



MindShift

12 Ways Teachers Can Build Resilience So They Can Make Systemic Change

By [Katrina Schwartz](#)  Jul 30, 2019



Teachers can actively cultivate habits that lead to more resilience. *(iStock/Benjavis)*

When Elena Aguilar started her teaching career in Oakland public schools 25 years ago, she was sure there was no better job than teaching. She loved her work, but she couldn't help

noticing how many teachers left her Oakland school each year. And she started taking note of how disruptive that cycle is to the school community and to the school's ability to implement new programs.

“We'd get everyone trained and then two years later 75 percent of teachers who had been in that training were gone,” Aguilar said. It's very hard to make progress on long term goals like improving school culture, deepening reading instruction, or improving how special education teachers and general education teachers work together when half the staff is turning over each year.

Several years into her teaching career Aguilar helped to found a new school. “This was the dream school to teach at,” she said. “We had so much support and small classes and resources, but there was still burnout and stress that led to so much turnover.”

Eventually Aguilar began to coach colleagues, but the stress and exhaustion she'd noticed at the beginning of her career was always at the center of those coaching conversations. She was supposed to be a literacy and leadership coach, but most conversations ended up focusing on emotions and building educator resilience.

“It's all about finding your own power and being able to recognize your own power and what you can influence,” Aguilar said. “What you can control is your own response, the way you make sense of things, and the story you tell about something.”

Sponsored

When things are hard in the classroom, it's tempting to blame the kids, their parents, or the communities they come from, but those are not things an individual teacher can control. Building personal resilience is about responding to adversity, to setbacks, to getting knocked down. The resilience comes from learning something in those moments.

“Resilience is about thriving and not just surviving,” Aguilar said. “Because I think there are places where people use the term and they're just talking about survival. But resilience is when you experience a challenge or a setback and you come out stronger than you were before, having learned something new.”

After decades of teaching and coaching, Aguilar has written a book that joins her years of experience in classrooms around the country with the research about resilience. Called *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators*, the book offers **practical ways** educators can build their resilience mapped to months of the year, and the ebbs and flows of energy that dictate school life.

But this isn't the average self-help book. Aguilar, like many educators, sees real issues in the systems and structures of education. But she also knows teachers are too overwhelmed and tired to pick their eyes up and see the bigger issues. Aguilar believes that building personal resilience leads to action. In *Onward* she writes:

"Here is my theory of action: If we boost our individual resilience, then we will have more energy to address organizational and systemic conditions -- to elect officials who will fund public education, organize against policies that dehumanize educators, and push back on punitive assessment policies and scripted curriculum that turn teachers into robots and students into depositories to be filled. With more energy and more resilience, we can build and strengthen the kinds of communities in which we can thrive, where we can engage in professional development that allows us to reflect on our own biases, and where we can observe and learn from each other."

As a coach, Aguilar is action oriented. She wanted to give educators things they can do, habits they can form to boost their resilience. The current research isn't framed that way; it describes dispositions, which are more like attitudes or ways of being. Resilient people tend towards optimism, for example, and they're curious and courageous.

Aguilar has taken that research and developed a sequence of reflections and activities that teachers can do throughout the year to build habits that cultivate a resilient disposition. She thinks they will be most powerful if educators do them together.

1. Know Yourself

"You'd need to do this in the summer when you have a bit of a break," Aguilar said. She recommends June, when school has ended and teachers have had a little time to recover. In June many educators are reflecting on the end of the year anyway, so why not go a bit deeper to think through the values, socio-political identity, strengths and personality traits that define each of us?

In *Onward*, Aguilar writes: "Self-knowledge helps us to be more confident about our actions and clear on our decisions. It's what enables us to show up in a way we want to show up."

This is foundational work. Everything else depends on self-knowledge because so much of how one reacts to a situation is rooted in experience, context, identity and perception.

2. Emotions

There's been an increased focus on **social and emotional learning for kids in classrooms**, but much less attention is paid to helping teachers manage the array of emotions that come up over the course of a school day. Just because teachers are adults doesn't mean they've had practice recognizing, **naming and reckoning with their emotions**.

"Embedded within emotional resilience is emotional intelligence," Aguilar said. "And I find so many adults have never had an opportunity to really learn about emotions."

In the **workbook** that accompanies *Onward*, Aguilar offers activities that walk educators through a process of thinking through what an emotion is, how to understand their own, and offers language to talk about emotion. This is reflective work, perfect for July when teachers have a little distance from the classroom.

3. Tell Empowering Stories

"It really might be the most important habit, but you can't practice it well without understanding your emotions, so they all connect," Aguilar said.

The stories educators tell **dictate the experience they'll have**, she said. The story could be about kids and parents that don't value education. Or, it could be that teaching in a particular context is hard because the political and economic systems aren't set up to support this community. "You can tell really different stories about the same thing," Aguilar said.

She has found that educators often get excited about this habit: "When they realize they have the power to reframe a situation, it's actually very empowering. It can be a big relief to people."

It can also open up avenues of creativity. Sometimes teachers can feel so overwhelmed that it's difficult to see a situation in any other way than the one they're already locked into. Aguilar has seen this time and again when coaching. She often asks teachers and leaders probing questions to shift the way they see **the constraints** and structures within which they are working.

"I think it's really critical because so many educators almost can't imagine how things could be better," she said.

