well-being. I have also met with a mental health counselor throughout my cancer treatment. I have relied on my faith as a support to get me through and believe that there is a reason I have experienced so much adversity in a short amount of time.

Viewpoint of the Study

Crotty's framework (1998) consists of four major categories, two of which involve questions the researcher should ask involving theoretical perspective and epistemology. Within the epistemology of this specific study, one might consider the subjective nature that involves me making meaning of my own experiences and the connections made to those participating, the co-researchers jointly in this study (Bhattacharya, 2017). My knowledge of this topic was created by positioning my understanding of my experiences to uncover the meaning of resilience in times of stress. Subjectivism was the epistemology that informed my perspective.

Social constructivism theoretical perspective allowed for constructing meaning of resilience based on the discussions and reflections of the research team. Social constructivism was initially set forth by Lev Vygotsky (1978). This theoretical approach views knowledge as being constructed through social interactions within groups. This perspective was constructed

through the engagement of others, reflection, and dialogue. This approach does acknowledge subjectivism and highlights the ways in which personal experiences are influenced by broader social and cultural contexts. This was executed as we explored lived experiences of stress in and outside of the workplace.

Research Design

More than reflection, this self-study served as a tool for improvement. Samaras and Freese (2006) concluded that a shared definition of the self-study methodology for research is difficult to pin down. However, there is a shared consensus on the importance of this methodology and what should be included (Samaras, 2011). Samaras (2002) defines self-study as “a component of reflection in which teachers systematically and critically examine their actions and the context of those actions as a way of developing a more consciously driven mode of professional activity.” Through my reflections from recorded conversations with co-researchers, I engaged in a study of myself as it pertains to balancing a career in education with stressful life events. The actions and context I examined included my experiences with cancer diagnosis and treatment, dealing with conflicts with colleagues, and being in a position where I felt like a failure.

Through the exploration of my problem of practice and my lived experiences, I collaborated with co-researchers through conversations in which I gathered data to connect reflections surrounding personal stressful events. I explored how those shared lived experiences impacted our professional lives as we identified what it means to be resilient as educators.

This was a personal history self-study in that it was a “study on the influence of one’s culture, context, and history on one’s teaching practices” (Samaras and Freese, 2006, p. 21). My culture included the settings in which I was employed: a mostly white, suburban to rural district, with under resourced students and a district that lacks monetary resources paying lower-than-average salaries and lacking extra resources for classrooms and extra curriculars. My history

consisted of 19 years in education with the most years spent in the ELA classroom in 8th grade at one middle class suburban middle school. Contextually speaking, I was a former classroom teacher turned instructional coach who was used primarily as an administrator.

Research Site

The research site for this self-study consisted of a small group of educators from districts across the southeastern portion of the United States. The conversations were recorded over an application for the iPhone, Marco Polo. Therefore, specific research sites were the locations at which the participants, or co-researchers, chose to record their responses. The co-researchers I participated in discussions with were either counselors, administrators, instructional coaches, or teachers.

Co-Researchers Selection

I engaged in purposeful sampling in this self-study. Purposeful sampling is defined by Crossman (2020) as a sampling method that takes place based on what the study is trying to achieve and the characteristics of the participants, or population's characteristics. I selected co-researchers based on their intimate relationship with me during the past several years as confidants. More than friends, I consider them relational mentors. They were all suited to having in-depth conversations about the events of the past because they were there with me through each of the events. In addition to my major life events, they were going through some major upheaval as well. These four women are all close confidants that have also experienced trauma. In this way, not only did they allow me to better reflect through candid conversations regarding resiliency, but they also shared what they have learned through their very tough life experiences. The participants voluntarily offered their opinions and takeaways as they feel pertained to them, while also understanding that their identity will be withheld. Co-researchers had the option of skipping any question they chose not to answer or answering in an alternative

format. For example, one co-researcher chose to write a statement in response to the first week's questions as opposed to using the video recording tool throughout the four-week project.

Co-researchers have lived through shared life experiences with me are what makes these women eligible to join this study. They have all experienced trauma and have been part of this rural educational setting. While not a requirement to be a co-researcher, many of these women have a strong faith rooted in Christianity. I share the belief with all these women that a higher power is leading our paths. All the co-researchers in this study have faith in God.

Table 1 describes the co-researchers in the first column, their corresponding context within the educational setting in the second column, and in the last column identifies the stressful life events they have endured while also serving in the teaching profession. Before I began data collection, I submitted IRB documentation for approval and ensured that all co-researchers understood the study's design and the timeline.

Table 1

Co-Researcher Context

Co-Researcher Name	Educational Experience	Stressful Life Event
Dawn	Administrator	Fostering and Adoption
Nicole	Instructional Coach	Divorce and Relocation
Elizabeth	Guidance Counselor	Public Scandal
Julia	Teacher	Death of Husband
Rose	Teacher	Cancer and Divorce
LeeAnn	District Leader	House Fire, Divorce of Parents

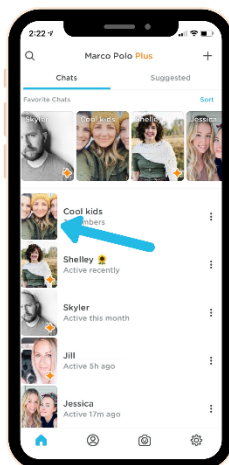
Data Collection

I drew on my own experiences to create conversation prompts with my co-researchers. These prompts were connected closely to the research questions. To give co-researchers time to analyze their thoughts, I utilized an asynchronous video recording tool. I engaged in one-on-one conversations through a communication platform called Marco Polo (as shown in Figure 2). This

tool allows users to record their conversations in a password protected video format. The participants selected were comfortable using this tool as they had used it before the study began.

Figure 2

Marco Polo App



To begin the research portion of this study, I shared the conceptual framework found in Appendix A. This document was emailed to the co-researchers thanking them for their participation, as well as introducing the study using the conceptual framework. The participants were provided with this image to keep in mind as we began the first round of conversations. We completed four rounds of conversations each week. Following each round of conversation, I wrote a journal reflecting on the conversations. These detailed journals combined one-on-one conversations and included my own response to the conversation prompts. Recorded conversation threads were deleted at the end of the study. I engaged in conversations with each co-researcher separately. Using the recording device, I began each Sunday with a starting prompt. We utilized that upcoming week to have conversations regarding the discussion prompts ending the conversation each Friday. **Table 2** illustrates the process that includes the discussion prompts.

The following research questions related to each week's discussions: In what ways do I understand support for educators in times of stress in our personal and professional lives as I

reflect with co-researchers? Secondly, how does reflecting with co-researchers on our experiences expand my understanding of being resilient?

During the first week we discussed how we are doing regarding our overall wellbeing as compared to the conceptual framework. The conversation flowed throughout the week, with the closing prompt ranking our well-being from 1-10. *One* being the least stressful and 10 being the most challenging season in life. These two questions related to both research questions in that they directed us to connect with our lived experiences and supports that we connected with.

During the second week we discussed the hardest season we had experienced. This level of stress might have qualified as traumatic event depending on what they had endured. As we discussed this hard event, we transitioned into how this event affected our work performance. This conversation related to research questions, and in turn the conceptual framework when we examined the storms in life that impacted our well-being.

Week three led the conversations to strengths during hardships. What did we find supportive during these traumatic events? We connected these supports with resiliency. This allowed us to examine resilience versus non-resilience as pertained to the research questions of this study.

Week four was a reflective week that created an opportunity for us to reflect on what we had discussed over the past weeks. This was the moment that we connected our conversation with a reflection that we believed would have benefited us the most during our traumatic life event. This conversation correlated with aspects of resiliency during traumatic events while also working in the field of education.

