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Rita Reinsel Soulen

Old Dominion University, rsoulen@odu.edu

Lois Diane Wine

Old Dominion University, lwine@odu.edu

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Building Resilience in New and Beginning Teachers: Contributions of School Librarians

Rita Reinsel Soulen
Old Dominion University, USA

Lois Diane Wine
Old Dominion University, USA

Building beginning teachers' resilience may contribute to increasing teacher retention in the early years, in turn improving student academic achievement. School librarians contribute to developing teaching skills by mentoring new teachers. This qualitative study of first to third year teachers and school librarians investigated the contributions that school librarians made in building resilience of beginning teachers through a focus group of new teachers and interviews of school librarians. Findings show that school librarians may contribute to early career teacher resilience, especially during the first days of school, by encouraging perseverance, providing nourishment and empathy, and offering the library as a resource, especially for research.

Introduction

Teacher retention is a problem across the United States, especially among those teachers in their first three years. Data from the Public School Teacher Attrition and Mobility in the First Five Years research from the United States National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that among all beginning teachers in 2007–08, 10% did not teach in the following year and 17% had left the teaching field just four years later (2015). High levels of teacher turnover is of concern as it relates to school cohesion and, in turn, student performance (Ingersoll, 2001).

Development of teacher resiliency is critical to classroom success and teacher retention (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Bobek, 2002; Doney, 2013; Gu & Day, 2013). The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as bouncing back from difficult experiences, or adapting well when faced with adversity (APA, 2017). Personal resilience may be bolstered using strategies to build resilience, such as caring and supportive relationships that create trust, provide role models and offer encouragement and reassurance (APA). Recent psychological practice has moved toward building these positive qualities (Seligman & Csikszentmihaly, 2000).

Many educational institutions in the U.S. currently provide a formal mentoring program to new teachers in the field (Evertson & Smithey, 2000) at the K-12 level in state and locally supported public schools. In K-12 (ages 5 to 18 years) educational institutions in the U.S. public school librarians stand in a unique position to offer guidance sorely needed by new educators as they enter the field (Morris, 2015). As an example, a recent plea on the listserv of a state professional association showed that school librarians acknowledge the professional responsibility to support new teachers.

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“Hello fellow LibraryLanders! I am thinking ahead to next year and my school has an abundance of new teachers coming in. I am working on my welcome packet and wondered if any of you have a great one you wouldn't mind sharing?” (Thompson, 2016).

New faculty in the K-12 setting may struggle to develop the resilience needed to remain in the classroom (Tait, 2008). The movement toward building positive qualities has resulted in a focus on resilience to sustain commitment and effectiveness in teachers' professional lives (Day & Gu, 2014). This trend has become evident in policies and practices that promote resilience in early career teachers (Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce, & Hunter, 2016).

First year and beginning teachers may struggle on the front lines of the classroom. Research shows, however, that mentoring of new teachers does make a difference. The NCES data also show that the percentage of beginning teachers who continued teaching was larger among those who were assigned a first-year mentor (92%) than among those not assigned a first year mentor (84%). Four years later, 86% of mentored teachers were still in the classroom, while 71% were not (NCES, 2015). Through the use of qualitative methods, this case study explored the ways in which the school librarian can contribute to building resilience in new teachers. This study may better define how, as librarians and educators, our practice engages our community of learners and assumes social responsibility for the development of early career professionals. This is significant in that resilience of new teachers may affect faculty turnover which in turn may relate to student achievement (Ingersoll, 2001).

Review of the Literature

Resilience Defined

In the millennial issue of the *American Psychologist*, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) outlined a framework for a new science of positive psychology, defining a blossoming field which fosters positive attitudes toward subjective experiences, individual traits, and life events through psychological interventions. They hoped to catalyze a change in the focus of psychologists from preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life to building positive qualities. Powers (2010) used the risk and resilience perspective to suggest that positive and protective factors may buffer the effects of risk factors to encourage resilience within the social environment. She defined resilience as dynamic, a process of positive adaptation in the context of adversity. From this perspective, protective factors provide the building blocks of resilience. Her research showed that risk factors were consistently associated with negative outcomes, while increasing protective factors may enable functionality despite the risks. Ledesma (2014) defined resilience as “the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration, and misfortune” (p. 1). O'Leary further defined resilience as the ability to move beyond survival and recovery, to thrive in the face of profound challenge (O'Leary, 1998). Organizations may influence the building of their employees' resilience capacity, and thus should commit to fostering the resiliency of the employee (Ledesma, 2014; O'Leary, 1998)

