

**AN INQUIRY INTO TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AROUND BUILDING  
RESILIENCE AND THE IMPACT ON TEACHING PRACTICE**

**Brenda Mykytiuk**

A Project

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies,  
Concordia University of Edmonton

In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree

**Master of Education**

**Concordia University of Edmonton**

**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

Edmonton, Alberta

**AN INQUIRY INTO TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AROUND BUILDING  
RESILIENCE AND THE IMPACT ON TEACHING PRACTICE**

**Brenda Mykytiuk**

**Approved:**

*Simmee Chung* [original signature on file]

---

**Supervisor: Simmee Chung, Ph.D**

**Date: March 20, 2020**

*Brent Bradford* [original signature on file]

---

**Committee Member: Brent Bradford, Ph.D**

**Date: March 20, 2020**

  
**Dean of Graduate Studies: Edgar Schmidt, DSocSci**

**Date: April 14, 2020**

## **Dedication**

This research study is dedicated to all educators as they navigate through life challenges while building resilience.

No matter how bleak things may look, there is always hope.

Remember to keep pushing forward.

## Abstract

Resilience is an emerging concept within education. While teachers have a prescribed or mandated curriculum to teach, the life experiences of teachers inevitably shape the “other” curricula that are being lived out alongside students. By attending to two teacher-participants’ curriculum-making in regards to their storied experiences around building and fostering resiliency, this study strives to go “beyond the mandated curriculum” (Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016, p. 294). Currently, research on teachers’ resiliency and how this impacts their teaching practice is limited, therefore the need for this research study becomes more critical (Gu & Day, 2013; Shussler et al. 2018). Research questions explored in this study are: How is resilience defined? What does it mean to build resiliency? Does building resiliency impact or shape one’s teaching practice? How might teacher leaders or administrators support teachers’ and students in more attentive ways? Through semi-structured interviews with two teacher participants, the findings in this paper include key themes such as: defining resilience; the role of physical activity; the importance of relationships and role models. This research study explored how these teacher participants have faced life challenges or traumatic events which have shaped their lives and teaching practices. Coming alongside these participants, the researcher (a teacher leader) also shares how this study has shaped her thinking as a mother, leader, and colleague.

**Keywords:** *resilience, resiliency, life challenges, trauma, learning, teaching, life experiences, curriculum making, education, teachers, teacher leaders*

## Acknowledgements

This research study was made possible by the support and love of numerous individuals. I would like to show special gratitude to the following people:

To my superintendent, Neil O'Shea, who spoke to me about the Concordia program and encouraged me to apply. Thank you for seeing the potential in me and giving me the initial push to get started.

To my supervisor, Dr. Simmee Chung, for all of your patience, understanding and support. You have a wonderful way with words and make things sound so eloquent. Your encouragement made me believe that anything was possible. Thank you for investing so much time in me and this project. I was blessed to have you as a supervisor.

To my two Concordia cohorts who worked alongside me during this journey. It was through everyone's encouragement, laughs, entertaining Graphic Interchange Formats (GIFs) and support that helped me get through. Thank goodness for emails, texts and WhatsApp.

To my participants, Brooke and Norman. Thank you for sharing your personal lived experiences with me and your journey of resilience. Your stories were powerful and will help others.

To my family, friends, and coworkers. Thank you for being there for me and giving me space when I would say, "I need to work on my masters."

To my husband, Tom. Thank you for supporting me in every possible way. I could have never done this without you. Thanks for listening to my ideas and having those professional conversations.

To my children, Veronica and Michael. Thank you for understanding when I had deadlines to complete and our cuddle time was shortened. I enjoyed our "family time" completing my assignments while you worked on homework as well. It was a way that we could all be together.

## Table of Contents

<b>Dedication</b> .....	iii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	v
<b>Research Context</b> .....	1
<b>Research Aims and Objectives</b> .....	2
<b>Related Literature</b> .....	5
<b>Definitions of Resilience</b> .....	5
<b>Teachers’ Roles in Shaping Resilience</b> .....	6
<b>Conceptualizations of Resilience</b> .....	8
<b>The Connection between Trauma and Resilience</b> .....	9
<b>Conceptualizations of Curriculum</b> .....	10
<b>Methodology</b> .....	11
<b>Principals</b> .....	12
<b>Participants</b> .....	13
<b>Participant 1 - Brooke</b> .....	14
<b>Getting to know Brooke.</b> .....	14
<b>Participant 2- Norman</b> .....	15
<b>Getting to know Norman.</b> .....	15
<b>Key Findings</b> .....	17
<b>Theme 1 - Participants’ Personal Definitions of Resilience</b> .....	18
<b>Theme 2 - The Importance of Physical Activity</b> .....	19
<b>Theme 3 - Importance of Relationships</b> .....	20
<b>Theme 4 - Becoming a Role Model</b> .....	21
<b>Theme 5 - Waning Resilience</b> .....	21
<b>Theme 6 - Interactions with Students</b> .....	22
<b>Key Learnings</b> .....	24
<b>As a Mother</b> .....	25
<b>As a Leader</b> .....	25
<b>As a Colleague</b> .....	26
<b>Next Steps and Concluding Thoughts</b> .....	27
<b>References</b> .....	30

## Research Context

When I find my resilience is fading, I look at my tattoo of an arrow and I am reminded that even something as strong and powerful as an arrow needs to move backwards before it moves forwards. (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020)

These words from one teacher-participant, Brooke<sup>1</sup>, resonate as I reflect on my experiences as a new leader in a school situated in northern Alberta. For her, the arrow symbolizes an ongoing journey of resilience. The metaphor is significant. As I came alongside Brooke and another teacher-participant in this research, I began to consider my personal journey. I was encouraged to inquire more deeply into my understandings and experiences around building resilience as a former student myself, teacher, and now a teacher leader and researcher.

