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# Fostering Resilience in Students: Advancing Strategies to Enhance the Impact of Social Work Education and Professional Practice

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**Fostering Resilience in Students: Advancing Strategies to Enhance the Impact of  
Social Work Education and Professional Practice**

by

Mary Clay Thomas

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Social Work

University of Saint Thomas  
School of Social Work  
May 2021

### **Abstract**

In both academia and social work practice, resilience has emerged as a necessary component to thrive in a profession that presents emotionally rigorous and high-pressure demands. Resilience is the study of capabilities, processes, or outcomes denoted by positive adaptation in the context of risk or adversity. Educators provide pivotal opportunities for students to learn the practices of self-care, reflective practice, and empathy. Teaching social work students the components of perseverance and the skills needed to build resilience is extremely important; however, there is little research offering programmatic techniques and practice application for educators and practitioners. This banded dissertation seeks to answer these questions: What are best practices for teaching resilience and how can social work educators most effectively integrate resilience into social work programs? Three products are comprised in this Banded Dissertation. The first is a systematic literature review, which identified, reviewed and synthesized current material about resilience and distinguished best practices for teaching resilience. The second product is a conceptual paper that answered the following: how do educators teach resilience to emerging social work students? This paper drew insight from a systematic review and developed a teaching framework for implementation. The final product was a presentation at a professional, peer reviewed social work conference. This presentation followed the completion of the systematic review and presented the research findings.

*Keywords: resilience, teaching resilience, neuroscience, mindfulness*

**Dedication**

To the social work students at Mary Baldwin University, thank you for teaching me the true meaning of resilience and for inspiring this research.

To my daughters Anna Greenway and Reid Elizabeth, may your own resilience be deep and everlasting.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am extremely grateful for the support and encouragement I have received from my Mary Baldwin University colleagues and friends. Thank you for your steadfast cheer and friendship, and for helping me always stay focused on why, and for whom, I am doing this work.

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To my cohort of brilliant doctors and now friends, we did it! I cannot imagine a better group to journey alongside.

Lastly, to my family and friends, this has been the most transformative three years. Thanks for standing by, lifting me up, and sharing your love. I am beyond grateful.

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## **Fostering Resilience in Students: Advancing Strategies to Enhance the Impact of Social Work Education and Professional Practice**

The topic of resilience has become increasingly prevalent and widely researched among fields of social work, psychology, education, medicine, and social sciences. Resilience is defined as a process of positive adaptation within the context of significant challenge or difficulty (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Social work students benefit from learning and demonstrating skills of resilience as the profession is often emotionally demanding and stressful; research and best practices both emphasize the importance of self-care and emotional well-being. While studies surrounding resilience are largely available, teaching resilience from a neurologically based, ecological perspective in social work education programs is both understudied and underutilized. This dissertation identifies and develop significant teaching resources that build resilience in college students and answers the following research questions: What are best practices for teaching resilience and how can social work educators most effectively integrate resilience into social work programs?

Resilience is a contemporary ecological concept which has helped theorists and practitioners conceptualize a more optimistic view of how people heal and change (Benard, 1993). Luther and Cicchetti (2000) described resilience as a dynamic process whereby individuals are able to positively adapt despite challenging experiences of trauma or adversity. This definition of resilience on a life continuum, as opposed to a personal characteristic or fixed result, is a popular definition within resiliency research and is applicable to the understanding that students can grow and change while they are in college.

Within literature findings clear and repeated indicators for students to increase their feelings, stressors, and levels of self-knowledge are evident. For example, Beddoe et al. (2013)



discussed the need to prepare students for the reality of practice by learning to identify the warning signs for burnout and educate them about the signs of stress and compassion fatigue. By developing skills of emotional hardiness, students are more prepared for the adverse workplace often experienced in social work settings. Other areas of literature reveal positive correlations between resilience and skill building for college students including learning core stress management skills such as mindfulness, peer coaching, and reflective practice (Grant & Kinman, 2012).

Teaching students to build and practice resilience is one way educators prepare students for the emotional rigors of the profession. This dissertation is comprised of three scholarly products, each discussing the research, theory, and practice necessary to enable students to develop emotional regulation, build peer support, and an improved sense of self. Social workers experience high levels of compassion fatigue, often practice poor self-care, and the stress experienced by social workers contributes to the growing retention problems within the profession (Grant & Kinman, 2012). Further, research findings indicate that social work student interns experience high levels of stress that they are often reluctant to disclose to their professors or supervisors (Maidment, 2003; Barlow and Hall, 2007). The need for social work students to learn to build the skills of resilience while they are in college is vital in order for them to find and maintain success in the profession. This banded dissertation offers insight into how educators can help students develop the necessary skills and coping strategies for professional and personal resilience and growth.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Resilience research in the field of social work offers tools for self-care and builds empathy and community in an emotionally challenging profession. The conceptual framework

utilized in this dissertation draws upon best practices for teaching resilience that can be developed and implemented within social work programs. The ecological perspective and social neuroplasticity provide the foundation for examining why resiliency education is needed in the social work curricula. Guidelines and recommendations on the implementation of teaching resiliency across the micro (self), mezzo (group), and macro (institution) levels are also explored and proposed.

### *Resilience*

Resilience is a contemporary ecological concept, which has helped theorists and practitioners conceptualize a more optimistic view of how people heal and change (Benard, 1993). McMurray et al. (2008) found that social workers often had a difficult time defining resilience and described it as a personality trait that enables a person to handle difficult life events. Instead of characterizing a person as resilient, a more accurate explanation states that a person demonstrates resilient adaptations in the face of challenging life circumstances (Luther and Cicchetti, 2000). Within the field of social work, students may learn the concept of resilience, but are seldom taught the ways in which building professional and emotional resilience will aid them in the profession. Similarly, a social work curriculum offers few tools for teaching resilience. Importantly, for the context of this dissertation, the operational definition of resiliency is defined as the ability to overcome adversity and be successful in spite of being exposed to high-risk situations (Greene, 2013).

### *Ecological Model*

The ecological paradigm was originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1997) and suggests that humans and their environments mutually influence one another (Greene, 2014). If an environment is nurturing and loving, then resilience is more easily sustained. Within the

ecological framework, when an environment is nurturing and supportive at the micro (self), mezzo (group) and macro (institution) levels, then the human ability to build and sustain resilience is increased substantially. The capacity to build resilience is demonstrated in various formats. Applying the ecological framework at varying levels within social work programs encourages students to learn and apply the benefits of resilience across systems. For example, students learn to engage in a mindfulness practice (self), practice empathy-building skills (in group work) and attend (institution-wide) social work trainings and reflective practice opportunities on campus. A primary importance of the ecological framework is that it can be utilized and applied within various environments such as direct practice, small groups, policy formation, and within organizations. The ecological model encourages educators to identify opportunities to teach resilience at multiple levels.

### *Neuroscience*

The national discourse surrounding the social work profession and college and university curricula is lacking in information about the human brain, how it works, and subsequent implications for the assessment, treatment, and prevention of clients' psychosocial conditions (Rutledge, 2014). Social neuroscience is defined as the science of applying neuroscience knowledge to social problems, behavioral phenomena, and the human condition in general with significant implications for mental health and well-being (Siegel & Solomon, 2003). Siegal's (2020) research suggests that the mind's ability to focus attention in specific therapeutic ways can help override crippling fears and negative learned behaviors. This work offers examples of how consistent focus and practice teaches the brain about new firings that create newly formed synaptic linkages (Siegal, 2020). Modern neuroscience has indicated that the power to direct attention has within it the power to shape the brain's architecture of the brain itself (Siegal,

2000). This practiced behavior activates neural firings and leads to the production of proteins that enable new connections to be made among neurons in the brain. It is critical that universities graduate social work students with a functional knowledge of the human brain, and as well how to apply those principles, not only in practice but towards helping students to understand their own brains and how they can rewire their brains toward positive self-care behaviors. Together, the ecological model and neuroplasticity guide the framework for the conceptual model that outlines how social work programs might infuse resiliency education at multiple levels helping the brain to implement and maintain skills of resilience throughout college and beyond.

### *Application*

This conceptual framework introduces specific neurological-based and ecologically based practices that help students build skills of resilience. At the micro level, when students learn to deepen their emotional intelligence and mindfulness practice, they build self-resilience. At the mezzo level, practicing mentoring and peer support within group courses and within program club and outdoor activities helps students learn to apply and practice resilience between peers. At the macro level, understanding the impact of empathy and mutual support within communities motivates students to implement large-scale resiliency strategies. In summary, teaching resilience through an ecological perspective encourages students to identify the missing pieces between needs and resources across all systems. This development and understanding builds tools for extended self-care and greater introspection, and it deepens the meaning of peer and community support.

### **Summary of Banded Dissertation Products**

This banded dissertation is comprised of three scholarly products. Product One is a systematic literature review that identifies, reviews, and synthesizes current material about resilience and distinguishes best practices for teaching resilience. The systematic review analyzes articles written about teaching resilience and explained best practices for social work educators who are helping students build and sustain traits of strength and grit enabling them to work to their highest potential. The method included an analysis of eleven articles where key data was extracted to examine sample methodologies of teaching resilience. Outcomes from this review presented evidence-based data highlighting the benefits of teaching resilience as a part of the social work education curriculum. The overall findings from this systematic review led to the second product, the conceptual framework.

Product Two is a conceptual paper that responded to the additional question: How do educators teach resilience to emerging social work students? This paper drew insight from the systematic review and sought to develop a teaching framework for implementation. The framework described in this conceptual paper explained best practices for teaching resilience that can be further developed and implemented. Concepts from social neuroplasticity and the ecological perspectives provided the foundation for understanding and explaining why resiliency education is needed in the social work curricula. In this paper, guidelines and recommendations on the implementation of teaching resiliency across the micro, mezzo, and macro levels were outlined. Lastly, best practices and interventions across department programming and student initiatives were proposed.

The third product is an oral presentation at the Western Social Science Association Conference a professional, peer-reviewed conference in April 2020. This presentation followed the completion of the systematic review and informed participants of the findings from the

research. This included the outcomes from the study, the implications for social work education and best practices for teaching and implementation. Due to COVID-19, this presentation was conducted virtually.