Table 2***Discussion Prompts***

	Starting Prompt for the week	Closing Prompt for the week	Connection to Research Question
Week 1	How are you doing right now regarding work and your personal life? How does the conceptual framework, the image of the tree, relate to you?	When you think about the season you are currently in, how would you rank it on a scale of 1-10, 1 being the easiest and 10 being the hardest.	RQ 1-As we reflect on our lived experience of stress, what supports (emotional, physical, spiritual, social) do you find you connect with? RQ 2- How does reflecting with my co-researchers on our experiences shape my understanding of being resilient?
Week 2	Think about the hardest season of your career as an educator. Tell me about that time. How did you navigate this season?	When you reflect on that season, how did this impact your ability to be your best self at work?	RQ 1-Relating to the stressful storms in life that come and go at varying strengths RQ 2-Opening the door to resilience or non-resilience
Week 3	Reflect on ways you found strength in times of hardship as an educator. Can you please tell me about those times?	When you think about this time, were there things that were not making you feel strong? What were the factors contributing to your inability to show resiliency?	RQ 1-Connecting to the factors believed to exude supportive strength RQ 2-Points to ways in which resiliency is exhibited
Week 4	If you could write a letter to someone going through exactly what you went through, what would it say?	When you examine the image of the tree, what does it mean to you now? What is one thing that you would take moving forward? Is there anything else you would like to share before we close our conversation?	RQ 1-Shares understanding of strengths found during difficult times RQ 2- Articulates reflections of strength during hard times

Throughout the week I guided the discussion. If the one-on-one discussions were moving naturally, and the research questions were being fully addressed, I did not use ancillary questions. If for some reason the conversation was stalling, I asked the following ancillary questions:

Week One: When you examine the conceptual framework, do you agree or disagree with the supports that are labeled in the graphic?

Week Two: When you think about how your challenge(s) impacted your work, can you explain what the relationships with your teammates, students, and administrators looked like? What feelings come to mind when you reflect on these dynamics?

Week Three: When reflecting on where strength was found, do you wish you might have employed other ways to find strength? Were there other alternatives you might have wished you had considered?

Week Four: Do you believe that you have grown from your difficult circumstances? Explain why or why not.

The co-researchers had rich reflective answers to the questions, and I rarely found myself utilizing the ancillary questions. I was surprised at the high level of feedback I got from them in response to the prompts. They took time to think about their answers before responding. This was possible due to the asynchronous nature of the Marco Polo tool.

In my end of week journal summaries, I used a template to guide my reflections. The template consisted of guiding questions found in Table 3. The first question created space for me to notice any surprises that came up throughout the week during the Marco Polo conversations. The second question led me to identify patterns. The third question surrounded resilience. Lastly, the final question pointed back to my experiences as I combined the reflections from me, my co-researchers, and the new information that has come about from conversations throughout the week.

Table 3***End of Week Journal Summary Template***

Reflective Question	My Response
What stands out to me as important about support for each co-researcher? Why does this stand out to me?	
Looking across the responses this week, what patterns do I see?	
What stands out to me about the meaning of being resilient for each co-researcher? Why does this stand out?	
When I apply this week's topics to my own life, what reflections come to mind?	

At the end of the month-long research process, I reflected in the form of a final journal. This journal was then compared to my initial journal that I complete during the summer of 2024.

Overview of the Data Collection and Analysis Process

I carefully analyzed each of my journals through multiple coding processes following the four weeks of the recorded conversation period. I printed a hard copy of the journals and went through each page carefully.

Considering my broad approach to the research I was pursuing; I began with descriptive and emotions coding. In this way, I was able to break down sections of the data in an organized

manner (Saldana, 2013). Emotions coding is appropriate for qualitative research as it directly relates to participants' experiences, actions, and feelings. Noting a storyline within the emotion coding process was a strategy that created the emotional journey of our shared experiences (Saldana, 2013, p. 107). This layered approach allowed me to gain deeper insight during my first round of coding.

Thematic coding as second cycle coding strategy allowed me as the researcher to “draw out a code’s truncated essence by elaborating on its meanings” (Saldana, 2013, p. 205). As I read and re-read the data, I reflected on how the terms fit into categories. One recommendation includes talking with the people that took part in the study; these analytic reflections can provide what Saldana (2013) calls this a “reality check” and shares that this strategy can cultivate further insight for the qualitative researcher (p. 206).

After I had done this iterative work, I used the themes that resulted from my own analytical thinking based on the results from the transcripts (Bhattacharyya, 2017). Some of these themes aligned, and others were distinct from my original framework as outlined in my original conceptual framework.

I then created codes that pertained to the study. These codes were then entered into a program, Dedoose, for analysis. This computer program's website states, “Dedoose is a powerful, cloud-based application used to analyze and visualize qualitative and mixed methods data. Use Dedoose to analyze interviews, focus groups, photos, video, audio, survey data, and more in collaborative, innovative ways” (*Great Research Made Easy*, n.d.). After entering the main categories, I created corresponding codes. By combining key terms from my literature review, conversations, and reflections, the following codes included in Table 4, *Categories with Corresponding Codes*, were identified during my data analysis.

Table 4***Categories with Corresponding Codes***

Categories	Corresponding Codes
Spirituality	Faith, Faith in Future, Growth, Higher Power is in Control, Negative Impacts of Spirituality, Stoicism Mindset, Suffering Leads to Growth
Change	Changing Teaching Modalities, Loss, Moving Positions, Moving Schools, Moving your Children
Culture	Morale, Pandemic Teaching, Positive Work Environment, Professional Identity Shifts, Reward in Teaching, Trust
Personal Stress	Cancer, Criminal Investigation, Death of a Spouse, Divorce, Emotionally Overwhelmed, Foster Care and Adoption, Newness, Pregnancy & Miscarriage, Single Parenting, Stalemate, Uncertainty
Relationships	Educators/Colleagues as Relational Mentors, Subordinates, Spiritual Mentors, District Leaders/Admin, Administration, Educator Friendships, Family Members, Instructional Coaches
Work/Life Balance	Balance between Personal and Professional, School Year Cycle Mindset, Breaks/Time off, Child Care Availability, Desire for Alignment, Time Effective Workday
Work Stress	Criticism from Colleagues, Focus on Medial Tasks, Lack of Flexibility, Professional Disillusionment, Role Clarity, Social Media, Toxic Work Environment, Work as a Positive Distraction, Aspects/ Characteristics of Relationships, Patience, Role Model, Trust
Resilience	Sustainable Engagement in Teaching Role, Acceptance, Seasons Change, Perspectives, Nature Seeking, Strength, Positive Outlook, Being Grounded or Centered, Gratitude, Autonomy Over Job, Self Sufficiency, Time as a Healer

Explanation of Coding Process

After I entered all the main categories and corresponding codes in Dedoose, I uploaded the research documents. I uploaded four journals representing each week during the research process, an initial journal that was completed in the summer of 2024, and then a final journal that was completed after the 4-week research process. These documents were then coded within the Dedoose program.

After the documents were coded thoroughly, I then analyzed the data within the Dedoose program with a qualitative chart tool called “Code Applications.” By using this tool, the following parent codes were tallied: spirituality was coded twenty-six times, change was coded

twenty-eight times, culture was coded twenty-nine times, personal stress was coded forty-seven times, relationships were coded sixty-two times, work/life balance was coded thirty-three times, work stress was coded thirty-five times, and resilience was coded eighty times. These totals combine the child codes that fall under the parent codes as well as the occurrences where the excerpt was coded with the parent code itself.

Trustworthiness

I preserved trustworthiness by maintaining a transparent process throughout the research (Shenton, 2004). Sincerity, part of transparency, is “marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research” (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). To truly make meaning from my past, I had to be sincere and honest about my attitudes toward the events and in turn this study.

There was full transparency in the reflection process and personal stance within this study. I did this by authentically representing my experiences. Transparency in self-study entails the researcher being open and honest regarding every aspect of the research process (Samaras and Freese, 2006).

The transferability of the study design was achieved through the clear design described in this chapter. There was systematic documentation of the reflection process and rigor in data collection and analysis as described, ensuring that this study was done with fidelity and pride. “Transferability is achieved when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action” (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). This relates to the intention behind the qualitative study, not only to analyze my own past, but to also allow others to relate to the conversations and themes to better understand the trials and tribulations they might encounter.

According to Samaras (2011), member checking is “examining and validating a researcher’s interpretation of pieces of data to check interpretations” (p.283). In the self-study realm, it is important to note that member checking involves getting feedback on my interpretations and reflections as a result of the research. Member checking involved the sharing of the revised conceptual framework in order to obtain feedback from the co-researchers around my new understanding of resiliency. I sent each member the original framework during the first week of the study, as well as the updated version at the conclusion of the study, detailing why I updated the framework in the way that I did. From this process, overall, my co-researchers shared that they believed the updated framework was indicative of my reflections.

