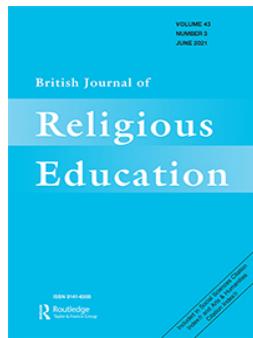


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Teachers' faith, identity processes and resilience: a qualitative approach

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are at risk to suffer from burnout and adverse mental health as a result of work-related stress and conflicts. The development of teacher resilience depends upon a complex interaction between extraneous factors (i.e. administrative and social support), and, intrinsic factors (i.e. personal values). Although it is known that personal faith plays a crucial role in the development of resilience in different contexts (i.e. emotional exhaustion, illness), it remains questionable whether there is a possible relationship between teacher resilience and personal faith. The present project addresses this gap in knowledge by investigating narrative accounts of teachers' individual experiences with resilience in relation to their personal faith. The Thematic Analysis of two group interviews with 16 teachers indicates that the teachers' personal faith provided religiously motivated narrative frameworks that facilitated the interpretation of one's experiences. By resonating with basic constituents of identity construction (i.e. meaning, distinctiveness, self-esteem), the religious interpretation of conflicts shielded the teachers' identity from threat in times of distress. In conclusion, the present study's exploratory results suggest that personal faith may improve teacher resilience. Future, large-scale studies may provide further evidence to reconsider the role of religious education in teacher training as important factor in the development of teacher-resilience.

KEYWORDS

Christianity; faith; identity processes; identity threat; resilience; primary schools

Introduction

Elementary education in primary schools tries to help children develop the skills, knowledge and values necessary for a peaceful life with others (Bickmore 2001). While forging abilities that allow students in schools to work together in positive ways is one of the most important goals in primary schools, the development of these abilities also strains teachers and was found to be a crucial factor in poor levels of mental health (Borman and Maritza Dowling 2008; Roffey 2012; Garrard and Lipsey 2007; Batton 2002; Jones 2004). However, while literature outlines that conflicts in school may have adverse effects on the teachers' wellbeing, it is unclear which strategies teachers may put into place to respond to classroom conflicts. Instead, to date research focuses predominantly on the evaluation of programmes that aim to improve the students' conflict management strategies and gives little attention to the teachers' conflict coping strategies (Garrard and Lipsey 2007; Papastylianou, Kaila, and Polychronopoulos 2009). Here, individual faith and belief may be particularly important resources in dealing with classroom conflicts as research suggested religiosity to have a positive effect on the development of resilience and coping with work-related stress (Graham et al. 2001; Poling 2011; Gloria, Faulk, and Steinhardt 2013; Fowler 1999). However, to date it is unclear how a teacher's belief may contribute to conflict and work-stress resilience. The present project addresses

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this gap in knowledge by conducting a qualitative exploration of teachers' narrative accounts to investigate their individual experiences with conflict resolution in classroom in relation to their faith. In doing so, the present project provides an exhaustive analysis of individual perspectives on the consequences of utilising their faith in a professional environment.

Teaching has been identified as a particularly stressful occupation (Burke and Greenglass 1993; Kyriacou and Sutcliffe 1977; Savicki and Cooley 1983). A factor that contributes to adverse mental health in teachers is the number and severity of student-teacher confrontations (Biller 1981; Schwab and Iwanicki 1982; Cinamon, Rich, and Westman 2007). Here, research suggests, that the more severe conflicts are, the greater the risk to teacher's mental health and wellbeing (Dyrbye et al. 2011; Zhou and Wen 2007; Burke and Greenglass 1993). For example, teachers who experience severe conflicts on a daily base were found to be at greater risk to suffer from burnout and poor mental health conditions even when compared with other highly stressed occupational groups (Zhou and Wen 2007; Travers and Cooper 1993). Therefore, the development of resilience is crucial for maintaining wellbeing in the classroom environment (Beltman, Mansfield, and Price 2011). The present research addresses how teacher may develop resilience and to which extent personal faith may be involved in this process. In doing so, the present project will add to previous knowledge by understanding how and to which extent identity formation processes and identity stability may impact on the development of resilience.

