



## Research paper

## Analysing teachers' figurative language to shed new light on teacher resilience

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Presents a clear conceptualisation of the pillars that support teacher resilience.
- Analyses figurative language that reveals a view of resilience that respects the teachers' actions.
- Expands theoretical and practical understanding of teacher resilience in everyday interactions.
- Suggests tailoring teacher professional learning towards enhancing teacher resilience.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses practising schoolteachers' use of figurative language, drawn from a set of semi-structured interviews with 42 Australian teachers, part of a wider, five-nation study of teachers' emotional experiences. The analysis is clustered around the teachers' talk about commitment (as manifesting motivation), agency (as a consequence of professional competence), relationships (as expressing social competence) and self-awareness (as a primer of emotional competence) that framed the teachers' experiences of effectiveness and wellbeing. More broadly, teachers' intuitive use of figurative language to communicate their experiences sheds new light on the phenomenon of teacher resilience.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent educational research has focused on teachers' resilience and well-being, particularly in light of the high rate of teacher turnover and the resulting global shortage of qualified teachers (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Liu et al., 2018; Van den Borre et al., 2021). Promoting teachers' resilience (Hascher et al., 2021) and well-being (Acton & Glasgow, 2015) has been emphasised. It is well accepted in the literature that teacher resilience supports the maintenance and development of teacher wellbeing (Mansfield, 2021); however, teachers' experiences of everyday interactions within educational structures have the potential to wear them down (Santoro, 2018).

From a positive psychology perspective (Huppert, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), understanding processes that contribute to flourishing or optimal functioning may assist teachers with developing their own resilience. When teachers reflect on and articulate their emotional experiences, they construct additional insight into their professional worlds.

As an extension of this understanding, the following research question was explored: How does the figurative language expressed by teachers, when they reflect on and articulate their experiences, identify their resilience strengths; and how do they build capacity to thrive in the contemporary educational world? To address this question, this paper presents the findings gleaned from collected interview data that were analysed according to the four pillars of building resilience which exist inside the motivational, professional, social and emotional dimensions of resilience (Mansfield et al., 2012, 2016). It is proposed, understanding how

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teachers appraise their experiences sheds new light on the processes that they use to maintain commitment, feel a sense of agency, cultivate relationships and be self-aware.

The following account communicates how teachers' use of figurative language opens a window into how they gain work satisfaction, optimistically accept change and uncertainties, and positively adapt in adverse situations. It narrates the figurative language one teacher used when describing personal experiences and everyday interactions in the teaching profession. Furthermore, the paper illuminates the figurative language that reflected the emotional experiences of a broader group of teacher participants, who did not always express work satisfaction, acceptance of change and an optimistic perspective.

In keeping with this example, we have included illustrations of our own use of figurative language in the paper to highlight and *shed new light* on our understanding of the participant teachers' equivalent deployment of such language. Italics are used to represent the figurative language where the emphasis might otherwise be lost. The following section provides context for the use of figurative language in general, with implications for teacher resilience and wellbeing in the latter part of this section.

### 1.1. Figurative language in research

Language often reflects how people think and feel. How one describes an experience provides clues as to how one constructs that experience (Munby & Russell, 1990). In English, figurative language takes many forms, including metaphors, similes, imagery, hyperbole, aphorisms, irony, alliteration, clichés, idioms, and other rhetorical devices (Colston, 2015). These creative ways of writing or speaking are also referred to as literary tropes (Chakrabarty et al., 2022), and serve the functions of provoking attention, enhancing comprehension and evoking agreement.

Figurative language works efficiently to communicate a range of meanings, deliberately or subconsciously, in a way that shows politeness, envisages an image, bolsters an idea, or expresses what cannot be formulated literally without ambiguity (Colston & Gibbs, 2021). Beyond the literal meaning, the use of these expressions asks the reader or listener to understand something because of its relationship with an action or image or with something else. As such, figurative language enriches written work and heightens the verbal expression of ideas that might otherwise be difficult to visualise or communicate.

A traditional view of figurative language is that its use is abnormal, as it is an indirect means of communication that takes longer to comprehend (Gibbs & Colston, 2012), a little like *not being able to see the forest for the trees*. However, research has shown that figurative language can be easily interpreted provided that the pragmatic and contextual information is available, just as is required for the semantic content of literal forms of expression (Searle, 1980). Furthermore, figurative language is more than an indirect and ornamental form of communication; it demonstrates meaning concretely in a form that can be seen or felt (Colston & Gibbs, 2021). This quality of figurative language makes it an ideal vehicle for capturing complex thoughts. It follows that a focused analysis of words and phrases expressed as figurative language enables researchers to experience what others are thinking and feeling, albeit not to the extent of *being able to read their minds*.

As an example of the use of figurative language in research, Munby and Russell (1990) explored teachers' use of metaphors to gain insights into how they constructed their professional worlds. In their study, the teachers' reflections were expressed as metaphors to structure the basic understandings of the experiences that shaped their perceptions and actions. When analysing the metaphors in the interview transcripts, the researchers used a process of

reframing that provided insights into the participants' teaching practices. Additionally, the ensuing understandings became a source of professional knowledge for the teachers involved in the research. Munby and Russell (1990) proposed that "... reframing reveals a quite different way of constructing the problem, and the solution swiftly follows" (p. 2).

In the health literature, Luthar (2015) proposed how "idioms of resilience" (p. 722) are the processes that individuals use to cope with the complexities that they face, and even use as a source of resilience. Idioms are phrases repeated so often over time that they become fixtures in language and often lose their literal meaning. Conventionally, clichés are expressions that describe something so well that they become overused, yet are often repeated when people are experiencing deep emotions to convey their feelings (Dubosarsky, 2008). By contrast, hyperboles exaggerate the literal meaning to convey an intensity of emotion. The relationship between language and emotion is again evidenced when phrasing a message ironically (Filik et al., 2015) to emphasise the juxtaposition of what appears to be the truth and is the opposite in reality. Alternatively, aphorisms formulate generally known sentiments or truths that provoke thought and motivate actions. Language that provides visual images evokes the senses, whilst similes make comparisons by stating that something is like something else, and metaphors share traits between two unrelated things.