When I asked co-researchers for feedback regarding the conceptual framework initially, four of the six responded. One shared that it was good and that the storms were an accurate metaphor for the stressors in life and at work. A different co-researcher shared that she believed it should be more specific. She recommended that the mental supports be more definitive in nature, and that this term was too broad for her liking. In addition, a third co-researcher wanted to see something that was organized in a more traditional way, perhaps in a table or chart. Lastly, the fourth co-researcher that responded explained that she believes the symbol for teacher well-being should not be a tree, but something that moves and is not stationary. They noted that the newly organized framework was more succinct in nature and accurately depicted highlights from our conversations. The same co-researcher that shared her belief that the symbol of teacher well-being should be moving and not something that stays rooted, also shared in the end that she liked the cross section of the tree as an addition in the final framework.

Confirmability was key as the audience must be able to “follow the actual sequence of how data were collected, processed, condensed/transformed, and displayed for specific conclusion drawing” (Miles, et al, 2013, p. 311). I was explicit in the conversation process including journal recording and the timing of each round of conversations.

In summary, the structure of the conversations and the weekly journals allowed me to reflect upon the research questions as they pertained to conversation starter questions. Deep, meaningful conversations took place during each of the four weeks of the research period. The asynchronous recording tool, Marco Polo, allowed co-researchers to think through their answers in advance to responding. Through multiple rounds of coding, I was able to flesh out the main points of my reflective self-study research. I was able to better understand what support looks like during times of stress, as well as further shape my understanding of resilience as it pertains to working in the field of education.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The purpose of this self-study was to examine how educators experience resilience while navigating stressful events, or events that could perhaps be classified as traumatic events, in their personal and professional lives. The following research questions were constructed: In what ways do I understand support for educators in times of stress in our personal and professional lives as I reflect with co-researchers? Secondly, how does reflecting with co-researchers on our experiences expand my understanding of being resilient? One on one conversations included questions that directly correlated with these research questions. To expand on Chapter 3, I will share a brief profile for each co-researcher to add context for my self-study journey.

Dawn is a 20+ year veteran educator who is now serving as a school leader. A deeply religious person, she has dedicated much of her personal life to not only raising her biological children but fostering numerous children in her community. She is now the mother to two adopted children, in addition to her biological children. Through the discussions with Dawn, I learned the importance of trusting God's timing, and how important it is to exhibit resiliency while working in education to maintain healthy relationships with co-workers.

Nicole's storm took place in the 10–15 year window of her career. She has served as a teacher, instructional coach, and vice principal. During her stressful season she navigated a divorce quickly followed by relocating. Through my conversations with Nicole, I discovered the beauty of having the control to create a positive culture within the classroom despite what is going on throughout the building; this phenomenal educator was determined to make her classroom atmosphere a positive one even though she was healing from a huge personal struggle. In addition, Nicole maintains a healthy work/life balance that has been integral in her professional success.

Elizabeth has been in the field of education for almost two decades. This guidance counselor has been involved in a public scandal that has completely turned her life upside down. She has shown remarkable grit as she navigates this unknown territory. Through her testimony I was able to connect to the importance of making family a priority even while working and enduring a personal storm. She continues to create a safe home for her family despite the swirling storms around her.

Julia has been in education for almost 25 years. She has worked as a teacher serving middle grades students throughout her entire career. After her husband's devastating diagnosis, she was the primary caretaker for him during his 4-year battle with cancer. She never gave up hope and fought for him regarding his care and treatment until the very end. She is a remarkably strong woman despite her epic heartbreak. I have learned that the grief she lives with each day is still fresh, and time has yet to afford her a renewed perspective. Although she believed that she had little to share with me on the topic of resilience, she is a living example of someone who has kept going following unimaginable tragedy.

Rose has been in education for close to two decades. Her marriage was coming to an end while she was also being diagnosed with breast cancer. Rose knew she had to dig deep to make it through these storms. Having recently been introduced to Stoicism, she relied heavily on the principles within this ancient Greek philosophy. She shared at length, and I was struck by her determined mindset so much so that I began to study this philosophy myself.

LeeAnn is a district leader with around 15 years of experience. Unlike the other co-researchers she shared a time that occurred at the beginning of her career. Her thoughtful reflection regarding the mentors she worked with and worshiped with allowed me to understand better how important relationships are to our ability to thrive as educators.

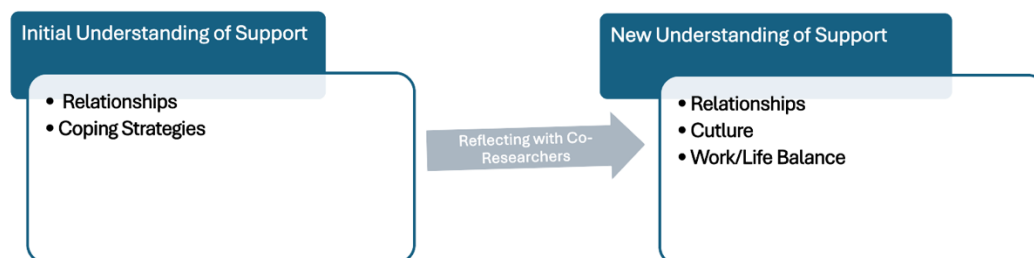
In the sections that follow in this chapter, I will share themes that correspond with each research question. Within each theme, I first define the theme, then share my understanding of the theme prior to engaging in this self-study, followed by what I learned during the self-study through conversations with co-researchers and journaling. I conclude with my new understanding of the themes.

Research Question 1: Supports in Times of Personal and Professional Stress

Three main categories apply to my newly shaped understanding of supports that include relationships, culture, and work/life balance that summarize the high points of my new perspective. Figure 3 illustrates the organization of this section.

Figure 3

Organization of Initial & New Understanding of Support



Relationships

I knew prior to the study that relationships were one of my number one sources of strength and support. I am blessed to have a multitude of close, true friendships; many inside the field of education. These relational mentors have been influential on my career. I was also concerned about the conflicts I had experienced with professionals in the schools that I worked in most recently. As I reflected on the importance of trusting relationships, I appreciated my positive

relationships even more, and I worked through my feelings regarding the negative interactions with my co-workers. What I now understand is how important it is to be aware of how stress affects my relationships. In addition, moving forward I would like to approach conflict that might be damaging professional relationships quickly and carefully.

There was a clear emphasis on the importance of having trusting relationships with those working within the field of education when looking for support during difficult times. The types of relationships that were discussed included those with family and friends outside of the field of education, colleagues that are close friends, mentors, and teammates that might share the same position or grade level. Relationships were a dominant theme when co-researchers were asked about support during difficult times.

Dawn shared that her family was a great support for her when she transitioned into administration. She also shared that those working within the field of education were more of a support than those that did not work in education because those that did not work in education did not “get it” when it comes to truly understanding what she was going through when dealing with tough times in the workplace. Dawn also shared that it is important for her to not bring in stress to work as an administrator. She stated that “Bringing in hardships from outside of school and coming into work greatly affects relationships. If you are going through something it affects your relationships with your co-workers.” Five of the six co-researchers mentioned how important their professional friendships were to their well-being.

LeeAnn mentioned relationships with mentors early on in our conversations. These veteran teachers in the profession that had worked much longer than her few months were integral in supporting her during her very challenging first year on the job. They came from a place of love and support. It seemed like no matter how badly she felt she had messed something up, they were ready to help her make it right. When she failed to give the benchmark exam at the appropriate time they would say to her, “We are going to fix it; it’s fine.” She was not fearful of

these mentoring teachers. She valued their input and fully embraced their guidance. This conversation reminded me of mentors I have had throughout the 20 years of my career. Remembering the importance of this type of support allowed me to think back to the happiest seasons of my career.

In addition to friendships with colleagues and mentor figures, there are also meaningful relationships formed with members of a shared team. Elizabeth found solace in collaboration with her fellow guidance counselors during her intense professional storm. They worked closely together, sharing lunch every weekday. I summarized in my week three journal, “Elizabeth relied on her team for strength. They were very close and communicated regularly throughout the day in all scenarios.” I have had the honor of working with exceptional teammates for the majority of my career; however, I found myself in a precarious position during the fall of 2020 with my new team, in a new position. We did not have a lot in common, and we were all dealing with the stress of pandemic teaching. Things came to a boiling point in January. This could have been avoided had I handled the conflict I was experiencing with one particular co-worker on this team face to face and much earlier in the school year.

