Teacher Persistence: A Crucial Disposition, with Implications for Teacher Education

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Teacher Persistence:  
A Crucial Disposition, with Implications for Teacher Education  

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Abstract  
Teacher persistence helps foster effective teaching. Specifically, teacher persistence may promote high expectations for students, the development of teaching skills, teachers’ reflectiveness, responsiveness to diversity, teaching efficacy, effective responses to setbacks, and successful use of reformed teaching methods. Common evaluation practices in teacher education may undermine teacher persistence. Teacher educators might support the development of teacher persistence by emphasizing the knowledge that makes persistence a rational response to setbacks, by teaching self-regulation skills that support persistence, and by using evaluation practices that require greater effort and persistence of students. The importance of fostering thoughtful teacher persistence is discussed, along with the ways in which teacher education may foster either mindless or thoughtful persistence. Conditions in which greater teacher persistence may be especially beneficial include teaching young children, or teaching children who learn more slowly, who have challenging behaviors, or who have specific disabilities. It is especially important for teacher educators to foster greater persistence among young new teachers who will teach in urban settings.

Introduction  
“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” – Popular saying  

The first-year teacher stood confidently in front of her class on the first day of school, and asked for their attention. Immediately, all eyes were riveted on her. All of her students complied with her requests immediately and mastered the content of each lesson. Having been an “A” student in college, she was gratified to find that her success in her teacher education coursework had carried over directly to her teaching.

The scenario described above is not the real world of teaching, nor the typical transition from teacher education courses to classroom teaching. Although most teacher education students achieve reasonable success on their first try with most course assignments, success does not come so easily in teaching. Indeed, one of the most frequent comments of prospective teachers who are encountering their first substantial field placement is how difficult it is. Some
individuals who struggle the most with this transition are those who did extremely well in their coursework.

There are many explanations for the difficulty of this transition and for the high rate of teacher attrition that follows. One common explanation is that teacher education coursework focuses too much on theoretical content or general principles whose application to specific teaching situations is unclear (e.g., Green, 1991; Keiffer-Barone, Hendricks-Lee, & Soled, 1999). Other research suggests other explanations and remedies for this difficult transition, including the benefits of 5-year teacher education programs for reducing teacher attrition (e.g., Andrew, 1990), or the importance of providing prospective teachers with more field placements (e.g., Weiner, 1993). There is merit in each of these perspectives.

In this article I propose an additional factor that may impact the degree to new teachers’ struggle and leave the profession—teacher persistence. I address three questions—what is persistence, why is teacher persistence important, and how can teacher educators foster greater teacher persistence?

Persistence, a Simple But Powerful Disposition

The Random House dictionary notes that to persist is “to continue steadfastly or firmly in some state, purpose, or course of action … especially in spite of opposition,” and “to last or endure tenaciously” (1987, p. 1445). Persistent individuals have a habit of persisting in many situations, and thus, persistence is a disposition—a habit of mind and action (see Katz, 1985).

Persistence is most directly addressed in the literatures on achievement motivation and self-regulation. For example, persistence is one characteristic of individuals who have a mastery orientation to achievement (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), which is characterized by attributing one’s success to high ability (and effort), and attributing failure to controllable factors, especially to insufficient effort. Persistence has also been addressed in research on volition, an area of motivation research that addresses individuals’ ability to “buckle down” when they need to (see Corno & Kanfer, 1993). Finally, persistence is an important goal for and outcome of effective self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994).

Persistence is highly valued in American culture. We emphasize its importance to children when we teach them about the major setbacks that Abraham Lincoln overcame before becoming President of the United States, or read them the Aesops’s fable about the tortoise and the hare, or teach them the importance of a strong work ethic. Adults are reminded of the value of persistence in countless stories in the media detailing successful individuals’ “rags to riches” stories, and quotations regarding the importance of persistence are common. As President Calvin Coolidge noted:

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.
In support of this common-sense perspective, research indicates a strong relationship between persistence and success. For example, persistence appears frequently in analyses of individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to various fields (e.g., see Gardner, 1997). Extraordinarily talented individuals benefit from decades of hard work to master the discipline, and from role models who emphasize hard work and persistence, and who demonstrate persistence when encountering setbacks. Persistence is clearly important even in research itself, reflected in the finding that many highly cited books and journal articles were initially rejected (e.g., see Campanario, 1993).