Initially before I engaged in this research study, I thought about the context of my school landscape. I often wondered about what the differences were between those students who soared, and those who struggled. I was surprised by the number of students with complex backgrounds, many who experienced stressful life challenges and traumatic events, and yet - still came to school every day. As a new teacher leader (i.e., school administrator), I wondered how I could help all students reach their full potential and have a growth mindset. I pondered how some of these students flourished despite their ongoing issues. I thought about what teachers were doing in order to help their students develop and learn.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brooke is used as a pseudonym to protect the participant's identity.

Like the arrow metaphor that Brooke shared in our conversation, I wondered, how does one shift from a backward momentum of being in the midst of difficult life challenges, to composing forward looking stories or stories of resilience? These questions provoked me to look inward and reflect on the experiences that have helped shape me into the individual and educator that I am today. Upon reflection, I realized, my close knit and loving family were factors that gave me perseverance and a safety net to fall back on when I hit roadblocks, especially when faced with life challenges. Recognizing that these stories around family and stability were sustaining stories for me, I was able to move forward. Reflecting on my experiences around resilience in my role as a teacher leader, I realized that if I want to help more students thrive, I need to attend more closely and deeply into the storied experiences of other educators and colleagues.

### **Research Aims and Objectives**

The need for this study is important as current research on teachers' resiliency and how this impacts their teaching practice is limited. As Gu and Day (2013) contended:

To date... there has been little research which has investigated the ways in which teachers' capacity to be resilient may be nurtured, sustained or eroded over time as they experience different conditions in their work and lives. (p. 22)

Schussler et al. (2018) echoed the need for this research with teachers as they stated that resilience has been studied primarily for "at-risk children and youth" but "far less research has examined resilience among teachers" (p. 3). In 2013, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) completed a five-year study on beginning teachers looking at attrition rates and who have left the profession. One of the major findings was that

beginning teachers required more support at the start of their career. Moreover, new teachers were found to enter the classroom excited, positive and energized but their spirits wane as challenges, changes or barriers come into play (ATA, 2013). However, Gu and Day (2013) also showed that veteran teachers close to retirement may experience a decline in their resilience and shift of support. This important information illustrated the reasons why research focusing on teacher resilience is worthy of continued attention. Current school environments increasingly have student populations from complex backgrounds and home environments. There is a growing sentiment that teachers may only have a “ten-year old shelf life” and will need to move on due to compassion fatigue. Furthermore, statistical data points to the need for a better understanding of resilience. For example, when considering suicide rates, Statistics Canada (2016) reported:

- Approximately 11 people die by suicide each day
- Approximately 4000 deaths by suicide per year
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth and young adults (15-34 years)

Hence, the need for more educational information on mental health and resilience is vital. As educators, it is incumbent on us to understand more of the research surrounding teachers’ sense of resiliency, both in and outside of schools.

The tone of the classroom is largely shaped by teachers and leaders in the school. Students are quick to pick up on the emotions of their teachers and school leaders. I wonder if when teachers are compassionate, supportive, and look forward to going to work, these positive attitudes are reflected in the classroom environment. Likewise, if

teachers are feeling overwhelmed and showing anxiety, does this have a negative impact on students.

As I strived to meet the expectations of having all students reach their full potential, I thought about the life experiences we bring as educators, which inevitably shapes the learning that occurs in the classroom. The relationships that we develop and nurture help create a learning atmosphere where students feel safe, welcomed and cared for. Further to this, to foster resilience among our students, I began to wonder if teachers themselves have experiences around resilience that shape their teaching practices and interactions with pupils. I wanted to focus on teachers' experiences around the life challenges they faced and how this influenced the person they are now. In thinking about these questions, this study aimed to explore what resilience meant to teachers (participants) and how these experiences have shaped or impacted their learning and teaching. Other research questions include:

- How is resilience defined?
- What does it mean to build resiliency?
- Does building resiliency impact or shape one's teaching practice? If so, in what ways?
- By attending to the lived experiences around resiliency, how might I support teachers in schools?

My hope for this research study is to inform my understanding as an administrative leader (and potentially other teacher leaders) of how resilience can be developed and nurtured among teachers. By providing safe inquiry spaces to share their storied experiences, teachers will be able to communicate how these experiences around

building resilience have shaped their teaching practices. Moreover, this research study aimed to inform teacher leaders on how we might attend more closely to teachers' lived experiences in order to best support teachers, students, and the school community.

### **Related Literature**

As awareness of resilience grows in society, additional research is being conducted focusing on this concept. In education, although studies have focused on student learning and resilience, minimal research and literature exists concerning teachers' perspectives and experiences around resilience. My first focus was to explore the definitions of resilience and factors that may influence resiliency. Second, I looked at literature that presented different roles teachers may play in promoting resilience. Third, I examined the growing connection between trauma and resilience. Lastly, I looked at existing literature on teachers' conceptualizations of resilience and curriculum.

### **Definitions of Resilience**

Recent research suggested resilience has gained traction in the education world. Mirza and Arif (2018) postulated that "research on interventions to create resilience is gaining importance as evidence builds... that resilience processes can be identified and changed." (p. 36). This prevalence reflects a growing awareness that students face increasingly complex social, identity, and emotional challenges; these complexities are compounded by the ever present influence of technology and social media. The Alberta Government (2019) produced a "Well-Being and Resiliency" framework and defined resiliency as, "the ability to maintain or quickly return to a state of well-being, even in the face of significant hardship, adversity or stress" (p. 12).

