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Factors Influencing Job Satisfaction of Estonian Primary School Teachers

Merike Kaseorg^{a*}, Krista Uibu^b

* Corresponding author: Merike Kaseorg, Merike.Kaseorg@ut.ee

^aUniversity of Tartu, Narva road 4, Tartu 51009, Estonia, Merike.Kaseorg@ut.ee, +372 7376334

^bUniversity of Tartu, Salme 1a, Tartu 50103, Estonia, Krista.Uibu@ut.ee, +372 7376462

Abstract

Vast changes in the education field have an effect on teachers' job satisfaction. In a tightening competition principals of educational institutions have to keep track of their staff's satisfaction, as it is an important factor in achieving the organization's objectives. The aim of the current article is to find out about the internal (e.g., work-related collaboration with colleagues and school principals, school management) and external (e.g., salary, promotion) factors influencing job satisfaction. Forty-five primary school teachers from 28 Estonian schools participated in the study. Structured interviews were used to collect teachers' attitudes and descriptions and thematic analysis to analyze them. It was found that primary school teachers' job satisfaction was greater in the case of internal factors. It became evident that about 50% of the primary school teachers were satisfied with work-related matters and school management. It appeared that even though the professional development of teachers was supported in small quantities, teachers found opportunities for self-development by exchanging knowledge and experiences with colleagues. Most teachers were not satisfied with their salary and possibilities for promotion in schools. When teachers are satisfied the collegiality, job satisfaction with school environment and job performance improve.

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1. Theoretical background

1.1. Introduction

Job satisfaction has been studied in different areas, including economy, educational policy and psychology (Loogma, Tafel-Viia, & Ümarik, 2013; Tech, & Waheed 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, when the interest in the job satisfaction and dissatisfaction emerged, Locke (1969) defined these terms



in following ways. The job satisfaction refers to “the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as achieving or facilitating one’s job values”. Vice versa, the job dissatisfaction was defined as “the unpleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as frustrating or blocking the attainment of one’s values”. The most decisive characteristic of job satisfaction is the extent to which people like or dislike their job (Spector, 1997).

In recent decades in many countries, including Estonia, much attention has been paid to the relationship between different characteristics of teachers, pedagogical framework, work-related factors, and job satisfaction. The studies have indicated positive relations between employees’ professional performance and job satisfaction (Saiti, 2007; Weiss, 2002). It has been found the external factors may prevent employees’ dissatisfaction with job more effectively, but they do not lead directly to the job satisfaction (Tech, & Waheed 2011; Wei-Cheng et al., 2008). In school context it has been found that the students gain better academic results if their teachers’ job satisfaction is higher (Jacob, 2012; Loogma et al., 2014; OECD, 2014). Although, as the primary school teacher is a teacher in the most numerous types in Estonia (OECD, 2014), the research at these job satisfaction is still limited. Also, the evidence about the effect of different internal and external factors (professional development, collaboration with colleagues, school management, salary etc.) on teachers’ job satisfaction is not sufficient (Ghavifekr, & Pillai, 2016; Leithwood, 2006). Thus, the aim of the current study is to determine internal and external factors affecting the Estonian primary school teachers’ job satisfaction.

1.2. Internal and external factors of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is related to organization’s productivity and efficiency (Koustelios, 2001), employees’ loyalty (Matzler, & Renzl, 2006) and creativity (Gaki et al., 2013) as well as school performance (Caprara et al., 2006; Saiti, 2007). Some theorists have specified the job satisfaction as a multifaceted construct which includes different components. Broadly, the components may be divided into two groups: internal (or *intrinsic*) and external (or *extrinsic*) factors (Herzberg et al., 1959). Internal factors comprise different motivating factors (e.g., the work itself, achievement, advancement and recognition, and responsibility) promoting job satisfaction. External factors (e.g., company policy and job security, working conditions, employees’ status and salary, relationship with colleagues), in contrast, are important in prevention of dissatisfaction with job and they create a short-term satisfaction. However, they do not lead to long-term satisfaction and motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959; Tech, & Waheed, 2011; Wei-Cheng et al., 2008).

