

Autonomy and career management skills in the context of lifelong learning: cognitive coping strategies of the teachers and effects in work burnout and work engagement.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is analysing cognitive coping strategies used by a sample of 385 teachers from Madrid (Spain) to face three different stressful situations: role conflict and role ambiguity, students challenging behaviours and work overload. Moreover, it has been studied the relationships between those personal coping resources and two teachers' well-being measures: work burnout and work engagement. The assessment was carried out through Brief COPE and another items designed ad hoc. The MBI was used as a burnout measurement and the UWES assessed work engagement. Results show that cognitive strategies more frequently used by teachers hardly vary along the three stressful situations. Some examples of the strategies more frequently used are: "I think about one or more specific and realistic objectives about this situation", "I consider as many solutions as possible to cope with this situation". They have in common that they pursue an active solution for the problem. Beside, these strategies are negative and significantly correlated to burnout and positively to engagement. In conclusion, it is important that school counsellors promote this kind of cognitive skills among teachers in the context of lifelong learning because they can be factors that protect from burnout and increase teachers' well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays teachers frequently have to cope with stressful situations that can affect their psychological welfare at work. Among the situations they identify as more stressful are mainly: a) Pupils' behavioural problems. Such problems can vary from lack of attention or participation in tasks to severe negative conducts or even aggressions; b) Work overload and lack of time to perform the different tasks and c) The conflict and ambiguity in the teacher's role (Cifre, Llorens and Salanova, 2003; Fernández-Berrocal and Extremera, 2003; Hakanen, Bakker and Schaufeli, 2006; Kyriacou, 2001; Manassero et al., 2005; Marqués, Lima and Lopes, 2005; Martínez, Grau and Salanova, 2002; Moriana and Herruzo, 2004; Salanova, Martínez and Lorente, 2005; Van der Doef and Maes, 2002).

Furthermore teachers find resources available to them - both, personal and institutional, very limited to face these stressful situations at work. Moreover, they state to have received little initial and ongoing training in this sense and therefore, there seems to be a perception of lack of resources, support and even a sense of defencelessness when they need to confront changing and conflict situations (Marqués, Lima and Lopes, 2005; Van der Doef and Maes, 2002).

For all these reasons, this work tries to analyze what coping strategies are used by teachers to face up stressful situations as the ones mentioned earlier on). We will specifically focus on coping strategies of cognitive nature, as they have been merely analyzed in previous research. It will therefore be a question of analyzing the thinking processes or strategies of cognitive coping that teachers usually use when facing the role conflict, work overload and the challenging behaviour of pupils.

Likewise, this work will deal with the relationship between those personal resources of cognitive coping and two measures of special relevance in the evaluation of the subjective teaching wellbeing: the professional *burnout* and the *work engagement*.

The burnout syndrome or “work burnout” is defined as an extended answer to chronic stressors due to work that consist on the following aspects: exhaustion, Depersonalization (cold and distant attitude towards the work receptors –in this case pupils), cynicism (distant attitude towards work itself) and inEfficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001; Salanova, Llorens, García-Renedo, Burriel and Bresó, 2005). Amongst the employment sectors, education is one of the most affected by this syndrome (Schaufeli and Enzman, 1998; Travers and Cooper, 1997). Besides, different researches have showed that the presence of this syndrome can have important negative consequences on teacher’s health (specially in mental health) and the amount of teacher’s sick leave, their work performance (productivity, behaviour with pupils, aggravation of the educational system), the tendency to abandon the profession and their family life (Guerrero, 2004; Martínez, Grau and Salanova, 2002; Travers and Cooper, 1997).