*Why* is persistence so important? It takes persistence to learn, to refine skills, and to give oneself additional opportunities for success. Also, in comparison with individuals who give up, people who persist at something have more reason and opportunity for engaging in beneficial processes such as reflection, collaboration, and help-seeking.

**The Importance of Teacher Persistence**

In the ERIC database, *teacher persistence* does not refer to persistence in the teaching act itself, but rather, refers to teachers remaining in the profession. Virtually all “teacher persistence” literature is of this type (e.g., Cockburn, 2000; Pigge & Marso, 1997).

However, as defined here, teacher persistence is a disposition manifested in the day-to-day actions of teaching. Continuing to work hard at teaching is part of what constitutes teacher persistence, but working hard by itself is not teacher persistence. Rather, as defined here, teacher persistence means a tendency to persist steadfastly, *until successful*, in the many specific courses of action that constitute teaching. For example, it means not just to teach again the next day and to teach mathematics again the next day, but to persist with those three students until they understand fractions. Thus, the disposition of teacher persistence may be manifested in many ways. A persistent teacher may, for example, try many strategies to teach a new concept or skill and not give up if students do not “get it” right away. Similarly, a persistent teacher might continue to use a conflict resolution approach to managing challenging situations, with the knowledge that students need time to learn and internalize these conflict resolution strategies. Teachers are also persistent when they reflect on something repeatedly to try to figure it out and to plan how to do better the next time. Persistence, or its absence, also affects teachers’ work with colleagues, administrators, and parents. I suggest that greater teacher persistence—as a disposition manifested in teaching—significantly influences teaching success and teachers’ likelihood of remaining in the profession.

Persistence is critical for teaching excellence. Haberman (1995) identified persistence as the first of fifteen “functions” of “star” teachers of children in poverty. Teacher persistence may be important because it influences many factors related to effective teaching. These include teachers’ expectations for students, development of teaching skills, efficacy beliefs, response to setbacks, reflection, use of reform-oriented teaching practices, and responsiveness to student diversity.

First, persistence is necessary for developing or maintaining the high expectations of students that underlie teaching excellence. High expectations for student learning can quickly
evaporate, and be replaced by much lower expectations, unless teachers persist. Students usually do not reach high expectations immediately—only through repeated efforts does student performance rise to new levels that warrant and reinforce teachers’ lofty expectations for student learning.

For example, Teel, DeBruin-Parecki, and Covington (1998) reported on a two-year study involving two groups of low-income African-American middle school students who had been judged to be at-risk academically. The intervention involved instructional changes in one of their classes, specifically, non-competitive, effort-based grading, multiple performance opportunities, increased responsibility and choice, and validation of cultural differences. In response to the intervention, students demonstrated greater positive motivation, earned higher grades, became more involved in class discussions and more confident of their ability. The majority of students persevered more on course assignments, became more willing to revise work for a higher grade, and became more motivated to work harder in their other classes. In interviews “the majority of students attributed their success partly to the encouragement they received to re-do work completed below the standards expected by the teacher and to turn in late work with only a moderate penalty” (p. 489). Thus, these students were given opportunities to persist, succeeded through persistence, and became more persistent in this class and others. In turn, the improved performance and behavior students achieved through persistence justified substantially higher teacher expectations.

