Resilience Training to support trainee teachers during their initial teacher education programme

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the implementation of a resilience training programme within a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Post-Compulsory Education and Training). The research aims to address low retention rates in both the academic programme and subsequent teaching roles. Existing literature highlights the barriers faced by student teachers and practising educators, including stress, increased workload, performativity measures, and inadequate support (Ofsted, 2019; EWC, 2020; Department for Education, 2018).

A pragmatic mixed-methods approach was adopted, using a convergent design to evaluate the impact of a resilience intervention based on themes from resilience training in other sectors. Interventions included Duckworth's (2016) Grit questionnaire, hermeneutic dialogue circles, and reflective journaling.

The findings from this research suggest that while the Grit questionnaire has limitations as a diagnostic tool, the resilience training provided benefits such as improved self-awareness, critical reflection, and the value of collaborative safe spaces. However, translating these skills into professional practice remains challenging due to systemic pressures in the workplace (Jennings et al., 2017; Shaw et al., 2016). The study concludes that resilience training is beneficial but must be supported by organisational structures to be sustained post-qualification (Reivich et al., 2011; Precious & Lindsay, 2019).

Introduction

The post-compulsory education sector faces significant challenges, including high rates of work-related stress, burnout, and concerns regarding teacher retention within academic programmes and subsequent careers (Ofsted, 2019; EWC, 2020).

This study aimed to address low retention and equip trainee teachers for successful progression. Despite validation efforts focused on employment outcomes, there is a recognised need for greater support in managing stress and promoting staff well-being (Department for Education, 2018; UCU, 2022). Literature on teacher retention underscores the necessity for enhanced employer support measures (Jennings et al., 2017; Card, 2018).

Inspired by successful interventions in other professional sectors such as nursing, sports, and the armed forces which face similar challenges including performativity measures and increased workloads (Jones et al., 2022; Mealer et al., 2014; Pozo-Rico et al., 2023), this research addresses the current lack of specific resilience training tailored to the post-compulsory sector.

The study evaluates the impact of a resilience-based training module on trainee teachers' resilience, retention during the course, success in job entry, and ability to incorporate resilience strategies into professional practice.

Literature Review

The post-compulsory education sector in the UK, and particularly in Wales, is marked by persistent and multifaceted challenges. Among these are high levels of work-related stress, widespread burnout, and sustained concerns over teacher retention. These issues affect both those entering the profession through initial teacher education programmes—such as the PGCE (Post-Compulsory Education and Training)—and experienced educators already embedded within the system

(Ofsted, 2019; EWC, 2020). Regulatory bodies have consistently identified stress and attrition as critical concerns, while the broader literature highlights the need for enhanced institutional support mechanisms (Jennings et al., 2017; Precious and Lindsay, 2019).

Contributing to this pressure are wider systemic factors, including ongoing policy reforms, austerity-driven funding reductions, and increasingly rigid performativity frameworks (Department for Education, 2018; UCU, 2022). These external stressors exacerbate the everyday demands placed on educators, heightening the risk of attrition and making the need for proactive, targeted support strategies more urgent (Jones et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2016).

In this context, this study explores the role of resilience training as a targeted intervention to support the well-being and retention of teachers. Despite increasing interest in resilience across education, there remains a lack of bespoke training tailored specifically to the post-compulsory sector in Wales (Precious and Lindsay, 2019). Drawing from established resilience interventions in high-pressure professions such as nursing, elite sport, and the armed forces, this research investigates how such approaches might be adapted to the educational context (Mealer et al., 2014; Pozo-Rico et al., 2023). These sectors face comparable challenges – including workload intensification, emotional labour, and performance metrics – rendering their strategies potentially transferable to teaching.

The conceptual foundation of the study integrates constructs of grit and resilience, both of which are associated with sustained effort in the face of adversity. Grit, for example, has been associated with long-term goal attainment and has particular relevance for individuals at risk of disengaging from initial teacher education programmes (Duckworth, 2016; Card, 2018). While critiques – such as the 'jangle fallacy' – highlight overlap between grit and other psychological traits, a combined focus on resilience and grit may offer valuable insights into the personal and professional development of trainee teachers (Ansari et al., 2016; Card, 2018).