The job satisfaction of teachers is an important factor of the organization’s success and it has an impact on the quality of teaching provided in the classroom (Hamre, & Pianta, 2010; Tech, & Waheed, 2011). Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2011) have conceptualised job satisfaction as a reaction what influences teacher’s work or role. Although, teachers’ satisfaction with school managers and principals is not sole indicator of management efficiency, it is important for effective environment where management decisions are being made (Hung, 2012). Thus, Sharma & Jyoti (2006) have found that every aspect of the job (e.g., colleagues’ behavior, promotion and recognition, students’ achievement, emotional and physical environment) may perform an essential part in teachers’ satisfaction with their job. Wisniewski & Gargiolu (1997) have stated that teachers’ job satisfaction also associates with freedom

to do their work as they want, including teaching favorite subjects, a reasonable class size and support of colleagues. Cooperation with colleagues allows to exchange experiences and to analyze each other's work as well as to find possible solutions and preventive actions for complex situations (Uibu, Kaseorg, & Kink, 2016). The characteristics of very good teacher are good communication and cooperation skills, good understanding of the substance as well as the ability to convey (Õpetajaameti kuvand ja atraktiivsus, 2016).

According to Herzberg et al. (1959) it is easier to measure external factors, since it is easier to control and manipulate them. In contrast, the internal factors are more subjective and elusive, for investigation of the respondents' proper descriptions are needed (Braun, & Clarke, 2006).

1.3. Context of this study

Estonia has launched significant initiatives to improve the quality of the education system and looking to international standards and best practices (Santiago, Levitas, & Shewbridge, 2016). Estonian teachers' professional development is supported by contemporary standards and competency-based training system (Kallas, & Tatar, 2015; OECD, 2014). In 2005, the standards of teachers' professional work were described in terms of competencies (Õpetaja V kutsestandard, 2005). In this document, teachers' professional career was described at competency-based structure: beginning from the knowledge and finishing with different competencies. In 2013, the three-level standard of teachers' competencies was approved by The Ministry of Education and Research (Estonian Qualifications Authority, 2013). Currently, teachers' professional activities and competencies are described in detail according to their work experience (teacher, competent teacher, master teacher). In addition to common roles and responsibilities, more experienced teachers had a chance to perform different additional tasks. They have the possibility to practice as a teacher-researcher or teacher-trainer in pre- and in-service teaching, to supervise students during their pedagogical practice at school and consult supervisors from the university (Eisenschmidt, & Koit, 2014). Such innovation has probably had a positive effect on Estonian teachers' job satisfaction. In recent studies (Juurmann, 2010; Ülbius et al., 2014) it was indicated that the majority of Estonian teachers (even 90% by Ülbius et al., *ibid.*) are satisfied with school microclimate and with the recognition and feedback received from their colleagues.

However, the studies, conducted in Estonia, have indicated that working conditions, school contexts, and organizational culture still do not sufficiently support teachers' professional development (Eisenschmidt, 2011; Toomela, 2009). The schools in Estonia do not seem to be using the competency-based career structure as a possibility to distribute roles and tasks among teachers within schools (Santiago, Levitas, & Shewbridge, 2016). Hence, the career structure is yet to penetrate schools' teacher management practices. Therefore, the current study focuses on teachers' job satisfaction, which may, among other things, have an impact on Estonian school culture and educational system.

2. Research questions and purpose of the study

Drawing on previous studies (Juurmann, 2010; Saiti 2007; Santiago et al., 2016; Sharma, & Jyoti, 2006; Toomela, 2009) we stated the following research questions:

1. What components (work-related, school management etc.) appear in primary school teachers' descriptions about their job satisfaction?
2. Which internal and external factors affect primary school teachers' job satisfaction the most?

This study aimed to determine the internal and external factors affecting Estonian primary school teachers' job satisfaction.

3. Research methods

3.1. Participants

Within the framework of the study, 45 primary school teachers from 28 Estonian schools were interviewed. All teachers taught basic subjects from Grades 1 to 3. The teachers' average age was 41.2 years; the youngest was 26 and the oldest 58 years. Their teaching experience varied from one year to 39 years ($M = 18.3$).