It is suggested that, when teachers use rhetorical devices such as imagery, comparisons, contradictions, contrasts and exaggerations (DiYanni, 2004), they shed light on their experiences, the complexities of their work and the challenges that they face, in a socially meaningful way. In the book *Cultivating Teacher Resilience*, Mansfield (2021) referred metaphorically to "the journey of a sapling becoming a tree, and its resilience through the Australian seasons that shape the tree and contribute to its uniqueness" (p. 4). The growth of the tree provides a powerful comparison as to how a teacher draws on personal and contextual resources to sustain and grow, and even to *bounce back* from challenging life experiences. Withal, the relationship among figurative language, teacher resilience and wellbeing are under explored in the literature. It is the exploration of the interconnection of the teacher and the context that reveals how teachers talk about overcoming challenges and sustaining their resilience and wellbeing (Beltman, 2021).

### 1.2. Teacher resilience and wellbeing

Wellbeing is defined as a sense of overall satisfaction promoted through balancing positive emotions with accepting the challenges that metaphorically are part of the "tapestry of everyday life" (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020, p. 3). In the educational context, teacher wellbeing is recognised as an essential component of the optimal functioning of schools (Dreer, 2022) and of positive student outcomes; *when teachers blossom, students flourish*. Research shows a direct link between building teacher resilience and factors that affect teachers' well-being at work (Brouskeli et al., 2018; Clarà, 2017; Johnson et al., 2016; Mansfield, 2021). Therefore, there is a global trend for researchers to attend to teachers' resilience in an effort to determine how wellbeing can be enhanced (Ledger, 2020).

Resilience is a predictor of increased satisfaction in a number of professions, and among teachers, it is a significant indicator of effective work performance and success (Sautelle et al., 2015). Gu and Day (2013) defined teacher resilience as having the "capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching" (p. 39). If resilience is determined as a process rather than as a quality, then teacher resilience is manifested when teachers effectively adapt to difficult circumstances and situations (Clarà, 2017). Presuming teachers can affirm that their professional practice is worthwhile, and that they are engaging in effective teaching,

they reap the rewards from their work (Santoro, 2011). For example, teachers who feel valued are more likely to engage positively with students and to build strong relationships within the educational community. Alternatively, the negative costs include teacher stress, burnout and abandonment of the teaching profession.

When teachers experience work-related stress, it is often because they feel that they are unable to meet the professional expectations imposed by others, and thus feel not capable of succeeding. However, what if teachers perceive that they are unable to meet their own professional expectations, standards and values? Santoro (2011) contended that *demoralised teachers* leave teaching because they feel unable to meet the professional expectations that they impose upon themselves, and thus find themselves unable to *live up to their own expectations*. Adopting both of these perspectives recognises that there is a relationship between the contextual and the personal resource-based approaches to teacher resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016).

Notably, five decades of research suggests that resilience is strongly linked to interpersonal experiences and the social context (Luthar, 2015). Additionally, the literature supports the notion that resilience is a human capacity that can be developed and strengthened, and that the ability to recover from an adverse situation varies across contexts (Glazzard & Rose, 2019). Teachers demonstrate resilience in the face of challenging situations when they avail themselves of personal and contextual resources to strategically adapt and forge ahead (Mansfield, 2021).

It follows that professional learning can make a significant contribution to teachers' resilience and wellbeing (Fernandes et al., 2019). This acknowledgment reflects the view that resilience is dynamic (Mansfield et al., 2016) and can be developed through personalised professional learning opportunities (Peel, 2021; Smith, 2017). Professional learning that focuses on teachers' assets begins from a position of strength with *an eye on the positives* (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

Essentially, when teachers are engaged in the processes of self-reflection, their resilience can be enhanced in a way that sustains their identity (Johnson et al., 2015). Teacher identity refers to the development of self-awareness and the understanding of oneself as a teacher. Professional identity is framed through the teachers' perceptions of the work that they actually do (Flores, 2018). For early career teachers, identity and resilience are interwoven, as they enter the teaching profession, adapt to the everyday challenges of teaching and look beyond to transform their vision of themselves as a teacher (Cobb, 2022).

Evidence-based implementation models have been presented that are informed by current research to reflect the multifaceted nature of resilience. Teacher professional learning programs have been developed as an outcome of this research. For example, the four dimensional framework for teacher resilience (Mansfield et al., 2012) informed the creation of the Building Resilience in Teacher Education (BRiTE) professional learning program that was implemented to support teacher resilience (Mansfield et al., 2016). Furthermore, the Aligning Wellbeing and Resilience in Education (AWaRE) model (Hascher et al., 2021) specified the relationship between the constructs of resilience and wellbeing, and was designed to assist teachers in understanding the resilience phenomenon and process better.

The present paper aims to add to the literature by exploring the relationship between figurative language and teacher resilience. It sheds light on the manner in which the figurative language expressed by teachers identifies their resilience strengths as they reflect upon their experiences. Further, it distinguishes the elements that create and/or frustrate teachers' capacity to thrive in the contemporary educational world. The following section presents the conceptual framework that represents the growth of teachers'

capacity to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching (Gu & Day, 2013) and the integral adaptations made by teachers to overcome adversity in their work (Clarà, 2017).

