

# THE TRAINEE TEACHER'S HANDBOOK

A COMPANION FOR INITIAL  
TEACHER TRAINING

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Learning Matters  
An imprint of SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

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New Delhi 110 044

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Cover design: Wendy Scott  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

First published in 2018 by Learning Matters Ltd

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**Library of Congress Control Number 2017957600**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-5264-2399-3 (pbk)

ISBN 978-1-5264-2398-6

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# 7

## The resilient teacher

**In this chapter we will explore:**

- **what emotional resilience looks like;**
- **ways of building emotional resilience;**
- **approaches to minimising stress.**

### Introduction

For most people there will be times when it is necessary to find strategies to cope with the requirements of working life, whatever the job level or work context. Teaching is a role which has many emotional demands and has been recognised as one of the most challenging occupations in terms of experiences of work-related anxiety and stress (Health and Safety Executive, 2016). For trainee teachers these demands may be increased as a result of the dual roles undertaken as both teacher and student. This can mean you have twice the demands, so it is important to develop strategies to build your own resilience.

### What does the resilient teacher look like?

Resilience refers to our ability to develop positive strategies to manage workload, create a work-life balance and adopt approaches to cope with events which are challenging. Emotional resilience could be described as the way we recover from events or an ability to 'bounce back' from adversity and is an essential skill for any role which presents a range of regular challenges. So what does emotional resilience look like?



Figure 7.1 The resilient teacher

## Reflection

Imagine you have just been given a very difficult assignment that you need to pass in order to progress on your course. You have already done some reading but still don't understand the topic enough to write about it. Your peers don't seem to be struggling with the assignment and you are beginning to question why you are finding it so difficult. What do you do?

Is your immediate response to tell yourself you will rise to the challenge, or do you doubt your abilities and begin to slump into despair? If it is the former then congratulations on your strong self-belief and, if the latter, don't worry – the skills you need to overcome this hurdle can be learnt.

Emotional resilience includes things like self-awareness, the ability to be reflective, a sense of humour and optimism, and, though it seems that these might simply be personality traits, there is evidence to suggest they are skills we can all develop. As they are important skills for teachers we will be exploring many of them in other chapters. In this chapter the focus will be on the three key pillars of emotional resilience.

## Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy can be defined as a person's beliefs about their capability to exercise influence over events which affect their lives. The term was developed by Albert Bandura (1977) as part of social cognitive theory which acknowledges the role of cognition and motivation in directing our

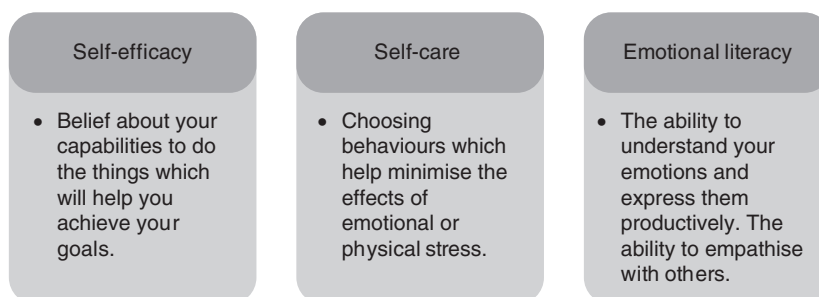


Figure 7.2 The pillars of emotional resilience

behaviours. According to Bandura, what people think, believe and feel affects how they behave and has an impact on how we motivate ourselves to achieve desired outcomes.

Bandura referred to self-efficacy as part of the 'self-system' which has a significant influence in how we perceive and respond to a range of situations as well as our ability to direct action which helps us to achieve the outcomes we want. All individuals can identify things they want to change but how they approach these challenges will differ. Individuals with a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to view challenges as problems to be mastered, whereas those with a weak sense of self-efficacy will believe that these things are beyond their capabilities and as a result may avoid difficult tasks. For example, a person with a strong sense of self-efficacy may:

- see problems as challenges;
- develop an intrinsic interest in activities;
- form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests and activities;
- recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments;
- sustain efforts in the face of failure.