While teacher persistence is important with all students, it is especially important with students about whom others have lower expectations, and who may have low expectations of themselves (see Goldberg, 2000). Although reminders of the importance of high expectations are frequently heard in teaching and teacher education (e.g., Arnold, 1997; Vail, 2001), reminders about the persistence that is usually necessary to develop or sustain such high expectations are a much rarer refrain. Exhorting prospective and practicing teachers to have higher expectations of their students could actually be counterproductive, unless teacher educators also foster the persistence that helps turn those expectations into reality. Moreover, as Delpit (1995) noted, “We say we believe that all children can learn, but few of us really believe it” (p. 172). Where teachers hold high expectations only half-heartedly, persistence in teaching is necessary—to transform those sometimes-feigned high expectations into firm convictions about students’ potential.

Second, persistence is necessary for developing teaching skills, which involves experimentation and practice, reflection, and more practice. For example, McGee (2000) found that teacher persistence was a crucial factor in supporting teacher learning about infusing technology into instruction. We know that “learning to teach” does not occur in a day or a semester; for highly effective teachers, it is something that they continue to do, day after day, throughout their entire careers. As Haberman (1995) noted, “star” teachers are not only more persistent, they view ongoing persistence—for example, in the search for more effective ways to teach—as simply part of the job. In contrast to this view on the necessity of persistence, Haberman (1995) noted that less effective teachers look for teaching solutions that will resolve teaching issues once and for all.
Third, persistence may promote teacher efficacy—teachers’ belief in their ability to teach skillfully and affect valued student outcomes. This may be significant because teacher efficacy has been found to be associated with student achievement, with teachers’ use of effective teaching strategies, and with teachers’ use of and willingness to adopt “reform-oriented” teaching strategies (see Ross, 1995, and Tschanne-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, for reviews). Teachers who do not persist are less likely to develop their teaching skills and experience teaching success, both of which are critical for fostering confidence in one’s teaching efficacy. Moreover, in summarizing two decades of self-efficacy research, Bandura (1995) noted that it is not achieving success easily, but rather, achieving success by overcoming difficulties, that fosters a more robust sense of efficacy.

Fourth, persistence is part of an adaptive teacher response to teaching setbacks. Most obviously, teachers must persist in order to achieve success after initial teaching setbacks. Related to this, teacher persistence appears within the criteria used for assessing essential teaching skills, in the Praxis II and Praxis III teacher assessment systems, and the Pathwise teacher mentoring system, all developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). One of the nineteen criteria in these assessments is “Demonstrating a sense of efficacy.” Although teacher efficacy research has focused largely on teachers’ beliefs about their teaching efficacy, the description of this criterion (ETS, 1995) focuses more on the persistence manifested in teachers’ behaviors:

Teachers with a high degree of efficacy regard student difficulties in learning as challenges to their own creativity and ingenuity. They actively search for better techniques to help students learn. Thus, a teacher with a high degree of efficacy is not expected to know all the answers to reaching every student, but he or she will persist in looking for alternatives (p. 46).

Fifth, and related to the issue above, persistence and reflection influence one another reciprocally in teachers’ response to teaching setbacks. Teachers’ persistent responses to setbacks must be informed by thoughtful reflection, so that they do not persist blindly in using ineffective approaches. When teachers persist, they have more opportunity and motivation for thoughtful reflection. Teachers who “give up” on resolving a teaching problem might give the issue a second thought, but a second thought is often not enough. Rather, energetic persistence is often necessary for effective teacher reflection (Eby & Kujawa, 1998), as the problems that require professionals to reflect are typically complex and uncertain (Schon, 1987).

Sixth, persistence is critical for the success of educational reforms that call for changes in classroom teaching. When new teaching approaches require students to take greater responsibility for their learning, teachers may also have to persist to work through the student resistance that the new approach often engenders. Also, to the extent that many recent educational reforms embody goals that are often achieved gradually over long periods of time (e.g., increased student autonomy), persistence and patience are required before the fruits of one’s teaching labors materialize. Furthermore, successfully reforming education practices requires enormous time and effort. During a multi-state study on efforts to reform subject matter teaching (e.g., see Grant, Peterson, & Shoigreen-Downer, 1996), a colleague and I studied a school in South Carolina that was enjoying reasonable success in implementing authentic
assessment and reformed subject-matter teaching. We asked the principal what the school faculty had to do in order to accomplish this. He simply replied, “We work like dogs.”