### **Discussion**

The human brain holds the ability to control thoughts, feelings and actions. Social workers work with people to help them change their thoughts and behaviors; practitioners must also understand how to practice and implement brain-based self-care practices. The experiences of college students have been profoundly altered with the use of social media, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased social and peer pressure. Within the field of social work, students must prepare to enter a high stress environment. Unfortunately, this stress and emotional disruption can seriously alter the brain's development, quality of social relationships, and ability to care and nurture oneself. Social work educators have offered an incomplete series of practice and intervention skills to students to address the trauma and challenges presented by the profession; this dissertation points to the limited level of interventions currently practiced by social work educators. As a result of these findings, the three products comprised in this dissertation offer research, teachings, and practice examples for educators that will help students to rewire their brains towards resiliency.

The rigorous systematic review process that was utilized for this study assists educators in understanding the current data about how resilience is currently being taught. The goal was to gather, analyze, and report research in a way that would assist faculty and practitioners in understanding how to use and implement components of teaching resilience in the classroom and introducing it into university programming. The objective of this review was to analyze (1) available articles about teaching resilience to social workers to include predominantly those

articles that were (2) student focused and/or applied within a BSW program and (3) included a practical practice framework that could be utilized for future teaching practices.

The research findings from this systematic review points to the need for students to build components of self-care and emotional well-being into their educational practices in order to prepare for the rigors of professional practice. Beddoe et al. (2013) discussed the need for students to increase levels of self-knowledge and emotional hardiness. In order to thrive and build skills of resilience, findings indicate the need for consistent supervision, positive role models, professional development opportunities, and an organizational culture that reflects the support and emotional growth that is necessary for college students. Infusing skills of resilience into coursework can help students develop essential personality traits. This literature review also suggested that group work is essential to resilience building and this is demonstrated through regular group practice both in classes and on campus (First et al., 2018; Gitterman & Knight, 2016). Mentoring and peer support were both reviewed as necessary for peer coaching and consistent peer support increase this personal and professional self-awareness (Gerdes et al., 2011; Kinman & Grant, 2011). Finally, findings suggested that students who are able to build a reflective practice and skills of consistent emotional regulation are more likely to develop skills of resilience over time (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Learning these skills through the practice of mindfulness and a curriculum that integrates self-reflection and reflective training enables students build skills of grit and resilience to prepare them for the challenging domain of social work practice.

The model proposed in the conceptual framework was developed as a result of the systematic review findings. The neural pathways of traditional college-aged students are not fully developed and educators hold a meaningful opportunity to build and shape the resilience of

students while they search for significance and belonging. By offering a somewhat structured path to learn self-care, mindfulness, and self-compassion the brain learns to rewire and develop skills of resilience. This pathway can be offered and implemented by educators by providing support and interventions at multiple levels. This type of regular, meaningful teaching and connection allows the brain to learn to pay attention to overall well-being and connect students to dormant parts of themselves and potentially thrive in the face of adversity. Movement, mindfulness, and connection, the pillars of resilience building, can provide the framework to push more social work educators and university programs to implement and build greater programs of resilience. Teaching the skills of resilience will enable educators to equip the next generation to build a robust bank of resilience to benefit the social work profession and practice.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

Based on the findings from the systematic review and the conceptual framework, social work educators can readily and practically implement some or all of the suggested interventions. Teaching must be more transactional and include personal development and time to explore some of the vulnerable and corrosive aspects of the work and self. By providing specific teaching tools, methods, and applications, social work educators ensure that students are equipped with sufficient thinking time for personal development, connections to others for positive role models, and an education that provides the necessary resources for building a toolbox of resilience and growth.

This dissertation offers specific suggestions for educators to help students to learn about themselves at various levels, encourage valued peer support, self-care, and empathy. Each of these components, if offered consistently throughout college, can contribute to higher levels of resilience in social work students. At the micro level, teaching tools include various slides,



conversations, journal entries, and discussions about the multiple levels of self-care (personal, professional, relational, emotional) and the ways they can begin to practice. Courses grounded in the contemplative sciences offer students the opportunity to explore their own triggers, deepen their appreciation of self, and build skills of self-care, breathwork, and mindfulness. By encouraging social work students to participate in mentoring and group models across curricula, educators offer group level support and intervention. In addition, a mentoring program offers both emotional and professional mentorship for new and incoming students. Finally, group opportunities for students to experience class outside, walking meetings, hiking groups and community work with nature is another step towards building resilience and community while developing new neurons for a greater capacity to practice and care for self. Each of these findings contribute to the larger social work curricula by offering programmatic and academic building blocks to enable our students to develop greater capacities toward growth and betterment. The research in this dissertation is paramount in offering concrete next steps toward furthering resilience education within the curriculum of social work.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Moving forward, social work research would benefit greatly from studying the short and long term impact of resilience programming into its coursework and campus community, and with support from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Suggestions for future research include the collection of data to establish the effectiveness of such programming. While the idea of resilience has been slowly emerging on college campuses, the implementation remains insufficient and with limited funding. The long-term outcomes of such programming have yet to be measured in a quantitative or qualitative fashion. For example, a survey among social work faculty across the country to ask questions related to their experiences with teaching

resiliency would be an appropriate next step in research. Further, implementing surveys regarding building resilience with college students, following the suggested programmatic goals, is warranted and would provide helpful data moving forward. Lastly, partnering with the Council on Social Work Education around teaching resilience and the value of implementing these teaching goals into social work competencies would provide the continued support and backing this research commands.

### **Conclusion**

In order to teach resilience, social work programs must incorporate programmatic practices that value repetition over extended time in order to build new neurons of resilience. The systematic review completed for this dissertation offered concrete research and specific examples of how resilience is currently being taught internationally across programs. Following the review, the conceptual framework offered examples of specific resilience programming practiced at one institution at multiple levels to help build new neural pathways for students of social work. Finally, this research was presented at a peer-reviewed conference for feedback and collaboration. Each of these products circled the primary goal of the research: what are the best practices of teaching resilience in the field of social work?

The absorption of new practices occurs repeatedly at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels throughout college. The value of teaching resilience lies in the belief of a program, supported by the education standards of CSWE, to implement courses in contemplative sciences, improve peer connections, and offer opportunities to move, connect and breathe. True resilience fosters well-being: an overall sense of peace and contentment. By internalizing and repeatedly experiencing opportunities to connect and build positive neuroplasticity, students of social work will be far

more able to protect their own vulnerabilities while improving the resources for the vulnerable and oppressed.

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**Teaching Resilience to a New Generation of Social Workers: A Systematic Review**

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**Author's Note**

Data and preliminary analysis were conducted as part of the author's dissertation. Portions of these findings were presented at the Western Social Science Association 2020 Annual Conference in Portland, Oregon.

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**Abstract**

Much has been written to support the need for social workers to be resilient and maintain high levels of self-care. While there is extensive research surrounding resilience across the helping professions, there is limited data related to teaching resilience and social work education. Educators provide pivotal opportunities for students to learn the practices of self-care, reflective ability and empathy. This systematic review analyzes articles written about teaching resilience and explains best practices for social work educators who are helping students build and sustain traits of strength and grit to enable them to work to their highest potential. The method includes an analysis of eleven articles where key data was extracted to examine sample methodologies of teaching resilience. Outcomes from this review present evidence-based data highlighting the benefits of teaching resilience as a part of the social work education curriculum.

*Keywords:* resilience, teaching social work, self-care, social work educators

### **Teaching Resilience to a New Generation of Social Workers: A Systematic Review**

Resilience has become a popular term in the helping professions and is widely recognized as a valued trait for those in the field of social work. Students studying social work may learn the concept of resilience, but seldom are they taught specific strategies to help them build professional and emotional resilience to aid them in the field. Similarly, the social work curriculum offers few tools for teaching resilience (Beddoe et al., 2013). Resilience is conceptualized in relation to adverse life events or conditions that are challenging and problematic (Masten, 2008). Sufficient evidence exists suggesting that resilience can be taught and emphasizes that more attention should be given to increasing students' emotional competencies and self-care practices (Kinman and Grant, 2011). High burnout rates, exposure to abuse and trauma, compassion fatigue and emotional exhaustion are often recognized as primary aspects of the profession, whereby social workers must learn to safe-guard their own emotions and care for others (Beddoe et al., 2013). Within the field of social work, acquiring skills related to resilience are vital to both career and personal success.

The ecological paradigm was originally developed by Bronfenbrenner (1997) and suggests that humans and their environments mutually influence one another (Greene, 2014). If an environment is strengths-based and is nurturing and loving, then resilience is more easily sustained. Within an ecological, strengths-based framework, when an environment is responsive and supportive at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, then the ability to build and sustain resilience is increased substantially. The capacity to build resilience is demonstrated in various capacities ranging from an understanding of self to relationships with the outside community.

Examining resilience using an ecological, strengths-based framework encourages students to learn and apply the benefits of resilience and positivity across systems.

The purpose of this systematic review is to analyze the current research about resilience using an ecological, strengths-based perspective to understand how it is being used to teach social work undergraduate students. This review analyzes eleven articles written about teaching resilience and seeks to answer the following research question: What are the best practices for teaching resilience to students who are studying social work? The literature review provides an outline of the theory and conceptual frameworks used to teach resilience. The method of this review will include specifying databases, identifying key words, specified dates, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Articles were chosen based on their focus on students as participants with interventions that involved primarily students of social work. Comparisons between theoretical frameworks and teaching or training programs were all focused on building and teaching resilience. Outcomes were based on varying numbers of samples and described various programs and interventions that helped students develop areas of resilience.

The value of students building resilience while they study social work is paramount. Learning to build community, developing a deeper sense of themselves, and increasing levels of hope and empathy all play a vital role in building resilience. Students who build skills of resilience have lower levels of depression and stress in a time where mental health issues on college campuses are on the rise (First, 2018). Further, by investing in group work and building community, social work educators help students improve peer relationships and develop pro-social behaviors (Sheppard, 2015). Outcomes from this review will contribute to the literature by compiling evidence-based data that highlights the benefits of teaching resilience as a part of the social work education curriculum. As a result, social work educators will be better positioned to

invest in their students' ability to build professional and personal resilience, thus more effectively preparing the next generation of social workers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Resilience research in the field of social work offers tools for self-care, builds empathy, and supports community building in an emotionally challenging profession. While resilience is widely researched across disciplines, the practice of teaching resilience to social work students is largely underutilized. The ecological and strengths-based theory provides the theoretical frameworks within which the questions of best practices for teaching resilience will be answered. This theory provides a conceptual framework to help understand and explain why resiliency matters in social work education.