In studying the literature, I wonder if teachers needed to have a sense of resilience themselves in order to attend to, or possibly teach/model a sense of resiliency with their students. Current literature has noted that there is no single wellspring for the source of resilience. Singh (2018) explained that “resilience is not a genetic trait. It is derived from the ways that children learn to think and act when faced with obstacles large or small” (p. 313). Adding to this, Singh (2018) provided an accurate analogy about resilience describing it as, “...not just about ‘bouncing back’. It’s about ‘bouncing forward’” (p. 312). More to this, they note that the idea is much more complex and identified what we have “learned from the process in order to become stronger and better at tackling the next challenge” (Singh, 2018, p. 312). How teachers “bounce back” and thrive requires further investigation, along with the subsequent impact on student learning. Muller, Dodd, and Fiala (2014) stated that the research into resiliency has shifted from “individual and environmental protective factors” to key elements “focusing on how to promote positive characteristics to create an environment where both children and teachers can thrive” (p. 548). Likewise, Mirza and Arif (2018) defined the notion of resilience as “the ability to survive in tough circumstances” (p. 34).

### **Teachers’ Roles in Shaping Resilience**

In schools, teachers influence and interact closely with students on a daily basis. Therefore, teachers’ positive mental health is crucial. Mirza and Arif (2018) discussed how the “presence of positive key adult relationships is important in the literature on resiliency” (p. 34). They shared how teachers are integral in providing this positive adult relationship either themselves and/or enabling these relationships with other adults. Teachers who have developed personal resilience, or understand how to teach the

skills that develop resiliency, can foster it in the classroom and teach the skills needed for children at risk (Mirza and Arif, 2018, p. 47). In reviewing the related literature on resilience, I noticed the pivotal role teachers play in building these skills. I began to wonder how these skills are developed, taught, and/or enabled among teachers. Despite the importance of these questions, Gu and Day (2013) observed that while “resilience among children has been well researched, there remains limited empirical work on resilience in teachers.” (p. 25). Likewise, Vance, Pendergast, and Garvis (2015) recognized that “explicit understanding of how to utilize resilience skills may enhance teacher’s professional capacity in the school context” (as cited in Papatraianou, Levine, & West, 2014, p. 202).

Mirza and Arif (2018) contended that “teachers can foster resiliency characteristics among at risk students by providing them a protective mechanism aiming at developing protective factors contributing towards resilience” (p. 45). Acknowledging that teachers have developed resilience, researchers have suggested that they need to draw on their personal experiences and impart these skills to their students (Mirza and Arif, 2018, p. 45). Additionally, Mirza and Arif (2018) argued that “...some school based programs and interventions effectively foster resilience by building specific individual characteristics like emotional regulation, empathy, optimism, self-esteem, self-efficacy and problem solving skills” (p.35). Based on the surrounding literature, an essential part of this research examined how the participants’ experiences impact their teaching practices and subsequently, their students.

## Conceptualizations of Resilience

Vance, Pendergast, and Garvis (2015) conducted an 18-month study with seven high school teachers. From their research, it was clear teachers have a generalized concept of resilience but required “prompting, reflection and deconstruction in order to identify their own explicit skills” (p. 199). Vance et al. (2015) grouped resilience for teachers into three co-groups. The three clusters included, “confidence, self-efficacy and being able to cope”, “persistence, problem-solving and coping”, and “relationships and connectedness” (Vance et al, 2015, p. 199-201).

Gu and Day (2013) conducted a study involving 300 teachers over a three year period and separated them into three groups of early, middle and late teaching based on the number of years of teaching experience. According to Gu and Day:

... teacher resilience is not primarily associated with the capacity to ‘bounce back’ or recover from highly traumatic experiences and events but, rather, the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which teachers teach. (p. 26)

Evidently, working conditions matter (Gu & Day, 2013). Additionally, more veteran teachers have a greater difficulty bouncing back. According to Gu & Day (2013), “44% of teachers in their final phase of their professional lives reported a diminishing sense of resilience and their struggle to teach to their best” (p.28). Further highlighting the important roles that educators play in each other’s lives, Gu and Day (2013) noted “trusting relationship between teachers in particular, was of vital importance in building their collective sense of resilience” (p. 37). Clearly, the existing literature does not hold a

definitive answer for what resilience means for educators as a collective, thus, this further demonstrates the importance of this research study to examine teachers' individual understandings and storied experiences.

### **The Connection between Trauma and Resilience**

Children who have experienced trauma from abuse and/or neglect may have significant classroom struggle or resistance to learning as a result of trauma's effects on a child's self-regulatory capacities and relational abilities. (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2018, p. 117)

Related literature has suggested a growing connection between trauma and resilience. The quote previously mentioned by Brunzell and colleagues (2018) provided a foundation for action research into trauma-affected students and informed the development of a school setting that understands and accommodates them. Brunzell et al. (2018) highlighted the influence educators have in mitigating the impacts of trauma. Frydman and Mayor (2017) described how this trauma is reflected in classroom behaviour. They state, "the manifested trauma symptoms of these students have been widely documented and include self-isolation, aggression, and attentional deficit and hyperactivity, producing individual and school wide difficulties" (p. 238). Given that disruptive classroom behaviour masks this deeper issue, the classroom offers a place to implement strategies that enable students to cope with their trauma and learn despite this stress (Frydman & Mayor, 2017). Additionally, Sitler (2009) recommended, "developing a pedagogy of awareness can help a teacher to reframe perceptions and consequently,

help disengaged or difficult students reinvest in their learning” (p. 119). Likewise, Banks and Meyer (2017) offered the following:

Essentially, when non-verbal strategies are encouraged to relieve stress in the academic setting students exposed to trauma are more likely to exhibit less explosive behaviors as a response to stress. (p. 70)

Based on these understandings of how trauma affects learning, it is incumbent upon schools and educators to develop, foster, and facilitate resilience among students at risk in order to enable their success in school and life.

