RESEARCH ARTICLE

Planning for Teacher Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Adaptive Regulation to Promote Resilience

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Abstract

Increased job demands coupled with insufficient resources, typically result in job strain which can lead to burnout. However, in a series of studies conducted with Canadian teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings indicated that not all teachers were experiencing this phenomenon. Whereas some teachers struggled to keep up with demands which surpassed their job and personal resources, others remarkably experienced achievement and growth. This article features a discussion of a multi-system approach of adaptive regulation proposed to maintain and enhance resilience, notably in response to the diversity of teacher experiences reported in the Canadian studies. While previous literature has discussed the construct of adaptive regulation in mitigating burnout and promoting resilience, it has not been considered for efforts aimed at teacher recovery from a pandemic.

Keywords

Introduction

How does a meaningful job that once brought engagement and joy become a source of considerable psychological strain, and what can be done when this occurs? Enter the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the resilience of teachers in school systems globally. Unlike some countries, apart from a short hiatus in the spring of 2020, Canadian provinces continued to offer face-to-face, group instruction to students throughout the pandemic. Not only did this exacerbate teachers' fears of contracting COVID-19, but stringent health practices affected most aspects of teaching students, organizing classroom procedures, and designing pedagogy. The ramifications of COVID-19 increased job demands, role ambiguity, and job conflict, and led to more stressful events, which exceeded both individual and role resources of many teachers, whether at the school board level or in the classroom.

This scenario exemplifies burnout, a condition characterized by feelings of exhaustion or fatigue, withdrawal of energy exerted toward work (cynicism), and/or colleagues and students (depersonalization), as well as reduced professional efficacy or accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout has serious consequences. Employees who are chronically fatigued, cynical, and depersonalized report poor physical outcomes and psychological health challenges (Shirom et al., 2005; Toker & Biron, 2012), which can lead to poor job performance, increased absenteeism, and in some cases attrition (Taris, 2006; Toppinen-Tanner et al., 2005). Efforts to reduce difficulties arising from burnout are key, not only to the success of employees in the workplace, but also to the success of organizations in general. In the context of the school system, when teachers are resilient, so too are their students (Arens & Morin, 2016; Collie & Martin, 2017; Klusmann et al., 2016).

In our own series of studies on Canadian teachers' burnout and resilience during the pandemic, we found that teachers were not all experiencing the pandemic in like ways (Babb et al., (in press); Eblie Trudel et al., (2021); Sokal et al., 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e). We found that while some teachers had adequate resources to meet their new job demands, some struggled to keep up, and others left the profession -- either temporarily through mental health

leaves, or permanently through resignations. Still, others found the challenge of the pandemic an opportunity for growth and achievement. Moreover, these distinctions were clearly correlated with different levels and combinations of job demands, internal resources from teachers themselves (attitude towards change, teaching efficacy, psychological health practices) and external resources provided by the employer (extra paid sick days for isolation, increased pools of substitute teachers, provision of extra custodial care). Given the diversity in teachers' experiences during the pandemic, it will be essential that our efforts at recovery are tailored to afford differentiation in the pathways offered toward regaining a collectively resilient teaching force.