Resilience is a contemporary ecological concept, which has helped theorists and practitioners conceptualize a more optimistic view of how people heal and change (Benard, 1993). Luther and Cicchetti (2000) define resilience as a dynamic process whereby individuals are able to positively adapt despite challenging experiences of trauma or adversity. This definition of resilience on a life continuum, as opposed to a personal characteristic or fixed result, is a popular definition within resiliency research.

### **Ecological and Strengths-Based Theory**

The capacity to build resilience is demonstrated in various formats. To apply the ecological, strengths-based framework at various entry points within social work programs encourages students to learn and apply the benefits of resilience at varying levels. The primary importance of the ecological framework is that it can be utilized and applied within various systems such as direct practice, agencies, policy formation, and within organizations. A strengths-based framework also helps students build characteristics that are often described in the

resilience literature which include optimism, positive coping skills, pro-social behavior, and learning the value of mindfulness and exercise (Oehme et al., 2019).

A strengths-based approach to resilience theory provides the understanding of how some social workers are able to bounce back from risk exposure and some are more negatively affected. Further, this theory offers a conceptual scaffolding for making sense of resilient characteristics and protective factors, both of which are fundamental to growth and change. By focusing on a person's ability to build on resources, strengths, and individual perspectives, educators provide students the opportunity to address their own problems through a strengths-based approach.

Learning the skills of resilience is imperative to supporting success in the field with both social work students and the clients with whom they will work. This systematic review seeks to answer what best practices are being used to teach the components of resilience to social work students and within departments. The method analyzes eleven articles, all chosen based on specific inclusion criteria, to help develop an understanding of the current trends for teaching resilience. The following literature review analyzes the current literature on resilience and helps explain the importance and value of teaching resilience to social work students.

### **Literature Review**

Resilience has become increasingly prevalent and widely researched among fields of social work, psychology, education, medicine, and social sciences. Social work students benefit from learning to be resilient, as the profession is often emotionally demanding and stressful; research and best practices both emphasize the importance of self-care and emotional well-being. While studies surrounding resilience are largely available, teaching resilience from an ecological perspective in social work education programs is both understudied and underutilized. This

literature review outlines the meaning of resilience, examines various resilience models, explores why social work students need to be resilient, and identifies gaps in resilience and social work education.

### **Resilience Defined**

Resilience is conceptually defined as dispositional characteristics comprised of personal physiognomies such as inner strength, competence, optimism and flexibility that contribute to one's ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity (Gulbrandsen, 2017). Masten (2018) further defines resilience as the study of capabilities, processes, or outcomes denoted by positive adaptation in the context of risk or adversity. Within the study of resilience, protective and risk factors as well as vulnerability have all played a significant role in theory development and characterize a person's ability to thrive in the face of challenging life circumstances. The process of adapting to stress and adversity can be positive and encourages people to persevere and thrive within a new perspective, develop new coping mechanisms, or expand socially (Afifi et al., 2016). Resilience research involves three connected components: adversity, outcomes, and mediating factors. When researching resilience, Van Brenda (2018) writes "resilience is a process that leads to an outcome and the central focus of resilience research is on the mediating processes" (p. 4). Conner and Davidson (2003), who authored the widely used Connor-Davidson Resiliency Scale, suggest that internal and external stressors are always present in a person's life and over time; their ability to cope with disruption will lead to one of the following four outcomes: (1) opportunity for growth and increased resilience, (2) return to baseline homeostasis in order to survive the disruption, (3) recovery with loss, or (4) dysfunctional state with maladaptive strategies.

### **Building Skills of Resilience**



Researchers examining modules of resilience postulate that several types of resilience models are used within social work education (Grant & Kinman, 2012, Van Brenda, 2018, de las Olas Palma-García & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2017). Within this literature review, findings include clear, repeated indicators for students to increase their levels of self-knowledge and own feelings, triggers, and stressors. For example, Beddoe et al. (2013) discuss the need to prepare students for the reality of practice by learning to identify the warning signs for burnout, and educate them about the signs of stress and compassion fatigue. By developing skills of emotional hardiness, students are more prepared for the adverse workplace often experienced in social work.

Resiliency research has pointed to the fact that certain personality traits support and maintain high levels of resilience and are defined as protective factors. One study found that a social work course that encourages the development of personality traits such as openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion all lead to an increase in resilience (Garcia & Mendieta, 2017). Within such personality traits, empathy is essential for effective social work practice. Skills of empathy include paraphrasing, appropriate self-disclosure, and articulation of feelings; however, teaching empathy as a valued and necessary part of social work education has been largely overlooked (Gerdes et al., 2011). Similar to resilience, Gerdes et al. (2012) suggest that empathy can be taught in the curriculum of social work but is severely lacking. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for social work, falls short of emphasizing the value of empathy as well. In a content analysis of 41 social work textbooks, 26 books made no mention of empathy, and the other 21 that did mention empathy did so in scant paragraphs (Gerdes et al., 2012). Such a strong connection between personality traits and resilience suggests

that, by fostering and teaching skills related to certain characteristics and behaviors, social work programs can indeed more readily prepare students for future adverse situations.

Emotional intelligence is perhaps one of the most highly regarded skills in reflective social work practice; however, little is known about the strategies necessary to inform the development of an emotional curriculum that might improve emotional competencies in social work (Kinman & Alexander, 2014). One study argued that students are introduced to resilience and adversarial growth in human behavior courses, but it is in the practice courses where students must learn to identify and develop resilience (Greene, 2003). Further, they suggest that field courses often focus on deficits and would benefit from assignments that focus on resilience related to their client's well-being and identify areas for growth and change.

Group work, while a natural format for exploring resilience and support, has been documented as declining in social work curricula and lacks educators who hold expertise in this area (Simon & Kilbane, 2014). As a result of a decline in group work, the significance of mentoring is increasingly necessary. Peer coaching has direct benefits to building resilience and support for social workers, yet has not been systematically examined, according to Thompson and Thompson (2008). Such techniques will help social workers enhance their reflective practice, make positive changes in their own professional careers, and assist them in acknowledging unrecognized skills. Another study suggests that specific college-led interventions that utilize group work to facilitate peer support and group problem solving helped students to apply the strengths-based approach to address personal feelings and stressors (First et al., 2018). The value of peer support is highly regarded in resilience literature and can be easily fostered with the implementation of meaningful, ongoing group practice.

Other areas where literature indicates positive correlations between resilience and skill building for college students include students learning core stress management skills such as mindfulness, peer coaching, and reflective practice (Grant & Kinman, 2012). Exercise, such as yoga classes, is also mentioned as a strategy to help students build characteristics of resilience (Oehme et al., 2019). Mindfulness, or learning to be in the moment with the support of breath awareness, is largely linked to helping reduce stress in social workers (Ying, 2009). Peer coaching offers ways for students to build resilience by offering skills of feedback and self-reflection, while learning about areas to improve and identification of personal strengths (Green et al., 2007). Finally, reflective practice, as mentioned above, is often provided through the use of supervision, which offers opportunities to learn and practice emotional reflection about ethical and practice-related issues in a safe environment (Grant & Kinman, 2012). Each of these interventions and teaching practices offers a varied and meaningful opportunity for students to build skills of resilience in a safe and protective learning environment.

Teaching students to build and practice resilience is one way educators prepare students for the emotional rigors of the profession. Woven throughout these articles is the suggestion that there is enormous value in a student developing emotional regulation, strong peer support, and a stronger sense of self; all contribute to greater emotional resilience and professional success for future social work students. Social work programs offer various methods to help students learn these fundamental skills; however, the collective research indicates implementation of resilience-building strategies in social work programs is needed to teach students to face the rigors of the profession in a more successful and meaningful way.

While efforts have been made to understand the impact of resiliency on student learning and preparedness for social work practice, more is needed in curriculum development to

strengthen knowledge about resiliency for students. By providing students with the necessary skills and stamina to enter the field, they are more likely to find professional success and satisfaction and experience less burnout and compassion fatigue. The following method section will help explain how the research question was addressed through the careful analysis of eleven articles for this systematic review.

### **Method**

The research focus for this qualitative, descriptive review sought to identify the best practices for social work educators who are helping students build and sustain traits of strength and resilience. A systematic review implies the inclusion of selection criteria, a comprehensive and explicit search strategy, and objective criteria to collect and analyze the findings from the report (Boland, 2017). While there is much research about resilience and teaching social work, less was found for this review about how social work educators can prepare their students for the field by implementing resilience strategies into their curriculum and programming. Therefore, the rigorous systematic review process was utilized for this study to assist educators in understanding the current data about how resilience is currently being taught. The goal was to gather, analyze, and report research in a way that would assist faculty and practitioners in understanding how to use and implement components of teaching resilience into the classroom and university programming. See table 1 outlining the author, method, intervention, and outcomes below.

**Table 1***Description of Intervention Programs and Outcomes (N=11)*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Beddoe, Davys and Adamson	Qualitative	Personal attributes, resilience knowledge, peer support, work-life balance, mentorship	Series of recommendations to build resilience into social work curriculum.
de las Olas Palma-Garcia, Hombrados-Mendieta	Quantitative	A course that develops personality traits	Development of personality traits increases resilience.
First, First and Houston	Qualitative	Group work	Resilience and Coping Intervention: RCI to be an effective group work intervention for use with undergraduate students; RCI offered more hope and reduced stress and depression.
Gerdes, Jackson, Segal and Mullins	Conceptual Framework	Framework for teaching empathy	By teaching students about neural pathway developments, they can build skills of empathy to build resilience.
Gerson and Fernandez	Quantitative	PATH: includes 3 60-minute meetings over 3-week period	PATH significantly increased optimistic and personal control behaviors.
Grant and Kinman	Quantitative	Curriculum developments	Students agree that greater emphasis should be placed on the importance of resilience earlier in their education and training.
Oehme, Perko, Clark, Ray, Arpan and Bradley	Quantitative	Psychoeducational resilience program	Online integrative tool for campus resilience demonstrates positive results.
Spellman	Conceptual Framework	Teaching strategies to build resilience	Systems thinking, metacognition, and scenarios thinking develop skills of resilience.
Sheppard and Clibbens	Quantitative	Group work	Group work improves emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, peer problems, pro-social behavior.
Wilks	Quantitative	Peer support	Friend support plays significant protective role amid academic stress and builds resilience.
Williams-Gray	Conceptual Framework	Warrior ethos, resilience, and strengths-based practice	Social work education can prepare resilient practitioners who are returning military.

