

Correlates of Depersonalization and Cynicism in Teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique opportunity to examine teacher stress in an uncharted context. In addition to the pressures of the pandemic itself, teachers have been faced with varying degrees of quality in the administrative responses to the pandemic within their schools and school divisions. Together, these contexts allowed examination of current theorizing about the components of burnout, with attention to the potential differences between cynicism and depersonalization promoted within these conditions. Here we present the results of a survey of 133 Canadian teachers who reported on their burnout components, attitudes towards change, and evaluations of their school and divisional leadership. Both correlational analysis of survey data and follow-up focus groups of 20 teachers who participated in the survey confirmed that cynicism and depersonalization are overlapping yet distinct components of teacher burnout which correlate with different variables. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Teachers, burnout, cynicism, depersonalization, leadership

1. Literature Review

1.1 Current Theorizing about Burnout

The most well-accepted model of burnout is based on the seminal work of Maslach and Jackson (1981). The work of these scholars began within the realm of human services work, where the emotional demands of caregiver relationships figured predominantly. Theorizing from this work resulted in a three-component model of burnout: (1) *exhaustion*, where a worker has insufficient resources to meet demands and feels emotionally, physically, and psychologically depleted; (2) *depersonalization*, where a worker withdraws exertion of energy from the recipient of the work (for examples, students or patients); and (3) *Loss of accomplishment*, where the worker feels that their work is no longer meeting its goals. It should be noted that the original version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and a later variation called the MBI-Educator Survey (Maslach et al., 1996) were responses to evidence of the importance of relationships in teaching and other service roles, and therefore these instruments use the term ‘depersonalization’ to describe a distancing from the emotional relationship with recipients or students that served as a means of distancing oneself from the work (Maslach et al., 2001). Later versions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory were developed to address more general workplace contexts where the emotional demands of the work were less salient (Schaufeli et al., 1996). In this more general version of the MBI, the term ‘depersonalization’ was replaced with the term ‘cynicism’, which indicated a withdrawal of energy toward the work itself rather than the recipient of the work.

Larsen et al. (2017) differentiated depersonalization from cynicism in their work as follows: while depersonalization was defined as “callousness, indifference and objectification [*of students*]” (p. 162), cynicism was defined as “lack of work interest and belief in the importance and contribution of *one’s work*” (p. 162).

Over time and across contexts, debate has ensued about the accuracy of the three-component conceptualization of burnout, and these debates remain today (Kristensen, 2005; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Some researchers have treated exhaustion alone as a sufficient criterion to indicate burnout (for examples, see Shirom, 2003, and Bekker et al., 2005). However, critics of this stance contend that this criterion alone is insufficient to indicate burnout, as workers can be exhausted without burning out. Alternatively, the Spanish inventory for measuring burnout has added components to the three-part conceptualization of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Scholars such as Schaufeli and Taris (2005) have warned about the dangers of such additions to the three-component model, citing both the “principle of parsimony” and the allure of a “laundry list of dimensions” (p. 259). These scholars advocated that the criteria of burnout would require at least two components: (1) exhaustion, as previously defined, and (2) withdrawal, which could encompass either or both of depersonalization and cynicism. Schaufeli and Taris (2005) defended the need for two different types of instruments to address burnout in the helping professions versus other professions, being as the MBI- Educator Survey focuses on the students while the MBI-General Survey focuses on the work itself. They proposed that depersonalization is a special type of cynicism that is relevant in emotionally laden human professions like teaching, and therefore deserves special recognition. This is an important consideration in the context of teachers working within the pandemic, as they may experience burnout through exhaustion in combination with *either or both* of depersonalization and cynicism. The investigation of whether depersonalization and cynicism are distinct constructs within teacher burnout during the pandemic therefore serves as the key focus in the current study.

