Navigating the Turbulent Time: A Qualitative Inquiry into Resilience among Vietnamese ESL Teachers during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: resilience; teacher burnout; Covid-19 pandemic; ESL teachers; teacher retention

The aim of this study is to explore the dynamics of the resilience process among Vietnamese ESL (English as the Second Language) university teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study investigated the interactions between risk factors and protective factors at both personal and contextual levels that shape teachers' resilience patterns. Fifteen teachers from different stages of teaching career participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews in qualitative research design, and the collected data were analyzed by means of a two-cycle analysis procedure. Findings of the study revealed two major risk factors, including *turbulence and ambiguity* and *decreasing autonomous motivation*. Despite this, teachers drew on three primary resources to adapt to the abrupt changes: *positive imaginaries about the future*, *sense of professionalism*, and *relational resources*. Analysis showed that these protective factors were located across personal level and microsystems; however, there were missing links for protective resources at institutional level, mesosystems, and macrosystems. Taking cognizance of this, the study emphasizes the role of transparent policies and school leadership in bolstering teachers' resilience in adversities.

Introduction

Concerns have been escalating over the issue of teacher shortage at both national and international scales. Approximately 70 million teachers' job posts have to be filled and retained globally if the development goals of quality, inclusive education set by the United Nations are to be fulfilled (Kangas-Dick, & O'Shaughnessy, 2020). However, the issue of teacher recruitment and retention has undergone an unexpected crisis internationally (Avalos & Valenzuela, 2016), for reasons related to burgeoning workloads, excessive bureaucracy, lack of

support, disruptive students' behaviors, and changing the social status of the teaching profession (Manfield et al., 2016). Teacher burnout and attrition imply severe consequences economically, academically, and psychologically by causing a negative school climate and lowering academic performance (Kraft, Marinell, & Shen-Wei Yee, 2016).

In this context, sustaining teachers' resilience is critical in helping teachers manage stress, pressure and remain in their profession (Flores, 2018). Broadly speaking, resilience refers to the capability to adapt positively to challenges and adversities and to maintain well-being despite stress (Luther et al., 2000). In alignment with Luther's model, this study views resilience as an ongoing dynamic process instead of a fixed personality trait that is pertinent to individuals. The notion of resilience is especially relevant in the present situation, as the Covid-19 pandemic has caused turbulence and disruptions in many fields, including education, and created increasing stress and pressures on teachers at all levels. This calls for a need to explore the resilience pattern that operates among teachers during these adversities.

Although the construct of resilience has been widely investigated in psychology (e.g., Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012), this is a relatively new concept in education and thus needs further investigation in different settings and contexts. Furthermore, much of the extant literature on teacher resilience has gravitated towards the early stages of the teaching career, and thus the experiences in other phases of teaching are still under-presented.

Taking cognizance of this, the present study expands the existing literature by shedding light on the dynamics of resilience factors that influence ESL university teachers in the Covid-19 pandemic in the Vietnam context. The Covid-19 situation poses an interesting case to look into the pattern of resilience: unlike other creeping educational phenomena such as neoliberalism, the pandemic has been a sudden incident bringing about unexpected disruptions in every educational aspect.

Literature review

Resilience

Resilience, a psychological concept recently imported to educational research, is "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luther et al., 2000, p. 543). In a more recent definition, resilience is construed as "the sum of an individual's abilities that allow him or her to bounce back from adversity and even thrive in the face of difficult times" (Kim & Kim, 2017, p.2). In the field of education, teacher resilience refers to what sustains teachers to survive and thrive in their profession and navigate in adversities or during turbulent times (Beltman et al., 2011).

While early conceptualizations conceive resilience as personal attributes, which are internal to a person and couched within their capacity, including motivation, self-efficacy, physical conditions, and resourcefulness (Masten et al., 1990), recent discourses describe resilience in the dynamic interaction of both personal and contextual factors (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019;

Benard, 2004). Accordingly, resilience is not only attributed to psychological orientations but also affected by social support systems such as family, friends, workplace, and social environments (Gu & Day (2007), Truebrigdge (2015).

Individual characteristics

A large body of literature related to teachers' burnout, attrition, and retention has unraveled a number of individual risks and resources that may foster resilience among teachers and protect them from demotivation. Personal risk factors may involve insufficient self-efficacy, introversion and difficulties in seeking for help, and conflicts between teachers' beliefs and imaginaries and the realities of school practices (Beltman et al., 2011). Despite this, teachers can draw on a number of personal protective factors, including autonomous motivation, conscientiousness, openness, self-efficacy, and relational resources (e.g., Day & Gu, 2009) in order to survive and thrive in difficult times. For example, Bowles & Arnup (2016) argue for a positive correlation between teachers' sustained commitment to teaching and such characteristics such as adaptability, orientation towards optimism, and locus of control. In another recent study, Ainsworth & Oldfield (2019) point out the critical role of self-esteem, life orientation, and emotional intelligence in improving teachers' well-being and retention.

