

RURAL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER JOB SATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

The retention rates of principals in rural areas are lower than in urban contexts, and the preparation of such leaders is often lacking (Clarke, Stevans, & Wildy, 2006; Gates, Ringel, Santibañez, Guarino, Ghosh-Dastidar & Brown, 2006). Rural school leaders who do not receive early preparation may be less able to perform in their jobs and hence experience poorer job satisfaction. Herein we investigate whether rural school leaders who received preparation prior to their appointment experience higher levels of job satisfaction in their roles than those who received no such preparation. Across 658 rural school leaders, we find a small increase in job satisfaction for rural principals who received formal preparation prior to the commencement of their leadership position than those who did not, even after controlling for demographic and school factors. The increased satisfaction for prepared principals remained statistically significant even after we statistically controlled for the number of years they had been an educational leader. Formal preparation of rural principals may result in long lasting small increases in job satisfaction, and may play a role in larger strategies to increase rural school leaders' job satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Effective school leadership is critical for student achievement and school survival (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom., 2004; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). In rural communities, educational leaders are a rich source of intellectual capital and contribute toward capacity building and sustainability (Anderson, Davis, Douglas, Lloyd, Niven, & Thiele, 2010). Rural schools have fewer applicants for leadership positions (Barty, Thomson, Blackmore, & Sachs, 2005), and once appointed, principals are often underprepared to undertake rural leadership positions (Clarke, Stevans, & Wildy, 2006). Retention rates of rural principals are also lower, with rural principals more likely to leave the school system than urban ones (Gates, Ringel, Santibañez, Guarino, Ghosh-Dastidar, & Brown, 2006). The latter in particular may be indicative of lower job satisfaction for rural principals, since job satisfaction is closely linked to absenteeism and staff turnover (Barber, 1986; Freudenberger, 1975; Mobley, 1977).

Research on job satisfaction dates back to the Great Depression (Circa 1930), when researchers quantified that up to one third of the workforce were dissatisfied in their roles (Hoppock, 1935). In this context, factors that contributed to job satisfaction became of interest to researchers (Hoppock, 1935; Barnard, 1938). Since that time, research has found that greater employee satisfaction is associated with workers being more committed to the organisation, a term known as organisational citizenship (Williams & Anderson, 1991). Similarly, greater employee satisfaction is associated with reductions in employee burnout, being defined as a combination of disengagement and exhaustion (Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayana, & Schwartz, 2002). Reduced staff turnover is also evident for employees who are more satisfied (Mobley, 1977). Research also suggests that improving the satisfaction of employees will result in small gains in employee productivity (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985). Therefore it is in the interests of employing agencies to ensure that staff satisfaction is as high as possible.

Underpinning the association between job satisfaction and positive outcomes for employees and employers is Jayaratne and Chess' (1984) theoretical model of employee burnout. Jayaratne and Chess reason that when an employee is faced with negative job facets such as poor comfort, financial rewards and promotion opportunities, they feel depersonalized, characterised by a lack of control. Further the lack of positive job factors leads to exhaustion, withdrawal and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Thus, job burnout occurs due to an employee's needs being neglected by an organisation, leading to poorer work performance and a higher chance of the employee leaving the position.

What factors might improve the job satisfaction of staff? Many factors that affect employee satisfaction are difficult to alter, such as the social status of the job and size of the community the job is located within (Hoppock, 1935). Other factors, such as the salary level of the position can be costly to manipulate (Martin & Schinke, 1998) or contingent upon unpredictable organisational needs, for example, promotion opportunities (Martin & Schinke, 1998). This is particularly true for educational leaders in rural communities, who have reached a promotional level of organisational leader/school principal wherein resources for salary raises are limited and strictly controlled by central educational authorities. As such, there is a strong need to develop methods for improving the long-term satisfaction of educational leaders in rural contexts that are cost-effective and practical.

One method that may be effective for improving the job satisfaction of rural principals is the formal preparation of leaders for their roles. Research in other professions has shown that initial training is linked to job satisfaction and intention to stay in the job (e.g., Chiang, Back, & Canter, 2005), as well as job performance more generally (Judge, Thoreson, Bono, & Patton, 2001). To the extent that this phenomenon generalises to an educational context, it might be expected that formal training of educational leaders would serve as a protective factor against dissatisfaction.

To investigate this possibility, we undertook a national survey of rural, regional and remote school principals, examining their demographic characteristics, job satisfaction, and formal preparation levels for undertaking a leadership position in a school. We hypothesised that principals who had received some sort of formal training prior to undertaking their role as an educational leader would have higher mean levels of job satisfaction than their counterparts who received no such training.

METHOD

Participants

These were 658 school leaders (309 male, 362 Female, 12 non-responses) employed in rural, regional and remote Australian Schools. The modal age was 51-55 years, comprising 32 per cent of participants. Participants were predominantly principals of their school, with 569 participants indicating that they were principals ($n = 530$) or in the role of principal ($n = 39$) at the time of responding to the survey. Remaining participants were in a variety of educational leadership roles, including deputy principals ($n = 29$), assistant principals ($n = 22$), directors ($n = 12$), assistant directors ($n = 5$), and a variety of specialist leadership positions ($n = 19$, missing responses = 2).