Finally, persistence is necessary for developing methods and curricula that are responsive to and effective with diverse groups of students. Achieving this requires extra work, for example, in getting to know students, their families, their heritage, and their perspectives—all of which are critical to effectively teaching “other people’s children” (Delpit, 1995). Indeed, Delpit ended her classic analysis of cultural conflict in education with a brief description of a first-grade teacher named Stephanie, who developed a curriculum that was highly responsive to and respectful of her African-American students. What was necessary for Stephanie to acquire the knowledge she needed to create this rich curriculum? Stephanie “worked, read, and studied on her own to make such knowledge a part of her pedagogy” (Delpit, 1995, p. 182).

Furthermore, it is only through trial and error, and the reflection and skill building described earlier, that teachers are able to adapt their teaching to be appropriate for diverse learners. The persistence this requires is remarkable, for the approach that “works” with one student or one class may not work with others. In this situation, the responsive teacher then reinvents his or her teaching once again.

Persistence is a very old-fashioned virtue, but for the many reasons outlined above, it seems clear that persistence is still critical for effective teaching in the 21st century. Increased effectiveness may reduce teacher attrition, since having an effect on students has been found to be central to teachers’ motivation to teach (Lortie, 1975; McLaughlin, 1991; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sederberg & Clark, 1990), and to be a main source of their satisfaction with teaching (e.g. Cockburn, 2000; Stanford, 2001). In contrast, Glickman and Tamashiro (1982) found that teachers who had lesser confidence in their teaching effectiveness were more likely to leave the profession than were those with greater confidence in their teaching effectiveness.

How Can Teacher Education Foster Teacher Persistence?

Perhaps no teacher education program will ever adopt the mission statement “Dedicated to Developing Doggedly Persistent (or Cheerfully Persistent) Teachers.” However, given the foregoing analysis, it seems wise for teacher educators to explicitly aim to develop the persistence of prospective and practicing teachers. Adopting this as a program goal is a first step, but how can teacher education programs foster greater teacher persistence?

One approach is to use some measure of persistence as a selection criterion for entry into teacher education programs. Martin Haberman has included such criteria in his clinical interviews for teacher education candidates, and believes that this process improves the program’s ability to identify candidates who are more likely to be persistent and effective teacher. However, it is not clear how widely such a time-intensive screening process will be used, especially in large teacher education programs.

In working with those students who are already admitted, teacher educators might consistently address the knowledge, skills, and disposition described below as part of the core content of their teacher education programs. First, teacher education programs might
systematically emphasize the knowledge that makes persistence a rational response to the daily challenges of teaching. Simply learning about the role of persistence in the stories of highly effective teachers would be a good beginning. Along these lines, while sending teacher education students to observe and interview respected teachers is appropriate, such assignments should also include watching those teachers do the behind-the-scenes work of planning the next day, evaluating and grading students’ work, and preparing and organizing teaching materials. Prospective teachers might interview these teachers about the work and persistence needed in teaching, and about how they have worked, and are working, to address teaching challenges.

Delpit (1995) noted that teacher education programs often emphasize how children of color, poor children, and children from single-parent homes struggle with school achievement. This emphasis gives prospective and practicing teachers a reason to believe that persistence does not yield results with these children. Thus, if they are not already doing so, teacher educators might heavily infuse their courses and programs with research and stories about the dramatic effectiveness of individual teachers and educational programs for these children (e.g., see Delpit, 1995; Berreuta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984; Teel, et al., 1998). In essence, the goal is to help prospective or practicing teachers gain knowledge that might influence their expectations for student achievement, or their efficacy beliefs regarding their own teaching. Researchers could then study the possible influence of learning such knowledge on these teachers’ beliefs about students, their beliefs about themselves, and their persistence in teaching.