Contextual characteristics

Emergent evidence in the body of literature has suggested that contextual factors may have an overriding role in determining the level of job satisfaction and resilience among teachers (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). Contextual risk factors vary significantly within the curriculum, school, family, or professional contexts. As regards school contexts, it has been reported that demanding and heavy workloads, combined with the pressure to fulfill various, or even, conflicting roles at school, have pushed many teachers to the critical point of exhaustion (Richards et al., 2018). Furthermore, teachers also suffer stress and demotivation from disruptive students' behavior and negative teacher-student relationship (Greenberg et al., 2016). Another source of risks comes from increasing accountability-based education across all levels, which results in a lower sense of autonomy and self-efficacy among teachers (Datnow & Park, 2018; Greenberg et al., 2016). More importantly, lack of support from school leaders and administration plays a pivotal role in causing teachers' burnout and attrition (Flores, 2018).

Family contextual constraints primarily focus on maintaining a balance between family and work commitments, lack of necessary facilities at home, or little support from family members (Fleet et al., 2007). Professionally, low self-esteem and lack of social recognition regarding professional values may lower the possibility of teachers remaining in their jobs (Aujila-Bhullar, 2018).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a variety of contextual protective factors have been proven to bolster resilience among teachers. One element is related to strong leadership and a positive school atmosphere, which contributes to teachers' well-being (Ellison & Mays-Woods, 2019). Specifically, different studies have established a relationship between favorable school ambience (e.g. perceived job security, professional development, and level of school support)

and teachers' turnover rate and students' achievement (Richards et al., 2016). In addition, supportive and trusting relationships with leaders, colleagues, family, friends, and reinforcement from professional networks also serve as important social support in adversities (Olsen & Anderson, 2007). Another important protective factor is transparency in setting role expectations and clear targets for teachers' performance (Belknap & Taymans, 2015).

In sum, varied personal and contextual factors have been identified in the body of literature in relation to teachers' resilience. However, more empirical evidence is needed to understand the interactive patterns between the risk factors and protective factors in different adverse contexts (Flores, 2018). While the Covid-19 pandemic has posed additional challenges and threats to the already stretched conditions experienced by teachers worldwide, it also creates unique dynamics of personal and contextual dimensions in teachers' resilience.

Teachers' resilience amidst the Covid-19 pandemic

Previous studies have revealed the dynamics of varied personal and contextual factors in the Covid-19 pandemic context. For example, in an investigation into Canadian teachers' attitudes in the Covid-19 disruptions, Sokal, Trudel, and Babb (2020) revealed a positive relationship between the college teachers' resilience and their attitudes. To be more specific, the teachers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes towards change, technology, and administrative support positively correlated with their sense of accomplishment and resilience. In another study, Bento et al. (2021) found that Brazilian teachers' resilience depended on their individual adaptive processes and communication processes, which facilitated the interaction between previous knowledge and the emergent requirements in this disruptive time.

In a recent study regarding Vietnam's educational contexts, Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) elaborated on several factors bolstering resilience capability in one foreign language institution, which encompassed "clear directions from the top-level stakeholders, the mutual cooperation between relevant faculties and departments, and the initiatives taken by supporting and teaching staff to suit the local context's conditions" (p.48). Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) also found out that teachers' willingness to adopt change and technology during the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e. using video conferencing) was influenced by several factors such as "effort expectancy, hedonic motivation, and habit" (p.12). This finding is related to another study conducted by Ly, Nguyen, and Nguyen (2021), wherein factors such as regulated environment, teachers' technology literacy, and the suitability of the tools were found to determine teachers' level of adaptation to the crisis.

The aforementioned studies have illustrated the dynamics of teachers' resilience during the Covid-19 crisis, which needs illumination from further empirical evidence. In addition, the perspectives and experiences of Vietnamese teachers as the major stakeholders in Vietnam's education have still been underrepresented in the body of literature. This research seeks to fill this gap by exploring the resilience patterns among Vietnamese ESL teachers in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, a qualitative design was conducted to seek answers to the following questions:

    1.   How do ESL teachers describe their personal and contextual risk factors during the turbulent time caused by the Covid-19 pandemic?