4. Build Community

Aguilar imagines this habit tied to September when school is back in session and people have energy and hope for the year ahead. "One of the visions I had when I wrote this book was that

teachers would read this book together,” she said. “They’d talk about it together, and they’d do the workbook activities together.”

And in doing so, they’d deepen relationships with one another. Those relationships can be a **crucial source of resilience** when setbacks occur.

5. Be Here Now

This section draws from **mindfulness practices** and their power to ground educators in the present moment. Mindfulness in schools has exploded over the past few years, especially on the West Coast where Aguilar lives. So she was surprised when readers from elsewhere in the country had never heard of it.

“The ability to be present in the moment allows you to be clear on what story you’re telling,” Aguilar said. “It’s really hard to tell powerful stories if you’re not able to recognize when you’re telling a story.”

She equates this set of strategies with October because towards the end of this month things can start to get hard for educators. It’s a time for deep breaths, **creating some metacognitive space before reacting** to students, and taking care of oneself.

6. Take Care of Yourself

November is often a hard month for teachers. The excitement from the beginning of the year has worn off, the days are getting shorter and darker, and **exhaustion becomes a factor**. Most educators have probably heard they should take care of themselves and yet many still don’t. Aguilar uses this section to help educators interrogate why this might be.

“Teaching is so dominated by women and there’s so much messaging to women about self care, but they also get messages about giving to everyone else,” Aguilar said. Sometimes deep values come up about who deserves rest and what it means to prove one’s worth.

“It’s intended to help people untangle what’s going on,” Aguilar said.

7. Focus on the Bright Spots

“This is an opportunity to focus on strengths and assets and skills and shine a light on what’s working,” Aguilar said. Again, in the heart of winter it can be easy to let a **natural negativity bias** take over. It requires **active work to push back** against those thoughts and create structures to notice the progress students have made and the many beautiful things happening in schools and classrooms.

“Resilience has a lot to do with how often we experience what is thought about as positive emotions. That is in part how we get to the thriving part of the definition, and not just the surviving,” Aguilar said.

It’s easy to dwell on the negative, the lesson plan gone awry, the one kid who won’t engage. But Aguilar says that unless educators actively work to refill the reserves of satisfaction, meaning and connection it’s hard to keep going.

8. Cultivate Compassion

In January it might seem like teachers would return from a vacation and feel rested, ready to jump back into the classroom with energy. That’s partly true, but Aguilar has also found that the time off can decrease people’s tolerance for stuff they have to deal with in the classroom. They’ve felt like a normal human for a few weeks and they don’t want to go back. That’s why she suggests **cultivating compassion for oneself, colleagues and students** during this time.

“Recognize that if you’re cultivating compassion you can have greater understanding with a student who lost their temper and did whatever they did, and you can respond differently in that moment.”

9. Be A Learner

Learning is something resilient people do. They take away a lesson from hardships they experience.

“One of the most useful prompts for someone when they’re in a challenging situation is to ask, is there any possibility I could learn something from this experience?” They don’t even have to know what they’re learning yet, but just asking if there’s something that will reveal itself later can make it feel possible to get through.

Aguilar used the example of her mother’s battle with cancer and ultimate death. In the moment, she felt horrible and couldn’t see her way out of the pain and grief she was experiencing.

“When I think back to that time, now I can see there were things that I learned,” Aguilar said. “But it’s definitely not a situation in which I would say that was a great gift because I learned this or that. Without question I would rather have my mother back.”

In those difficult moments, it helps to acknowledge and value the emotions someone is feeling. Without that acknowledgement people don’t feel heard and they can get stuck in the negative emotions.

10. Play and Create

There's a lot of research showing that **play is fundamental to learning** and to human nature. Yet it's often stripped from schools. **Play also helps people to be creative**, deal with stress and solve problems, all qualities connected to a common disposition of resilient people -- courage.

11. Ride the Wave of Change

"Springtime is when things start changing in schools," Aguilar said. "Spring time can be really unsettling and difficult." New initiatives are launched, hiring happens, teaching assignments change, it can be hard for teachers and deplete their energy.

Aguilar recommends that teachers engage with change, but think carefully about whether the change is within their sphere of influence. Making that distinction can help an educator decide where to spend their energy.

"We all have a finite amount of energy and we can make decisions about how and where we use it. Change gives us an opportunity to reflect on that."

12 Celebrate and Appreciate

"We need to end the year on a note of celebration," Aguilar said. Taking time to recognize growth and show gratitude offers a different perspective on what can be a tiring time of year. Many schools have end of year rituals to celebrate the achievements of the year, but personal rituals, as well as class rituals can also be powerful.

Aguilar has no illusions that teachers will pick up this book, do a few exercises, and magically become more resilient. She knows these qualities require cultivation and time, but from personal experience she also knows they work. She now has a daily gratitude practice, and she finds herself repeating over and over again the activities that help her deconstruct her thoughts and beliefs to gain a deeper understanding of her values.

SPONSORED

She hopes that with practice and dedication teachers can increase their own resilience and regain some power over their professional experience. It's unpleasant to feel like an actor in a system over which one has no control. But even when curriculum is mandated, testing overzealous, and students don't want to listen, teachers are making choices. The more resilient a teacher feels, the more able they are to see those moments of choice and make the most of them.

[SEE COMMENTS](#)

Mind/Shift

Want to stay in touch?

Subscribe to receive weekly updates of MindShift stories every Sunday. You'll also receive a carefully curated list of content from teacher-trusted sources.

SIGN UP