However, it seems insufficient to exclusively concentrate in the study of “burnout” to study the teaching wellbeing. It is also necessary to know what factors are associated to the positive emotional state many other teachers display at work. In this sense, from a perspective related to positive psychology (Seligman y Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) the focus has recently been extended towards the study of strengths and optimum function of human beings that contribute to their personal wellbeing. This way, the lines of future research, preferential to the subject of work related stress are those referred to the study of the positive aspect of stress (Peiró, 2005) and with the development of researches with a pro-active focus –based on prevention-, more than re-active one –based on research and intervention on what has already happened. A few experts in the study of stress in the teaching sector point out the importance of developing research that study the role that successful strategies of stress coping play in the development of the teaching career (Jesús, 2002; Kyriacou, 2001).

From this new “positive” perspective the concept of “work engagement” is starting to gain importance. It has been defined as a positive mental state related to work and characterised by high levels of energy and Vigor, work dedication and enthusiasm as well as consistency and concentration at work (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2004; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker, 2002).

The last aim of the line of investigation of which the work we are hereby introducing is part of, is to orientate the design of the processes of initial and ongoing training of teachers in order to provide them with those personal resources of cognitive coping that arise in the fulfilment of their professional activity to ultimately contribute to their subjective teaching wellbeing, favouring in this way a better development of their teaching activity.

METHOD

Participants

In order to carry out this study, we have taken an incidental sample of non-probabilistic character of 383 of Madrid Community (Spain) of which 28.9% are men and 71.1% women. The average age of the sample is 40.33 years old ($s=10,8$) and represent an average of 14.9 years of teaching experience ($s=11,35$). 80% of respondents work in private (paid by users) and semi-private centres (Private School that receives public funds) and 20% in public centres (paid by the Public Administration).

Regarding education levels, 56% ($N=215$) are kindergarten or primary school teachers and 44% ($N=168$) are secondary school teachers.

Measures

Data collection was gathered through questionnaires and self-reports. The elaborate instrument for this research was the “*Scale of cognitive coping in education*” and an “ad hoc” questionnaire to collect information on different control variables. The questionnaire presents a stimulating situation that describes, first of all a situation of role conflict and ambiguity. Later on, the questionnaire illustrates a second situation which describes the conduct of a trouble-maker pupil who arrives late to his classroom and does not bring his school materials or his homework done and who starts making provocative comments and pays no attention during the lesson. And finally, it describes a work overload and lack of time situation. Following each of these situations teachers are asked to tell their level of agreement or disagreement with a few statements which represent different cognitive strategies that can be used to confront the stimulating situation proposed, which constitute the content of such “*Scale of cognitive coping in education*”

The “*Scale of cognitive coping in education*” offers twenty seven options of cognitive coping that has been elaborated from the adaptation of the English version of the items of the scale Brief COPE (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, 1989; Carver, 1997) fulfilled with new “ad hoc” items designed consistent with the theory model proposed for our research on teacher’s cognitive coping strategies. The response scale of this tool evaluates the frequency of use of each strategy and introduces six alternatives, from 1 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*A lot*). Reliability for situation 1, “Conflict and role ambiguity”, was of Alpha de Cronbach = 0.78. In situation number 2, “pupil’s conduct problems”, the reliability was Alpha de Cronbach = 0.78 and in situation 3, “Work overload”, Alpha de Cronbach reliability was 0.77.

Teaching wellbeing has been measured based on instruments already consolidated in previous researches and which psychometric qualities have been accredited in different national and international publications. The dimensions of Burnout, Exhaustion, Cynicism and Professional Efficacy have been assessed through the Maslach *Burnout Inventory- General Survey (MBI-GS)* (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach and Jackson, 1996) in Salanova’s Spanish version (2000) that consists of 15 items. Depersonalization was assessed through the scale also named *Maslach Burnout Inventory- Human Services (MBI-HSS)* (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) (5 items). Items are all assessed through a Likert scale of 0 (*never*) and 6 (*always*).

Internal consistencies (Alpha of Cronbach) of the Burnout dimensions obtained with our sample data have generally been rather good: Exhaustion: 0.88; Cynicism: 0.84; Professional Efficacy: 0.77 and Depersonalization: 0.60. As we can appreciate, last magnitude reliability is slightly lower than on the rest of the magnitudes, as it has been happening with this sub-scale (Depersonalization) in most studies carried out by different researchers.