Second, teacher educators might help prospective and practicing teachers develop the skills that help teachers persist. This would include teaching general self-regulation strategies (e.g., see Dembo, 2001) such as planning, encoding of information, and motivational control. It might also include specific strategies for regulating one’s emotions in stressful teaching situations (see Sutton, 2002). Although there is little research on teachers’ self-regulation (Sutton, 2002), these are promising areas for fostering teacher persistence. Researchers might study the utility of general models of self-regulation for fostering persistence in teaching, and also study the effects on teachers’ persistence of using the self-regulation strategies that highly-effective teachers report using.

Third, teacher educators might help prospective and practicing teachers develop the disposition (i.e., habit) of persisting when faced with setbacks. Habits or dispositions develop through regular use and practice, and teacher education students might practice being persistent and experiencing success through persistence in several ways. First, teacher educators might routinely require students to revise and improve lesson plans or other assignments, based on instructor feedback. Similarly, students might re-teach lessons in methods courses, or persist until they reach some objectives with the PK-12 students they are teaching in methods courses, practica and student teaching, or service learning activities. In field placements, students’ persistence in addressing learning or behavioral issues could become a key factor in evaluating their performance. Requiring revisions and improvements of our students communicates high expectations for them, and providing them with multiple rounds of feedback models teaching persistence.
In addition to addressing these outcomes within the core content of teacher education courses, we need to examine the way in which we evaluate our students. The literature on grading practices suggests that colleges of education have “a leading position in grade inflation” (Zirkel, 1999, p. 256), with departments and colleges of education frequently giving the highest grades of any academic unit, with the vast majority of grades awarded being A’s and B’s. On the graduate level in education, a substantial majority of grades given in many institutions are A’s, with very few C’s given. Perhaps positive faculty intentions underlie this prevalence of high grades. For example, faculty may give consistently high grades as an attempt to mitigate the problems associated with using grading systems at all (e.g., see Kohn, 1994).

Nevertheless, if teacher educators are giving consistently high grades without requiring substantial effort, persistence, and high-quality work from students, this practice may undermine students’ persistence, or at best, do nothing to develop it. Students who earn consistently high grades on their first try are more likely to attribute their successes to their high ability, and regard ability as a fixed “entity” (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Based on motivation theory and research, when these individuals face the inevitable struggles of early teaching experiences, they may be more likely to attribute their failures to lack of ability, and believe that their low level of ability is fixed and cannot be changed (see Cain & Dweck, 1995). Not surprisingly, this pattern of attributions and beliefs about ability leads individuals to be discouraged and give up easily when they encounter struggles and failure (Bandura, 1995).

In contrast, students who have consistently achieved success after persisting, and who receive the message that their progress has been due to hard work are more likely to believe that their abilities are developed through effort (see Schunk, 1982). This attributional pattern is associated with increased effort and persistence when encountering struggles (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). As Bandura (1995) noted, “A resilient sense of efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort. Some difficulties and setbacks in human pursuits serve a useful purpose in teaching that success usually requires sustained effort” (p.3).

Evaluation practices that require repeated efforts and thoughtful revisions from students—on written assignments and when teaching in field placements—are not without challenges. Although some students appreciate being challenged in this way, most do not cheer this approach, and some students resent it. These changes in evaluation also require teacher educators to exert additional effort to make their performance expectations clear, and to put more time and effort into evaluating students’ performance and providing them with feedback.

Discussion and Limitations

It is important to contextualize this discussion—to define when increased teacher persistence is likely to be most beneficial, and what type of teacher persistence is beneficial. Most teachers work very hard and often persist in the ways that characterize teacher persistence, as defined here. Thus, it would be both unfair and misguided to suggest that most problems with American education result from insufficient teacher effort and persistence. However, there are certain conditions in which insufficient teacher persistence may be more likely to be problematic.
Teaching children with challenging behaviors places a premium on teacher persistence, as does teaching children who learn more slowly or have disabilities that require complicated adaptations. Teaching young children can also demand extra teacher persistence, for young children often require an enormous amount of repetition in their learning.

