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Adaptability: An Important Capacity for Effective Teachers
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Abstract
A defining feature of teaching work is that it involves novelty, change, and uncertainty on a daily basis. Being able to respond effectively to this change is known as adaptability. In this article, we discuss the importance of adaptability for teachers and their healthy and effective functioning in the workplace. We discuss approaches for assessing adaptability and describe several important implications for practice and research that are relevant to the development of teachers' adaptability and furthering knowledge in this important area.

Keywords: adaptability, teachers, workplace outcomes, effective teaching

Adaptability: An Important Capacity for Effective Teachers
What is Adaptability?

People's lives are characterized by change, novelty, and uncertainty as they develop physically, cognitively, and emotionally across the lifespan (Martin, Nejad, Colmar, & Liem, 2012, 2013). This constant flux can involve major life events such as starting school, getting married, or having children (Martin et al., 2012, 2013). It can also involve more "everyday" events such as illness, a change in job role, or a car breaking down (Collie & Martin, 2015; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). The ability to effectively react and respond in constructive ways to these situations is known as adaptability. More precisely, Martin, Nejad, Colmar, and Liem (2012) define adaptability as an individual's capacity to "constructively regulate psycho-behavioral functions in response to new, changing, and/or uncertain circumstances, conditions and situations" (p. 66). Importantly, Martin et al.'s (2012) model of adaptability is a tripartite one involving cognitive, behavioral and emotional adaptability, and refers to modifying one's thinking, behavior, or emotions (respectively) to deal with changing, new, or uncertain situations.

In conceptualizing adaptability, Martin and colleagues (2012, 2013) refer to the lifespan theory of control (Heckhausen, 1999; Heckhausen & Shulz, 1995; Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). This theory proposes that lifespan development is impacted by an individual's capacity to play an active and effective role in adapting to the environmental opportunities and constraints (Heckhausen et al., 2010). Control also plays a key factor in this development and the concept of compensatory control is especially relevant to adaptability. Compensatory control refers to adjusting one's actions or thoughts in order to respond to circumstances or events in an effective manner (Tomasik, Silbereisen, & Heckhausen, 2010). However, there are some key differences between the lifespan theory of control and the tripartite model of adaptability (Martin et al., 2012, 2013). In particular, the lifespan theory of control largely focuses on goal disengagement (such as abandoning effort or striving towards a new goal), whereas adaptability is relevant to situations where individuals cannot disengage and must adapt to meet the demands of the task (Martin et al., 2012, 2013). In addition, whereas compensatory control focuses only on cognitive and behavioral adjustment, the tripartite model of adaptability also considers emotional adjustment (Martin et al., 2012, 2013). Notwithstanding these two differences, the lifespan theory of control provides an important theoretical basis for understanding the adaptability construct and how it functions.

At this point, it is important to note that although related, adaptability is different from cognate processes such as coping and resilience (Martin et al., 2012, 2013). Coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage difficult or challenging demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and resilience involves successful adaptation in the face of adversity (Howard &Johnson, 2000). Thus, whereas coping and resilience involve responses to adversity, adaptability concerns responses to change, novelty, and uncertainty that may be positive or negative in nature (Martin et al., 2012, 2013). Indeed, Martin et al. (2013) examined adaptability among students alongside academic buoyancy, which has been called "everyday resilience" and refers to students' ability to effectively navigate typical academic setbacks and challenges (e.g., a poor grade, competing deadlines; Martin, 2013). The results showed that adaptability explained unique variance in educational and personal well-being outcomes beyond the effects of academic buoyancy. It is also worth mentioning that in addition to being defined as an outcome (as described above), resilience can also be defined as a profile involving risk and protective factors

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(Mansfield, Beltman, & Price, 2014). Protective factors include constructs such as self-efficacy and optimism (Mansfield et al., 2014). Much like these factors, we suggest that adaptability may also be considered a protective factor that is relevant to resilience as a profile. In the next section, we further demonstrate the importance of adaptability by describing additional empirical research in the area. Following that, we make the case for why adaptability is a particularly salient capacity for teachers given the inherent change that is a natural part of teaching work.

Why is Adaptability an Important Capacity for Individuals?

