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Why Do You Work with Struggling Students? Teacher Perceptions of Meaningful Work in Trauma-Impacted Classrooms

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Abstract: This study contributed new findings to the construct of meaningful work (MW) and negative impacts on MW. In other professional samples, finding meaning in work has been shown to be an effective buffer when facing workplace adversity. However, prior investigation has neither identified nor explored the specific sources and mechanisms of meaningful work that teachers derive from educating trauma-affected students. Within a cross-sectional sample of primary and secondary teachers (N = 18) working in trauma-affected classrooms, two interrelated sources of MW: (1) practice pedagogy and (2) teacher wellbeing were further analysed for discussion via Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski's (2010) four mechanisms of MW (i.e., individuation, self-connection, contribution, and unification). These findings argue for the new development of trauma-informed pedagogies that both (1) enable teachers to redress the complex and unmet needs of students and (2) incorporate domains of meaning that teachers bring to their trauma-affected work.

Introduction

This study makes a novel contribution to the paradigm of workplace meaning that has yet to be explored for this specific professional cohort by determining sources of meaningful work (MW) that teachers believed sustained them in their trauma-affected classrooms. Originating from the contention that MW may be a fulcrum for increasing both trauma-informed practice pedagogy and workplace wellbeing, the rationale for this study was further bolstered by the call for the continued theorizing, research, and intervention for positive states, traits, and behaviours for employees under the paradigm of positive organizational behaviour (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Luthans, 2002). Calls have been made for the next phase of research to investigate experiential dimensions of MW, beyond the conditions, factors, and conceptual pathways previously explored (Steger et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Dik and colleagues (2013, p. 364) ask: In what ways can MW be “fostered, encouraged, elicited, or increased” and in what ways can an individual’s work be made *more* meaningful?

Teachers who choose to educate vulnerable and trauma-affected students often do so because positive social change gives their work meaning (Pines, 2002). Yet many teachers struggle with effective strategies to manage disruptive and disengaged student behaviours (Sullivan et al., 2014). The challenges of working with trauma-affected students can lead to burnout (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Antoniou, Ploumpi, & Ntalla, 2013; Farber, 1991; Rojas-Flores et al., 2015) and to exiting the profession (Betoret, 2009; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Karsenti & Collins, 2013). In fact, research suggests that up to 25% of

teachers want to leave the profession due to problems arising from disruptive student behaviour (Fernet et al., 2012).

Compounding these concerns, teachers themselves can be impacted by their students' trauma presentations through trauma's secondary- and vicarious-effects (Caringi et al., 2015; Dutton & Rubinstein, 1995; Figley, 1995; Hydon et al., 2015; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Stamm, 1995). Previous practice orientations to address secondary traumatic stress exposure have occurred via traumatology frames such as trauma stewardship (van Dernoot Lipsky, 2009), compassion satisfaction (Sharp Donohoo, Siegrist, & Garrett-Wright, 2017; Stamm, 2005), and vicarious posttraumatic growth (Arnold et al., 2005, Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Groleau, 2015). Further, exploration within the paradigms of positive psychology and positive organizational behaviour, suggests that meaning in work or having MW can serve as an effective buffer against burnout (Steger & Dik, 2009; Steger, Frazier, & Zaccanini, 2008). Individuals who believe that their work has meaning report increases in motivation and increases in workplace wellbeing (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Despite extensive theorizing on the outcomes of trauma-informed pedagogies (Bloom, 1995; Downey, 2007; Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009) and the symptoms of trauma-affected professionals in social-care fields (Caringi et al., 2015; Figley, 1995; Hydon et al., 2015; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Stamm, 1995), there is scant research on the phenomenological experiences of *teachers* and the workplace meanings they derive in trauma-affected classrooms (see for example Pines, 2002).

After summarizing the literature on the context of trauma-affected classrooms and finding meaning at work, this article defines and explores two broad *sources* of MW for trauma-informed teachers (practice pedagogy and teacher wellbeing). Next, these two sources were analysed to validate and extend the four hypothesized *mechanisms* of MW (i.e., individuation, self-connection, contribution, and unification; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). The results of this study provide future direction for both pedagogical innovations and workplace wellbeing supports for trauma-informed teachers in this challenging profession.

Setting the Context of Teachers within Trauma-Affected Classrooms

Trauma has been consensually defined as an overwhelming experience that undermines one's belief that the world is good and safe (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015). Children who have experienced trauma from abuse and/or neglect may have significant classroom struggle or resistance to learning as a result of trauma's effects on a child's self-regulatory capacities and relational abilities. When teaching trauma-affected students, teachers should be aware of both the impacts of childhood trauma on learning (Downey, 2007) and the impacts on themselves as professionals working within trauma-affected organisations (Bloom, 1995).

Teachers may assume that some of their students could be trauma-affected if they work within schools located in vulnerable communities; however the application of trauma-informed approaches has much wider relevance to many more schools given that up to 40% of students are exposed to traumatic events, including family violence and exposure to violence (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2014). Due to the lack of family, community, or systemic resources in vulnerable or trauma-affected communities, the classroom may be the only consistent and stable environment the student experiences; and teachers could be responsible for the only social, emotional and academic interventions in which a student participates. While teachers are not mental health professionals, they can be therapeutically informed to redress the specific learning capacities that trauma impacts which

students must develop for successful learning: increasing self-regulatory abilities and increasing relational capacities (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016).

Caregiving professionals who are exposed to the behaviours, cognitions, and emotions of trauma-affected individuals can develop their own trauma-affected responses which negatively impact professionals' workplace wellbeing (Caring et al., 2015; Figley, 1995; Hydon et al., 2015; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Stamm 1995). Secondary traumatic stress describes this cluster of debilitating wellbeing symptomology; which mirrors the presentation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Stamm, 2010). Workers with trauma-affected children have reported high levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and burnout (Cieslak et al., 2014; Stevens & Higgins, 2002). Pearlman and Saakvitne (1995) advise that caring professionals must be provided with opportunities to understand and address the negative effects on their workplace wellbeing when meeting the needs of trauma-affected cohorts.

Secondary traumatic stress has come to be understood as a cluster of overlapping concepts including vicarious traumatization and compassion fatigue. Newell and MacNeil (2010) suggest that secondary traumatic stress distinguishes *trauma-related* stress responses; while burnout, which may also include compassion fatigue, refers to *professionally-related* stress responses. In this seminal study, Maslach (1999) asserts that teachers are on a final pathway towards burnout when they feel unable and unsupported to adequately meet the learning needs of resistant students. Teachers reported (1) they had limited control when it came to decision making and school policy; (2) their moral values were no longer validated within the workplace; and (3) their mandates of care and their desire to form strong student/teacher relationships were no longer honoured nor facilitated by their schools.

Meaningful Work for Teachers

The study of meaningful work (MW) is embedded in the paradigm of positive psychology, the pursuit to understand and enable the conditions of flourishing for individuals, communities, and societies (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and the study of wellbeing, human strengths, and optimal functioning (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Rusk & Waters, 2015). Wellbeing for individuals within the workplace has been specifically framed by scholarship in positive organizational behaviour (POB; Luthans & Youssef, 2007) which contends that workplace wellbeing benefits performance improvement (Luthans, 2002) and is a viable goal in and of itself (Wright, 2003).

Meaning is now understood as an aspect or route to psychological wellbeing (Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Seligman, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2011; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008); and eudaimonic wellbeing theories place focus on personal and professional growth through meaning making (Steger et al., 2006). Seligman (2011), who prioritizes meaning as a domain in the overarching wellbeing theory, PERMA (i.e., wellbeing comprised of domains of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment), offers a helpful definition that meaning is “belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self” (Seligman, 2011, p. 12). Viktor Frankl (1959) maintained that striving to find meaning is a primary motivation in life—particularly when facing psychological distress and existential frustration. Frankl positioned three potential pathways towards meaning: caring for another; facing adversity with courage; and pursuing meaningful work.