Three previous studies have examined the relationships between cynicism and depersonalization. Studies by both Salanova et al. (2005) and Simbula & Guglielmi, (2010) concluded that cynicism and depersonalization are two different expressions of coping through distancing, and they are therefore two related yet distinct constructs. Based in the premise that related constructs should load in similar ways in terms of their relationships to other burnout-relevant variables, a third, later research study by Larson et al. (2017) used a different process of statistical analysis to examine these relationships. They found that cynicism loaded in significantly stronger ways with burnout-related variables such as organizational and professional commitment, job satisfaction, and social support than did depersonalization. Only psychological job demands loaded significantly more strongly with depersonalization than with cynicism. These authors concluded that depersonalization is not a universal coping strategy employed in the place of cynicism in emotionally laden professions. Although they supported the conclusions drawn by Salanova et al. (2005) and Simbula & Guglielmi, (2010) that cynicism and depersonalization are related, they emphasized that they are distinct constructs and dependent on context.

1.2 Cynicism, and Attitudes toward Change and Leadership

While defining depersonalization as a construct related to the recipients of the work and defining cynicism as being related to the work itself appears fairly clear, there has been ongoing debate about the nature of cynicism. That is, in some research reports, the term cynicism has been used to encompass both withdrawal from recipients as well as from work, and this has caused conflation and confusion in the literature. Furthermore, some initial research (for example, see Mirvis & Kanter, 1991) proposed that cynicism is a response to a general dislike or distrust of change itself—rather than a response to a situation—and is therefore somewhat of a stable trait.

Recent theorizing about attitudes toward change has resulted in a tri-component conceptualization, including cognitive attitudes toward change, emotional attitudes toward change, and behavioural attitudes toward change (Kin & Kareem, 2017; 2018). Based on the seminal work of Ajzen (1985), Kin and Kareem (2018) recognized three dimensions when defining attitudes toward change in teachers:

Cognitive responses to change are defined as teachers’ beliefs about the significance and necessity for change, and the extent of how school change would benefit them personally and in the context of the organisation. Affective responses to change are viewed as teachers’ feelings about the change, particularly the feelings linked to satisfaction or anxiety about the change. Behavioural reaction to change refers to the actions for or against change, [explicitly] the extent to which teachers would support or resist change. (p. 6)

Relating these three components of attitudes toward change to teachers' job roles within pandemic conditions has implications on the potential development of cynicism and/or depersonalization. First, teachers' *cognitive responses* to change address whether individuals believe in the reasons for the required changes in teaching behaviour, and whether they perceive that the new behaviour will result in a better state than the current situation (Berger, 2020). Resistance results from a lack of belief in the rationale provided for required behavioural changes (Berger, 2020). For example, there were varied cognitive responses to moving to online teaching as a safety measure related to COVID-19 in schools during a short period in the first wave. While some teachers believed this was a logical decision as way to maintain both learning and safety, others believed that online lessons created extra work for teachers as well as inequities for students (Author, 2020c; Newcamp, 2020). The inability to meet student needs in equitable ways due to teachers' behavioural changes for the sake of safety might promote withdrawal of energy from the work or from the relationships with students themselves.

Second, teachers' *emotional responses* to change may come into play. Even teachers who accept the need for changes in teaching behaviors at a cognitive level may worry about their efficacy for teaching while masked or providing online classes (Author, 2020c). Resistance to change can result from feelings that the requested behaviours are too far outside one's comfort zone (Berger, 2020), and the rapid introductions of these changes during the first wave of the pandemic may have further precipitated negative feelings in teachers.

Third, teachers' *behavioural responses* to change are dependent on their thoughts and feelings. That is, according to Ajzen's (2005) model, behavioural intention follows teachers' cognitive support of the new behaviour and their emotional acceptance of it. Furthermore, even teachers who adopt new behaviours will soon abandon them unless they are accompanied by both cognitive and emotional acceptance (Bouckennooghe, 2009). Therefore, theorizing about the components of attitudes toward change in teachers during the pandemic would predict that their compliance in behavioural changes would follow their positive beliefs and acceptance of the necessity of those behavioural changes in response to pandemic conditions.