### 1.3. Conceptual framework

A systematic review of national and international literature on teacher resilience was undertaken as part of a larger research project aimed at enhancing early career teachers' resilience (Beltman et al., 2011). From this comprehensive review of the empirical research, the multi-dimensional nature of teacher resilience was synthesised and conceptualised as four overarching and overlapping dimensions of resilience (Mansfield et al., 2012). As a contribution to the field, the motivational, professional, social and emotional dimensions were reconceptualised, by encompassing a range of personal and contextual contributing factors, to complement and expand on the existing understanding of teacher resilience.

The conceptual framework for this study extended on the four dimensional framework (Mansfield et al., 2012, 2016) to propose that teacher effectiveness for positive learning outcomes for students and teacher wellbeing is optimised when teachers:

- are committed to the work that they do in schools (McInerney et al., 2015);
- experience a sense of agency (Beltman, 2021);
- feel connected to others (Le Cornu, 2013); and
- become self-aware (Steward, 2014).

Based on the four pillars framed in this proposition – commitment, agency, relationships and self-awareness – it is assumed that teacher resilience can be developed. To support the outcomes of teacher effectiveness and wellbeing, the school context provides important sources to nurture or constrain teacher resilience (Beltman, 2021). Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that theoretically underpinned this paper.

Although this research did not directly study teacher effectiveness, wellbeing and resilience, the underlying assumption is that building a mindset of resilience enables teachers to sustain their effectiveness for positive student outcomes (Day, 2018). Furthermore, a resilient mindset is integral to teachers maintaining wellbeing over the course of their careers (Turner & Theilking, 2019).

### 1.4. Research design

This study drew from semi-structured interview data collected from teachers who participated in a larger research project that explored the narratives of teachers to identify what makes them resilient (Clarà, 2017). The project title, originally in Spanish, translates in English to “The relationship between narratives and the development of resilience in teachers” (NARRES). The NARRES project is a five-nation collaboration (Australia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador and Spain) that originated with the seminal work of Dr Marc Clarà (2015). The international research project involved surveying and interviewing teachers, and using semiotic techniques for analysis. The overall study is theoretically framed and informed by the connection between teacher narratives and resilience. The research recognises that the ways in which teachers makes sense of and appraise adverse situations play a crucial role in their emotional states. Each national team has explored the narratives of teachers in situationally specific ways to identify the connection between teacher narratives and how their work contexts impact their emotional experiences. For example, how a teacher makes sense of events can generate different emotional experiences depending on how the teacher narrates them (Clarà, 2022).

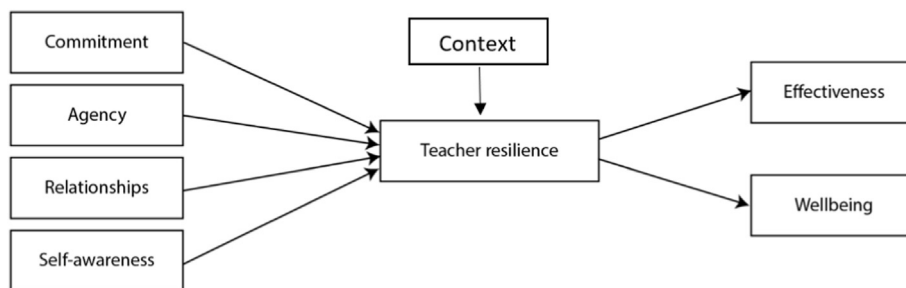


Fig. 1. The conceptual framework representing the pillars of building teacher resilience and the outcomes.

### 1.5. Data collection

The Australian five-member research team is affiliated with three Australian universities and is connected through their interest in educational research. The 42 teacher participants, from around the country, were working in primary and secondary schools, teaching different year levels and subjects. The surveys and interviews contained a wide range of the experiences of Australian teachers. After reading the participation information form and agreeing to engage in the research, the participants were requested to sign then email their confirmed consent. All the ethical considerations from the university (Ethics H18REA161 - Emotional Experiences of Australian Teachers) were observed. The survey was estimated to take 20 minutes, and participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. Following a semi-structured protocol, the one-hour interviews were conducted by the researchers, individually and in pairs, with each participant. The interview portfolio included questions based on the topics that covered: the teachers' career in teaching; situations experienced as a teacher; relationships with colleagues, students, parents and school administration; specific work tasks that they were required to perform; issues that caused them concern in their work; challenges that they faced at work that changed how they thought about a situation; and what it meant to them to be a teacher.

### 1.6. Data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were coded, categorised and thematically analysed (Peel, 2020). The initial qualitative analysis involved the research team in an inductive process of individually coding for content, and in an iterative process of collaboration for confirmation. The preliminary coding was framed through the following topics: complexities that emanate from the teachers' engagement with multifaceted events and issues; challenges that teachers encounter with problematic and potentially stressful situations; contradictions that teachers endure from events and issues that implicate competing influences and pressures; and comforts as sources of encouragement, motivation and pleasure.

Whilst this coding process was being conducted, the data from the interviews revealed the ubiquity of figurative language that the teachers embedded in their narratives. The figurative language became a conduit for communication, as the questions developed into a conversation-style interview where the teacher was encouraged to speak and elaborate. The figurative language was evident throughout the transcribed interview data, and the extracts were highlighted in the text and analysed in the context of their use. The figurative ideas that emerged from the participants' talk came directly from their emotional experiences, and were defined either in their own terms or in relation to another object (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008). This methodological approach shares resonances

and similarities with other analyses of teachers' use of figurative language to describe their working lives (e.g., Holt et al., 2007; Spieker, 2017; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). It is worthwhile noting that these analyses have traversed diverse teaching areas and different career stages of teachers.

This process of qualitative analysis involved a deductive, a priori set of codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) being used to recognise the connections between the figurative language and the pillars of building teacher resilience that were conceptualised from the literature (Mansfield et al., 2012) and that conceptually framed this study. This methodological approach complemented the research question by allowing the notions of teacher resilience to be integral to the process of the deductive analysis.