Concerning *Work Engagement*, it has been assessed through the *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)* in Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró and Grau's Spanish version (2000) that consists on 17 items and includes the 3 dimensions of the construct: Vigor, Dedication and Absorption. Items are assessed through a Likert's scale of 0 (*never*) and 6 (*always*). This questionnaire has introduced good psychometric qualities in different investigations (Salanova y Schaufeli, 2004). The internal consistencies (alpha of Cronbach) of the Work Engagement dimensions obtained with our sample data have also been rather satisfactory: Vigor: 0.78, Dedication: 0.85 and Absorption: 0.72.

Procedure

On the subject of objectives we attempt to study, our methodology is of non-experimental nature. It is an ex-post-facto study. From the perspective of the kind of data obtained, the design of our study corresponds to a strategy of transversal type or trans-sectional in which we use two cohorts with different subject groups (kindergarten and primary school teachers and secondary school teachers)

During the 2007-2008 term a presentation letter was sent via email to all Directors of Centres of the invited sample as well as a leaflet of the project in order to let them know about the research and request their participation. In some Centres, a member of the research team was invited to briefly present the questionnaire to teachers and administrators and, at the same time, to motivate them to take part.

All participants in this research and the obtained data have been treated complying with the ethical principles of scientific research. The statistical analysis –of descriptive and correlational character- has mainly been done on SPSS 15.0.

RESULTS

First of all, as it can be seen from Table 1, we offer a descriptive analysis of the scores obtained by respondents in the cognitive coping items and in each of the three stimulating situations raised. First, we confirm the most fundamental aspect that deserves to be emphasized is that teachers' average scores in each cognitive strategy do hardly differ from situation 1 (role conflict), situation 2 (pupils' behavioural problems) and situation 3 (work overload) and we have not found any significant difference in the twenty seven answers that referred to cognitive coping proposed in our scale in relation to the three stimulating situations suggested.

Table 1. Average scores in the Cognitive Coping Scale

COGNITIVE COPING SCALE	SITUATION 1 Conflict and role ambiguity		SITUATION 2 Behavioural Problems		SITUATION 3 Work overload	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1. I think: "we are always in this kind of situations at work"	2.63	1.42	2.31	1.34	3.26	1.61
2. I've been trying to see it in a different light, to make it seem more positive.	3.94	1.31	3.63	1.31	3.91	1.31
3. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do	4.76	.96	4.83	.97	4.76	1.03
4. I think: "I am sure he/she does this to annoy me"	1.41	.81	2.28	1.33	1.38	.81
5. I've been trying to find comfort in my religion or spiritual beliefs.	2.05	1.44	1.98	1.33	1.93	1.37
6. I mainly think about the negative aspects of this situation	2.31	1.37	2.71	1.42	2.13	1.33
7. I make jokes about it	3.23	1.42	2.78	1.40	3.44	1.40
8. I plan one or several realistic and specific objectives regarding the situation	4.58	.99	4.55	1.04	4.56	1.11
9. I think I must solve this situation perfectly, otherwise it would mean I am not a good teacher	2.96	1.49	3.18	1.51	2.99	1.56
10. I've been blaming myself for things that happened.	1.90	1.07	2.01	1.10	1.93	1.18
11. I believe nothing will change at work in regards to this situation	3.01	1.48	2.75	1.41	3.33	1.67
12. I think this is an awful situation	1.97	1.12	2.51	1.44	2.18	1.38
13. I constantly hesitate about what to do in this situation	2.35	1.13	2.40	1.21	2.01	1.17
14. I think about the maximum number of solutions or alternatives to tackle the problem.	4.61	1.09	4.61	1.07	4.54	1.13
15. I think about the pro and cons of the different actions I can take.	4.63	1.07	4.58	1.11	4.37	1.22
16. I think "I am not going to be able to cope with that"	1.83	1.01	1.96	1.08	2.09	1.22
17. I think about more pleasant things than those I am currently going through	2.95	1.43	2.89	1.48	3.00	1.38
18. I've been refusing to believe that it has happened	1.60	.97	1.57	.93	1.53	.85
19. I think "Things should go in a different way"	3.22	1.55	3.37	1.63	3.42	1.67
20. I try not to think about it	2.26	1.22	2.17	1.25	2.43	1.36
21. I think someone else is to blame for this situation rather than me.	2.14	1.33	2.31	1.39	2.11	1.40
22. I've been learning to live with it..	3.61	1.43	3.21	2.46	3.98	1.36
23. I constantly think about how I feel in this situation	2.42	1.17	2.44	1.24	2.41	1.25
24. I think "It is not worthy for me to do anything else to change the situation as it will not change anyway"	1.95	1.20	1.80	1.10	2.11	1.35
25. I think "there is no need to exaggerate. There are worse things in the world"	3.72	1.45	3.39	1.40	3.81	1.49
26. I think "I am handling well with the situation"	3.90	1.04	3.58	1.05	4.05	1.06
27. I think I can learn from this situation	4.57	1.15	4.39	1.27	4.29	1.31

