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Teacher job satisfaction: A new approach to an old problem

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Summary
In Singapore, teacher job satisfaction has never been higher on the agenda than at present. It is only through ensuring satisfaction with their working lives that teachers can be committed to quality improvements in schooling and to staying in the profession. In this small-scale study, we sought to understand the complex shape that job satisfaction takes. Previous studies had done little to heighten our understanding, so we employed an approach that allowed teachers to explain job satisfaction in their own, very unique ways. This yielded some fascinating perspectives, assembled in complex and sometimes surprising ways. There appeared to be no such thing as a single job satisfaction factor. Indeed, there were three, clearly distinct points of view: one focused on the satisfaction gained from being a professional; another on empowerment and recognition; while the third stressed the importance of rewards and conditions. If educational leaders understand these different perspectives, they will be able to establish conditions in which the levels of job satisfaction can be heightened.

Preamble
It is true without question that people who are happy in their working lives are usually effective and choose to stay in their jobs. Retention and commitment are clearly two key concerns for school administrators, but dissatisfaction may also lead to other problems, such as absenteeism and transmitting negative values and attitudes to students. There is certainly a compelling case for looking at job satisfaction. It becomes even more compelling when we consider the demanding context in which teachers operate. Indeed, the pressures of rapid change may become just too much for some unless there is at least a threshold level of satisfaction with working life.

The issue of job satisfaction, though, is a confusing one. First, separating satisfaction from dissatisfaction is fraught with difficulty, and, second, it is a concept that is virtually impossible to isolate contextually. For example, to what extent does unhappiness in a teacher’s home life manifest and express itself in the same teacher’s professional life? Such problems aside for the time being, our primary aim in this project was to understand the factors which teachers believed to be the significant contributors to their happiness with their jobs; and then, to consider the implications for how those teachers might be effectively managed.

Findings from previous investigations are both inconclusive and confusing, or, in some cases, over-simplistic. Further, the methods of investigation used in other studies may have contributed to the confusing picture and may have done little to make sense of what is undoubtedly a complex issue. We see, for example, in many surveys (quite often commissioned studies conducted by snapshot opinion pollsters) vague generalisations about the things that make teachers - not some teachers - happy or unhappy. In our opinion, this is a serious flaw in the research to date, one that fails to account for the complexity of thought and opinion on the part of teachers as individuals.
We decided, in a small way, to counteract such flaws by looking in-depth at the teachers' views, opinions, perceptions and attitudes, in just one institution. We were not concerned with trying to generalise our findings across a system. Our purpose was to gain an understanding of job satisfaction amongst teachers in that one school and then to consider how those who supervise teachers' work might employ strategies that promote, rather than impede, satisfaction.

**Understanding job satisfaction**

Studies over the past fifteen years or so have identified a range of factors that may be associated with teacher job satisfaction, some more than others. The temptation for researchers is to take these factors, present them to teachers and ask them to rank order them. Thus, by adding up the scores, the key factor emerges. We decided not to repeat history, but to start with a clean sheet. We wanted teachers to tell us what they thought about the job: the best bits and the worst bits. From there, we could begin to piece together a picture of what satisfaction meant to these teachers. The approach we chose to adopt is called *Q Methodology*: this approach allowed teachers to present their own stories of the delights and disappointments of their lives as professional educators.

Job satisfaction is a subjective point of view - the subject alone, as a partner in the research (Ribbins and Sherratt, 1992), can provide suitable measures. The individual teacher can express his or her subjective explanation of the issue. Thus, the approach we used is one that relies on gathering information and then applying concepts to it, rather than one that tries to locate data in predetermined concepts and theories. There were no *a priori* definitions; no attempts to infer. All the participants in the investigation counted and their responses formed our understanding of the issue. From this perspective, we had to expect the unexpected and to accept new explanations of satisfaction, ones that we may never have considered. Indeed, as it turned out, we were in for a surprise or two!

**Discovering what people mean when they talk about satisfaction**

Amongst the people in our research, there were very different worlds of experience, belief and reality, and these could not be accessed by adopting the same, old, tired techniques. In this project, their explanations of satisfaction were modelled in what is called a 'Q sort'. Each item – each bit of the puzzle, if you like – is related to all the others in a distinctive way. What is then provided is a whole response, a full picture with all the component parts linked together in a way that satisfies the player.