Rosso and colleagues (2010) define MW as (1) the meaning of work to an individual, (2) work that is significant and positive in valance, where (3) this positive valance is growth- and purpose-oriented (i.e., eudaimonic instead of hedonic). Similarly, Steger, Dik, and Duffy

(2012) propose four qualities of MW: MW is (1) subjectively judged to matter; (2) seen as significant; (3) serves the greater good; and (4) fulfils the broader need for meaning in one's life. Although the word *meaning* has both positive, negative, and neutral orientations (Brief & Nord, 1990; Wrzesniewski, 2003), Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) emphasize that within the MW literature, meaning implies the positively-orientated beliefs and values that employees make or find within their work. These authors claim a distinction between meaningfulness, which refers to the *amount* of significance the work subjectively holds for the individual (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003); and meaningful work, explained as work that feels significant to the individual. Alternately, Dik and colleagues (2013) clarify the distinction between work meaning (i.e., the meaning people give and take from their work) and meaningful work (i.e., work that is both eudaimonically positive and subjectively viewed as significant).

Early theorising which has contributed to current understandings of MW includes: serving the greater good through one's work (Jahoda, 1979); relational job design and workplace motivation (Grant, 2007); finding purpose through MW (Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000; Sparks & Schenk, 2001); social-cognitive models (Lent, 2013); protean career orientation (Hall, 2002); and job crafting (Wrzesniewski, 2003; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Those engaged in MW experience their work as more motivating and satisfying, have less absenteeism, and sustain a desire to stay within their organizations (Steger et al., 2012).

MW serves as an effective buffer to meet the daily adversity of workplace demands (Steger & Dik, 2009; Steger, Frazier, & Zaccanini, 2008). Those believing that their work is socially relevant and contributing to the greater good also report increases in their own wellbeing (Arnold et al., 2005; Steger et al., 2012). In addition to having higher work satisfaction (Kamdron, 2005), people who believe they have MW are more likely to see their work as a calling (see for example Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dik et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003).

In one of the first studies to explore MW in teachers, Willemse (2013) investigated the relationships between calling and MW with teachers ($N = 270$), and suggested that teachers who view their work as a calling do view their work as meaningful which then assists them to maintain a positive workplace attitude. Despite this early scholarship, there is scant research on MW with teachers. The study of MW is a field in its adolescence (Rosso et al, 2010) with continued calls for better understandings of experiential dimensions of MW and supportive interventions that will increase MW (Dik et al., 2013; Steger et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003).

Psychodynamic Existential Perspectives to Understand Meaningful Work

Dik, Byrne and Steger (2013) propose that many individuals desire work that existentially matters. People want their work to serve their own personal growth, to foster their own potential, and to increase the meaning they find in their daily efforts. Pines (2002) proposes that teachers seek existential significance through their work to find meaning and to prevent burnout. Helpful here is Frankl's (1959, p. 100) definition of existential as: (1) our particular human way of being and existing; (2) the meaning of our existence; and (3) the striving to determine meaning in personal existence (i.e., "the will to meaning"). Exploring the relevance of this perspective, Pines' study of teachers ($N = 97$) correlated lack of perceived significance in work to burnout. This study asserts that an existential perspective reframes teacher burnout through relating human needs for self-actualization (i.e., driven by the need for achievement and working towards one's potential) to lack of workplace accomplishment. For instance, environmental factors that correlate to burnout (e.g., managing disruptive students; insufficient practice pedagogy support; ineffective school policy) may be existentially interpreted by the teacher as *my efforts do not matter*.

Considering the specific work of teachers, there may be a direct relationship between implementing effective practice pedagogy and increasing MW. Pines (2002) explains that ineffectively managing disruptive students hinders teachers' ability to find existential significance in their efforts. Further, Pines speculates that failing to teach resistant students triggers teacher beliefs such as: *My teaching has no impact; I have no purpose in my work.*

Within the context of the trauma-affected classroom, the opposite of compassion fatigue is compassion satisfaction, defined as the pleasure one derives from being able to do one's work well, being satisfied by the helping aspects of the work, and feeling invigorated by the work itself (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2017; Stamm, 2005). People who work in trauma-affected environments report compassion satisfaction when they are encouraged to incorporate new ways of working into their practice, are supported to deal with professional adversity, feel happy and successful when continuing their work, and believe their work makes a difference (Stamm, 2005, 2010).

In addition to the possibility of a teacher experiencing MW through compassion satisfaction, they may also have the opportunity to experience vicarious posttraumatic growth. Considering the paradigm of posttraumatic growth (see for example Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), the literature has forwarded concepts of compassion satisfaction and finding satisfaction in one's work with trauma-affected individuals to the professional's own growth as a result of this trauma-affected work. Vicarious posttraumatic growth is defined as the positive changes for professionals resulting from vicarious trauma exposure (Arnold et al., 2005; Meyerson et al., 2011; Tedeschi et al., 2015). Vicarious posttraumatic growth in caregiving professionals mirrors posttraumatic growth in trauma-survivors with additional nuances (Manning-Jones, de Terte, & Stephens, 2015). Professionals reporting vicarious posttraumatic growth (1) reflected upon the resiliency of humankind in general (Arnold et al., 2005); and (2) reported "spiritual broadening" and the acknowledgement of the individual's spiritual life assisting in healing (as opposed to the changes in spiritual beliefs reported in posttraumatic growth; Manning-Jones et al., 2015, p. 131). Finally, professionals reporting vicarious posttraumatic growth experienced growth through (1) increases in the meaning and value of their work, (2) increases in their ability to make a difference in others, and (3) increases in their professional capabilities. To date, teachers have not been specifically studied within vicarious posttraumatic growth exploration (Meyerson et al., 2011).

Bi-Dimensional Model of Meaningful Work

In a comprehensive literature review and integration, Rosso and colleagues (2010) determined that a bi-dimensional model can be analytically applied to MW. The first dimension of MW defines the *sources* of the meaning (i.e., where the meaning comes from); and the second dimension describes the psychological and social *mechanisms* of meaning creation (i.e., how the work becomes meaningful). Therefore, the two dimensions position (1) the direction of action toward self or others in relation to (2) the individual's motives toward agency (drive to master, create, expand, differentiate) or communion (drive to connect, unite, contact, attach; Dik et al., 2013; Rosso et al., 2010). Thus, in order to forward the empirical, phenomenological exploration of MW: each source of MW should first be identified; then mechanisms can be determined to explain how meaning is made and sustained for the individual.

Rosso and colleagues determined four main sources of MW: (1) the self (i.e., one's values, motivations, beliefs); (2) others (i.e., student, coworkers, leaders, groups and communities); (3) the work context (i.e., the design of job tasks, organisational mission, financial circumstances, non-work domains); and (4) spiritual life (i.e., spirituality, sacred

callings). They also determined seven pathways or mechanisms to explain how work becomes meaningful: (1) authenticity (i.e., a sense of coherence or alignment with the work and one's true self); (2) self-efficacy (i.e., beliefs in the power and ability to produce effects or a positive difference); (3) self-esteem (i.e., evaluating one's self-worth in a workplace setting); (4) purpose (i.e., a sense of directedness and intentionality); (5) belongingness (i.e., the drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and significant relationships); (6) transcendence (i.e., connecting or superseding the ego to something or someone greater); and (7) cultural and interpersonal sense-making (i.e., meaning making through the role of cultural or social environment). By placing sources and mechanisms in a bi-dimensional model, four main pathways (i.e., individuation, self-connection, contribution, and unification) arise that are conceptually distinct (i.e., the two intersecting dimensions of "self—others" and "agency—communion"); but the authors suggest these pathways are not mutually exclusive and can be activated simultaneously. Further, when one source of MW fits multiple dimensions, the positive impacts of MW may be additive or have interactive effects (Dik et al., 2013). The bi-dimensional model was employed within this study to explore these pathway intersections towards MW with specific intention to inform future MW interventions for teachers.