As such, the deductive, a priori set of codes approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) operationalised the conceptual framework as a tool for data analysis. The data analysis was clustered around the teachers' talk about commitment (as manifesting motivation), agency (as a consequence of professional competence), relationships (as expressing social competence) and self-awareness (as a primer of emotional competence) that framed the teachers' experiences of resilience and wellbeing. To account for the variety of personal and contextual factors contributing to teacher resilience, the teachers' figurative language was examined in relation to the resilience processes associated with each pillar. These processes of resilience are elaborations that have been synthesised from the literature, building specifically on previous work (Beltman, 2021; Falecki & Mann, 2021; Hascher et al., 2021; Le Cornu, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2012, 2016; McInerney et al., 2015; Steward, 2014).

The deductive approach involved developing a literature-informed template as a codebook (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) to analyse the data extracts for subsequent interpretation. Fig. 2 represents the resilience analysis template that guided the data analysis. The template included the pillars and associated dimensions for building resilience (Mansfield et al., 2012, 2016) that were elaborated as the processes of resilience.

The resilience analysis template provided theory-driven codes to interpret the figurative language embedded in the interview transcripts and identified as data extracts.

#### 1.6.1. Participants

Due to the limitations of space, the findings have been presented as a narrative with data extracts in italics, to represent the voice of a participant teacher, Harriet (pseudonym). A short participant introduction is provided here:

Harriet currently teaches Year 6 students (11/12 years old). She has been working in the profession for seven years, after having taught in Year 3 classrooms for the majority of that time. As a child, Harriet found that school was a place that she really loved and valued. It was the connection that she had with her teachers that encouraged her initial interest in the profession.

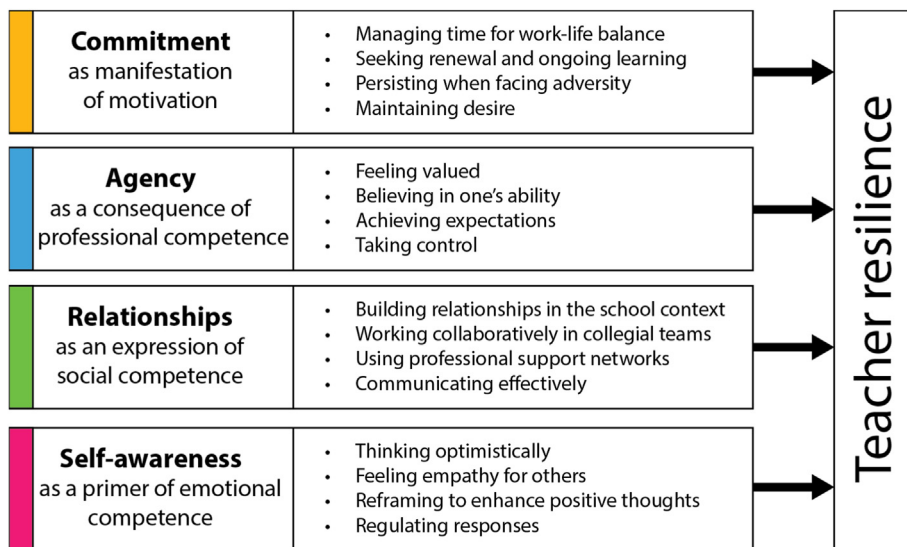


Fig. 2. The resilience analysis template that included the pillars for building teacher resilience and the processes of resilience.

The story that unfolded from the interview with Harriet identifies how she uses the processes of resilience as strengths and builds personal capacity to thrive in the educational context. As an early-career teacher, Harriet had *survived in the trenches* during the critical period, when many teachers decide to leave the profession (Kelly et al., 2019). Retaining teachers at all stages of their career poses a global problem (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022), but of particular concern is that many teachers are leaving the profession in the first five years of their career (Lavigne, 2014). With seven years' teaching employment, Harriet was deemed to have had enough experience to reflect on what influences impacted on her *staying power*.

Furthermore, the findings are juxtaposed from Harriet's emotional experiences to compare data extracts of figurative language expressed during the interviews with other teacher participants of the study. These teachers reflected on their experiences and discussed the influences that impacted on their capacity for resilience in the workplace. They had varied backgrounds and teaching experiences, and were each represented in the findings by a number allocated for anonymity (e.g., Teacher 2). The following account presents the findings gleaned from the analysis of the data collected, framed by the pillars and discussed in terms of the processes of resilience.

## 2. Findings and discussion

With an initial focus on one of the semi-structured interviews, the narrative includes embedded data extracts in italics to represent Harriet's voice and her intuitive use of figurative language. For each pillar, the dimension of resilience is theoretically presented with the processes of resilience. Throughout the narrative, these are located in bold text to highlight Harriet's resilient strengths. An explanation follows to acknowledge how she builds on these strengths to thrive in her educational context. The findings for each pillar then extend to include the larger group of participant teachers. The extracts of figurative language express personal and contextual experiences that present the teachers' challenges for maintaining resilience.

### 2.1. Teacher commitment: a motivational perspective

The motivational dimension encompasses the teachers' commitment to fulfil their call to work (Gu, 2014). Commitment is conceptualised as a manifestation of motivation that strongly correlates with resilience and is "understood as the capacity of dedicating time and effort for the profession" (Gratacós et al., 2021, p. 133). How teachers demonstrate the four processes of resilience through their commitments viewed through strategies that are employed to: (1) manage their time to balance work-life demands; (2) seek renewal and ongoing professional learning; (3) persist when facing adversity; and (4) maintain their desire to continue in their work, whether that be for enjoyment, satisfaction or challenge. Sustaining commitment requires resilience (Day, 2018).