On the other hand, someone with a weaker sense of self-efficacy may:

- avoid challenging tasks;
- have lower aspirations;
- have less commitment to goals;
- believe that difficult tasks and situations are beyond their capabilities;
- focus on personal failings and negative outcomes;
- lose confidence in personal abilities.

Self-efficacy is developed through experiences, emotions, imagination and observing others. The term 'mastery experiences' is used to describe self-efficacy based on enjoying success through mastering a skill or technique leading to an increased belief in our ability to achieve desired outcomes. If this is the case, the resilient teacher would be persistent in finding ways to overcome obstacles through effort and perseverance. Another influential form of experience is that described as

‘vicarious experience’ which relates to our observation of others. Seeing people we perceive as similar to ourselves achieve success through their efforts is likely to raise our own beliefs in this possibility.

Bandura also believed that we are influenced by ‘verbal persuasion’ from significant people in our lives (such as parents, teachers and managers) and these experiences can strengthen or weaken our beliefs in our ability to succeed. Based on these two points, the resilient teacher would observe and model the behaviours of other successful teachers and recognise the importance of feedback offered by the people who can provide support.

The importance of ‘imaginal experience’ is widely recognised in other fields such as sports and coaching. This refers to our ability to imagine the behaviours we want to exhibit by visualising what we want to achieve. Although this may seem like an unrealistic approach, the simple act of imagining an event allows us the opportunity to practise it in our minds and this in itself is a useful activity.

A final consideration is our emotional state. High levels of stress or anxiety can make us feel more vulnerable whereas experience of positive emotions can boost our confidence.

It is important to remember that we are not born with a level of self-efficacy that we maintain throughout our lives. Developing a strong sense of self-efficacy is something we can enhance with practice and the resilient teacher is the one who learns how to do this. Think of it as a continuum where you might start with a weak sense of self-efficacy but, through learning different ways of thinking and approaching tasks, you move through the continuum until you achieve the outcome you want.



Figure 7.3 The continuum of self-efficacy

### Activity

Think of something that really challenges your self-efficacy, for example public speaking or maybe a job interview. Write down a list of things you could do to help build your self-efficacy in relation to this challenge.

## Self-care

In simplistic terms, self-care could just mean looking after ourselves. At a very basic level this includes things such as personal hygiene, ensuring we eat healthily and dress appropriately and so on. Some people may even equate self-care with more indulgent activities, such as going on holiday or having beauty treatments. Our description will be based on the assumption that you already know how to take care of the basic things and will focus on those things which will make a difference to your experience of being both a teacher and a student.

Self-care means choosing behaviours which are supportive and balance the effects of emotional or physical stress. It includes eating healthily, exercising and getting enough sleep and it is recommended that you ensure time is built into your daily routines to ensure these things happen. It also means managing your emotions in healthy ways which meet your personal needs.

### Activity

The following list includes a number of strategies for coping with difficult times. Think about the list and rate the activities from 1 to 10 (1 being 'this doesn't/wouldn't work at all for me' and 10 being 'this works/could work really well for me').

- Taking a tea/coffee break
- Doing a few yoga poses
- Taking a walk in the fresh air
- Doing a challenging physical exercise like running
- Reading something you are interested in
- Sharing ideas, thoughts with others
- Singing
- Drawing
- Meditating

The list is not intended to be a guide – the real object of that exercise is to get you thinking about what works for you. Any other activity which gets you off the treadmill for a short period of time will do the trick.

## Emotional literacy

Emotional literacy refers to our ability to express our feelings by acknowledging and naming emotions as well as our capacity to listen to and empathise with others; this is closely linked to the concept of emotional intelligence. According to Goleman emotional intelligence refers to *Being able to rein in emotional impulse; to read another's innermost feelings; to handle relationships smoothly* (Goleman, 1996: xiii). Developing these skills has the potential to improve communication, empathy and relationships, skills which are essential for professionals whose roles involve day-to-day contact with a diverse range of individuals.