Concepts from traumatology literature (e.g., secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatization, compassion fatigue, and burnout) suggest the negative impacts on MW when working with trauma-affected students. When left unmanaged, these negative pathways undermine a teacher's sense of meaning they bring to and derive from their work (Pines, 2002). However, on the other side of the continuum, working with struggling students can generate the possibilities of satisfaction and growth; and these pathways can help teachers find both increased meaning in their work and serve as a buffer for teachers in times of workplace adversity.

To contribute to the next phase of study in the paradigm of MW, qualitative inquiry is necessary in the pursuit to diversify methods for theoretical advancement (Rich, 2017). To date, very little is known in the empirical literature on the development of sources and mechanisms utilised by teachers when work becomes meaningful within trauma-affected classrooms. Accordingly, the research questions of this study explored:

- (1) What specific *sources* of MW did teachers derive from working with trauma-affected students?
- (2) Once the sources were identified, how did work become meaningful through the *mechanisms* of MW?
- (3) How did secondary traumatic stress impact MW for teachers working within trauma-affected classrooms?

Methods

Participants

The participants for this study were classroom teachers ($N = 18$) from two Australian Government schools. These two schools were identified as having trauma-affected students within their cohorts because of complex systemic factors including low socio-economic indicators, transient populations, recently arriving refugee groups, and Aboriginal communities. School-reports confirming trauma-affected student cohorts were supplied from staff including wellbeing teams, community psychological support agencies and child protective services.

The first research site was a small primary school (foundation-year to grade-six) in a rural community approximately 150-kilometers from a large metropolitan city. The sample

comprised of nine teachers (seven women and two men; ages 22 – 51). The participants had between one and seventeen years of teaching experience; and averaged 12.2 years at this school. The group of nine classroom teachers represented the entire teaching staff representing all year-levels within this small school. All teachers taught literacy, maths and a range of inter-disciplinary subjects. Regarding this particular student cohort, 24% were of Aboriginal descent, 30% were known to the Department of Health and Human Services, and 72% of families were in the lowest quartile for socio-economic status within the state.

The second research site was a large Foundation to Year-Twelve school in a rapidly growing outer suburb. Nine teachers (six women and three men; ages 22 – 32) participated. They had between one and six years of teaching experience and averaged 1.8 years at this school. All teachers were middle-years classroom teachers (grades five through eight); and three of the teachers held additional leadership responsibilities within the school. Most teachers taught single-subjects to multiple student cohorts; and three teachers taught both literacy and maths to a single student cohort. Regarding the school's student population, 42% of students had a language background other than English; and over 40% of families were in the state's lowest quartile for socio-economic status.

Procedure

The data emerging from this cross-sectional design was collected in two sessions over a two-month period at the beginning of the calendar school year. Framed by a qualitative, constructivist paradigm, this study acknowledged the reflexive role of the researchers, alongside participants sharing a relationship-based, constructivist worldview (Gough, 2017). At the start of each session, teachers were first asked to complete a written journal entry with prompts such as: *Why do you do this work? What does being a teacher in this community mean to you? On your best days, what does educating your students mean to you?* Further, to better understand the effects of childhood trauma on meaningful work, researchers also asked questions such as: *In what ways do workplace concerns impact your motivation to do this work? How does teaching trauma-affected students impact the meaning that you get from your work?* For the remainder of each session, teachers then moved into semi-structured group interviews to discuss their responses. All sessions were audio-recorded; and all recordings and all journal entries were fully transcribed. The researchers disclosed with participants the ethical predicaments of reflective practice and other limitations regarding privacy, relational-roles, and clear boundaries of the researchers in attempts to mitigate the possibility of “moral injury”—particularly when discussing topics that were sensitive to participants (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2016, p. 5).

Analysis

Data arising from group interviews and individual journal entries were analysed using the following procedures. Iterative data theme reduction occurred through several readings of all transcriptions, including participant member-checking of interview transcriptions and dependability audits by two additional readers to increase internal confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and intercoder agreement (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). NVivo data analysis software was used to support the sorting and categorization of data themes.

The strategy of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996), an adaptation of qualitative content analysis, was selected due to its privileging of participant experience. In this study of workplace meaning, IPA, an inductive and non-hypothesis testing analytical strategy, prioritized the phenomenological meanings ascribed by the

participants themselves (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). Originating from studies within health and social care paradigms, IPA prompted the researchers to maintain focus on participants’ own voices and self-given meanings as worthy of analysis and discussion; rather than attempting to objectively assess the validity of participant responses. IPA offers an appropriate analysis frame for this study due to its surfacing of useful perspectives on the individual, idiographic level to better understand specific situations and events (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

To produce the qualitative content themes, the following data reduction sequence emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003): All data points were identified through open coding categorization to form 174 unique codes. An iterative process was followed throughout the data reduction to check for researcher bias resulting from pre-existing understandings due to a-priori theory. Forty-nine axial codes to reflect patterns and relationships were identified. Next, 12 secondary selective codes were reduced to four primary selective codes to create a unified framework for discussion in order to propose the possible interactions between participant responses and the relevant literatures.

Results

On analysing the qualitative data, two major themes emerged as sources of MW: practice pedagogy and teacher wellbeing, both shown in Table 1. Table 2 shows the results obtained from asking teachers to discuss the negative impacts and threats to MW. Table 3 presents example quotes taken from teachers about the sources and detractors of MW.

| <i>Primary selective codes</i> | Practice pedagogy | | Teacher wellbeing | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| <i>Secondary selective codes</i> | Student achievement | Student wellbeing | Workplace coping | Self-regulation | Relationship | Professional identity |
| <i>Axial codes</i> | Motivating students to learn Nurturing student independence Increasing growth mindset in students | Curriculum is more than academics | Maintaining teacher wellbeing Feeling positive emotions Succeeding at every day challenges Valuing resilience | Feeling energized Handling pressure Consistent every day | Building student relationships Caring for students Becoming a positive role-model Building professional relationships | Teaching is my whole life Valuing communities Teaching in low socio-economic communities Increasing professional abilities |

Table 1: Sources of Meaningful Work (MW) for teachers in trauma-affected classrooms

| <i>Primary selective codes</i> | Impacts on practice pedagogy | | | Impacts on teacher wellbeing | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|---|--|---|
| <i>Secondary selective codes</i> | Trauma-affected students | Unmet self-regulatory needs of students | Unmet relational capacities of students | Trauma-affected teachers | Trauma-affected teacher work | Stress-affected schools |
| <i>Axial codes</i> | Trauma affects child development Unready to learn Resistance | Triggers Hyper-arousal Anger Sadness Out of control Require structure | Attachment needs Manipulative as survival strategy Emotionally draining Hiding Inconsistent Rude | Secondary traumatic stress responses Dysregulated Alone Distracted Sick with illness Inadequacy Negative coping behaviours Losing motivation towards burnout | Lack of trauma-informed training Emotional responses to work Balancing professional and personal | School is stress Complexity of workplace demands Resourcing needs compound stress Challenges in professional teams |