Harriet manages her **time to maintain a work-life balance** but found it difficult to explain the industriousness of being a teacher, and that she *can't really put it into words what teaching is as it would be a forever list of jobs*. This descriptive use of imagery evokes a mental picture of the complexity of a teacher's role. She expressed the importance of letting the students know that she also has a personal life – *I try to let my kids see me as a teacher, but also as a person*.

Harriet's self-awareness enables her to see that she needs to be willing to **seek renewal and ongoing learning** – *you have to be, in this profession, very critical of yourself and what you do ... to learn from situations; reflect on things and change from year to year*. She provided the metaphorical example that indicated she is learning from her past experiences – *thinking about what could potentially go wrong or go off course and doing what you can to steer around to try to avoid these situations*.

Harriet confirmed her **persistence** yet identified the **adversity in teaching** in relation to time, which centres on *just trying to fit everything in without rushing the students*. She encounters difficulty accepting the assessment demands and spoke candidly using an idiom to explain – *they [assessments] are more wearing on me because of the extra time taken to mark students' work*. In addition, the *teaching of concepts in isolation* is also a concern as Harriet has observed students *struggling in lessons* because of an inability to apply their knowledge due to the fact that, she metaphorically described, *they've filed it [knowledge] away under a specific learning*

area. The students' learning retention and transference to other contexts relates directly to the issue that Harriet encounters with the content-laden curriculum, where she would prefer more time for students to consolidate their skills. Harriet expressed that the *overcrowded curriculum* and the corresponding lack of time are the sources of her *biggest struggles from a curriculum point of view*. She resolved to *cut down or cut out the things that aren't a hundred per cent necessary*, and through a cliché suggested *going back to basics ... towards a skill-based rather than [a] content-based curriculum*.

Harriet maintains her **desire** by seeing **teaching** as *not just a job*. She used repetition in her language to emphasise that she is *very, very passionate* about her work – *it's a big part of what makes me 'me'*. Harriet disclosed her commitment to her undertakings when she discussed the complexities associated with being a teacher, and the responsibility of teaching, employing the aphorism – *it makes a difference to people's lives*, to express her observation as a sentiment.

Harriet clearly has a deep commitment to teaching as a part of her identity (Cobb, 2022; Day, 2018); it's more than a job, it is who she is and how she makes a difference in the world. She has an ongoing reflective practice and a desire to grow as a teacher as a part of this. Yet, in parallel, she revealed challenges to these commitments: the paucity of time available for her to do her job well, the way she has to rush her students to complete their tasks and the content-heavy curriculum.

Other teachers in the study used symbolic imagery to reflect a less positive approach pertaining to the process of maintaining a work-life balance: "I see how under the pump they [teachers] are ... just churning through the work" (Teacher 9); and "I think it [teaching] has the ability to weigh you down as a human being" (Teacher 3). This same teacher identified his varied degrees of desire for his work, metaphorically stating, "It's one of those jobs to me that's very unstable in terms of emotion because it's like a roller coaster, with good times ... and completely bad times as well" (Teacher 3). These teachers expressed similar pressures concerning the demands of classroom teaching that made it difficult to persist in the face of adversity. One teacher used a simile to describe the pressure she felt: "It's like you're a nut and it squeezes like somebody just wants to break you" (Teacher 8). This teacher went on to contrast what is espoused to be quality, in relation to the provision of meaningful professional learning, with the actual learning support that is available. In reality, she perceived a distinctive contradiction and used irony to explain: "It's [professional learning is] all the things that are supposed to help me [to] do things well that dig away at my capacity .... All the support of supporting teachers is just talk" (Teacher 8). As recognised in the literature, teachers require school leaders to support them through the provision of quality professional learning time (Falecki & Mann, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2019). This includes regular opportunities for collaboration with peers and reflection on teaching. When this does not occur, their commitment is challenged and can directly impact their resilience.

## 2.2. Teacher agency: a professional perspective

The professional dimension involves the concept of agency to highlight that teachers' resilience is influenced by their experiences of being in control to generate, act on and monitor their work (Ebersöhn, 2012). By exhibiting agency, teachers can address and overcome many challenges (Cobb, 2022). Their personal agency is dependent on their feelings of competency to operate within the professional workplace. As such, teachers' agency is highly influenced by the work environment that in turn impacts their feelings of competency (Keogh et al., 2012). Agency is an action-situation transaction where teachers interact with their environment, so

their environment acts as a means of support (Biesta et al., 2015). The pillar of agency highlights teachers being empowered to make a contribution to their own way of working as well as having a voice about their work and working conditions. Teachers demonstrate four processes of resilience through agency when they: (1) are in a work environment where they feel valued; (2) believe in their ability; (3) achieve expectations; and (4) are able to take control to be innovative and adaptive. It follows that resilient teachers have resources that enable them to act upon rather than react to challenges (Beltman, 2021).

Harriet expressed that she is not sure that the public **values teachers** nor understands the job of a teacher; rather she feels that there is a common *stereotype of what a teacher looks like or what a teacher does*. She strongly accepted that this image reflects a narrow view of the teaching profession and that *no one quite understands it or gets it like another teacher gets it*, meaning that only teachers know what it is to be a teacher. Expressing a rhetorical contrast to accentuate the difference, Harriet reflected on how she perceives her professional self – *teaching isn't what you do, it's who you are .... It's such a big part of my identity*. The triadic relationship connection of identity-resilience-agency is supported in the research (Cobb, 2022), specifically as an enabler for early career teachers to manage challenges, demands and wavering confidence.

Harriet advocated that what she does as a teacher is *like sacred work*. This simile implied that she believes in her **ability to do this work**. Harriet shared how she identified herself with another teacher – *I saw myself in her ... young and fresh and fashionable*; with the use of alliteration reflecting her self-confidence. She recognised, as a strength, her ability to construct resources that she shared when often called upon by her teaching partners. Harriet acknowledged – *one of my skills is sourcing and making teaching resources that do not just take up space but look pretty and are functional as well*.