### **Selection Criteria**

This systematic review was composed of eleven articles based on their focus of teaching resilience. The objective of this review was to analyze (1) available articles about teaching resilience to social workers to include predominantly those articles that were (2) student focused and/or applied within a BSW program and (3) included a practical practice framework that could be utilized for future teaching practices.

Categories of inclusion were identified based on the literature review and include the following: maintain a student focus, offer an applied practice framework for teaching resilience, describe a teaching or theoretical background for application, and include a sample study with outcomes. While many articles included the topic of resilience, many did not meet the criteria because they failed to include social work or teaching, which were primary to this search.

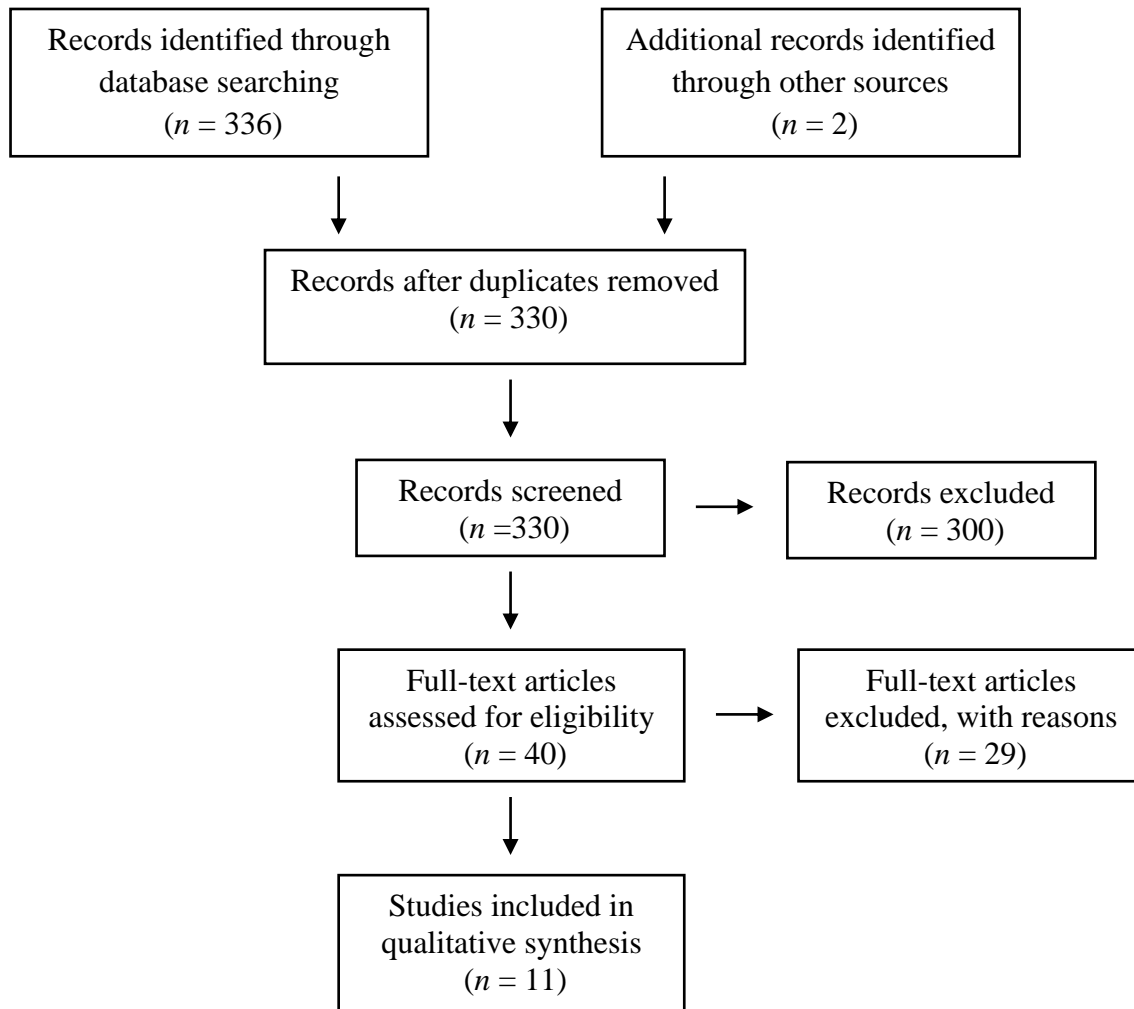
Categories of exclusion included articles that were not focused on teaching, were written more than ten years ago, or were not specific to the field of social work. Further, while articles about teaching resilience to vulnerable populations were plentiful, articles specific to teaching students of social work were scant. Exclusion criteria greatly minimized the available articles.

### **Search Strategy**

The search for this study included an original 336 identified articles. These were then narrowed down to 40 eligible studies. Following this, 29 were excluded with reason from the study. Eleven remained and were included in this systematic review. Figure 1 provides a visual explanation of the search strategy.

**Figure 1**

*Flow diagram of data collection and search process steps.*



### Data Collection

Search strategies included the following top social work databases: Academic Search Complete, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, SocIndex and PsycNET. Searches in other databases yielded minor and unreportable findings. Examination of journal articles were conducted using the following terms: *social work* and *resilience* and *teaching*. The words were used in various combinations.

### **Data Analysis**

Data for this study was primarily analyzed by the researcher and done over several months. The researcher read the abstracts of the articles to determine initial criteria and eliminated them as she progressed through the articles. For organizational and documenting purposes, all data was entered into an Excel spreadsheet for reference and comparison. This spreadsheet eased the data collection process and organized specific data for the researcher.

Risk of bias is evident in the person conducting the search and her opinion about whether the article would meet the chosen criteria. As an educator within the field of social work, her bias about approachability, effectiveness, and relatability were all factors in choosing the articles for this review. For example, articles with extensive quantitative findings, while relevant to the research, may have lacked a substantial applicability section, making them unrelatable to the intended focus of this paper. Additional opinions and researchers may have widened the applicability of the search process and selection.

The method of collecting data through a systematic review offers a structured summary of background, objectives, data sources, eligibility criteria, participants, and interventions. As discussed, results include limitations, findings, key findings, and conclusions. The method of collecting data about teaching resilience to students for this study offered a broad perspective of how resilience is currently being taught in various capacities across the world. What follows in the results section describes the outcomes of the included studies.

### **Results**

The study flow diagram is presented in Table 2. The articles point to several major themes about building resilience. These include the value of peer support/group work, professional development opportunities, organizational culture, personality characteristics, and



self-care practices such as mindfulness, art and role playing. Many of these themes overlapped within the research and were prevalent throughout the findings.

Worldwide studies that met the criteria were considered. Among the authors' home countries, seven were from the United States, two were from the United Kingdom, one was from Spain, and one was from New Zealand; this variation offered an international lens of resilience to the study. All studies were peer-reviewed publications. Theories were predominantly focused on resilience and strengths-based models; however, articles were not limited because of other theoretical applications. Two qualitative, six quantitative studies, and three conceptual framework articles were used for this study. Each of these articles was selected because of its inclusion of teaching resilience and offering of an applied teaching component to the article. Of the articles selected, ten out of the eleven were student centered; only four articles were located that focused specifically on social work undergraduate students and met the remaining criteria. All but the conceptual frameworks included a sample population with clearly articulated outcomes from the study. Articles included in the search were written within the last ten years keeping with the current trends in resilience research.

Each result was reviewed until the search ceased to offer information relevant to this study. Articles that failed to meet the selection criteria were excluded from the study. Initial studies within the SocIndex yielded 94 articles in this search criteria. Following further review, only four articles met inclusion criteria. PSYC Net yielded 116 results but following further screening efforts brought six relevant articles for final review. Academic Search Complete showed 103 related articles. Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection yielded 23 articles. A total of 336 articles were located after the initial search. Articles were then screened for the inclusion criteria and the final eleven were selected that met the desired guidelines for this

systematic review. Each selected article comes unnecessarily from a different journal; the majority are from within the field of social work and include one each from journals of psychology and ecology.

While articles could not meet all the identified selection criteria, they were selected based on their inclusion of a majority of the criteria. The researcher identified a minimum of two of the three primary objectives for inclusion. For example, Shephard's (2015) quantitative study based out of the UK discussed the importance of group work in building resilience in college students. While this article did not offer a specific teaching framework, the utilization of group work was clearly defined as a method for teaching resilience. Further, the three conceptual framework articles that were chosen for this paper did not include a findings section; however, they each offered a specific teachable resilience model or review of a resilience framework. These were included because they primarily offered an applied tool for teaching and could be helpful for educators hoping to build components of resilience into their programs.

## Table 2

*Findings Table (n=11)*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Journal</b>	<b>Results</b>
Beddoe, Davys and Adamson	27	Social Work Education	Supervision, role models, professional development opportunities, organizational culture, and valuing the profession, all impact organizational resilience.
de las Olas Palma-Garcia, Hombrados-Mendieta	479	International Social Work	Studying and practicing social work has a direct correlation between personality and resilience; social work programs that foster extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness build resilience.
First, First and Houston	55	Social Work with Groups	RCI encourages students to discuss their challenges while focusing on strengths and resources and to become active agents of change in peer problem solving.

Gerdes, Jackson, Segal and Mullins	*	Journal of Social Work Education	Psychodrama, Gestalt techniques, role playing, and imitative play teach empathy; art and mindfulness are also utilized.
Gerson and Fernandez	91	Journal of Applied Social Psychology	Three, 50-minute sessions over 5 days were proven to teach skills of resilience and thriving to undergraduates.
Grant and Kinman	240	Social Work Education	Predictors of resilience include emotional intelligence, reflective ability, empathy, and social competencies. Curriculum outlines ways to enhance these.
Oehme, Perko, Clark, Ray, Arpan and Bradley	229	Journal of Evidence Based Social Work	Public-health style, web-based outreach that destigmatizes help-seeking and use of campus services and encourages student wellness.
Spellman	*	Ecology and Society	Mandated curriculum, utilizing a resilience framework, and teacher training to support resilience learning encourages resilience-building learning tools to reach a wide range of students.
Sheppard and Clibbens	100	Child and Family Social Work	Increased friendships have a direct correlation to building resilience and reducing emotional problems and peer problems.
Wilks	314	Advances in Social Work	Allow students time to relieve stress in class, encourage empathizing with one another, and create a ritual to begin class.
Williams-Gray	*	Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work	Protective factors such as selfisms, cognitive processing, use of one's self in the world, personality, skills, and values contribute to protective factors of resilience.

