Principals' and Deputy Principals' Conference 2025

"Fostering Resilience through Strengthening Working Relationships"

Discussion Paper

into

Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

"Building resilience is not just a structural issue, it's deeply rooted in social connections and prepared leadership"

(Education Leadership Network Europe, 2025, a)

Introduction

As the saying goes, as is the school leader so is the school. It is widely recognised that strong leaders significantly influence the school environment and shape the school's vision, foster a positive and inclusive learning environment, and empower both staff and pupils. A diverse range of sources including professional magazines, opinion pieces, qualitative research, quantitative research and official leadership frameworks have all argued that school leaders must develop resilience to be successful leaders and to lead successful schools (Pollock et al. 2023). Not only is resilience important for school improvement but other research in this field has also found that individual traits, such as resilience, coping abilities and intrinsic motivation play an important role in protecting oneself from burnout (Demerouti & Adaloudis, 2024). Schools are complex sites which are influenced by a multitude of social, political, cultural, historic and economic factors (Halliday et al. 2019). It is within these complex sites that school leaders face the challenge of managing the impact of externally driven change and supporting others' resilience while at the same time paying scant attention to their own (Steward, 2014).

Challenges to Resilience

There are many challenges and demands which undoubtedly test the resilience of school leaders. Often these challenges may be complex and can range from internal matters such as staff relations issues to more external pressures such as staffing shortages to critical incidents. Workload is an issue that is frequently identified as having a negative impact on resilience (Steward, 2014). Existing literature highlights that the intensification of workload is characterised by an increasing number of complex tasks that are required to be completed in shorter periods of time with fewer resources on an ongoing basis (Dulude & Milley, 2020; Pollock et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021). Leaders are often expected to deal with such pressures as work intensification, local site management, increased accountability, tension between management and leadership, altered relationships with community, (Whitaker, 2003) and a myriad of other demands including legislative, administrative and curricular. Other individuals in the organisation do not always know, recognise or appreciate the pressures leaders are under (Cubberley, 2021). Calls for principals and deputy principals to cultivate their resilience as a means to withstand work intensification may have negative consequences for them in the form of poor mental health outcomes, such as burnout and the development of mental health stigma (Pollock et al., 2023).

Resilience- A Trait or a Skill?

It is argued that resilience is crucial for school leaders. Resilience enables leaders to navigate change, manage stress, lead through crisis, recover from setbacks, stress and adversity, foster a positive school culture and enhance personal well-being (Inclusive Teach, 2023). The question as to whether school leaders are innately resilient or it's something that can be learned has been widely considered.

Pollock et. al citing Block & Block, 1980; Martínez-Marti & Ruch, 2017; Werner & Smith, 2001 contend that when resilience is considered a trait, resilient people are understood to be unaffected by stress (Pollock et al, 2023). The flip side when considering resilience as a trait is that an individual's inability to recover from stress and adversity is denigrated as a personality fault, leaving little room for improvement (ibid). In more contemporary literature, resilience is largely considered as a skill which is learned over time through successfully navigating stressful and adversarial experiences. There is now a consensus that the processes involved in resilience are far more complex than specific internal traits or assets (INTO, 2015). ELNE opine that change is inevitable, but resilience is built (ELNE, 2025, b). Resilience is a skill which some school leaders lack which can be worked on with appropriate professional development (Pollock et al, 2023). However, this can lead to a negative association and may exacerbate existing mental health issues by creating stigma around acknowledging or disclosing struggles with resilience (ibid). Notwithstanding the often-negative connotation, the provision of professional development cannot be underestimated. A study in the Canadian province of Ontario involving almost 900 vice-principals revealed that over two thirds had less than five years of experience (UNESCO, 2024). This study highlighted that critical areas for development include: emotional intelligence, communication and mental health resilience skills (ibid).

A Focus on Fostering Resilience

Managing workload, dealing with constant interruptions and the growth of the 'to do' list can lead to tiredness, irritability and finally burn out (Steward, 2014). INTO research on resilience found that coping with stressful experiences varies between individuals and contexts and is related to motivation, beliefs and satisfaction (INTO, 2022). According to Steward the building and sustaining of emotional resilience depends upon a complex web of inter-related experience, reflection and learning (Steward, 2014). In the education system where leaders often face high levels of stress and numerous challenges, research-backed strategies which can be employed by school leaders to build their own resilience include fostering relationships, promoting efficacy, cultivating positive affect, embracing learning, implementing resilience

programs and practicing mindfulness (Inclusive Teach, 2023). In addition, practical strategies can be utilised and the importance of building social support networks is recognised as such a strategy.

Beausaert et al. submit that burnout is an increasing issue in principals (Beausaert et al., 2016). Feelings of burnout have been shown to diminish when principals have strong social support (ibid). The cultivation of strong working relationships can provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, factors which are key to resilience. School leaders who beat the odds seem to be resilient mentally, emotionally, socially, ethically, and physically (Ozmusul, 2017).