Harriet indicated an appreciation of the supportive school environment that enables her to **achieve the expectations** of being a teacher – *I'm very fortunate to be in the school that I'm at*. Using an idiom that compared the state of being overworked to a jet engine exhausting its fuel, Harriet suggested that the provision of additional time for the extra jobs *helps [to] stop that burnout*. The enjoyment and humour in the work that Harriet gains from being a teacher, and seeing the variable nature of working with children as an advantage, were expressed clearly – *being able to have a laugh ... especially working with kids, they're so unpredictable*.

Harriet referred to herself as the *fun teacher*, where she has opportunities to adopt and adapt new ways of teaching but emphasised that the *fun teacher* still needs to **take control**. She explained that *there's high quality learning happening* when the students *know the boundaries*; this metaphorically means that they are meeting the expectations, rules and procedures. Harriet maintains security in her teaching when there is consistency across the school that helps *everything [to] run a little bit more smoothly*. This extends to classroom routines, where students can depend on the consistency of expectations, which both Harriet and the students appreciate – *they're [students are] very into routines*.

Harriet has a strong sense of her own agency and also recognises its limits. She demonstrated reflective practices by looking backwards to connect her habits with her professional growth and identity (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Harriet understands her competencies and her peers' appreciation of them, such as her ability to develop great resources, to have fun, to know boundaries. As such, Harriet exhibited a form of agency from her experience, in that her reflections, on what she does, evoke implicitly the benefits of seven years of teaching experience and a supportive work environment. However, Harriet's perceived agency could change with a different interplay of available resources and contextual and

structural factors that constrain her actions (Biesta et al., 2015).

Perceptions of competency that influence agency were discussed by other teachers in the study in terms of capabilities, accountability to the education system and meeting incompatible expectations. One teacher reconciled her contribution and way of working through a rhetorical question about her capabilities when reflecting on her practice: “If I had taught it better, had I taught it differently, would that [student’s] mark be a bit different? But you can’t turn back time, can you?” (Teacher 2). Using hyperbolic language, a teacher referred to the “increase of bureaucracy ... and the terror of accountability” (Teacher 28). This representation is in contrast to being in control to exercise influence. Another teacher reconciled, “Accountability is a good thing, but, with accountability in big organisations like education departments, of course that means more box-ticking and more forms and more paperwork” (Teacher 10). Imagery was used, to express frustration about disempowerment, by a teacher who was asked to meet expectations with which she disagreed: “We are bending over backwards and doing everything, and even things that I think are maybe not right” (Teacher 16). Likewise, a teacher used a simile to discuss how she made conscious decisions to deal carefully with questionable school leadership requests: “When you have to think about, ‘Are you going to question this?’ It’s like walking on eggshells” (Teacher 12). These place-based perspectives of resilience highlight that teacher agency is evidently influenced by contextual challenges (Papatraianou et al., 2018).

### 2.3. Teacher relationships: a social perspective

The social dimension comprises building interpersonal relationships as a concept to include teachers’ collective and collaborative endeavours (Beltman, 2021). As a pillar of resilience, relationships are represented as skills and experiences that transfer to teaching as social competence (Hirschhorn, 2009). Positive interactions with colleagues, students, parents, the leadership team and other school staff enable teachers to work together (Le Cornu, 2013). How teachers demonstrate the four processes of resilience through the social perspective include: (1) building relationships in the school context; (2) working collaboratively in collegial teams; (3) using professional support networks; and (4) communicating effectively with others.

Using repetition of the second-person pronoun to refer to her relations with her students, Harriet declared, *if they know you, they trust you*. She aspires to be *that teacher that students connect with in her class*. **Building relationships** by getting to know her students was considered fundamental because she does not see them as *just a class of 31* [students]. She intuitively articulated the impact of forming relationships with the students in her class using the idiom to reflect her view that strong relationships influence successful management in the classroom – *they pick up on all your teaching .... This goes a long way as well with behaviour management*. Harriet expressed that taking the time to build a relationship with the individual students in her class *really matters to kids*, and emphasised the importance of making time for the *one-on-one moment* to establish these relationships.

Harriet clearly identified the significance of **working collaboratively in collegial teams** where she experiences what she referred to as *the school* and in which she talked appreciatively about how the school leadership team will *back you up if something goes a bit wrong*. Positive collegial everyday interactions with other teachers were identified as a source of encouragement through Harriet’s idiomatic phrase – *we all chip in to plan and prepare*. Again, using an idiom, Harriet was clear that it is her desire, where possible, to avoid the conflict that could occur if someone in the team *hasn’t done something up to scratch*, meaning as effective as is

expected, in accordance with the team’s standard. So, *rather than hoping for the best*, she sets the expectations from the start, *making sure everyone knows and agrees*.

Harriet confirmed that recognition from others in her **professional network** provides welcome support, in contrast to the *demanding job of teaching*. Also, influential to Harriet is the interpersonal teacher contact that she has with others in the profession, such as when they meet together informally in the staffroom for *adult conversations*. She values having time in the day to relax in the company of other teachers. Harriet humorously described using this as an opportunity *to let your hair out a bit after being trapped in a room with children all day*.

Harriet shared how she **communicates effectively** using a style of leadership where she focuses on informing all involved so that everyone is metaphorically *on the same page*. Specifically, she models the types of planning expectations to the other teachers in the team with transparent intentions. This style of clear communication, she explained, enables her to *lead by example rather than just tell[ing] people point-blank what to do*, using the idiomatic phrase to describe her direct style of speech.

Harriet is keenly aware of the importance of social relationships, with students as well as with staff. Her language of wanting to be a relational teacher is poetic in the depth that it conveys. She built upon this narrative through her discourse about connection being a basis for learning, and about this being made possible through one-on-one time. She conveyed her deep sense of collegiality and shared purpose with her colleagues through her language. Harriet made it clear that she has a strong awareness of the importance of social relations for dealing with adversity in her role.