Note. \*Indicates the study was a Conceptual Framework

## Study Characteristics

### *Peer Support and Group Work*

Sheppard and Clibbens (2015) and Wilks (2018) suggest that taking advantage of peer support is primary to students building resilience. For example, Wilks' (2018) research found that the protective factors of friendships were empirically significant and knowingly moderated the relationship between academic stress and resilience. His research further suggests that it is

friend, not family, support that is more apt to moderate the stress of academia and a student's ability to overcome stress during real-life settings while studying social work in college (Wilks, 2018). The benefit of peer support is also described in Sheppard and Clibben's (2015) article describing social workers who utilized group work with elementary-aged children to build skills of resilience. This group work emphasized the collaborative context and peer support as a way to manage emotional symptoms, encourage pro-social behavior, and increase overall peer relationships with the use of a skills group. First et al. (2018) also found that the use of groups with college-aged students built skills of resilience. Their group, Resilience and Coping Intervention, found that the students benefit from a place to discuss their challenges and become active agents of change in problem solving with their peers. Further, allowing students to use their own assets within a group setting enabled them to build skills of coping and resilience in the face of adversity (First et al., 2018). Finally, Gerson and Fernandez (2013) developed a three-session program to build resilience and found the effect size to be significant in its ability to monitor building skills of strength. This quantitative study found that its group content was successful in teaching about coping with stress in particular. Grant and Kinman (2012) also found that social support is one of the primary buffers against stress.

### ***Organizational Culture and Role Models***

Developing opportunities for professional advancement, and an organizational culture that includes the key components of resilience and creating relationships with professional role models, was the second noteworthy finding. The impact of role models and a culture of resilience within the academy both contribute to a student's ability to see herself as professional and gain important growth as evident from Beddoe et al.'s (2013) research. In their qualitative study, they spoke to 27 participants and found that the importance of reflective practice within

supervision enabled students to better see themselves in the field. Further, educators who demonstrated altruism, mentored, and encouraged those entering the profession was imperative to building resilience. Spellman's (2015) study found that teacher training that supported resilience was key to bridging the gap between student and teacher. For example, she found that many educators lacked the skills and knowledge to teach systems thinking based in the practice of resilience. She suggests that educators will be able to better support students by integrating factors of resilience training into the curriculum. Oheme et al. (2019) utilized a psychoeducational resilience program to complement existing mental health services and tested 229 students with this method. Their findings indicated a promising look at the online integrative tool to help build campus resilience.

### ***Personality Traits and Emotional Intelligence***

Emotional intelligence and personality were repeatedly mentioned within the review of articles as a vital component of building resilience in students. For example, in one study examining personality characteristics of 479 students and the development of resilience, the researcher found that students who exhibited extraversion, conscientiousness and openness were more successful (de las Olas Palma-Garcia and Hombrados-Mendieta, 2017). Further, they maintain that the development of programs and activities that foster the development of these personality traits will make individuals more resilient. Personal traits such as positive emotionality, cultural and intellectual curiosity, friendliness and interpersonal confidence all contribute to a social workers ability to deal with adverse situations and overall quality of life. Grant and Kinman (2012) suggest that emotional intelligence is a key competence for social workers as it is likely to help them develop their own emotions as well as those of others (Howe, 2008; Grant and Kinman, 2012). Within their research, they found that reflective ability, an

important predictor of well-being, as well as empathy and social competencies each contribute to building resilience. Returning military, who are seeking to build resilience, explored the major tenets of military programming in Williams-Gray's article (2016). They found that implementing a framework in undergraduate social work courses that includes the intersection of a warrior ethos, resiliency and a strengths-based framework provides a solid grounding for returning military personnel into civilian life (Williams-Gray, 2016).

### ***Mindfulness, Role Playing, and Art***

Further recommendations for building resilient techniques into social work programming include mindfulness practice, role playing, and art. Mindfulness training that includes moment-to-moment awareness has been found to foster resilience and is an effective stress management tool (Grant and Kinman, 2012; Goleman and Cherniss, 2001; Ying, 2009). To help build empathy in students, Gerdes et al. (2011) found that role playing facilitates insight, personal growth and mental flexibility and self/other-awareness. They also found that introducing mindfulness practice helped students to build empathy and greater cognitive processing. The use of art engages people in the act of "retraining the mirror neurons for affective sharing and cognitive pathways for self/other awareness" (Gerdes et al., 2011, p. 122). While some of these are familiar to teaching social work, the development of neurons and cognitive skills as practiced in these activities helps to develop the highest level of empathy and resilience.

The findings from this systematic review indicate an important step forward to helping college students build resilience. The value of peer support and group work is vital to student success and largely decreases stress and isolation. Campus culture and overall organizational commitment to leveraging components of resilience into curriculum is repeatedly noted as valuable in sustaining role models and professional development opportunities. The personality

traits of students and ability to demonstrate empathy are explained as skills educators can teach and encourage with students. Building resilience must be done at multiple levels and throughout the lifetime of a social worker. College educators may offer the first and lasting step toward a future generation of resilient and strengths-based social workers.

### **Study Implications**

Literature for this systematic review points to the need for students to build components of self-care and emotional well-being into their educational practices in order to prepare for the rigors of professional practice. Beddoe et al. (2013) discussed the need for students to increase levels of self-knowledge and emotional hardiness and the findings consistently reflect the benefit of this while they are in college. However, in order to thrive and build skills of resilience, consistent supervision, positive role models, professional development opportunities, and an organizational culture that reflects support and emotional growth is necessary. Personality traits, such as empathy, were discussed in the literature review as a protective factor in resilient skill building (de las Olas Palma-García and Hombrados-Mendieta, 2017). The findings further indicate that a curriculum infusing skills of resilience into coursework can help students develop essential personality traits. Literature also suggests that group work is essential to resilience building and this is demonstrated through regular group practice both in classes and on campus (First et al., 2018, Gitterman and Knight, 2016). Mentoring and peer support were both reviewed by literature as necessary for peer coaching and consistent peer support increase this personal and professional self-awareness (Gerdes et al., 2011, Kinman and Grant, 2011). Finally, literature findings suggested that students who are able to build a reflective practice and skills of consistent emotional regulation are more likely to develop skills of resilience over time (Kinman and Grant, 2011). Learning such skills can be offered through the practice of mindfulness, art

therapy and a curriculum that integrates self-reflection and a reflective practice to enable students to practice this on a regular basis throughout their college experience.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The strengths of this study are identified international studies summarizing the findings of specific ways in which social work programs can aid students in developing skills of resilience. The study offers social work educators specific information about how they might implement and practice skills of resilience with their students. Further, since the majority of the articles studied were written for social work journals, this paper contributes a synthesized review to the professional body of research.

Although the findings from this study indicate evidence that support the usefulness of resilience training for social work curriculum and programming, there are several limitations that restrict the generalizability of this study to other populations. The sample size is small (n=11) and the findings are varied, indicating the need to synthesize the findings moving ahead. There is a great deal written about teaching resilience and this is a limited window into the practice. Second, the findings are limited because there is limited research published about teaching resilience specifically to social work students. While much of this research could be applied to students of social work, the research is scant within this field. While the study includes an international population, it is not representative of a diverse worldview and is not necessarily inclusive of minority populations or students who are from a first-generation, low socio-economic background. Literature points to the need to provide greater support for these students and this study does not specifically highlight such undergraduates.

### **Recommendations and Future Research**



Future recommendations for this study include the development of a conceptual framework outlining how to specifically apply and implement these findings. Providing information about teaching resilience to students of social work is necessary for programs to best understand how to apply the research to practice and teaching. Specific teaching models and practice examples will aid programs toward understanding best practice models of resilience education within the field of social work.

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**Teaching Resilience:**

**A Framework Grounded in Social Neuroplasticity and the Ecological Perspective**

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**Abstract**

Resilience offers tools for students of social work to practice self-care, practice empathy, and create community in an emotionally challenging profession. While resilience is widely researched across disciplines, teaching resilience to social work students is largely underutilized. A conceptual framework described in this conceptual paper explains best practices for teaching resilience that can be developed in social work programs. Concepts from social neuroplasticity and the ecological perspectives provide the foundation for understanding and explaining why resiliency education is needed in the social work curricula. In this paper, the author proposes guidelines and recommendations on the implementation of teaching resiliency across the micro, mezzo, and macro levels at her institution, Mary Baldwin University, in Virginia. The author proposes best practices and interventions across department programming and student initiatives.

*Keywords:* resilience, teaching social work, teaching resilience

## **Teaching Resilience:**

### **A Framework Grounded in Social Neuroplasticity and the Ecological Perspective**

The human experience requires three primary needs for survival: Safety, fulfillment and connection (Siegel, 2020). While most humans have a reservoir of resilience and the ability to grow and recover from life's challenges in a unique and meaningful way, understanding what enables people to recover and consequently thrive is the intent behind resilience research. In the field of social work, resilience offers tools for practicing self-care, learning empathy, and building community in an emotionally challenging profession. While resilience is widely researched across disciplines, the practice of teaching resilience to social work students is largely underutilized. The Council on Social Work Education offers scant information about the following questions: Can students learn empathy and deepen their emotional intelligence? How might the social work curriculum better infuse the teaching and learning of resilience into its course and field work? This conceptual framework provides best practices for teaching resilience that can be utilized in social work programs. In this paper, I argue that concepts in social neuroplasticity and the ecological perspective can be used to help understand the concept of resiliency and why resiliency education matters. These concepts can be used towards understanding resilience and resiliency education and are being built into the social work curriculum at my home institution, Mary Baldwin University. However, these findings are based on preliminary information gathered in a systematic review and indicate an introductory finding that needs to be further tested.

Resilience is the study of what enables people to not only respond to adversity and recover from challenging life circumstances, but also to make sense of what we draw on to keep going and thrive in life following difficult experiences (Hanson, 2018). Through neuroplasticity

and practices such as mindfulness, self-compassion and connection, the human brain can be rewired to grow. The cumulative effect of this practice enables the human brain to grow resilience over time (Maddaus, 2020).