In the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the changes within the educational context were brought about in the form of public health measures related to the pandemic, and included the short pivot to online teaching, and then limited movement and grouping, as well as social distancing and masking when teaching face to face. These changes could be viewed as somewhat different from more typical, philosophically oriented changes within schools or school divisions, such as teacher scheduling, and classroom or grade level assignments. Whereas more traditional policy changes such as these might influence teachers' evaluations of their school-based or divisional leadership who are charged with initiating and administering these more typical decisions, changes based on provincial or school-based pandemic safety measures may be viewed by teachers as beyond the control of these leaders. The impacts of large-scale policy changes on teacher roles have been investigated as superordinate to school-based administration control and have been linked to demoralization in teachers when they result in the job roles changing so much that teachers feel they can no longer stay in the profession (Santoro, 2018). In this way, the influence of educational leaders on teacher burnout might be overshadowed or even diminished by the influence of the provincial health orders on teacher burnout.

Alternatively, given that copious research supports that teacher burnout is strongly affected by leadership at the school and school board levels (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Podalsky et al., 2016; Urick, 2016) as well as the importance of educational administrators to teacher coping and intentions to remain in the profession shown in our earlier national study on teacher burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic (Author, 2020a, 2020b), it is possible that the influence of educational leaders would remain salient despite the changes to teaching behaviours required by public health measures. Indeed, given that burnout is directly related to the ratio of job demands to resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2014; Author, 2022), alongside the understanding that educational leaders are charged with managing both demands and resources, it would stand to reason that teachers who view their educational leaders as less effective in balancing teachers' job resources and demands during a pandemic would have higher levels of burnout. Many studies have also found that cynicism toward one's organization is negatively correlated to work-related factors such as organizational commitment and loyalty, as well as job satisfaction (Andersson & Bateman, 1997; Spence et al., 2009). It is therefore plausible that ineffective educational administrators charged with managing resources and demands within the pandemic might foster higher levels of cynicism in teachers, whereas effective leaders might fend off teacher burnout despite the changes required by the health orders.

As such, we questioned whether teachers' views of administrator effectiveness might correlate with teacher burnout in terms of teachers' cynicism or depersonalization within the contexts of the changes required as school-based responses to the pandemic health measures. Implicit in this question is the effects to teachers' personal cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses to change.

1.3 Research Questions

Given the debates regarding the conceptualizations of cynicism and depersonalization as well as the influence of attitudes toward change and leadership found in the literature, this investigation sought to examine the relationships between these constructs within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we were interested in the following research questions:

- (1) Do teacher cynicism and depersonalization correlate with the same demographic variables during COVID-19 conditions?
- (2) Do teacher cynicism and depersonalization correlate in similar patterns with attitudes toward change during COVID-19 conditions?
- (3) Do teacher cynicism and depersonalization correlate in similar patterns with teacher evaluations of school-based and divisional leadership during COVID-19 conditions?

2. Methods

2.1 Participants and Design

The study was funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (1008–2020–0015) and approved by the University Human Research Ethics Board (certificate number 14993). As part of a larger project, 133 teachers from a central Canadian school division responded to a survey about teacher burnout in early April 2021, during the third wave of the pandemic. It should be noted that the school division that participated in the study was located in the province with the highest levels of COVID-19 transmission in Canada during the third wave of the pandemic, and the school division itself was designated as a pandemic “hot spot.” The city's restaurants and theatres were closed, visiting within homes was prohibited, and patients were shipped out of province for care due to an over-burdened hospital system. Despite these conditions, schools remained open. Within this context, teachers were invited through emails from both their divisional leadership and their local teachers' association to participate in our study. Consent forms and survey questions were accessed online and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. For a description of the demographic information related to the participants, please see Table 1.

