

Engagement of education personnel in the state of Tabasco in times of COVID-19

Entusiasmo laboral del personal de educación en el estado de Tabasco en tiempos de COVID-19

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to identify the levels of engagement experienced by education personnel in the State of Tabasco in times of pandemic, due to the sudden change that arose in the way of working, teaching, and the necessary reorganization in the individual and family level, which has caused certain reactions to change, stress, exhaustion, probable imbalances between work and personal life, among others, demanding the adoption of digital culture, virtual teaching, and other pedagogical strategies. The methodology used was quantitative, cross-sectional. A survey was applied to 499 workers. The findings show that the staff has developed resilience in the face of the current contingency.

Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación es identificar los niveles de entusiasmo por el trabajo que experimenta el personal de educación en el Estado de Tabasco en tiempos de pandemia, debido al repentino cambio que se suscitó en la forma de trabajar, enseñar, y la reorganización necesaria en el plano individual y familiar, la cual ha provocado ciertas reacciones al cambio, estrés, agotamiento, probables desequilibrios entre trabajo y vida personal, entre otros, demandando a éstos la adopción de la cultura digital, enseñanza virtual, y otras estrategias pedagógicas. La metodología empleada fue cuantitativa, transversal. Se aplicó una encuesta a 499 trabajadores. Los hallazgos muestran que el personal ha desarrollado resiliencia frente a la contingencia actual.

Engagement, COVID-19, Education

Entusiasmo laboral, COVID-19, Educación

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Introduction

COVID-19 forced teachers at all levels to evolve to e-learning and with it came challenges for which they were unprepared, including developing and/or maintaining their engagement even with the difficulties that the accelerated change would face.

In the State of Tabasco, the first positive case of COVID-19 was registered on 18 March 2020, and although the return to normality was declared at the federal level on 1 June, the risk conditions in the State led to the maintenance of the preventive measures that had been established in the Jornada Nacional de Sana distancia (Milenio, 2020). Subsequently, decree number 3196 was published in the official newspaper of the state of Tabasco stating that, "as of 1 June 2020, epidemic mitigation measures would be under the control of the state health authorities, who would act according to the epidemiological risk traffic light, considering the probability of spread or the occurrence of a new outbreak" (Government of the state of Tabasco, 2020, p. 9).

In the sphere of education, the pandemic has increased the challenges for teachers and education personnel as a whole, who have been key actors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and have responded to a number of emerging demands of various kinds during the socio-health crisis (Martínez-Gómez, 2020).

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) note that the health contingency led to the mass closure of face-to-face activities in educational institutions at all levels in more than 190 countries in order to prevent the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact. This has led education personnel to make various adaptations to continue serving their users through different strategies: online distance learning, using a variety of virtual formats and platforms, and offline distance learning, using broadcasts of educational programmes through traditional media such as radio or television (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020).

However, the need to adjust to the conditions of distance education has generated responsibilities and demands on teachers that significantly increase the time required to prepare classes, ensure adequate connections and follow up with their students in different formats, as well as the fact of not being a digital native and having to adapt to new contexts generates a sense of frustration. In the face of these situations that exceed the capacity to respond, psychological and physiological imbalances can occur, leading to technostress (Alcas et al., 2019). In addition to the above, school staff face the difficulties and tensions experienced by families, in many cases without having the necessary material or professional resources to address them, which generates emotional exhaustion, overwhelm, stress and psychophysiological disturbances among education staff (ECLAC & UNESCO, 2020).

According to official figures, in Tabasco, in the 2019-2020 school year, 37,962 teachers were registered, at all levels of education, serving a total of 755,824 students (Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP], 2020). These figures provide an idea of the importance of the population dedicated to educational tasks. Given the circumstances imposed by the Covid19 pandemic, which led to the closure of face-to-face classes and the prolonged use of technological media, it is expected that engagement levels will be high in order to overcome the difficulties imposed by this pandemic.

The quality of education provided by teachers, although it can be measured, is very difficult to see it reflected in the students, because at the higher level the teacher should be no more than a guide for the student, who must analyse, identify and provide solutions to any problems he or she may have over time. The existing evaluation mechanisms for teachers are biased by a numerical basis, as well as the grades they assign to their students without giving a more extensive overview of how this is in their work and above all knowing the characteristics of their evaluators who on the one hand are their students (who may or may not have personal biases that make them cloud their objectivity) and on the other their direct superiors (who will take as a reference the numerical performance of the students).