I stated in my initial journal, “I feel as if my professional relationships have suffered during the past 4 years when I reflect on this challenging season in life.” I accepted that what I was going through was negatively impacting my relationships with others, but I think that up until this point I did not have clarity on how to address this moving forward. Through my reflection with co-researchers, I can see the need to address issues directly with the person that I am experiencing conflict with. I can also see that I was not my best self while I was experiencing conflict with others during my rough season.

While I had a positive attitude surrounding relationships, I did have much guilt and shame over the professional conflicts I had experienced with others as of late. I can see now where relationships with those we work with can be both positive and a source of strife if they are

not maintained in a healthy way. I am now aware that my struggles could have had a negative impact on relationships within the workplace.

I think back to the teammates I have had through the years and the close friendships I have formed with co-workers, the very ladies that are the co-researchers in this study. I wanted to learn what they believed helped them through difficult times because I know that they helped me through mine. I also think back to the hurt I experienced when relationships were damaged, whether it be through my own missteps, or the missteps of others.

I recall the time I confronted an administrator who had said unprofessional criticisms about me to other staff members while I was at a job fair representing our school system. I called him immediately upon learning what he said. This was following two years of working in a stressful environment. I think I had reached my breaking point that day. This is an example of how I feel like I should address conflict moving forward. This was a time that I was direct and represented myself in a professional and clear manner. The trust was broken, and I had the hard conversation that needed to be had.

Now that I have strengthened my understanding of the importance of trusting relationships, I am willing to have hard conversations in order to work out differences. I will not obsess over relational hurt but take action in an attempt to work through the conflict that is inevitable when working with others. I look back at my journals and see where I mentioned that friendships are key to healing. I see where I recognized how much my educator friendships helped me through my difficult times. I can also see where I did not address conflicts directly with the person I should have addressed them with. I can see now that letting conflict simmer while not addressing the issue can be much more damaging than addressing them directly and clearly.

Culture

Culture was not a word that came to my mind when I initially thought about specific supports that teachers might lean upon when dealing with stress in their professional and personal lives. Now that I have reflected with co-researchers, I can combine the support we receive from school leaders, and the culture we create in our classrooms as tools that we use to maintain a strong well-being. Our circle of control is smaller in the classroom; this allowed me to thrive at a higher level when I was teaching students.

Nicole became emotional when she shared about how she was able to get through her roughest season, miscarriage and quickly thereafter, divorce. She moved to a new city and found herself back in the classroom after having left the classroom for a few years to serve as an instructional coach and assistant principal. Teaching eager second graders, many English language learners, was what she believes got her through. She knew that her energy mattered, and that they would be greatly influenced by her demeanor. With so much love in her heart, she told me how they were the ones that got her through that first-year post-divorce. Following the week two conversations with Nicole I made a note in my journal, “She knew that focusing on her students would take the focus off of her struggles.” I can see where being with students, having to be their positive leader, and receiving appreciation from them, can be an encouragement during hard times.

I can relate to the close bond she shared with her students, having returned to the classroom after having left for other positions. The culture we create in our classrooms is something within our control; it is something that we can lean on to get through hard times. My first year as an instructional coach, I was lonely and had little direction from administration. I did not know what I was supposed to do. When I asked my administrator if he wanted to meet and discuss his vision for my position, he told me I would have to make it my own, insinuating that I

would have my own way of being an instructional coach. I would find myself trying to work with teachers with no real structure or guidance. Following that stint as an instructional coach with little guidance from my administration, going back to the classroom was rewarding after two years of being on an island by myself. I formed close bonds with those students during the 2020-21 school year and keep in touch with some of them to this day.

I was able to form a positive culture with my students because I had full control of the atmosphere in the classroom. I don't think we give enough attention to the fact that leaving the classroom for roles in the building that are non-teaching roles can be lonely and a hard transition. I believe that we underestimate these big shifts because we might be within the same school or district. The change for me was difficult. I stated, "I think that when you step away from it you miss it, but you don't really know how much you missed it until you are back in it. I think that many times teachers want out to do something more or something that pays better, but sometimes in the end it is not worth it, because the gratification level is missing." This quote illuminated the reality that my time in the classroom was a more positive and rewarding experience than my time outside of the classroom.

Nicole's journey from teacher to instructional coach, then assistant principal, back to the classroom, and then back to instructional coaching offered her a unique perspective on supportive school administration and role clarity. As an instructional coach in her first setting, she didn't have full clarity about her role and responsibilities. She shares that in her second setting as instructional coach, she better understands her role, thus creating trust between her and her administration. I responded to her conversation in my journal with the following, "She has autonomy, and the trust needed to feel like she is doing good in her role. She feels respected in her current setting and trusted so that empowers her. She gets genuine and meaningful positive reinforcement." When I think about role clarity and the autonomy, or control, we exude when we

understand and have clear expectations, I realize how important this is for me to function in the workplace. I need clear structure and expectations in order to measure my effectiveness.

Through hearing her story, I understand how important culture is for educational roles in and outside of the classroom. When I was in an instructional coaching position with little definition, I could not articulate that this was the issue making things difficult for me. Now, having a better perspective, I can see from the outside looking back how detrimental a lack of a positive culture was to my success as an instructional coach.

While I have had supportive administrators through the years, during my most difficult times, the dynamic with my administrators was different. There were numerous extenuating circumstances to this reality. In my second stint as an instructional coach, I found myself working outside of my lane. I was acting as an instructional leader as opposed to an instructional coach. I realize now how harmful this was to building relationships and trust with teachers in the building. The culture of the building was one of stress and reactivity. I was working hard, but not on the things I was supposed to be working hard on. Again, looking back on this helps me better understand what happened and with my newly found mindset, I do not look back with regret and what ifs.

Work/Life Balance

I used to think that being in education and working on a school calendar schedule was a catalyst for wishing my life away. Counting down the days to school breaks can be looked at from two very different perspectives. According to Elizabeth, these breaks are what help her survive her stressful vocation. The awareness that she has knowing she will have time off to spend with her family is what keeps her going. This is a shift from thinking of the school cycle as a negative thing. I used to think that I wish I could work in a place where I could enjoy each day in a less stressful environment and not wish for an entire 9-week period away; however, I now

crave the cyclical nature of the school year. The summer respite that teachers and administrators get in order to come back fresh for a new group of students and staff. Having this school year calendar is a positive aspect of the work culture we possess as educators. I reflected during week one that, "I am thinking about how hard it is to give up the time off when considering other job opportunities outside of education." Having the ability to earn a salary while also having 10-12 weeks off each year is not commonplace in other occupations.

Nicole is a pro at leaving work at work. She prides herself on her ability to work efficiently all day so that she can leave at an appropriate hour and spend time relaxing and enjoying the things she wants to pursue with her loved ones. She believes that this strategy, not working after school until late every evening, is what enables her to be the best educator she can be for her students and colleagues. We see the term work/life balance in pop culture all the time, and it has almost become a joke for the younger generations in our workforce; however, for teachers, having time to be with family, friends, and step away from work is crucial when understanding supports during difficult times.

Rose shared that this is something she is working on in order to enhance her well-being as she continues to heal from her divorce and cancer diagnosis. I made mention of the fact that she said, "Rose stated that she is trying to find a better balance after many years of working 24/7 and that she is trying to break old habits." These habits included constantly checking emails and grading papers all hours of the night. She recognized that this had hurt relationships through the years. She maintained that she was looking for more quality time with her loved ones outside of school hours.

I now don't view counting down the days until school breaks as a bad thing anymore; I can see where these breaks are much needed for teachers to reset, take time with their loved ones, and clear their minds for a short time. I believe that having these time periods away from work is

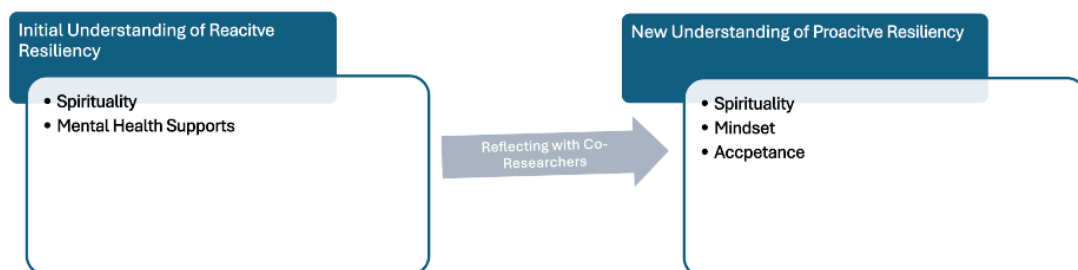
a support for teachers' longevity. This aspect of an educator's work culture is valuable for their well-being.

