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THE DYNAMICS OF TEACHER STRESS, BURNOUT, AND RETENTION

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Abstract

Teacher attrition remains one of the most persistent challenges confronting education systems worldwide, with resource-depleted classrooms undermining both instructional quality and organisational stability. This article draws on Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to examine how the cyclical loss and gain of psychological, social, and professional resources shape teacher stress, burnout, and retention decisions. Using a conceptual, literature-integrative approach, the article synthesises empirical evidence from Maslach and Leiter, Hakanen et al., and Skaalvik and Skaalvik, alongside contemporary job demands-resources (JD-R) and psychosocial retention research (Bakker & Demerouti; Casely-Hayford et al., Mvana), to trace the pathway from resource depletion to emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and turnover intention. The analysis situates COR theory within educational management and organisational communication practice, arguing that school leadership communication, workload transparency, and structured professional development function as resource-replenishment mechanisms that buffer burnout and strengthen retention. The discussion extends by including resource caravans and gain spirals as levers for sustainable teacher well-being, with particular attention to resource-constrained schooling contexts such as those found in South Africa. The article concludes that management interventions grounded in COR principles (workload redesign, administrative and collegial support structures, and recognition systems) offer a theoretically clear and practically actionable route to reducing burnout and improving teacher retention. Implications for educational management, human resource policy, and future empirical research are outlined.

Keywords: Conservation of Resources theory, teacher burnout, teacher retention, occupational stress, educational management, resource loss spirals

1. Introduction

Teacher shortages and rising attrition rates have emerged as a major challenge for education systems in both developed and developing countries. These trends have far-reaching consequences for organisational stability, communication within schools, and the quality of education provided to learners (Flores & Craig, 2023; McPherson et al., 2025; Mtika & Sosu, 2026). Evidence from international and regional studies points to a concerning pattern, that many teachers who entered the profession with a strong sense of purpose and commitment now report persistent exhaustion, reduced feelings of effectiveness, and intentions to leave the profession long before reaching retirement age (Brunsting et al., 2024; Perveen et al., 2025; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Explaining why some teachers maintain long and resilient careers while others become disengaged, withdraw, or ultimately leave the profession requires a theoretical perspective that can account for how the psychological, social, and material resources needed for effective work are accumulated, maintained, and depleted over time. Teacher stress cannot be understood simply as a general reaction to workplace pressures. Instead, an adequate explanation must identify the resources involved, clarify how gains and losses are experienced, and explain why certain forms of resource loss have particularly significant consequences.

Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory provides a useful framework for understanding these processes. COR theory views stress not as a general response to demanding circumstances, but as a consequence of actual or anticipated resource loss, unsuccessful attempts to regain resources after expending effort, or insufficient returns on invested resources. Over the past four decades, this perspective has remained influential in organisational and occupational health research because it brings together cognitive appraisal, social and economic conditions, and motivational processes within a single, coherent framework (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In the context of teaching, COR theory highlights that occupational stress is fundamentally a resource challenge rather than merely a psychological or individual one. Teachers who consistently lack the material, relational, and professional resources needed to meet their work demands may enter what COR theorists describe as a "loss spiral", where ongoing resource depletion increases the likelihood of further losses over time (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001).

This article builds on earlier conceptual work relating COR theory to occupational stress, by exploring how the theory helps explain the development of burnout and its eventual impact on teacher retention, a topic of clear relevance to educational management and organisational communication research. Teaching is inherently resource intensive, requiring teachers to invest substantial emotional, cognitive, and relational resources in their daily work, with the expectation that schools and educational systems will provide opportunities for those resources to be replenished (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). When demands such as excessive workload, role ambiguity, and inadequate administrative support exceed the availability of restorative resources, teachers may become trapped in the loss spiral described above. As resources diminish, their ability to cope with further demands also declines, making them increasingly vulnerable to additional losses (Hobfoll, 1989). This process provides a comprehensive explanation for how burnout links prolonged occupational stress to decisions to leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). It also helps explain why interventions that strengthen and build resources, rather than focusing solely on reducing job demands, may be especially valuable for school leadership and management practice (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

The remainder of this article is organised around several interconnected themes. It begins by discussing the theoretical foundations of COR theory before examining the processes of resource loss and gain in teaching. It then explores the progression from resource depletion to burnout, the way burnout contributes to turnover intentions, the protective function of psychological resource caravans, and the implications of these dynamics for educational management and leadership communication. The article concludes with a critical reflection on the limitations of the conceptual synthesis and considers implications for policy, practice, and future research. Consistent with its aim of theoretical integration rather than primary data collection, the article adopts a conceptual, literature-integrative approach. Drawing on foundational burnout research, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, and recent studies on psychosocial factors influencing teacher retention, including evidence from South Africa and Scandinavia, it develops a coherent account of the stress-burnout-retention pathway.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Conservation of Resources Theory