### **Conceptualizations of Curriculum**

Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) have advanced the notion that teachers must be thought of as “curriculum makers.” Notably, they share:

Teachers are in the best position to see the full range of curricula that students experience at school and to gauge their effects. Subject matter experts operating outside classrooms might be able to generate lists of concepts or ‘standards’ they would like to see included in mandated curricula, but those lists can never account for all, or even most, of the learning happening in schools. (Rosiek & Clandinin, 2016, p. 297)

Teachers adapt the curriculum to meet the various needs of the students beyond the planned curriculum creating what Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) described as the “enacted” curriculum. Aoki (1993) explored another pedagogy by creating his description of the “lived” curriculum in classrooms, which for teachers, “is a world of face-to-face living” (p. 258). In viewing teachers as being “curriculum makers,” we need

to attend to a multiplicity of curriculums. For example, the “hidden” curriculum as described by Rosiek and Clandinin (2016) reflected the nuances of teacher’s perceptions and world views and commensurate effect on students. Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997) connected the teacher’s role in curriculum delivery and the influences they have on “lives in the classroom, outside the classroom and in their personal lives” (p. 666). As this research study inquires into the curriculum making of two teacher participants, I hope to better understand their storied experiences around resilience through these broader understandings of curriculum.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the research was to attend to personal narratives from two teachers to inquire into their experiences with life challenges and stories of resilience. The research was conducted in a rural, public school division in northern Alberta. Employing qualitative research, I interviewed two participants, Brooke and Norman<sup>2</sup>, guided by aspects of narrative inquiry. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) identified the growing use of narrative inquiry in educational research based on the concept that “humans are storytelling organisms”, and “the study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). Narrative inquiry is “the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). I was also interested in narrative inquiry as this methodology encourages both researcher and participant to listen and share their lived experiences; these shared narratives help further inform one’s research questions/puzzles.

---

<sup>2</sup> Brooke and Norman are used as pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities.

The semi-structured interviews included open ended questions that allowed for personal reflection, flexibility and the opportunity to probe further when needed; this approach allowed the participants to be more relaxed and comfortable when sharing their experiences. This research study began by obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Board, a superintendent, and four principals, recruiting two teacher-participants, and finally conducting the interviews. After the recorded interviews were conducted, they were transcribed.

After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board, the next step was to get approval from the Superintendent of the selected school division where participants worked. With the Superintendent, I outlined the structure of my research, who would be involved, and shared the *Information Letter and Consent Form* for the district where participants would be recruited and selected from. The Superintendent was able to ask questions and get clarification on any details. The *Information Letter* identified myself as the primary investigator and Dr, Simmee Chung as my supervisor. The letter included the following five headings:

1. What is this research study?
2. What is the nature of this inquiry?
3. How do I participate?
4. Further questions and follow up.
5. What about my privacy?

## **Principals**

Once signed consent was granted by the Superintendent of the selected school division, careful consideration was taken into which four schools would be sent both an

*Information Letter* and the *Consent Form for School Principals*. When targeting school sites for recruitment, I considered the diversity of positions at the schools, the grades that were taught at the school, and school location. The *Information Letter for School Principals* were emailed out to the principals of four schools. This information letter mirrored the one that was sent to the district and outlined the same questions. After all of the principals agreed to have the *Information Letter for Participants* distributed to their teachers, I contacted principals individually to check if they required further information or had any further questions about the study.

### **Participants**

After the principals gave consent, I emailed the *Information Letter for Participants* and consent for participants to the participating schools. The responses varied from “yes” to “if you don’t have enough participants then ask me.” In evaluating the responses, I considered the age of the participants, their role in their respective schools, backgrounds, and their anonymity. Originally, I did not anticipate such a high level of participant interest, so it was difficult to choose the potential subjects. After careful consideration with the outlined criteria listed above, I selected two of the potential candidates and set up interview dates and locations. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional inquiry space, I analyzed participants’ storied experiences with attention to “sociality, temporality, and place” (p. 95). This structure helped me explore in greater detail the following: personal and social aspects of experiences; past, present, and future experiences; and the situation and place(s) which may impact experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 97). Key findings, including themes, were identified in the analysis

of the data. Interim field text was brought back to participants and negotiated with them before coming to the final research text.

### **Participant 1 - Brooke**

Participant 1, Brooke, was keen about the research. She was interested in participating in this study because she had “overcome some of the obstacles in [her] life so [she could] be a role model for students as well” (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020). Prior to the interview, we discussed the process and I explained the nature of the research. We then agreed to a mutual date and time for the interview. I invited Brooke to do the interview at my home to help make her feel more comfortable. Beforehand, I gave her the questions that would be asked during our interview. Brooke had expressed that it was sometimes difficult for her to think on the spot so she needed time to process information before providing answers. Before beginning the interview, I shared information about myself and explained that if at any time she became uncomfortable, she could ask to stop. I reminded her she was free to withdraw or stop her participation at any time. Also, she did not have to answer questions if she did not wish to. Once Brooke was ready, we began. I asked for consent to record the conversation which I told her would later be transcribed. A few days after the interview, Brooke provided me with three pages of notes of things that she wanted to add to her responses.