Multi-level Approaches to Intervention

Interventions to recover from burnout and increase resiliency can focus on individual and organizational levels of response (Bakker, 2017). Individual interventions are those initiatives which provide benefit on a personal basis. These might include supports to enhance coping or relaxation. Organizational interventions, on the other hand, are designed to address districts, teams, or departments in a more systemic way. Recent meta-analyses have demonstrated efficacy of combined individual and organizational processes, termed "multi-level approaches", to regulate individual responses and enhance job characteristics (West et al., 2016). Importantly, individual approaches to addressing burnout, when used in isolation, have demonstrated very low effect sizes and have resulted in increased cynicism in employees (Demerouti et al., 2001). In this regard, it is important to acknowledge and address the structural causes of burnout in the work environment, including modification of job demands and resources, rather than encouraging only changes to individual work processes. According to the Job Demands Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; 2017; 2018), it is critical for organizations to set reasonable outcomes and challenges, yet it is also important to ensure that sufficient resources are provided to optimize goals. The other essential understanding about intervention effectiveness is that individuals can actively influence their roles within an organization through strategies of self-regulation. Individuals who are actively engaged in their work can adjust demands and enhance resources through a concept known as job crafting (Tims et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Berg and colleagues (2007) defined job crafting to be "what employees do to redesign their own jobs in ways that foster engagement at work, job satisfaction, resilience and thriving." Conversely, when experiencing increased psychological strain and high demands which might involve negative cycles of inflexibility, undermining and avoidance, individuals can adopt a strategy known as job recovery to lower personal stress levels, detach, and relax (Sonnentag, 2003). In school organizations, job crafting and job recovery involve interventions for individual teachers in concert with systemic strategies for schools and their districts.

Individual Job Crafting

Job crafting can include the typical adjustments that individuals make in their thoughts (cognitions), actions (tasks) and interactions (relationships), in order to make their jobs more meaningful and less stressful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Additionally, taking initiatives such as optimizing role demands, reframing the purpose of work, selecting resources, and searching out personal challenges, often allows individuals to match their skill sets, to their interests, preferences, and goals (Demerouti & Peeters, 2018; Tims et al., 2012). In a study of job crafting by teachers, Van Wingerden and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that this type of intervention resulted in greater self-efficacy, increased opportunities for professional learning, and improved feedback on job performance. Job crafting has been shown to enhance hope, optimism, and self-efficacy (Vogt et al., 2016). Teachers, for example, may express interest in altering particular roles that they have, or tasks that they engage with in their schools. They may request to instruct in other curricular areas, at different grade levels or may wish to take on support tasks as resource teachers or guidance counsellors. Key resources in job crafting include the ability to exhibit emotional intelligence by recognizing personal responses (such as fatigue or the need for change) and subsequently regulating behaviours such as requests for feedback, coaching, or support (Pekaar et al., 2018a). In addition, Bateman & Crant (1993) indicated that individuals who have proactive personalities and take initiative are more likely to positively respond to stressful role demands.

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Organizational Job Crafting

School organizations may use a variety of structural resources to support teacher resiliency which can be facilitated through the superintendent's team or through human resource (HR) practices. Taris et al. (2003) demonstrated that systemic interventions such as participation in mentorship, coaching, planning, role and task restructuring, and specific professional learning in areas of further interest and growth all contributed to enhanced resiliency. Leadership was also noted as playing a key role in lessening job strain through proactive practices. Edmondson (2019) reminded organizational leaders of the importance of psychological safety to set the context for employee provision of input and direction. Likewise, Bass (1999) contended that a transformational leadership style positively influenced work performance and engagement. For example, when leaders increased their knowledge of a discipline through professional learning (e.g., mental health literacy), this process enhanced their efficacy and intention to promote like strategies at work. The promotion of mental health literacy lessened role strain and reduced short-term disability claims by employees (Dimoff et al., 2016). Similarly, leaders' awareness and perceptions of climates in their organizations were associated with health-promoting behaviours. This could include both the reduction of stigma in the area of mental health and advocacy for the value of well-being in the system. Moreover, Breevaart and colleagues (2014) suggested that transformational leaders could provide resources, opportunities for growth, feedback and support which would meet basic needs and better match tasks to challenges.