Space is insufficient in this short paper to do *Q* methodology justice, and the interested reader might wish to refer to Stainton-Rogers (1991) for a helpful explanation of how a *Q* study unfolds and of the procedures involved. In brief, however, statements that are representative of the issue are put into the *Q* sort, and each individual rank orders the statements by placing them on a grid and observing some procedural instructions. The *Q* sorts are then subjected to an inverted factor analysis. From this analysis come factors, which may be described as estimates of models of opinion. The factors are displayed as *Q* sort grids with all the statements arranged in a particular pattern. The researcher, partly by interviewing people who load highly on certain factors, then attempts to explain the essence of those factors in the form of a short account or story. Such a presentation is meant to facilitate understanding amongst those who need to use the findings.
The study

The Q sort was conducted during an annual staff seminar. Fifty-seven teachers were present at the seminar and all agreed to take part. They were briefed on the purpose of the research and assured that there was no such thing as a ‘right’ answer.

Statements about job satisfaction were gathered from a range of sources: from listening to casual conversations amongst teachers; from articles and books; and from informal interviews with various school personnel. The list of statements was scrutinised for comprehensiveness (an almost exhaustive range of views about the issue) and for heterogeneity (statements being as different as possible from one another.)

The teachers then sorted the statements in their own individual ways, showing how they valued each individual item in relation to others. A smaller and simplified version of the Q sort grid we used is shown below.

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Q sort grid

Findings

Three factors emerged from the analysis, which could best be described as summaries of particular points of view. For each of three factors, the individuals whose sorts had a significant loading were identified. These individuals are called ‘exemplars’, because they exemplify a factor and are in a good position to explain the finer points of that factor. Further, the analysis pinpointed those items (statements) which contributed most to a given factor’s variability.

For Factor A, the most ‘strongly agree’ statements included:

6. It gives me satisfaction when students understand what I’ve taught in the classroom.

1. Seeing my students obtain good grades gives me real satisfaction.

17. I get pleasure from seeing a weak student perform well or improve in the examination.

12. It gives me satisfaction to share my knowledge with students.

11. I like it when a student trusts me enough to tell me about a personal problem.

It is easy from those statements alone to identify the flavour of the viewpoint. It is about interactions with students and doing the professional job well. There were also other parts to the opinion that, together, formed the whole opinion. These parts included the satisfaction derived from appreciation (Item 35: It gives me satisfaction when former students return to school and thank me for teaching them; Item 14: It gives me real satisfaction when
parents of the students I teach call and thank me for helping their children). They also included the satisfaction of being able to develop professionally (Item 33: I get job satisfaction from being able to upgrade myself constantly at work by attending in-service courses; Item 9: It gives me satisfaction to be able to learn new things on the job.)

Two statements separated this viewpoint from the others. They were ranked very negatively in this factor but positively in the others. The items were:

3. Job satisfaction to me is seeing my pay in the bank each month.
61. I like this job because of the long school holidays.

Thus, we end up with a complex viewpoint, but one of which we can make sense. It tells us — in a nutshell — that satisfaction comes from doing the job well - teaching students effectively, getting good results and watching students improve, and gaining their trust and appreciation — and not from financial rewards and working conditions. Perhaps item 46 best sums up the perspective: ‘I gain satisfaction from doing work well and I am not too concerned about outside rewards.’

For Factor B, the most ‘strongly agree’ statements included:

8. I get job satisfaction from being empowered to make decisions in my own area of work.
35. It gives me satisfaction when former students return to school and thank me for teaching them.
5. It gives me satisfaction when my teaching is praised by colleagues or the principal.

This factor, as those statements show, is concerned with empowerment and recognition. The freedom to control one’s own area of work is a highly valued contributor to satisfaction, and this is confirmed in item 7: ‘I get job satisfaction from being given complete freedom in the classroom’ — a statement that was also highly placed. Teachers who loaded highly on this factor liked to make decisions about how to teach, what the pace of lessons should be, and which students should be given extra help.

The need for recognition in this perspective is evident through several items that speak of thanks and praise: from students; from fellow teachers; from parents; and from the principal. Such recognition is also evident in statement 50: ‘I feel a sense of job satisfaction when the principal speaks highly of the staff and the department I belong to’. Thus, being part of a team that is recognised is of importance. Whereas those who subscribed to the viewpoint expressed through Factor A sought recognition from their students, those who held this opinion looked for recognition from peers or superiors.