Likewise, as we can clearly appreciate, the same cognitive coping answers in all three stimulating situations have obtained the highest marks. Therefore, the most commonly used answers to cognitive coping by teachers to deal with the stressing situations we have raised in this study have been:

- "I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do." (item 3)
- "I plan one or several realistic and specific objectives regarding the situation." (item 8)

- “I think about the maximum number of solutions or alternatives to tackle the problem.” (item 14)
- “I think about the pro and cons of the different actions I can take.” (Item 15).
- “I think I can learn from this situation” (item 27).

This five items have in common that they all are a conceptual part of the cognitive processes of assessment and planning of the actions that the subject attempts to develop in order to cope with the situation/problem suggested in our questionnaire. In other words, all five answers referring to cognitive coping could be joined in the general framework of cognitive planning strategies that appear, according to this data, as the most relevant to teachers in the active problem solving.

Moreover, scores obtained by teachers have been analysed in the different dimensions of Burnout and Work Engagement. As it can be seen from Table 2, it seems that the profile of teachers who have taken part in the study appear to be of low Burnout (low scores in Exhaustion, Cynicism, Depersonalization and high score in Professional Efficacy) and a moderate-high Work Engagement (moderate scores in Vigor, Dedication and Absorption)

Table 2. Descriptive Statistical in Burnout and Engagement

	Dimensions (Marks from 0 a 6)	N	Mean	S.D
Burnout	Exhaustion	379	1.90	1.27
	Cynicism	379	1.10	1.13
	Professional Efficacy	379	4.62	.79
	Depersonalization	379	.69	.72
Work Engagement	Vigor	374	4.33	.95
	Dedication	374	4.71	.97
	Absorption	374	4.28	.98

Finally, a correlation analysis of the five more frequent cognitive coping answers in our study has been carried out to explore their relationship with the Burnout and Work Engagement dimensions claimed by teachers, considering each of the 3 stimulating situations. As it can be seen in Table 3, these cognitive coping answers, which we could conceptualize within a broader category as cognitive strategies indicators of “Planning and assessment of the action”, have showed moderate but significant correlations with each of the three stimulating situations proposed in relation to teachers’ Burnout and Work Engagement.

As it can be appreciated from the collected data in Table 3, the direction of the correlations has resulted just as expected from a theoretical perspective. That is, in regard to the dimensions which contribute to a high Burnout (Exhaustion, Cynicism and Depersonalization), correlations with cognitive coping items have been negative, whereas in the case of Professional Efficacy and the dimensions of Work Engagement, correlations have been positive. As far as the magnitude of these correlation concerns, we can confirm they have been between low and moderate, being the lowest .13 and the highest .41. Likewise, these correlations have been slightly higher for the dimensions of Work Engagement than for those of Burnout.