All this added to the problem caused by a pandemic (COVID-19) that took everyone by surprise and was accompanied by the enormous demand to innovate in order to adapt to what is now the new normal.

Maintaining or surpassing the quality offered during face-to-face time was a task that became not only a priority, but also a matter of concern for teachers who had to take courses and find out about the platforms available for synchronous and asynchronous work, check their available electronic devices to see if they had the necessary characteristics, check the quality of the internet available and if they did not have it or the existing one was not sufficient, hire or expand and, finally, adapt to the needs of their students who also experienced first-hand the suddenness and abruptness of the change. The challenges described above could only have been overcome through engagement, along with their vocational skills, so it is necessary to find out whether teachers perceive themselves as engaged.

The studies that group the variable " COVID-19" have had to reach all possible topics to set the greatest precedent of action that allows a contingency plan that contemplates the difficulties already experienced along with a plan that allows those affected not to decline in their spirits to perform remote tasks, studying how the worker feels is a task that companies have been adopting in order to avoid staff turnover and provide a healthy work environment.

Literature review

Background on engagement

According to Fernández and Yáñez (2014) Kahn first mentioned the term engagement in 1990 when he observed that some workers showed highly energetic and motivated behaviour at work, and this situation could not be explained by constructs such as institutional commitment, leadership or motivation. For this author, a person is engaged when he or she is physically involved, cognitively vigilant and emotionally connected (Fernández & Yáñez, 2014).

Engagement at work is a key element of the new paradigm within Positive Psychology, which seeks to understand, through scientific research, new processes centred on positive emotions, understood as feelings of happiness or lasting well-being, which is stable in people and independent of the environment in which they live (Raigosa & Marin, 2011). From the studies conducted by Wilmar Schaufeli, a Dutch researcher, he initially studied burnout due to his great interest in work-related stress and suddenly began to analyse the opposite, partly because his colleagues encouraged him to also observe employees who might present the opposite pattern, such as a lot of energy and enjoyment at work and made a lot of effort through observing the psychological processes involved in those people who were not suffering from burnout (Juarez, 2015).

Globally, there is much concern and interest about work-related stress, especially the consequences for both companies and for the worker him/herself because it reduces their quality of life. In Mexico, a study stands out where questionnaires were applied to measure variables such as physical and mental health, satisfaction with salary, intrinsic job satisfaction as well as the model of engagement at work to 151 professionals (working on their own and coming from various disciplines) and people with command within various organisations, as well as 269 operational workers (clerks, workers, salespeople and technicians) who agreed voluntarily (Arias, 2018). What is interesting about this work is the opposite emphasis on the deterioration of the quality of work life, which is also related in some way to burnout syndrome or Burnout Syndrome (WSS). In other words, it does not only analyse the causes of burnout, but also the opposite scenario of what would happen if the stressors did not exist in the work environment or were present at low levels. In this case, the opportunity arises to detect the favourable elements that can provoke the opposite effect: immersion (Arias, 2018).

Definition of engagement

Work enthusiasm is the term linked to engagement in the Mexican context. Theoretically considered as the opposite of burnout, work enthusiasm has sparked a great deal of research in the organisational environment (Hernandez-Vargas, et al., 2016).

The English term engagement is translated into Spanish as *compromiso* or *implicación*. This anglicism has been used to refer to a psychological construct that defines a specific state of mind which is measurable through validated scales (López & Chiclana, 2017).

Wilmar Schaufeli is considered the originator of the term engagement and author of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). For this researcher, Work Engagement "is basically a state where people are at work and they feel very energised, they feel very dedicated to what they are doing and they are also involved in their work, so you can say it is a kind of work-related happiness, and so basically it is a positive thing" (Juarez, 2015). Schaufeli (2011) proposed the work engagement model.

These authors defined it as "a positive and fulfilled state of mind related to work characterised by three components: vigour, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli, 2011 p.74). Vigour is conceptualised as a state of high energy and mental resilience, as well as the desire to exert considerable effort and persistence even when difficulties arise in carrying out the work. Dedication is seen as a feeling of enthusiasm, significance, pride, inspiration and challenge.