'Resilience' was initially a concept that characterised the capacity of an individual to adjust to adversity (Garmezy 1974; Beltman, Mansfield, and Price 2011). Recent research suggests that instead of being a personal attribute, resilience is a complex, dynamic relationship between risk and protective factors (Benard 2004). However, while resilience among children has been extensively investigated, limited empirical investigations have addressed teacher-resilience. Evidence from studies that have examined teacher-resilience indicate that a range of factors are involved in the development of resilience in teachers. For example, Luther & Brown outline that studies examining associations between teachers' personal attributes, effectiveness and resilience (Day & Schmidt 2007) ignore relevant extrinsic factors. Instead, extrinsic and intrinsic factors such as administrative support, individual values, leadership style, social support and significant relationships were found to be important in the development of teacher-resilience (Nias 1999; Hansen 1995; Day 2004). However, although religiosity was associated resilience in numerous contexts (i.e. illness, Mosqueiro, da Rocha, and de Almeida Fleck 2015; adolescence, Annalakshmi and Abeer 2011; emotional resilience, Rounding et al. 2011; caregiving, Pessotti et al. 2018), the role that a teacher's faith may play in the development of resilience has to date not been examined. This is problematic as personal faith and religiosity may be a time- and cost- effective means to fight psychological distress, exhaustion and burnout.

Reasons for the positive effects of personal faith on resilience may relate to identity maintenance processes. Specifically, Breakwell (2015) suggests that difficult experiences such as conflicts may lead to problems in establishing one's personal identity and so posing identity threat. Identity threat, responding to the notion of a structural model of identity, occurs when the guiding principles of identity are undermined (Breakwell, 1986). These empirically discovered and defined underlying, guiding principles or tenets of identity constructions are (1) identity continuity (continuity between past and present self-concepts; i.e. understanding oneself as created by God), (2) personal uniqueness (distinctiveness; i.e. being purposely distinctively created), (3) confidence and being in control over one's life (self-efficacy; i.e. being able to change happenings through prayer), (4) personal worth (self-esteem; i.e. being beloved by and justified through God), (5) feelings of closeness and acceptance by others (belonging; i.e. belonging to a church) and (6) finding a significance and purpose in one's life (meaning; i.e. having a purpose given by God in one's life; cf. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996; Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). These six basic and underlying tenets of identity construction, so Jaspal and Breakwell (2014), allow to maintain a positive understanding of oneself. Essentially, recent research suggests that personal faith and religiosity may contribute to identity maintenance processes by responding to these six underlying tenets of identity construction in a way that these cannot be undermined, providing a positive outlook on oneself even in times of distress and trouble

(Phillips, Connelly, and Burgess 2020). However, while it is known that religiosity, and in particular Christianity, does respond to the tenets of identity construction and promotes resilience, research has not yet examined underlying identity maintenance processes in relation to teacher resilience. Here, particularly personal faith and teacher resilience in relation to conflicts were examined as an important stressor, contributing to lower wellbeing in teachers. The present project addresses this gap in knowledge by taking an exploratory approach to understand how teacher's personal faith may impact on coping with conflicts in relation to the underlying tenets of identity construction (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). While the focus on the teachers' individual experiences will therefore not provide a generalisable conclusion allowing to define the extent teachers' faith may impact upon teacher-resilience, the present study will provide an exploration of how teachers may experience their faith in relation to resilience.

Method

A qualitative methodology is used to examine whether and to which extent religiosity may promote resilience and so contributes to wellbeing. Two group discussions with eight active teachers each were conducted in Vienna, Austria. This sample size is commonly considered to be an appropriate sample size to allow in-depth examinations of psychological thinking patterns and understandings (Patton 1990; Groenewald 2004; Holloway and Wheeler 2002) by Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Although there are no strict rules, qualitative research that is being analysed with Thematic Analysis commonly considers six to 20 participants to be an effective sample size examining subjective experiences (Holloway and Wheeler 2002).

