

COPING STRATEGIES OF RUSSIAN SCHOOLS TEAMS DURING THE PANDEMIC: GET AHEAD OF THEMSELVES VS SURVIVE AND FORGET

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Abstract

Unlike organizations from other sectors, schools have existed in stable conditions and rarely found themselves facing the necessity of radical changes triggered from the outside, such as market fluctuations. The pandemic situation can thus be considered a natural experiment, wherein school teams were forced to cope with a situation of urgent transition. They did so largely by themselves, before the federal and regional educational authorities were ready to provide recommendations on how to arrange remote learning in schools. Thus, it seems to be a unique opportunity to study the variety of ways school teams adapted to external challenges and integrated new practices into their work.

The concept of coping strategies has been used to describe the response to external "shocks" of individuals and school teams. Our study presents an in-depth investigation of coping strategies gathered in 12 schools, which were chosen based on the data of a massive survey in 100 Russian schools (N = 6931) conducted at the moment of transition to distance learning (March 2020). This paper identifies and classifies practices that reveal how adaptation to shock innovations occurred, drawing on semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers (N = 43).

At the first stage, we applied the method of open coding and identified the primary-level codes (N = 184) that could reveal the whole range of schools' practices for overcoming crisis situations, as well as practices of disseminating new solutions. At the second stage, we used thematic coding and correlated these primary codes with the code of coping strategy dimensions. In our study, more than 1000 citations correlated with the second-level codes N = 73. In accordance with the principles of valid coding, we did a double-independent assessment of each interview.

Drawing on the results of our analysis, we describe the set of coping strategies as a system of dilemmas, each of which must be "resolved" by school teams: 1) authoritative or multi-voice decision-making, (2) quality control of the educational process or "the opportunity to lower the bar," (3) openness to new tools or orientation to the use of acquaintances, (4) focus on reducing the workload and caring for the well-being of the collective or considering the pandemic as "wartime," (5) optimizing workload or inaction, (6) methodological support focused on helping with technical issues or developing a digital culture, (7) replacing "lagging" team members or supporting them to integrate into a new work format. In addition to choosing a given path within the indicated dilemmas, variability in schools' strategies was also revealed in the extent to which their policies were applied in a systematic way. The study shows that some schools' strategies were characterized by spontaneity and limited action, covering only a narrow circle of employees and children. Other schools managed to combine situational awareness (quickly restarting in a new format), with consistency (overcoming difficulties not in a spontaneous, but rather an intentional way which corresponded with the general strategy of the school.)

Keywords: coping strategies, shock innovation, COVID-19, transition to distance learning, school teams.

1 INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a sudden breakdown of habitual ways of working in education, from the school system as a whole to each individual school, teacher, student, and family.

The literature up to this point has offered analyses of the ways in which particular schools reacted to similar events that also had the potential to subject the participants of the education process to great risk: severe weather emergencies, extreme acts of violence, or socioeconomic and political instability [1], [2]. These analyses have established that lack of a strategy, as well as a slow or improper reaction to the crisis, lead to negative consequences for the school and the surrounding community [3]. The role played by previous experiences of "shock," both among individuals and institutions, has also been looked at, and the experience of successful "veteran" schools has been described [4]. However, these cases generally involve short-term measures taken by individual organizations, whereas systemwide

studies of schools' strategies for adapting to major external challenges have so far been absent. Education institutions are among the most stable organizational structures, especially compared to companies in various sectors of the economy. Schools are not subject to market fluctuations and rarely face situations where they must undergo radical change in response to external challenges [5], [6]. In this sense, the situation of emergency transition to distance-learning offers a unique opportunity to study the ways in which education institutions resist external pressures or "shocks," as well as to identify strategies of adaptation that are most characteristic of school teams.

In organizational psychology, the concept of "coping strategies" is used to analyze the reaction of an organization to an external shock. In general terms, a coping strategy is any response to external life circumstances that allows for avoiding or controlling emotional stress [7]. A common direction for studies in this field involves looking at individuals and the psychological specificities that allow them to successfully navigate stress, as well as their interactions with various aspects of organizations, communities, etc. However, the concept of coping strategies is also used to describe ways in which whole organizations or even countries deal with shocks [8].

