Loss and gain cycles? A longitudinal study about burnout, engagement and self-efficacy

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ABSTRACT

The present longitudinal study (two waves), conducted on a population of 274 secondary-school teachers, expands on previous research on burnout and work engagement. Accordingly, the effect of organizational factors (obstacles, facilitators) as well as personal resources (self-efficacy) on burnout and engagement is tested longitudinally following the Social Cognitive Theory. More specifically, we test the loss and gain cycles, and reciprocal relationships concerning burnout, engagement, and self-efficacy over time. Four questions are addressed: (1) Are obstacles positively related to burnout and work self-efficacy over time? (2) Are facilitators positively related to engagement and self-efficacy over time? (3) Is work self-efficacy negatively related to burnout and obstacles over time? and (4) Is work self-efficacy positively related to engagement and facilitators over time? The results of a hard-copy survey carried out at two waves (8 months between the two times), which were computed on Structural Equation Modeling show that obstacles are positively related to burnout, which in turn is positively related to self-efficacy over time. Likewise, facilitators are positively related to engagement and self-efficacy, which in turn is positively related to facilitators over time. These findings suggest a positive gain cycle in which self-efficacy plays a central role.

Teaching is an essential job in our society but it is also a high-stress occupation. Studies on burnout in this teaching context showed that teachers could feel anxious and frustrated, and may even suffer from burnout (see (Salanova, Llorens, Martínez, & Cifre, 2012a)). Although the concept of burnout has recently been extended to all professions and occupational groups, its original definition was a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among professionals who deal directly with recipients such as students, pupils, clients or patients (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009).

The persistence and the dimensions of burnout regardless of the profession have been evidenced by research (e.g., (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Schaufeli, Maassen, Bakker, & Sixma, 2011)). Specifically, burnout is defined as a "persistent, negative, work-related state of mind in 'normal' individuals that is characterized mainly by exhaustion and accompanied by distress, a sense of reduced competence, decreased motivation, and the development of dysfunctional attitudes at work" ((Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998), pp. 36). Recent research has shown that burnout is composed of the so-called "core dimensions", that is, exhaustion and cynicism (e.g., (Green, Walkey, & Taylor, 1991; Leiter, 1993; Llorens, García, & Salanova, 2005; Salanova, Peiró, & Schaufeli, 2002)). *Exhaustion* refers to feelings of strain, particularly chronic fatigue resulting from overtaxing work, whereas *cynicism* refers to an indifferent or detached attitude toward students, parents, and one's work, losing interest in one's work, and feeling that one's work has lost its meaning (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

One further step in the study of burnout has been the development of what is theoretically its opposite, i.e., engagement (Demerouti, Mostert, & Bakker, 2010; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011). Specifically in the teaching context, research has shown that teachers may also experience engagement at work, especially when they have enough resources to cope with high job demands (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007). Work engagement has been defined as a "*positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in the activity*" ((Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002), p. 72). Similarly to the case of burnout research, it has been shown that engagement is composed of the so-called "core dimensions", that is, vigor and dedication (Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2007). *Vigor* refers to the willingness to invest effort in one's work,

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persistence in the face of difficulties, and high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, whereas *dedication* indicates a particularly strong work involvement and identification with one's job.

Different scholars have shown that burnout and engagement experienced at work result from the combination of two sets of working conditions, i.e., job demands, and the job resources available to cope with these demands following two underlying psychological processes: the energy-draining and the motivation processes, respectively (e.g., (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001)). The first begin with chronic job demands, which in turn may deplete employees' energy resources and may thus lead to burnout. This level of burnout could also produce a deterioration of health (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008), musculoskeletal complaints (Jaworek, Marek, Karwowski, Andrzejczak, & Genaidy, 2010), a reduction in affective commitment (Llorens, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Salanova, 2006), and chronic work disability (Ahola, Toppinen-Tanner, Huuhtanen, Koskinen, & Väänänen, 2009). Second, the motivational process begins with the availability of job resources that stimulate the employee's motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) in the form of work engagement and positive work outcomes, such as life satisfaction (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012), organizational commitment (Llorens et al., 2006), autonomy, positive affect and efficacy beliefs in positive spirals (Llorens et al., 2007; Salanova, Llorens, & Schaufeli, 2011), employee and group performance (Salanova, Llorens, Cifre, & Martínez, 2012b; Torrente, Salanova, Llorens, & Schaufeli, 2012), and service quality (Hernández-Vargas, Llorens, & Rodríguez, 2014).

