

Secondary schools principals and their job satisfaction: A test of Process theories

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The study aims to test the validity of process theories on the job satisfaction of previously disadvantaged Secondary School principals in the North West province. A mixed-method approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative methods was used for the study. A questionnaire was administered during the quantitative phase with a sample that comprised thirty Secondary School principals purposefully selected from rural and township schools. The second part of the research was qualitative. Structured interviews were conducted with eight purposefully selected principals from the original sample of thirty. The theoretical framework of the research was based on the process theories. The results show that principals in the study felt that the rewards they obtain as a form of output were not equitable to their efforts (input). Finally, the researcher made a number of propositions and recommendations to school managers on ways to enhance job satisfaction of school principals.

Keywords: Principals, job dissatisfaction, equity theory, expectancy theory

The role of a school principal is central to the effective functioning of a school. The principal is regarded as a leader and the primary work performance manager of an organisation. Principals are supposed to give direction towards the goals of the institution. Castillo and Palomares (2004, p. 147) classify the duties of a principal into the following two models:

- *Socio-political:* conditioned by political tensions both inside and outside the educational institution
- *Professional:* operations based on scientific efficiency, autonomy and objectivity.

The demands of the job of the principal keep on increasing. Practising principals interact with supervisors, educators, parents and learners within an organisational structure that is inclusive of all these groupings. Each of these groups demands the attention of the principal. A principal has to perform the role of a manager, disciplinarian, visionary, facilitator, transformer, instructional expert, or all these together. Principals are

sometimes experiencing role conflict while trying to live up to everyone's expectations. This role conflict reduces the principal's effectiveness. In addition, external forces for improved learner outcomes and performance cause role strain which can result in job dissatisfaction as principals try to strike a balance between instructional issues and empowering the staff members (Catona & Stronger, 2007, p.382).

One has to merely read newspaper articles when Grade 12 results are published to realise the pressure under which principals perform. A newspaper headline from one of the newspapers read: "*Principals face the axe after Grade 12 results*" (Govender, 2006 p.4). At the same time, school principals are faced with a great number of other challenges in their profession that have an impact on their performance. Increased responsibilities, long workdays, difficult parents and school boards, as well as inadequate salaries make the position of a principal less attractive (Rodridge, 1999, p.6).

Research has been conducted on job satisfaction in many professions but a gap

exists on the job satisfaction of principals of previously disadvantaged secondary schools in particular contexts, such as the North West province. This study adds to the ongoing discourse on job satisfaction of school principals through an in-depth investigation into the job satisfaction of principals of previously disadvantaged Secondary principals in the North West province. The main research question was:

What influences the job satisfaction of principals of previously disadvantaged Secondary Schools in the North West province?

The study focuses on previously disadvantaged principals because they face many challenges due to the lack of facilities and resources. The North West province was chosen due to the fact that it is predominantly rural, with 65.1% of the population living in rural areas (Newman, 2008, p.4). This study used process theories as a conceptual framework. The equity and expectancy theories that make up the process theories are given attention in the ensuing discussion.

Conceptual framework: Process theories

People have different desires and expectations, and as such make the definition of job satisfaction difficult. Evans (1997, p.833) in defining job satisfaction, looks at the perception that individuals have in relation to what they bring into the job and what they get out of it. This means that job satisfaction follows if there is a perceived balance between the input and the output. Maforah (2010, p.11) defines job satisfaction as the sense of fulfilment brought about by a feeling of achievement and recognition. When people perform certain duties, they have certain expectations in the form of a reward for the job done. The reward that one gets is a form of recognition for the work done and can result in either job

satisfaction or dissatisfaction depending on the expectations of the individual. This is in line with what process theories posit; that there is a significant relationship between human behaviour and certain variables such as personality, values, needs, attitudes and expectations that may affect the level of job satisfaction of an individual. The process theories that the researcher will deal with are the equity and valence theories.