Figure 7.4 The hamster wheel

There are four key elements to emotional intelligence:

- **Self-awareness** – knowing what we are feeling and understanding the impact this may have on others.
- **Self-regulation** – being able to direct emotions in a way that anticipates consequences (avoiding acting on impulse).
- **Motivation** – using emotions to achieve goals, enjoy learning and persevere in the face of obstacles.
- **Empathy** – understanding and sensing the feelings of others.
- **Social skills** – managing relationships and prompting desired responses from others.

It is likely that you will face a number of challenges during your training and it is very important that you develop some strategies to help you deal with those challenges in productive ways. Think about the events which have the potential to cause you anxiety, for example passing assessments or being observed on your teaching, and try to anticipate the ways in which you can manage these events so that you achieve the most successful outcome. This might mean practical preparation, such as ensuring you read relevant literature and prepare thoroughly for teaching, but it can also mean managing your emotional state to ensure that events are not hijacked by unexpected emotional responses.

Adopting this approach will help you to feel in control of things which in turn will reduce any anxiety you might be experiencing. However, there may be some things that you struggle to let go of; if that is the case, try working through the ‘worry decision tree’ as a way of calming yourself. This is a simple technique which is helpful in focusing energy on the things we can do something about.

The technique involves writing down whatever is worrying you then answering the following questions:

Is there anything I can do about this?

If the answer is ‘yes’, work out what to do or how to find out what to do and make a list.

If the answer is ‘no’, stop worrying and distract yourself.

Next, ask yourself if there is anything you can do right now.

If the answer is 'yes' then write down what you could do and do it now. Then stop worrying and distract yourself.

If the answer is 'no', plan what you could do and when. Then stop worrying and distract yourself.

Adapter from Butler and Hope (2007)