#### **Getting to know Brooke.**

In conversation with Brooke, she described her upbringing as stable until she reached her teenage years. Brooke and her brother were part of a large extended family. She recalled how family was an important facet of their lives. When she was in grade ten things changed after her parents divorced and she moved from her quiet rural home to the

city. Brooke expressed how it was a difficult transition moving from a rural to an urban community and experienced the loss of friends and separation from her extended family due to the relocation. Thinking back to that time, Brooke remembers being bullied. She remembers her mom being there for her and saying, “You’re fine the way you are and it’s something that others need to learn to deal with” (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020). During this transitional time, Brooke was not able to see her father for many years. She did have a friend that became a father figure but he was killed by a drunk driver over ten years ago. Brooke’s storied experiences shaped her disposition to help others. She shared how she always enjoyed coaching and looked to teaching as a career. She wanted to mentor and work with children.

### **Participant 2- Norman**

Participant 2, Norman, was chosen because of his role and background working with diverse students considered at risk. Norman agreed to participate in an interview because he wanted to share his knowledge and firsthand experiences about being resilient. We agreed to a mutual time and location. We decided on a more central place to meet. Prior to the interview, I also explained the process and informed him about the nature of the research. I was pleased by the ease of the process and how Norman provided in-depth responses to the questions. It was a fluid conversation. Our interview went over the scheduled sixty minute time frame.

#### **Getting to know Norman.**

Growing up, Norman described his family as being very stable, that is, until grade seven. He remembered moving frequently with his siblings, living in poverty (sometimes with the power shut off), wearing the same or old clothes, being hungry on occasion, and

his parents having gambling addictions. In conversation, Norman shared this fragment of his life:

I think the biggest life turn that happened was Video Lottery Terminals (VLTs). From there we moved, we were evicted, sometimes without power, so we moved quite a bit, sometimes in the middle of the night. I spent a lot of my childhood in the car in front of Bingo, and hearing my parents fight. (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020)

As a student, Norman recalled being sent to the resource room and being given a psychological assessment by what he thinks were psychologists. He recalled hearing one of the psychologists saying “I don’t think that the teachers liked that...well he needs an enrichment program” (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020).

Although he never met his biological father, his step-father was a part of his life until Norman reached his twenties. His mom and step-father divorced when he was twenty-one. Norman recalled a history of having challenging school experiences in which he had many dealings with the office, almost being expelled in grade two, and doing many half days at school during his elementary school years. Moreover, Norman shared a memory from grade five:

In grade five there were three grade five teachers in my school, and they divided who got me. It wasn’t fair for one teacher to have me for the whole year, so I moved three times into three different classes throughout the year. (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020)

As a result of the things happening in his life, Norman noted how he often got into fights at school. In his teens, he began drinking and experiencing addictions. Despite many challenges and negative events in his life, Norman mentioned some of his later motivations, in particular, why he decided to become a teacher.

I went into teaching because I loved coaching. My goal was always to get out of my socioeconomic class. If I hadn't gotten pulled off the street in grade nine, I would have eventually ended up in a group home. (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020)

Norman also shared the impact of his Grandmother when she saw his potential and picked up a university application for him to fill out to enter a Bachelor of Education Program.

### **Key Findings**

Listening to the participants' narratives was an illuminating segue to the experiences which have shaped and re-shaped who these teachers have become today. Looking across the stories they shared with me, I pulled forth key findings as I sought to attend more closely to these two teachers' lived experiences. The findings have been categorized into the following themes: participants' personal definitions of resiliency; importance of physical activity; importance of relationships; becoming a role model; what they do when their resilience is waning; and interactions with students.

## **Theme 1 - Participants' Personal Definitions of Resilience**

Inquiring on how the participants' personally defined resilience was interesting. Throughout Brooke and Norman's lives, they may not have been consciously aware of their resilience or thought of defining what resilience meant to them; rather, they were living it.

Brooke's personal definition is that resilience results from life challenges that occur due to one's circumstances. She sees it as being twofold, as it may include something that you may be born with. Brooke shares more of her evolving understanding of what resilience means to her:

I see resilience as overcoming whatever speed bump gets in your way or is put in your way not by choice. I think there are some situations that we are born into that we can't control, and other things that come up that we need to overcome.  
(Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020)

Norman identified that everyone has resilience within but may not realize it. He shared:

Resiliency to me is a group of factors that come together to overcome a tragedy or hardship, but it is also important to identify it as that. I think everyone is resilient, they just don't know they are. They don't attribute their resiliency to resiliency.  
(Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020)

By reflecting on Brooke and Norman's personal definitions and understanding of resilience, in my role as a teacher leader (administrator), it highlights the importance and

need to attend to more closely not only the stories (i.e., past, present), but also the forward looking stories and factors that help sustain these teachers' sense of resilience.