Teaching resilience highlights the concept that one can learn to develop mental resources in two specific ways. First, when people experience what they want to develop further, such as feeling grateful, understood and confident, they begin to understand the feelings they seek. Second, this critically important step invites the ability to convert this belief into lasting change within the nervous system and begin to rewire the brain (Hanson, 2018). With increasing numbers of young people being diagnosed with depression and anxiety, it is becoming more evident that students and young professionals are casualties of the stress built into our economy and are often overworked, hooked on technology, or unable to adequately pay their bills (Huffington, 2015). Learning to pay attention to overall well-being connects people to dormant parts of themselves and enables them to not only survive but thrive in the face of adversity. Teaching the skills of resilience will enable educators to equip the next generation to build a robust bank of resilience.

Social workers serve in some of the most stressful and emotional work environments. Largely a female-oriented profession, social work focuses on helping the most vulnerable and oppressed populations. The need for social workers to develop resilience is necessary to protect their own well-being and to provide quality service for consumers (Grant & Kinman, 2012). Contemporary social work education and practice emphasize and promote the strengths-based perspective; however, the realities of social work practice often push social workers and especially inexperienced students, toward a problem-focused perspective (Gitterman & Knight, 2016). There is general agreement in resiliency research that inadequate attention is paid to the



causes and manifestations of workplace stress and that social work students are largely unprepared for the realities of their jobs (Beddoe et. al., 2013).

Social work education can and should contribute to multi-tiered opportunities to prepare resilient practitioners for the profession; this education is essential for preparing successful practitioners who can handle the stress of their jobs and thrive in a challenging work environment. The literature reveals scant research on self-care practices among social work students, yet self-care is noted as vital to helping students prepare to be effective practitioners (Moore et al., 2014). Jack and Donnellan (2010) noted a decline in the well-being of newly graduated social workers where the focus has been on knowledge and tasks rather than self-care and the strengths of the emerging professional. For learning to be more than transactional, teaching must include personal development and time to explore some of the vulnerable and corrosive aspects of the work and self. By providing specific teaching tools, methods and applications, social work educators ensure that students are equipped with sufficient thinking time for personal development, connections to others for positive role models, and an education that provides the necessary resources for building a toolbox of resilience and growth. This conceptual framework offers specific teaching tools and methods for the academy to aid students in building resilience.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Resilience and Neuroplasticity Defined**

Resilience is conceptually defined as dispositional traits comprised of personal characteristics such as inner strength, competence, optimism and flexibility that contribute to one's ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity (Gulbrandsen, 2017). Masten (2018) further defines resilience as the study of capabilities, processes, or outcomes denoted by positive

adaptation in the context of risk or adversity. Resilience is not reserved for extraordinary individuals, but rather is a basic human adaptation system Masten (2001) suggests. Research has demonstrated that resilience is a two-tiered construct that includes both a condition of adversity and the positive adaptation (Adamson et al., 2014). Further, resilience is lodged in personal characteristics, an organizational context, and the political intricacies of social work. Each of these build on one another and demonstrate the micro, mezzo, and macro components of resilience as described by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development. This model proposes that by intervening at multiple levels, similar to the ecological model, educators are offering a plethora of tools and interventions to support individual, group and community growth. When a student is learning to build the components of resilience, she must approach this learning from all three levels to build a reservoir of strength and capabilities.

Neuroplasticity research suggests that transformation and change is possible. Daniel Siegal researched the mind's ability to focus attention in specific therapeutic ways that can help override crippling fears and negative learned behaviors. Siegal's work provides numerous examples of how intentional focus is one way to teach the brain about new firings that create newly formed synaptic linkages (Siegal, 2020). Further, he demonstrates how positive practiced behaviors activate neural firings and this leads to the production of proteins that enable new connections to be made among neurons in the brain. Neuroplasticity is possible throughout a lifespan and is activated by attention itself; in other words, modern neuroscience has taught us that the power to direct attention has within it the power to shape the brain's architecture of the brain itself (Siegal, 2000). The following sections introduce specific neurological and ecologically based practices that help students build skills of resilience.

### **Journaling**

There are many practices used in social work to teach self-care. A popular method has been the use of journaling in an attempt to help students reflect on spiritual, mental, emotional, social and physical well-being (Bedoe et al., 2013). Students in the field often need a platform to process their own stressful situations and the implications for their clients. Moore et al.'s (2011) qualitative study found that stress reduction and an increased ability to focus in school were the result of journaling as part of a practice course. All students reported that journaling helped them to learn and implement self-care techniques.

### **Personality Characteristics**

Within the field of social work, research exploring how personality traits contribute to social work has been conducted to better understand how personality contributes to resilience. Luthar et al. (2000) found that certain personality traits such as good humor, being socially responsible, having good self-esteem, self-discipline and self-control, as well as having planning and critical thinking skills help overcome adversity. Such personality traits have been defined as protective factors in the development of resilience. More importantly, personality traits are not static over the lifetime of a person but rather can be taught, transformed and gradually change as a result of learning, biological factors and sociocultural conditions (Gonzalez, 1987, as cited by de las Palma Garcia et al., 2017). In other words, with the appropriate teaching and opportunities, resilience can be learned and practiced by students of social work.

### **Empathy**

Empathy is essential for social workers to demonstrate compassion and effective practice and can be practiced at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. High levels of empathy are well-regarded and necessary for people working in the human service professions. Grant and Kinman (2012) found that the role of empathy maintained a strong underpinning for both resilience and

psychological well-being. One quantitative study suggested that moderate levels of empathic concern enhances a social worker's resilience to stress whereas "empathic distress tends to diminish it leading to low levels of wellbeing more generally (Grant & Kinman, 2012, p. 611)." While empathy is critical for human service work, little is written about it specifically in social work teaching.

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness refers to the moment-to-moment awareness or paying attention to the current moment without judgement (Grant & Kinman, 2012). Golemand and Cherniss (2001) emphasized the importance of mindfulness in fostering resilience. Learning to stay in the present moment has been extremely helpful for managing stress and the uncertainties of their own emotions and their client's in the profession in social work. Critical self-reflection, patience, better listening and critical self-reflection have all been demonstrated to be outcomes of a regular mindfulness practice.

The article, *Brief mindfulness training in the social work practice classroom*, described the idealism students arrive with when they enter social work; unfortunately, students are seldom aware of the deep emotional complexities of the profession (Thomas, 2017). After administering the *Mindful Awareness and Attention Scale* during class, Brown and Ryan (2003) found no significant improvement with mindfulness, emotion regulation or empathy after the use of brief mindfulness exercises of a 16-week period. However, a component of the qualitative study suggested even temporary shifts in receptivity and openness that encouraged a stronger sense of connection, safety and use of more positive intention and attention (Thomas, 2017). With significant research about mindfulness available, these studies demonstrate that mindfulness has

the ability to assist students learn self-reflection and self-care however, where they best learn to practice remains questionable.

### **Peer Support/Mentoring**

Group work among peers, a mezzo-level intervention, is one way that social workers can find support and build resilience. Resilience can be epitomized through the application of group work and resiliency theory, suggest Gitterman and Knight (2016). Protective factors, as related to resilience, range from micro, social and community level characteristics and each of these contribute to the support and ability to withstand challenges and hardships. Mutual aid is a significant factor in building resilience and enhances self-efficacy and more effective coping (Gitterman & Knight, 2016). Peer coaching aims to develop skills through the development of feedback, self-reflection and support (Green et al., 2007). The remunerations of coaching are many and often serve to benefit both the peer coach and the recipient of the coaching. Grounded in social neuroplasticity and the ecological perspective, each of these resiliency education practices encourages brain development and engages students at micro, mezzo, and macro levels of their college experience.

### **Resilience in Social Work**

Workplace adversities stem from limited resources, poor organizational culture and changing social policies. Anderson (2000) found that compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion, exposure to threats and violence, working with involuntary clients, and facing areas of public scrutiny were all factors of a social work stress. In order to face this growing stress in the workforce, social workers need to have advanced concepts of social and emotional intelligence as evidenced by Kinman and Grant's (2011) research. The need for demonstrated empathy, self-reflection and emotional intelligence were all predictors of resilience. Both within the United

States and the Council on Social Work Education's database, there is less research regarding the information related to teaching empathy to social work students.

### **Teaching Resilience within the Social Work Curriculum**

In order to learn skills related to perseverance and resilience, professors must include opportunities for students to learn about themselves at various levels, develop valued peer support, self-care and empathy. Each of these components contribute to higher levels of resilience in social work students. Several studies suggest that educators are not providing sufficient training in these four areas and that social work curriculum and standards do not emphasize their value sufficiently (Spellman & Bhuvanewari, 2016; Greene, 2003; Spellman, 2015). Findings from research papers and concepts from conceptual papers conducted by multiple scholars utilized for this paper were completed in countries outside of the United States indicating an even greater need for in-country resilience training and education within social work.

Emotional intelligence is perhaps one of the most highly regarded skills in reflective social work practice, however, little is known about the strategies that inform the development of an emotional curriculum that might improve emotional competencies in social work (Kinman & Alexander, 2014). One study argued that students are introduced to resilience and adversarial growth in human behavior courses, but it is in the practice courses where students must learn to identify and develop resilience (Greene, 2003). Further, they suggest that field courses often focus on deficits and would benefit from assignments that focus on resilience in their client's well-being and identify areas for growth and change.

Group work, while a natural format for exploring resilience and support, has been documented as declining in social work curricula and lacks educators who hold expertise in this

area (Simon & Kilbane, 2014). As a result of a decline in group work, the significance of mentoring is increasingly necessary. Peer coaching has direct benefits to building resilience and support for social workers, yet has not been systematically examined, according to Thompson and Thompson (2008). Such techniques will help social workers enhance their reflective practice, make positive changes in their own professional careers and assist them in acknowledging unrecognized skills.

Mindfulness is increasingly offered as professional development activities and community workshops, but it is seldom offered as a social work course with on-going integration. While the research is varied on the positive outcomes of mindfulness in classrooms, the personal and professional benefits are well-documented and supported. Further, with emerging research around the brain's ability to grow and develop with neuroplasticity, there is evidence that learning to practice mindfulness will significantly change the brain in positive ways.

Empathy, as described above, is key to developing resiliency lacking in the social work curriculum. Similar to resilience, Gerdes et al. (2012) suggest that empathy can be taught in the curriculum of social work but is severely lacking and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) falls short of emphasizing the value of empathy. In a content analysis of 41 social work textbooks, 26 books made no mention of empathy and the other 21 that did mention empathy did so in scant paragraphs (Gerdes, et al., 2012). Learning to cultivate empathy is imperative to developing resilient qualities, however the curriculum lacks sufficient emphasis in this area.