COR theory is built on the idea that people are motivated to acquire, protect, and preserve the resources they value. According to the theory, psychological stress emerges when valued resources are threatened, when resources are actually lost, or when investments of time, effort, and energy fail to generate the expected returns (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2023; Hobfoll & Hou, 2025). Within this framework, resources are defined broadly. They include object resources, such as materials, tools, and physical infrastructure; condition resources, such as tenure, seniority, employment security, and social standing; personal resources, including self-efficacy, resilience, optimism, and occupational identity; and energy resources, such as time, money, knowledge, and attention. This expansive view enables COR theory to capture both the tangible realities of under-resourced schools, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching materials, and limited administrative capacity, and the less visible psychological resources, such as psychological capital, engagement, and occupational passion, that shape how teachers interpret and respond to workplace challenges (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Mvana, 2024).

Two central principles distinguish COR theory from earlier stress frameworks, particularly Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive appraisal model. The first is the principle of resource loss primacy, which proposes that losses carry greater psychological weight than equivalent gains. Put differently, losing administrative support or classroom autonomy is likely to affect teacher wellbeing more strongly than a comparable gain in support or autonomy is likely to improve it (Dönmez & Avcı, 2026; Hobfoll, 1989). This principle is especially relevant in educational settings because it suggests that withdrawing an existing form of support, such as a mentoring programme or dedicated planning time, may trigger a level of stress that exceeds what might be expected from the scale of the change itself. The second principle is resource investment. COR theory argues that individuals must draw on existing resources to protect themselves from future losses, recover from losses already experienced, and acquire new resources. This helps explain why teachers who have already experienced significant resource depletion are particularly vulnerable to further strain. With fewer reserves available, they are less able to respond effectively to new challenges, making each additional demand more difficult to absorb and potentially more damaging than the one before it (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Hobfoll's (2001) later developments of the theory introduced two concepts that are particularly valuable for understanding teacher wellbeing and retention: resource caravans and gain spirals. Resource caravans refer to the tendency for resources to accumulate and reinforce one another. For example, supportive relationships with colleagues may strengthen a teacher's self-efficacy, which can, in turn, sustain higher levels of engagement and occupational passion (Hobfoll, 2001; Mvana, 2024). Gain spirals describe the complementary process through

which an initial resource gain creates opportunities for further gains, generating an upward and self-reinforcing trail that mirrors the loss spiral in reverse. Together, these concepts provide a strong rationale for management interventions that focus on building interconnected resources rather than addressing individual problems in isolation. Because resources tend to operate as part of wider systems, strengthening one area, such as collegial support, can produce benefits that extend into other domains, including self-efficacy, engagement, and ultimately retention intentions, especially when such interventions are sustained over time rather than implemented as short-term initiatives (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Although COR theory shares important points of overlap with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, it remains conceptually distinct (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017, 2024). The JD-R model focuses on two broad processes, namely, a health impairment process driven by job demands and a motivational process driven by job resources. COR theory, by contrast, provides the deeper motivational logic that explains why resources have such a powerful influence on employee wellbeing and behaviour. From a COR perspective, resources matter because they help individuals maintain valued identities, relationships, and desired outcomes, while their loss threatens these same foundations. The two frameworks are therefore best understood as complementary rather than competing perspectives. Consistent with this view, much of the literature reviewed in this article employs JD-R measures of job demands and resources while drawing on COR theory to explain the underlying mechanisms through which these factors influence stress, burnout, and retention outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Lu et al., 2024).

3. The Dynamics of Resource Loss and Gain in the Teaching Profession

Teaching is an inherently demanding profession that requires the continual investment of intellectual, emotional, and relational resources to maintain high-quality instruction and a positive classroom environment. When schools are unable to replenish these resources through adequate administrative support, manageable workloads, reasonable curriculum demands, and meaningful professional development opportunities, teachers begin to experience resource depletion. According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this depletion is the immediate source of occupational stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Research informed by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework reinforces this perspective, showing that resources such as social support, autonomy, and constructive performance feedback help protect teachers from the effects of demanding work environments. Conversely, when these resources are lacking, engagement and well-being tend to deteriorate more rapidly (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Rosinta et al., 2026).