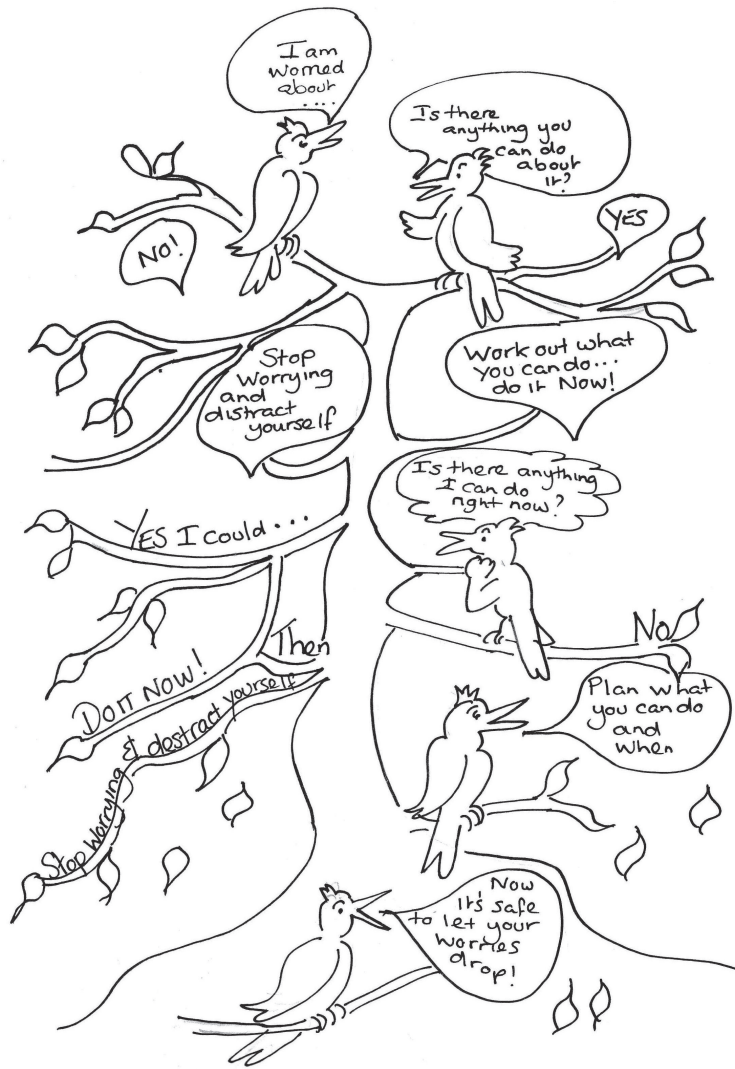


Figure 7.5 The worry decision tree

## Managing stress

The resilient teacher is able to manage their workload in ways which allow time to do things outside of work and thereby manage overall stress. While it can be very tempting to spend all of your

waking hours on ensuring you are on top of things, this approach is not sustainable and ultimately will make you less effective in your role. In Chapter 2 we introduced you to some strategies you could use to manage your time effectively and would recommend that you select some of those strategies to try to find approaches that work for you.

According to the Health and Safety Executive (2016) over 11 million work days were lost due to stress and this accounted for 45 per cent of working days lost due to ill health. These statistics also highlight that stress was more prevalent in public service industries including education. This might paint a somewhat depressing picture but it is important to remember that you have some control over your response to stress and if you have an awareness of coping strategies from the outset you are much more likely to overcome any hurdles which present themselves.

## Your feelings are important

It is very easy to fall into the trap of taking care of others and neglecting ourselves. This approach is prevalent in working environments where the welfare of others is a priority. Your fundamental values in relation to teaching are very likely to include caring for your students, being aware of their well-being and ensuring that you support their development. These are sound principles on which to base your practice, so long as you remember that you also need to apply them to yourself. It is very important that we manage our own well-being as, without this, we are unable to do the same for others. You are not a robot, you too have emotions which will affect your responses to situations differently on different days and while you may think that this is something you just have to hide so that you can get on with your job, it is worth remembering that, however good your acting skills, some of what you are thinking and feeling will impact on the classroom environment. There is a popular quote by Ginott which illustrates this eloquently:

*I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.*

(Ginott, 1972: 15, 16)

### Reflection

Take a moment and think about all the feelings you had yesterday - what do you notice? Name the emotions you felt and think about how they influenced your behaviour. This might be a useful thing to record in your reflective journal.

Because you are interacting with different people all day long, a key part of teaching is learning how to manage relationships. To do this you do need to acknowledge how you are feeling and work out what strategies help you in situations you find difficult. Keeping a reflective log is useful here as it will help you to establish patterns. Remember to log how you felt about particular interactions,

what behaviour those feelings prompted and then how you felt about your own behaviour. There are some strategies you can implement to help you cope in more difficult situations – the reading at the end of this chapter will be helpful for that. Some initial things to try are:

- **Breathing.** This does sound obvious but calming your breathing really does help calm your mood. Try the simple 7-11 technique: breathe in through the nose to the count of seven and breathe out of the mouth to the count of 11. It takes some practice but when you have the technique you will notice an impact.
- **Pausing.** Don't always respond to things immediately. If something has provoked an unhelpful emotion, for example an email or a comment from someone, then leave it for a while and go back to it when you feel calmer.
- **Talking to someone.** Your mentor will be helpful if they are around but you will find that other people are often willing to listen and may be able to offer helpful advice. Be mindful of other people's space though – it isn't recommended that you lunge at the first person you meet! Select carefully and ask if the other person has time for a quick chat. People are generally very understanding about the difficulties you will be facing – after all, they will have been through them themselves.