Teaching students to build and practice resilience is one way educators prepare students for the emotional rigors of the profession. Woven throughout these articles is the suggestion that there is enormous value in a student developing emotional regulation and a stronger sense of

self; both contribute to greater emotional resilience and professional success for future social work students. There remains a gap in the application of resilience within the social work curriculum. In this paper I propose guidelines and best practices for how to teach resilience. I argue that by integrating resilience into social work programs, students will be better prepared to holistically practice social work with clients.

**Strategies in Proposed Guidelines**

In this section, I propose a guide for how social work programs can build resilience into both their curriculum and university programming. The model of programming I am proposing is informed by experience as a social work program director, associate professor and doctoral student. Specifically, I will draw from resources my university has used both programmatically and within our curriculum to make a case that students can build skills of resilience while in college. The model I am proposing includes applications for teaching resilience from an ecological perspective to include micro, mezzo, and macro-level interventions. A key focus of my proposed model is neuroplasticity and the role it plays in helping the brain to be taught new ways of thinking and practice. The following discussion is broken into three sections highlighting the micro, mezzo, and macro-level interventions that spread across the program and curriculum levels within my university. Tables 1 and 2 outline this information within specific course offerings and curriculum and programmatic offerings.

**Table 3**

*Courses including Resilience Building Activities*

Micro-Level interventions	Mezzo-Level Interventions	Macro-Level Interventions
Introduce mentorship program (ISW) Journaling (SWP1,2,F) Strengths Finder 2.0 (SWP1,F)	Mentorship group work (SWP2) Resilience and Coping Intervention (SWP2)	Practice and document self-care while in field (F) Participate in outdoor activities for social work club and students building personal relationships (ALL)



Introduce mindfulness in concept, theory and practice (ISW, MC)	Learn about complexities of family systems as related to personal resilience (SWP2)	Provide consistent community service activities (SWP1)
Develop mindfulness practice (MC)	Engage in group work to learn how to lead and understand group dynamics (SWP2)	Engage in leadership opportunities within the major (F)
Learn about self-compassion and empathy (ISW, SWP1, MC)	Practice mindfulness in groups (SWP2)	
Introduce nature and social work (ISW)	Engage in SW group lunches (ALL)	

Key: Courses where these may be implemented:

- Introduction to SW=(ISW)
- Mindfulness Course=(MC)
- Social Work Practice I=(SWP1)
- Social Work Practice II=(SWP2)
- Social Work Practice III=(SWP3)
- Field=(F)

**Table 4**

*Social Work Programmatic and Curriculum Interventions*

<b>Programmatic Interventions</b>	<b>Curriculum Interventions</b>
Group work: RCI, mentoring, community service	<i>Teaching self-care techniques:</i> breathwork, Strengths Finder 2.0, journaling, reflective practice, family mapping.
Mentoring program between first year and senior students	<i>Teaching empathy:</i> use of role plays with multiple perspectives, writing from another’s point of view, reflection.
Outdoor community building activities: hikes, walking meetings, class time outside	<i>A Resilient Approach to Social Work: Trekking the Grand Canyon Course</i>
Community practice through the Social Work Club	<i>Mindfulness Self-Compassion Course</i>
Weekly social work lunches with faculty and students	Self-care mapping in field work
Leadership opportunities within Social Work Club	Incorporating physical activity into coursework

**A Proposed Model of Teaching Resilience**

**Micro-Level Interventions**

The concept of self-care is not always a natural behavior for students but is rather a sophisticated cognitive skill that can be learned and developed (Decety & Lamm, 2006). When students enter college, they are often living independently for the first time in their lives and,

without adult supervision, are often prone to riskier and poor self-care behaviors. Becoming self-aware requires the ability to maintain internal focus (self-other awareness) while managing difficult and anxiety-prone situations (emotional regulation; Gerdes et al., 2013). Mindfulness practice has become more common and widespread across campuses with the offerings and spaces for yoga studios, meditation spaces, and various other research centers focused on increased self-awareness and contemplative sciences. Mindfulness practices have proven to be both empirically driven and effective interventions in the field of social work (Coffey & Hartman, 2008).

There are several ways Mary Baldwin University has introduced mindfulness and self-care into the curriculum. These include: the introduction of self-care during introductory social work courses, the establishment of a Mindfulness Self-Compassion course into the curriculum as a required course, offering a 3-5-minute breathwork opportunity at the beginning of class and meetings, and the use of the Strengths Finder 2.0 as a reflective tool.

As mentioned above, self-care can be a relatively new concept for college students, so the formal introduction of self-care as more than one simple act is introduced to the students during their first few weeks in the program. This teaching includes various slides, conversations, journal entries and discussions about the multiple levels of self-care (personal, professional, relational, emotional) and the ways they can begin to practice. Students are encouraged to begin utilizing this understanding and writing about it during their first course, Introduction to Social Work. Reflective and reflexive ability are important predictors of resilience, thus implementing such practices early is paramount to improved neuroplasticity and growth (Kinman & Grant, 2011).

This is followed by sophomore year's Mindfulness Self-Compassion, a largely popular elective turned required course in the major. This course teaches students specific mindfulness

techniques, the philosophy and practice behind self-compassion and the many benefits of learning to care for self in college and beyond. Thomas (2017) found that a stand-alone course focused on stress management and self-care have shown a variety of benefits including: improvements in mindfulness, increased therapeutic presence, reduced stress, and increased awareness of body states.

Applying a three to five-minute breathwork practice to the beginning and end of a class time can be incredibly effective in helping students find focus and intention for class time. The normalizing of this before class begins becomes commonplace and highly anticipated and welcomed by students living with high stress and anxiety. This practice can be both a curriculum and programmatic intervention and used before and after meetings and group work. Research by Kerr et al. (2013) suggests that by developing a mindfulness practice should be foundational practice for educators to help students focus and shift attention as well as develop their ability to emotionally regulate.

Finally, the curriculum for Social Work Practice courses infused The Strengths Finder 2.0 to help students become more self-aware utilizing a strengths-based lens (Rath, 2007). This test is administered during the Social Work Practice with Individuals (micro) course and assignments were utilized as a part of the building block for self-understanding and to help identify a student's positive skill set moving forward. This micro-level intervention introduces insights that help strengthen and build preliminary skills in resilience. Tables 1 and 2 outline this information further within specific course offerings and curriculum and programmatic offerings.

### **Mezzo-Level Interventions**

Social support for students has been long recognized as a necessary support for effective stress management, anxiety, and self-efficacy for students (Holden et al., 1997, Green et al.,

2001, Wilks & Spivey, 2010). Resilience is an indicator of a student's ability to build and harness future internal strength; group work is one way that students can build resilience while they are in college (Wilks & Spivey, 2010). Typically, students take Social Work with Groups and Families following micro practice and, in this course, they are introduced to the benefits and challenges of group work. A model such as the Resilience and Coping Intervention (RCI) incorporates a strengths-based approach, group problem solving, peer support and connection as key components for mitigating college stress and challenges (First et al., 2018). This group model is described as manualized group intervention, meets weekly for 45 minutes, is facilitated by one or two people, and can be completed in one session or as needed in class (First et al., 2010). The model and necessary tools are readily available and can be practiced to help build resilience and peer support and can be utilized across curriculum and programming.

Building peer relationships is essential to developing and sustaining resilience (Grant et al., 2014). Programmatically, a social work department can build and sustain strong peer relationships is through the development of a peer support program or mentoring program. Such a program matches first-year students with seniors for mentoring and group support, and it can offer both emotional and professional mentorship for new and incoming students. This work can be offered in an individual or group style and is effective in helping with retention and overall success.

Heinsch's (2012) article focused on finding a place for nature in social work practice. Few studies examine or consider the role of nature in social work practice, however she suggests that this partnership contributes to emotional, cognitive and spiritual well-being (Borrell et al., 2010; Coates, 2004, Coates, Gray & Heterington, 2006). Subsequently, adding group opportunities for students to experience class outside, engage in walking meetings, develop a

hiking group and engage in community work with nature is another step towards building resilience and community while developing new neurons for a greater capacity to practice and care for self.

Another way our university has integrated the outdoors and community building resilience into our curriculum offerings is through a 3-week May term course. This interdisciplinary course titled *A Resilient Approach to Social Work: Trekking the Grand Canyon* offers students an opportunity to engage in hiking trips throughout the spring semester to build strength and familiarity with the outdoors coupled with learning the key components of resilience, grit and mindfulness through various course readings and discussions. This preparation is followed by a ten-day trek through the canyon. During the trek, students express a reflective component of the course to include how transformative experiences involving physical movement serves as metaphors for internal exploration of self. They also learn to put theory into practice with a variety of individual and group coaching activities and learn walking and hiking as a resilience practice.

In the second social work practice course, students begin to understand their own family systems through the introduction of family theory and mapping with tools such as ecomaps and genograms. These assignments encourage students to understand their own family patterns, develop empathy for their family members, and deepen their emotional intelligence and self-compassion.

Finally, to build community within the major and among mentors and mentees, weekly lunches for social work majors and professors help develop deeper, more meaningful relationships within the major. This opportunity to build and sustain aspects of community building and resilience is beneficial for all involved in the major. Wilks and Spivey's (2010)

research suggests that friend-related social support moderates the negative association between academic stress and resilience and was in fact the lone support factor in moderating the stress-resilience relationship. This interaction between friends and stress has a positive impact on building student resilience and further supports the idea that helping students build and maintain friendship is ever important within the social work program. Tables 1 and 2 outline this information further within specific course offerings and curriculum and programmatic offerings.

### **Macro-Level Interventions**

Collins (2012) suggests that the focus on individual resilience can often draw attention away from organizational structure and structural exploitation and reminds the reader of the value of policy and macro intervention with regard to resilience. Field work, the signature pedagogy within social work, is the culminating opportunity for social work majors to practice and implement their three to four years' worth of learned self-care skills. Seniors also provide mentorship for younger students, engage in community action on a macro scale and benefit from the teachings gleaned from spending time outdoors. Further, students step into leadership roles within the Social Work Club to further exhibit their understandings of resilience and grit.

While students are in field, they develop a self-care plan. This plan asks students to provide regular check-ins with themselves about their progress towards personal, professional, emotional care and provides a venue to record and hold themselves accountable for success and challenges. Regular class time is offered for students to practice mindfulness, discuss how they care for themselves and to discuss their development of resilience. Further, students journal throughout their time in field to document and reflect on their direct experiences. This offers another tool for self-reflection and the building of empathy. Finally, Wilks and Spivey (2010)

suggest that field supervisors can utilize friend support or peer support to alleviate stress and promote resilience at practicum sites and this is regularly encouraged by our Field Director.