The equity theory

The equity theory deals with social comparison processes. Social relationships can be regarded as exchange processes where an individual performs a specific act in exchange for a specific expected reward (Steers, 1979, p.124). This is because people are never passive observers at work. They observe and learn that certain actions lead to particular reactions, and that affects how they behave. The equity theory generally suggests that the way people evaluate their jobs is largely influenced by their perceived treatment in comparison to others in a similar situation (Sell & Shipley, 1979, p.59). People have a belief about the value of their contributions at work, and how their contributions should be rewarded. Over time, people develop beliefs of what they think is fair treatment in relation to their contributions. The belief of people regarding how they are treated is always in comparison to the treatment that others receive who are in similar circumstances (Pinder, 2008, p.316; Chindanya, 2002, p.53; Garudzo-Kusereka, 2003, p.44).

People always feel that they are bringing something of value into the workplace and they regard this as their input. Education levels, experience, skills, intelligence, training, age and effort are regarded as inputs. Different people recognise different inputs and whenever two individuals exchange something, there is a possibility that one or both will feel that the exchange was inequitable. The

important characteristic of an input is that it must be relevant and be recognisable by both parties (Steers, 1979, p.107).

Pinder (2008, p.316) writes that what people receive as a reward for their efforts or input is regarded as an outcome. Different people, including school principals, appreciate different outcomes. Salary, fringe benefits, status, opportunity to learn, physical outcomes/ privileges and job satisfaction are the main outcomes of job satisfaction. People usually evaluate their outcomes based on their inputs. If their view is that the outcome befits the input, then equity or satisfaction has been reached. In a situation where an individual feels that the outcome is not equivalent to the input, then a state of inequity or dissatisfaction is reached. The state of equity or inequity is always based on an individual's perceived value of the input, and the value of the output in comparison to others. In other instances, the output of an individual can be more than the outcome of the input of another. Individuals have shown greater tolerance for the sort of positive inequity situation than in cases where they believe that there is negative inequity (Pinder, 2008, p.316). Inequity results in the creation of tension in an individual that results in job dissatisfaction - the greater the perceived discrepancy between the outcome and the input, the more the tension. This causes an individual to act and reduce the tension (Sell & Shipley, 1979, p.60).

There are different measures that an individual can take to try and reduce the tension caused by inequality. Some of the actions as indicated by Adams (in Steers, 1979, p.114) can be guided by their specific circumstances.

- Altering the inputs: People can either increase productivity when they assume that the increased input will result in increased outcome, or they may reduce production/input to a level where

they assume that it matches the outcome.

- Altering outcomes: Individuals may negotiate for an increase in salary or benefits, so as to try and match what they perceive to be in line with their input.
- Distort inputs and outcomes cognitively: Individuals can drop their expectations by changing the weight placed on the value that they had placed on an outcome in relation to an input.
- Leaving the field: this can happen in several ways, namely absenteeism, quitting the job, or emotionally disengaging.

Expectancy/valence theory

The expectancy/valence theory on the other hand, views individuals as thinking beings with beliefs and anticipations for the future. As such, the theory posits that human behaviour is a result of some of the products determined by an individual's characteristics or internal forces and the perceived environment (Steers, 1979, p.210). The expectancy theory is based on the following assumptions:

- Behaviour is determined by a combination of forces in the individual (intrinsic) and environmental factors (extrinsic). This means that people have specific needs that are influenced by their experiences in life. They then develop expectations on how they should be treated at work. Their work environment provides other extrinsic factors that will affect how an individual reacts.
- Different people place different values on the same things, as different people have different needs and goals.
- People do the things that they regard as bringing desirable outcomes and avoid those that they

perceive as causing undesirable outcomes.

The core of the expectancy theory are the expectations that people have about being able to perform well in their jobs, and whether good performance will make them succeed, and if their performance will be rewarded accordingly (Pinder, 2008, p.363; Garudzo-Kusereka, 2003, p.39; Chindanya, 2002, p.47). People perceive outcomes as related to behaviour. They always look at possible outcomes to behaviour before making choices, and will choose the most favourable outcome as a premise for their behaviour (Roos, 2005, p.32; Thomas, 2000, p.10). The assumption is that people choose behaviours based on the anticipated consequences or outcomes. Thus according to Lawler III (in Gruneberg, 1976, p.90), an employee's behaviour is determined by two variables, namely:

