Teacher Satisfaction

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When analyzing the many factors that influence the overall satisfaction and dissatisfaction of a teacher, it eventually all boils down to the children in the classroom and whether or not they still provide the satisfaction that inspired a teaching career in the first place. Happy teachers have many things that they agree lead to their fulfilment, but the overarching theme can be summarized as “teaching has meaning to me” (Hurst 223).

In order for teachers to feel that their career has meaning, there are many prerequisite factors that need to be in place. It appears that the strongest factors that influence teacher satisfaction come from within the teacher themselves. The teacher’s philosophy, their motivation, their addiction to student success, their need to improve, and their drive to keep learning are all intrinsically based factors which seem to be the strongest elements to their own happiness. The external factors such as employment workplace and extrinsic rewards greatly help to aid in satisfaction if they are positive, but generally won’t be enough to make them quit the entire profession if they are negative. It seems to be an underlying generalization that the teachers who decide to leave the profession do so because they get caught up in the politics and other expectations and lose focus on the motivation of why they became a teacher: to positively influence the lives of children. In this paper, we will break down how the motivators of teaching can be categorized into ‘Personally Intrinsic’, ‘Workplace Environment’, and ‘Extrinsic Benefits’, and then analyze why these factors as well as other statistics exemplify the results that they do. I will conclude the paper by summarizing how all of this information is important and relevant to know before heading into my future career as a teacher.

PERSONAL INTRINSIC MOTIVATORS

We will start with the motivators that I have already mentioned seemed to be the most constantly referred to by satisfied teachers. In all of the articles that I researched from fulfilled teachers, they consistently mentioned elevated levels of happiness in correlation with being held accountable for student success. A few of the quotes which exemplified this were comments such as “teachers are proud to stand among the ranks of those who change lives-they know that they have made a difference” (Hurst 218), and “what separates us from teachers who “burn out”… is heart! We love our work. We love children and we love seeing them learn…feeling a sense of self-worth, and believing that what we are doing is important. [These] are all vital ingredients in measuring success or happiness” (Dolmage, 1).

Teachers also have other intrinsic motivations such as a general love for learning and always striving to learn new things. Teachers gain reward from constantly learning new things, and studies have shown that the best teachers are the ones who make the curriculum come to life with their own interests, new exciting knowledge, and what the students are interested in. Between the new learning, new students, and new challenges every day, the profession is never boring and is always opening up new doors for improving oneself. When the teacher is enthusiastic and the curriculum is engaging, the students will follow and should in turn enjoy their learning and be actively participating. This freedom to play with the curriculum and to always explore new ways of learning also raises one of the other major factors for why teachers love their profession: autonomy. Satisfied teachers often express that they love having the freedom to teach their classes the way that they like to, and enjoy the freedom to make their own choices and to explore creativity. So, if a teacher feels worthwhile, sees their students succeeding, and continually grows as an individual, their personal teaching philosophies are almost guaranteed to be being met. When one is confidently achieving their own personal goals, it can be said that they are reaching to the higher levels of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs: the level of self-actualization. Once engaged in this complex level of needs, teachers continue to expand their knowledge and reinvent their methods because this level calls upon creativity, problem solving, and authenticity. This push for greatness is also found in Herzenberg’s model of motivation which supports how professionals such as teachers are always motivated to “perform well” (Dolmage 4) because they are fueled by “achievement, recognition, interesting tasks, responsibility, and advancement” (Dolmage 4). All of these personally intrinsic factors have been proven to be of utmost importance in the patterns of satisfied teachers, and we will come back to intrinsic factors later to analyze how the other factors can break these positive and rewarding fundamentals, causing teachers to lose focus and ‘burn out’.

ENVIRONMENTAL WORKPLACE

The next category of factors that greatly influence teacher satisfaction can be generalized as ‘environmental workplace’. Under this umbrella heading we find the day-to-day politics that teachers encounter which often leads to teacher isolation or stress. Important factors include things like administrative backing, co-worker relations, parental support, available funds and resources, school philosophy, school location, type of school, workload, grade and subject being taught, the student body’s attitudes, and community involvement. The happiest teachers are the ones in schools that match their own personal philosophies from the intrinsic category, and who feel confident, supported, and respected by those factors mentioned above. Teachers who are surrounded by supportive people (colleagues, administrators, parents) are more likely to find that their workplace environment increases their daily happiness and keeps them from feeling isolated or overwhelmed. If they have mentors or teachers they can collaborate with, they can get regular feedback, validation, and general help with their anxieties. These teachers are more likely to feel included than isolated at their school, and in turn will be more satisfied by feeling like they belong. Teachers also report higher levels of happiness if they feel that their workload is not too demanding which could mean from either their own class’s workload and evaluating, or other co-curricular things such as committees, supervision, clubs, etc.

There are some statistics which raise interesting facts about teacher satisfaction in relation to workers environment as well. The trends show that the younger the grade taught, the more satisfied the teacher is likely to be, and the subjects that are ‘options’ as compared to core subjects are also more satisfying to teach. Findings also show that private school teachers are happier than public school teachers, and that satisfaction of teachers varied by province in Canada. All of these statistics are related to the environmental factors of teaching because they are subject to change and teachers can move around them or experience them differently depending on the school.

Along with all of the above factors, the school’s philosophy can affect the student body of a particular school which can also have a huge impact on whether or not the teacher feels that they have any respect in a school, or if they have any control over their students. In this way, the student behaviour or attitude of a particular school might either satisfy or dissatisfy the teacher depending on if the philosophy of the teacher agrees with the philosophies that they are surrounded by daily. Overall, the workplace environment can either help to foster a teacher’s success or to clash with what a teacher needs in order to feel safe enough and confident enough to be completing their higher intrinsic goals that we previously highlighted.

