

Workplace hazards for mental health: From Awareness to Union Action in Occupational Health and Safety Prevention...

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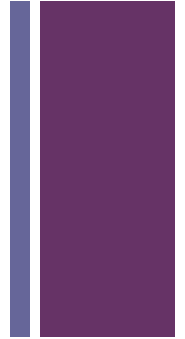
Michelle Desfonds, conseillère syndicale, Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ).

*Teach-in: Stopping the Spread of Psychosocial Hazards at Work
University of Ottawa, October 24-25, 2011*

www.fse.ulaval.ca/crievat



Presentation Objectives

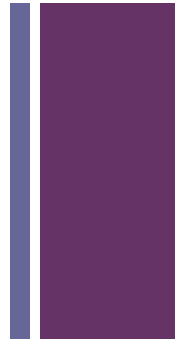


- To document the nature of work situations that are difficult or hazardous for mental health of school staff
 - Work organization
 - Individual and collective defensive strategies
 - Exploration of possible courses of action: the work of unions.



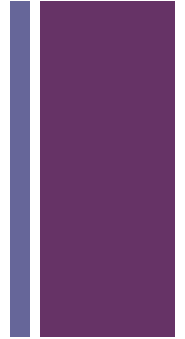
Some significant indicators in schools

- Stress, distress and exhaustion = literature shows variable, but worrisome prevalence rates (20% to 60%)
- Long term disability leave = 50% related to psychological health in Québec (FCSQ).
- Precarious employment = 48,6% of school board employees are not permanent (teachers 40%; support 60%) (MELS)
- «Professional drop-out » = + than 20% amongst teachers with precarious status, in Québec





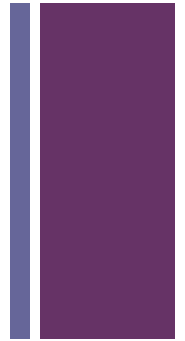
Studies on psychodynamics of work: Becoming aware of difficult situations



- Psychodynamics of work studies subjective and intersubjective relationships of those workers exposed to (potentially) pathogenic work organization (Dejours, 2008, IPDTQ, 2006 –free translation). It relies on participants' experiences in order to understand the distance between prescribed (job description) and actual working conditions. It reveals what is done to deal with the realities of work.

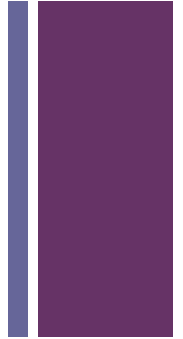
■+ Methodology

- Public high-schools (regular and specialized programs); socioeconomically disadvantaged milieu
- Eight (8) groups of voluntary participants (teachers, education professionals, vice-principals and support staff) in two semi-urban schools.
- « The suffering school: psychodynamics of work in the school system » (*L'école en souffrance: Psychodynamique du travail en milieu scolaire*), edited by M.F. Maranda et S. Viviers (2011), PUL, Université Laval, Québec.





Six difficult working situations in the school system today...

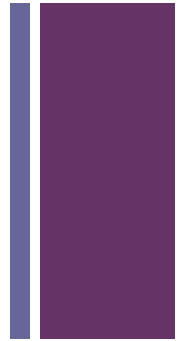


- Workload: too many students/ class and too many students with special needs
- Disrespect and violence
- Time pressures (immediacy and urgency)
- Complexity of tasks and role ambiguity (reforms and contradictions: ex: accountability and reporting)
- From bureaucracy to disorganization
- Work and job precariousness



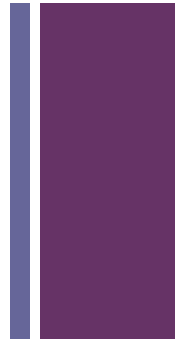
Towards hazardous situations?

- The notion of *hazardous work situations* looks at organizational work elements in their relation with individual and collective defensive strategies established to counter suffering. These strategies can often have adverse effects on mental health as they alter the perception of reality and inhibit action.





Two types of defensive (individual) strategies in the school system under the guise of a *paralysing adaptation*



1. An adaptation to the 'restorative school' which addresses unmet needs:
 - Social, pedagogical and organizational needs: **working behind the scenes** (ex: over-involvement in therapeutic relations; in taking care of students beyond work requirements)
 - Hyperwork vs lack of time, or distance
 - = burn-out....of human resources
2. A reactive adaptation to the encroachment of work which incites one to withdraw :
 - Individual withdrawals by taking leaves
 - Retrenchment behind defensive discourses: denial, trivialisation, procrastination in a context where union action is slow to develop.

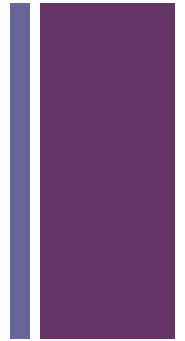


Some difficulties facing union action on (primary) prevention at the source of mental health problems at work (Maranda et al. 2009)

Individualization of the «problem » (individual model)

Increased judicialisation of workplace relations

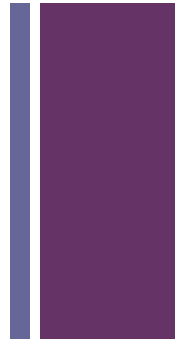
- Resorting to expert models (« scientific »)
- WITHOUT ANY LINKS TO WORK ORGANIZATION SPECIFIC TO EACH WORK PLACE
- Non-integration in daily union action
- Lack of union training on this subject





Exploration of courses of action based on the workplace (schools)

- Implementation of socioprofessional integration program (reinforce social links)
- Implementation of a permanent place for crisis resolution
- Experimental project to replace the « task sheet » and exercise to eliminate finicky bureaucracy
- Discussion workshops on pedagogical preoccupations
- Implementation of a joint OHS committee
- Making work visible (for the purpose of communication; shared understanding and clarification of roles and functions)
- Sensitization and discussion surrounding the damage done by precarious employment and jobs.





References

- Dejours, Christophe (2008). *Travail, usure mentale*, Bayard Éditions, 4e édition.
- Institut de psychodynamique du travail, sous la dir. de (2006). *Espace de réflexion, espace d'action en santé mentale au travail*, Presses de l'Université Laval, 207 p.
- Maranda, M.F. et S. Viviers, sous la dir.de (2011): *L'école en souffrance: psychodynamique du travail en milieu scolaire*. PUL: Québec, 192 p.
- Maranda, M.F. et coll. (2009). Recherche-action en organisation du travail et santé mentale: récits de pratiques syndicales, *Regards*, Ministère du Travail, Gouvernement du Québec, vol. 5, no. 1: 24-26.