V. J. Callan proposed a theoretical framework for looking at the interaction between individual and organizational strategies in the process of overcoming the negative consequences of organizational change [9]. On one hand, this framework takes into account the role of individuals in the process of organizational transformation. On the other hand, the model looks at adaptation strategies not from the point of view of each individual, but rather looks at them as members of a collective, defined by organizational and individual factors, and responsible for the transformation process. The core of the issue is that it is wrong to underestimate the role of individuals in the transformation process, but it is also incorrect to ascribe the whole process of overcoming negative events to individuals. On the contrary, this method claims that organizational change will be more successful when planners understand the gap between the needed changes and existing organizational practices, taking into account the readiness of employees to implement changes. Active efforts to overcome this gap are also needed. Thus, to understand the whole picture, we must look at the process of implementing changes not by single individuals but by school teams. Using this approach, it is likely that we will be able to assess the conditions under which it is possible to successfully meet external challenges.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to describe the spectrum of school teams' practices in overcoming the negative consequences of the pandemic, as well as the ways in which innovations in the transition to distance learning were disseminated.

2 METHODOLOGY

The method chosen for collecting data was the semi-structured interview. Blocks of interview questions touched on aspects that resonated with the theoretical model of coping strategies by Callan (See Table 1) [9].

Table 1. Coping strategy dimensions.

| <i>Coping strategy dimensions</i> | | <i>Major topics in the interview guide</i> |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Communication/ Leadership | Empowering individuals to take control of change. Provision of timely and accurate communication. Training in communication. The use of transformational leaders. | The communication within the school team. |
| | | Quality control of the educational process. |
| | | Leadership and the decision-making process to organize the transition to distance learning. |
| Learning and unlearning | Promotion of unlearning programmes to deal with the removal of old elements of organizational culture; use of pre-merger diagnosis and integration workshops to determine elements of culture incompatibility. | Teachers' professional development. |
| Re-classification of the task | Establishment of support teams. improving person-job fit; job enrichment. Classification of roles and relationships. | School team support. |
| | | Teachers' workload. |
| | | Change in job description. |
| Stress and conflicts events | Provision of stress management interventions, including establishment of fitness and wellness programmes. | Stress and conflict events. |

Empirical data for this study was gathered during fieldwork in Nizhny Novgorod in April 2021. The choice of Nizhny Novgorod was made due to the availability of data on the technological preparedness of schools at the moment of transition to distance-learning [10]. This allowed us to gather data both in schools that were well prepared for distance-learning and those that were more inclined to resist digital innovations. A “high technological profile” was ascribed to schools where employees expressed positive attitudes to technologies (optimism and confidence in their effectiveness). Schools with a “medium technological profile” are those where, on one hand, there is a relatively large proportion of employees with positive attitudes to technology (techno-optimists), but, on the other hand, an equally strong tendency towards negative attitudes to technology. The “low technological profile” group contains schools where the majority of teaching staff are mistrustful of technologies and skeptical of their effectiveness. 12 schools were chosen for participation in the study, with representatives from each of these types.

The selection of informants at each school was done in the following way: the principal (or vice principal) of each school participated, along with several teachers. We requested for a teacher to be invited who easily adapted to distance learning, as well as a teacher who had a lot of difficulty in the transition. 43 interviews were conducted with an average time of 40 minutes.

The open coding phase of the interview analysis resulted in primary-level codes (N=184), revealing the whole spectrum of practices of overcoming the crisis situation and disseminating new solutions. Using thematic coding, the texts of the teacher and administrator interviews were marked with codes (more than 1000 citations correlated with the second level codes N = 73). In accordance with the principles of valid coding, we did a double independent assessment of each interview, placing them on different poles of a set of “dilemmas.” In cases where coders’ assessments did not align, an additional expert who had not yet assessed the given case was invited to help define the position of the school are given continuum.