Individual Recovery

When repeatedly exposed to high job demands, such as those experienced during the pandemic, some teachers experienced greater levels of role strain and now require engagement in recovery strategies outside of work hours. The nature of job recovery speaks to the process of reinstating the resources that have been depleted through work and returning them to pre-existing levels (Sonnentag & Natter, 2004). Sonnentag and Fritz (2007) warned, however, that not all activities would simply help an individual to recover from a stressful work role. They suggested rather that the underlying attributes of psychological detachment in the form of low activation behaviours, mastery of new tasks, and feeling in control during non-work hours were experiences that would better support recovery from work strain. For example, Dobson (2021) indicated that leaders should encourage a reduction in multi-tasking and arrange for blocking of time for priority tasks with reduced distraction. Dobson added that planning for rest, digital downtime, and a focus on non-work activities during non-work time is critical. It has been found that the more often recovery occurs when off the job, the more positive on-going work engagement and role performance can be (Binnewies et al., 2009; Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012a). Unfortunately, the research has also demonstrated that individuals were less likely to engage in role recovery during periods of high job strain, and, in addition to being unable to adequately handle daily role demands, they were less likely to replenish needed resources and supports they required (Kinnunen & Feldt, 2013; Sonnentag, 2012). This finding suggests that recovery will be even more important to teachers as we move toward restabilizing the teaching force.

Organizational Recovery

School organizations may access a variety of systemic resources available for reduction and prevention of burnout. Bakker and de Vries (2021) observed that human resource (HR) managers, principals, or direct supervisors who collaborated and communicated with school staff on a regular basis could better gauge stress levels of individuals, teams, or departments and take immediate steps to respond when role stress was consistently elevated. This finding speaks to the importance of principals (Sokal et al., 2020c), who not only have better understanding of the staff in their buildings, but also have frequent contact that provides multiple opportunities to observe changes in coping levels in teachers. HR practices implemented as result of this information might include specific recovery training programs designed to help individuals to detach during their non-work time. Hahn and colleagues (2011) and Siu and colleagues (2014) noted that such training was effective in restoring sleep quality, as well as feelings of mastery and self-efficacy. On a more proactive basis, school organizations may reduce and prevent burnout through regular provision of programming facilitated by HR personnel, as well as, on-going exposure to healthy

leadership practices. The key point is that when demands not only increase but persist, it is crucial for school organizations to be aware that individuals may no longer be able to adapt or self-regulate (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, 2018; Demerouti et al., 2019). In this case, an increase of stable systemic resources might serve to buffer the overwhelming daily role demands of teachers, resulting in additional proactive and preventative approaches to avoid burnout.

Recommendations for Practice

When considering ways to provide support according to the various groups of teachers in our studies, we recommend that several guidelines should be observed:

It is important to be mindful that exhaustion is aligned with an increase in job demands, whereas depersonalization and accomplishment are most closely related to resources (Alarcon, 2011). While it might seem intuitive to provide a greater number of resources when people are experiencing exhaustion, our research has demonstrated the contrary. Teachers who were exhausted by the increased demands of the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that they perceived additional resource provision as demands rather than supports (Sokal et al., 2020e). Moreover, there was a correlation in the literature between available resources and depersonalization (Demerouti et al., 2001), with depersonalization increasing with lack of job resources. This speaks to the importance of 'fit' in terms of matching the response to the level of resilience or burnout of a particular teacher, as an inappropriate level of resources can actually exacerbate burnout.

The groups of teachers in our study who indicated high levels of exhaustion also exhibited high depersonalization, suggesting that despite resource provision being essential, only a select ratio of resources to demands delivered maximum recovery on the burnout continuum. Likewise, the value of resources in relieving exhaustion and mitigating depersonalization was dependent on the perspectives and responses of teachers, not with those of individuals or systems providing external resources. This finding supports the need to listen to teachers to determine which supports are meaningful to them and which are simply wasted expenses. Clearly, the key was for teachers to have the opportunity to choose what they believed to be helpful and the agency to modify that support in order to move from burnout to engagement (Ford et al., 2019).