Analogously to the negative and positive factors included in job stress research (e.g., (Salanova et al., 2012b; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004)), a relatively recent movement has shown that burnout and engagement could be determined not only by the traditional job demands and job resources but also by the presence of obstacles (e.g., unmotivated students) and facilitators (e.g., management of indiscipline) (Llorens et al., 2005; Salanova, Cifre, Grau, Llorens, & Martínez, 2005a). While job demands and job resources refer to physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job (Demerouti et al., 2001), obstacles and facilitators are of a more organizational nature, are more specific to each situation, and are related to performance (Brown & Mitchel, 1993; Carayon, Gurses, Hundt, Ayoub, & Alvarado, 2005). Specifically, obstacles are defined as the tangible organizational characteristics of the situation that have the capacity to impede job performance and restrict productivity. In contrast, facilitators are defined as those aspects of the situation that can promote performance or one's ability to perform one's job optimally. More specifically, facilitators are strategies directed toward managing obstacles in order to mitigate the extent to which problems may interfere with performance (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998).

There is empirical evidence to show that obstacles and facilitators play a negative and positive key role in psychological well-being, respectively (Brown & Mitchel, 1993; Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, & Bresó, 2010). As regards obstacles, research has provided evidence that teachers are also exposed to specific obstacles and troubles in their workplace (e.g., unmotivated students, problems with parents and other colleagues, damage to the infrastructure of the educational center, wrong management of technological resources), which could potentially increase their levels of strain and unwell-being in terms of burnout (Llorens et al., 2005; García, Llorens, Cifre, & Salanova, 2006). Secondly, different scholars conducting research on teachers have shown that the perceptions of facilitators (e.g., technical facilitators, classroom management, and management of indiscipline) positively affect well-being. For example, Salanova et al. (Salanova et al., 2005a) used Structural Equation Modeling on a sample of 142 university lecturers and 872 university students to show that the perception of facilitators in an educational setting decreases burnout and increases engagement through the impact of perceived competence. Despite the fact that past research has confirmed the existence of links between obstacles/facilitators and burnout/engagement, it is also important to uncover the psychological mechanism underlying these relationships over time. More longitudinal research is therefore required to investigate these dynamic, reciprocal relationships among obstacles/facilitators, and burnout/engagement over time.

Another step in the development of burnout (and what is theoretically its opposite, i.e., engagement) has been the inclusion of personal resources in explaining the process of their development. Based on the *Social Cognitive Theory*, one of the pivotal personal resources in stress and health processes is self-efficacy, defined as "*beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments*" ((Bandura, 1997), p. 3). Research has shown that efficacy beliefs play a pivotal role in coping with stress and in enhancing psychological well-being (e.g., (Salanova et al., 2002; Llorens et al., 2007; Bandura, 1997; Bandura, 2001)).

Different scholars, using cross-sectional designs, have shown that high levels of specific self-efficacy at work (Cherniss, 1993) relates to burnout, and work engagement (e.g., (Salanova et al., 2012a; Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró, & Grau, 2000; Salanova, Martínez, & Llorens, 2012c)). For example, in a study involving two samples of teachers, Schwarzer and Hallum (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008) demonstrated that self-efficacy protects them from the experience of job strain and reduces the probability of experiencing burnout. According to Bandura (Bandura, 2001), people's beliefs in their efficacy could develop from four major sources of influence, which vary in strength and importance: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and somatic/affective states. In this study, we focus on the last of these sources of efficacy beliefs: affective states (burnout and engagement) as antecedents of work self-efficacy.

Previous research conducted using longitudinal studies seems to show that self-efficacy may not only precede but can also follow affective states by reciprocal relationships (Llorens et al., 2007). Specifically in teachers (Salanova et al., 2011), found a gain cycle of efficacy beliefs, positive affect, and activity engagement. That is, more self-efficacious teachers experienced more positive emotions (especially more enthusiasm) and, consequently, more work engagement. Furthermore, this engagement also led to more self-efficacy over time. Other studies also found that the presence of teaching facilitators (i.e., good social relationships with colleagues and students, adequacy of technology, training) positively relates to work engagement, which in turn predicts high future levels of teacher self-efficacy (Salanova et al., 2005a; García et al., 2006). Despite the relevance of these previous results, there is a lack of longitudinal studies in the teaching context where not only facilitators and engagement but also obstacles and burnout are related to self-efficacy.

The current study is innovative in that we show how organizational factors (obstacles and facilitators), negative and positive affect (burnout and engagement), and personal resources (self-efficacy) are related across time. Moreover, we investigate for the very first time how obstacles/burnout, facilitators/engagement, and self-efficacy are dynamically and reciprocally related to each other, thus creating loss and gain cycles, respectively. To do so, we need to understand the sequences of the psychological experiences that explain the relationships rather than just isolated episodes. In order to study the dynamic interplay of obstacles/facilitators, burnout/engagement, and self-efficacy a longitudinal research design is necessary to be able to differentiate between cause and effect. Such studies, particularly those that combine causal and reversed effects into one reciprocal causation model, are relatively