Research Question 2: Educator Demeanor of Resilience

The second research question is answered by an exploration that includes exhibiting a demeanor, or personal stance, of resilience that we deem helpful in times of strife. In *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brene Brown defines resiliency as “the ability to overcome adversity” (2010). Originally, I perceived that I was not resilient because I did not feel like I was able to bounce back quickly from my struggles, nor was I able to put them behind me and move forward. I shared in my initial journal, “Being a resilient educator would entail upholding the utmost level professionalism in the face of major distress.” Now I have more of a proactive and less of a reactive opinion of this term. I now see resiliency as a demeanor, or a stance. Figure 4 illustrates the organization of how my perspective has changed surrounding resiliency.

Figure 4

Organization of Initial and New Understanding of Proactive Resiliency



In the beginning my intention was to study supports that enable educators to exhibit resiliency. In my mind, these supports might be strategies relating to mindfulness and overall wellness. In addition, I considered ways that school leaders could support resilience for the teachers that work in their schools. Lastly, I considered ways that colleagues could support one

another. For example, in the initial journal entry I completed before beginning the study I stated, “I have to wonder what I am lacking that would help me be stronger as an educator going through hard times.” I discussed prayer in my writing and the strength I found in speaking with other friends I trusted about my challenges. I did not consider strength from within when I began my journey in this research. I was struck repeatedly by the ways co-researchers continually brought up spirituality, mindset, and acceptance in various ways and from different perspectives; each perspective highlighted a resilient stance.

Spirituality

Four of the six co-researchers spoke about spirituality in some capacity. This was something that I knew was important in my life as an educator, for example in initial journal entry I reflected, “I know God has a plan for my life, but I have to wonder if these difficulties are something I am supposed to endure, or make a change and escape from?” Thus, when I began this journey, I defined spirituality as my relationship with my creator. In this section I will share the ways spirituality was described as not just a relationship with a higher power, but how some denominations relating to spirituality can also create negative thoughts or attitudes about faith in a higher power.

One co-researchers spoke about how much religion served as a support for them during difficult times. Lee Ann reflected upon the spiritual mentors that were present in her life during her challenging season, her first-year teaching. I journaled in response to my discussion with her: “She said that her bible study group was super helpful to her. This spiritual mentor was important to her. Her teammates were also believers so that was good. They shared the same values and faith system. I can see where this would be huge.” I can see now that sometimes our faith can be viewed in different ways by different people.

Dawn shared that during her most difficult season she happened to be teaching in one of the easiest positions she had ever held. While she was dealing with being a foster parent, she was also teaching small groups of students in classes with no more than 4-6 students. She shared that, “When I look back and see how God worked, if I was in a regular classroom and not SPED, I probably would have wanted to quit. Only having 6 at a time-this was huge-I do think so far, the two have not collided. Mostly it is either hard at home or hard at school-God has worked a balance for me.” While I can relate to her sentiment regarding God’s hand at work, I do not believe that I experienced a trade off as it pertains to personal and work stress. From Dawn’s story, I learned that maybe I should give myself more grace when I look back at how disheartened I was during my initial journal. I had just been through a lot of challenges at once. I have come a long way when it comes to self-compassion.

What I did not expect was for one co-researcher, Rose, to articulate how much her religious background did not help her during her time of stress. Rose shared that in her experience, her religious background hurt, not helped, during her time of stress. The co-researcher shared, “Being at work-where I make the decisions, where I call the shots, where I’m in charge-made me feel strong, while being at the mercy of my family and church-staring me down and having to face my morals and values could bring me to my knees sometimes.” She went on to explain that while she did turn her back on her faith, the struggle that she went through, divorce, is not something the church she attends condones, thus making her resistant to leaning into her faith during her difficult time. Whereas Rose discussed religion but shared that it was not a support for her in her tough season, Nicole and Julia did not discuss faith as a support at all.

Faith is the belief that something good is ahead, and faith in the future, or expressions of what is to come, were woven throughout the conversations that took place surrounding spirituality. When I journaled during week three about faith, I connected it to uncertainty. I

recorded, “The question of the unknown is a huge factor in the ability to be resilient. This is certainly where faith comes in. Those that have a belief in God’s plan, or a higher power, can rely on that for home base, whereas when someone goes through something hard and they are not a believer, they don’t know where their hope lies.” I went on to reflect, “Perhaps, those without a strong faith background, this is where resiliency must come from somewhere else. Our faith gives us hope we are going to get through it. I know this has been huge for me.” I think about how much faith has influenced my decisions. I have peace from the belief that all things work for good when a higher power is in control of my life.

From my journal during week 3, I stated “My faith is something that gives me strength all the time; every day, and that definitely motivates me as an educator.” I can now clearly see where in addition to spirituality bringing me a sense of peace, spirituality is also something that might not bring everyone peace, even believers. While they might believe in a higher power, they might also lean more heavily on their inner strength, or their determined mindset.

Mindset

An additional demeanor of resiliency that a co-researcher leaned upon is not necessarily a system of faith, but one way to think about things, or a mindset. I understood mindset as a way of thinking. I knew it was important to have a growth mindset, but I did not understand mindset as it applies to ancient philosophy. A co-researcher expanded my definition of mindset to include stoicism.

Rose felt like her specific spiritual belief system evoked feelings of guilt and shared that Stoicism gave her strength. While Stoicism is not a spiritual belief system, but is more of a philosophical approach to life, this co-researcher stated that this was what helped her the most during her most challenging season in life as a mother and teacher.

According to Merriam-Webster online, stoicism is “the philosophy of the Stoics” and is an “indifference to pleasure or pain.” This philosophical approach to life leads one to accept what is and face hardships face on. The co-researcher shared that this mindset is the number one support that she leaned on during her hardship of dealing with divorce and cancer simultaneously. She knew that she was all she had and that she could not give up. I reflected on her mindset in my journal, “Rose seemed to have this unimaginably helpful perspective. This has opened my eyes to alternative supports-Stoicism rooted in ancient philosophy-this being something I had heard of but never knew anyone firsthand that relied upon it. She had tools that she mentions numerous times, tools she wishes her students possess, that she used to get through her tough seasons.” Rose said that “It saved me and my life and my sanity. It is a philosophy from Ancient Greece and Rome. Here are the basic principles: first, accept things you can’t change, second, be present, and third, resist explaining yourself.”

She shared throughout the second and third week how much this approach helped her and I could see where this mindset would have certainly helped me. I stated, “These are principles that I need to grow and cultivate in my own life in a purposeful way. They are things that I am familiar with already, but I believe will help me moving forward. Some of these things were lacking when I went through hard things.” For example, Marcus Aurelius (2003) stated that “It’s not the thing itself that troubles you, but only your judgement of it. And you can wipe this out at a moment’s notice” (8.47). How many times did I let things get to me that I could have let go and made a non-issue? I was inspired by Rose’s approach and her passion for Stoicism led me to do more research in this area.

When I connected Rose’s determination to the stories of the other co-researchers, I could see the same thread woven throughout each of their stories. Dawn was determined to support her foster children even though sacrifices had to be made, Nicole had to gather the strength each day to model a positive mindset for her young elementary students, and Elizabeth had to refocus her

attention and shift her mind to other things when the weight of the scandal was coming down on her like a ton of bricks. Julia had to keep going even when she did not want to continue, and LeeAnn utilized the support of her mentors to overcome her challenges as a new teacher to strengthen her first-year teacher mindset. In each of these cases these individuals did not shut down; they used their mindset to move forward to succeed.

One thing that stuck out to me was documented in my week four journal, “The time you put into your tough season will not be a waste.” I think that while I know I can lean on my faith in God, I also now know that I can channel principles that have stood the test of time over thousands of years. I will always lean on my faith but accepting difficult situations while also pursuing them head on will be my new approach to difficult times.

Now I see how powerful my mindset can be to my success. As I look back on what I have been through, I can easily identify times where my mindset was not one of determination, but one of exhaustion. I was trying to be everything: a good cancer patient, an appreciated instructional coach, a present mother, and a caring wife. I needed a better perspective. I needed to give myself more grace. I wish I had had the attitude that this criticism and this brain fog is only temporary, that I will get to the other side of this.