- *Effort-reward probability*: The probability of an effort will lead to performance (expectancy), and the probability of performance will lead to a reward (instrumentality). This is an individual's own subjective perception and belief that when he/she makes a certain amount of effort to effectively perform his/her duties, it will result in a reward or a positively valued outcome.
- *Valence*: Valence is the importance or value that an individual places on expected rewards that came as a result of effective performance. The rewards could be extrinsic or intrinsic. Extrinsic rewards form part of a job situation and are given by others (salary, security and acceptance). The intrinsic needs are internally-mediated by individuals as a way of rewarding themselves. These involve feelings of accomplishment, achievement and development, and satisfy self-

esteem and self-actualisation (Gruneberg, 1976, p.90; Schaefer, 1977, p.10). Pinder, (2008, p.365) highlights valence as the expected satisfaction that one would derive from an outcome and not the actual value of an outcome. This is because people have different needs based on life orientation and will thus attach different values to the same things because they have different valences.

The equity theories above deal with the comparisons that the individuals make regarding their job input and the resulting outcomes in relation to others in similar circumstances. The expectancy theory explains how individuals do their jobs with a certain amount of effort, taking into consideration the probability that their performance will lead to a desirable outcome. The study will thus look into how principal's performance is linked to the rewards that they obtain.

Research method and data collection

The study followed a mixed-method approach with the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This permitted the researcher to look into emerging themes or trends that could arise when conducting quantitative research, which can then be further explored by means of qualitative research. Brown (2004, p.96) indicates that using mixed methods strengthens the study at hand, as well as the internal validity of the research. The researcher used a quantitative approach in the first part of data collection for this study. The sample comprised of purposefully selected 30 Secondary School principals located in rural and townships in the North West province. Principals were requested to complete a questionnaire which was first piloted and comprised of four sections. Section A consisted of the

demographic and biographical background of the subjects with the following results: 66.7% of the respondents were male. The highest population of the sample (60%) was between the ages 31 and 40, followed by 26,7% of the sample being between ages 41 – 50 years. The majority of the respondents had more than five years' experience as principals, with the majority (76.7%), married. The highest qualification for most of the respondents was a Bachelors' degree (37%), followed by an Honours' Degree (30%).

Sections B and C covered both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect the level of job satisfaction. The questions were clustered together to address the following variables: the nature of the work; physical working conditions; role conflict; recognition and self-actualisation; salary; and interpersonal relations. The respondents were required to respond by means of a four-point Likert scale ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. Section C was designed to determine how principals evaluate their jobs. The respondents were required to respond using a key ranging from definitely disagree to definitely agree. Section D of the questionnaire consisted of open-ended structured questions meant to describe the daily activities in the working lives of a principal that brings about either satisfaction or dissatisfaction and their recommendations of an improvement of such by their seniors.

The data was interpreted through descriptive statistics that included correlating the percentage of respondents who answered an item in a specific way and the means of each item. The higher the mean, the more satisfied the respondents were on an issue (Maforah & Schulze, 2012, p.230). To ensure content validity, the factors on the conceptual framework were captured in sections B and C of the questionnaire and expert opinion was also sought. The Cronbach alpha was used to calculate reliability of the scaled items of the questionnaire.

The second phase of the research was qualitative, with an aim to seek clarity on some of the observed trends from the results of the quantitative phase. Eight principals were purposefully selected from the original sample of thirty. Two female principals and six male principals from both township and rural schools were chosen. They had a variety of teaching experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this phase, which were based on the results of the quantitative phase. The questions were related to factors that could somehow influence the job satisfaction of school principals. In relation to the process theories, some of the questions that the principals were asked was to determine their expectations and experiences when they were first appointed and in subsequent years. Principals were also requested to give their views on the type of recognition principals get for the work they do. All interviews were recorded with permission from the respondents. A convenient time and place for the respondents to be interviewed was determined. To ensure reliability and validity of the results, the data was collected over a relatively long period. This gave the researcher the opportunity to continually analyse data and compare and refine ideas. The data was also recorded in the language the respondents were comfortable with and interviews were conducted in the most natural setting as possible (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p.330).

For the qualitative data analysis, the researcher used Guba and Lincoln's constant comparative method analysis. A transcript of the interviews was prepared and any emerging themes and trends were captured. Similar trends were classified together into units which were then coded to form the themes and sub-themes. This was repeated so as to compare codes for duplication. The categories were also pre-determined by the questions asked during the interviews (Brown, 2004, p.104 - 105). Informed consent was obtained from the

Department of Basic Education, as well as from the participants for ethical considerations. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed and all respondents were willing participants who were made aware that they could withdraw from the research should they wish to. Permission was also obtained to record the interviews with the respondents.