There are several other strands woven into the factor’s complexity. It is not entirely dissimilar to the first factor, in that the interactions with students and their success are seen as important, but the emphasis is perhaps not quite so strong. Unlike Factor A, item 3 (‘Job satisfaction is seeing my pay in the bank each month’) is scored very positively.

For Factor C, the most ‘strongly agree’ statements included:

25. I get job satisfaction from coming to a big air-conditioned staff room with a personal phone and computer.
61. I like this job because of the long school holidays.
34. I get job satisfaction from getting paid an additional allowance for extra projects carried out.
38. I get job satisfaction from being part of a well-known school.
3. Job satisfaction to me is seeing my pay in the bank each month.
40. I like teaching in a school near where I reside.
54. I feel satisfied when I am piled up with work because it makes me feel important and indispensable.

We have drawn out more items to illustrate this factor, partly because each of those items is surprising, especially if one has become immersed in the rhetoric of professionalism and the importance of teaching over all other things. Here we have a completely different viewpoint. It is one that stresses the importance to satisfaction of rewards and conditions. The pay packet, allowances, long holidays and good physical working conditions are all viewed as important.

Like the other factors, this viewpoint shows there is no satisfaction to be gained from interacting with parents, organising special events or going on field trips. There is also a rejection of interference: principal, vice-principal and other teachers are advised to leave the teacher alone to do the job if satisfaction is not to be compromised.

From our analysis of the factors and from the follow-up interviews with those individuals who loaded most highly on the respective factors, it was possible to form 'accounts' which expressed succinctly the unique pattern of opinion for the factor concerned and which conveyed the complexity of the point of view. The three accounts that were formed are shown below:

Account A
Job satisfaction stems from having a thoroughly professional attitude to all aspects of one's job. This point of view suggests that satisfaction comes from the professional nature of teaching and from seeking to carry out one's professional duties diligently. The focus is on students making achievement gains and responding to the teacher's efforts. Thus, this understanding tells us that teachers gain enjoyment from their work when students understand what is taught, when they perform well - evidenced by obtaining good grades - and when they feel sufficiently trusting to be able to share personal problems with their teachers. In a nutshell, teachers gain much from influencing their students' futures, and this may be achieved also by passing on values and customs. The enjoyment of the job is reinforced, of course, when parents and former students take the trouble to express their gratitude. But while satisfaction is a product of being a true professional, it is enhanced by, first, other colleagues, including principal and vice-principal, taking an interest in the teacher's work and by, second, opportunities to heighten one's professional knowledge and skills through upgrading and through learning new things. This understanding emphasises, therefore, that it is the intrinsic nature of teaching that satisfies, and not the more peripheral benefits like access to facilities, air-conditioned staff rooms and the opportunity to go home early. Nor are substantial benefits like pay and job security accorded any real importance, for lasting satisfaction can be derived only from the daily interactions with students and seeing the fruits of one's labours.
**Account B**

Job satisfaction comes from being empowered to make professional decisions and from having one's efforts recognised. This understanding tells us that teachers derive satisfaction from their work when they are given the freedom to make decisions about their own areas of work, including what goes on in the classroom and what shape their training and development should take. But coupled with empowerment is a need for recognition: from students by expressing thanks; from colleagues when they praise the quality of the teacher's instruction; and from the principal when he or she speaks highly of teachers in the department. While it is clear that job satisfaction is linked to empowerment, recognition and productive efforts with students, the end of month pay cheque is also important. The job can only be done properly, though, if it is immune from the many available distractions, like administrative and cover duties, organising events, counselling, field trips and dealing with students' parents. What is far more important is doing the core job well and knowing that the principal will stand up for his or her teachers whether things go well or badly.

**Account C**

Rewards and conditions are contributors to making teachers happy in their work. This point of view emphasises the need for good working conditions, such as having an air-conditioned staff room with personal phones and computers, the enjoyment of long school holidays and, where possible, working in a school not too far from home. The financial rewards are equally important, such as the monthly pay cheque and additional allowances for carrying out projects. But rewards may take other shapes: for example, teachers gain satisfaction from the gratitude of former students, from the prestige of being part of a well-known school, and from the kudos of having taught students who then obtain good grades. Satisfaction is enhanced if teachers know they have the support of the principal in adverse circumstances and if they are consulted about decisions. On the other hand, job satisfaction is likely to be compromised by teachers' having to organise special events, interact with parents or go on field trips, and by others — including principal, vice-principal and colleagues — interfering in a job over which the individual teacher thinks he or she should have considerable freedom and control.