Another important context regarding teacher persistence is teacher age. For many individuals, their underlying work ethic, and their self-discipline and persistence are not as developed in their early- and mid-twenties as they will be in the decades that follow. Although working hard is not the entirety of teacher persistence, working hard is a necessary ingredient of teacher persistence. Students who sometimes complain about taking 9:00 classes, or who seem astonished when professors ask them to work on a task for two hours in a row then quickly step into a profession that requires much more of them than that. New teachers gradually adjust to the demands of their new role, and many of them report working much harder than they had to in their teacher education programs. However, many new teachers struggle while making this adjustment, and the beginnings of their careers may get off to a rockier start than they would have if those individuals were more persistent to begin with.

Urban districts employ a disproportionate number of young novice teachers, and in urban districts, a dismaying number of these teachers leave the district or leave teaching altogether before their sixth year of teaching. Enormous persistence is also required of teachers in suburban and rural districts, but the need for teacher persistence is especially strong in many urban districts. If teacher education programs better prepared future urban teachers for the persistence that will be required of them, might more new teachers in urban settings (especially younger ones) last longer in teaching? If so, how might having a more stable teaching corps influence other issues with which urban districts struggle?

However, with respect to the challenges that urban teaching often poses, some scholars may argue that a focus on a psychological characteristic like teacher persistence is naive. They might suggest that teacher educators should instead focus of the cultural context of teaching, and how that sustains or undermines teachers (and teacher persistence). From that view, it may seem foolhardy to invest our energy and talents in fostering greater persistence in future teachers—and then send them into poorly functioning schools and districts, contexts that may erode their persistence and zeal for teaching. On the other hand, Haberman has described star teachers of children in poverty as being individuals who persevere in their efforts to reach children despite the problems around them. This is not a rational kind of persistence that Haberman (1995) has described—persisting if the conditions are right, or supportive. No, it is clearly a kind of seemingly irrational persistence that he has described—a commitment to reach students despite all the conditions that make others see such efforts as foolhardy. Teacher educators need not choose between fostering teacher persistence versus trying to improve the conditions of teaching; they can and should work on both simultaneously. However, many teacher educators may be in a better situation to foster a stronger habit of persistence in the future teachers they teach than they are to change the global conditions of local schools, especially in large urban districts with hundreds of schools.

What kind of teacher persistence is worth fostering? Mindless persistence—doing the same failed strategy again and again—is not the goal. Reflection and persistence should
complement each other, and teacher educators should help future teachers to be both persistent and to be smart about how they persist. For teacher educators, requiring students to indeed make the necessary revisions on earlier work or in certain aspects of their teaching—and not to simply do it again—is one way of fostering thoughtful persistence. In contrast, to require students to revise work, but to not carefully ensure that they made necessary improvements, may simply promote mindless persistence.

**Conclusion**

Thomas Edison commented, “The difference between coal and diamonds is that diamonds stayed on the job longer.” Teacher persistence is not a panacea. However, thoughtful and determined persistence can make the difference between teachers who struggle and only last a short time in the profession, and those who continue to grow professionally, and make a substantial positive impact on their students. Many proposals for improving teacher education involve complex structural changes in programs, but all teacher educators can foster teacher persistence, through simple (yet challenging) changes in core content and evaluation. In spite of the challenges that accompany these changes, fostering greater teacher persistence—thoughtful teacher persistence—is worth the effort. It can help support high expectations and the development of teaching skills, as well as teachers’ reflectiveness, responsiveness to diversity, confidence in their teaching efficacy, effective responses to teaching setbacks, and successful use of reformed teaching methods.

**References**