Table 2: Negative impacts on Meaningful Work (MW) for teachers in trauma-affected classrooms

| Meaningful Work (MW) themes defined | Sample quotes |
|---|---|
| <i>MW through practice pedagogy:</i> Teachers described their work as meaningful when their pedagogical strategies were effective for student learning | ‘I want the kids in our grade to be enthusiastic about learning, but also about life.’ ‘You think it’s about teaching them academics, and then you meet our students and their many social skills and wellbeing needs.’ ‘Wellbeing is a priority.’ |
| <i>Impacts on practice pedagogy:</i> Teachers described the needs of trauma-affected students and the ways in which this negatively impacted their attempts at effective pedagogy | ‘It’s very hard to identify why sometimes a student will explode, and what the specific triggers will be.’ ‘It’s mentally exhausting and emotionally draining.’ ‘Sometimes you can figure out [student behaviour]; and sometimes you can’t.’ |
| <i>MW through teacher wellbeing:</i> Teachers described their work as meaningful when they perceived their own effective coping, relational interactions, and positive professional identities | ‘I didn’t know until I started at this school that I also needed wellbeing for myself.’ ‘I feel it physically, probably in my heart. It’s not even a mental thing, it’s just a real warm, fulfilling thing inside.’ ‘It’s the greatest surprise I’ve had being a teacher—how much resilience I have to develop in myself...’ ‘The longer I’m teaching, I value relationships more now than when I first started.’ ‘Trust with the students—it’s hard to develop and easy to lose with them, so you’ve got to be a positive role-model.’ ‘Emotionally, you don’t ever leave the job.’ |
| <i>Impacts on teacher wellbeing:</i> Teachers described the ways in which their own wellbeing decreased due to concerns of secondary traumatic stress exposure and overwhelming workplace demands | ‘I have distressing emotions, like sadness and I find myself crying because of what some students have to face and the behaviours they present in response.’ ‘I’m fatigued and I know that it’s not that I need more sleep. It’s emotional and I want to sleep more from exhaustion.’ ‘You have this conflicting feeling of—I could’ve or I should’ve done more.’ |

Table 3: Sample quotes for Meaningful Work (MW) from teachers

Practice Pedagogy and Mechanisms of MW

The first theme was teachers’ practice pedagogy as a source of MW. Throughout all data gathering sessions, when prompted to reflect on what made work meaningful for teachers was the perception of the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of their own pedagogical attempts to increase student achievement and wellbeing. Arising from the data were teacher observations that practice pedagogy was indeed their label for describing their comprehensive work with students (i.e., strategies for teaching and learning; strategies to support positive student behaviours). Teachers’ own continual focus and refocussing on pedagogy throughout

the sessions suggests that effective pedagogy is a particularly important and synergistic intersection for how work becomes meaningful for teachers in trauma-affected classrooms.

Individuation as a mechanism of MW occurs when the individual feels a sense of self-efficacy through autonomy and control at work (Rosso et al., 2010). Individuation describes when teachers feel they have the power and ability to make a difference, effect change and exercise control through their efforts; and when an individual feels their self-esteem is bolstered because they believe they are valuable and worthy at work (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Pedagogy played a role in the individuation toward MW when teachers felt that their instructional strategies and positive behaviour management were effective. Their sense of autonomy and control at work was fortified when they were given the adequate resources to design engaging lessons and other classroom supports to effectively assist in managing complex behaviours (i.e., another adult as an education support worker or an internal system within the school of a ‘buddy classroom’ when a student needed a time-out to de-escalate).

Teachers’ own perceptions that they were valuable and worthy hinged on both the daily wins of incremental student learning and the daily struggles of successfully de-escalating student resistance and refusal. Individuation was blocked when teachers ended school days deflated and demoralized when students were not open to relational interactions, or worse, when both teacher and students became heightened and students acted in hyper-aroused, angry or triggered ways within the classroom. Teachers reported that their self-esteem depended on their effective classroom strategies, and often they attributed their struggles to inadequacies in their own pedagogy, rather than systemic influences of broader community disadvantage.

Self-Connection as a mechanism of MW occurs when one’s work feels authentically aligned to the “true” self (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 108). This phenomenon can be present when an individual feels internal consistency with their own values (Shelton & Elliott, 1998); and when the person feels authentically alive at work (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Pedagogy played a role in the self-connection toward MW when teachers felt their own professional identities affirmed as effective teachers who could both dynamically perform their jobs and inspire students to take learning risks within the classroom; and manage themselves effectively in the face of student escalation. Teachers reported themes of connecting to their authentic selves when work was most meaningful—versus their “reactionary” selves under duress when ineffectively addressing student behaviour. A repeated practice pedagogy theme was needing more pedagogical strategies to empower self-regulation in students—that could be mirrored and role-modelled as teacher practice strategies consistently throughout their schools. Some teachers envisioned that if they were able to develop these pedagogical strategies, their own sense of professional identify and workplace engagement would increase.

Contribution as a mechanism of MW occurs when one’s work contributes to a sense of significance, impact and interconnection in something greater than the self (Rosso et al., 2010). Pedagogy played a role in the contribution toward MW when teachers felt the effectiveness of their teaching directly correlated to impact in their communities. Reframed within existential perspectives (Dik et al., 2013; Pines, 2002), teachers voiced that it was the success or failure of the students’ learning that contributed to the sense that their work held significance toward the greater good. It was the effectiveness of practice pedagogy that directly influenced a sense of purpose and meaning strengthened by perceptions of direct impact that teachers made on their students. Teacher responses within these themes were examples of vicarious posttraumatic growth (Meyerson et al., 2011; Tedeschi et al., 2015), wherein the teachers reported experiencing their own growth as a direct result of witnessing the growth in learning of their trauma-affected students. Often, teachers felt their contribution to students was lacking if teachers only focussed on academic content.

Teachers perceived that their practice pedagogy needed to be “more than academics” and that this realization was only possible once they understood the full context of their vulnerable communities and the learning needs of dysregulated students because of adverse childhood experiences. While the aim of academic learning was central to teachers’ organizational mission and design of job tasks, teachers discussed what they perceived as a “hidden curriculum”: the teaching of wellbeing. Teachers then defined wellbeing for students with phrases such as “learning how to take care of your stress in the classroom,” “knowing about your heated emotions,” or “having strategies to make relationships.” Most teachers in this study had neither prior university training nor professional development to address trauma-affected students’ wellbeing needs. Some spent time discussing that their pre-service university teacher training left them feeling unprepared for teaching in vulnerable communities. Teachers discussed their desires to incorporate wellbeing into daily academic instruction to reach their most vulnerable students—and all of their students. As a source of MW, teaching practices that incorporated wellbeing for students were imperative goals in their work. Heidi explained her initial surprize when discovering the role of wellbeing in her classroom:

There’s a hidden curriculum that you’re not told about...and it’s frustrating until you figure this out after your teaching degree. You think it’s about teaching them academics, and then you meet our students and their many social skills and wellbeing needs.

Heidi’s observation of the “hidden curriculum” was shared by her colleagues. The hidden curriculum of incorporating wellbeing was something her colleagues were attempting to do as an ad-hoc triage-response to the needs they saw in children every day. She continued:

A lot of our kids will come to school without food, clothes will be really dirty, covered in dirt, and no sense of hygiene. You have to model wellbeing for them. There are so many adults who aren’t filling this gap at home, and you have to learn to cope with this because it’s really frustrating because you can see great potential in the kids.

The data clustered in themes such as wellbeing for the whole child, children requiring more than academics to be successful; and needing to address social and emotional needs first within a trauma-affected classroom. The teachers also spoke at length about the need for advocacy to prioritize the wellbeing concerns of trauma-affected students in a systemic way (i.e., through the re-visioning of student learning standards, teacher competencies, teacher training, and professional learning communities).

Finally, pedagogy played a role in the unification toward MW when teachers felt their own values alignment was activated through daily efforts toward community empowerment. Unification as a mechanism of MW occurs when an individual feels both guided by their own purpose and this purpose has significance for others; and the individual feels a sense of belongingness, harmony and social identification at work (Rosso et al., 2010). This was perceived by teachers when they were able to create strong cultures of safety and belonging within their classrooms through deliberate strategies; but given the current contexts of both schools, some teachers struggled to create cultures of positive and significant student relationships. Here, the theme of role-modelling was emphasized by teachers again, as teachers experienced a positive sense of social identification, one aspect of unification (Rosso et al., 2010) when they were able practice pedagogical strategies that specifically built relationships with students (i.e., correcting students in supportive ways; co-regulating heightened students without embarrassing them in front of their peers; stating directions as positive expectations).