For those who might feel job satisfaction is a unitary construct with little variation in emphasis, our analysis of 'consensus items' (those statements that were scored similarly across all the factors) revealed quite the reverse. There was agreement across the three points of view on only four items. These related to interacting with colleagues, respect from outsiders, teaching social integration skills, and comparisons by students with one's colleagues. However, all four statements were seen as neither contributors to nor detractors from satisfaction. This reinforces the view that the three factors represent very different perspectives, although there may have been some elements of those perspectives that were similar across factors.

The location of items 27 and 56 was perhaps mildly surprising. Neither the opportunity to voice opinions nor the scope to have variety in one's work were seen as satisfaction-enhancers. We would have thought that teachers valued the chance to air their views about curriculum and instructional matters, and to appreciate some diversity in their work patterns. We can only assume that the phrases 'staff meetings' and 'field trips', which appeared in those statements, influenced the ways teachers responded to those items, since other data
suggested there was satisfaction to be gained from having one’s say and enjoying at least some variety.

**Implications for school leaders**

In a sense, life for school leaders would be made easier if there were a commonly held view amongst teachers about job satisfaction. The important task for leaders then would be to understand the structure of the point of view and act accordingly. Alas, life is not so simple. However, we believe that our use of this methodology has made a complex issue somewhat simpler than it would have been had we adopted other approaches.

Viewpoints – about anything, from political opinion to where we should go for our holidays cannot be seen as static. They may change according to circumstances, and indeed some teachers may move from one viewpoint to another depending on how he or she feels at that moment. For example, there are times when we become disillusioned with our jobs, for whatever reason, and we may easily adopt the viewpoint expressed in factor C. So it is important that we understand the factors at play, even though they may be minority ones. We know from this study that many of the teachers loaded quite highly on factor A and that was indeed the dominant factor. We also know that a sizeable number loaded highly on factor B. That does not mean there are not times when people from both those groups concur with factor C.

What is the managerial significance of this? First, there must be an awareness of these points of view. They really do exist in the minds of teachers, and that is what they believe whether we agree with them or not. Second, there must be a recognition that teachers may espouse a very different viewpoint at certain times. It may be caused by their feeling depressed or by a bad experience. If the teacher were then to mix this antagonistic perception with other external factors, such as the chance of another job or reflections on life generally, it could be the trigger to do something drastic. Thus, factor C, which is about rewards and conditions of work, may be only a minority factor (exemplified by a low number of teachers) but it is an important one that needs to be understood.

The clear message to school leaders from factor A is that many teachers thrive on interest shown by the principal, vice-principal and other teachers. Leaders need to support professionalism by actively commenting on job performance. Second, they must provide opportunities for teachers to learn new things and to upgrade their skills.

Factor B tells us that some teachers gain satisfaction from having the freedom to make decisions about their own areas of work. Yet, the emphasis at the moment is on increasing collaboration and on reducing professional isolation. Whether it is possible to reconcile teachers’ wishes with such an organisational trend is a matter for debate. There is, though, scope for teachers to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy when it comes to decisions about their own classrooms and how they manage the pace and focus of learning. The message to school leaders is to think carefully before intervening in such a way as to limit teachers’ ability to make decisions. For example, for a principal to dictate how a subject should be taught because of unsatisfactory results is an intervention fraught with danger. Challenging teachers’ professional judgement (and that of heads of department) is a risky business and likely to exacerbate dissatisfaction levels.

Factor C has a message to managers about rewards and conditions. Some would argue that these are merely about reducing dissatisfaction rather than enhancing job happiness. However, it is probably perilous to ignore such matters, since attention to financial rewards,
physical working conditions and vacations gives strong signals about management's attitude to staff. Allowing teachers to go on working in a cramped and poorly lit environment can tell them they are not thought of very highly.

Conclusion
Our findings have shown a diversity of view about job satisfaction. But the diversity is not bewildering, nor is it problematic. The real challenge – after understanding – is to enhance satisfaction and achieve organisational learning. Such learning may reap rich rewards “both for the organisation in pursuit of its mission and for the members in terms of satisfaction, fulfilment and a genuine desire to make a worthwhile contribution to success” (Stott and Walker, 1995, p.463). What is needed is the creation of a new flow (Clayton, 1993, p.5), one that is characterised by common understanding. Such a flow, we argue, can happen only if there is a true and lasting feeling of satisfaction in the lives of teachers.

References