Acceptance

When I think about how much I struggled answering the question, “Why is all of this happening?” I think about how much time and energy I have spent on ruminating thoughts regarding conflicts with other staff members, the decisions I made to leave positions for other roles, and the “what ifs?” that constantly plagued me. At one point I was hoping to discuss these very questions with my co-researchers during this study. After all, are we not supposed to learn something from all of our challenges? I think I was putting a lot of pressure on myself to learn from my mistakes so that I never make them again. I did not anticipate the practice of accepting

what is to come up as many times as it did in conversations. Whether it was in the stressful moment of a workday, or accepting life altering developments, co-researchers discussed how important it was for them to accept what is as they went through their hard times.

One co-researcher shared a fascinating anecdote with me during our conversations. Rose told me about the unique behavior of buffalo as storms approach them. These animals do not run away from storms similar to cows; oppositely, they move toward storms. They face them head on because they know that they will waste energy running from them, becoming weaker. They accept what is happening and face it head-on. This concept impacted me greatly. Imagine my surprise when I randomly drove past a pasture of buffalo the very day that this story was shared with me! The owner of these magnificent creatures happened to be out caring for his herd. This was a powerful moment in my research process. Not only was I hearing this story, but I had the opportunity to see them in person. Facing adversity head on to save precious energy is a paradigm shift that I am thankful for experiencing in my self-study journey.

Nicole shared that as an academic coach she has stressful seasons. She shared that she acknowledges that these days are hard but quickly added that they are short-lived and that a lighter season is ahead. In my closing journal I concluded that maybe finding answers to all my questions from the past is not necessary at this point. I thought, “The cancer was hard while simultaneously work was hard. This is what it is. Accepting that this was a hard time in my life and not trying to figure out why, who, or how it all happened is OK. While I was hurt by others, I believe that no longer dwelling on this is what is best for me.” I think about the extreme duress Julia is under, and my problems are nothing. I feel like a healthy perspective is paramount in moving through difficult seasons.

Another contribution from co-researchers was also something I did not see coming, and that was the realization that time can heal our pain. I stated in my final journal, “It is the thought that this, too, shall pass AND the belief that when it does pass, there will be more struggles to

come. There are seasons of peace and seasons of trials.” Accepting what is, while also acknowledging that time will move us forward, is a helpful thought process. As we move further away from the struggle at hand, the phenomenon “fading effect bias” takes place. Recognizing that time can heal our pain was mentioned by all co-researchers with the exception of one, Julia. I will discuss more on Julia later in this chapter. In *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life*, author Arthur C. Brooks shares that, “Research shows that we tend to see important past events—even undesirable ones at the time—as net positives over time. This is in part because unpleasant feelings fade more than pleasant feelings do, a phenomenon known as ‘fading effect bias.’” He goes on to add, “This may sound like a cognitive error but really isn’t. Almost every transition—even the most difficult one—bears some positive fruit; we usually see and treasure it in the long run” (2022, p.195). As we move further from the stressful events that took place in our lives, we gain a more positive perspective on those events; being aware of this during the stressful event could perhaps bring comfort.

One co-researcher that had a distinct difference in her responses was Julia. Unlike the other co-researchers who were looking back on their struggle, Julia is very much still in hers. I stated in my week two journal, “The grief Julia feels, and her state of mind, is different from what the other co-researchers are sharing. She is on an entirely different level.” She is devastated by the loss of her husband who passed away tragically to cancer about a year and a half ago. This loss has left her depressed and in the depths of grief. As she continues to work as a teacher and raise their two children, she goes through the motions, in continual emotional pain from his absence. She shares that she “pretends to be OK.” She has taken steps to remove all the extras outside of teaching off her plate. In this way, she can still do her job. She has purposively pulled away from colleagues to protect herself from conversations about husbands and the fact she does not have one anymore. She is resilient in that she keeps going; however, her pain is deep and is not behind her. She did not speak of the same channels of support that the other co-researchers

shared. I believe that she struggled to accept that her husband was going to die, nor has she fully accepted that he is gone at the time of this study.

Acceptance means facing things head on and doing what has to be done despite the pain. As hard as it might be to hear during times of duress, time can help heal wounds. The co-researchers that shared their experiences with me throughout the four weeks of our journey together shed light on the importance of acceptance, facing adversity, and recognizing that time can help the healing process.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I shared that through the discussions with co-researchers I reframed my perspective on how I understand support during times of work and personal stress. In addition, reflecting on these experiences has shaped my understanding of what it means to be resilient. The strength that comes from within allows one to exhibit resiliency. The ability to face our obstacles by accepting the circumstances cultivates resiliency. In the next chapter I will share closing thoughts and implications. I will connect the research questions while also sharing the updated conceptual framework.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Moving throughout this dissertation process has been a transformative experience. When I began over the summer of 2024, I was disillusioned and raw from the fall out of what I had experienced. I decided to step down from my instructional coaching position to try something outside the field of education. One might say this was not the plot twist you would see coming from a student in the last leg of a Doctoral Program. That position did not work out, and I found myself in a place of quiet reflection after several years of the non-stop grind.

During the winter of 2025 I prepared to embark on the conversations with the co-researchers. I did not anticipate the encouragement and wisdom that I would glean from the women that I worked with through this process. With a newfound hope, I applied for a remote teaching job and was back at it once again teaching 6th grade ELA as an interim. I do believe that this full circle moment was what I needed to find closure in what had been truly transformative experience. In the final stretch of my self-study, as I was preparing my dissertation presentation for defense, I was reminded yet again of how much I miss working with such amazing teammates and mentors, how magical the culture of a classroom can be when I have full control of that atmosphere, and how far I have come regarding the accepting the events in the past.

Samaras states, “Self-study is a transparent and systematic process requiring an open, honest, and clear description of the spiral of questioning, framing, revisiting of data, and reframing of a researcher’s interpretations” (2011, p. 81). Throughout this process I have been transparent and have continued to question and reframe my thoughts and feelings regarding the research questions.

In this chapter I have included letters to my old self as well as educators who are currently struggling in a storm of their own. These letters are shown in italics.

Dear Rachel from May of 2020,

I am writing this letter to myself, to the Rachel who was sitting on the couch, sick from chemo, having just read survey responses that were cruel and unfair. I know you feel like you are drowning, and that you have failed as an instructional coach miserably. Being on the other side, I can tell you that not only is that not the truth, but the dissertation that I thought would be disheartening and negative was instead a source of great inspiration.

You don't understand how much time is necessary to adjust to change. If I could tell you anything, it would be that when the challenges come your way, keep pushing forward and do not look back. Accept what is and move forward. Do not try to understand why things have happened the way they have, worry over what others think or don't think about you, and focus on what you can do to be strong and move forward in a positive way. I know you can't see it now, but time will pass, and you will gain renewed strength and a more valuable perspective. Your path will lead you through a season of growth and change. You will learn much from your dissertation experience having a huge level of gratitude for the family, friends, and teachers that helped you get to the other side. You will learn that your thoughts are the most powerful weapon you have when faced with a struggle. You will understand that accepting what is and facing challenges head on is the best method for survival. You will feel empowered to face conflicts with others in an honest and caring way so that you may work through differences and get past conflicts. You will be thankful for this difficult season knowing that it drew you closer to God and that it led you to pursue a self-study in resiliency.

You do not know how to articulate this concept now, but you will learn that liminality is a term that psychologists use to describe uncomfortable life transitions. Do not underestimate how much you can grow from change. After working in some hard situations with some difficult dynamics, you are better off having gone through it all. While you did not feel resilient at the

time, through your research and reflection you will understand better what it means to be resilient, and you will be proud of your journey.

With Gratitude,

Your Future Self

What I learned: My Journey of Self-Study Discovery

As I look back on my self-study journey, several discoveries are clear. These include a new awareness of the importance of mentors in my life. In addition, I realized that the circle of control I have in the classroom allows me to thrive as an educator. By creating my own classroom culture, I have the ability to focus on the positives I see in the field of education as opposed to the external factors that are beyond the classroom door; the factors that are far out of my control. Lastly, discovering the importance of accepting the events of the past without judgement, and acknowledging that I can move past it without having to figure it all out, have been a turning point for me both personally and professionally.