Teachers responded that practice pedagogy which focused on student wellbeing reinforced their perceptions that their work was effective and held positive meaning. They

described “great days” where students were ready to learn and connected to one another; and these days were few and far between in the first months of the new school year within classrooms where there was “always some emergency”. Teachers emphasized that for their practice pedagogies to remain meaningful, they needed to continually focus on the “small daily wins” to maintain focus on the whole-child and the momentary glimpses to celebrate when things were going well in the classrooms. These responses helped to confirm that practice pedagogy that embedded a focus on increasing student wellbeing could be a meaningful component of a teacher’s purpose and a motivation to help the greater good.

Threats to MW due to ineffective Practice Pedagogy

Based upon their own phenomenological perspectives, teachers perceived that MW decreased and/or was negatively impacted when existing strategies within their practice pedagogy were unable to meet the complex needs of some students resulting from the impacts of trauma and systemic community concerns. A hindrance to the mechanism of individuation as a result of experiencing secondary traumatic stressors, teachers reported that the daily meanings that they derived from their work could be diminished or thwarted from this vicarious exposure—and was often further compounded by the lack of knowing how to teach effectively within trauma-affected classrooms. For instance, teachers contended there was a lack of specific training to effectively teach trauma-affected students; and their existing practice pedagogy diminished perceptions of MW. Specifically, two sub-themes described this category of responses: feeling unprepared by their university pre-service teacher training qualifications, and the subjective sense that early-career teachers often were assigned the most “difficult” classrooms containing high numbers of their school’s trauma-affected students. Maddie, a first-year graduate teacher who felt this way continued to explain, “At my university, they don’t teach you how to calm down, they teach you how to control the students.” She discussed how she found from the outset of the first weeks of school that “screaming at them is not going to make a difference.” She continued:

I used to walk into the classroom and say, ‘You know what, if that kid’s mucking up, I’m just going to yell at them!’ because that’s the only thing I knew. How do I stay calm and still get the message across?

Framed by the MW mechanism of self-connection, MW did not occur when teachers acted in ways incongruent with their own values. These and other comments reflected psychological distress and dysfunction, in this case yelling and other dominating behaviours, in earnest attempts to manage a dysregulated classroom. When some teachers in this study felt uncertain as to how to meet the needs of resistant students, they fell back into emotional, aggressive, and dysregulated compensatory responses.

Other threats to self-connection and feeling capable as an effective teacher were observed when the teachers spent large portions of the group sessions discussing the self-regulatory concerns of their students with particular focus on needing practice strategies to increase self-regulation within their classrooms—and feeling inadequate as a professional to effectively employ practice strategies. Themes which clustered into the category of the unmet self-regulatory needs of students included: triggers, hyper-arousal, anger, and sadness. Additional themes included students labelled “difficult” or “out-of-control”, students with low energy levels, and students who required more structure within the classroom. Teaching students whose stress responses were easily triggered was both confusing and frustrating for the teachers. Teachers shared the observation that teachers who did not have strategies to work with trauma-affected students quickly lost perspective on how to seek support to effectively address learning needs within their classrooms. Further, one group of teachers hypothesized that without effective practice pedagogy, teachers themselves may be negatively impeding a student’s self-regulatory abilities required for classroom learning.

Carole shared that she was still triggered and re-triggered by the most defiant students in her classroom. She observed her own process:

The more worked up you get, the more likely it is that you're going to explode, and then [students] will react to that. And I mean, in their personal lives they have people all the time exploding at them or whatever. The human part of me will react, or wants to react! If someone swears at me, I want to swear back at them. It pushes me to a point where I don't want to improve the relationship.

Teachers concurred that a teacher's resources of empathy and self-regulation could be drained in the face of repeated exposure to student dysregulation. Carole acknowledged here that her trauma-affected students had dysregulated behaviour modelled for them by other adults outside the classroom; and her practice approach was negatively compromised when she lost control of her own self-regulation.

Threats to both MW mechanisms of contribution and unification occurred when teachers' practice pedagogy was ineffective. Thus, teachers felt that they were not making a contribution to the greater good or to the benefit of their students; and therefore did not experience a sense of belonging and social harmony at work (Rosso et al., 2010). Teachers also observed that forming strong relationships was central to understandings of MW. Robust relationships could be difficult with students who resist relational interactions; and their current practice pedagogy required more strategies to create a stronger relational density within the classroom—wherein students are continually surrounded by healthy relational interactions. Teachers reflected that their trauma-affected students struggled to build positive relationships, and they argued that the relationships that trauma-affected students do form can be unstable, fleeting, conditional, or confusing to others.

The teachers in one cohort agreed that maintaining strong relational interactions in the classroom drained them emotionally when assessing and intervening in poor relational behaviour hourly and throughout the day. Christy expressed this uncertainty: "Look at their body language, look at what they're trying to say to you. Sometimes they call out silly things, but there's a reason behind their behaviour."

The group continued to talk about the kinds of inconsistent relationship-based behaviours that students bring to the classroom. Often, teachers admitted to negatively ruminating when students challenged the teacher/student relationship and described escalating student behaviours as "rude" and "manipulative". Joseph, a middle-years teacher, said that he was exhausted from the negative relationship and daily resistance with his most challenging student. He described this student by conceding:

I have this kid that has no credit in the bank. She's probably one of the toughest people I've ever had around. She is belligerent, antagonistic... Like, I know it's not good to think about a twelve-year-old having this long thought-out plan around how she will manipulate my classroom. And even when she's doing the right thing, it's just so hard to not think, "What's your end game?"

Joseph used the sessions to explore his own responses to improving relationships with specific students like the one mentioned above. He continually reported that he struggled to see his work as meaningful and struggled to objectively approach some of his students. He conjectured that his current pedagogy strategies were not working. Initially, he started the school year with caring and empathy, but soon identified that the MW he wanted was decreasing in the first semester of the school year because he perceived that his own practice was not effective in neither academic nor relational ways.

Teacher Wellbeing and Mechanisms of Meaningful Work

The second broad source of MW for teachers within trauma-affected classrooms was teachers' observations of how their own workplace wellbeing increased their sense of meaning at work. As a source of MW, teacher wellbeing was specifically defined by this study's participating teachers as their own workplace coping, self-regulation and feeling energized, positive relationships, and professional identify. This finding was indeed consistent within the pre-existing literature. As meaning is integral to psychological wellbeing (Jayawickreme et al., 2012; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008); and a well-established domain of wellbeing frameworks (i.e., PERMA; Seligman, 2011), finding positive meaning from one's efforts at work is one of the cornerstones of workplace wellbeing (Luthans, 2002). The results of this study indicate that teacher wellbeing, as a source of MW, may intersect in simultaneous ways through all four mechanisms (i.e., individuation, self-connection, contribution, and unification) in the bi-dimensional model of MW (Rosso et al., 2010).

Findings supporting the mechanism of individuation and teacher wellbeing included the noticing of their own self-efficacy when they could stay self-regulated when coping with classroom adversity (i.e., student resistance, defiance and disruption). Teachers quickly focussed on the positive outcomes of feeling self-regulated and the ways in which this fortified their sense of meaning. Some teachers discussed that their MW came from increasing self-regulation in trauma-affected students. They consensually agreed that their students could only increase self-regulatory capacities (i.e., managing difficult emotions; acknowledging the stress response when learning something new) if teachers were self-regulated themselves and modelled self-regulation as professionals. Therefore, they envisioned their work as meaningful when they could increase self-regulatory capacities such as being able to contend with adverse student behaviours without losing control of their own emotional responses and coping in a positive way.