The design of the intervention programme drew upon resilience strategies from other professions (Jennings et al., 2017; Mealer et al., 2014; Reivich et al., 2011), incorporating elements such as mindfulness practices, reflective writing, and peer dialogue. Mindfulness-based interventions, including Acceptance and Commitment

Therapy (ACT), were employed to foster individual awareness and emotional regulation (Jennings et al., 2017; Reivich et al., 2011). Reflective writing, long used in counselling and healthcare, facilitated deeper emotional processing and promoted self-awareness, autonomy, and reduced stress (Cornu, 2009; Mealer et al., 2014). Peer dialogue and collaborative discussion were also crucial, enabling the co-construction of meaning through open communication (Adams, 2022; Shaw et al., 2016).
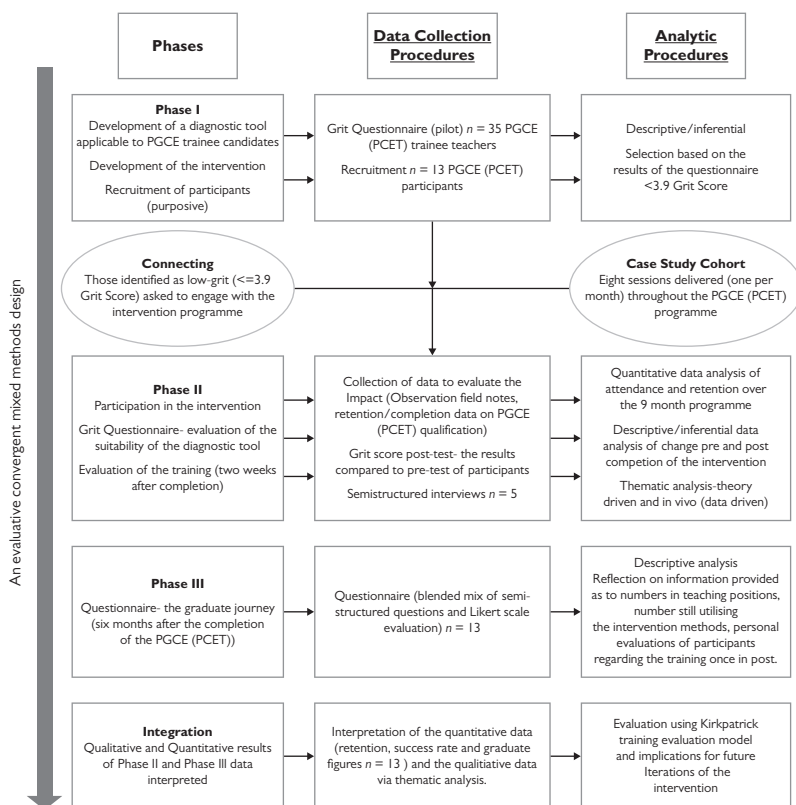
To ensure progression, the training followed a spiral curriculum model and utilised structured approaches such as hermeneutic dialogue circles, enabling participants to explore their beliefs through discussion (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Cornu, 2009). Inspired by the British Military's Mental Resilience Training (MRT), the programme integrated themes of self-belief, social support, and emotional control (Reivich et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2017). However, the research also acknowledged that individual interventions must be complemented by systemic changes. Literature underscores that sustainable teacher resilience cannot be achieved without addressing institutional stressors such as performativity and workload (Fazackerley, 2019; UCU, 2022; Jennings et al., 2017).

Methods

This study evaluated resilience training to support trainee teacher retention during and after the PGCE (PCET) programme. Using a pragmatic mixed-methods approach, it integrated qualitative and quantitative data following Hall and Howard's (2008) framework, valuing both equally and acknowledging researcher positionality. Grounded in pragmatism, the study bridged positivist and interpretivist traditions for a balanced perspective (Creswell, 2006; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

The researcher's dual role as teacher was recognised to address potential bias. A case study design guided the exploratory research, focusing on the intervention to generate practical recommendations (Yin, 2014). Data integration employed Ivankova et al.'s (2006) joint-display model (Diagram 1), while Kirkpatrick's (1998) four-level evaluation framework (Diagram 2) assessed the training's effectiveness.