In the case of Canadian teachers who coped well during the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of job crafting to enhance both relational and task boundaries could provide opportunities for individuals to experience further engagement and meaning in their work. The learning here was that job crafting is not a top-down process, but rather an enduring and influential element in how work is conducted and experienced by individuals (Berg et al., 2007). In the case of Canadian teachers who demonstrated high exhaustion, high depersonalization and lower accomplishment, however, attention should be shifted toward opportunities for reset and recovery. Conventionally, individuals bringing work home, dwelling on work issues, and failing to rejuvenate, experienced higher stress levels and depleted personal resources, rendering them less able to access supports when needed (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2019). Although avoidance behaviours would generally result in short-term reductions in stress levels, individuals engaging in this strategy would have little effect on the demand-resource imbalance, resulting in overall reduced work performance and strain. In this case, an emphasis on recovery strategies would be supportive not only in decreasing role demands but also in preventing further job strain, acknowledging the deleterious and contagious effect that burnout has in diminishing the resilience of colleagues and students (Klusmann et al., 2016).

According to Schaufeli and colleagues (2009) a healthy workplace depends on employees who are "motivated, proactive, responsible, and involved" (p. 216). Hence, Bakker and de Vries (2021) encouraged the adoption of a flexible selection of coping strategies that would be responsive to the provision of resources as role demands change. A process of adaptive regulation to promote resiliency would be especially salient during the time of disruptive changes from the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery from them. Moreover, with increased resilience for teachers, students are more likely to thrive (Arens & Morin, 2016; Collie & Martin, 2017; Klusmann et al., 2016). Schaufeli and colleagues (2009) added that avoiding burnout was an essential but insufficient condition to foster engagement, which suggests that all employees should have opportunities for development and growth within their workplaces. Grant (2021) concurred, asserting that it would be critical for organizations to promote

cultures of learning to facilitate intelligent risk taking, employee voice and choice, open sharing of struggles, and greater evidence of trust.

Implications and Next Steps

What can be done when a job that once brought great enjoyment becomes a source of psychological strain? While unresolved burnout can be contagious between colleagues, resulting in difficult interactions, negative workplace climates and reduced effectiveness in organizations, the contagion effect could also be harnessed for positive impact (Centola, 2021). It is exactly this type of influence that Centola referred to when he described a contagion infrastructure. Given that organizational change (such as that demanded by the pandemic and subsequent recovery) necessitates that people also change, Centola argued that this requires knowledge translation across large groups of individuals who are being asked to adopt novel strategies or ideas. Nonetheless, people most often avoid innovation due to the perceived risks involved. Centola emphasized that resistance to innovation involves overcoming barriers to change such as trust, risk and coordination, and he recommended creating collaborative connections across organizations and using principles of relevance (credibility, solidarity and legitimacy) in the context of social influence. In this regard it is critical to reinforce the importance of school and divisional administration in their proactive awareness and recognition of elevated stress levels of staff, through day to day, interaction and collaboration. As Wang and colleagues (2017) noted, leadership consideration could result in greater efficacy and trust required to engage employees in job crafting and recovery strategies where necessary.

As new vaccines for COVID-19 are rolled out across Canada and throughout the world, we are looking forward hopefully to returning to a state of normalcy. However, it is essential to recognize that teachers are not in the same place individually or collectively as they were when the pandemic began. Scholars warned at the onset of the pandemic that collateral damage to teachers would be substantial if they were not adequately supported during the pandemic (Dorcet et al., 2020) , and copious scholarly and popular presses have highlighted the toll the pandemic has taken on teachers in particular (Dabrowski, 2020). The applications proposed here involve a paradigm shift in the conversation about fostering resilience and mitigating burnout, from a 'one-size fits-all' approach to a differentiated, strategic, and multi-dimensional process. Teachers and school boards can harness evidence-based practices as agents of informational diversity, identifying where they collectively see the appropriate fit and adopting recommended strategies to support regulation at both individual (teacher) and organizational (school board) levels. It is ironic that the contagion effect which created such chaos during COVID-19, might now offer a solution to promote teacher resilience in a post-pandemic world.

Acknowledgement

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