After receiving ethical approval from the University, purposive and modified snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. In the first instance, the project was advertised at different Austrian schools to which the researcher had access to. Initially, nine Austrian individuals responded to the advertisement and participated in the study. With the aim of recruiting a diverse sample (e.g. differences in nationality, denominations, age, gender, etc), a modified snowball strategy was used. Therefore, the sample was expanded by asking the participants to invite others to conduct the study (Crabtree and Miller 1992). In this way, seven additional participants were recruited. The 16 participants were between 21–55 years old and self-identified with being deep-faith Christians and having experienced student-teacher conflicts.

To collect descriptions of the participants' first-hand experiences and their reactions to those experiences, a semi-structured interview schedule was utilised. The two group discussions with eight participants each lasted 100 and 170 minutes. The interview schedule was structured in two sub-sessions. In the first stage, participants are prompted to speak freely about their faith in relation to their coping strategies. Therefore, the initial question intended to open up a discussion ('Thank you for your participation. As you know I am interested in religiosity and the impact religiosity may have on your teaching. Could you tell me about a recent conflict situation in which your belief helped you dealing with this conflict'). The initial question tried to open up a dialogue by inviting participants to freely talk about their experiences with faith in relation to conflict coping. This opening question was therefore framed in direct way in order to stimulate a critical discourse in that the majority of the group could be involved. During the initial question, follow-up questions that guided the discussion were asked. These follow-up questions were structured around the participants immediate answers. An example for such a follow up question would be: 'You mentioned that the gifts of God helped you to endure, even in difficult times. What do you mean by that?' 'You mentioned that in a situation in which the student made negative, abusive remarks, you freed yourself from the hatred you felt in by prayer. How exactly did this work?', or, 'You said you called out to God during the conflict. What do you mean by that?'. The last set of questions comprised specific questions that were based on pre-existing knowledge. Examples for this type of question would be "When thinking about conflicts, which one was quite challenging or severe and how did you cope with it?" 'When you think about a conflict you just



spoke about, how did you feel? [...] How did you overcome these negative feelings?', or, "Which conflict-coping strategy do you employ in everyday life? [...] What does this conflict-coping strategy mean for you personally?.

The interviews were video-taped, transcribed and translated from German to English. The transcribed interviews were sent to the participants for checking. After the participants made some minor changes and sent the corrected version back. All names (teachers and students) were anonymised and each transcript was analysed individually by Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic Analysis was found to be the most suitable method as it examines the holistic meaning of phenomena through the description of subjective perceptions (cf. Gavridis 2004). Following the transcription of the qualitative data, the transcripts were repeatedly read to become as intimate as possible with the accounts. Initial ideas about key topics and potential themes were noted, using NVivo 13, a qualitative data analysis software. The data was then reread and reviewed to identify potential key ideas that emerged repeatedly. Several mind-maps were created in order to fully understand the interaction of nodes and their contextual relationship. In the next step, nodes were merged into initial codes. By taking the nodes' contextual information into account, the generated codes intended to identify meanings that lie beneath the semantic surface of the data. At this stage the data was coded by categorising interview extracts, identifying possible relationships with identity processes (Breakwell 2015). Preliminary themes were identified and defined. However, as one criticism of thematic analysis is that only those themes are identified that the researcher is looking for, the preliminary coding and definition of themes was carried out also by a non-psychology graduate student independently from the researcher. Concordances and differences in coding were contrasted. The comparison between the researcher's and non-psychology graduate's categorisation of interview extracts and definition of themes indicated a high inter-rater reliability. The main researcher and the non-psychology graduate student coded a total of 76% of interview extracts either exactly (both raters categorised the exact same text-passage alike), or, similarly (both raters categorised text including the exact same text-passages alike) to the same two emerging themes. The two themes identified by the researcher and the non-psychology graduate student were named 'Application of Christian Principles and Virtues as a Coping Strategy' and 'Attributions of a God-given Personality as a Coping strategy' and defined. Neither the researcher nor the non-psychology student identified other themes during the process of data analysis.