Teacher Resilience

For teachers, resiliency was described as the ability to adjust to diverse situations and to increase competence in the face of adverse conditions (Castro, Kelly, & Shih, 2010). Resilience was a dynamic capacity, influenced by socio-cultural factors, which build or erode ability to perform as knowledgeable, committed, enthusiastic teachers (Day & Gu, 2014). Several models of teacher resilience have emerged in the research. Tait (2008) focused on the relationship between resiliency, personal efficacy, and emotional competence within the context of novice teacher success and retention. Doney (2013) developed a model of teacher resilience showing that mentors can encourage

new teacher retention by fostering resilience. Results of Doney's qualitative study of novice secondary science teachers suggested that stressors and protective factors interact, stimulating responses that counteract the negative effects of stress. Greenfield (2015) systematically reviewed the literature surrounding teacher resilience, and the conditions that may promote it. He proposed a model of teacher resilience which integrated context, challenges, relationships, actions, and beliefs.

Resilience in New Teachers

New teachers who develop characteristics of resiliency may combat the challenges of the first years of teaching. Johnson and Down (2013) reconceptualized early career teacher resilience to reveal implicit values, beliefs, and assumptions, and to promote a spirit of optimism and human agency. Day and Gu (2013) cited the impact of support for new teachers from the school/departmental leadership and colleagues as highly significant in building resilience through confidence and self-efficacy. Key influences were found to be the level of support, recognition of their work, and the school culture. The Australian Early Career Teacher Resilience project (Johnson, 2016) sought to discover how beginning teachers dealt with threats to their wellbeing, to identify strengths and strategies that promote teacher resilience, and to provide evidence based interventions. This organization offered a framework of conditions supporting early career teacher resilience including policies and practices, teachers' work, school culture, relationships, and teacher identity. Alternatively, using a socio-cultural and critical approach provoked ideas, policies, and practices to illuminate the experiences of early career teachers and thus promote resiliency (Johnson, et al, 2016). New teachers who develop characteristics of resiliency may be better able to combat the challenges of the first years of teaching.

School Librarians and New Teachers

Forming collaborative partnerships with teachers and other educators is a basic tenet of the role of the school librarian in the U.S. (American Association of School Librarians [AASL] & Association for Educational Communications Technology, 1988; 1998; AASL 2009; AASL, 2018). Beginning teachers who are hungry for information, insight, and discretely delivered assistance, provide an opening for school librarians to enhance visibility, encourage mentorships, build alliances, connect to the newcomers' notions of success, and demonstrate expertise (Hartzell, 2003). Those librarians who offer their services may be pleasantly surprised at requests from new teachers (Freeman, 2014) who are "desperate for help and ideas" (Andronik, 2003, p. 45). The vulnerability of teachers in their first year (Hartzell, 2003) affords the opportunity to work together, provide resources, and share ideas in a professional learning community (Freeman, 2014).

Leaders in the field of school librarianship recommend tactics for building influence with teachers, such as developing an orientation program for new hires (Hartzell, 2003). For example, Emery (2008) created a school library orientation using a video to introduce new teachers to library resources. This changed the way new teachers used the school library, shifting requests toward teaching, learning, independent reading, making presentations to students, planning projects and assignments, and teaching information literacy skills. Such programs for new teachers may also provide a social outlet to temper the habit of isolation (Lindsay, 2005).

Actions by school librarians for new teachers appear on a continuum of collaboration, ranging from support to intervention which directly impacts academic achievement. (Loertscher, 2000). More specifically, Thomas (2002) outlined steps of the process, such as extending an invitation to collaborate, flexible planning, staying actively involved, sharing responsibilities, and reflection. Other recommended actions on the part of the school librarian include introducing best resources,

book talks, provision of websites and databases, and one-to-one instruction (Corrick & Amos, 2000). Such collaboration between the school librarian and new teacher may lead to more innovative and challenging lesson plans (Corrick & Amos, 2000).