Strengthening Working Relationships

It is of course recognised that both internal and external relationships are integral to the school organisation. Notwithstanding the latter, the aims of this discussion paper is to build and strengthen internal working with colleagues, mentors, and in-school management (ISM) teams or senior leadership teams. Effective instruction, shared decision making and equity orientation to foster supportive environments are leadership characteristics associated with resilience (UNESCO, 2024). If leadership teams successfully build relationships, show compassion and communicate well, achieving the best outcomes for pupils will be the ultimate focus and drive (Cubberley, 2021). In recognition of the importance of working relationships for school leaders, how can they be strengthened?

Trust is foundational to strong working relationships and a vibrant school environment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). School leaders face the complex task of cultivating trust and empowerment within their teams, while also intervening when necessary to resolve conflicts. This requires open, caring relationships that support learning, professional development and knowledge sharing. Investing in trust-building helps new leaders perform more effectively in their roles (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). As a practical measure distributed leadership initiatives appear to reinforce sensemaking and trust, becoming an embedded cultural element within which cooperation, dialogue and reflection form the foundation for decision-making about school improvement (Constantinides, 2023).

According to Lasater it is through professional development in the areas of rapport, trust and communication, with multiple opportunities to practice learned skills, that school leaders could develop the skills necessary to navigate the complex relational terrain that surrounds their positions (Lasater, 2016). However, Lasater opines that failure to provide school leaders with explicit and extensive training on relationship development is problematic and may leave

them involved in highly complex social interactions with diverse groups of people without the skills and experiences necessary to navigate these situations (ibid). In that regard the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) believe that greater access to and engagement with team coaching would have a profoundly positive impact on the development of a shared leadership culture in our schools (IPPN, 2024). Similarly the Education Authority in Northern Ireland also provide a coaching programme.

Whilst the team coaching offered through the Oide Leadership section is welcomed and highly recommended, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that the requirement for the principal to have availed of one-to-one coaching session in advance of applying to access team coaching serves as a barrier. The IPPN surmise that the impact of this requirement is clear, with fewer than 5% of schools (primary and post-primary) having completed team coaching as of the end of 2023 (ibid).

System Structural Solutions

Cann et al. citing Wylie and MacDonald 2020 contend that only a minority of primary school principals feel supported by government agencies (Cann et al., 2021). Pollock et al. surmise that rather than advancing suggestions for structural solutions to work intensification, recent educational leadership trends have called for individual solutions in the form of principal resilience (Pollock et al., 2023). The constant messaging to principals [and deputy principals] that they must develop their resilience while structural changes are not made to address work intensification creates a culture in which seeking out support signifies non-resilience (ibid). They further argue that an overemphasis on individual resiliency without structural supports and system-level considerations can negatively impact school leaders (ibid). By overemphasizing individual resilience, the individual becomes responsible for alleviating adversities rather than the organization being responsible for improving working conditions (ibid). Ozmusul notes the difficulties compounded by the absence of available education policy in terms of sustaining resilient leadership. He opines that each resiliency has a breakpoint (Ozmusul, 2017). Given the often unsuitable conditions and limited resources, he further argues that the school systems and policymakers in education should not want everything from school leaders (ibid). It is abundantly clear that there is much more that the system must and should do to support school leader resilience. As a practical example, during the European Education Leadership Week 2025, educators from three school initiatives shared how collaborative leadership fosters resilience (ELNE, 2025, b). There is certainly scope for further development in this area.

Concluding Remarks

The literature review explores how school leaders can foster resilience by strengthening internal working relationships. It argues that resilience is not just an individual trait but a skill shaped by social support, professional development, and systemic structures. While workload and stress challenge leaders, building trust, promoting distributed leadership and engaging in team coaching are key strategies. The review critiques the overemphasis on personal resilience without structural reform and calls for policy-level support to sustain resilient leadership.

What INTO members say about Fostering Resilience

To gather the views of teachers on Fostering Resilience through Strengthening Working Relationships, the Principals' and Deputy Principals' Committee (PDC) set up four focus groups to discuss the topic. Each focus group had between four and ten participants. The focus groups were comprised as follows:

- Principals
- Deputy Principals (DP)
- Assistant Principal I (AP1)
- Assistant Principal 2 (AP2)

The focus group discussions were conducted via Microsoft Teams during April and May 2025. Participants discussed a list of questions, some of which were common to each of the five groups and others which were specific to each of the groups. Deirbhile Nic Craith, former Director of Education and Research in INTO facilitated the focus group discussions. The PDC wish to express its thanks to all of the participants for their engagement with the topic and particularly to Deirbhile for skilfully eliciting their views on this theme.

Professional challenges to personal resilience.

The focus group participants were asked to identify the biggest professional challenge to their personal resilience. One of the major challenges to resilience of school leaders identified was that of workload and paperwork with one principal remarking 'the amount of paperwork at the moment is just mammoth'. Following on from workload, time management featured highly as a challenge to school leaders. Managing time, pulling from teaching time and trying to fit it all in was highlighted as a struggle. In the words of one participant, 'initiative overload is one that

would give you palpitations'. Another remarked that they sometimes feel suffocated by the amount that is just coming in at the one time. This was also echoed in the AP2 focus group and the challenges of new initiatives and bringing about change were highlighted. Expectations featured across two of the groups, namely others' expectations of the role and their own expectations. Other challenges to resilience mentioned included the pace of change, chasing up on agencies and individuals, feelings of guilt, managing school finances, challenging behaviour, assaults and special education needs provision in a school. One participant opined, 'it's kind of like death by a thousand cuts'.