Results

The analysis of results suggests that particularly in times of conflict and distress, the teachers' faith and religiosity allowed to de-escalate conflicts. Here, personal faith related to conflict strategies in a twofold way. On one hand, the participants applied the principles of their personal belief, which constitutes the theme 'Application of Christian Principles and Virtues as a Coping Strategy'. On the other hand, the participants understood their occupation as a vocation and anticipated having a divinely created personality that shielded them from overwhelming conflict-related distress. This perception constitutes the theme 'Attributions of a God-given Personality as a Coping strategy'. However, in both themes quotes extracts from the interviews were found to respond to the six tenets of identity construction. In this sense, faith and religious elements may have facilitated stress-relief and a positive outlook on one's occupation. While conflicts were considered to be stressful, personal faith and religiosity allowed to make sense of one's experience by embedding difficulties into a narrative framework. This framework provided meaning by allowing to categorise experiences as being part of a greater, divine plan for one's life and one's extended environment.

Application of Christian principles and virtues as a coping strategy

Essentially, the results suggest that all 16 teacher participants reported on highly severe student-teacher confrontations in that their authority as a teacher was questioned with students denouncing

teachers for their ethnicity or to physical features. However, all teachers utilised faith and religious virtues in order to resolve conflicts in low levels of escalation. T1 explains:

I said that the break was over, but Joseph did not listen to me. He stood on his chair and started to jump from one table to another. I asked him to sit down in a friendly and calm way. But he said that he doesn't need to listen to me because I am a woman. When I tried to calm him down and tried to take his hand, he spat at me and kicked me. [...] I tried to endure this humiliation as Christ did. After some time, Joseph calmed down and he sat down. We discussed his behavior and I explained which consequences this will have. I also invited his parents and we discussed a way forward.

This quote exemplifies a conflict that questioned the teacher's authority. While trying to calm the student down, the teacher accepts the insults hurled at her by drawing on her belief. Essentially, drawing on the virtues of belief allowed her to act in patience and to accept the situation as it is. In this sense, the teacher participants felt that they would be acting in accordance to God's will by enduring conflicts and acting in the situation within that they currently are. T14 explaines:

Sometimes you have these days, it's just a nightmare. Like when Greg spat in my face. I was so angry, I wanted to smash him against the wall. But I said nothing; I turned away and recalled something I read the other day in a letter of Paul. There is "saving grace" – this is God's free mercy towards sinners. Then we have "training grace" which is a school of virtue. And we have "hope-inspiring grace", which is in our hearts, our hope, our vision. I was so so angry but then I thought, I will take this attack as a "training grace". If I endure students spitting in my face, like the soldiers spat in Christ's face, I get the reward in heaven. So I stayed calm and called Greg's parents instead. I felt that this really helped me to grow in character, and humility. I am not the victim of my feelings and emotional responses to the situation. No.

This quote exemplifies how a conscious reflection on Christian virtues and readings contributes to self-control in distressful situations. In this sense, the avoidance of rash responses to emotionally overwhelming situations contributed to *self-efficacy* (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014) by gaining a feeling of confidence and control over one's life. In contrast to losing one's temper, following Christian virtues therefore contributed to greater levels of self-perceived calmness allowing to handle challenging situations prudently. In conclusion, a conscious reflection on personal faith in conflict situations may have contributed to stability in identity by being able to control one's temper. This is mirrored in T7's account who describes how self-efficacy also contributed to self-perceived self-worth:

And then there was this one student who just didn't listen. I asked him to clean up his desk and he said: 'Fuck off, Bastard!' I was so shocked and angry at the same time. I wanted to yell at him, wanted to drag him to the headmaster. But I am working on my temper. Just the other day I had a meeting with my spiritual advisor [priest in close relationship with T7]. I am really trying hard to become a better person, a less quick-tempered person. So, instead yelling at him, I sat down in front of him. I looked at him and asked him: Why did you say that? Why do you want to insult me? And he started to cry. His parents just divorced, and he couldn't cope with it. Would I have shouted at him, he wouldn't have told me. This was a success, a real success, I was so proud: I was able to get to the source of the problem. And that's what I mean when I say that my faith makes me to a better teacher.