Morris (2015) encouraged school librarians to welcome new teachers, providing collegial support, to “open doors to collaboration, effective teaching, student learning, and growth for the school library program” (p. 39). She noted that collaboration reflects continuous learning, and suggested strategies for reaching out to new teachers. In uncertain times, the school librarian can help new and beginning teachers make sense of the situation in which they find themselves.

Welcoming New Teachers

School librarians as “instructional partners and collaborators with other educators . . . meet the learning needs of all learners, including other educators” and lead “professional-development opportunities that articulate the positive impact of the school library’s resources, services, and programming” (AASL, 2018, pp. 89-90). School library program guidelines have historically identified building partnerships of teaching for learning which “promote collaboration among members of the learning community” (AASL, 2009, p. 19) and recommend that school librarians “model leadership and best practice for the school community” (AASL, p. 45). The importance of providing a welcoming environment (AASL, 2018), especially to new teachers, continues to be a recurring theme in the literature (Baker & Willis, 2016; Morris, 2015; Woeste, 2008). As school librarians, our professional practice engages our community of learners and assumes social responsibility for the development of their teachers, especially new and beginning teachers. Yet as researchers we know little about how librarians support our entering faculty in our school communities.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study was to investigate the contributions that school librarians made in building resilience of new and beginning teachers. With little literature specific to the role of the school librarian in mentoring new and beginning teachers to rely on, the study attempted to define the role of school librarians in building new and beginning teacher resilience and answer the following research question:

How do school librarians contribute to building resilience in new and beginning teachers?

Methodology

The qualitative design of this research used a case study to investigate the contributions made by school librarians to new and beginning teacher resilience. The case study approach in the universal tradition (Hayes & Singh, 2012) was appropriate in that the researchers attempted to describe a phenomenon in its natural setting. The social constructivist paradigm was applied as the researchers attempted to identify the building blocks of new and beginning teacher resilience. By defining these constructs, the researchers hoped to improve the working life of new and beginning teachers. Thus there was a strong bent toward critical theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted in two parts. A focus group of new and beginning teachers captured the qualities of resilience supported by the practices of school librarians through the lens

of the new and beginning teachers, while interviews of school librarians determined practices that contribute to new and beginning teacher resilience from the perspective of the school librarians.

The researchers developed the conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1) based on information gleaned from the literature, with emphasis on the work of Doney (2012) and Greenfield (2015). The conceptual framework shows that the collaborative role of the school librarian combines with the contributions of the school librarian to support new teacher resilient traits and behaviors. These actions of the school librarian may support the development of resilient traits and behaviors. In turn, resilience of new teachers may influence teacher retention and student achievement.



Participants in this exploratory study consisted of new teachers and school librarians (N=11) from one urban school district in a mid-Atlantic state, U.S. (see Table 1). It is important to note here that one of the researchers is the school librarian and lead teacher mentor at the school where the focus group of new teachers took place. She is also a school librarian in the district where the interviews of school librarians took place. These roles provided her with intimate knowledge of, and access to, the new and beginning teachers, and a professional relationship with the interview participants.

Table 1. Demographics

| <u>Focus Group-New/Beginning Teachers</u> | <u>Interviews-School Librarians</u> |
|---|---|
| 6 new/beginning teachers in one school | 5 librarians in one district |
| All contracted | All contracted |
| 2 not yet certified | All certified |
| 2 Music Grades 6-8 (students aged 11-14 years) | 2 Elementary School, Kindergarten-Grade 5 (students aged 5-11 years) |
| 2 Math Grades 7 & 8 (students aged 12-14 years) | 1 Combined Elementary/Middle School, Kindergarten- Grade 8 (students aged 5-14 years) |
| 2 English Grade 6 (students aged 11-12 years) | 2 High School, Grades 9-12 (students aged 14-18 years) |
| 2 first year | 3 < ten years' experience |
| 3 second year | 2 > ten years' experience |
| 1 third year | |
| 5 < 30 years | 1 < 40 years |
| 1 > 50 years old | 1 < 50 years |

2 < 60 years

1 < 70 years

3 white/Caucasian

2 black

1 black/white

All white/Caucasian

The focus group consisted of six new and beginning teachers from one urban middle school (students aged 11-14 years) serving students grades 6-8 in a large mid-Atlantic state, USA ($n=6$). New teachers were defined as those in their first contract year ($Y=0$). Beginning teachers were defined as those in their second or third ($Y=1, 2$) of teaching under contract. Purposive sampling was used to select focus group participants for the amount of detail they could provide about development of resilience in new teachers. All were contracted teachers. Two were not yet certified, while four were certified in their subject area. Two participants were in their first year of teaching, three in their second year, and one in her third year. Two were Music teachers, two were Math teachers, and two were English teachers. Five of the teachers were thirty years or younger, while one was over fifty years old. Self-reported race/ethnicity included white (2), Caucasian (1), black/white (1), black (1), and black/non-Hispanic (1).