Evidence from South Africa illustrates how these processes unfold within a school system where resources are often limited and where resource loss may occur more quickly and with greater consequences than in better-resourced contexts. In a study of educators in the North West Province, Jackson and Rothmann (2006) found that teachers experienced high levels of occupational stress arising from demanding working conditions, including ongoing curriculum changes, combined with insufficient job resources such as autonomy and control over their work environment. More recently, Selebano et al. (2025) reported that low levels of social support were associated with higher burnout and poorer mental well-being among primary school teachers in Gauteng. Interpreting their findings through a Conservation of Resources perspective, the authors emphasised that "the availability and management of psychological resources play a critical role in influencing burnout levels" (Selebano et al., 2025, p. 4). Significantly, the study also found that high job demands, low job control, and work-family conflict did not independently exert a statistically significant effect on teacher well-being. This suggests that in resource-constrained environments, the loss of supportive and restorative resources may pose a more immediate threat to teacher functioning than the intensity of job demands alone. As such, the findings provide direct empirical support for the COR proposition that stress stems primarily from resource loss and insufficient resource gain rather than from exposure to demands.

Within under-resourced settings, this pattern often develops into a loss spiral consistent with COR theory's resource investment principle. Teachers who already have limited access to institutional, social, and material support possess fewer reserves with which to absorb new pressures. As a result, they may enter the depletion process earlier and experience its effects more intensely than colleagues working in more resource-rich environments (Hobfoll, 1989; Mvana, 2024). This imbalance in resource availability has important implications for educational management. Interventions designed for well-resourced systems, such as modest increases in planning time, may have limited impact in resource-scarce settings if they are not accompanied by broader forms of organisational and structural support. In some cases, they may even prove ineffective because they do little to address the underlying resource deficit. The South African evidence also highlights an important pattern that warrants attention from school leaders. Because low social support functions both as a direct predictor of reduced

well-being and as an antecedent of burnout, initiatives that strengthen collegial relationships, mentoring, and supportive workplace networks may offer wider protective benefits than interventions focused solely on reducing workload (Selebano et al., 2025).

4. From Resource Depletion to Burnout

Burnout, conceptualised by Maslach and colleagues as a syndrome characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (or cynicism), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), can be understood within the Conservation of Resources (COR) framework as the outcome of prolonged resource depletion. Of these dimensions, emotional exhaustion, defined as the depletion of emotional and physical energy, is widely regarded as the core component of burnout and is the aspect most consistently identified across studies. From a COR perspective, emotional exhaustion represents the direct lived experience of chronic resource loss. As teachers continually invest emotional energy in their work without sufficient opportunities for recovery or replenishment, their reserves gradually diminish, eventually undermining their ability to sustain the level of emotional engagement that effective teaching demands (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Depersonalisation, by contrast, refers to the development of emotional distance, detachment, or cynicism toward learners, colleagues, and the work itself. Viewed through a COR lens, this response may be interpreted as a protective coping mechanism through which individuals attempt to conserve their remaining emotional resources by withdrawing from relationships and interactions perceived as demanding or insufficiently rewarding. While such withdrawal may provide short-term relief, it rarely prevents continued resource depletion and may ultimately contribute to further stress and disengagement over time (Hobfoll, 1989; Maslach et al., 2001).

Maslach and Leiter (2016) further argue that burnout is most likely to emerge when there is a persistent mismatch between employees and key aspects of their work environment. Their Areas of Worklife framework identifies six interrelated domains in which such mismatches may occur: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. Within school settings, factors such as limited professional development opportunities, weak administrative support, constrained autonomy, and inadequate recognition may reduce teachers' access to the resources needed to manage the demands of their work effectively. As these resources become less available, teachers may become increasingly vulnerable to burnout. Although the Areas of Worklife framework does not examine these specific school-based conditions directly, it offers a valuable lens through which to understand how organisational environments can contribute to burnout. This perspective aligns closely with COR theory, which proposes that stress and burnout arise when individuals experience sustained resource loss, face threats to valued resources, or lack sufficient opportunities to restore resources that have been depleted.

A similar pattern emerged in the study by Hakanen et al. (2006) of Finnish teachers. Teachers who reported higher levels of supervisory support, appreciation, job control, and an innovative organisational climate also tended to report stronger work engagement and, to a lesser extent, lower levels of burnout. Job demands, however, showed a stronger relationship with burnout than job resources. The findings therefore supported two related but distinct processes within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model: job demands were primarily associated with burnout, whereas job resources were more strongly associated with work engagement. Although Hakanen et al. (2006) did not explicitly test COR theory, their findings are consistent with the view that resource loss and resource gain operate as interconnected yet distinct processes rather than simply representing opposite ends of the same continuum.

