

RESILIENCE FOR TEACHERS

Annie Greeff is an ex-teacher who understands what it's like to be in the classroom and is passionate about giving something back to the profession that teaches all other professions. Annie, the author of two books on resilience for learners, believes that teachers with personal resilience make a difference to the entire culture of a school.

Few would dispute the power of the teacher as a role model. Andrew Cope, a practitioner of a fairly new field of psychology called Positive Psychology, believes that the effect that a teacher has on his or her learners in the classroom is up to twelve to fourteen times more than the teacher anticipates.

If the effect of the teacher on the learner is so profound, then it's vital to understand that our learners absorb our energies and attitudes like osmosis. There is a continuous and contagious transfer of values, beliefs, outlook on life and style. Most people, when asked what they remember most about school, will not rattle off a theorem or decline a verb, they will tell you about the teachers who inspired them. Annie believes that the most inspiring teachers have learnt the art of resilience.

And resilience is an art that can be learnt. In fact, it is a vital competency that should be acquired by teachers and parents alike in order to grow resilient communities. There is a growing need for adults to reflect on and transfer their own social and emotional skills as children become more and more immersed in a virtual reality world of TV, computers and cell phones. The modern child may spend more time communicating through 'Facebook' or 'Mix-it' than having real interactions. One place where they can learn emotional skills is from a teacher who is not only an academic but who takes on the role of life coach in the classroom.

This would seem to be a heavy burden to bear for a teacher perhaps already weighed down by academic demands. Annie is not suggesting adding to this load but providing teachers with skills that will help them cope with the stresses of teaching, with the added benefit of role modeling these skills to their learners. She sees teachers as emotional caretakers and quotes Ron Edmonds, the so-called grandfather of school effectiveness research who wrote: 'A school can create a coherent environment so potent that for at least six hours a day it can override almost everything else in the lives of children.'

Annie defines resilience as the ability to use a variety of skills to adapt to life challenges in order to be a happy, growing human being. Different people are challenged by different things, and adversity can come in the guise of trauma, change, multiple challenges and even boredom. We are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, a so-called 'self-righting capability' which enables us to bounce back from hardship and to overcome the negative influences that block achievement. These include development of social skills, problem solving skills, analytical thinking skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose.

Ghandi suggests that: ‘Real education consists of drawing the best out of yourself’. Although this is true, it would be wrong to suggest that resilience is all about individual effort. It is also about your connection with others and the support given within the environment in which you live. The ideal is to create an understanding of the interconnectedness of individuals, groups and society as a whole, thereby stimulating a sense of social responsibility while also acknowledging that each person can make a difference.

It’s encouraging for schools to know that when staff are allowed to work in a protective environment, over time, positive qualities form a stronger bond than that of the adverse influences. So the ideal strategy for fostering resilience is to develop coping skills within the individual and then to ensure that the person experiences connection with others within a supportive environment. When these support factors act in synergy, they automatically compensate for the areas in which the person experiences difficulty.

If extreme old age (over ninety) is the ultimate proof of resiliency, research findings based on work done by Thomas Perls and Margery Hutter Silver (1999) indicate that the following are common characteristics of well-adjusted people in old age: adaptability; assertiveness; sense of humour; charisma; involvement; service to others; sense of purpose; caring relatives and religion. On the flip side of the coin as age accelerators are: regrets and bitterness; detachment; stubbornness to accept help; compulsiveness; emotional stress; obesity; alcohol consumption; depression, smoking and inactivity.

What would it take to have teachers who could rise above the demands of the classroom and find the energy to still have charisma, optimism and a sense of humour? Annie would answer that part of what they need is to be able to value themselves as people while finding meaning and purpose in what they do.

Resilience is not just about survival, it should include healing as well as growth and happiness. Just coping is not enough, inner contentment is equally important. Hopefully, we grow stronger and wiser with experience and develop a sense of gratitude and a deeper appreciation of the gift we call life. Ultimately, perhaps as teachers who have so much influence in shaping the future, we understand something about a collective purpose and the privilege of being able to make a difference.