The interview population consisted of five librarians at separate schools in the same school district ($n=5$) as the focus group population. Convenience sampling was used to select interview participants. All were white females who were certified, contracted school librarians ranging in age from less than 40 years to over 60 years. Three had less than 10 years of experience as school librarians while two had more than 10 years of experience. Two practiced in elementary schools (students aged 5-11 years), one in a combined elementary/middle school (students aged 8-14 years), and two in high school (students aged 14-18 years).

Data collection took place in two parts. First, a focus group of six new and beginning teachers centered on identifying resilient behaviors, especially those supported by school librarians. The focus group tapped into the experiences of the new and beginning teachers over the course of the school year, which was ending. In the second phase of the study, interviews of five school librarians centered on their contributions to resilience of new teachers. A similar semi-structured protocol was used for both the focus group and the interviews, with the questions adapted to reflect the lens of the participants.

The conceptual framework was developed from the literature, then used to create a blueprint for the protocol which was similar for the focus group and interviews. The protocol questions (see Appendix A) were adapted to collect evidence through the lens of the new and beginning teachers, and the lens of school librarians. Questions included a personal definition of resilience; resilient traits and behaviors of teachers; importance of resilience for teachers; behaviors that evidence resilience; the role of school librarians in building resilience; examples of this role; mentoring new and beginning teachers; retention; and student achievement.

The researchers engaged in the process of memoing and summarizing (Hays & Singh, 2012) during the data collection process. The focus group and interviews were voice recorded then transcribed verbatim and coded to identify themes and patterns. Field notes also filled in details not captured in the voice recordings. The transcribed data was chunked and assigned descriptive tags, shortened into etic codes, then developed into a digital codebook with patterns, themes, evidence, and quotes from new and beginning teachers and librarians. While some codes related directly back to the conceptual framework, blueprint, and protocol, others emerged from participant discussion.

Relationships, patterns and themes emerged through this process. To establish trustworthiness, results were offered to participants for member checking. The transcriptions and codebook which directly related to the contributions school librarians make to new and beginning teacher resilience were peer audited.

Findings

Findings of this study included personal definitions of resilience from both the new teachers and the school librarians. Other general themes which emerged included, mentoring, student behavior, contributions of the school librarian, perseverance, retention of new and beginning teachers, teamwork, and student achievement. This report of the findings focuses on the contributions of the school librarian in developing resilience for new and beginning teachers.

Personal Definition of Resilience

Participants offered varied personal definitions of resilience. Both the new teachers and the school librarians pointed to being flexible and moving with the changes. One librarian saw resilience as the shiny side of perseverance. "Bright, shiny, it just has sparkles. The word resilience has sparkles around it in my vision". Another librarian saw resilience as crucial to survival in the field of education. One elementary school librarian even had her personal definition of resilience posted above her desk, "Resiliency: the act of recovering from hardship."

General Themes

Several general themes emerged from the data. Overall a feeling that resilience was "huge" for teachers emerged. Resilience was described as a necessary trait when dealing with difficult student behavior, and participants pointed out that student behavior and teacher resilience mutually impact each other. Perseverance was seen as the practical side of resilience. The importance of teamwork as contributing to retention was influenced formally by administration and informally by other teachers and peers. Participants generally expressed that mentoring, both formal and informal, does make a difference. While evidence arose that school librarians can contribute to new and beginning teacher resilience, retention was seen as being also dependent on both district policies and the school environment. Participants responded that student achievement would be influenced more immediately by teacher resilience and long-term by teacher retention.