In addition to the surveys, 20 focus group participants from the same school division were recruited through the anonymous surveys to participate in four separate online meetings held in late April 2021. Focus group participants were asked general questions about their experiences of teaching during COVID-19. Next, participants were given information about five patterns of teacher responses revealed by our previous national sample of teacher coping and burnout during the pandemic (Author, 2022). These included two types of “red” groups who were experiencing high burnout levels, a middle group called the “over-extended” or “amber” group, who were beginning to burn out, and two “green” groups who were flourishing under pandemic conditions. Focus group participants were then asked to comment on whether they recognized themselves or their colleagues within the five patterns described. The recordings of these focus groups were transcribed and then coded by two of the researchers separately and later together using grounded theory substantive coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As described by Thomas, we framed our analysis as related to categories based on previous research as “guidelines rather than truths” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 134). The categories relevant to the current research included cynicism, depersonalization, attitudes toward change, and attitudes toward leadership. Comments related to these variables were selected to elaborate the findings of the survey data.

2.2 Measures

Cynicism and depersonalization were measured using two versions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The MBI for Educators (MBI-ES) (Maslach, et al., 1996) is a 22-item instrument that measures the characteristics of burnout, including exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. It uses a 7-point Likert scale indicating the frequency with which educators agree with the statements: 0 (never); 1 (a few times since beginning of the pandemic); 2 (once a month or less); 3 (a few times a month); 4 (once a week); 5 (a few times a week) 6 (every day).

Three examples of statements are: “I feel emotionally drained from work” (exhaustion); “I don’t really care what happens to some students” (depersonalization); and “I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job” (accomplishment). The cynicism sub-scale was used from the general version of the same MBI suite of instruments. Responses were measured using the same scale and processes. An example statement related to cynicism is, “I have become less enthusiastic about my work,” and responses were measured using the same time reference (i.e., the beginning of the pandemic). Cronbach alpha values were calculated using the current data set and indicated acceptable reliability for the sub-scales of exhaustion ($\alpha = .88$), cynicism ($\alpha = .88$), depersonalization ($\alpha = .75$), and loss of accomplishment ($\alpha = .66$).

We used the Teacher Attitudes Towards Change Scale (TATC Scale) (Kin & Kareem, 2017). The 9-item scale measures three main constructs, including cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses to change using a 6-point Likert scale. Possible responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Example statements are, “I often suggest changes for my school” (cognitive response to change), “Change frustrates me” (affective response to change), “In general, change often helps me perform better” (behavioural response to change). Subscale scores were determined by the means of the participants’ responses to the three statements relevant to each subscale. Cronbach alpha values were calculated using the current data set and for the sub-scales of cognitive attitudes toward change ($\alpha = .78$), affective attitudes toward change ($\alpha = .75$), behavioural attitudes toward change ($\alpha = .47$).

To measure attitudes toward school and divisional leaders, we used the School and Divisional Leadership scale (Crosby, 2015). Two subscales were used to measure this construct: 13 items measured school leadership, and 10 items measured divisional leadership. All items were scored in a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). An example item from the school leadership sub-scale was, “Teachers feel comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them with the school administration.” Likewise, an example item from the divisional leadership sub-scale was, “District leaders consistently support teachers.” Cronbach alpha values were calculated using the current data set for school leadership ($\alpha = .96$) and divisional leadership ($\alpha = .95$), and both indicated excellent reliability for both sub-scales.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative results

We began our quantitative analysis with descriptive analyses of each of the subscales, as indicated in Table 2. It is noteworthy that overall means for cynicism in the sample were higher than those for depersonalization; cognitive attitudes toward change were higher than affective or behavioural attitudes toward change; and attitudes toward school leadership were more positive than attitudes toward divisional leadership.