This quote explains how the application of personal faith in conflict situation may promote stability in identity *self-esteem* by drawing on *self-efficacy* (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). Essentially, challenging situations are perceived as an opportunity to grow in Christian virtues. In this sense, success is defined by being in control over one's emotions. Situations in that reflective thinking and the application of principles of personal faith overrule rash and emotional responses are characterised as personal achievement. This contributes not only to self-efficacy, as a feeling of being in control over one's life and the situation, but also to self-esteem, conceptualising personal growth in accordance to Christian principles as a personal success. In this sense, difficult situations can be endured, even if there is no immediate gratification, as T4 suggests:

Marie called me "smelly Nigger primate". [...] No, of course I didn't lose my temper! I established a dialogue. Being a teacher is my calling – this is what I am meant to do. It is not always easy to deal with the students, but when I go home and spend some time in prayer, I know that it is my vocation – because I can change lives. For the better. And that helps me to endure, to accept conflicts.



This quote exemplifies how struggles and difficulties are endured by drawing on Christian concepts. Here, teaching resonates with providing meaning, that is finding a significance and purpose in one's life. This allows to accept conflicts by understanding them from a superordinate, third-instance perspective. Teaching becomes more than an occupation, it turns into a vocation and, in doing so, responds to meaning as the underlying tenet of identity construction (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014).

Attributions of a god-given personality as a coping strategy

Understanding oneself as '*chosen to teach*' (T9) allowed to see oneself as having a purpose in one's struggles. In this sense, using one's religious identity contributed to maintaining a positive outlook on oneself and one's work. T8, for example:

Arguing with the students takes so much time and energy, it's a real struggle sometimes. [...] It needs some special people to get on with the children. It really gets to you sometimes. But that's also what I like about it: It's my God-given personality that allows us to endure the conflicts in the classroom.

This quote demonstrates how understanding oneself as being different from others with inherently different, divinely created traits acted as a resource in order to cope with work-related stress and conflicts. The strategy to understand oneself as equipped with specific traits that allowed to cope with difficult situations in the classroom may therefore have responded to the underlying identity tenet distinctiveness (cf. Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). This was also evident in T12's account:

Once there was a big argument that only I could handle. It happened on Monday Morning where two pupils started to fight. A teacher tried to pull them away from each other, but they started kicking him. I asked God for help, that they'd listen to me ... and then I went over. They looked at me and there was a moment, it was very special. I looked into their eyes and they into mine ... and they stopped fighting and then we were able to discuss the problem. It was really tough – to sit down and speak with them ... a long discussion. I directed their dialogue – I am a really patient person so that came in quite handy! After that day, I felt really good about myself – and my skills.

This quote exemplifies how the perception of making a positive and unique contribution towards conflict resolution contributed to a positive self-perception. In this sense, conflicts do not only have a negative aspect. Instead, the contribution towards resolving a conflict is considered to be a personal success and related to one's unique personality. Interestingly, the conceptualisation of personality in this context is related to understandings of identity as divine prenatal gift. As the following quote will show, this conceptualisation of personality may also contribute to identity continuity (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). T7:

I remember when I was a child, I always helped to solve the arguments of my siblings. They never went to our mother for help but came to me. [...] Yes, I guess I have always been like that – always had the ability to help with conflicts. And obviously I developed this skill further, but it has always been there to some extent. It is just part of me, part of who I am, always have been. [...] Yes. It makes me happy because I can make a more positive atmosphere, and, in a way, it makes me feel special.