A recent systematic review of research on job demands, job resources, and teacher burnout reached similar conclusions, finding that workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity are consistently associated with higher levels of burnout. In contrast, social support and supportive workplace environments were identified as important protective resources that help buffer teachers from the negative effects of demanding work conditions. However, the strength of this protective effect was found to vary considerably across organisational and cultural settings (Rosinta et al., 2026). These findings suggest that burnout is shaped not only by the demands teachers face but also by the extent to which schools provide the resources needed to help them manage those demands effectively.

Comparable insights emerged from Lu et al.'s (2024) systematic review of 54 studies on teacher resilience conducted within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework. The authors found that existing research has focused more strongly on resource-related factors than on job demands, highlighting the central role of organisational, social, and personal resources in promoting resilience among teachers. At the same time, the review calls for greater attention to the nature of job demands themselves, particularly the distinction between challenge demands, which may encourage growth and development, and hindrance demands, which impede performance and well-being. Viewed through the lens of COR theory, these findings reinforce the argument that

resource loss and inadequate resource replenishment undermine occupational functioning, whereas access to supportive resources helps sustain, restore, and strengthen teachers' capacity to cope with workplace pressures.

For educational management and leadership, the implication is not that efforts to reduce job demands are unnecessary. Rather, the evidence points to the importance of addressing both sides of the equation. In contexts where structural constraints make substantial reductions in workload, class size, or administrative demands difficult to achieve, strengthening available resources may represent an equally important strategy. Enhancing administrative and collegial support, increasing professional autonomy, recognising teachers' contributions, expanding opportunities for professional development, and fostering supportive school cultures can all help counter resource depletion and promote sustained engagement, resilience, and well-being.

The following table synthesises the empirical pathway from resource dynamics to retention outcomes established across the reviewed literature.

Stage in the COR-informed pathway	**Mechanism**	**Representative evidence**
Resource threat and loss	Excessive workload, role ambiguity/conflict, and inadequate administrative support threaten and deplete time, energy, control, and social-support resources.	In teachers, workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity are consistently positively associated with burnout (Rosinta et al., 2026).
Inadequate resource replenishment	Limited professional development, recognition, autonomy, and social support constrain recovery and prevent resource accumulation.	Burnout is associated with mismatches in workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).
Burnout	Persistent resource depletion manifests as emotional exhaustion and cynicism/depersonalisation.	In the JD–R framework, high job demands predict burnout, whereas job resources promote engagement and mitigate adverse work processes (Hakanen et al., 2006).
Withdrawal and turnover intention	Burnout, particularly exhaustion and cynicism, contributes to reduced satisfaction and stronger intentions to leave the profession.	Teacher research links burnout dimension (emotional exhaustion) to motivation to leave (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).
Resource protection and potential gain	Psychological capital, supportive relationships, and engagement can conserve and potentially build resources, reducing burnout-related withdrawal.	Psychological capital is negatively associated with burnout; burnout mediates the link between psychological capital and turnover intention (Zambrano-Chumo et al., 2024).

5. Translation of Burnout into Turnover Intention and Retention

The progression from burnout to behavioural withdrawal, reflected in reduced engagement, increased absenteeism, and ultimately departure from the profession, represents the retention-critical stage of the Conservation of Resources (COR) pathway. In their study of Norwegian teachers, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) found that emotional exhaustion was strongly and directly associated with teachers' intentions to leave the profession. This relationship operated both independently and indirectly through its negative effects on job satisfaction and teachers' sense of belonging within the school community. Their subsequent study (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017) extended these findings by demonstrating that school goal structures and teacher self-efficacy were important antecedents of emotional exhaustion. Suggesting that the loss spiral does not develop in isolation but is shaped by organisational conditions that undermine teachers' sense of professional competence. Taken together, this body of research aligns with both the JD-R and COR literatures, which consistently identify emotional exhaustion and declining job satisfaction as key mechanisms linking resource depletion to workforce attrition.