Throughout the self-study process, relational mentors were used to categorize the co-workers that are more than colleagues, or co-workers that are friends. Teachers that collaborate with one another have a reduced perception of stress in the workplace (Wolgast and Fischer, 2017). When I have relational mentors to work closely with, I can share, learn, reflect, and grow. While formal mentorship programs can be effective and are cited throughout literature (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Ragans, 2016; Turner, et al., 2022), relational mentors are mutually beneficial to both the mentor and mentee (Ragans, 2016). These relationships foster mutual growth through conversations. Vulnerability and empathy are required when we share honestly and openly.

Trust is the basis for all healthy relationships, and the relational mentor dynamic is no exception. Through talking openly, clarity and healing can take place. In a working environment where the challenges are numerous and the stakes are high, having relational mentors is necessary

for me to work effectively and be my best self. More than just listening and giving advice, we affirm the humanity of teaching when we support one another in an open and honest way.

The gratification that comes with having the control to create a positive classroom culture is invaluable. When I was going through hard times as a teacher, I believed that the routine of the classroom kept me grounded. I had created my own classroom culture which was a loving and positive one. When I was going through hardships outside of the classroom, I believed that not having the same sense of fulfilment as an instructional coach caused me to suffer more in my struggles. The culture was not the same as it was while I was in the classroom. While teaching is challenging and hard, receiving the love and gratitude of students can make a huge difference in my overall well-being. I was overcome with emotion when I listened to one of the co-researchers share how much her students helped her transition into a new season in her life. This is one of the moments throughout the research that I will not forget.

I believed that external strategies would emerge pertaining to support for fellow educators. I did not anticipate that the strength we find from accepting our circumstances without judgement. When I think about the lesson we learn from the buffalo, facing the storm head on as opposed to running from it, I am reminded of how important it is to accept the challenges, or storms in life, and face them head on. Two of the four co-researchers were still in the midst of their struggles during this self-study. Through my reflections with them, I could see the importance of acceptance. The role of acceptance is essential for building and sustaining resilience.

To really drive this point home, I witnessed a herd of buffalo along the roadside in the area in which I was traveling on the very day that I listened to Rose's feedback. Her sharing this powerful story, along with me not so randomly coming across them in person, was certainly a powerful part of my reflection on acceptance and the strength we have within ourselves to overcome life's obstacles. I see acceptance not as resignation, but as a form of resilience. It offers

clarity and calmness as we move forward in our path through hardship, or as we look back on the hardship that we faced previously. In this study I discovered that resilience begins not with striving but with allowing. In this space, educators may find the strength they did not know they possessed.

When I think about my experiences and the ways that I understand supports for educators, I think about how important time and perspective can be. If we can maintain the belief that time will pass and the struggle dissipates, perhaps we can get through the pain more easily. In addition, if we understand how much we can grow from our challenges, maybe we can be thankful for the struggle in hopes that something good will come from it. This cycle of drawing support while also maintaining strength from within is illustrated in the following figure, figure 5.

Figure 5

Cycle of Drawing Support



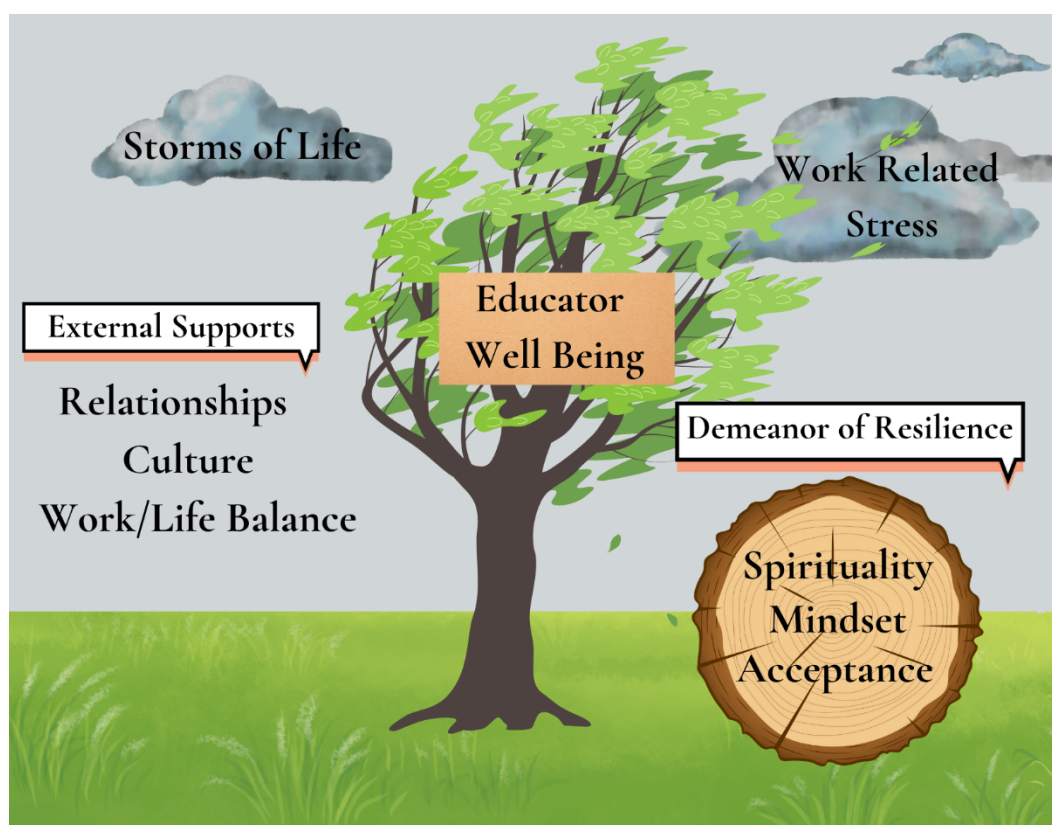
Evolution of the Conceptual Framework

The original conceptual framework was derived from what I believed were more concrete supports for teachers going through hard times. Now, I can see where more abstract ideas are in line with the reflections I gleaned through the data gathered with co-researchers throughout the self-study process. Given all this, I believe that conceptual framework might shift from an image

that includes supports, to an image that has more emphasis on aspects of the demeanor one has when exhibiting resiliency, or the tools that we draw from within ourselves, as seen below in figure 6. This newly updated framework better illustrates resiliency and supports because it balances the external supports with the aspects of a demeanor of resiliency.

Figure 6

New Conceptual Framework



What this Means: Implications

The purpose of this self-study was to examine how educators experience resilience while navigating stressful events in their personal and professional lives. Through self-study I explored my understanding of what supports helped maintain teacher resiliency through times of personal

trauma. I achieved this by examining my own personal experiences through reflective self-study research in conjunction with conversations with co-researchers. Given the purpose, two research questions were explored throughout this study. In what ways do I understand support for educators in times of stress in our personal and professional lives as I reflect with co-researchers? Also, how does reflecting with co-researchers on our experiences expand my understanding of being resilient? In this section I will discuss implications for school leaders and districts, for those supporting colleagues in times of stress, and for educators who are in their own storms.

For School Leaders and Districts

While the field of education has many challenges, it is still a rewarding and gratifying career. The culture of an organization is what cultivates an environment in which teachers can thrive in spite of hardships. As shared in the literature review, teachers share that a sense of meaning contributes to what enables them to persevere amidst the stressors of their jobs (Hartwick & Kang, 2013; Intrator, 2002; McNally et al., 2008; Nieto, 2003). Creating a positive environment is integral for a teacher's well-being.

As schools continue to face challenges around educator burnout and attrition (Chang, 2009), intentionally fostering relational mentorship through collaborative spaces and reflective practice may offer a sustainable path forward. My own resilience was both tested and strengthened through these relationships. This study highlights how critical these relationships are in supporting the whole educator.

In addition to creating and maintaining an overall positive culture and cultivating relational mentorship opportunities, there are steps administrators can take to offer support. Based on this self-study, educators who were in trusting relationships with administrators and had role clarity felt more job satisfaction than those who were not. Additionally, encouraging teachers to seek a healthy balance between their work life and personal life is key to well-being.