A person's capacity to be adaptable is important because it enables successful adjustment to life's inherent changing circumstances. Indeed, emerging research has shown that adaptability is associated with important academic and non-academic outcomes among adolescents and employees. Martin et al. (2012) examined adaptability among high school students and showed that it was positively associated with academic achievement, school enjoyment, satisfaction with life, meaning and purpose in life, and academic buoyancy. They also found that more adaptable students tended to hold greater incremental beliefs about intelligence (i.e., the belief that intelligence is malleable; Dweck, 2006) and lower entity beliefs (i.e., the belief that intelligence is fixed; Dweck, 2006). In a related longitudinal study, Martin et al. (2013) used data collected at two time points one year apart to show that incremental beliefs (positively), and the personality traits of conscientiousness (positively) and neuroticism (negatively) predicted adaptability. In turn, adaptability positively predicted academic and non-academic outcomes (i.e., class participation, school enjoyment, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and meaning and purpose in life).

In another study that looked at adaptability among students, Martin, Nejad, Colmar, Liem, and Collie (2015) examined whether adaptability plays a role in promoting perceived control among students, and whether this, in turn, reduces the experience of constructs that are known to be detrimental to students' academic and non-academic development: academic anxiety, disengagement, performance avoidance (i.e., where students are motivated by the desire to avoid disappointing others), and self-handicapping (i.e., sabotaging one's chance of success to have an excuse in case of failure). The results showed that when students were more adaptable, they also tended to perceive that they had greater control over their academic outcomes. In turn, greater perceived control was associated with reduced levels of the four detrimental outcomes.

Turning to the workplace, O'Connell, McNeely, and Hall (2008) examined adaptability among government employees and demonstrated that females and workers with higher educational qualifications reported greater adaptability. In addition, employees who perceived greater support from their managers also reported higher adaptability. In related research, Cullen, Edwards, Casper, & Gue (2014) examined adaptability among pharmaceutical company employees and found that adaptability was positively associated with job satisfaction and job performance (as assessed by supervisors). Taken together, therefore, the emerging research base has shown that adaptability is an important capacity for students and general employees. Indeed, the range of outcomes examined in the prior research suggests that adaptability has broad relevance to positive functioning at school and work. Of note, work is also beginning to consider the role of adaptability among teachers.

Why is Adaptability Important for Teachers?

We contend that adaptability is also highly relevant to teachers given that teaching work involves responding to and managing constant change (Collie & Martin, 2015). The capacity to adapt in order to effectively manage these changes is crucial for teachers' work in the classroom, staff room, and beyond. We have listed a few examples of this below.

- Teachers must respond to the different and changing needs of students by adjusting the lesson pace, adapting activities for different students, or seeking out different resources to better explain or illustrate key points.
- Teachers must adapt in order to cope with unexpected situations in classroom management by regulating emotions that might arise such as frustration, anger or mirth and conveying patience, or thinking of alternative ways to solve problems.
- Teachers must also effectively interact with colleagues under shifting conditions, such as when there is a change in job role, they require resources to teach a new part of the curriculum, or they require help to deal with a new or challenging student.
- As they move into new roles or new schools, teachers must also interact effectively with new colleagues, adjust to the different priorities of a new principal or colleague, or calibrate to the style of a new teaching aide in the classroom.
- Common change in most schools is experienced with the changes in timetabling that occur on a regular basis and sometimes at the last minute.
- Teachers must also be prepared to stop a lesson midway, reschedule their teaching, or condense content into less time when time is pressing.
- Finally, teachers are regularly involved in professional learning and are expected to continually integrate new knowledge into their teaching practice. In addition, curriculum or policy changes may require further adaptability from teachers.

Thus, being able to effectively respond to the inherent novelty, change, and uncertainty that characterizes teaching work is a highly important capacity for teachers. We can consider potentially adaptable responses by way of Martin et al.'s (2012) tripartite model of adaptability (as relevant to the adjustment of thoughts, behavior, and emotions). For example, if a teacher is asked to teach a new subject that is unfamiliar to them, effectively dealing with this change requires regulating thoughts to find connections between the new material and familiar topics (cognitive adaptability), regulating behavior to seek out a helpful person who has more knowledge and relevant resources in the new subject (behavioral adaptability), and regulating emotions such as anxiety or excitement to focus on finding a solution in a focused and timely manner (emotional adaptability).