More recent longitudinal evidence both strengthens and refines this understanding. In a prospective study of 308 Swedish teachers followed over a 24-month period, Casely-Hayford et al. (2025) examined how the health-impairment and motivational processes proposed within the JD-R model influenced teachers' intentions to remain in their positions. Their findings indicated that the health-impairment pathway, driven by job demands and

manifested through exhaustion, was a stronger predictor of retention intentions at both 12 and 24 months than the motivational pathway associated with job resources. Arguing that teacher retention strategies should prioritise the optimisation of job demands rather than focusing exclusively on enhancing job resources. This introduces an important refinement to the COR-based argument advanced in this article. While strengthening resources remains important for protecting teachers from burnout, reducing excessive demands may be equally, and in some circumstances more, important. In contexts where teachers face unsustainable workloads, high emotional demands, and persistent work pressure, interventions aimed at reducing these demands may have a greater impact than resource-building initiatives alone. From a COR perspective, this pattern is consistent with the principle that resource loss exerts a stronger psychological impact than resource gain. Consequently, slowing the rate of resource depletion through demand reduction may provide greater protection than an equivalent increase in available resources.

Nevertheless, the broader pattern emerging from the literature remains remarkably consistent. Madigan and Kim's (2021) meta-analysis found that all three dimensions of teacher burnout, emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment, were positively associated with intentions to leave the profession. Among these dimensions, emotional exhaustion showed the strongest relationship with quitting intentions, followed by depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. The authors also found evidence suggesting that the association between burnout and turnover intentions has strengthened over time. Together with job satisfaction, burnout explained a meaningful proportion of the variation in teachers' intentions to quit, with burnout symptoms making the strongest contribution to this relationship. These findings underscore the particular importance of emotional exhaustion as a correlate of teachers' intentions to leave, although the evidence does not suggest that it is the sole or universally dominant predictor across all educational contexts.

Further support for this interpretation comes from Räsänen et al.'s (2022) five-year longitudinal study of Finnish comprehensive school teachers. The study found that persistent intentions to leave were closely associated with an elevated risk of burnout. Among teachers who repeatedly reported turnover intentions, emotional exhaustion was the most commonly experienced symptom, although feelings of cynicism and professional inadequacy were also prevalent. These findings suggest that decisions to leave teaching are rarely sudden or isolated events. Instead, they often emerge from ongoing experiences of occupational strain that develop over time. Burnout, therefore, appears to be the strongest factor associated with teachers' intentions to leave the teaching profession (Carlotto & Diehl, 2023). Viewed through a COR lens, this pattern is consistent with a prolonged process of resource depletion that both precedes and reinforces teachers' consideration of leaving the profession.

For educational management and leadership, these findings highlight the importance of early intervention. Monitoring signs of emotional exhaustion, declining well-being, and reduced engagement may enable schools to respond before teachers' intentions to leave become firmly established. Such proactive approaches offer greater opportunities for retention than relying primarily on exit interviews, which occur only after a teacher has already decided to leave. By identifying and addressing resource loss early, schools may be better positioned to interrupt the progression from stress and burnout to eventual workforce exit.

6. Protective Role of Psychological Resource Caravans

Extending the classical COR framework is recent work by Mvana (2022), highlighting the potential role of work engagement, psychological capital, and occupational passion in supporting teacher retention in resource-constrained South African school settings. Drawing on a psychosocial perspective, the study examined how these factors relate to organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with human-resource retention practices. With findings indicating the function of psychological capital, an intermediary mechanism linking work engagement with job satisfaction and satisfaction with human-resource retention practices. Consistent with a COR-informed view that personal and work-related resources may help teachers manage ongoing demands and sustain positive work-related outcomes.

This facilitating role is of particular significance for management practice because it suggests that interventions need not exclusively target structural demands such as class size, remuneration, or administrative burden; they can also target the psychological and motivational resources that determine how teachers interpret and respond to those demands. This argument is consistent with COR theory’s proposition that people invest resources to protect against loss, recover from resource depletion, and acquire further resources (Hobfoll, 2001). COR theory also suggests that resources often occur in interconnected clusters, or resource caravans, such that personal and work-related resources may support one another. Accordingly, initiatives that strengthen teachers’ occupational passion, such as opportunities for professional voice, curriculum ownership, and recognition of pedagogical

innovation, may also be associated with stronger self-efficacy and work engagement. These potential gains, however, are likely to depend partly on the organisational conditions that enable or constrain teachers' access to resources. Complementary Scandinavian qualitative evidence supports this interpretation, emphasising that teachers in a 'positive deviant' hard-to-staff school with a persistently low turnover rate attributed their decision to remain to a protective community of teacher social capital that provided a sense of security, belonging, recognition, and appreciation (Casely-Hayford et al., 2024), and such resources map closely onto the psychological capital and social support constructs identified in the South African literature (Mvana, 2024).