The mechanism of self-connection through teacher wellbeing was activated when teachers experienced positive emotions—and these positive emotions served to help with workplace coping. When reflecting upon their work with trauma-affected children, themes describing positively valenced emotional states were shared by all participants. MW themes clustered around wanting to feel genuinely happy to be with the students; to love both the work and the classroom community; to feel passionate about every day work efforts; and to feel satisfied and proud of their work.

Teachers observed that their work felt meaningful when they left school energized after a day when they were able to well-regulate their own physical and emotional responses in order to manage all of the needs and demands of their students and their schools. Christy, a middle-years teacher, discussed how feeling energised after her best days at work increased her ability to regulate herself and connect to family members later in the evenings: "And I want to go home and talk about positive things that have happened. I have a lot of energy, exercise and just feel happy." The most meaningful days at work were days when teachers said they felt "in control of themselves" and "able to mirror self-regulation for students". Christy mentioned that on her best days, she was better equipped to regulate her anger on her after-work commute home, to feel more tolerant of her partner, and to have more motivation to exercise—all contributing to her sense of wellbeing through positive emotions (i.e. feelings of happiness), engagement in relationships (i.e., more time for her partner), and accomplishment (i.e., wanting to share positive stories with her partner).

The MW mechanism of contribution through teacher wellbeing was activated when teachers' efforts at work effectively fostered relationships. Each teacher agreed that healthy relationships and relational interactions increased their own wellbeing and their own

contribution to strengthening their school community's wellbeing. Forming strong relationships with students was a pervasive MW theme across all teacher responses; and teacher perceptions all converged on role-modelling relationships as integral to MW. As relationships are an intrinsically important route to wellbeing (Seligman, 2011)—the teachers validated this aspect of workplace wellbeing with perceptions that their work was meaningful when they were able to exemplify healthy relational interactions. Sub-themes within building relationships with students included feeling attached to students, building trust in the classroom, nurturing cultures of belonging, and spending free time with students to strengthen relationships. Teachers discussed how the teacher-student relationship could be tested when students were challenged outside their comfort-zones when increasing academic rigour within progressively more difficult learning aims.

Sonia, who had spent over a decade teaching in a vulnerable, rural community, summarized this belief: "It's the most important thing I think. You can't be a teacher if you don't have good relationships with your kids." She expressed frustration when working with teachers who did not value building strong relationships; and questioned the effectiveness of a teacher with ineffective relationship-building skills. By showing care for students and by being responsive to students' needs, teachers reported that MW increased when they felt trust building within the teacher student relationship. Teachers agreed that the best of their student relationships contributed to their own wellbeing when relationships were versatile, flexible, genuine and patient. Carole noticed: "Eye contact is a big thing. When they start to make eye contact with you and start telling you about their lives, that's the point at which I know that I've got in a little bit."

The MW mechanism of unification through teacher wellbeing was identified when the theme of role-modelling wellbeing for students could be seen as (1) aligned to the teacher's value system, (2) a pathway for social identity at work, and (3) a mechanism for belonging and increasing relational interactions (Rosso et al., 2010). Gene and Mike were both male teachers, working together on the same team. Gene reflected on what gave his work meaning:

It's quite rewarding being a male in this school. Many families here don't have positive male figures in their lives; and a lot of them see males connected to domestic violence in the house. Also being an Indigenous person myself, we have a high population of Indigenous kids at this school, and I want them to see that you can be successful, go to university; and you don't have to be satisfied with being on the dole because your mum and uncle have.

Teachers discussed that being a role-model unified their values and actions in their classrooms. Christy commented on how her wellbeing depended on her own behaviour:

At the beginning, my emotional intelligence was nowhere near what it is now; and I've made the big realization that I need to watch what I'm doing, I need to watch what I'm saying, I need to watch how I'm behaving, I need to watch body language, I need to watch my own language.

Many teachers responded with hopes that their work continued to contribute to the greater good through broad impact on their communities. They spoke of being committed to the communities surrounding their schools and acknowledged (in both research sites) that their communities were places of significant social disadvantage. Mike discussed that teaching became meaningful to him as a way to live according to his values by contributing to his community in ways that he had wished he received as a young person. He envisioned: "I want my students to avoid the mistakes I made and hit the ground running." His comments were echoed by other teachers who voiced their similar purposes for teaching in low socio-economic communities. For Mike, the mechanism of unification may be reinforced through these relational interactions when allowing him to action his values of social justice, to align to his purpose, and to socially identify with his community as a proactive agent of change.

Threats to Meaningful Work due to the Erosion of Teacher Wellbeing

Given the sources of MW derived from teachers' own perceptions on the positive impacts for their own wellbeing, it is imperative to acknowledge their own observations on the negative effects of working with trauma-affected students and the ways in which the vicarious exposure to secondary traumatic stressors could trigger responses such as compassion fatigue and burnout in this teacher cohort. Within the sessions, teachers built upon their own understandings of their work in schools as trauma-affected work. Teachers initially shared their thoughts on their schools as dynamic workplaces that challenged them every day. As the schools in this study were selected for reporting trauma-affected student cohorts, these schools were described as trauma-organized systems (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008; Figley, 1995) containing trauma-affected classrooms (Downey, 2007; Wolpow et al., 2009).

If the MW mechanism of individuation allows the individual to feel a sense of control, autonomy and self-efficacy at work (Rosso et al., 2010), then teacher reports of feeling dysregulated and "out of control" at work impeded this mechanism's pathway. These findings were consistent to presentations of secondary traumatic stressors in other professional samples (Caringi et al., 2015; Cieslak et al., 2014; Figley, 1995; Hydon et al., 2015; Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Stamm, 2010). Teachers perceived a key theme of feeling dysregulated themselves in moments of classroom stress—and it was in these particular moments that their perceptions of MW would plummet. Subthemes included being triggered by the students, losing control in front of the students, angry responses such as yelling, crying, and feeling anxious or hyper-vigilant. Two teachers in the study described having nightmares involving their students (e.g. a student yelling at them, feeling dysregulated in the classroom, and a student dying).

Teachers spoke of letting students "get the better of them" and confessed to saying and doing things that they knew were not the behaviours they intended to model for their students. Teachers all agreed that they had every intention to be "in control" of their emotions, but the trauma-affected students found ways to undermine this intent during emotional teacher/student conflicts within the classroom. For instance, when Ashley was asked what a "good day" in the classroom looked like for her, she answered "Well, in the first few weeks of term, a good day is when I don't have to yell all day. I feel like I don't have to be that psycho teacher that's just screaming."

John echoed this response and shared that his own dysregulation arose when he perceived student aggression as a challenge to his own authority as a teacher. John reflected later in the conversation, "It's hard to remind yourself to calm down, to de-escalate. I let the kid explode, then I got upset as well, and then I had to go straight on with teaching all these other kids."

Physical symptoms and sickness became a theme in these teachers' trauma exposure responses. A cluster of teachers described themselves in the difficult times in the year as "sick and unmotivated". Teachers discussed how they had been sick the year prior and how they struggled in some cases to return to work—but did out of obligation to their team and their students. For instance, Heidi wrote in her journal that she had to take off four weeks two years ago with pneumonia and exhaustion. Although she was on-leave for four weeks, it took her six months to recover while still teaching.

In addition to the pressures of their trauma-affected work, some teachers confided in their journals that they were negatively coping with workplace stress in a small cluster of ways. Teachers talked about negatively coping with their stress with food, smoking tobacco, and over-sleeping. Two teachers talked about "emotional eating". One shared, "I get really tense at home, I don't want to plan for the next day, and honestly all I'm interested in is

food.” Another shared: “I’ll be honest, I smoke. I was supposed to give up, having this job, I just think it gets me through. I think I can’t quit—whatever gets me through.” One teacher wrote “addictions” in her journal, but did not elaborate further.¹ These negative coping behaviours linked teachers to other trauma-affected workers within caring-professions; however, as each profession requires a unique practice approach, this data suggests that a trauma-informed praxis framework to support MW for teachers must include deliberate wellbeing strategies for ways of working within school classrooms.