A related concept that sheds further light on the importance of this topic is innovative teacher behavior. Thurlings, Evers, and Vermeulen (2015) explain that this is "a process in which new ideas are generated, created, developed, applied, promoted, realized, and modified by employees in order to benefit role performance" (p. 1). As this definition suggests, innovative behavior is used by teachers to improve their teaching practice. Of note, there is some overlap between innovative behavior and adaptability in that they both involve adjusting or modifying thoughts, behaviors, or actions. However, a key difference in the concepts is that adaptability occurs in response to a new, changing, or uncertain situation, whereas innovative behavior involves a planned process with a central aim of improving performance. Notwithstanding this, the literature on innovative teacher behavior can help to inform understanding of adaptability. Thurlings et al. (2015) suggest that innovative teacher behavior is important given rapid changes in technology, pedagogical knowledge, and society more broadly. They also indicate that innovative teacher behavior is central for promoting innovation among schools and students, and for ensuring society remains competitive. Importantly, these reasons can also be applied to adaptability given that teachers are regularly faced with novel situations due to these changes.

Research on Teachers' Adaptability

The literature has regularly discussed teachers' adaptability or flexibility as a central factor in effective teaching and learning (e.g., Corno, 2008; Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, & Beckett, 2005; Kunter et al., 2013; Mansfield, Beltman, Price, & McConney, 2012; Parsons, Williams, Burrowbridge, & Mauk, 2012). Much of this work has considered teachers' adaptability in instructional practices (e.g., Corno, 2008, Parsons et al., 2012; Vaughn & Parsons, 2013). For example, Corno (2008) highlights the importance of adaptive teaching practices to meet the needs of students who may have diverse developmental levels, cognitive abilities, language and cultural backgrounds, social-emotional competencies, and socio-economic backgrounds. Similarly, Parsons, Williams, Burrowbridge, and Mauk (2012; see also Parsons, 2012) discuss the importance of innovation and "in-the-moment adaptation" in the classroom in order to respond to students' needs and interests. More precisely, Parsons and colleagues (2012) observed teachers' use of adaptations in their instruction such as spontaneous modeling or scaffolding, adjusting instructions, or working one-on-one with different students.

Researchers have also considered the role of adaptability more broadly—that is, beyond instructional adaptation and with respect to teachers' functioning at work (e.g., Hargreaves, 2005; Mansfield et al., 2012). For instance, Mansfield, Beltman, Price, and McConney (2012) examined descriptions from early career teachers of what it means to be a resilient teacher and demonstrated that being adaptable and flexible was a central theme in participants' responses. Moreover, the participants indicated that adaptability involves actions such as adjusting to new roles, accepting changes, and having a "plan b." As noted above, we suggest that adaptability is a protective factor that is supportive of resilience.

More recently, Collie and Martin (2015) sought to develop understanding of teachers' adaptability and its association with other factors that are salient to teachers' healthy and effective functioning at work, as well as students' positive outcomes. They used Martin et al.'s (2012) tripartite model and the accompanying Adaptability Scale to assess teachers' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional adaptability. Of note, this assessment was not specific to the workplace—it concerned teachers' capacity to be adaptable in life generally (domain-general).

As part of the study, Collie and Martin (2015) were interested in examining whether teachers' perceptions of the work climate are associated with their adaptability. To measure work climate, they examined teachers' perceptions of principals' autonomy supportiveness at work. Stemming from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), autonomy support refers to behavior by an authority figure that affirms employees' empowerment and self-determination. In the case of principals, this involves actions such as inviting teachers' input in decision making, providing teachers with choice over their work tasks, and listening to teachers' perspectives (Deci & Ryan, 2012; see also Collie, Perry, & Martin, 2015). Collie and Martin found that when teachers perceived their principal to be more autonomy supportive, they tended to have higher adaptability. They also examined teacher well-being and organizational commitment in the study and found that teachers who were more adaptable (and those who perceived greater principal autonomy support) tended to report higher levels of well-being and organizational commitment.