Contributions of the School Librarian

The data showed that the opening days of school served as a portal to establishing a relationship between the school librarian and new teachers. Other themes which emerged included persevering in the face of adversity, nurturing, empathy, the library as a resource, and guidance in teaching research skills. Together, these serve as building blocks of the contributions of school librarians to new teacher resilience,

The First Days of School. School librarians contributed to teacher resilience from the start of the school year. Orienting to the building during the first days of school ranged from a formal library orientation for new teachers to individual assistance with classroom setup. A high school librarian described a yearly event in her library during teacher preservice week where they hosted a casual presentation to the new faculty to let them know how librarians can assist them. In a middle school, a new teacher was appreciative of the librarian's attention. "In those initial days...you were very

helpful with bringing my projector, and as far as setting up my classroom. That helped out a whole lot, just to start". Another first year teacher suggested a direct invitation, "If the librarian said, "Hey you can come to me for resilience"? Otherwise I probably would never do it." In her third year of teaching, one English teacher appreciated a more balanced exchange, ". . . being able to come up to the classroom and talking to the teacher, or having the teacher come down to you, to kind of assess what they might need in the year . . ." A librarian in a combined elementary and middle school, summed it up. "We've got to teach them [new teachers] to learn how to navigate so they don't get burned out in the first five years . . . latch onto the new ones and let them know what the library offers."

Perseverance. Perseverance was a recurring theme both in the general findings and more specifically as a trait which can be promoted by the school librarian. A second year teacher understood the importance of the safety net provided by mentors. "I remember there was one time I thought I taught something wrong . . . But there was someone there who said don't worry about it. That helps build confidence, that you can fall down and still be okay." Reassurance from other faculty does make a difference. As one librarian affirmed, "Hey, you don't have to get it right the first time. Or the fifth time." One middle school librarian understood the contribution this encouragement made to teacher retention. "I would just work with them to try to, make things better for them, make them happier, make them want to stick around, so we don't lose them." Through building this confidence, teachers look to the future and begin to plan for the next school year, and librarians can support these plans. In planning for the next school year, one high school librarian identified digital resources, such as DVDs, databases, websites, and webquests to be curated or even produced, "If we can't find one already made we can create one."

Nourishment. The nurturing support of caring faculty, including the librarian, may lead to teachers who grow to be strong and flexible in the school community. One high school librarian compared the services of the school library to the food court at the mall. For new teachers "It's a place you can come and get something that helps to hopefully nourish you." Another high school librarian imagined this support as "being a hand on their back," or, from another high school librarian, "to try to let them know they're not in it alone." One elementary school librarian saw this support as leading to ease and comfort in coming to the school librarian for assistance later in their teaching career.

Empathy. The profession of school librarianship combines the roles of both teacher and librarian leading to a special professional rapport. A first year teacher shared one moment of this empathetic relationship. "You told me your first year experience, like you told me you went home for Christmas and you just had a breakdown. But then you came back . . . It was good to know that everybody kind of struggles their first year." A third year teacher confirmed that experience does lead to strength, "And people look so put together now, they've all had their time, their moments." A high school librarian who had been an English teacher further defined this identification, "Having been in the classroom ourselves gives us the perspective of the teacher; helping to build self-esteem." She described the library as a "no judgement zone", a place of comfort and confidence, where new and beginning teachers are not alone. At times, just providing a listening ear and a comfortable environment may be enough. As one high school librarian said, "I can just be there to listen to them. And a lot of times they just need that."

Library as Resource. The school library served as a resource for the community of learners and the development of their teachers. One third year teacher recognized this deep connection. She commented "I think you do have the pulse of the school because everyone uses your resources," which was supported by a high school librarian's statement, "Librarians are open to everyone."

Another high school librarian referred back to notion of orienting “We can give them resources and point them in the right directions that help bolster their lesson plans. We will be here to help them as much as they need it.” A librarian in a K-8 school recognized that librarians provide human, physical, and digital resources. She noted that librarians know the curriculum across all the content areas, match the curriculum to resources, and build classroom libraries and centers. Librarians also provide physical and digital resources in the forms of content area books, primary and secondary sources, reference resources, websites and online resources. For a librarian in one elementary school, these baby steps lead to the big idea of collaboration. She expressed that by providing resources, content, materials, and support, the next step would be collaborative lessons.