The implication for school leadership is that resource-replenishment strategies must operate at two levels simultaneously, and these are structural interventions that reduce demand-side depletion (workload redesign, administrative support, class-size management), and psychosocial interventions that build resource caravans (mentoring, recognition, engagement-building communication practices, and opportunities for professional growth). Neglecting either level risks an incomplete intervention, since resource gains in one domain, for instance, salary increases or reduced administrative load, will have limited protective effect if psychological resources such as self-efficacy, belonging, and occupational passion remain depleted (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Mvana, 2024). Building on Casely-Hayford et al.'s (2025) finding that job demands outweigh job resources in predicting teacher retention within the Job Demands-Resources model. This demand-primacy result can be extended through Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theory to propose that resource "gain spirals" accumulate most readily when structural demand is held within sustainable bounds, rather than being continuously depleted by an unmanageable baseline of occupational demand.

7. Implications for Educational Management and Leadership Communication

Viewed through a management and organisational communication lens, COR theory reframes teacher retention as a resource-governance problem rather than solely an individual coping challenge. School leadership plays a critical role in policy execution and resource allocation, with communication practices such as open communication and recognition of teacher achievements contributing to a supportive environment, while perceived lack of management support and micro-management deplete teachers' psychological resources (Selebano et al., 2025). In effect, school leaders act as resource gatekeepers, their transparency about workload distribution and their responsiveness to teacher concerns shape whether staff experience resource gain or resource loss. Therefore, structured professional development, mentoring programmes, and administrative support systems operate as institutionalised resource-investment mechanisms that COR theory predicts will reduce burnout and, by extension, turnover intention (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Hakanen et al., 2006; Casely-Hayford et al., 2025).

Selebano et al.'s (2025) management model, developed for South African primary schools and grounded in the Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment, and Health (PERMAH) framework, offers a concrete illustration of how COR-consistent principles can be translated into institutional practice. Their recommendations include the establishment of structured peer support networks and mentoring programmes to strengthen interpersonal resources; formal and informal recognition systems to acknowledge teacher achievement and provide the feedback that sustains motivation; open communication between administrators and teaching staff to build trust and reduce the ambiguity that fuels chronic stress; and policies addressing workload management and work–life boundaries, including flexible scheduling and mental health days. Read through Hobfoll's (1989, 2001) framework, each of these recommendations maps onto COR constructs: peer support and mentoring build the social resources that anchor resource caravans; recognition systems supply the energy and esteem resources that offset the emotional labour of teaching; and open communication reduces the ambiguity and unpredictability that COR theory identifies as a potent, independent source of perceived resource threat.

Practical management implications drawn from the reviewed evidence include the following:

- Redesigning workload allocation and role clarity to reduce chronic resource threat, since role ambiguity, role conflict and workload are consistently linked to teacher burnout (Rosinta et al., 2026), and overload, alongside limited growth opportunities and low control, accounts for a substantial share of the variance in exhaustion among South African educators (Jackson & Rothmann, 2005).
- Institutionalising administrative and collegial support structures, given that job resources sustain engagement and organisational commitment through the motivational pathway (Hakanen et al., 2006) and that teachers themselves identify leadership and peer support as central to their wellbeing (Selebano et al., 2025). It should be noted, however, that longitudinal evidence has not consistently confirmed a

moderating or buffering effect of supervisor and colleague support on the demands–exhaustion relationship (Casely-Hayford et al., 2025).

- Investing in psychological capital-building interventions, such as mentoring, recognition and professional efficacy training, on the premise that resources accumulate as interlinked caravans rather than isolated, one-off benefits (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Such investment is particularly pertinent given the role of psychological capital, work engagement and occupational passion in teacher retention (Mvana, 2023, 2024) and the value of structured peer support, mentoring and recognition systems in school settings (Selebano et al., 2025).
- Monitoring early indicators of resource depletion, such as declining engagement or informal expressions of exhaustion (Mvana, 2023), so as to intervene before loss spirals become self-reinforcing (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018).
- Calibrating interventions to context, recognising that resource-constrained schools may be limited to lower-cost measures such as peer support and recognition programmes, whereas better-resourced schools can offer more comprehensive mental health and professional development provision (Selebano et al., 2025), which suggests that resource-constrained systems may require external resource injection before internal gain spirals become self-sustaining.
- Prioritising demand-side management as a first-order intervention, particularly the reduction of emotional demands and work pace, given longitudinal evidence that retention policies should address job demands rather than primarily enhancing job resources (Casely-Hayford et al., 2025), and earlier evidence that the health-impairment pathway is the more prominent of the two Job Demands–Resources processes (Hakanen et al., 2006).