## Emotional triggers



Figure 7.6 Mirror, mirror

We all have triggers for certain emotions which tend to provoke well-rehearsed responses. Some common triggers are:

- **Striving for perfection.** Getting frustrated if a lesson doesn't go well is normal but also remember that there is a lot to be learnt from your mistakes and a constant drive for perfection will simply make you feel inadequate. Think about it – *are you perfect?* I guess that 90 per cent of people will answer 'no' to that question (and the other 10 per cent may want to consider the traits of narcissism). *You are not perfect, we are not perfect, embrace the imperfection* and use it as an opportunity to continue to develop your practice.
- **Always trying harder.** If your students don't understand, you spend longer planning your lessons, if the 'stuff to do' list expands, you stay up later trying to get through it. This can become a vicious circle as it will simply make you more tired and in the long run less effective. *If what you are currently doing isn't working, don't do more of it – try something else.*
- **Staying strong.** The nature of working closely with other people means we feel we are letting others down if we don't do something. This can lead us to going to work when we are ill or not admitting it when we are struggling with something so that pressures begin to build up inside us. *Acknowledge your weaknesses and give yourself a break.*

## Work-life balance



Figure 7.7 Work-life balance

Learning to become a teacher may be one of the most rewarding things you do. It is an emotional journey but also a very rewarding one. You will develop a lot of skills and learn new things, many of them about yourself. It is important that you make the most of the opportunity but it is also important to remember that this is not all there is. Other aspects of your life are what make you the person you are and in turn those interests and passions will make you a better teacher. Teaching can enhance your life and your life can enhance your teaching so it is very important that you make time for it. Some of the advice in this and other chapters will help you to organise your time more

effectively and manage some of the emotions you will be experiencing. This should help to make the journey a more pleasant one but most of all it should allow you to make this a part, rather than the whole, of your life.

## Things to think about

In this chapter we have explored the ways in which you can develop the skills of emotional resilience. Are there any situations you might find challenging? If so, which of the techniques covered in this chapter could you try? The only way to develop emotional resilience is through experience and practice so make a commitment to try something that will help you to develop positive thoughts and behaviours. We have included a goal-setting template at the end of the chapter so that you have somewhere to log some individual goals based on your reading of this and the previous six chapters.

### In a nutshell

This resource can be photocopied and used as a revision tool or a prompt for discussion with your peers.

#### Self-efficacy

This describes a person's beliefs about their capability to exercise influence over their lives. The term was outlined by Bandura (1977) to explain the way our thoughts and feelings affect how we motivate ourselves to achieve outcomes. Bandura outlined the differences in the ways individuals might respond to events if they had a 'strong' or 'weak' sense of self-efficacy.

'Strong'	'Weak'
Problems seen as challenges	Avoid challenging tasks
Intrinsic interest in activities	Have lower aspirations
Sense of commitment to interests	Less commitment to goals
Recover quickly from setbacks	See difficult tasks as beyond them
Sustain efforts in the face of failure	Focus on personal failings and negative outcomes
	Less confidence in personal abilities

Source: Bandura (1977).

#### Putting it into practice

*Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you're right.* This famous quote, accredited to Henry Ford, explains the concept of self-efficacy in a nutshell. Try the following to help develop your self-efficacy.

**Take baby steps.** If you see a task as overwhelming, break it down into small steps and enjoy the success of achieving each one.

**Remember past success.** If you think you can't do something . . . think about if there was a time when you could. Remember this success.

**Visualise.** Imagine yourself carrying out a particular task or behaviour successfully. See and feel what that is like – if you can visualise it, the chances are you can do it.

**Recognise self-doubt.** Notice self-doubt and accept it for what it is. This isn't a truth or a fact, it is simply a perception. If you can doubt yourself, you can also believe in yourself.

**Get support.** If you don't know where to start, talk to someone you trust. Ask what they would do then decide on your own approach.

## Personal development goals

Use this space to set some initial goals for yourself. Don't be too ambitious – there will be plenty of time for that as your training progresses. Try to be specific, so think about what the goal will 'look like' when you have achieved it and how it will be measured.

<b>Goals and Deadlines</b> <i>(What do you want to achieve? By when?)</i>
<b>Strategies</b> <i>(How will you achieve these goals?)</i>
<b>Success</b> <i>(How will you know you have achieved the goal(s)?)</i>

## Suggestions for further reading

**Butler, G and Hope, T** (2007) *Manage Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide*, 2nd edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Goleman, G** (1996) *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. London: Bloomsbury.

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