Research. In schools, one area of collaboration for librarians has been working with English teachers on research skills. One first year English teacher spoke of his experience as a long-term substitute, recalling “We worked with the librarian . . . She was actually guiding our lesson on how to do proper research with students.” Another English teacher referred to the librarian supplementing lessons by working with her students in small groups on a focus area. Convincing teachers in all content areas that the library has something to offer may be more challenging, but still possible, as evidenced by this exchange between two Math teachers and their school librarian.

Geometry Teacher: I don’t think so. No. I don’t have a lot of the applications that calls for research to be done . . . I don’t see time for it necessarily with the curriculum and the guidelines.

Researcher: So you’re a math teacher. So coming from a math teacher’s perspective your answer is probably not.

Geometry Teacher: Probably not.

Researcher: (turning to Pre-Algebra Teacher) You’re a math teacher also.

Pre-Algebra Teacher: I think it would be worth looking into. It would just be something different for the kids to do instead of just the same lesson, so I don’t know.

Geometry Teacher: It would be something different. There would have to be some understanding of concepts . . . and I think for me getting the understanding of the concepts takes too long like to do a project.

Discussion

As perceived by these participants, the school librarian contributed to building resilience of new teachers in several ways. During the first days of school the librarian served in the role of orienting new teachers to their new careers. Later, she encouraged new and beginning teachers to persevere during difficult times, offering nourishment and empathy to build confidence. The school librarian provided the resources of the library and encouraged integrating research into the curriculum. These actions of the school librarian which augmented the resilience of these new teachers may, in turn, result in increased retention.

The beginning of the school year, when new teachers were feeling disoriented, provided the most concentrated opportunities for the school librarian to connect to the new teachers. Encouraging perseverance through nurturing and empathy led to the new teachers viewing the library as a resource, and the librarian as an expert in teaching research skills. However, the value of this expertise varied by the teachers’ perspective based on the subject taught. Not surprisingly, the English teachers in this study were more connected to the school librarian while Math teachers had a more difficult time seeing the value of the librarian for their lessons, and the Music teachers were more open to new experiences. The opportunity was apparent, though, that with some convincing,

all of the new teachers in this study may be willing to work more closely with the librarian to build the collaborative relationship

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the research was performed in one school district using a small sample. Additionally, while the new teachers were somewhat diverse, the district librarians were not. Therefore the study has limited generalizability. The established insider relationship of one researcher to the study participants allowed for greater access to the new teachers and the librarian. However, this relationship may also introduce bias into data collection and analysis.

Conclusions and Implications

For library and information science educators, this research provides evidence that the effective librarian can influence resilience of beginning faculty. By establishing relationships with those just entering the field, the librarian may create a safe zone, a retreat, and a place of replenishment for new professionals. The formation of a welcoming environment may assist in establishing the library as a useful resource and guide new faculty to see the value of student research through opportunities for project-based learning. This investment in mentoring of new and beginning teachers by school librarians may result in teachers who are more comfortable coming to the librarian when more experienced.

This research developed an initial description of the contributions that school librarians make to developing resiliency among new and beginning teachers, which may influence retention and in turn address student achievement. By affecting teacher retention, resiliency influences social stability both within and outside the school house doors. Parents, community, administrators, and other stakeholders rely on a stable, experienced, highly qualified professional faculty to promote student achievement. With better definition of the role of school librarians as leaders and collaborators we may act to mitigate the escalating social problem of new and beginning teacher attrition in our school communities.

Future research will use this exploratory qualitative study to develop a quantitative research using interventions by school librarians to provide supporting structures to new teachers in order to promote resilience, reduce burnout, and increase retention. Attempts will be made to approach a more causal research design based on these qualitative findings. By defining the behaviors of school librarians that support new and beginning teacher, practices may be put in place to improve new teacher resilience and retention, and contribute to increased student achievement.

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Author Notes

Rita Reinsel Soulen (rsoulen@odu.edu) is a lecturer in the Library Science program, doctoral candidate, and NxtWave scholar at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, USA. Her research is focused on the role of the school librarian in developing new teacher resilience through mentoring and collaboration.

Lois D. Wine (lwine004@odu.edu) is a doctoral candidate and NxtWave scholar at Old Dominion University and a practicing high school librarian in Williamsburg, Virginia, USA. Her primary research areas are the impact of school librarians within the school ecosystem and the implementation of school librarians' roles as described by the National School Library Standards.

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