If the MW mechanism of self-connection allows an individual to feel a sense of authenticity and personal engagement at work (Rosso et al., 2010), then the effects of secondary traumatic stress responses hindered this pathway. In this theme, secondary traumatic stress responses often took the form of emotional responses and feeling helpless to positively impact struggling students and their families. While some teachers noted varying levels of academic progress, they still felt a deep sense of disappointment for their struggling trauma-affected students—and some teachers felt this disappointment as a professional failure and a threat to their own identity affirmation. Themes in this category referred to the work of teaching as “overwhelming”, “exhausting”, “emotional”, and “unclear workplace boundaries between my professional and personal life.” Naomi had a particularly difficult moment in the first interview:

For me, what’s been really challenging is being over-sensitive to the kids (started crying) and just having that compassion to cope with what’s happening to them, their environment, and what’s going to happen to them tomorrow.

Further, in their journal entries, some teachers used additional words to describe their own emotions when thinking about trauma’s effects on their work such as: uncontrollable anger, crying, frustration, and sadness—which mostly took place in teachers’ homes after work.

Carole commented, “Literally I will come home from work maybe three to four times a week, and I will go to bed, have a nap, get up for dinner and then probably go back to bed after dinner. I could have taken three days off and just slept for 72 hours.” She discussed at length how her struggle to effectively build strong relationships with the students directly corresponded to her negative rumination and fatigue at home. On days when there was extreme defiance from some students (e.g., calling her names, refusing to begin classroom assignments, self-exiting from the classroom), she felt even more deflated and frustrated at home in the evenings.

Some teachers noticed their own physical decline within the first months of the school year. When teaching within trauma-affected environments without formal training or pedagogical support for trauma-informed school practices, teachers noticed negative physical effects that impeded on their abilities to be present and able for their students. Specifically, teachers mentioned that they felt overly distracted, fatigued, and physically sick more often than they believed they would be in classrooms with less complex needs.

Multiple teachers discussed that they felt an inability to listen to others by the end of a long day with their students. Joseph shared his struggle: “I’ll just be really distracted, like anything can get to me. I’ll be distracted by things and my mind will just jump, jump, jump, jump...and it feels like I can’t physically focus even if I try.” When asked if he had any

¹ The researchers did not pursue the specific nature of reported addictions with the participant. After the interview, support was offered per the approved procedures outlined in ethics agreements.

supports in place to help his focus, he replied that his current strategy was to talk to his partner at home in the evenings and then try to forget about the day.

Threats to the MW mechanism of contribution were perceived when teachers felt their efforts had no lasting impact, no significance in the community, and no purpose. A group of primary teachers who all taught the same student cohort shared stories of nurturing incremental progress in some trauma-affected students; then witnessing negative family and community influences play out once students moved on to the next school. John reflected on his anger after finding out that one of these students had recently dropped out of the local secondary school:

It makes you feel angry, that you put in all this hard work and it just kind of goes south, and you're not angry at the kid. I reflect that it feels like an end point, like "This is it." I can't help this kid anymore and this has happened, so I supposed I've failed.

Teachers discussed the uncertainty of what to feel. They vacillated between trying to celebrate the daily learning successes, but still felt a heaviness when knowing or finding out more about a family's negative trajectory in the community.

The pathway toward meaningful contribution was further degraded when teachers reported ongoing distress throughout the school term. Teachers talked of feeling alone in their work, including feelings of guilt, cynicism, or minimizing their emotional responses. On particularly difficult days, teachers voiced feeling disconnected from others, and this lack of relational interaction increased their sense of workplace distress. One participant shared that she had to seek the ongoing support of a mental health professional in order to remain in her job.

Finally, the MW mechanism of unification was blocked when teachers noticed their wellbeing declining because they were disconnected from their purposes, value systems and interpersonal connectedness. Further, when teachers questioned the meaning of their profession, wellbeing felt far out of reach. Carole summed up her own struggle when confronting her own anger in a trauma-affected classroom environment. She discussed the anger she felt at length, including regret that she lost control of her classroom, her reactions, and the *apathy she felt later when reflecting on a difficult day*:

I have thoughts like, "What is the purpose and what am I doing?!" I'm not teaching anything, I'm not helping these kids. I'm just getting abused, and I'm disliking [the students] and feeling like I want to give up on them. This is the toughest gig I've ever had, and I go home at night and think, "Why am I a teacher?" It gets in your heart and in your head. It breaks your heart and I have sleepless nights.

In her most distressed interviews, she questioned the meaning and value of her professional choices; and her concerns were echoed by others in her interview group. Whereas teacher wellbeing contributed to MW through all four mechanisms, the threats to wellbeing due to trauma's secondary effects had negative repercussions in all four mechanisms as well.

Discussion

A key aim of this cross-sectional study was to establish if this sample of teachers was experiencing the effects of secondary traumatic stressors and was indeed a suitable cohort for this exploration within trauma-affected classrooms. Although the schools had been selected for indicators of significant community disadvantage and frequent interactions with child protection services, the researchers did not make any assumptions about trauma's secondary effects on the study's participants. The data confirmed that teachers reported many threats to

successfully deriving meaning from their work. Their perceptions were consistent with the literatures on secondary traumatic stress impacts on workplace wellbeing within broad professional samples (Caringi et al., 2015; Figley, 1995; Hydon et al., 2015).

Teacher wellbeing was compromised when they felt the effects of secondary stressors such as dysregulation, isolation, distraction, sickness, inadequacy and distressing emotions after work (Stamm, 2010). They also felt the effects of burnout, wherein the professional environment’s demands exceeded the resources that teachers felt they were given (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Findings confirmed that teachers felt that they had not been given trauma-informed training, nor proper support to handle their wellbeing needs such as those listed above. Additionally, they consensually agreed that their schools were complex places of workplace demands and scarce resources, which can often be found in trauma-organized systems working with trauma-affected children (Bloom, 1995).

Rosso and colleagues’ (2010) bi-dimensional model was chosen as the analytical framework for this study for its comprehensive integration of recent MW literatures. This study sought to test the model’s relevance with a professional sample of teachers to better understand the pathways towards meaning in this workplace context. The four MW mechanisms (i.e., individuation, self-connection, contribution and unification) proved useful to increase understandings of how the two sources of meaning (i.e., practice pedagogy and teacher wellbeing) became meaningful to teachers. Further, both sources of meaning were located in all four mechanism pathways. Per the bi-dimensional model, sources of MW that activate one or more pathways may increase the perception of meaningfulness. Although the authors of the bi-dimensional model propose that all four pathways do not need to be experienced simultaneously, the current data suggests that sources of MW for teachers in trauma-affected classrooms do indeed activate multiple mechanisms at once. The intersection of sources and mechanisms of MW for this sample is illustrated below in Figure 1.