EXTRINSIC BENEFITS

There are many benefits outside of the actual teaching aspect of the profession which would seem to be pretty good motivators to those outside of the profession. Teachers in Canada are pretty well known to be envied for their good salary, holidays and weekends off, benefits, job security, and good pension. Also, it is important to mention that because many of the teachers are female, there is also the benefit of having job security after a maternity leave. It would be logical to assume that many of these factors are the types of things that have attracted teachers to the profession, but studies often show the opposite. It appears that the extrinsic benefits are not the reason why good teachers are drawn to the profession, and the ones that do probably don’t last as long and aren’t likely to be found in the ‘satisfied’ bracket because “teachers who went into teaching because of inherent professional values were more satisfied than those whose entry into the occupation was for economic reasons” (Peterson 3). Although these above things ***do*** unquestionably make teachers happier, they are not as strong of motivators as intrinsic and environmental factors are, and most teachers would still stay in the profession if those factors were to worsen.

STATISTICS

There are a few other statistics that don’t quite fit into any of the three categories above, simply because they are factors that are outside of anyone else’s control. The statistics show that along with factors such as grade taught, subject taught, location, and type of school, there are two other factors that have an obvious correlation towards teacher happiness: age and gender. The studies show that teachers under 30 and over 60 are the happiest, and that female teachers are more satisfied than males. Other more controllable statistics showed that married teachers are more happy than single ones, and teachers holding a higher degree are more likely to be happy as well. Now that we have taken a look at each of the categories, we can use the statistics just given to try and determine why each motivator is valued the way that it is.

ANALYSIS

Starting with the last few statistics, it is easy to see how the more personal statistics are harder to dissect a root for. I would argue that married teachers would be happier because they are less likely to experience the crushing ‘isolation’ that single teachers might encounter simply because they should at least have someone to talk to about their daily struggles. The statistic about a higher degree equating to more happiness can possibly be related back to the intrinsic factor of always wanting to expand knowledge: those people probably love learning. It can be argued that the statistical information tends to lose validity because the statistics can be interrelated, which makes it hard to determine where a teachers happiness is actually stemming from. For example, the finding that females are more satisfied than males could have something to do with the fact that males are predominantly found in the high school grade range, which we know from other statistics also means that the higher grades yield less satisfaction. From that point, we can also add that it is likely that these male high school teachers may also be teaching core subjects such as math and science, which we know yield greater dissatisfaction than option classes. On the contrary, some studies claim that “demographics were not significantly related to job satisfaction” (Peterson 11).

It is hard to observe job satisfaction without touching on what causes job dissatisfaction, and not surprisingly, most of the things that caused people to be dissatisfied were extrinsic or environmental factors. The majority of the complaints were about low salary (however these were largely American studies), lack of parental support - especially in middle school, and role overload. Role overload was the particularly stressed complaint, which can be summarized in the quote “teachers are expected to attend to such a vast array of problems and new problems and curriculum. New duties are added every year with virtually none taken away. TOO MUCH!” (Peterson 8).Many of the teachers claims about work overload were also focussed in the amount of assessment, lesson planning, and extra-curricular activities that are required of them. When we consider all of these things in the perspective of why teachers ***do*** love teaching, it is obvious that these things decrease job satisfaction simply because they distract teachers from what they actually want to do: be focused on the kids!

A lot of the statistics I read seemed to all relate back to common sense or personal choices. Many of the things such as grade or subject taught and work environment are geared by personal perceptions about what age group you like, what subject you enjoy teaching, how you can make the subject matter meaningful to yourself, whether you are a very social person, whether you are someone who needs lots of reassurance, etc. For example, the statistics prove that lower elementary school teachers are the most satisfied. This is probably because they are more excited to learn, more likely to thank you, and more likely to have their parents on board, but if that doesn’t match your personality and you hate young children, then that statistic won’t have any value to you anyways. With that being said, I feel that most of the extrinsic and environmental factors are less permanent factors than intrinsic ones, therefore, they are much easier to change if a teacher finds themself becoming dissatisfied. For another example, if a teacher is stuck teaching a high school class, in subjects that they don’t know, with poor staff relationships, in a rough neighbourhood with little parent contact, and find themselves miserable with their job, then perhaps they just need a change in atmosphere not necessarily a change in profession. Changing to a different grade, or a new community, or a very inclusive school may be an entirely different situation.

On the other hand, it isn’t quite as easy for teachers to suddenly change the intrinsic motivators such as having more passion, or suddenly finding an interest for professional development.

When viewing the statistics, they seemed to paint a very hopeful perspective for me personally; however, I will not be banking my future happiness into the confines of those statistics. The fact that I am a female, under 30 years old, and that I want to be an elementary school teacher looks very promising on a statistical grid, but I know that those ingredients weren’t the prerequisites for my desire to be a teacher… my love for learning, children, and fulfilment is. I think that teachers need to really evaluate the environment, people, and attitudes around the jobs they are considering *first* if they want to be truly satisfied in their careers. Personally, I will be looking for schools that remind me of the environments that I know I will succeed in, and that are similar to the same environments where I fell in love with teaching in the first place.

As I have outlined in this paper, I feel that the biggest key to remaining in the profession and being satisfied throughout the years is to keep intrinsic motivations in view at all times. Once a suitable environment that fosters success has been established, teachers should “hold on tightly to their original passion for teaching” (Hurst 223). The quote that best summarizes my view is: “when teachers stay focused on the success of our students, we taste victory ourselves…when the reality of student achievement seems hopeless, we should tune in on the success of our students. If we provide and atmosphere in which success is the only thing that can grow well, not only will our students blossom, but we will be energized as well.”