Diagram 1: Procedural diagram of each phase of the evaluative convergent mixed method design (Ivankova et al., 2006)

Phases	Data Collection Procedures	Analytic Procedures
Phase I Development of a diagnostic tool applicable to PGCE trainee candidates Development of the intervention Recruitment of participants (purposive)	Grit Questionnaire (pilot) *n* = 35 PGCE (PCET) trainee teachers Recruitment *n* = 13 PGCE (PCET) participants	Descriptive/inferential Selection based on the results of the questionnaire <3.9 Grit Score
Connecting Those identified as low-grit (<=3.9 Grit Score) asked to engage with the intervention programme		**Case Study Cohort** Eight sessions delivered (one per month) throughout the PGCE (PCET) programme
Phase II Participation in the intervention Grit Questionnaire- evaluation of the suitability of the diagnostic tool Evaluation of the training (two weeks after completion)	Collection of data to evaluate the Impact (Observation field notes, retention/completion data on PGCE (PCET) qualification) Grit score post-test- the results compared to pre-test of participants Semistructured interviews *n* = 5	Quantitative data analysis of attendance and retention over the 9 month programme Descriptive/inferential data analysis of change pre and post competion of the intervention Thematic analysis-theory driven and in vivo (data driven)
Phase III Questionnaire- the graduate journey (six months after the completion of the PGCE (PCET))	Questionnaire (blended mix of semi-structured questions and Likert scale evaluation) *n* = 13	Descriptive analysis Reflection on information provided as to numbers in teaching positions, number still utilising the intervention methods, personal evaluations of participants regarding the training once in post.
Integration Qualitative and Quantitative results of Phase II and Phase III data interpreted	Interpretation of the quantitative data (retention, success rate and graduate figures *n* = 13) and the qualitiative data via thematic analysis.	Evaluation using Kirkpatrick training evaluation model and implications for future Iterations of the intervention

An evaluative convergent mixed methods design

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (2018) were rigorously followed. Participants gave informed consent and could withdraw at any time. The university counselling team was notified in case support was needed. To avoid stigma, participants were not told their selection was based on 'low-grit' scores. Confidentiality was protected using pseudonyms, with data managed

Diagram 2: Kirkpatrick (1959) model for evaluating training programmes and the source data collection points for analysing the findings.
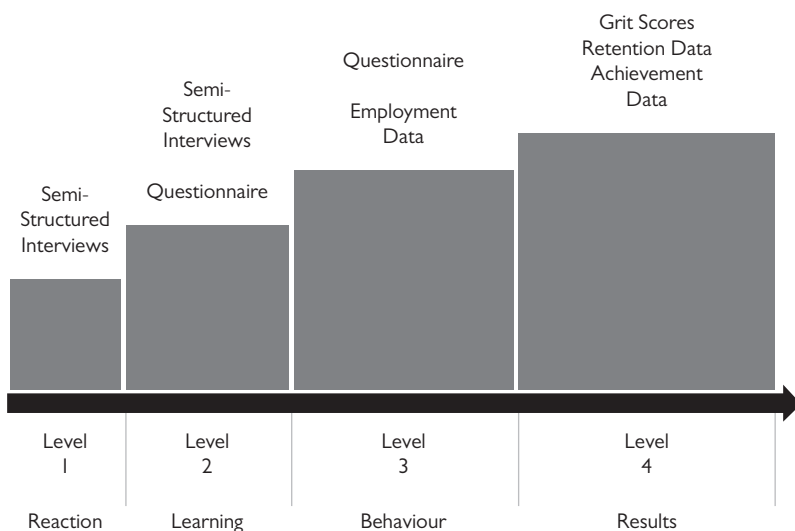
according to the Data Protection Act (1998) and GDPR. Ethical approval was obtained from Wrexham Glyndŵr University and the University of Bolton. The researcher's dual role as teacher and researcher was continuously reflected upon to ensure objectivity and ethical rigor.

Sampling and Participant Description

The study focused on PGCE (PCET) trainees at Wrexham Glyndŵr University during the 2021–22 academic year. All 25 trainees were invited to complete Duckworth's Grit Scale online, a format previously validated through a pilot study. Using purposive (criterion-based) sampling, trainees with grit scores below 4.1 (scale of 0-5) – based on Duckworth's threshold for low grit – were invited to participate in the resilience training.