In the final part of the study, Collie and Martin (2015) examined the extent to which teachers' adaptability and the other workplace factors were associated with students' numeracy achievement. The findings showed that teachers who reported greater well-being tended to have students who obtained higher achievement levels. It is also important to note that teachers' adaptability was indirectly associated with students' achievement via teachers' well-being. Taken together then, Collie and Martin's findings suggest that adaptability plays a core role in

teachers' functioning at work and that it is also indirectly associated with students' outcomes. Moreover, principals' autonomy supportiveness appears to lay an important foundation for teachers' adaptability.

Assessing Teachers' Adaptability

There are several ways in which teachers' adaptability can be assessed. The first is a qualitative approach that involves asking teachers questions via interviews or focus groups that tap into the role of adaptability and flexibility in their work. Mansfield et al. (2012) utilized this approach in their study on teachers' resilience and found themes such as adaptability, flexibility, adjustment, and willingness to accept change in the responses. A second approach involves observing the adaptations that teachers make in their teaching work. As noted above, this approach has been used to assess teachers' adaptability in instructional practices (e.g., Parsons, 2012; Parsons et al., 2012).

More recently, Martin et al. (2012) provided a third approach with the development of the Adaptability Scale to assess individuals' adaptability in life generally (see the Appendix for a domain-specific application to the workplace and teachers' work in the classroom). As noted above, this approach was utilized by Collie and Martin (2015) in their study on teachers' adaptability and provided empirical evidence for the importance of adaptability among teachers. Indeed, an additional approach that is more directed at practice might involve teachers' self-assessing their own adaptability. To do this, teachers might utilize questions such as those shown in the scales in the Appendix to reflect on their own adaptability.

Implications for Practice and Research

The literature on teachers' adaptability has several important implications for practice and research. With respect to possible approaches to promote teachers' adaptability, principals may want to be aware of the impact that their leadership style can have on teachers' adaptability. Efforts to be autonomy supportive include inviting input from teachers' in school decision making, providing teachers with choices in their work, encouraging teachers to ask questions, endeavoring to understand issues from teachers' points-of-view, and conveying confidence in teachers' capacity to do their work effectively and efficiently (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012). Collie and Martin (2015) found that under such conditions, teachers' adaptability is enhanced.

Another avenue for supporting teachers' adaptability involves the concept of incremental beliefs about intelligence (Dweck, 2006). As described above, Martin et al. (2012) demonstrated that students' who hold greater incremental beliefs (rather than entity beliefs) tend to be higher in adaptability. Intervention efforts designed to build incremental beliefs of intelligence have been successful among students (e.g., see Paunesku et al., 2015) and may, in turn, help to promote adaptability. An important avenue of future research is to see whether such efforts are also applicable to teachers (can incremental beliefs about intelligence be promoted among teachers?) and whether any increases in these beliefs also promote teachers' adaptability.

For teachers, self-assessment may be something that could help to promote adaptability and, in turn, professional growth. By harnessing Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) model of teacher professional growth, this could involve teachers choosing a challenging situation that occurred recently in their classroom, reflecting on the extent to which they adjusted their thinking, behavior, or emotions to deal with the situation and how they could do this more effectively in the future, and then experimenting with these ideas when a similar situation arises.

Given the cyclical nature of professional growth, this could, in turn, lead to further reflection and testing of strategies for adaptability.

Turning to implications for research, there are three main areas that deserve attention. First, there is a need to extend knowledge of how adaptability is associated with teachers' experiences at work. Based on a meta-analysis of research on innovative teacher behavior, Thurlings et al. (2015) outline a model where innovative behavior is influenced by teachers' personal characteristics (e.g., years of experience), individual factors (e.g., personality, motivation, self-efficacy, competence), and organizational factors (e.g., relatedness, resources, school climate, job role and tasks). Such factors are also likely relevant to adaptability. For example, Collie and Martin (2015) showed that the organizational factor of autonomy support is positively associated with adaptability. Moving forward, this model may provide a useful framework for guiding research on factors associated with teachers' adaptability.

Second, there is a need to examine whether and how teachers' adaptability can be increased. As suggested above, interventions that aim to promote teachers' incremental beliefs are one avenue that deserve empirical attention. Professional development that helps principals to be autonomy-supportive and whether this, in turn, promotes teachers' adaptability is another important area of examination. A characteristic of such studies is that they will ideally involve appropriate study designs to provide support for causality (e.g., cross-lagged modeling).