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Structured interviews were conducted with the sampled primary school teachers. The interviews consisted of 15 main questions. Using targeted thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2006), the job satisfaction components were classified into groups based on the conception of Herzberg et al. (1959). For the thematic analysis the interviews were fully transcribed. Then, the main themes, sentences or sets of sentences that expressed a conceptual whole, were implemented as analytic units. Based on analysis, three thematic dimensions of job satisfaction, which expressed work conditions, collaboration with colleagues, school management, salary etc., were differentiated. These themes were differentiated into three groups: 1) internal factors, 2) external factors and 3) mixed factors (see Fig. 1). Presenting the study results, codes instead of teachers' names were used (e.g., T1–T12).

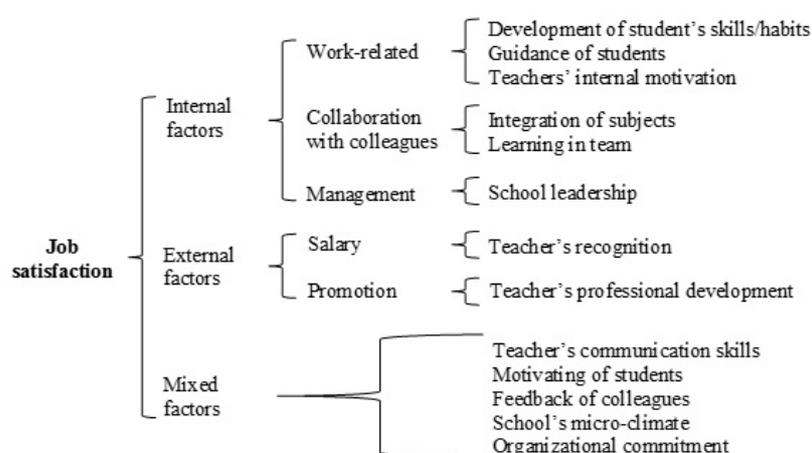


Fig. 1. Sub-themes of three groups of job satisfaction.

4. Findings and discussion

According to the results, two obvious thematic blocks – internal and external factors – were differentiated. Additionally, components belonging into both groups also occurred in primary school teachers' descriptions. This group was named a *mixed factors group* (see Fig. 1).

4.1. Internal factors group

In teachers' answers we distinguished several *work-related* dimensions. The most important factor in the frame of school context is the **development of students' skills and habits**. According to results, only 19 primary school teachers considered it as a significant topic. Teachers mentioned that it is essential to develop students' listening and reading skills as well as attention and remembering and consistency in learning habits. Even less, only 15 teachers of 45 considered that the guidance of students' learning is a teacher's duty. For example, a teacher said: "*Teaching is education and growing and it is helping, and understanding, and assistance.*" (T1).

Teachers also described how they arranged an adequate learning environment for their students. It corresponds to the expectations of the whole society, that **teacher guides students' multifaceted development**. Therefore, the teacher's role is not only to teach students, teacher has to lead their students in the learning process (see also Torokoff, & Mets, 2008). Besides, in the contemporary context of educational policy, teachers have to guide students, instead of transferring them the knowledge. It can help students to become more independent learners and get ready for lifelong growth. For that reason teachers have to expand their professional knowledge through systematic self-analysis, reflection and professional development (Kallas, & Tatar, 2015).

Although Herzberg et al. (1959) have stated that motivation is like an internal self-charging battery, it is also important to receive external influences to keep higher motivation. In our study, only 26 teachers of 45 described different components of **internal motivation**. Further, one teacher clearly stated that the internal motivation is an important factor of the job satisfaction. She pointed out:

"I think, me, as a teacher, I have to give something. This is perhaps a more practical value. I think, I can explain complicated things in the simplest way very well." (T2)

In line with Juurmann's (2010) study, one teacher of our study mentioned that if school principals take their opinions more into account and the students are also motivated, the teachers' internal motivation will increase.