Thirteen participants were selected. The demographic profile of this group reflected the broader PGCE (PCET) cohort. For the post-training qualitative evaluation, five participants who attended all sessions were selected for semi-structured interviews, ensuring diversity in age and gender. All 13 participants were invited to complete a follow-up questionnaire six months after the programme to assess its long-term impact.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study utilised four primary data sources:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews (n = 5):** Conducted via Microsoft Teams within two weeks of training completion. A hybrid inductive–deductive thematic analysis was used, with themes drawn from literature and training aims. Inductive coding allowed new insights to emerge. Intercoder checks and reflection diaries enhanced trustworthiness (Haynes-Brown and Fetters, 2021).
- **Six-Month Follow-Up Questionnaires (n = 13):** Assessed longer-term outcomes post-transition into teaching. Open-ended responses were analysed inductively, offering valuable triangulation despite the limitations of self-reporting (Ivankova et al., 2006).
- **Quantitative Grit Score Comparison**: Pre- and post-programme Grit Scale data provided insight into self-perceived resilience (Duckworth, 2016).
- **Academic and Retention Data**: Training attendance, post-graduation outcomes, and historical retention data were reviewed. Follow-up responses and employment outcomes helped contextualise findings within an 'at-risk' programme setting (Ofsted, 2019).

Data Integration and Triangulation

Triangulation was key to enhancing reliability, combining data from multiple time points and varied sources. This comprehensive, multi-layered approach offered a deeper understanding of the intervention's impact while addressing common limitations of case study research (Ivankova et al., 2006; Yin, 2014).

Results and Discussion

The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative data to examine trainee retention, attendance, graduate success, and intervention impact. Quantitative data reveal retention and progression patterns, while qualitative insights from interviews and questionnaires deepen understanding of participant experiences and training value (Creswell, 2006; Ansari et al., 2016).

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative component of this study examined participant retention, attendance, employment outcomes, and pre-/post-intervention grit scores. Thirteen PGCE (PCET) trainees engaged in the resilience training, and their outcomes were compared with the wider cohort and historical programme data.

Retention results were notable: all 13 participants completed the year and gained their teaching qualification. This contrasts with previous years, where attrition levels were a concern and proportionally aligned with the intervention group's size (Adams, 2022; EWC, 2020; Estyn, 2021). While this is a promising finding, it must be interpreted cautiously given other influencing factors, such as reduced enrolment and structural changes within the programme (Bell, 2023; UCU, 2022). Nonetheless, complete retention in a previously 'at-risk' programme is significant (Department for Education, 2018; WG, 2019a).

Attendance varied across the training sessions. By Session 4, 10 of the 13 participants were present, highlighting practical challenges around engagement with additional interventions during a demanding PGCE year (Jones et al., 2022; Savage, 2022).

Six months post-graduation, follow-up questionnaires provided insight into employment outcomes. Although data were self-reported, respondents shared examples of overcoming early-career challenges using adaptive coping, perseverance, and self-reflection – key components of resilience (Reivich et al., 2011; Shaw et al., 2016; Pozo-Rico et al., 2023). These accounts suggest the training helped participants manage professional setbacks, though further longitudinal study is needed to assess sustained impact (Jennings et al., 2017; Precious and Lindsay, 2019).

Grit Scale data (Duckworth, 2016) showed minimal change between pre- and post-intervention scores (+0.10), with the small increase lacking statistical significance. Initial scores were consistent with low-grit benchmarks, validating the tool's diagnostic use (Stoffell and Cain, 2018), but post-programme concerns around social desirability bias and scale limitations echoed wider critiques (Card, 2018; Cahapay, 2021; Kaushik and Walsh, 2019). As a result, the Grit Scale was deemed unsuitable for future use.

Ultimately, while quantitative data suggest positive retention and employment outcomes, these effects are not fully captured by grit scores, underlining the value of integrating qualitative methods to better assess programme impact (Haynes-Brown and Fetters, 2021; Cook and Kamalodeen, 2020).

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis draws on data from semi-structured interviews conducted with a sub-sample of participants (n = 5) and open-ended responses from a follow-up questionnaire completed by all participants (n = 13). A hybrid thematic analysis approach was employed, integrating inductive insights from participant narratives with deductive themes drawn from the literature on resilience training in analogous professional contexts such as nursing, elite sport, and the armed forces (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick, 2006; Adler et al., 2015; Mealer et al., 2014).