These measures align with COR theory's emphasis on resource investment as a proactive rather than reactive management stance, since the resource investment principle holds that people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Institutions that wait for burnout to manifest before intervening are, in COR terms, responding after the loss spiral has already taken hold, at which point recovery requires substantially greater resource investment than prevention would have required. This asymmetry is compounded by the fact that loss spirals gain in both magnitude and momentum while gain spirals are weaker and slower to develop (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Extending this logic to organisational communication, leadership communication that is reactive, responding to resignations, grievances, or visible signs of distress, operates structurally later in the COR pathway than communication that is proactive, continuous, and oriented toward the early detection of resource strain. School management systems that build regular, low-stakes channels for teachers to report emerging pressures, such as workload audits, informal check-ins and climate surveys, may therefore be understood as investing in the organisational infrastructure required to intercept loss spirals before they become self-reinforcing.

8. Critical Reflection

The evidence reviewed in this article indicates that COR theory provides a persuasive framework for understanding how stress can develop into burnout and, ultimately, influence teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. This conclusion is broadly supported by foundational burnout research (Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2016), studies examining teacher wellbeing and retention (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, 2017; Casely-Hayford et al., 2025), and more recent reviews informed by the Job Demands-Resources perspective (Lu et al., 2024; Rosinta et al., 2026). At the same time, a closer examination of the literature highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how stress, burnout, and retention interact across different educational contexts.

Firstly, the evidence points to important contextual differences in the protective value of workplace resources. Resources such as social support, professional autonomy, and recognition do not appear to mitigate stress and burnout to the same extent across all educational systems and cultural settings. Rather, their effectiveness seems to depend on the broader organisational and resource environment in which teachers work (Rosinta et al., 2026; Selebano et al., 2025). This finding is consistent with the central logic of COR theory. Resource loss tends to have a stronger impact than resource gain, and resources must be continuously maintained and reinvested to prevent further depletion. However, the evidence also suggests that the resources most likely to protect teachers from burnout may vary across contexts. As a result, resource-based interventions should be adapted to local conditions rather than transferred uncritically from one educational system to another. For example, management approaches developed in well-resourced school systems may require substantial adaptation when

applied in South African schools, where many teachers continue to work under conditions of material, infrastructural, and administrative constraint (Jackson & Rothmann, 2006; Selebano et al., 2025).

Secondly, the findings of Casely-Hayford et al. (2025) provide an important reminder that strengthening resources alone may not be sufficient to improve teacher retention. While initiatives such as mentoring, recognition, and professional development can help teachers cope with workplace challenges, their impact may be limited when excessive job demands remain unchanged. Factors such as large class sizes, heavy curriculum requirements, and growing administrative workloads can continue to erode teachers' energy and commitment, reducing the long-term effectiveness of resource-based interventions. This observation does not contradict COR theory. Instead, it reinforces one of its central propositions that resource losses often exert a stronger influence than resource gains. From this perspective, efforts to build supportive resource caravans may have limited long-term impact if the sources of ongoing resource depletion remain unaddressed. The evidence therefore suggests that effective retention strategies should adopt a dual approach, combining resource enhancement with deliberate efforts to reduce excessive job demands. In practice, supporting teachers requires not only strengthening the resources available to them but also addressing the structural pressures that contribute to stress and burnout in the first place.

Thirdly, while the practical recommendations emerging from this literature are theoretically well grounded, implementing them may prove challenging in schools that already face significant resource constraints. Many of the proposed interventions, including mentoring programmes, workload reviews, and formal recognition systems, depend on school leaders having sufficient time, expertise, authority, and organisational support to put them into practice. In under-resourced schools, however, these leadership resources may themselves be limited. This creates a potential paradox. The very strategies needed to prevent teacher burnout and attrition often require resources that are already in short supply. From a COR perspective, this challenge highlights the importance of supporting not only teachers but also those responsible for leading and sustaining wellbeing initiatives. Consequently, effective implementation may require additional support from district, provincial, or national education authorities rather than relying solely on individual schools to generate and maintain the necessary resources on their own. By strengthening leadership capacity alongside teacher support systems, education authorities may be better positioned to interrupt cycles of resource depletion and promote more sustainable retention outcomes.

