

---

Volume 4 Issue 3

*Nourishing Purpose: Understanding Teacher  
Retention and Fostering Educators' Sense of  
Mission*

Article 5

---

January 2024

## Beyond Teaching: The Self-Fulfillment of Creating a Positive and Safe Learning Environment for Children Exposed to ACEs

Tessa J. Davis

University of Phoenix, [tjdaviscna@gmail.com](mailto:tjdaviscna@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/jaep>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Davis, T. J. (2024). Beyond Teaching: The Self-Fulfillment of Creating a Positive and Safe Learning Environment for Children Exposed to ACEs. *The Journal of Advancing Education Practice*, 4(3).  
<https://openriver.winona.edu/jaep/vol4/iss3/5>

This Opinions from the Field is brought to you for free and open access by OpenRiver. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Advancing Education Practice by an authorized editor of OpenRiver. For more information, please contact [klarson@winona.edu](mailto:klarson@winona.edu).

Teachers are deciding to leave education at high rates. This is due to high workloads, lack of support, and students' challenging behavior (Barnes, 2019). Many students who present with behavior issues come from environments where they are exposed to adverse childhood experiences at home. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur during childhood. This includes physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, parental divorce/separation, emotional and physical neglect, living in a household with a member who has a mental illness, has been to prison, or has substance abuse problems (Lacey & Minnis, 2020). It is estimated that 46% of children have experienced at least one ACE (Barnes et al., 2020). This amount of exposure creates a public health issue and leads to adverse effects on children throughout adolescence. Exposure to ACEs is linked to stress, anxiety, and unhealthy brain development in children. Children become at risk for learning developmental delays and physical, mental, and emotional health issues (Barnes et al., 2020). Webster (2022) states that those experiencing a higher number of four or more ACEs are at a higher risk for learning and behavior problems. For many children exposed to ACEs, school is their sense of safety, and they find security in their teachers. Nurturing and providing students with a safe learning environment gives educators a sense of fulfillment.

### **Recognizing ACEs in the Classroom**

Teachers are tasked with teaching a classroom full of children from different walks of life. They deal with various personalities, strengths, and struggles daily. Educators are given the skills necessary to work efficiently with each child through professional development. One of the skills that they are equipped with is recognizing adverse childhood experiences in students. Adversity can cause stress in children, which creates depression, anxiety, and behavior issues. Children can have feelings of helplessness, fear, and terror that follow them into the classroom (Murphy, 2019).

Recognizing trauma and adversities in students is critical to creating resilience. Teachers may see signs of poor classroom performance, issues with communication, behaviors of acting out, decreased focus and attentiveness, and issues regulating emotions. As stated by Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco (2019), educators recognize and observe students' reactions when they encounter new or difficult situations, during high-stress moments such as a student being disciplined or receiving a low grade, and observe their interactions with peers. Teachers familiar with their student's background and behavior are aware of the risks their students encounter. By monitoring a student's emotional and social

well-being, educators become equipped to meet the needs of each student to the best of their ability (Gardner & Stephens-Pisecco, 2019).

### **Resilience in Teachers**

Many teachers state that their demanding jobs affect their health, well-being, and ability to commit which creates an unhealthy work-life balance. An essential trait for teachers to possess is resilience. Resilience is crucial in aiding to end the current teacher recruitment and retention crisis (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). It also assists teachers with coping and managing their classroom and work environment. Higher levels of burnout due to a lack of resilience are linked to a decrease in the quality of teaching in the classroom (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). When the quality of teaching is affected, this can lead to the inability to recognize trauma and adversities in students. The students depend on their teachers to promote positive learning environments.

When faced with adversities in the classroom, teachers are able to find support in the professional resources available to them at school (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). These resources may include support from educational leaders, peer support, workload management tools, professional development, and a supportive school culture. Along with the professional resources, there are also personal resources and practices that help create resilience and retention in teachers. One of those personal practices is self-care. The personal ability to maintain psychological and emotional balance is self-care (Park et al., 2020). Taking care of oneself allows the teacher to better care for others as well as leads to professional and personal success. Activities of self-care can include journaling, exercising, pampering, reading, and more. Self-care enables teachers to function effectively (Park et al., 2020). When teachers are able to function effectively, they are more creative, flexible, and patient when assisting students who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences.