Other teachers in the study expressed their positive interactions with colleagues. In some instances, this was in contrast to how they perceived their relationship with members of the leadership team, as one teacher indicated: “I went to my staff room and spoke to my immediate colleagues because that’s the saving grace. I’m not talking about senior management, that’s a different thing, but your immediate colleagues, they save your life” (Teacher 17). Articulation of the cliché *saving grace* with its interpretation provided emphasis. Similarly, imagery was used by one teacher, who had not had a positive experience with previous leaders in the school, as she confessed, “When I got my new principal in term two, my strategy there was duck and weave. It’s really inappropriate to say, but I didn’t want to be in his space” (Teacher 15). This is in direct contrast to the comment by another teacher, albeit from a different school, who stated, “He is the best principal I’ve ever had and ever worked for. He had my back 100%” (Teacher 2). Furthermore, one teacher metaphorically reflected on the difficulty of achieving and maintaining a balanced professional interaction with those in the school context: “It’s a fine line between when you teach, you’re meant to be a teacher, you’re not meant to be a counsellor” (Teacher 12). Another teacher conveyed her mixed feelings of empowerment in relation to collegial unity by communicating a moral message from a movie:

There’s not too much that a single teacher can change. I think I just stomp my foot in the wind, but, when you clump a whole heap of us together, we become an agency for change. I’m not sure if you’re familiar with the movie *A Bug’s Life*? It was about these ants who are being oppressed by the grasshoppers, then at the end, there’s one ant that realised that he wasn’t going to make a change, but, by rallying together the rest of the colony, they were a lot more powerful than the grasshoppers. (Teacher 16).

Relationship building with not only students, but also colleagues

and leadership is considered valuable for teacher resilience (Le Cornu, 2013). As has been indicated by some of the teachers in this study, school leaders' decisions and actions can have positive and negative influences on teachers' resilience. Consequently, these influences can also impact generally the attitude and mood of the teaching staff. Therefore, school leaders, who are considerate of their own feelings and empathetic to the situations and feelings of others, are positioned well to positively promote the resilience of the teaching staff and prosper in their leadership role (Klap et al., 2021).

#### 2.4. Teacher self-awareness: an emotional perspective

The emotional dimension focuses on self-awareness to provide a clear picture that steps teachers towards building resilience (Thom, 2020). Self-awareness primes emotional competence through positive self-reflections that serve to enhance resilience (Wosnitza et al., 2018). The four self-awareness processes of resilience include: (1) thinking optimistically; (2) feeling empathy for others; (3) reframing to enhance positive thoughts; and (4) regulating responses.

Harriet described her experiences *working with kids ... having one of those moments in the day where she has found herself thinking optimistically* by expressing the irony in the phrase – *if you don't laugh, you just cry* – contrast. She explained that sometimes *I just need to stop and talk with grownups ... have those moments when you can just have a giggle or vent about something*.

Harriet enjoys being a teacher but **empathises with others** as she understands that for some teachers the work *can be very draining*, figuratively meaning to exhaust the supply of energy. Harriet tries to mentally step outside, consider how others in her teaching team are feeling, and take the time *to understand all the stress that this job brings .... It's important to share moments with others*.

Harriet identified her ability to **reframe** her **thoughts** and feelings by *not taking things too personally*. She described that one way to deal with issues that could potentially be worrying was metaphorically *just [to] put that [issue] in the box*, where she adopts a stance that she has dealt with a situation to the best of her ability. Harriet shared her concern about how some parents can be difficult to reason with or to change their perceptions in particular situations. Harriet rationalised that those *parents always just want the best for their children*.

Harriet shared that at times she has needed to **regulate** her **responses**, particularly during difficult situations and sensitive conversations with some of the parents of the children whom she teaches. She used imagery to describe when the parents *come in with all guns blazing* and admitted that she *tended to stew on* these awkward confrontations. Harriet used an idiomatic phrase to describe her discomfort when parents, who were *all fired up* with discontent, approached her as the teacher, especially if she were unsure or even unaware of the issue. She expressed that it was important early in the school year to *get everyone on side* to avoid situations that can cause literally and figuratively *sleepless nights*.

Perhaps most poignantly, Harriet's figurative language revealed aspects of her emotional world. She disclosed a depth of insight; that the teaching profession has ample challenging moments, and that she has learned something about the choice of different possible emotional responses to those moments. She showed optimism, empathy, and an ability to reframe thoughts and to self-regulate within the complex interplay of relational and contextual conditions (Le Cornu, 2013). Harriet repeatedly referred to having learned not to take things or situations personally. Yet her own language made it clear that there are challenges to this calm and compassionate state of teaching. As Harriet conveyed, teachers talk

about their emotional experiences when, or if, their emotions are prominent as part of an experience (Sohn et al., 2017).

When sharing the impact of reconciling emotionally difficult situations, the teachers in the study used clichés. For example, one teacher stated, "I feel frustrated a bit in my job, which again snowballs into a combo [of a] stressed anxious mix" (Teacher 11); and from another teacher who realised the obligation bestowed on teachers: "It's a huge responsibility. We're about making people the best that they can be ... because they [students] might come to school, and that could be the only positive thing in their whole life" (Teacher 2). This comment highlights the importance of understanding how the teachers' experiences, work contexts and personal feelings exert positive or negative impacts on their capacity to function optimally, and consequently on the students' learning and school experience (Day, 2018).

Teachers reason about the options available in their work environment and choose how they will operate. As such, their decision-making involves complex thought processes. In time, some of this conscious processing for decision-making develops as automated cognitions (Fiorella, 2020) that can become opaque to the teachers themselves, but were expressed in the interviews through their figurative language.