As seniors, students step into the role of mentor for the social work first-year students. This role includes bi-monthly check-ins and opportunities to care for and mentor a younger student new to the university and major. This check-in can be met by attending weekly major lunches with a mentee or getting involved in a service or outdoor activity offered for students. This opportunity provides a platform for seniors to apply their learned self-care and empathic practices with newer students in the program across micro, mezzo, and macro programmatic levels.

The Social Work Club offers monthly social justice or community practice opportunities serving vulnerable or local populations. These events are open to all students within the major or club (non-majors welcomed) and offers both leadership and practice opportunities to build resilience, friendships and professional experience. Seniors also engage in macro-level policy work in the community in pairs or groups, further sustaining the relationships built within the major. Tables 1 and 2 outline this information further within specific course offerings and curriculum and programmatic offerings.

### **Specific Coursework Additions**

In Gerdes et al.'s (2012) content analysis describing how empathy was taught in social work curriculum, their study found that most programs made no mention of empathy, and that those that did mention empathy provided no conceptualization or definition of the construct. This study offered a concrete framework for affective response, cognitive processing and conscious decision making to help students learn how to build empathy and empathic responses (Gerdes et al., 2013). Examples from this study include readings, writing from another person's perspective,

role playing from multiple viewpoints and on-going reflection grounded in a basic understanding of neuroplasticity.

The human body was designed for physical activity and spending time outside can be incredibly restorative (Moore et al., 2011). This regular need for movement can be woven into social work curriculum in a variety of ways. Walking meetings, courses that meet outside during warmer months, encouraging regular exercising programs and participation. As described above, I developed an elective course that encourages students to challenge their physical and emotional resilience while hiking in the Grand Canyon. Heinsch's (2012) article suggests incorporating community gardens or playgrounds into daily practice and to include an eco-assessment into a psychosocial assessment. She also encourages the use of nature-based activities with clients, pet ownership, or utilizing nature as therapy. Several of these components can be woven into social work courses and time spent with students.

### **Implications for Social Work Education**

The development of this resilience programming has taken the better part of three years. The faculty at my institution has embraced the teaching of resilience and its simultaneous programming. Within this new resilience model, there remain successes and challenges. For example, seniors may struggle to find adequate time to mentor first-year students properly, and faculty may be challenged to keep students accountable and motivated to support newer students. Learning to implement mindfulness practice in an online teaching format may prove challenging as it requires training for adjuncts who have less time to learn a new way of teaching and have little face-to-face time with students. Lastly, with the arrival of COVID-19, students are more fearful of gathering in groups. This new way of life has limited group practices and challenged our ability to serve the greater community.



On the other hand, the need to build community, although virtual, has proven to be even more important during the pandemic. As a result, our students have found outdoor activities even more attractive and have discovered opportunities to plant trees and participate in suicide prevention walks as ways of safely gathering. Faculty meet with students in outdoor areas and make walking meeting appointments to enjoy the seasons. At our university, the provost has gathered a group of faculty to discuss self-care and mindful interventions for the greater campus to help support and nurture the growing number of students and faculty who are anxious and overly stressed. Our students, because they are already well educated about this type of intervention, are eagerly contributing to this initiative and act as student leaders.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Despite challenges in the development of guidelines and the proposed model, social work programs can implement various aspects of this into their curricula at micro, mezzo, and macro levels to increase student resilience. Teaching self-care can be practiced in many meaningful ways; the path to this education and practice is varied but nevertheless worthwhile. Building a mezzo-level support for students through various group and family-oriented interventions is another worthwhile way to build resilience. Finally, by serving and building a strong community both within the program and greater society, students learn to think and practice outside of their own lives; this building of new neural pathways helps students learn resilience on various levels.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The limitations of this work include faculty who might not be comfortable with implementing certain aspects of this programming. This might include faculty who choose not to begin or end class with meditation practices or who do not embrace the curriculum addition of a mindfulness course or recognize the connection between outdoor learning and social work.

Further, as curriculum varies within programs, there may not be the space or availability of faculty to add certain courses and electives mentioned here. Lastly, the suggestions to add a mentoring program, lunch with students, or outdoor programming may vary in possibility and interest levels among both students and faculty.

Future research includes the collection of data to establish the effectiveness of such programming. While this has been slowly developing at my institution, the long-term outcomes of such programming have yet to be measured in a quantitative or qualitative fashion. A systematic review was conducted to review existing information on the topic of resilience and the teaching of resiliency. Guided by the preliminary findings of this systematic review, further research studies are needed. For example, there are several opportunities to survey students at the beginning, middle and end of resilience teaching to observe and collect data and outcomes. Specific groups on campus will be targeted to ensure reliability and consistency.

The neural pathways of traditional college-aged students are not fully developed. The opportunity to build and shape the resilience of our students is paramount in this time of a pandemic and while college students search for meaning and belonging. By offering a somewhat structured path to learning self-care, mindfulness and self-compassion, the brain learns to rewire and develop skills of resilience. Students' nervous systems are designed to be changed by their experiences and such practices depend on what they are paying attention to within their own lives (Hanson, 2018). Neuroplasticity is dependent on what students practice and repeatedly experience; these recurrent behaviors, implemented across systems, consolidate into the nervous system and help the brain to rewire (Hanson, 2018). Mindsight, a concept developed by Daniel Siegel (2010), suggests that the practice of paying attention to our thought patterns allows us to sense and shape energy and information flow. This perception allows humans to gain perception

and knowledge of the regulation (mind), share (relationships), and mediate neural mechanisms (brain) at the center of our lives (Siegel, 2010). The practice of teaching resilience to students of social work through micro, mezzo, and macro lenses encourages them to see themselves as a part of an interconnected community, part of the wider world; this starts with our teaching them about their own self-care and compassion.

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**Teaching Resilience: Empowering Social Workers for the Next Generation**

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**Abstract**

The helping professions widely emphasize the importance of self-care and building resilience to support the ongoing pressures of this work. There is extensive research surrounding resilience across helping professions, however there is limited data related to teaching resilience and social work education. College classrooms and campuses can provide a meaningful opportunity teaching, modeling, and practicing self-care, reflective abilities, and empathy for students. This presentation provides information analyzing best practices for teaching resilience based on the findings from a systematic review. This systematic review analyzed articles written about teaching resilience and explains best practices for social work educators who are helping students build and sustain traits of strength and grit. The method includes an analysis of eleven articles where key data was extracted to examine sample methodologies of teaching resilience. Outcomes from this review present evidence-based data highlighting the benefits of teaching resilience as a part of the social work education curriculum.

*Keywords:* resilience, teaching social work, self-care, social work educators

### **Introduction**

The author was invited to present at a roundtable at the peer-reviewed Western Social Sciences Administration Annual Conference in April 2020. This conference advances scholarship, teaching, service, and professional exchange across the social science disciplines. The Association's mission is to foster professional study, to advance research, and to promote the teaching of the social sciences, as well as to promote social justice, equitable treatment, and the application of due process for all peoples ([wssaweb.com](http://wssaweb.com)). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference was held virtually.

The goal of this presentation was to present the author's findings from the systematic review that analyzed articles written about teaching resilience and outlined best practices for implementation. This included explaining high burnout rates, exposure to abuse and trauma, compassion fatigue, and emotional exhaustion that are often recognized as primary aspects of social work (Beddoe et al., 2013). As a result, social work students must learn to prepare for this stressful working environment by developing strategies of self-care and resilience. Learning to build community, developing a deeper sense of themselves, and increasing levels of hope and empathy, all play a vital role in building resilience. Students who build skills of resilience have lower levels of depression and stress in a time where mental health issues on college campuses are on the rise (First, 2018).

Outcomes from this review provide evidence-based data that highlight the best practices of teaching resilience as a part of the social work education curriculum. The ecological and strengths-based theory provides the theoretical frameworks within which the questions of best practices for teaching resilience will be answered.

Literature for this systematic review points to the need for students to build components of self-care and emotional well-being into their educational practices in order to prepare for the rigors of professional work. Consistent supervision, positive role models, professional development opportunities, and an organizational culture that reflects support and emotional growth is necessary.

The findings presented indicated that a curriculum infusing skills of resilience into coursework can help students develop essential personality traits. Group work, mentoring, and peer support were all reviewed by literature as necessary for personal and professional self-awareness (Gerdes et al., 2011, Kinman and Grant, 2011). Finally, literature findings suggested that students who build a reflective practice and skills of consistent emotional regulation are more likely to develop skills of resilience over time (Kinman and Grant, 2011). Learning such skills can be offered through the practice of mindfulness, art therapy, and a curriculum that integrates self-reflection and a reflective practice to enable students to practice this on a regular basis throughout their college experience. The systematic review presentation provided valuable research outlining how social work educators can infuse resiliency training into their curriculum across multiple levels.

# Teaching Resilience to a New Generation of Social Workers

## A Systematic Review

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## Purpose of Review

- Analyzed current research about teaching resilience with an ecological and strengths-based perspective
- Reviewed 11 articles (out of 336 initially identified articles)
- Seeks to answer the question: *what are the best practices for teaching resilience to students of social work?*
- Articles were identified based on their focus on students as participants with interventions for students of social work

## Method

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- A qualitative, descriptive systematic review seeks to identify best practices for social work educators who hope to help students build and sustain skills of resilience and strength.
- This review sought to assist educators in **understanding current data** about how resilience is currently being taught in social work programs.
- **Goal:** gather, analyze and report research to assist practitioners and educators in understanding components of teaching in classroom and university programming.

## Data Analysis

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- Completed by the researcher over several months and data was entered into an Excel spreadsheet based on the chosen criteria
- Risk of personal bias because researcher chose the articles: the researcher was looking for articles with approachability, effectiveness and relatability
- Offered a structured summary of background, objectives, data sources, eligibility criteria, participants and interventions

## Results

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- Peer support and group work
- Organizational culture and role models
- Personality traits and emotional intelligence
- Self-care practices: mindfulness, role playing and art

## Discussion

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- Discussion about the 4 identified areas of teaching resilience
- Social work competencies (CSWE): how do they intersect with the suggested interventions?
- Strengths and limitations
- Recommendations for future research