Strategies to maintain personal resilience.

Participants were asked to reflect on the strategies they utilise to maintain their own personal resilience. All focus groups highlighted the importance of touching base and debriefing with their colleagues, in particular the In-school Management Teams (ISM) in the Republic of Ireland and the School Leadership Teams in Northern Ireland were referenced. One participant commented, 'you have that inner circle who is your ISM team and I would be absolutely, totally and utterly at sea only for them'. Prioritising workload was another strategy that featured strongly amongst participants across the focus groups and acceptance that you can't get it all done, looking after priorities and saying no to everything else. Leading a healthy lifestyle and looking after one's health and wellbeing featured as one of the strategies with participants mentioning exercise classes, golf, walking the dog, listening to music as well as going to restaurants with one participant remarking, 'you have to look after yourself before you start looking after other people'.

Consistent across three of the focus groups was the importance of focusing on the work that has been completed such as writing reminders of what has been completed and recording in a diary an account of what has been done. Others mentioned that they try to leave work behind them with one participant remarking, 'I try and leave school at school'.

Other strategies included maintaining a sense of perspective, ticking off to-do lists, scheduling planning time along with seeking out support from the INTO and Management bodies.

Characteristics of good working relationships

Participants were asked to consider the characteristics of good working relationships and how to strengthen them. Communication was the most highly featured characteristic of a good working relationship amongst the four focus groups. Being open to discussion, opinions and

dialogue with ISM were listed by members as important. Clear and consistent communication was also highlighted. Being a good listener falls under the umbrella of communication and holding back and listening to others' opinions are integral and important parts of communication.

Trust was the next most important characteristic as identified by focus group participants. Trusting other members of the ISM team was paramount to our members with one member saying that an approach of, 'what's said at the table, stays at the table' emerged as a key factor in building trust with the leadership team. A core characteristic of good working relationships is cultivating personable relationships. In the words of one member, 'it's a great building block to everything else' which emphasises the importance of galvanising those strong connections. Understanding colleagues' personal situations can foster empathy.

Another worthy trait highlighted was being a team player with one participant observing the mantra 'we're all in it together and we're all doing it for the benefit of school'.

Strengthen those relationships to contribute to resilience

Off-site meetings with ISM team were noted by some members as a means of strengthening working relationships and contributing to resilience. There also appears to be a trend in moving meetings off-site perhaps removing the team from the school removes the stress associated it. Showing empathy for colleagues was highlighted as a means of strengthening relationships. One participant surmised, 'having empathy for other people and understanding what's going on in their lives and not always thinking the agenda we're pushing is the most important thing'. Offering to assist when possible, being respectful, good communication and being accountable were also listed.

How can the system evolve to support the resilience of school leaders?

Participants were asked to consider how can the system evolve to support the resilience of school leaders. Release time for ISM and administrative days for deputy principals featured highly in the responses as ways the system can evolve to build the resilience of school leaders. Six of the AP2 members brought this point to the fore and it was echoed by the DP and principal focus groups also to allow time for training, time budgets and resilience building.

The financial aspect was emphasised across the groups. One principal remarked, 'the elephant in the room is that we're not being paid in recognition of the staff that we manage' and

commented on principals managing up to five times the number of staff that they are being paid for.

Grants and financial management of systems were a major bone of contention amongst the focus group members. They highlighted the need for a 'centralised location' for funds and in relation to grants, some feel the level of paperwork required in applying for grants is unnecessary and excessive as the Department of Education and Youth 'know how many kids you have in your school'. A centralised location to pay electricity, insurance etc. was also recommended.

The value of having guidelines or a job description emerged as being important especially for AP2 and deputy principals as there appears to be variations in the respective workloads. The deputy principals' focus group touched on the benefits of ISM meetings taking place offsite and strong recognition was given to Forbairt. Participants from Northern Ireland emphasised the benefit of time-out clusters and time budgets.

Conclusion

The research and focus group findings underscore the complex challenges school leaders face in maintaining personal resilience, from overwhelming workloads to evolving and unrealistic expectations. Yet, they also highlight the power of collegial support, healthy boundaries, and strong working relationships rooted in trust, empathy and communication. Participants offered thoughtful strategies and systemic recommendations including release time, financial recognition and clearer role definitions. These insights provide a valuable roadmap for fostering resilience and strengthening leadership across schools. By listening to and acting on these voices, the system can evolve to better support those at the heart of education. Collaboration among school leaders has significant potential to support a resilient response when it is needed most (UNESCO IIEP & Education Development Trust (UK), 2022). This conference provides the opportunity for Principals and Deputy Principals to collaborate and share their views to ascertain what system supports are required to foster their resilience and strengthen working relationships.

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