Results

The factors that influence job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction, as highlighted by the process theories have been used as key elements for presentation of the results. Process theories posit that the output should always benefit the input and that rewards should live up to expectations. This premise was used to measure the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of principals in both the quantitative and qualitative phases.

Equity

The highest positive correlation was obtained between general job satisfaction and a salary. How principals view their salaries affects their levels of job satisfaction which means that the lower the salary the higher the level of job dissatisfaction. The results indicated that 83.4 % of the principals felt that they were not adequately rewarded for the good work that they do. On top of that, 66.7% of the principals were dissatisfied with the salaries they receive as compared to other professions. 76.7% of the principals feel that their salaries are not equal to the effort they put into their jobs. More than 70% of principals were dissatisfied with their salaries compared to their age and experience. A very large number of principals (90%) were dissatisfied with the lack of fringe benefits. What is of note is that 60% of the principals were dissatisfied with the impact that a salary has on their performance. Meanwhile 90% of the principals indicated that they are not kept

in their jobs by the salaries they get and that their salaries will not make them leave their jobs. In actual fact, 93.4% of principals indicated that they loved their jobs.

In the qualitative phase of the research, several respondents expressed views on how the Department of Basic Education could show its appreciation for the work done by principals. These included merit awards (Male); incentives (Female), (Male); salary adjustments (Female); and subsidies for cars (Female). One male respondent suggested that: “give principals the opportunity to work as CEOs. To be given more space to do their work and deal with problems like other senior managers do.”

Expectancy

On the issue of the principal's expectations, the respondents on the qualitative phase indicated that they had various expectations when they were first appointed. These included: support from the Department of Basic Education; being able to address challenges; good remuneration, co-operation with others and guidance from role models. The reaction was different from each respondent based on experience, age and expectations. The newer appointees felt like they were getting some form of support, while the principals with longer service felt that they were getting limited support from the Department. On the matter of co-operation with others, although 73.3% of the principals were satisfied with their expectations from colleagues, 50% of the principals were not satisfied with their expectations from parents. Principals also showed the least satisfaction with the feedback they got from their supervisors. On being able to address challenges, the majority of the respondents expressed satisfaction with their own conflict management skills (86.7%).

Valence

Valence pertains to the value that an individual places on an expected outcome. All respondents agreed that their work as principals is important. Even though 93.4% of the respondents found their jobs stimulating, 83.4% of the respondents disagreed with the fact that they get fairly rewarded for the work they do and 43.3% have considered leaving their jobs for another one.

In the qualitative data, the responses from the respondents show that they placed high value in working with learners, for example:

“The fact that I am dealing with young minds, guiding them and advising them gives me such great pleasure.” (M)

“Developing the precious minds of African learners ignites a determination and passion for work.”

“When my learners have passed I get so happy.”

Discussion and analysis

This study confirms the equity and expectancy theories that job satisfaction of principals of previously disadvantaged schools in the North West is influenced by the perceptions that individuals have in relation to what they bring to work and what they get in return. Individuals perform certain duties and expect to be rewarded according to how they value their input (Steers, 1979, p.124). Principals in this study perceived their experience, expertise and qualifications as valuable input. Most principals felt that the rewards they obtain as a form of output is not equitable to their input. The highest positive correlation seems to be between salary and job satisfaction. Principals have expressed their dissatisfaction with their salaries in this study. The lower the salary levels, the higher the job dissatisfaction.

According to Lock and Porter (in Gruneberg, 1976, p.115) salary satisfaction results when the existing salary corresponds with the desired salary, and dissatisfaction increases when the two diverge. Principals in the study have compared their salaries to certain elements of their perceived job characteristics, such as the level of difficulty of the job, the time spent on the job and the responsibilities attached to the job and found a notable gap between their salaries and what is expected from them in terms of performance. According to Pinder (2008, p.219) an increase in remuneration is expected by employees who perceive the increases in responsibilities they get as an input they make to the job. Principals in the study indicated how their responsibilities have increased and their work having become more complex, and yet their salaries were not commensurate with their responsibilities. This then creates what Pinter (2008) refers to as tension. The tension resulted in change in behaviour, where a large number of principals felt demotivated and commitment levels low due to what they regard as poor working conditions. Conley, Glassman and Shaw (2007, p.55) links low job satisfaction to psychological and physical withdrawal from the job. A high number of principals (83.3%), indicated that low salaries will not make them leave their jobs. So what is it that keeps principals in their position in spite of their dissatisfaction with their salaries?