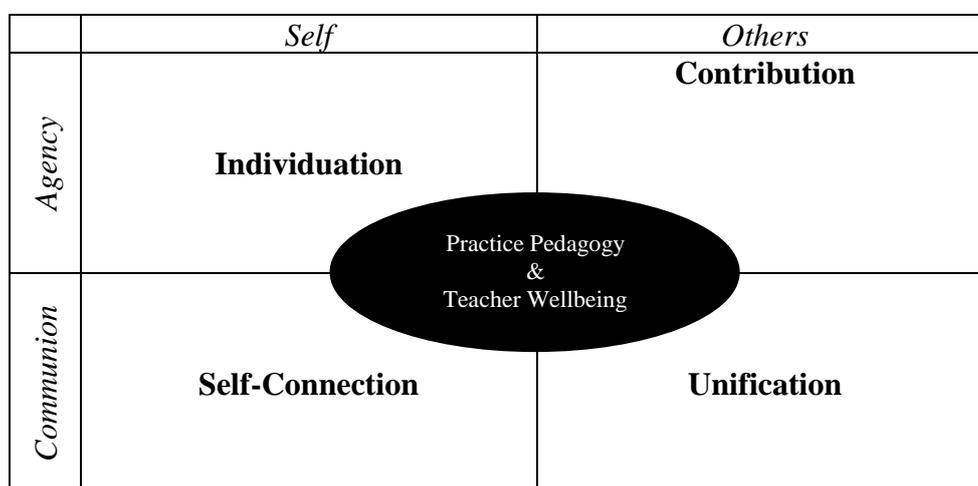


Figure 1: Model of Meaningful Work for Teachers in Trauma-Affected Classrooms

Of interest were practice pedagogy and teacher wellbeing themes that described the additive benefits of combining teacher concerns for their students with concerns for themselves as professionals. One example of a theme with additive benefits was role-modelling as it emerged as a repeated theme in both sources of MW. Role-modelling was viewed by teachers as a strategic tool to model trauma-informed practice pedagogy strategies of increasing self-regulatory abilities and relational capacities for students (Bloom, 1995; Brunzell et al., 2016; Downey, 2007; Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). These strategies should be employed in practice pedagogy within trauma-affected classrooms

because struggling students must have daily examples of healthy interaction role-modelled for them throughout the school day.

Role-modelling was also perceived to be an integral pathway towards teacher wellbeing and a pathway towards greater good intentions through community contribution (Steger et al., 2012). Teachers observed positive benefits to their own wellbeing when they were able to be the effective relational models they strived to be. All four mechanisms of MW were activated in the pursuit of role-modelling, and this focus on role-modelling wellbeing, contributing to the success of others, and devoting one's "whole life" to their classrooms suggests that work becomes meaningful in trauma-affected classrooms when teachers feel they are living examples of the kinds of people they hope their students will become someday. The concept of compassion satisfaction (Sharp Donahoo et al., 2017; Stamm, 2005) is helpful to understand the ways in which teachers receive positive feedback loops of compassion when they feel their resources of empathy and care are returned in the form of healthy school-based relational interactions. In the case of role-modelling, teachers recalled times when they felt these feedback loops of caring and empathy—particularly when students were mirroring positive emotion, a love of learning—and successfully de-escalating in a heated classroom moment.

In summary, the results of this study indicate that teachers can and do obtain meaning when working in trauma-affected classrooms. This study found that common sources of meaning emerged from practice pedagogy that successfully supported positive student behaviour and academic engagement. Other sources of meaning came from teacher wellbeing such as a teacher learning how to better regulate their own reactions, connecting to others through durable workplace relationships, and reflecting on their own daily contribution to community. Once impeding factors (i.e., secondary traumatic stressors or burnout factors) are acknowledged, teachers may feel more empowered to pursue the various pathways towards meaning through individuation, self-connection, contribution and unification.

Strengths and Limitations

Given the calls for novel contributions to understanding the experiential (e.g., phenomenological) dimensions of MW (Dik et al., 2013; Steger et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003) and positive organizational behaviour (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008); and considering the call to diversify methods within positive psychology (Rich, 2017), several steps were taken to acknowledge both strengths and limitations of this study's conclusions. While there were many attempts to increase strengths within the research design (see Methods section), this study had several limitations. Regarding the concern of reflexivity in qualitative research analysis (Gough, 2017), the researchers disclosed their breadth of experience as education researchers, in addition to prior histories of teaching and school leadership. Therefore, a limitation of the analytical method was the subjective judgement made by the researchers and their auditing peers, despite attempts to increase confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2000); and the themes derived from this research team therefore might not be replicated by another team with different praxis orientations.

Among the limitations recognised within Rosso and colleagues' (2010) bi-dimensional model is an over-reliance within Western culture orientations to define the self (as a source of MW) by the individual's personal values; as opposed to an interdependent understanding of the self which is connected to others (often found in Eastern cultures and traditions). Given that the current exploration was with a sample of teachers of Western orientation, this critique was noted and deemed a helpful reflexive frame. Rosso and colleagues suggest that future exploration should enquire into the role of cultural values and MW, and the specific ways in which values-creation relates to MW. Other limitations of the

bi-dimensional model question the use of this model to explain how an individual's perception and experience of MW changes over time; and the ways in which the bi-dimensional model applies to a broad spectrum of professions. Schnell and colleagues (2013) note that the generalizability of MW models can only be argued once different professions are individually studied. Given concerns of generalizability, the cross-sectional sample does not represent all teachers within trauma-affected classrooms; however, useful conclusions can be made by this small sample to contribute towards future theorizing and intervention to support this professional cohort.

One issue for data interpretation is the inference of direct causation of perceived secondary traumatic stressors and potential co-mingling with other profession-related stress (Shaufeli, 1998). A mitigating frame is that working with traumatized populations comprehensively impacts the work of every single individual within an organization's culture (Bloom & Sreedhar, 2008). As such, the study acknowledges a clear bias towards the stressors or difficult aspects of working with trauma-affected children. This particular focus was deemed necessary by the researchers to gain explicit understandings of the potential causes and negative effects of secondary traumatic stress attributed to working with trauma-affected children. Moreover, this study should be considered within the context of the study's methodology using a qualitative, constructivist paradigm (Altrichter et al., 2013).

Future Directions

Given the emergent themes of practice pedagogy and teacher wellbeing as two sources of MW for teachers in trauma-affected classrooms, future research can explore the various relationships between these two sources. Do MW increases in practice pedagogy take precedence before teacher wellbeing within this context—and/or does workplace wellbeing facilitate a teacher's effective practice implementation? What is the possible reciprocal nature of these two factors? Further, in what ways might pedagogical interventions (i.e., increasing practice strategies) directly increase workplace wellbeing, thereby increasing MW for teachers?

Future research may also employ multiple ways of collecting and checking data beyond the existing triangulation of data employed in the current study (i.e., journal entries, sequential open-ended group interviews, participant checking of transcriptions). Future studies could endeavour to understand MW for teachers through quantitative measures, classroom observations, and text analysis (i.e., text from teacher generated student reports, parent newsletters, etc.). Further, longitudinal research is also needed to explore (1) the interventions and adaptations made to trauma-informed teacher practice pedagogy and (2) the effects of these interventions on student achievement and both student and teacher wellbeing. Future investigation with the aim of increasing meaningful work for teachers would do well to continue privileging the voices, perspectives, and phenomenological experiences of teachers to foster growth and wellbeing for themselves as models of learning for the entire school community.

Conclusion

Given the challenging, daily work of educating trauma-affected students, the findings of this study supported the contention that teachers in trauma-affected classrooms experience MW if they observed their own workplace wellbeing and have effective practice pedagogy. While the theme of workplace wellbeing confirms existing literature on MW, the findings of this study introduced a new category, practice pedagogy, as a potential focus for future

intervention. The results of this study argued that practice pedagogy, a source of MW which sits at the intersection of all four mechanisms of how work becomes meaningful (i.e., individuation, self-connection, contribution, and unification), has the powerful potential to enhance iterative and additive experiences of MW. Further, a focus on the continued innovation of practice pedagogy for trauma-informed practice may simultaneously enhance the pathways towards MW—as identified by the teachers themselves (i.e., meeting the achievement and wellbeing needs of trauma-affected students; increasing teacher workplace coping, teacher relationships and role-modelling, and teacher professional identity).

These findings fortify the call to create trauma-informed pedagogical practices which promote and nurture the self-regulatory, relational, care and wellbeing being needs of all members in the school community—students and staff. This data also alerts to the phenomena that for teachers who work in schools not yet systemically aware of trauma’s secondary adverse effects, trauma-informed teachers may need to mobilize and advocate with their school’s leadership to shift the organization’s aims towards the mitigation of the vicarious effects of childhood trauma on the practice and wellbeing of teachers.

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