This quote exemplifies how being a teacher turns into an expression of the individual's personality rather than seeing the individual as a teacher. This allows to allocate specific superior conflict resolution strategies to the teacher's nature, and, in doing so, may raise self-esteem and self-efficacy. The anticipation of specific inherent traits as condition for a career may therefore resonate with the tenet identity continuity, and, in doing so provides a rationality that elevates self-esteem (cf. Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). By segregating an inherently different 'type' of people and associating oneself with this category, the individual is able to establish a sense of belonging. This makes group-membership in a way to an inherited right that forges group-cohesion, even in conflict-situations. T13 explains:

We teacher get along quite well because we kind of think all in the same way. And that's crucial – to get on well, to be part of our team, our teacher gang, if you want to call it like that. Especially when it comes to being

challenged by the students or their parents, we watch each other's backs. [...] Like when Suzanna's dad came to speak to me and started shouting, becoming physically abusive. He was furious. I was so scared! A colleague who heard the shouting knocked at the door and came in. Together we established a dialogue and Suzanna's dad calmed down. This is just to give an example for how important it is to be part of a team.

This quote is in line with previous literature that suggests social support to be an important factor in a teacher's development of resilience (Wei, Shujuan, and Qibo 2011). Specifically, this quote indicates that belonging, as underlying tenet of identity construction (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014), becomes particularly important for survival in times of distress and conflict. While the anticipation of similarities in thinking patterns and personalities facilitated the attribution of group-cohesion through like-mindedness, the in-group membership gave a sense of security. This allowed to create also a stark separation from former teachers who followed other career aspirations and left school. T14 explains:

But then we also had teachers like Timothy. Timothy was just not teacher material. Lovely guy, good Christian, but not teacher material. [...] He was just overwhelmed with his class, overwhelmed with the pupils acting out, with the everyday quarrels. He just didn't have the personality to do it – he did the training but just couldn't do it in the real world. He was off for a really long time – burnout or so, school was just not ... the right place for him to be ... he is now some sort of manager somewhere.

As this quote exemplifies, anticipations of the absence of an inherently given teacher personality justified the unsuitability for this role. In this sense, the role of teacher training in that relevant skills could be acquired was diminished. Instead, if a teacher did not develop sufficient resilience to cope with conflicts, then this teacher was associated to being part of the outgroup, that was not divinely chosen to teach. Therefore, the rationality that only a specific subset of the population was made, or created, to teach allowed to understand differences in career aspiration and development.

Discussion

The present study's findings suggest that religious, Christian coping strategies may contribute to the development of resilience by responding to underlying tenets of identity 'construction'. In doing so, the results indicate that religious, Christian coping strategies and narratives may shield from identity threat, contributing to identity maintenance and stabilisation processes. Teachers, therefore, applied principles of their personal faith to cope with conflicts and used religious narrative frameworks that justified their inherent and distinctive suitability for their profession. Teaching became in this way conceptualised as a challenge to grow in Christian virtues besides a vocation that one was chosen, or born, to commit to.

In line with previous research, the analysis of the narrative accounts pointed out numerous challenging situations that teachers encounter that would require and that require the development of resilience in order to maintain personal wellbeing (Burke and Greenglass 1993; Kyriacou and Sutcliffe 1977; Savicki and Cooley 1983; Biller 1981; Schwab and Iwanicki 1982; Cinamon, Rich, and Westman 2007). However, while previous research focused particularly on how extraneous and intrinsic factors may contribute to the development of resilience (Day et al, 2006, 2007, Nias 1999; Hansen 1995; Day 2004), the present research extended previous knowledge by examining a possible relationship between personal faith and resilience. Specifically, the results indicate that personal faith and religiosity may respond to underlying constituents of identity construction and so shield from identity threat in times of occupational distress. This is in line with an extensive series of research on the maintenance of identity indicating that the avoidance of identity threat contributes to greater psychological wellbeing and resilience (i.e. Author 2020, Blaine and Crocker 1995; Loewenthal 2014; Vignoles, Chryssochoou and Breakwell 2002). However, the present study furthered this notion by indicating that the application of individual faith in challenging situations contributed to personal development and growth that resonated with the principles of identity construction self-esteem and self-efficacy. In this sense, the narrative accounts suggest that Christian virtues were conceptualised as more understanding, reflective and calmer