### **Creating Resilience in Students**

Resilience in children is seen as continued growth and success in overcoming the odds even after being exposed to traumatic life experiences (Yoon et al., 2020). Teachers assist in the process of creating resilience in their students. Educators pick up the broken pieces and help put them back together. Despite the adversities experienced in the home, children can still have positive experiences

in the classroom. Teachers serve as caregivers who create consistent, nurturing, and functioning relationships that serve as a blueprint for students to succeed (Hambrick et al., 2019). Success in children is their ability to demonstrate positive achievements at school, relationships with peers, extracurricular activities, and other relevant areas in their lives (Yoon et al., 2020). Many of these relevant areas are extensions of the classroom. Children pour themselves into school activities such as sports, clubs, and volunteer activities to escape the adversities of their home life.

Teachers need to understand the needs of their students and address them accordingly. Building trust is crucial to the journey of resilience (Scott et al., 2021). Healthy relationships between the student and teacher require a connection that is built on trust. Creating a safe learning environment adds to this trust. Another building block to trust is when educators maintain zero tolerance for bullying. Students who have experienced adversities may struggle with self-regulation, whether disruptive behaviors or self-isolation. The more adversities experienced, the more difficult it is for a child to self-regulate (Murphy, 2019). Teachers provide structures to assist with self-regulation. Maintaining a flexible learning environment that includes frequent breaks and checking in with students keeps them on track while learning. This decreases stress and anxiety. Breathing exercises are also used to regulate emotions. When educators show patience and remain calm when addressing students, it minimizes the risk of activities that may reintroduce stress and trauma. If a need is recognized for connections to community agencies, teachers can refer the student to the school counselor to make needed recommendations.

### **Rediscovering Fulfillment as a Teacher**

It can be challenging for a teacher to teach daily lessons while helping students deal with adversities at home. As soon as one fire is put out, another one may flare up. This can lead to burnout from juggling multiple roles in the classroom. However, serving in an environment where a difference can be made in the life of a child who looks to their teacher for a safe, positive, and healthy relationship makes it worth it. Values influence an individual's sense of well-being (Barnes, 2019). Teachers feel a sense of value through creativity, recognition, and facilitating the development of their students. Barnes (2019) states that hope for a better world guides many teachers. One of the most common desires is to show compassion, service, and kindness to their students. When educators see that they are valued as individuals and in what they do to serve others, this may assist in addressing the retention crisis.

### About the Author

Tessa Davis is a doctoral student specializing in Educational Leadership and Higher Education at the University of Phoenix. Her research interest focuses on Adverse Childhood Experiences of adult learners.

### References:

- Ainsworth, S., & Oldfield, J. (2019). Quantifying teacher resilience: Context matters. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 82, 117-128.
- Barnes, A. J., Anthony, B. J., Karatekin, C., Lingras, K. A., Mercado, R., & Thompson, L. A. (2020). Identifying adverse childhood experiences in pediatrics to prevent chronic health conditions. *Pediatric Research*, 87(2), 362-370.
- Barnes, J. M. (2019). Teachers' values: An international study of what sustains a fulfilling life in education. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 7(5), 1-18.
- Gardner, R., & Stephens-Pisecco, T. L. (2019). Empowering educators to foster student resilience. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 92(4-5), 125-134.
- Hambrick, E. P., Brawner, T. W., Perry, B. D., Brandt, K., Hofmeister, C., & Collins, J. O. (2019). Beyond the ACE score: Examining relationships between timing of developmental adversity, relational health and developmental outcomes in children. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 33(3), 238-247.
- Lacey, R. E., & Minnis, H. (2020). Practitioner review: Twenty years of research with adverse childhood experience scores – Advantages, disadvantages and applications to practice. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, 61(2), 116-130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13135>
- Murphey, D., & Sacks, V. (2019). Supporting students with adverse childhood experiences: How educators and schools can help. *American Educator*, 43(2), 8-11.
- Park, N. S., Song, S. M., & Kim, J. E. (2020). The mediating effect of childcare teachers' resilience on the relationship between social support in the workplace and their self-care. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(22), 8513.

Scott, J., Jaber, L. S., & Rinaldi, C. M. (2021). Trauma-informed school strategies for SEL and ACE concerns during COVID-19. *Education Sciences, 11*(12), 796.

Webster, E. M. (2022). The impact of adverse childhood experiences on health and development in young children. *Global Pediatric Health, 9*, 2333794X221078708.

Yoon, S., Dillard, R., Pei, F., McCarthy, K. S., Beaujolais, B., Wang, X., ... & Cochey, S. (2020). Defining resilience in maltreated children from the practitioners' perspectives: A qualitative study. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 106*, 104516.