The third area of research concerns the variability of adaptability in different domains and over time. Can teachers be highly adaptable in one subject, but less in another? Moreover, is adaptability positively influenced by preparedness (Bransford et al., 2005) or subject familiarity? Another important question concerns the stability of adaptability—does adaptability change over the course of a school year or a career in teaching? Does it fluctuate over a school day? Given the nascent nature of adaptability research, these are just a handful of important questions that deserve attention.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the concept of adaptability and highlighted several salient reasons for why it is a key capacity to be promoted among teachers. We also discussed several methods for assessing adaptability and important implications for practice and research. As we have noted, effective instruction requires adaptation of instructional content and lesson pacing to be responsive to students' differentiated learning needs, changes in the levels of learning support provided to students as they develop expertise in the content, and modification of classroom management strategies to respond to the fluctuating classroom environment (e.g., Corno, 2008; Kunter et al., 2013). In addition, working in schools requires that teachers are able to successfully respond to and deal with any changing demands that transpire across the school more broadly (e.g., changes in staffing, new procedures or policies). As such, adaptability is a capacity that is of central relevance to teachers' healthy and effective functioning at work. Moreover, it is also relevant to students' academic outcomes.

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Appendix

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Below is the template for the Adaptability Scale – Domain-Specific. It is scored from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (7).

Adaptability Scale – Domain-Specific (Template)
1. <<At (or In, or When …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to think through a number of possible options to assist me in a new situation.
2. <<At (or In, or When …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to revise the way I think about a new situation to help me through it.
3. I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations <<at (or in, or when …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>> to assist me in a new situation if necessary.
4. <<At (or In, or When …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to seek out new information, helpful advice, or useful resources to effectively deal with new situations.
5. In uncertain situations <<at (or in, or when …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to develop new ways of going about things (e.g., a different way of doing something or finding information) to help me through.
6. To assist me in a new situation <<at (or in, or when …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to change the way I do things if necessary.
7. <<At (or In, or When …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to reduce negative emotions (e.g., fear) to help me deal with uncertain situations.
8. When uncertainty arises <<at (or in, or when …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to minimise frustration or irritation so I can deal with it best.
9. To help me through new situations <<at (or in, or when …) <u>insert domain or role here</u>>>, I am able to draw on positive feelings and emotions (e.g., enjoyment, satisfaction).

Below are two applications of the Adaptability Scale – Domain-Specific. Two possible stems are shown below. The first is relevant to the workplace generally and the second concerns teachers' work in the classroom specifically. Both scales are scored from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (7).

Adaptability Scale – Domain-Specific (Example for the workplace)
1. At work, I am able to think through a number of possible options to assist me in a new situation.
2. At work, I am able to revise the way I think about a new situation to help me through it.
3. I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations at work to assist me in a new situation if necessary.
4. At work, I am able to seek out new information, helpful advice, or useful resources to effectively deal with new situations.
5. In uncertain situations at work, I am able to develop new ways of going about things (e.g., a different way of doing something or finding information) to help me through.

6. To assist me in a new situation at work, I am able to change the way I do things if necessary.
7. At work, I am able to reduce negative emotions (e.g., fear) to help me deal with uncertain situations.
8. When uncertainty arises at work, I am able to minimize frustration or irritation so I can deal with it best.
9. To help me through new situations at work, I am able to draw on positive feelings and emotions (e.g., enjoyment, satisfaction).

Adaptability Scale – Domain-Specific (Example for teachers' work in the classroom)
1. In the classroom, I am able to think through a number of possible options to assist me in a new situation.
2. In the classroom, I am able to revise the way I think about a new situation to help me through it.
3. I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations in the classroom to assist me in a new situation if necessary.
4. In the classroom, I am able to seek out new information, helpful advice, or useful resources to effectively deal with new situations.
5. In uncertain situations that arise in the classroom, I am able to develop new ways of going about things (e.g., a different way of doing something or finding information) to help me through.
6. To assist me in a new situation that arises in the classroom, I am able to change the way I do things if necessary.
7. In the classroom, I am able to reduce negative emotions (e.g., fear) to help me deal with uncertain situations.
8. When uncertainty arises in the classroom, I am able to minimize frustration or irritation so I can deal with it best.
9. To help me through new situations that arise in the classroom, I am able to draw on positive feelings and emotions (e.g., enjoyment, satisfaction).