Tabla 3. Correlations of the most significant items of cognitive coping with teachers' Burnout and Work Engagement in all the three stimulating situations studied.

	FACTORS	DIMENSIONS	Ítem 3.	Ítem 8..	Ítem 14.	Ítem 15..	Ítem 27..
Situation 1 "Conflict and Role ambiguity"	BURNOUT	Exhaustion	-.21**	-.23**	-.20**	-.20**	-.31**
		Cynicism	-.22**	-.21**	-.21**	-.25**	-.30**
		Depersonalization	-0.10	-.18**	-.13*	-.19**	-.16**
		Efficacy	.33**	.28**	.21**	.26**	.28**
	ENGAGEMENT	Vigor	.36**	.30**	.31**	.32**	.37**
		Dedication	.35**	.27**	.26**	.30**	.36**
Absorption		.28**	.19**	.19**	.22**	.22**	
Situation 2 "Pupils' behavioural problems"	BURNOUT	Exhaustion	-.13*	-.25**	-.17**	-.13*	-.18**
		Cynicism	-.24**	-.24**	-.28**	-.21**	-.19**
		Depersonalization	-.19**	-.19**	-.15**	-.19**	-.16**
		Efficacy	.25**	.27**	.24**	.22**	.20**
	ENGAGEMENT	Vigor	.30**	.33**	.31**	.25**	.27**
		Dedication	.32**	.32**	.33**	.29**	.33**
Absorption		.22**	.24**	.27**	.27**	.26**	
Situation 3 "Work Overload"	BURNOUT	Exhaustion	-.19**	-.21**	-.17**	-0.10	-.30**
		Cynicism	-.15**	-.13*	-0.08	-0.05	-.23**
		Depersonalization	-0.10	-.17**	-0.07	-0.07	-.18**
		Efficacy	.25**	.30**	.16**	.23**	.29**
	ENGAGEMENT	Vigor	.24**	.27**	.19**	.20**	.41**
		Dedication	.30**	.27**	.19**	.21**	.36**
Absorption		.18**	.24**	.15**	.14**	.31**	

Code Book: Ítem 3. I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do. *Ítem 8.* I plan one or several realistic and specific objectives regarding the situation *Ítem 14.* I think about the maximum number of solutions or alternatives to tackle the problem *Ítem 15.* I think about the pro and cons of the different actions I can take. *Ítem 27.* I think I can learn from this situation.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the conducted analysis, we can confirm that teachers who have taken part in this study use more frequently cognitive strategies headed towards an active planning and resolution of problems rather than those focused on emotion or self-referent. For this reason, it seems that in general their cognitive coping strategies have a more pro-active and rational character than an emotional or negative one.

Furthermore, these more pro-active strategies have moderate and significantly been related to all the dimensions that constitute the Burnout Syndrome. However, the negative values of the correlation coefficients show that teachers characterized by the use of coping strategies of "Planning and Assessment of the Action" in order to tackle potentially stressful situations, exhibit low levels of Burnout. Also, all dimensions of Work engagement considered have correlated in a positive way with the analysed cognitive coping answers. Therefore, teachers who use cognitive strategies of "Planning and Assessment of the Action" enjoy, to a greater extend, psychological wellbeing at work.

In this way, we would like to emphasize the importance that the data of this study can provide to the design of the process of teachers' initial and ongoing training. Our work points out the usefulness of offering training programmes and personal consulting in both, the study programmes of the new grades in Kindergarten and Primary Education and Secondary School Teacher Training Master as well as performance assessment programmes addressed to practicing professionals. Such training programmes could primarily contribute to provide teachers gaining the cognitive strategies we have conceptualised in our work as "Planning and Assessment of Action" as a resource that allows them to cope with the different types of potentially stressful situations they might need to face in their professional activity.

Finally, for future researches it would be very interesting to go a bit deeper in the study of all these strategies we have named as "Planning and Assessment of the Action" as well as other cognitive coping strategies and their relationship with teachers' wellbeing, developing more complex and specific models.

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