Next, we conducted Pearson two-tailed correlation of the variables of interest, as presented in Table 3. Our findings showed that cynicism and depersonalization were strongly correlated. Moreover, they both correlated in similar significance and direction with many other variables under consideration, such as significant negative correlations between cynicism and depersonalization with attitudes toward school-based and divisional leaders. However, these trends were not always supported: specifically, there was no significant correlation between cynicism and age, whereas there was a significant correlation between depersonalization and age. Older teachers were significantly less likely to report elevated depersonalization. Furthermore, whereas there was no significant correlation between cognitive attitudes toward change and depersonalization, cognitive attitudes toward change were significantly correlated with cynicism. In terms of theoretical consideration, as predicted by conceptualizations by Kin and Kareem (2017), cognitive, affective, and behavioural attitudes toward change were all correlated. In terms of leadership influences, teachers’ attitudes toward both school-based and divisional leadership followed identical patterns: they were both significantly correlated with cognitive and affective attitudes toward change, but not with behavioural attitude toward change. It was interesting that neither age or years of experience correlated with any change attitude dimensions nor leadership attitudes, however level of education correlated positively and significantly with behavioural change attitudes.

3.2 Qualitative Results

Next, we move to our qualitative interview data to explore participants’ experiences of cynicism and depersonalization as they relate to teaching during the pandemic, attitudes toward change, and leadership attitudes.

3.2.1 Cynicism

Comments by Cora suggested that she had insights about her own cynicism as expressed through her withdrawal from work:

[I'm] just really limiting the hours I'm in the building. I think in a typical year, I get to school early, and stay late, and be there for kids as much as possible. And just now, I am going a little bit later and making a point of leaving on time. I think you just have to...[pauses] you just can't work and dwell.

Brittany expressed cynicism similar to Cora:

I still feel connected to the kids. I still feel like the relationship-building has been going okay. I just feel like I'm doing a little less than I normally would and feeling a little more stressed a little more easily than I normally would.

In both cases, comments indicated withdrawal from the work as distinct from withdrawal from the students.

3.2.2. Depersonalization

Brittany noticed a stark example of depersonalization within a colleague—one that shocked her due to being unexpected and different from past practice:

I think there was a question [on the survey] about 'How often do you feel kids are inanimate objects?' and I was just like 'Oh my God!' But then today [at recess] there was a child laughing in the bathroom, and one of my colleagues who I'm normally close to and normally loves kids as much as I do said, 'Who is still there here? Why are there kids? I can't handle any more kids!' and I thought 'Oh, people are feeling that way, and they are hiding it really well.' She would never act that way when a child was in her own classroom, but just between the two of us, she was like 'That's enough giggling for the day-- I'm done!'

This participant's perceptions of the wording of a statement in the MBI depersonalization scale as being an extreme statement has been highlighted in previous research as noteworthy (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005). The fact that Brittany also thought the statement was extreme but then witnessed an example of it with a colleague suggests that depersonalization does sometimes manifest as the treatment of students as impersonal objects. Julia further highlighted the unique circumstances of teaching in a pandemic that might further exacerbate teacher stress and prompt withdrawal in the form of depersonalization:

I've seen that from day one where the teachers are already stressed out because they're immune compromised, and they're such an amazing teachers. They want to be there for the kids, but they're also like 'I don't know if I'm gonna be able to do this, this year.'

3.2.3. Leadership Influences on Teacher Cynicism

Like Cora and Brittany, Tannis also felt a sense of cynicism, but in her case she related her response to the expectations of her school leadership:

So, in September, I went into school feeling like I felt more involved, a little more over-extended, like how's this going to go? But feeling more optimistic. And then admin. tells us their expectations, and then I felt inefficient, detached— like I don't want to be here anymore. I want to go home. Get me out of here. This is not going to go well. How am I going to do this and be a mom and do everything else? Get me out of here!