### 3. Implications

During in-depth research interviews, the participants are the experts on their experiences and frame their phenomenological expressions as well as they are able (Morgan, 2011). As the findings and discussion demonstrated, the teachers in this study consistently turn towards figurative language to invite the researcher into their world. How else can Harriet possibly, in just a few sentences, convey what it feels like to have worked with the pressures of being a teacher in the current system, year after year, day after day, all while still striving to be an effective teacher? Yet in the narrative, Harriet's figurative language suggested a resilient teacher. Through her reflections, she revealed a compelling commitment to the profession, an active sense of agency, a collaborative effort that supports relationships, and a perceptive self-awareness.

Furthermore, through the use of figurative language, the teachers provided clues about the contradictory narratives that they hold concerning the world that can support or inhibit their resilience (Clarà, 2017). The characterisations of Harriet's resilience and the instances drawn from the other teacher participants are the authors' interpretations of the data; the point is to emphasise and realise quite how much can be revealed about a teacher's resilience through the figurative language used, where a lot can be conveyed in just a few words.

Three propositions follow from this work, which are expressed as ideas. Firstly, it would be useful for those working with teachers in a professional development capacity to tailor teacher professional learning towards a clear understanding of how figurative language exposes the processes of resilience. These are presented in the pillars of building resilience on which teachers can draw from personal and contextual resources. Teachers' professional learning is almost exclusively about curriculum and pedagogy, policies and procedures. However, teaching is a highly emotional experience, and guidance surrounding the motivational, professional, social and emotional influences would assist teachers to sustain resilience, so that they can strive to thrive rather than struggle to survive in the profession (Beltman et al., 2011).

Secondly, practising schoolteachers, school leaders, teacher educators and pre-service teachers would benefit from keenly listening for figurative expressions that reveal strengths and weaknesses in the pillars and, in particular, unresolved contradictions (Clarà, 2017). Figurative language reflects thoughts and



feelings. Being more aware of how to articulate, perceive and appraise experiences could assist teachers to find timely support for themselves, and for their teacher colleagues, as it is needed.

Thirdly, there is an opening to recognise the value of figurative language use and the resilience analysis template for future research endeavours that relate to enhancing teacher resilience in a way specific to the four dimensions and the pillars and processes of building teacher resilience. The conceptualisation of building resilience presented in this paper has contributed to the existing research on teacher resilience by recognising how individuals manifest resilience (Gu, 2014), as they identify their resilience strengths and build capacity to thrive in the contemporary educational world (Beltman, 2015). This perspective reflects a positive, adaptive view of resilience and respects that, at times, teachers do find themselves in the midst of adversity. If optimism is the ability to mediate external events and interpret them from a positive perspective (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) then, as a way forward, learned optimism stands as an external force of teacher resilience and wellbeing.

#### 4. Limitations and future research

Some limitations should be acknowledged in this research. Firstly, the teachers interviewed for the project were all research volunteers, which meant that they made the decision to take part in the interviews in response to a call for interested participants. This suggests that the teachers who responded to the request to be involved in the study were open to sharing their emotional experiences. However, their intentions to participate were evidenced as being for different reasons. Their motivation to participate included: demonstrating an eagerness to tell their stories about how well they have coped when dealing with situations; conveying a desire to debrief about the challenges they faced in their work; seeking a way forward to make sense of their experiences; and grasping an affordance to tell their side of a story to evoke compassion. Although this paper represents a small-scale study that focused on one teacher participant and extracts from a small number of other participants, it was part of a larger project. The larger research project explored the narratives of teachers to identify the elements of resilience that are evident through self-reflections (Clarà, 2017). Owing to space constraints, the data included were limited to the pertinent extracts from only 12 teachers of the 42 teacher interviews that were represented in the study. As such, the findings of this qualitative analysis are not intended to provide generalisable conclusions, but instead to expand theoretical and practical understanding of what is already known about teachers' resilience in relation to their everyday interactions within the educational context.

Similar research on teacher resilience has been conducted on a broader scope and scale (Day, 2018; Mansfield et al., 2016) and focused on factors that affect teachers' decisions to leave their career. The findings in this paper were derived from a proactive approach to expand the understanding of the elements that retain teachers and support teacher quality in the profession. This positive psychology approach (Huppert, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) can be emulated and conducted with other teachers to increase flourishing in their work as a proactive preventative approach rather than as reacting to a problem. This paper was framed by narrowing the conceptualisation of resilience to the four pillars of building teacher resilience. It is acknowledged that there is a methodological trade-off between using the prior theorising approach and using an inductive approach, whereby the data analysis is described as "going at it fresh" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 94).

#### 5. Conclusion

Educational research has embraced the phenomenon of teacher resilience as being influenced by multiple personal and contextual factors that interact together over time to shape professional growth (Beltman, 2021; Beltman et al., 2011; Mansfield, 2021; Mansfield et al., 2016). This paper has shed a new light on the processes of resilience that are conceptualised in the pillars of building teacher resilience. Grounded in previous *Teaching and Teacher Education* literature on resilience (Clarà, 2017; Cobb, 2022; Lavigne, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2012, 2016; Van den Borre et al., 2021), this research expands theoretical and practical understanding of teacher resilience in everyday interactions. As a contribution, the resilience analysis template has the potential to act as a functional resource for teachers' professional learning. The methodological approach, implemented to analyse the figurative language used intuitively by the teachers, offered a respectful way for the researchers to experience what the teachers were thinking and feeling when they responded to the interview questions (Colston & Gibbs, 2021; Morgan, 2011). A mindful understanding of the processes for resilience may assist practising schoolteachers, school leaders, pre-service teachers and teacher educators to re-experience themselves through the lens of the figurative language they use intuitively when describing their experiences.

#### Declaration of competing interest

Submission of an article implies that the work described has not been published previously.

#### Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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