## **Theme 2 - The Importance of Physical Activity**

Another theme that emerged between both participants was the importance of sports and exercise. The power of regular exercise and belonging to a team sport was a significant part of their stories. This value continues to be carried on in their adult lives. Being part of a team gave each of them a positive self-image and a sense of belonging and acceptance. Brooke and Norman noted it made a difference when other individuals who recognized their value, relied on them, and saw them in a positive light. The impact of these experiences on their teaching is that they both decided to become coaches as they believe that participating in sports and being part of a team helps give individuals a chance. Norman hoped to replicate the dedication his past coaches had put toward his growth and development as they spent countless hours training and providing him opportunities when other teachers and administrators did not show the same level of attention. Unlike his experience in grade 5 when teachers "divided who got [him]", Norman recalled how his more supportive coaches/teachers adamantly supported and defended him. He shared a story that sustained his sense of resilience:

To not let me play sports would have been a life sentence. So, when people say now, 'He can't play basketball unless he has all of this stuff done or he's got all of this homework to do.' My coaches would say, 'Well did he have it done before? No, well then basketball is not the problem.' So now for my high school basketball practice, when teachers say students shouldn't be allowed to play, I

disagree. I'm like, well then we will see him for no days. At least we got him for the two days he comes to practice. Maybe if I couldn't play sports who knows, right? Who, I'd probably be. I'd probably be where my sister is currently at: in crisis and an addict. (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020)

Returning to Norman's words, I can see how he values sports and views playing sports as an integral role in building self-esteem and confidence.

### **Theme 3 - Importance of Relationships**

Both participants also spoke about the importance of relationships. They had someone important in their lives that made a difference for them. Brooke discussed the importance of her high school biology teacher. After her parents divorced she had to wait before and after school for her mom to pick her up. She described sitting in the teacher's room and having a place to do her work and someone to talk to. This space was a safe haven for Brooke and where she had a supportive relationship with an adult.

Norman also named a coach/teacher who was an important figure in his life that believed in him when nobody else would. This coach helped give him a purpose and recognized his self-worth. He looked beyond the mis-behaviours and saw the potential within Norman that others may not have seen or overlooked.

The value of relationships was clearly paramount to both participants. I wonder how educators can develop a deeper understand of how our roles extend far beyond delivering the prescribed curriculum. As Aoki (1993) expressed, there is the "lived curriculum" that these teachers are living out, both in and out of schools.

#### **Theme 4 - Becoming a Role Model**

Both participants wanted to recreate the positive conditions of their own school experience by becoming a role model. In their experiences, they saw the significance and impact of having someone to look up to and want to be like. Brooke described how she tries to emulate her past biology teacher who created space for her just to be herself and to share events in her life.

I have been able to be that teacher/mentor for students where some stay after school in my room to work and get help but never actually ask questions about their assignment but ask tons of other questions about life. (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020)

Norman also wanted to recreate for other students, how his coaches made him feel and how they dedicated so much time to him and his sports training.

#### **Theme 5 - Waning Resilience**

Understandably, becoming successful teachers, Brooke and Norman still experience bad days along with the good. They expressed how they continue to employ several methods or strategies to “bounce back” and to help sustain them. Both participants spoke about using music, movies, and exercise to rebalance. A difference between these participants was that one meditated while the other surrounded herself with positive people or messages. “I listen to some specific songs about being brave, strong or surviving and overcoming obstacles” (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020).

Norman shared another approach of being generous. “Generosity I guess is another thing that I do when I’m having a bad day; I go out of my way to be generous.” (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020).

Throughout their shared stories, Brooke and Norman recognized that teaching can be emotionally exhausting and stressful, so they have developed ways to avoid burnout and maintain positive physical and mental health.

### **Theme 6 - Interactions with Students**

A recurring theme that materialized from the interviews was how life challenges and past traumatic events have impacted the way they perceive their students and interact with them. Norman expressed how his actions as a teacher today, “... is because of [his] experience in high school” (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020). Both participants recognized their influence on their students’ formative years and how they try to set students up for success in life. Norman made the following comment:

I know they are going to mature. I know they are going to be fathers and mothers and that I don’t need to teach them that lesson today, and so in my practice, relationships trumps everything. (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020)

Norman’s perspective focused on how he can influence students now and noted that “We’re not here to stimulate the real world, we’re here to keep kids out of trouble until they can figure it out.” An observation from Norman was:

Another one of my common talks is that a teacher’s job, or my job is not to give you trouble, it is to keep you out of trouble. The worst thing I see people do is

wait and watch a kid until they mess up and then give them trouble. We're here to protect kids. I know if we judge people by how they are in grade eight I would not be employable anywhere. (Transcript with Norman, February 4, 2020)

Thinking back to his own school experience as a "troubled" child and teen, Norman empathized with his students and what they might be going through. He stressed the need to take care of students' physical and emotional needs prior to even trying to teach. He spoke about how a student's "wellbeing matters more than the test." He keeps food, water, gum and an exercise bike in his classroom. When students have an outburst or need some quiet time, Norman tries to be gentle and either gives the student some space or asks what they need. He will talk to them after they have calmed down. Norman's own life challenges made him aware of all of experiences that students may be carrying and bringing to school from their home lives. Coming alongside his students and attending to their lives, helps Norman be a more empathetic, understanding and patient teacher.

Brooke, too, concentrated on the impact that she has as a teacher. She described what shapes her daily interactions with students:

Knowing I can make a difference in somebody's life. Even through all the hard days I know there's at least one person that I deal with that I will have an impact on their life... As hard as it is, change is good. And it helps us grow. Any students who are kind of having a rough go, make 'em realize that tomorrow is going to be easier, and things do get better, as cliché as it sounds. At the end of the day, we're all there for the same reason, it is to help kids in our building become young adults. (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020)

Brooke understands that as a teacher, her actions and reaction influence her students and may offer them a sense of hope. She realized that she may not be able to impact everyone, every day, but there is always someone she does impact whether it is obvious or not. Brooke understands what it is like to be excluded or bullied. She does not want her students to feel this way. Brooke observed that “I make sure I’m as inclusive as possible and try to make sure that every kid realizes that they got something special to offer the world” (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020).