Although not a focus in the current study, the links between administrative job demands, cynicism, and loss of accomplishment are clearly demonstrated in this comment. Subsequently, Tannis was overt in her self-regulation practices that prevented her from devolving further and clearly indicated that although she felt cynical, she wanted to avoid depersonalization of her students. In her comments here she makes reference to the “red zone,” a colour coding cue we used in the focus groups to explain two of the five burnout patterns that had the highest levels of burnout in our previous national research (Author, 2022), and the “over-extended” group—those on the tipping point before burnout.

I'm definitely over-extended. If there's a bunch of announcements and extra stuff coming at us, I will live in the red zone. And because I was feeling like that, I had to reduce my day. I'm not working full days right now as a result of that, because I don't want to be in the red zone and be a teacher in the red zone for my students. So, mindfully, I made that adjustments for my kids, because that's not fair to them, because it's how I am, because I can't—that would hurt me more and hurt them, if that makes sense.

Peter likewise identified with the patterns we presented related to his own experiences and those with his colleagues. Similar to Tannis, he linked cynicism in the form of withdrawal from administrative demands.

By far, [it's] what I'm seeing more and more. We just had a staff meeting today, like even my admin, there was a noticeable frustration on the lack of participation and conversations. And a lot more [red zone] now—I would say because of the longevity of this whole thing. For myself, I was involved pretty heavily for a while, [but] I'm more in the over-extended and [red zone] in some areas. But yeah, I can put a name and face to almost every group [within the burnout patterns presented] here very quickly. And the red groups would be more numerous.

Peter attributed his cynicism to the lack of leadership, including lack of support when it was needed (for example, masks arriving too late to get ahead of the third wave) and administrators who ignored teachers who made the effort to pitch in:

But until [resources are provided when needed], it's doomed to be at decline, because even the people who have the surges of optimism and energy to try and make a difference and bring some light back... teachers will respond well to that when they're given a helping hand. But if there's constantly no help being given when struggle is happening.... I feel like there's an element where the government and divisions can influence, directly influence, if they pay attention to it and they understand.

Note that Peter made reference to both the superordinate influence of government but also included the divisional administrators in his plea.

3.2.4. Dimensions of Attitudes toward Change

Peter continued his insightful comments by differentiating between cognitive and affective attitudes and actual behaviours:

Every single teacher is still working their butt off, regardless of how they're doing—how detached they are— they're still working. And that is something that you're never going to see in any trade or any business or any industry that's for work's sake. That is unique to teaching and the reason it's unique to teaching, the job itself, the profession that attracts these people who are going to do what they have to do. You know, they feel a need to contribute to society's growth through educating children, and that piece of data needs to just be screamed to everybody that is going to listen, because these are the people that need help.

Peter confirmed the fact that although teachers may have thought negatively and felt discouraged, they continued to instruct for the sake of their students, a practice he believes is exclusive to the teaching profession during the pandemic.

4. Discussion

Through both qualitative and quantitative data, the current study provides a rich depiction of the experiences of teachers during the third wave of COVID-19. Moreover, the contributions of the findings are both theoretical and practical in nature.

First, conceptualizations by Kin and Kareem (2017) that attitudes toward change are composed of three inter-related components are supported through correlational evidence in the current study. Our quantitative data further support the claims by Schaufeli and Taris (2005) that measures of cynicism and depersonalization are both important, and that teachers can experience either or both as expressed through withdrawal in the context of their teaching roles and relationships. Our findings that cynicism and depersonalization correlate in different ways with age and cognitive attitudes toward change support previous findings of their conceptualization as related but distinct constructs (Larson et al., 2017; Salanova et al., 2005, Simbula & Guglielmi, 2010). Furthermore, our qualitative data suggest that teachers who are burning out as a result of cynicism can differentiate this response from depersonalization. This validates the claim proposed by Larson et al. (2017) that depersonalization is not a universal response in the burnout processes in emotionally laden professions.

On a practical level, the qualitative and quantitative data suggest that the distinctions between the three components of attitudes toward change are important and that in some ways they run counter to the current theory. It is very interesting that attitudes toward both levels of leadership correlated significantly with cognitive and affective attitudes toward change.