Age is regarded by principals as an input because with age comes experience and to a certain extent, qualifications. A high number of principals (83.3%) agree that age affects their performance positively. Most of the principals in the sample were between ages 31 – 50. Most principals cited age as the reason for not leaving their professions. One principal said: *“At my age, I cannot be thinking of changing careers. People usually keep their jobs till retirement. So, I have to make do.”* According to (Chye, Hain &

Kong, 1993, p.31; Clark & Oswald, 1996, p.57; McNeeley, 1988, p.163) from the early thirties there is a steady increase in job satisfaction of principals coupled with a high morale. At that point the individuals usually settle in their jobs and may find satisfaction from other factors that do not necessarily have to do with the job itself. Lawler (in Ghazi, 2004, p.69) talks of how when job satisfaction increases with age, job value remains constant. Also people over 45 years of age are likely to stay with their employer for the longest period. The important question on any employer's mind is: "Are people staying because they want to be here, ought to be here or need to be here?" (Bennett, 2002, p.1).

A study conducted by Bennett (2003, p.1) talks of individual personalities being directly related to productivity. Behaviour being internally-mediated (intrinsic) as a way to reward oneself, or externally-mediated as the reward one receives from others. The value that one places on either the intrinsic or extrinsic affects how they behave. The values are influenced by experience, needs and goals. Principals in the study have indicated that although the extrinsic factors (salary, resources, incentives) are externally motivated and result in their job dissatisfaction, the intrinsic factors that are internally motivated are the ones keeping them in their jobs. Dealing with young minds, developing young minds and the joy of each student progressing well is a sufficient reward for most principals. That for most principals is what makes it all worthwhile.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results indicate that while there are factors that increase the levels of job satisfaction of principals of previously disadvantaged Secondary Schools in the North West Province, there are factors that also result in their dissatisfaction. Behaviour of the principals is influenced by their expectations and the value that

they place on intrinsic and extrinsic factors and in this case behaviour has been altered to reduce the perceived imbalance.

The fact that the majority of principals in the study are of a mature age and have indicated no intention to leave the profession unless something worthwhile comes along, means that attention needs to be paid to the factors that result in the dissatisfaction of the principals. The quality of results in schools is a source of concern for the government. School principals play a significant role in making sure that schools operate efficiently and this will have a direct bearing on the performance of educators and learners alike. What is a source of concern is the fact that based on the findings of the study, there could be principals who have psychologically left their profession while physically present in schools due to altered input as a direct response to perceived lack of equity. The situation will have serious impact on the smooth operations and schools and eventually affect the quality of teaching and learning. According to Conley *et al* (2007, p.55), there is a direct correlation between effective leadership and high learner performance.

School managers as the principal's immediate supervisors should play an important role in enhancing the job satisfaction of principals. The following recommendations were deduced from the study.

Recognise effort and performance

Principals in the study have expressed opinion on ways they think can be applied by their managers to recognise effort and performance. Some of the factors mentioned include merit awards, recognition certificates, gift vouchers and car subsidies (Most principals actually feel that they use their cars more on work related trips than their own private affairs).

Improve salaries and fringe benefits

The results of the study show that a comprehensive look into the remuneration package of principals is important. The package should reflect experience, qualifications and performance. There has to be an incentive for improving one's qualifications and even more for operating a good school with excellent results. It is otherwise very discouraging for principals who try their best with no recognition of the effort they put in place.

Give autonomy

One of the factors that principals highlighted in the results is the importance of being given space to make decisions and operate their schools in the best way to suit their different conditions. One principal said: "Give us an opportunity to work as CEO's." This means that the Department of Basic Education should look into reducing bureaucracy and involving principals in decision making, especially on matters that have a direct bearing on how they operate their schools. Principals are the ones with direct contact with the challenges that schools face, so their input and voice should add real value to any discourse on education related matters.

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