Brooke and Norman’s words remind me of the importance of actively listening to what both teachers *and* students are saying and attending to their storied experiences. Their stories (i.e., past, present, future) around resilience speak to me about their strengths, rather than looking at experiences through a deficit lens or model.

### **Key Learnings**

When I identified the key learnings from my study, I wanted to look at resiliency through multiple lenses. I considered Lugones (1987) concept of “world-travelling” to understand where resilience fits within individuals. Lugones (1987) tells me that by travelling to others’ “worlds” we can try to understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes” (p. 17). In conversation with these participants and through listening to their storied landscapes, I am reminded of my journey. In the next fragments, I share what I have learned from coming alongside these two teachers and draw on how this research has further shaped me as a mother, leader, and as a colleague.

### **As a Mother**

Listening to the storied experiences of Brooke and Norman, I think about the importance of relationships. What is especially relevant is the beginning of relationships at an early age and the strength of connection. As a mother, I look at how I can support my two teenage children and help them develop strategies for “bouncing back”. I have to work hard at resisting being a parent who swoops in to solve their issues. I understand it is not possible to eliminate all barriers so they never experience failure, upset or emotional distress. In times of challenge, I need to support them and provide a sense of belonging. Whether it be a team they wish to be a part of, or have someone listen to their stories, I need to continue to work on composing safe spaces with them so they feel comfortable to share their struggles, life challenges, and other experiences with me, and I with them.

### **As a Leader**

After listening to Brooke and Norman’s storied experiences, I recognize the necessity of a supportive environment at school. For Brooke, her school became a safe haven after her parents’ divorce. For Norman, the school was the opposite until he found a coach who believed in him. As a leader, I envision developing a strong foundation of support for students and staff to create a safe place for everyone to come to. I will attend more closely to the emotional intelligence or emotional landscape of our school culture by checking in with staff and students and actively listening, I will continue to work at co-composing spaces so that both students and staff feel like they are welcome and belong. Brooke and Norman reminded me of an area that I often forget about, that is, the

need for daily physical activity and mental health and wellness. I realize that creating an environment where resiliency is attended should not be limited by the walls of the school, but needs to be carried over into the playground, on the school bus, in the community, and into the homes of children. We need to look at ways to provide students with a “second chance” and consider alternative approaches to dealing with behaviour issues. A consideration is reviewing literature with alternative approaches such as, *Don't Suspend Me! An Alternative Discipline Toolkit* by Hannigan and Hannigan (2016). Given the findings from Gu and Day's (2013) research, as a leader at my school, I need to find ways to maintain teachers who are close to retirement and elevate them so they can teach to their maximum potential. The literature reminds me that “leadership recognition and support were shown to be key influences” (Gu and Day, 2013, p. 30). In my role as a leader, I see myself working closely with the voices and input of teachers and students to collectively shape a school climate which fosters resilience and strength. I will continually strive to co-create more safe spaces for both educators and students to share their stories of resilience.

### **As a Colleague**

As a colleague, I think about the ways that I can support other leaders but also ways that I hope to be supported. Reflecting on my first years of teaching, I remember how lonely and isolating it was. I lacked a support group. I believe this situation can still exist at different times during a teaching career; support groups are valuable at any stage. When I consider Brooke's comment about surrounding herself with positive people, it reminds me that a supportive professional learning community is a key component of resilience. I recognize that resilience is very much an individual, personal

quality and is defined and developed differently amongst people. While there may be overarching universal components to fostering a sense of resilience like relationships, exercise, and positive role models, a person's resilience will be formed by individual experiences and circumstances. I hope this research fosters an understanding of resilience and how we might better support teachers and students in school. If I can be a better listener, friend, and/or colleague through what I have learned, then I can share my learning and knowledge with others. I can foster a spirit of teamwork and show appreciation and respect for experiences of others that adds to our understanding of resilience.

### **Next Steps and Concluding Thoughts**

Through inquiring in greater depth with the two teacher-participants (i.e., Brooke and Norman), I recognize the importance of attending to the lived experiences or "lived curriculum" that shape both teachers and students' lives (Aoki, 1993). As more research about resilience and how it can counter the impact of trauma on learning unfolds, strategies for developing this important inner resource will become more defined and prevalent. Hence, this research is an ongoing journey.

My next step is to take what I have learned and turn it into a reality within my school landscape. In my teacher leadership role, I will continue to work towards facilitating and maintaining safe and caring schools which promotes staff and students' sense of resilience and success. As Houle (2010) once shared her goal of "...making curriculum in schools that accounts for the lived curricula of all children" (p. 30), I, too, plan to take time to attend more closely to the lived curriculum of students and be more cognizant of how their storied landscape may shape and affect their learning. I also plan

to build on this research in a number of ways. First, I intend to create spaces for teachers to share their own understandings and experiences related to resilience, as well as share literature on resilience. I also plan to explore existing understandings of trauma, stress, grief, and anxiety as these terms are often connected to resilience. Further, I hope for staff to engage in professional development related to the importance of building healthy and strong relationships, as colleagues, and with our students. As part of this professional development, teachers may explore and share various ways they have maintained personal resilience. Third, I plan to share this research with a wider audience and with other school personnel. By working more closely with a ‘team’ of educators, support staff, and the school community, as a start, we may foster more resilient school teams and attend closely to the needs of students who require more support.

