Adaptability involves the capacity to respond to and manage new, changing, and uncertain situations or events that arise. Given the regularly changing nature of teachers’ work, we (Collie and Martin) suggest that adaptability is a central capacity for teachers. We set out to examine this in a recent study. Results support our assertion that teachers’ adaptability is positively associated with teachers’ wellbeing, work commitment, and students’ test achievement. Moreover, it is predicted by greater principal support.

What is adaptability and why is it important for teachers?
Teaching work is characterised by experiences of change, novelty, and uncertainty. For example, on regular occasions teachers must:

- respond to students by adjusting lesson pacing, adapting activities, or seeking out new resources to better illustrate main points
- respond to unexpected classroom management situations by keeping emotions that might arise (such as frustration) and thinking of alternative ways to solve problems
- interact with new colleagues, students, and parents
- adjust teaching plans when shifts in timetabling or daily routines occur, and
- integrate new knowledge from professional learning into teaching practices.

Being able to effectively adapt and respond to these new, changing, or uncertain situations and events (and the many others that can occur in teachers’ work) is known as “adaptability.” Thus, adaptability is the capacity to modify one’s thinking, behaviour, and/or emotions to deal with new, changing, or uncertain situations (Martin, Nejad, Colmar, & Liem, 2012).

The challenge of having to teach a new subject is a useful lens through which to understand the adjustments to thinking, behaviour, and/or emotions that are critical in a teacher’s working life. Here, adaptability would involve adjusting:

- thinking to identify new connections between the unfamiliar material that teachers have to teach and topics with which they are already familiar
- behaviour to seek out a helpful person who knows the new subject well, and
- emotions that may arise from having to teach the new subject.

As this example suggests, adaptability is a key capacity for teachers—both in terms of teachers’ ability to manage the stress that can accompany new, changing, and uncertain circumstances, but also for effective instructional practices.

Surprisingly, very limited research has directly examined the role of adaptability in teachers’ work. Therefore, we set out to examine teachers’ adaptability and its links with important outcomes for teachers and students.

The study
In our recent study (Collie & Martin, 2016; Martin & Collie, 2015), we asked teachers to rate their own levels of adaptability. In order to understand how adaptability is associated with teachers’ other experiences at work, we also asked questions about:

- levels of support for teachers provided by school principals (e.g., whether principals listen to teachers’ opinions, provide teachers with choices in their work, endeavour to understand teachers’ perspectives)
- teachers’ wellbeing at work
- teachers’ commitment to their school, and
- teachers’ background characteristics.
We collected data from over 100 teachers from various Australian schools and obtained achievement test scores from over 1700 students taught by these teachers.

What did we find?
Four key findings were revealed in the study:
- teachers who perceived the school principal as more supportive tended to report greater adaptability, wellbeing, and work commitment
- teachers who reported greater adaptability tended to experience greater wellbeing at work and greater work commitment
- teachers with greater adaptability, and therefore higher levels of wellbeing, tended to have students who achieved higher test results
- teachers' age, gender, and years of teaching experience did not seem to affect their adaptability.

What do these findings mean?
Our study provides evidence of the link between teachers' adaptability and important teacher outcomes (including wellbeing and work commitment). It also highlights a direct link between teachers' wellbeing and students' test achievement, and the role of teachers' adaptability in boosting this wellbeing. This research also indicates that principal support is important in assisting teachers' adaptability. Finally, the study suggests that levels of adaptability do not appear to be noticeably different for male and female teachers, older or younger teachers, and early or later career teachers.

How can we use these findings?
One key implication concerns the role of principals to promote an autonomy-supportive culture. Strategies principals can use to nurture adaptability include:
- conveying confidence in teachers' abilities to do their job in a self-directed manner
- inviting teachers' input in decision making
- listening to teachers' needs, and
- encouraging teachers' initiative.

Another implication is that efforts to promote adaptability might be linked with increases in teachers' wellbeing and (indirectly) students' achievement. By harnessing broad ideas from Clarke and Hollingsworth's (2002) model of teacher professional growth, we suggest a series of steps that may help to promote teachers' adaptability (Martin & Collie, 2015). These involve encouraging teachers to:

1. think about a recent unplanned and challenging situation they encountered in their classroom (e.g., students were unengaged in a learning activity)
2. reflect on the extent to which they adjusted the following in order to deal with the situation:
   a) thinking (e.g., altering expectations about what will be accomplished in the lesson)
   b) behaviour (e.g., adjusting an activity to be more engaging to students), and/or
   c) emotions (e.g., calming frustration by taking a deep breath).
3. determine whether they could adapt/react more effectively in the future, and lastly
4. experiment with these ideas in similar situations.

As a cyclical process, these steps can then be repeated.

Conclusion
Our research has provided much-needed information on the importance of teachers' adaptability and its links with significant teacher and student outcomes. Our findings suggest that promoting teachers' adaptability is a desirable outcome in itself, and a means to other important workplace and academic outcomes.

References

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