3 RESULTS

According to the results of our analysis, coping strategies are conceptualized as a system of dilemmas that need to be “resolved” by the leaders of the transformational process and by school teams. The interviews showed that in terms of some of the aspects of coping presented in Callan’s theoretical model, different schools chose different solutions. We describe these spectrums using a consistent method of identifying their poles.

3.1 Quality control of the educational process

One aspect of the schools’ coping strategies during the emergency transition to distance-learning was the level of quality control exerted on the work of the staff (“lowering the bar” vs. “keeping a finger on the pulse”).

The results of our analysis of the interviews revealed a strategy of loosening control over the education process on the part of school administrators. Principals and vice principals understood the extraordinary situation as necessitating a “*lowering of the bar*” (the words of informants are reported here and further in italics) and a “*greater tolerance for the actions of teachers*” so as not to increase the psychological burden on the employees. In some of the schools that adopted this strategy, administrative quality control was replaced with oversight by parents. In the distance learning format, teachers found themselves in a “panopticon” situation: parents who were present in the room with their children could, at any moment, start observing the education process. The teacher, meanwhile, would not be aware when they were being observed. According to interviews with school principals, this fact alone already had an impact on teachers. Additionally, this stimulated a process of feedback which helped teachers organize the education process more effectively.

At the other end of the spectrum were schools where the internal quality control system actually became more important during the pandemic. According to interviews, administrators worked to systematically “*keep a finger on the pulse*” and guided the actions of the teachers, intervening in solving problems faced by teachers. These teams viewed oversight by the administration not only as a process of quality control of the services being provided and the educational outcomes, but also as a function of support for the changes being implemented. This often correlated with positive motivation and an attitude among administrators that they should get to the bottom of the problems being faced by teachers.

Additionally, some principals noted that the transition to distance learning opened up new opportunities for oversight. For example, if a link is available, it is possible to visit an online class on Zoom with less time consumed than before, or an efficient system of feedback may be created using electronic surveys.

3.2 Leadership and the Decision-making Process

An entire school's transition to distance learning was a task that had never been undertaken before anywhere. Given that government offices gave only general recommendations, the school team had to make a large number of managerial decisions about how to organize and educate under the new conditions. In some schools, these decisions were made in the context of a general discussion, or took into account teacher surveys. Other schools simply gave instructions on how teachers should act without taking their opinions into account.

On one end of the spectrum are schools where the teaching staff were minimally involved in the process of decision-making. According to our informants, key decisions such as whether to have a synchronous or asynchronous work format, which digital platform to choose, and others, were made by the principal single-handedly, or were imposed on the school "from above." The key point here is that the narratives given by informants indicated that "*there was no appeal*" in the decision-making process, meaning that there was no opportunity for discussion. In addition, these schools did not undertake any activities in which teachers' or parents' opinions could be taken into account.

The other side of the continuum contains schools in which the staff were maximally involved in the decision-making process about formats and methods of distance learning. In cases where the whole school adopted a given format, the opinions of all teachers were taken into account and uniform tools were chosen by consensus. This may occur through a general discussion at a meeting or by vote. Another type of practice that can be considered to maximally involve the teaching staff is giving full autonomy to teachers in choosing formats and tools for their work. In such schools, we find situations where administrators may help a teacher make the choice, but this is more likely to be an exception and occur only at the request of the teacher.

3.3 Choosing New Tools

Schools' emergency transition forced them to adopt a large number of digital innovations. The dilemma here is related to the school teams' strategies for choosing digital tools: on one end of the spectrum are schools that chose the most readily-available tools, minimizing the need to venture beyond practices that participants already felt comfortable with. On the other end are schools that were open to new practices and engaged in a search for new tools, choosing among them in an analytical way.