responses to challenging situations. Therefore, being in control over oneself, one's temper and one's reactions in critical situations resonated with the feeling of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Additionally, also the personal interpretation of Christian doctrine, combined with faith in these doctrines, contributed to resilience by stabilising the identities when threatened and exposed to difficult situations. Essentially, Christian doctrine allowed to form a narrative story arch that facilitated reflections on the students' behaviours and contributed to an evaluation of the meaningfulness of a teacher's work. In times of conflict, individual interpretations of Christian religious texts were therefore utilised to make sense of one's struggles and, as a consequence, to forgive offenders. Here, a particularly important factor was to see oneself as divinely chosen for being a teacher. Therefore, teachers defined themselves through their occupation: Instead of understanding teaching from the perspective of a contractually obliged occupational identity, being a teacher was described as imperatively bound to one's identity, similar to a gender identity (Duveen 2001). Thus, being a teacher became an all-encompassing description of one's inherent and God-created personality. This notion was crucial for maintaining a positive view of one's identity, even in times of struggles, and so responded to underlying identity maintenance processes. In conclusion, in addition to the development of resilience in times of i.e. illness, emotional exhaustion or caregiving (Mosqueiro, da Rocha, and de Almeida Fleck 2015; Annalakshmi and Abeer 2011; Rounding et al. 2011; Pessotti et al. 2018), personal faith and religiosity may play a role in the development of teacher-resilience.

However, although the present findings have outlined a link between personal faith and teacher-resilience, a number of caveats need to be taken into consideration. As a qualitative study with a relatively small sample size of 16 strong-faith teachers, the present study is limited in its ability to be generalised. This caveat is particularly important in the context of the recruited population, being all teachers who are self-declared highly affiliated Christians. It remains possible that similar accounts could be obtained from highly affiliated individuals from other Christian denominations or individuals with different strong faith believe such as Jews and Muslims. Similarly, it may be questionable whether other self-identifying, highly affiliated Christian teacher would agree with the statements from the interviewed individuals. However, while these caveats need to be taken into consideration, the present study's main aim concerned exploring whether and to which extent personal faith and religiosity may contribute to the development of resilience by tapping onto underlying constituents of identity construction. Although the present results may therefore not be generalisable the present study provided directions that future studies may want to pick up and address. An additional limitation concerns the retrospectivity of the participants' accounts. As the present project relies on the reconstruction of the teachers' experiences, their accounts are interpretative and influenced by their present situation (cf. Robbins 1988). Thus, in trying to make sense of their experiences, the participants' accounts may have been flawed by an interpretative bias. However, this is a common problem in qualitative research more generally as reporting on subjective experience always relies on the respondents' retrospective accounts.

However, despite these limitations, this study offers a new perspective in teacher-resilience research by relating personal faith to tenets of identity construction and resilience. Although it is not suggested that personal faith may be an exclusive way to develop resilience as a teacher, it was found to be a useful addition that may contribute to teacher-resilience and would be worth to be examined more exhaustively. Therefore, future research may want to conduct large-scale studies investigating a possible relationship between religiosity, teacher-resilience and identity processes, and, to examine possible benefits of implementing religious education in teacher training courses. This would allow to outline possible effects with quantitative and representative samples and so may provide more generalisable conclusion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Rita Phillips completed her PhD at Oxford Brookes University. As a lecturer in Psychology she focusses her research around social psychological phenomena in everyday life, working mainly in the US and the UK context. Rita has worked as a Mellon-Sawyer Fellow at the University of Oxford and has received several awards for her research.

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