Furthermore, the literature reviewed pays limited attention to how resource loss and burnout may unfold differently across teachers' careers. Most studies treat teachers as a relatively homogeneous group, despite evidence suggesting that career stage can shape how individuals experience and respond to workplace demands. Early-career teachers, for example, may be particularly vulnerable because they have not yet developed the professional experience, coping strategies, and psychological resources that can help buffer stress. In contrast, more experienced teachers may draw on substantial professional and institutional resources, yet still face challenges associated with declining energy levels, changing role expectations, or career fatigue. These differences suggest that the resource-loss process described by COR theory may not operate in the same way across the teaching workforce. Future research would therefore benefit from examining career-stage dynamics more explicitly, recognising that the factors influencing retention are likely to vary over the course of a teacher's professional life.

Finally, it is important to recognise that this article is conceptual and integrative in nature. Rather than generating new quantitative evidence, it synthesises findings from a diverse body of research to develop a theoretically grounded understanding of the relationship between stress, burnout, and teacher retention. As such, the conclusions should be interpreted as an evidence-informed synthesis rather than as a causal model that has been empirically tested within a single educational context. The studies reviewed vary considerably in their research designs, participant groups, and national settings, encompassing South African survey research (Selebano et al., 2025), longitudinal studies of teacher retention in Sweden (Casely-Hayford et al., 2025), and psychosocial modelling among Black South African teachers (Mvana, 2022). Despite these differences, the consistency of findings across contexts strengthens confidence in the central proposition that resource loss, burnout, and teacher retention are closely interconnected.

At the same time, the diversity of contexts represented in the literature highlights the need for further empirical investigation. Future research should therefore focus on longitudinal and cross-cultural studies that examine the relative influence of structural resources, such as staffing levels, workload conditions, and administrative support, alongside psychosocial resources, including social support, professional autonomy, recognition, and psychological capital, in shaping teachers' decisions to remain in the profession. Such work may be particularly valuable in under-resourced educational settings, where the loss spirals described by COR theory

are likely to be amplified by ongoing material, organisational, and administrative constraints (Selebano et al., 2025; Mvana, 2024).

In addition, mixed-methods research could provide a deeper understanding of how resource dynamics unfold within schools. Combining validated quantitative measures, such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey and established assessments of job resources and psychological capital, with qualitative insights into school leadership practices, workplace communication, and resource allocation processes would offer a more comprehensive picture of the factors that influence teacher wellbeing and retention. By building on the conceptual framework proposed in this article and grounding it in context-specific evidence, future research could contribute to the development of more effective management, communication, and wellbeing strategies aimed at strengthening teacher retention across diverse educational settings.

9. Conclusions

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory provides a strong framework for understanding how patterns of resource loss and gain influence teacher stress, burnout, and retention. The literature reviewed suggests that resource depletion, reflected in factors such as excessive workload, limited administrative and collegial support, and restricted opportunities for professional development, contributes to burnout and increases the likelihood that teachers will consider leaving the profession. Conversely, resources such as psychological capital, work engagement, and organisational support appear to play an important protective role by helping teachers cope more effectively with workplace demands (Hakanen et al., 2006; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Mvana, 2024). At the same time, the evidence highlights the importance of addressing not only resource availability but also the conditions that drain resources in the first place. Recent research on teacher retention suggests that initiatives designed to strengthen resources may have limited impact when excessive job demands remain unchanged (Casely-Hayford et al., 2025). This insight is consistent with a central proposition of COR theory, that resource losses often exert a stronger influence than resource gains. In practice, reducing the rate at which teachers' resources are depleted may be just as important, and in some contexts more important, than increasing the resources available to them.

From an educational management and organisational communication perspective, the literature points towards a dual strategy. Schools need to reduce structural sources of strain, including excessive workload, role ambiguity, and administrative burden, while simultaneously strengthening the psychosocial resources that support teacher wellbeing. Resources such as engagement, self-efficacy, occupational passion, and a sense of collegial belonging can help teachers maintain resilience in the face of ongoing workplace demands (Hobfoll, 2001; Mvana, 2023). Evidence from resource-constrained educational settings, including South Africa, further suggests that this approach requires careful adaptation to local circumstances. Where structural pressures are persistent and support resources are limited, resource loss can accumulate rapidly, increasing the risk of burnout and attrition (Selebano et al., 2025). As a result, interventions developed in better-resourced contexts cannot be assumed to transfer directly without consideration of local realities.

Overall, the evidence suggests that embedding COR principles into school leadership practices and human resource policies may contribute to healthier and more sustainable teaching environments. Strategies such as workload redesign, stronger administrative and collegial support, meaningful recognition systems, and proactive, transparent communication can help reduce burnout while supporting teacher retention. As many education systems continue to face teacher shortages, COR theory offers not only a valuable explanation of why teachers leave but also a practical framework for identifying the organisational conditions that encourage them to remain and thrive in the profession.

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