Theme 1: Threat and Challenge as Catalysts for Development

Participants frequently identified personal and professional challenges – such as stress, self-doubt, and workload – as key barriers to their development. The resilience training helped individuals articulate these perceived 'threats' and develop practical coping strategies. Structured reflection and facilitated peer dialogue were especially valued, enabling participants to reframe difficulties as opportunities for growth and self-awareness (Turner and Barker, 2013; Cornu, 2009). One trainee reflected that they could now 'recognise where the pressure was coming from' and 'not internalise failure'. This supports literature suggesting that resilience is not built by avoiding adversity, but by engaging in thoughtful reflection in response to it (Brown, Morgan and Fralick, 2021; Pozo-Rico et al., 2023).

Theme 2: From Competition to Bonding

Initially, some participants described a competitive cohort culture, often shaped by prior academic or workplace environments where vulnerability was discouraged. As the training progressed, shared reflective practice facilitated emotional openness and trust. This shift towards collaboration created a sense of community and reduced performance-related pressure. Such developments reflect wider research highlighting the role of psychological safety and peer bonding in resilience-building, particularly in high-pressure settings (Jones et al., 2022; Estyn, 2021; Jennings et al., 2017; Reivich, Seligman and McBride, 2011).

Theme 3: Digging Deeper

Participants highlighted the depth of reflection enabled by the programme's structured writing tasks and guided prompts. Unlike traditional journaling, which some described as 'superficial', the scaffolding allowed them to 'dig deeper' into their values, motivations, and emotional responses. This deeper introspection was frequently linked to increased classroom confidence, emotional self-regulation, and a stronger sense of professional identity. Group dialogue further validated individual reflections, fostering a supportive environment where participants felt 'seen' and understood. This aligns with literature asserting that reflection is most impactful when supported by social interaction and collaborative learning (Cornu, 2009; Shaw et al., 2016; Gray, 2013; Gray, 2014).

Participants identified the safe, non-assessed nature of the training as a key strength. Several noted that reflective practice in other parts of their course felt performative or forced, whereas the resilience sessions offered genuine opportunities for exploration without fear of judgement. The hermeneutic dialogue circles, in particular, were highlighted as a powerful tool for fostering empathy and mutual learning (Crotty, 1998; Pozo-Rico et al., 2023).

While the training was perceived positively, some participants highlighted the need for ongoing support, expressing concerns that benefits may fade without follow-up. Others felt more equipped to manage stress but noted persistent systemic issues – such as excessive workload, performativity pressures, and limited autonomy – remained major stressors (Jerrim and Sims, 2021; Ofsted, 2019; Bell,

2023). These findings support calls for wider structural reform beyond individual-focused interventions (Card, 2018; UCU, 2022).

Discussion

The resilience training programme positively impacted trainee teachers' ability to manage challenges, regulate emotions, and reflect on practice. Its structured, collaborative approach was valued over more individualised reflective methods (Cornu, 2009; Turner and Barker, 2013). While grit score changes were limited, retention and qualitative data indicated improved stability and preparedness. The findings emphasise the need for supportive organisational cultures beyond initial training, ensuring sustained reflection and emotional support (Jones et al., 2022; Pozo-Rico et al., 2023; Jennings et al., 2017). Ultimately, the study highlights the value of resilience training in tackling teacher retention and well-being challenges, while also calling for systemic change to create a more supportive environment for early-career educators (Department for Education, 2018; Bell, 2023; UCU, 2022).

Conclusion

This study evaluated a bespoke resilience training programme within a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Post-Compulsory Education and Training) as a strategy to address teacher retention. Informed by resilience-building strategies from other high-pressure sectors, the intervention emphasised reflective writing and collaborative dialogue (Adler et al., 2015; Mealer et al., 2014). While the Grit Scale demonstrated limited diagnostic value, participants reported the training as beneficial and impactful.

A key contribution of this research is the development of a resilience model tailored specifically to the needs of post-compulsory teacher trainees (Cornu, 2009; Pozo-Rico et al., 2023). The findings suggest that long-term impact depends not only on individual resilience but also on the presence of supportive organisational structures. This highlights the need to address systemic pressures in parallel with personal development strategies (Card, 2018; Jerrim and Sims, 2021; Ofsted, 2019).

Acknowledgements

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