Some schools aimed to minimize venturing beyond the limits of "understandable" or "familiar" practices and tools. Teachers in these schools made use of tools that were ready at hand: already tested, imposed "from above," familiar to a given teacher or students, or adapted from everyday use (such as the VKontakte social network or the WhatsApp messenger). The teaching staff at these schools did not analyze various alternatives or problematize the effectiveness of the tools they adopted. According to them, this allowed for reducing time spent and maximizing the speed of getting the education process up and running.

On the opposite side were school teams where there was an openness to a new and wider horizon of alternatives and a search process for the optimal tools. Teachers at such schools tested a variety of tools rather than accepting the tool already most close at hand. According to informants, it was important for them to personally use a "*trial and error method*" with new tools so they could understand its strengths and weaknesses. Even after the digital tool was accepted into the school's arsenal, the school teams were willing to switch platforms. This might happen not just when forced, like when some tool failed to work, but also with an eye to moving to a more ideal solution, like when a more convenient interface or better content library was identified.

3.4 Stress and Decreased Psychological Well-being

Another coping strategy of school teams during the pandemic is tied to the problem of decreasing well-being among the staff. On one side of the spectrum, a school may tend to believe that decreased well-being of teachers is to be expected in the given circumstances. On the other side of the spectrum, administrators may be of the opinion that they need to provide increased care for employees.

The first strategy is one of team mobilization. Speaking about the transition to distance learning, these informants leaned on a "wartime" discourse: "*come together and survive*;" "*it was a real battle and we came out victorious*." Concrete practices of caring for staff well-being were absent in such schools, and decreased well-being was viewed as normal in the pandemic context. It's interesting to note that the mobilization strategy employed for the teaching staff may correspond with increased care for students and families. For example, in some schools there were added activities of care (short PE sessions,

opportunities to speak with psychologists, etc.) which were aimed only at students, while decreased well-being among teachers was not taken into account. The school team may also have taken upon itself an increased psychological burden (such as being available to families 24/7) in order to curb the risk of decreased well-being among families and children.

The opposite strategy was noted in schools where a military-style discourse was absent. On the contrary, these schools supported a discourse of fostering “*tolerant*,” “*understanding*” attitudes to the actions of teachers as well as students. Administrators at such schools saw care for employees as their duty. “*We remedied dissatisfaction if it occurred*,” for example, if teachers voiced concerns about their own state of mind in work chats, they would receive psychological support from their colleagues. Additionally, the administrations of some schools took a “*hands-on approach*” by analyzing the psychological state of their employees (spontaneous monitoring).

3.5 Increased Workload and Burnout

There is another aspect of the coping strategies of schools that touches on the problem of increased workload on the teaching staff during the transition to distance-learning. In extremely compressed timelines, teachers were forced to master new tools, find new teaching materials, create processes for receiving and grading in-class and homework assignments, etc. According to the informants, all this brought on a significant increase in workload. On one side of the spectrum of schools in this aspect were those that completely ignored this problem. On the other side were those that took a systematic approach to reducing and reallocating workload.

The first strategy represents a lack of measures taken to reduce or reallocate workload. Informants explained their lack of action taken to solve the problem of excessive workload by the fact that, in their opinion, all team members were in the same situation. School administrations did not work through the possibility of reallocating workload among teachers, did not monitor the workload levels within the team, and offered no solutions. In the case studies of schools in this category were noted missed opportunities for redistributing workload: for example, teachers who were freed from teaching obligations were not recruited to do additional work outside of their direct responsibilities, which could have helped others reduce their workload.

The opposite strategy involved creating organizational processes to help reduce workload for teaching staff while maintaining a high-level educational service. In such schools, the team reached the conclusion that teaching an online class session reduced workload in comparison with asynchronously grading written work. Thus, the efforts of the team were geared towards gradually increasing the share of synchronous class time. Another measure to reduce the problem of excessive workload was selective grading of assignments, and using tests that could be graded automatically. Another effective practice of reducing workload was limiting the timeframe in which parents and students could contact the teacher, as well as routing such communications through a class advisor (“*you may only call the class advisor, but you may write to all teachers*”). School administrators also made efforts to maximally simplify technical issues related to distance learning. For example, they worked to perfect processes of scheduling and organizing digital spaces, allowing teachers to avoid spending time on organizational tasks.