That is, the less positive the attitudes toward leadership, the less positive the cognitive and affective attitudes toward the required behavioural changes by teachers. And yet, behavioural attitudes towards change were not correlated with attitudes toward either level of leadership. It seems that teachers were able to enact the expected teaching *behaviors* even in circumstances where they did not believe in the “the significance and necessity for change, and the extent of how school change would benefit them personally” (indicating negative cognitive attitudes toward change) and where they did not have “feelings linked to satisfaction about the change” (indicating negative affective attitudes toward change) (Kin & Kareem, 2018, p. 6). Given that past research has suggested that cognitive and affective attitudes toward change affect intentions, which in turn affect behaviours (Ajzen, 1985), it stands to reason theoretically that teachers would likewise resist behavioural compliance given their less than positive thoughts and feelings about the change required by the pandemic— which was not the finding of the current study. Moreover, these data were collected during the third wave of the pandemic, when teachers in the study division had been instructing within COVID-based safety protocols for over a year and were very tired, as indicated by their exhaustion levels in the MBI-ES; And yet our findings showed that the behavioural attitudes were not significantly related to levels of cynicism or depersonalization. Perhaps a means of understanding this unexpected finding can be found within the comments offered by Peter. Although Peter, like others, acknowledged that many colleagues as well as himself lamented the lack of support and experienced the increased cynicism about the working conditions of teaching in a pandemic, he concurrently acknowledged that no matter the burnout level of the teachers he knew, they were still performing the expected behaviours. Peter viewed this as unique to the teaching profession-- “the profession that attracts these people who are going to do what they have to do,” because “they feel a need to contribute to society’s growth through educating children.” If this is the case, then teachers appear to have committed to teaching behaviours despite their negative thoughts and feelings toward the changes required by school and divisional administration and provincial officials, perhaps as a part of the morals, ethics, and callings of their profession.

All research has limitations, and ours is no exception. First, the data were gathered from a small group of teachers within one school division, and therefore this limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the teachers who participated had the capacity to do so, so perhaps the teachers who were more burnt out and were on stress leave were not represented proportionately in the sample. The most serious limitation is the lower Cronbach alpha level produced by the behavioral attitudes towards change subscale of the TATC Scale (Kin & Kareem, 2017). Thus, low levels of reliability should prompt caution and encourage replication studies to ensure that our findings related to behavioral attitudes towards change are sound.

Despite these limitations, together the current findings contribute to answering the three focus questions of the current research. First, although in some cases teacher cynicism and depersonalization correlated with the same demographic variables during COVID-19 conditions, this was not true with all of the variables under consideration. We found that increased teacher age appears to have served as a protective factor against depersonalization during the COVID-19 pandemic within the current sample of teachers. Second, teacher cynicism and depersonalization correlated in similar patterns with affective and behavioral attitudes toward change during COVID-19 conditions, however there were distinct relationships between cognitive attitudes toward change and cynicism, and between cognitive attitudes toward change and depersonalization. Specifically, whereas cognitive attitudes toward change were negatively and significantly correlated with cynicism (i.e., the less a teacher believed in the rationale for the changes, the more the teacher withdrew from the work), the relationship between cognitive attitudes toward change and depersonalization was not significant. It appears that although a negative cognitive attitude toward change was enough to influence a withdrawal from the work, it was insufficient to produce the withdrawal from the students that is associated with depersonalization. Third, teacher cynicism and depersonalization correlated in similar patterns with teacher attitudes toward school-based and divisional leadership during COVID-19 conditions, suggesting that educational leadership is still influential in addressing teacher burnout in this COVID-19 context. Although our analyses were unable to separate the teachers’ burnout responses to the pandemic in general from the effects of their school-based and divisional leadership, both the qualitative and quantitative data support the conclusion that educational administrators remain influential during pandemic conditions. The correlations reported here suggest that leaders have the capacity to both promote or inhibit teacher withdrawal from work and from students during pandemic conditions. Finally, our unexpected patterns of correlation converged with the qualitative evidence in our findings to suggest that the threshold for withdrawal of teachers from students, specifically in the form of depersonalization and practically in the form of behavior, is higher than required for teacher withdrawal from work in the form of cynicism.