If you are an administrator looking to hire resilient educators, consider asking teacher candidates about a challenge they faced and how they dealt with that challenge. This would be an interview question that would allow you as the administrator to see how well the candidate approaches stressful situations. In addition to discussing resiliency during interviews, I would create systems that cultivate an open line of communication with staff members. Discussing challenges can allow you to better support the teachers and staff members working in your building. Lastly, trust is paramount. Bryk and Schneider (2002) maintain that in schools where there is a low level of relational trust, there is a negative impact on students. Having and earning the trust of your teachers cultivates a healthy working environment. If you are approachable and trustworthy, staff members will feel more comfortable sharing their struggles. In this way, they can connect with you so that you might better support them through their difficult season.

School leadership can greatly influence teacher resiliency (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). A resilient mindset is ideal for those wishing to lead a successful career in education. Modeling this for teachers is one way in which administrators can support teachers in this area. All in all, creating a positive culture and maintaining positive relationships is key for teacher well-being. Modeling a healthy attitude of resiliency can benefit both the school leader and the staff.

For Those Supporting Colleagues in Times of Stress

Supporting colleagues during tough seasons can be daunting. There are times when there are not enough words to console someone you know that is hurting. Possessing the understanding that your friendship in and of itself is a support is gratifying. This type of support is crucial for enduring hard things in life. Collegial support can provide a sense of community that teachers need during times of stress (Ragans, 2016).

Through my reflection in this self-study, I perceive that there is a wide spectrum of life stressors that educators might have to endure during their lifetimes. From cancer to death of a loved one, to the ups and downs of parenting foster children, divorce, and miscarriage, a lot of life happens during a teacher's career. Supporting one another is what allows us to continue moving forward. We must remember that a healthy level of stress is unavoidable, but toxic stress can be detrimental to our job performance and lead to burnout (Aguilar, 2018a). Encouraging a healthy mindset, reminding your colleague that this, too, shall pass, and being available to listen when they need to talk are all ways that you can support your fellow educators. If appropriate, gently reminding them the importance of acceptance might be helpful. Another specific way to be a supportive colleague is to carve out time to check on your work friend. Going out of your way on a busy workday to see how they are doing shows them that you care. Asking them how you can help them if they are feeling overwhelmed is yet another way to show that you are there for them. Perhaps covering an extra duty or grabbing them a coffee could also be a supportive gesture that will help them to achieve balance.

For Educators in their own storm

Remember your purpose and why you originally chose the field of education. We know that there is a connection between commitment to work of educators and a sense of calling to the profession, spirituality or religion, and well-being (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012). If you can articulate why you do what you do for students, perhaps you can find the good amid your struggles. Positive relationships are key to thriving in stressful situations. Educators who lean on their trusted friends articulate positive results from sharing their experiences with others.

While we can lean on supports, sometimes in the end we must make the decision to dig in and get through it in spite of our lack of resources or help. Just like the supports we use to nurture newly planted trees, we see that in the end the tree must grow strong to support itself. The

materials used to support the new tree should be removed within the first year. In many cases, planting the tree correctly is enough and staking is not necessary. In fact, not staking trees allows them to grow a deeper root system, in this way they grow to be more stable. When we apply this analogy to our own lives, we can see parallels. The sooner we can grasp the mindset required for a resilient demeanor and hold on to the things we have learned through our adverse experiences, the stronger we will be in our next chapter.

A healthy mindset is crucial for survival, but sometimes this is not enough. While change can be hard, sometimes change is necessary. Making a shift to another position within the field could offer you a fresh perspective while also giving you the opportunity to stay within the field of education. If you are in a negative working environment where you are unable to build a network of supports, and do not have the ability to control the culture in which you wish to work, consider making a move. While turning to external supports can be helpful, remember that the strength you possess is key to you overcoming your obstacles.

Strengths and Limitations

As a self-study, I can confidently say that this process allowed for a deeply personal exploration of resilience. Reflecting with co-researchers enriched the data and grounded the findings in authentic lived experiences. Working with multiple perspectives allowed me as the researcher to avoid being overly self-focused. The power of these conversations and my reflections that followed cultivated my professional growth and lead me to a classroom position that I believe will be the best fit for me at this season in my career. In addition, findings relate to current issues in education and offers accessible insights for school leaders and educators that are working to foster resilience through their practice. In closing, one of the major strengths of this study is that it demonstrates how reflective practice can be a vehicle for transformative learning and positive change.

As this self-study was bound to understanding within my own journey, a limitation to this study is that everyone's journey is different. My interpretations are shaped by my own worldview, experiences, and assumptions. While this is inherently a self-study, it does limit generalizability in that my life experiences are unique to me. The co-researchers were chosen purposefully and reflect a particular context; this may not represent the broader educator population. This study, while rich in emotional and narrative detail, lacks external verification with other data sources. In closing, while this self-study cannot offer universal conclusions, its strength lies in the honesty of reflections, the depth of the relationships with co-researchers, and its ability to make visible the often invisible work of emotional survival and resilience in the field of education.

A Quick Note to Educators in the Storm

Dear Fellow Educator,

I write this to you as Dr. Pemberton. Still learning and growing, I know I have storms yet to face, but I also know that my tree is part of a forest- and you are part of that forest too. Maybe you are just starting your journey. If you are finding yourself in the middle of a storm-whether it's in your classroom, your home, or your heart, know that you are not alone. This letter is not intended to offer quick solutions. Instead, it is an invitation to pause and reflect.

Resilience is found in the moments when you allow yourself to pause, feel, and be honest about what hurts. It is about acceptance and not defeat; it is about the truth of where you are. Give yourself permission to not have all the answers, to seek support without shame, to allow healing to take time, and to find strength in connection. You are doing sacred work but you are also human and this matters most.

With Hope,

Rachel

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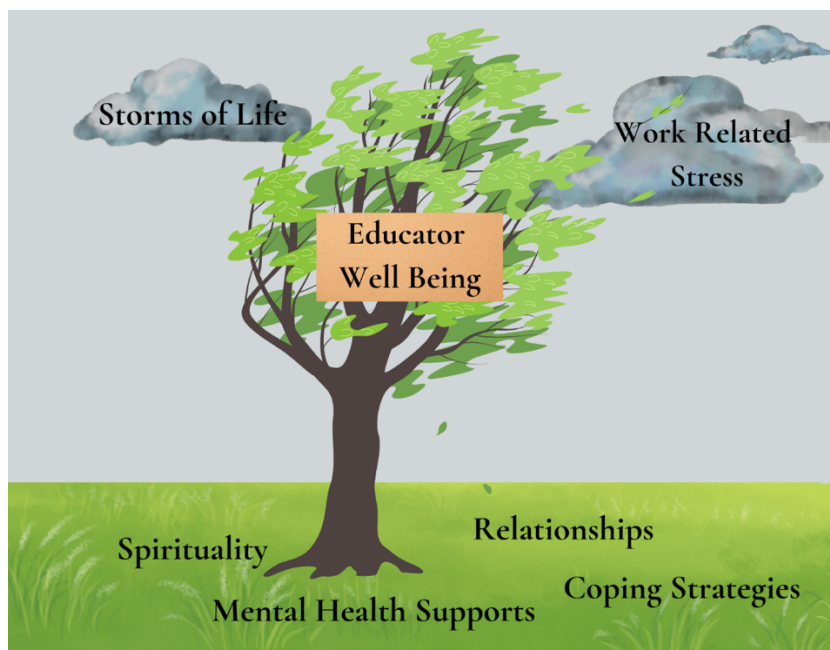
Appendix A

Co-Researcher Introductory Document

Thank you for taking part in this self-study as a co-researcher. This self-study combines the reflections of the researcher and yourself, the co-researcher.

There are two research questions that were explored throughout this study: In what ways do I understand support for educators in times of stress in our personal and professional lives as I reflect with co-researchers? Secondly, how does reflecting with these co-researchers on our experiences shape my understanding of being resilient?

During these reflective conversations, we utilized a conceptual framework that illustrates the atmospheric changes in the form of storms raging periodically around the well-being of educators.



For our initial conversation we discussed how your life relates to this tree symbolizing educator's well-being. Over the following four weeks we continued our conversations relating to resiliency in our personal and professional lives.

Please note that if you would like to take a break at any point in the conversations, you may do so. If you would like to record your thoughts without the use of the camera on Marco Polo, you may do so. The conversations will continue one on one in the app throughout the entire week and restart each Sunday with a new conversation prompt. Thank you in advance for your thoughtful and meaningful participation.