3.6 Teachers Mastering New Digital Tools

Another aspect of coping strategies is linked to the support provided by the school for teachers’ professional development in the context of mastering the distance-learning format. On one side of the continuum are schools where support for teachers was limited to providing technical instructions; on the other are schools where multifaceted support was provided.

In the first strategy, administrators took a narrow view of the needed actions to support teachers mastering new technical tools, merely providing technical instructions. Teachers working at such schools noted that they were forced to independently adopt innovations linked to the new format, as the school lacked possibilities for seeking support in cases of difficulty, and no training activities were conducted. The only recourse for mastering new platforms were sets of written instructions provided by the administration. These instructions were generally geared towards the technical side of adopting innovations, such as “*which buttons to push*.” Additionally, such schools lacked a general discourse surrounding the development of a new digital culture and how to work with resistance to it.

The opposite strategy was to create a systematic approach that offered methodological support for teachers. Analyzing the interviews, we can see that the content of such support was broader than that of schools in the first category. It touched not only on technical issues involved in using digital tools, but

also on content-related aspects (“teaching situations: how to prepare students for exams, how to assess those exams, how to hand out grades, what to take into account and what not to”). Teams at such schools shared a sense that adopting digital innovations does not merely involve technical mastery, but also an understanding and acceptance of the new format (“satisfaction with the process”). To achieve this, school teams worked with individual teachers’ attitudes and levels of acceptance of new practices by clarifying issues around “what the teacher must do, and what should be the result,” as well as “why this is important.”

3.7 Low Levels of Technological Preparedness Among Teachers

Another aspect of schools’ coping strategies was the way in which schools worked with teachers who experienced difficulty in adapting to the distance learning format. In some schools, such teachers were left to their own devices or were excluded from the education process. In other cases, active initiatives were conducted to support the “laggards,” and gaps in their digital skill sets were ameliorated.

One of the strategies we identified involved efforts to find alternatives for teachers who for one reason or another could not cope with the transition to the distance format, as opposed to helping them adapt. In some schools, “special” formats of the education process were organized for such teachers, such as contact-less boxes for turning in printed copies of assignments. Families would receive printed assignments from such teachers, and would then return them for grading using the boxes. At other schools, teachers were excluded from the education process during the pandemic, while their colleagues took additional teaching loads upon themselves. One teacher would conduct online classes for a double group. In some cases teachers who were unable to meet the requirements of distance learning quit their jobs.

The other side of the spectrum involved efforts to “bring along” teachers who lagged behind and help them achieve mastery of the new format. In some schools we found established mechanisms for providing such aid: mentoring programs, specialized chats, meetings, etc. Informants from these schools expressed the need to give some members of the team special attention, which corresponds to a desire to minimize degradation of the education process. In other words, the teaching staff at these schools was unwilling to lower the educational bar, despite the extraordinary nature of the pandemic. They actively worked with those teachers who needed help, who struggled to adopt the necessary innovations. Initiators of such aid could be either the school administration or individual “active” teachers.

4 CONCLUSIONS

According to the results of our analysis, coping strategies are conceptualized as a system of dilemmas that need to be “resolved” by the leaders of the transformational process and by school teams: (1) authoritative or multi-voice decision-making, (2) quality control of the educational process or “the opportunity to lower the bar,” (3) openness to new tools or orientation to the use of acquaintances, (4) focus on reducing the workload and caring for the well-being of the collective or considering the pandemic as “wartime,” (5) optimizing workload or inaction, (6) methodological support focused on helping with technical issues or developing a digital culture, (7) replacing “lagging” team members or supporting them to integrate into a new work format.

This study shows that some schools’ strategies are characterized by spontaneity and limited action, covering only a narrow circle of employees and children. Other schools managed to combine situational awareness, that is, in a short time to rebuild into a new format, with the consistency, that is, to make measures to overcome difficulties not spontaneous, but meaningful, consistent with each other and with the general strategy of the school.

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