Thus, while cynicism was widespread in the teachers sampled, depersonalization and resistant behavioural responses to the changes were less present. Administrative leaders will therefore need to provide support and resources to ensure teachers do not reach the point where depersonalization becomes their next response to the stress of teaching in a pandemic.

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Table 1
Demographic Information

Gender		Frequency	Percent
	Male	34	25.4
	Female	93	69.4
	Other	1	0.7
	Don't wish to say	5	3.7
Age			
	25 or younger	4	3
	26-30	22	16.4
	31-40	51	38.1
	41-50	35	26.1
	Over 50	20	14.9
	Don't wish to say	1	0.7
Teaching Experience			
	1 or less	6	4.5
	2 to 5	30	22.4
	6- to 10	26	19.4
	11 to 15	29	21.6
	Over 15	42	31.3
Education			
	Less than B.Ed	1	0.7
	B.Ed	83	61.9
	Some graduate work	24	17.9
	Masters	25	18.7

Table 2
Means of Variables Related to Burnout

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
MBI Exhaustion	133	0.33	6	3.6785	1.28681
MBI Depersonalization	133	0	5.6	1.4741	1.23791
MBI Cynicism	133	0	6	2.1353	1.55853
MBI Accomplishment	133	1.63	5.88	4.1281	0.95165
Cognitive Attitudes toward Change	134	1.33	6	4.0473	0.88443
Affective Attitudes toward Change	134	1.33	6	3.8619	1.03379
Behavioural Attitudes toward Change	134	2.33	5.5	3.8495	0.73573
Attitudes toward School Leadership	134	1	6	4.4237	1.27738
Attitudes toward Divisional Leadership	133	1	5.9	3.5566	1.15487

Table 3
Correlations between Variables Related to Burnout

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. MBI Cynicism	Pearson Correlation									
	Sig. (2-tailed)									
	N									
2. MBI Depersonalization	Pearson Correlation	.600**								
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0								
	N	133								
3. Cognitive change attitude	Pearson Correlation	-.291**	-0.117							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.18							
	N	133	133							
4. Affective change attitude	Pearson Correlation	-0.134	-0.027	.468**						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.123	0.753	0						
	N	133	133	134						
5. Behavioural change attitude	Pearson Correlation	-0.064	0	.415**	.406**					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.464	0.997	0	0					
	N	133	133	134	134					
6. School leadership attitude	Pearson Correlation	-.360**	-.432**	.444**	.186*	0.109				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0	0.031	0.212				
	N	133	133	134	134	134				
7. Divisional leadership attitude	Pearson Correlation	-.243**	-.284**	.282**	.332**	0.085	.519**			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.005	0.001	0.001	0	0.331	0			
	N	132	132	133	133	133	133			
8. Age	Pearson Correlation	-0.107	-.182*	-0.125	-0.072	0.037	-0.073	0.042		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.22	0.036	0.152	0.409	0.672	0.403	0.631		
	N	133	133	133	133	133	133	132		
9. Years of Experience	Pearson Correlation	-0.114	-0.07	-0.107	-0.039	0.076	-0.118	-0.034	.805**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.193	0.423	0.221	0.656	0.384	0.178	0.702	0	
	N	133	133	133	133	133	133	132	133	
10. Education	Pearson Correlation	0.026	-0.066	-0.063	-0.001	.176*	-0.092	-0.058	.204*	.231**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.765	0.453	0.469	0.989	0.043	0.293	0.509	0.018	0.008
	N	133	133	133	133	133	133	132	133	133

* correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed)

** correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed)