

The Covid-19 pandemic led to exceptionally difficult conditions and circumstances for school communities. As schools struggled to cope and adapt to the ever-changing environment, having strong, positive, and supportive relationships proved to be a key factor in nurturing the resilience of educators and students alike.

I was privileged to work with many school communities throughout 2021 – teachers, principals, special needs assistants (SNAs), parents, and children themselves – and to support them in the vital area of well-being and resilience. I worked with individual schools and was also grateful to have the opportunity to deliver many webinars through Education Centres around the country.

The care and concern of teachers, principals, and SNAs for the well-being of their students was palpable: staff wanted to know how best they could continue to support and nurture resilience. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to share ideas from positive psychology – the science of well-being – and to reassure school communities that what they were already doing was so important.

My key starting point for school communities was to remind them that in order to nurture students' well-being and resilience, we must begin with staff. Staff well-being is sometimes overlooked – as educators, our caring role means we are continually looking after and prioritising the needs of our students. Yet you can't pour from an empty cup, as the saying goes, and the well-being of teachers directly affects students. High well-being in teachers is associated with higher academic achievement and increased student well-being (McCallum et al., 2017). In many schools, staff well-being committees played a more important role than ever in keeping a sense of connection, support, and camaraderie alive when it was most needed.

Understanding the meaning of resilience was also critical. Resilience is a complex, multidimensional process of adapting to and coping with adversity, stress, and challenge. It is reassuring to know that resilience is actually the most common response to adversity (Bonanno, 2005) – we are all more resilient than we think. This quickly became evident in school communities, as staff adapted and created new ways of teaching. Most children showed great flexibility in adapting to the new

# Staff Wellbeing Impacts Student Wellbeing

Supporting  
resilience in school  
communities



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protocols and all the new demands placed on them, and they also showed a new-found appreciation for school, especially after the periods of remote learning.

Such post-traumatic growth is a common response, and it was very evident in the teaching community. One study, conducted with over 400 teachers in Ireland, reported that four out of five felt they had experienced positive psychological growth and felt more confident in their online teaching and use of technology as a result of the pandemic (Dempsey & Burke, 2021). This was despite the fact that seven out of ten of these teachers reported feeling more stress during that time, which reflects the idea that stress can co-exist with post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2007).

Why did this happen? One of the most important protective factors in the development of resilience is the presence of positive, supportive relationships, and this is where most schools came into their own. This is the so-called ‘ordinary magic’ of resilience – a term coined by psychologist Ann Masten (2001). Masten, a pioneering researcher in the development of resilience in children, suggests that resilience is nurtured through all of the small, ordinary, day-to-day acts of care, connection, and support.

This genuine support and care, the sense of community and the deep bonds between staff themselves and between staff and students proved to be the bedrock on which resilience could be nurtured. That does not mean there wasn't severe hardship and distress. Being resilient does not mean we are immune to feeling fear, anger, anxiety, or distress – it is not about ‘toughening up’. On the contrary, it is about being open to all our emotions and processing and expressing them in constructive ways, rather than suppressing or avoiding them.

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This type of emotional regulation is a key factor in developing resilience (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Allowing staff and children the space and time to express, share, and regulate these emotions helped to normalise them. Schools did this in so many ways throughout the pandemic, in the period of online learning and on the return to school – morning check-ins, creative activities, and mindfulness, for example. The healing power of just being listened to cannot be overestimated.

During this time, many teachers and principals spoke about the huge weight on their shoulders – the worry and sense of helplessness at not being able to fix everything for their students. This was particularly true during distance learning, when teachers struggled to reach vulnerable students who were not engaging fully with online learning. One of my key messages was to try to take this weight and burden off through the use of self-compassion.

Self-compassion is a powerful antidote to self-criticism (and criticism from others) and is a key element of resilience. High levels of self-compassion are associated with higher levels of happiness, well-being, and resilience (Neff, 2011). Self-compassion is a key aspect of nurturing our own resilience as educators, and it was particularly important during the pandemic, because the challenges were greater than ever before. I encouraged

educators to recognise the wonderful work they were doing and to use self-compassionate phrases to counteract harsh or critical self-talk.

Another key factor in developing resilience is the presence of positivity. Positive emotions and traits such as gratitude, hope, humour, love, pride, tranquillity, joy, inspiration, and awe buffer us during times of challenge and difficulty and sustain and uplift us (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). We need a ratio of at least 3:1 of positive to negative emotions daily, because our brains' negativity bias means negative emotions have a stronger impact and last longer than positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). With so much negativity to deal with, it was important for schools to be aware of this.

It was wonderful to be able to reassure teachers that all the small daily practices that many of them were already doing to boost positivity were helping to build resilience, for both themselves and their students. I encouraged teachers to tap into the power of daily gratitude practices, mindfulness sessions, kindness initiatives, and other play and fun activities which brought a sense of joy and happiness into the classroom. One of my big messages to teachers was that these positive emotions are not luxuries: they are necessities in the development of resilience.

It was so uplifting to see teachers doing such superb work in exceptionally difficult circumstances all through 2021, and to be able to reassure them that they were building resilience every single day through their care and support. The dedication and resilience of the whole school community shone through and sent a beacon of hope and light to the rest of society at a very dark and difficult time.

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