    2.   How do these teachers draw on personal and contextual resources to cope with these risk factors and remain resilient?

Methods

Research context & Participants

This study was carried out at a Foreign Language Faculty of a public university in Vietnam, as the country was undergoing a fourth lockdown period due to the Covid-19 outbreak. In this context, all university courses were being conducted fully online. Although this was not the first time that online teaching and learning was required on an ad hoc basis in response to the contagious disease, this lockdown was by far the longest.

The participants were fifteen ESL teachers (eight females, seven males), with ages ranging from 28 to 34 and with two to eight years of teaching experience. A convenience sampling technique was employed as the basis of participant selection, which draws on availability, accessibility, and willingness on the part of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). All the teachers had been working for the university for at least two consecutive years and had been engaged in online teaching for several semesters.

For ethics considerations, participant information was sent to all prospective interviewees to provide basic information regarding the purposes of the study, the level of participants' engagement, and the potential risks. Written consent was sought before each interview session, and clarifications were given concerning the voluntary nature of the study and the strategies with which all the collected data will be treated to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in English to avoid any loss of meaning that might occur during the translation process.

Design of the Study

This study aims to understand varied personal and contextual risk and protective factors that may interfere in the resilience process of Vietnamese ESL teachers during the turbulent Covid-19 outbreak. Due to its exploratory nature, the study employed a qualitative research design with in-depth semi-structured interviewing as the primary data collection method. Qualitative studies, as explained in Creswell and Poth (2016), help to understand "a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (p.2).

Data collection & analysis

Data collection was performed employing in-depth semi-structured interviews, which endow teachers with opportunities to extrapolate on their experiences and perspectives while still maintaining the overall pattern of study focus. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews embrace elements of flexibility and openness, giving spaces for probes and follow-up questions to facilitate in-depth understanding (Wellington, 2000). The participants were required to give a general description regarding the courses they were teaching and the experiences they encountered during this time. In the following main questions, the teachers were asked to describe the factors that facilitated or hindered them from remaining resilient. Accordingly, aspects of personal characteristics, workplace characteristics, social circumstances, and social and family relationships were drawn into consideration to comply with the personal and contextual dimensions of teachers' resilience.

The interview protocols began with the list of interview questions being sent out to the participants prior to the interview so that the teachers would have more time for reflection and feel more comfortable at the interview. Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, all interviews were conducted online via the MS Teams platform and were recorded with the participants' consent. Each interview lasted for about 50-60 minutes. After initial analysis, pieces of data that were ambiguous or conflicting were sorted out, and emails were sent to relevant participants to seek clarification.

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and followed a two-cycle analysis procedure as suggested by Saldaña (2013). In the initial cycle, a combination of different coding strategies, including In Vivo coding, descriptive coding, and process coding, was employed to explore various nuances of the data and to identify emergent codes. Thereafter, these codes were further refined and then grouped under overarching categories. In the second cycle, major themes from the data were drawn by means of pattern coding. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), pattern codes are "explanatory or inferential codes that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation" and are processed by condensing data into "a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis" (p.69).

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of a qualitative study design. Firstly, the data were coded and recoded so that the subtle nuances of interview data could be revealed. Analytic memos were kept during the study as a means to record personal reflection and positionality during the process. Secondly, the codes and themes were then cross-checked by one colleague who was experienced in qualitative coding. Furthermore, the teachers were informed that they could add, rectify, or withdraw any information in the interviews if they felt that it no longer represented themselves and their experiences. A rich and thick description of the data was provided, accompanied by direct quotations from the participants' narratives wherever necessary.

Results/Findings and discussion

The purpose of the present study is to explore the teaching experiences of Vietnamese university teachers during the Covid-19 lockdown in order to find out different risk and protective factors that shape their resilience. The analysis elaborates on the major themes couched in the interview data by, firstly, explaining two main areas of challenges shared by the teachers and then extrapolating on personal and contextual resources that teachers drew on to survive and thrive.

Risk factors experienced by ESL teachers

Thematic analysis of the interview data reveals two major challenges that ESL teachers had to cope with during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Turbulence and ambiguity

Findings show that the Covid-19 outbreak incurred great 'turbulence' and tangible changes in many aspects of university education. A large part of teachers' narratives pivoted around the unexpected changes they experienced in pedagogies, teaching platforms, and assessment policies, as expressed in the following extract.

> TAM: It was full of turbulence at first. Everything went online: teaching, testing, communication… We needed to change teaching methods, lesson plans, make many test versions. Policies changed all the time, and sometimes we didn't know what to do [….] I believe the English language should be taught face-to-face to have better interaction.

These disruptions from the normal routine of teaching, learning, and assessment put teachers in many negative emotional states such as 'alertness', 'worry', and 'stress', and rendered them in constant ambiguity: 'We didn't know what was going to happen next or 'We planned to have the test online, but were aware that they could be offline'.

This part of the analysis reflects Flores' description (2018) about how adversities such as social changes and economic crises can profoundly influence schools and teachers' lives through drastic changes in policies and curriculum. One interesting nuance of the pandemic's influence on teachers is the lack of role transparency in this awkward time:

> GIA: Everything is blurred. Sometimes I am not sure what my role is anymore and what is expected from me. Do I need to maintain the normal quality of the course? Do students have to meet the course outcomes as usual? If I stick to the norms, then students will fail [….] If I force them to learn, they'll get bored and complain […] And then I need to help students have lots of communication and Interactions in online platforms. You know, I teach English. So how can I negotiate?

This finding suggests a relationship between ambiguity and increasing confusion and pressure among teachers. As discussed in Belknap & Taymans (2015), when teachers experience insufficient or conflicting information concerning their role and their expected performance at school, they seem to withstand a greater level of stress and burnout, and this will interfere with their resilience.

Decreasing autonomous motivation

During the interviews, many teachers emanated an increasing level of demotivation during this turbulence. One of the most important sources of this originated from burgeoning workloads and multiple administrative tasks that teachers had to cope with.

> QUAN: There are tons of things to do that I feel it would never end. Many overlapping training workshops online, lots of paperwork especially for tests, many new rules to learn […] We also need to spend more time on lesson preparation, making videos and interactive lessons online for example [….] We also need to take care of students much more – explaining the lessons again and again since many of them don't pay attention and don't understand, do a lot of reports why they cannot attend classes or why they drop out. And then meetings for hours on end… and exam invigilation too! It's just too much!

Another source of demotivation comes from the fact that teaching increasingly became a top-down process rather than personal creativity when it went online. Concerns over online teaching and learning led to greater accountability and control over teachers' work, which was manifested in strictly monitored learning outcomes, homogeneous pedagogies, and uniformed tests. As a result, many teachers expressed a lack of autonomy and control over their own teaching, which resulted in decreasing motivation.

The encroachment of neoliberalism in the field of education has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g., Goodson, 2010; Gray et al. (2018)). Neoliberalism supports the values of free trade, privatization, and knowledge market (Peters, 2010), and it entails the imposition of a top-down curriculum, increasing accountability by employing accountable exams to measure success, and introducing benchmarks and standards for education evaluation (Goodson, 2010). Accordingly, the neoliberal approach to education has exerted great stress and pressure on teachers. Furthermore, from the result of the present study, it is likely that the workloads were aggravated when all teaching courses unexpectedly went online. Several teachers expressed increasing burden when this was combined with increasing 'family commitments' and 'financial constraints' in the Covid-19 contexts. This finding is significant since research has suggested negative influences of ongoing stress and pressure on teachers' autonomous motivation, which in turn adversely affects their professional development (Pelletier & Rocchi, 2016).

Personal and contextual resources employed to cope with risk factors

Despite the aforementioned challenges and risks experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, all teachers make use of personal and other resources to help them overcome the adversities and remain in the profession.

Positive imaginaries about the future

One of the pervading factors that sustained the teachers in this tough time was the inclination towards optimism and hoped prevalent in most narratives. A majority of teachers believed that this present situation was temporary and the future would behold brighter scenarios for both teachers and students.

> NGOC: It will not be the same forever. Covid-19 will be contained, and everything will come back to normal soon. I believe things can be much better compared to the past, as we [teachers] can now learn new skills in teaching, have new pedagogies, and students somewhat learn to be more independent. Even though it cannot be the same as it was in the past, we will soon adapt to it.

Other teachers expressed appreciation for this opportunity, which helps them become 'more flexible and more adaptive to changes. The idea of 'turning challenges into opportunities' was reiterated across the interview scripts and thus could reflect the teachers' attitudes towards this event. As Bullough and Hall-Keynon (2011) pointed out, hope and optimism are critical in sustaining teachers in difficult times and helping them navigate challenges. This part of the analysis also reveals the increasing sense of efficacy that accompanies teachers' optimistic perspective. The teachers expressed great belief in their improved teaching skills and strategies, problem-solving skills, and self-directed learning capability.

Sense of professionalism

Besides hope, most teachers admitted that the factor that helped them move forward was their commitment to the teaching career and a desire to make changes to education and students' lives. Some teachers described fulfilling experiences embedded in their teaching profession.

> SON: For me, what gives me the strength to overcome many challenges is my passion for teaching and the job of teaching. Yes, I know the salary is low, workloads are so heavy, especially during this time of Covid-19. But I have never regretted being a teacher. I think in this kind of profession, we are doing so many meaningful things. And I love seeing my students improve and develop every day.

> HANH: What keeps me in this job is my students. Sometimes they lack motivation, and it makes me feel down. But most of the time, I like teaching them. It makes me feel young and full of energy. Sometimes they can be so inspiring. Anyway, communicating with students can be fun and less complicated than in other professions.

Put simply, the teachers emanated a strong sense of vocation in their profession and a good understanding of their responsibilities and level of engagement as teachers. This finding accords with earlier observations (e.g., Flores, 2018; Galea, 2018), which showed that students as sources of motivation could contribute to teachers' sense of professionalism and, in turn, bolster resilience in challenging working contexts.

The role of relational resources

In accordance with the results of other studies, participants primarily drew on different types of support from their friends, family, and social networks to help them sustain in this context. However, while previous studies emphasized school leadership as a significant contextual resource (Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy, 2020), this study has not been able to demonstrate this role in teachers' perception, except for many training sessions. Most of the participants referred to family, friends, and colleagues as great sources of support during the Covid-19

outbreak.

> MAI: I am lucky to have family, friends, and my colleagues shared with me during this difficult time. The school does give me many pieces of training, and they are helpful. But I actually learned a lot from my colleagues. Previously, I didn't believe in group works in teaching, but now we plan the lessons together, and I feel I am not alone. My husband also gives me a lot of encouragement and support in many ways [….] I feel blessed from all of this.

Previous studies have argued for the critical role of supportive relationships in building capacity for resilience among teachers (Peters & Pearce, 2012). Especially, stable family support and strong informal, supportive relationships have been proven to help teachers sustain their teaching commitments against challenges (Papatraianou and Le Cornu, 2014). In fact, insufficient support from different relationships has been cited as one of the most popular reasons for teachers' turnover and attrition. Gu and Li (2013) point out that "teachers' worlds are made up of multi-layered relationships" (p. 298), and these inter-related relations are vital in positively or negatively shaping their capacity for resilience.

Kangas-Dick & O'Shaughnessy (2020) categorize protective factors into different levels of a holistic system: personal level; 'microsystems' (including interpersonal relationships and different social roles played by the teachers); 'mesosytems' (comprised of two or more microsystems); and 'exosystems' (including two or more contextual settings) (p.132). These multi-layer protective factors interact with each other to bolster teachers' levels of resilience. However, the results of this study do not demonstrate this holistic system in full. Rather, it seems that relationships at the institution level were not activated, and school communities, working culture (mesosystem) and relevant policies (exosystem) did not serve as protective factors for teachers to survive and thrive in this tough time. These missing links might explain for continuous teachers' burnout and attrition found in this study.

Conclusion

This explorative study set out to discover patterns of risk factors and protective factors that shape teachers' capacity for resilience in the turbulence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Results of the study confirmed the inter-relations of personal and contextual dimensions in these factors. Broadly speaking, the ESL teachers suffered from increasing ambiguity and complications from changing educational contexts. Besides this, burgeoning workloads and escalating top-down control on every aspect of teaching and learning derived teachers of creativity and autonomous motivation. As emphasized by Deci and Ryan (2000), prolonging stress and pressure from jobs can exhaust autonomous motivation and deform it into controlled motivation or even demotivation. Despite these prevalent risk factors, teachers also drew on different protective resources to navigate the challenges. These resources came from personal factors such as optimism, hope, and a sense of professionalism and from contextual factors such as support from their close relations. However, the findings did not prove the pivotal role of institutions and wider culture and policies in helping teachers survive and thrive.

Sustaining teachers' resilience during adversities such as during the Covid-19 pandemic is critical to improving teachers' retention and decreasing turnover. The findings of this study draw attention to a significant gap in the protective system for teachers. Specifically, this paper emphasizes the role of transparent policies and school leadership in reducing teachers' burnout and ensuring their well-being. In other words, fostering supportive relationships at the institutional level, meso level, and exo-level is important in this tough time.

This study strengthens the idea that resilience is not pertinent to a person's characteristics and is a process that is shaped and reshaped by the interaction of different factors. The key strength of the study lies in the in-depth understanding of the target phenomenon due to its exploratory nature. However, the limited number of participants in qualitative research design also means limited generalization of the research results. Therefore, it is suggested that further studies would be conducted among participants with different backgrounds so as to identify the resilience patterns of teachers in adversities.

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