Absorption refers to high concentration and fascination leading to not feeling that time is passing to such an extent that it is sometimes difficult to detach from the work (Arias, 2018). A relationship can also be established with regard to the issue of labour rights in Mexico and consequently to the concept of quality of working life, which is also closely related to engagement, in the sense that the employee or worker can achieve greater commitment or involvement in proportion to the conditions of their working environment, also seen as a human right, contributing to the occupational health of workers (Patlán, 2016).

Immersion in workers in the education sector

Reviewing the literature and research work on the subject, in Tabasco, Mexico, a study on staff satisfaction and analysis of its factors, close to the engagement that is important for the purposes of this paper, was conducted in a university hospital.

The study population consisted of 81 workers, from all shifts, categories and areas or services. To assess the organisational climate and job satisfaction, a validated questionnaire was applied, applying an observational, cross-sectional and descriptive study during the months of April and May 2008 (Pavón-León, et al., 2011). In the education sector, specifically teachers have also become important when studying the level of enthusiasm at work or engagement, due to exposure to psychosocial risk factors, such as: a) high psychological demands, b) low esteem, c) high double presence (working and domestic workday); d) high job insecurity and low social support (García, Iglesias, Saleta, & Romay, 2016).

Derived from the previous approach, the effect of engagement on adaptive performance and job satisfaction in university teachers was the focus of another research paper. To achieve this, the authors conducted an explanatory research study in a sample of 230 university teachers. They used instruments to measure engagement as an independent variable, as well as performance and job satisfaction as dependent variables (Ortega & Patlán, 2019).

Models, dimensions and scales of engagement

Kahn identified three psychological conditions that influence the presence of Engagement, which are: a) Psychological Fulfilment, or idea of reward by being intensely involved in the work; b) Psychological Security, or security of being involved in the work without suffering negative consequences for self-image or status and c) Psychological Availability, sense of having the necessary personal resources to favourably perform the task (Fernández & Yáñez, 2014). Schaufeli and Salanova have emphasised the importance of discerning the engagement construct from other similar concepts, but which essentially refer to different aspects of the mental state: organisational commitment, job involvement, affective organisational commitment, continuance commitment, extra-role behaviour, job satisfaction, among others (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2014).

The UWES scale has been the most widely used in many research studies (López & Chiclana, 2017). Work engagement is situated in the Job Demands and Resources Model. This model has been used to predict burnout, organisational commitment, work connectedness, engagement, absenteeism and job performance (Ortega & Patlán, 2019). According to this theory there are two categories: job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to physical, psychological, organisational or social aspects of work. An example of these is work pressure. Job resources are those that stimulate personal growth, among others (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013).

For Schaufeli et al. (2011) cited by Flores et al. (2015) work engagement is a construct that integrates feelings of vigour, dedication and absorption. It is from this definition and approach that engagement takes on a more scientific nuance. Vigour is conceived as high levels of energy and mental resilience, willingness to invest in work and persistence in difficult situations. Engagement is practically being strongly motivated to work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. The absorption component is characterised by being completely focused and involved in the work, having difficulty detaching from it and perceiving that time passes lightly (Flores, Fernández, Juárez, Merino, & Guimet, 2015).

Methodology to be developed

This is a quantitative study, with an explanatory scope and a non-experimental and cross-sectional design, because the data collection period was from 22 April to 20 August 2021.

The data collection technique was an online survey using a form designed in Google Form. The response time was subject to the availability of the staff and the internet access possibilities of the participants. The study population consisted of 499 participants and their characteristics are shown in table 1.

Variable	Categories	%
Sex	Women	52%
	Male	48 %
Marital status	Single	22%
	Married	61%
	Widowed	7%
	Unmarried	8%
Level of schooling	Technician	3%
	Bachelor's degree	39%
	Master's degree	47%
	PhD	11%
Seniority	1-5 years	25%
	6-10 years	24%
	11-15 years	22%
	16-20 years	16%
	21-25 years	9%
	1-5 years	25%
6-10 years	24%	

Table 1 Profile of participants

Source: Own elaboration

The instrument was integrated with 9 items from the Immersion questionnaire by Schaufeli et al. (2002) which detects the energetic and affective connection that the employee has towards his or her work. The response scale was from 0 to 6, where 0= Never, 1= Almost never, 2, = Sometimes, 3= Regularly, 4= Quite often, 5= Almost always and 6= Always.