Procedure

Rural school leaders were contacted through the Principals Australia mailing list and invited to participate in an online survey. Six hundred and fifty eight school leaders responded to the critical questions used in the analyses undertaken in the present project. We asked participants to indicate the number of years they had served as an educational leader, their highest qualifications (Bachelors degree, Bachelors degree with honours, Diploma, Doctorate, Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma, Masters Degree, other [please specify]), their state (in Australia), school sector (Catholic, Government, Independent, Other [please specify]) and school type (rural, regional, remote), prior to asking about their job satisfaction. Single item measures of job satisfaction have been shown to be acceptably reliable relative to multidimensional scales (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997). Therefore, job satisfaction was assessed by the question 'I rate my job satisfaction as' (0-100 per cent in 5 per cent increments). We asked participants to indicate whether they had received formal training prior to undertaking their role as a rural educational leader (none, short courses run by employing

authorities, short courses run by consultants, formal qualifications [e.g., graduate diploma in leadership], programs presented by a professional association, other [please specify]). Job demand was assessed using a novel 26 item scale (Drummond & Halsey, 2013).

Results

Three hundred and thirty nine school leaders had received some kind of formal training (ranging from short-courses to formal qualifications), while 319 had received no preparation before undertaking their position. The groups had both remained in their roles at length, having acted as educational leaders for 11.8 ($SD = 7.6$) years on average if they had received preparation and 12.8 ($SD = 8.0$) years on average if they had not (a non-significant difference, $p > .10$). Participants in rural areas had acted as educational leaders for 12.1 years on average ($SD = 7.8$ years), while participants in regional areas had acted as educational leaders for 13.4 years on average ($SD = 7.2$ years). Participants who were in remote areas had acted as educational leaders for only 10.2 years on average ($SD = 8.3$ years). Participants who had received no formal training rated their job satisfaction as significantly lower ($M = 80.70$, $SD = 14.82$) than those who had received formal preparation for their roles ($M = 84.03$, $SD = 11.48$), $t(656) = 3.22$, $p = .001$, comprising a statistically small effect, $d = 0.25$.

To further investigate the relationship between preparation and job satisfaction, we repeated the above analysis factoring in the effects of a number of covariates. Specifically, we statistically controlled for the effect of the highest qualifications obtained by the participant, the gender of the participant, the number of years that they had worked as an educational leader for, and the State their school was located in. We also controlled for whether their school was Public, Private, Independent or Catholic, which grades the school taught and their subjective job demand as indexed by a novel 26-item scale (Drummond & Halsey, 2013). This analysis obtained almost identical results to those reported above, $F(1, 632) = 7.97$ $p = .005$. Thus, the difference in job satisfaction between leaders with formal preparation and no formal preparation cannot be explained by these factors.

Job experience can be conceptualised as continual on-the-job training (Mincer, 1962). It is therefore conceivable that the effects of formal preparation may be lessened by time. To explore this possibility, we performed a median split on length of time the participant had served as an educational leader (Median = 11.00 years). Those who had been in their roles for 11 or fewer years ($n = 345$) again experienced significantly less job satisfaction if they had received no formal training ($M = 79.10\%$, $SD = 15.52\%$) than if they had received some kind of formal training ($M = 83.45\%$, $SD = 11.45\%$), $t(343) = 2.99$, $p = .003$, a statistically small effect, $d = 0.32$. For participants who had been in their roles longer than 11 years ($n = 311$), the difference between those who were formally prepared and those who were not was reduced to non-significance, although a marginal trend remained ($M_{PREPARED} = 84.70$, $SD = 11.56$ Vs $M_{UNPREPARED} = 82.29$, $SD = 13.95$), $t(309) = 1.67$, $p = .098$, $d = 0.19$.

DISCUSSION

The present project investigated whether rural school leaders are more satisfied in their roles when they undertook formal leadership preparation courses prior to undertaking their leadership roles. Our results suggest that a lack of formal preparation of rural school leaders for their roles is associated with lower job satisfaction ratings. These differences, while small, are striking given that they occur for principals who have been employed for up to 11 years in their current position. Indeed, there was a trend toward those who were employed for longer than 11 years to also experience higher job satisfaction when they had received formal preparation.

The small effect sizes in the present study are unsurprising, as there are a multitude of factors that influence job satisfaction. In an environment where high staff turnaround and dissatisfaction is common, such as within some rural schools, cost-effective strategies such as formal leadership preparation courses that result in small gains in job satisfaction in the long term may be critical to securing the sustainability of leadership in rural education. If several such strategies were combined, then long-term satisfaction may see larger gains for relatively low costs.

It is important to note that we asked principals about their job satisfaction prior to requesting their formal preparation status. It therefore seems unlikely that the present findings are due to demand effects. Formal preparation of rural school leaders may ameliorate the learning curve of their roles,

and serve as a protective factor against job dissatisfaction for a significant length of time after appointment. Longitudinal studies of job satisfaction may aid in further examining this phenomenon in rural and urban contexts.

Overall the present research is a first indication that small long-term increases in job satisfaction may be associated with the provision of formal training courses for rural educational leaders before they take up their position. Randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental research is required to examine whether the provision of such courses causes the increased job satisfaction observed in the present study.

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