My main goal, as Singh (2018) described in his understanding of resilience, is to enable individuals to not only bounce back, but to bounce forward. I want staff and students to gain confidence and recognize that they have the potential to withstand life challenges and traumatic events. Other next steps include exploring more research focusing on resilience and how it can counter the impact of trauma on learning. I hope to seek additional strategies for developing this important inner resource.

Beyond this study, I want to take a greater look at issues around social justice. In particular, how we can ensure greater equity in education for students. Future plans also include working more closely with Indigenous communities and partners. In collaboration with our diverse community partners, I want staff and students to gain confidence and recognize that they have the potential to not only withstand life

challenges, but to shape and give voice to their own forward looking stories of resilience.

Or, as Brooke reminded us with her words:

When I find my resilience is fading, I look at my tattoo of an arrow and I am reminded that even something as strong and powerful as an arrow needs to move backwards before it moves forwards. (Transcript with Brooke, February 3, 2020)

## References

- Alberta Government. (2019). Well-being and resiliency: A framework for supporting safe and healthy children and families. Retrieved from <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/520981c4-c499-4794-af55-bc932811cb1e/resource/7fda0ae8-8d97-49e7-b94b-7f0088cd767d/download/well-being-resiliency-framework-march2019.pdf>
- Alberta Teachers Association. (2013). Teaching in the early years of practice: a five-year longitudinal study. Retrieved from [https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/Teaching%20in%20the%20Early%20Years%20of%20Practice%20\(PD-86-19b\).pdf](https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Research/Teaching%20in%20the%20Early%20Years%20of%20Practice%20(PD-86-19b).pdf)
- Aoki, T. T. (1993). Legitimizing lived curriculum: Towards a curricular landscape of multiplicity. *Journal of Curriculum & Supervision*, 8(3), 255–268. Retrieved from <https://search-ebsohost-com.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=9511050991&site=ehost-live>
- Banks, Y. & Meyer, J. (2017). Childhood trauma in today's urban classroom moving beyond the therapist's office. *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, 30(4), 63-75.
- Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2018). Why do you work with struggling students? Teacher perceptions of meaningful work in trauma-impacted classrooms. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(2), 115-142.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2–14.
- Connelly, F. M., Clandinin, D. J., & He, M. F. (1996) Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Teacher stories - stories of teachers - school stories - stories of schools. *Educational Researcher*, 25(3), pp. 24-30.
- Dane, L. F. (2002). On commonalities and differences. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 8(4), 365–367. [https://doi-org.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/10.1207/S15327949PAC0804\\_07](https://doi-org.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/10.1207/S15327949PAC0804_07)
- Dinham, J., Chalk, B., Beltman, S., Glass, C., & Nguyen, B. (2017). Pathways to resilience: how drawings reveal pre-service teachers' core narratives underpinning their future teacher-selves. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 45(2), 126–144. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/10.1080/1359866X.2016.1204424>
- Frydman, J., & Mayor, C. (2017). Trauma and early adolescent development: case examples from a trauma-informed public health middle school program. *Children and Schools*, 39(4), 238-247.
- Garcia, B. (2019). Leading the Development of Strategies to Rekindle the Joy of Learning and Build Resilience. *International Journal of Teacher Leadership*, 10(1), 65–75. Retrieved from <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1220165&site=ehost-live>
- Gu, Q., & Day, C. (2013). Challenges to Teacher Resilience: Conditions Count. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(1), 22–44.

- Houle, S. (2010). Not making the grade: A narrative inquiry into Timmy's experiences with the mandated curriculum. In *Education*, 16(2), pp. 30-40, Retrieved from <https://ineducation.ca/ineducation/article/view/98/478>
- Kim, A., Hanna, T., & Dotres, J. (2019). Anchors for Resilience: Strategies and Routines Resilient Leaders Use to Balance Competing Priorities. *Learning Professional*, 40(5), 18–19. Retrieved from <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1235294&site=ehost-live>
- Lugones, M. (1987). Playfulness, “world”-travelling, and loving perception. *Hypatia*, 2(2), 3–19.
- Miller, S. M., Dodd, A., & Fiala, K. A. (2014). Comparing protective factors and resilience among classroom-based teachers and community-based educators. *Education*, 134(4), 548–558.
- Mirza, M. S., & Arif, M. I. (2018). Fostering Academic Resilience of Students at Risk of Failure at Secondary School Level. *Journal of Behavioural Sciences*, 28(1), 33–50. Retrieved from <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=132336739&site=ehost-live>
- Public Health Agency of Canada. (2020, March 4). Government of Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/suicide-canada-key-statistics-infographic.html>
- Rosiek, J. and Clandinin, D. J. (2016). Curriculum and Teacher Development. In D. Wyse, L. Hayward, & J. Pandya (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment*. Vol. 1, (pp. 293-308). Los Angeles: SAGE reference.

- Schussler, D. L., Greenberg, M., DeWeese, A., Rasheed, D., DeMauro, A., Jennings, P. A., & Brown, J. (2018). Stress and Release: Case Studies of Teacher Resilience Following a Mindfulness-Based Intervention. *American Journal of Education*, 125(1), 1–28. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/10.1086/699808>
- Singh, S. (2018). Positive schooling and resilience. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology*, 9(2), 311–316. Retrieved from <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=133608427&site=ehost-live>
- Sitler, H. (2009). Teaching with Awareness: The Hidden Effects of Trauma on Learning. *The Clearing House*, 82(3), 119-123.
- Vance, A., Pendergast, D., & Garvis, S. (2015). Teaching resilience: a narrative inquiry into the importance of teacher resilience. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 33(4), 195–204. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.aec.talonline.ca/10.1080/02643944.2015.1074265>