To measure the degree of enthusiasm for work, the data were analysed using descriptive statistics and quartile analysis in order to identify the levels recorded for each of its dimensions. In addition, scales were used with categories of analysis that emerged by grouping the percentages of the distribution based on the corresponding percentile.

Results

The results of the research are presented below, starting with the descriptions of the dimensions of immersion presented in table 2, in which the participants are more inclined towards the dimension of dedication, while the most dispersed dimension is vigour.

Variable	Media	Standard deviation
1. Vigour	4.88	1.06
2. Dedication	5.31	.90
3. Absorption	5.25	.84

Table 2 Descriptive data on the variables studied.

Table 3 shows that 27% of the population shows that they do not feel energised in their work, followed by 23% of the population with a low level, 14% with a moderate level and 36% with a high level in this area.

Level	Percentile	Range	%
No vigour	25	1.67-4.00	27
Low	50	4.10-5.00	23
Moderate	75	5.10-5.66	14
High	100	5.66-6.00	36

Table 3 Vigour level

Table 4 shows that 32% of the population is not engaged in their activities, 11% have low levels and 57% have a high level in this factor.

Level	Percentile	Range	%
Non-dedicated	25	.33-5.00	32
Low	50	5.10-5.66	11
High	75	5.67-6.00	57

Table 4 Level of dedication.

Table 5 shows that for the absorption dimension, only three categories of analysis were recorded, with 36% reporting no absorption, 15% reporting low levels of absorption and 49% reporting high absorption.

Level	Percentile	Range	%
Not absorbed	25	2.00-5.00	36
Low absorption	50	5.10-5.30	15
High absorption	75	5.40-6.00	49

Table 5 Absorption level

Conclusions

In accordance with the situation that prevails among education personnel almost a year after the covid-19 health emergency was declared in our country, certain criteria and assertions can be established regarding the level of vigour, dedication and absorption.

With regard to the vigour variable, almost half of those surveyed practically stated that they did not have it or if they did, it was at a low level, contributing to the fact that individually they lacked the elements or capacities to generate the energy necessary to carry out their teaching work, while the other half stated that they had moderate and high levels of vigour.

With regard to the variable dedication, just over half stated that they were dedicated to their activities; this is a consequence of the adaptability to new methods, educational technology, the use of different synchronous and remote transmission platforms, and everything that distance teaching entails in which there is no common contact with students, as well as not knowing whether the educational objectives set are really being achieved.

Lastly, the variable of absorption, with 49% of those surveyed saying that they felt immersed in the teaching and learning process. This situation favours good understanding or empathy towards the students, since the difficulties have not only been one-sided; in addition, this attitude helps to improve the management of work-related stress, which has an impact on a better quality of life. However, the other half is not immersed or committed and is an area of opportunity and improvement.

There is evidence that the current pandemic has caused some emotional exhaustion, stress and a decrease in the level of commitment to the work, which has an impact on the deterioration of the emotional and physiological health of the staff. It should be remembered that these results or observations recorded in this research correspond to the year 2021, one year later, so the sample studied has also developed certain socioemotional attitudes that favour the confrontation of uncertainty, fear, etc., in a certain way due to the development and application of the first vaccines, which has gradually allowed the physical and mental reintegration into the activities of educational work.

Recommendations

By virtue of what has been diagnosed and studied in this study, it is important that governmental, educational and health authorities, educational personnel and others involved in the teaching and learning process continue to work together through policies and actions that reinforce those that have been implemented since the beginning of the pandemic.

The education authorities must continue to provide the necessary inputs and tools to provide students and other users with quality education, free of discrimination or others that are detrimental to the healthy coexistence and socialisation of education, achieved through competent personnel in both technical and socio-emotional skills, guaranteeing the physical and psychological well-being of the parties involved. Health authorities should continue to monitor and establish agreements that foster a culture of health care not only in these times of pandemic, but on a permanent basis. And society in general, to continue to participate actively by raising its commitment to the achievement of the objectives of the different actors of national education.

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