The next dimension, what was distinguished in teachers' interviews was *collaboration with colleagues*. It covered two sub-themes: **learning in team** and **integration of subjects**. In concordance to previous studies (Juurmann, 2010; Sharma, & Jyoti, 2006; Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2011; Weiqi, 2007) the majority of teachers reported that they cooperated well with the school principals as well as head teacher and their colleagues. For example,

“We exchange work programs with other primary school teachers. In that sense, our work plans are a joint project.” (T3)

Teachers also evaluated the cooperation with their students highly. *“It is pleasant for me to communicate with students and to understand how they think, argue and realize.” (T12)* According to Juurmann’ study (ibid.), there were only 8.3% of teachers, who valued the cooperation with parents. In our study the number on named teachers was also small (7 teachers). The productive cooperation was found to be an important component in earlier studies (Koustelios, 2001). It encourages professionals to intensify a dialogue with colleagues and it is aimed to use a professional community as a place for collaboration and communication. It also helps to develop social skills of teachers. The collegiality corresponds to the formats of contemporary culture of organization, which promotes the culture of openness and instructs to plan time for professional collaboration (Schratz, 2014).

However, the sub-theme *integration of subjects* was appeared conservatively. Only few teachers (7 from 45) highlighted the integration of different subjects. *“All of us must contribute, in this way, we take on decisions.” (T4)*. The reason might be that primary school teachers provided education to same students in the first four grades and they taught majority of subjects. Therefore, they could integrate the subjects spontaneously and did not highlight extra integration.

Also, the *management* and its main component *school leadership* belonged to the internal factors group. Witherspoon (1997) has pointed out that leadership exists through communication, and its main function is to share concepts and their meanings in order to seek and use information more effectively. It was found that teachers’ satisfaction with school management is important not only for the efficiency of management system, but it is also essential for the whole work environment where management decisions are made (Koustelios, 2001; Tech, & Waheed, 2011). In our study, 24 teachers emphasized the importance of school leadership: *“Of course, I like the arrangement of work in our school, it suits me. No intrigues!” (T5)*.

4.2. External factors group

Next, we analyzed external factors influencing a job satisfaction of primary school teachers. *Salary* was the most mentioned factor in teachers’ interviews. We put it under the theme *teacher’s recognition*, which comprises both, financial and non-financial compensation of work (Herzberg et al., 1959). According to the results, the recognition was an important motivator for 35 primary school teachers. They found that recognition or non-recognition of school leaders’ influences their work in broad extend. Besides, almost half of the 35 teachers expressed their satisfaction with regard to recognition in their schools:

“In spring, we will select the best teacher and the best colleague, and in autumn (on day of teachers) we are recognized. The school principals indicate that they care about us.” (T6)

In line with previous study (Juurmann, 2010), the primary school teachers of our study described also the main ways of recognition in their schools: different certificates, verbal laudation, various work

accessories at the beginning of the school year (e.g., pens, notebooks, etc.). On the other hand, some teachers mentioned they were waiting for a greater recognition by their school principals. For example,

“I don’t know. It puts a strain on us, it does not motivate.” (T7)

“I have worked for 10 years and I have got only flowers at the beginning of a school year.”
(T4)

Also, in the TALIS 2013 survey it was found that the recognition is quite a rare phenomenon in Estonian schools; principals do not encourage their teachers enough (Ülbius et al., 2014). Teachers are often under pressure to do more and to obtain high outcomes in their professional job, but the resources for these activities are insufficient (Bentea, & Anghelache, 2012). Another reason may be low salary. Insufficient payment for particular demands may influence teachers’ level of job satisfaction (Sharma, & Jyoti, 2006). Tech & Waheed (2011) have emphasized that a subjective level of salary satisfaction is an important factor of job satisfaction. The dissatisfaction with salary not necessarily implies a lack of job satisfaction, or vice versa. For example, if a teacher has no career opportunities in school, it does not mean he or she is not satisfied with their job. However, if the salary is not sufficient, it usually causes dissatisfaction with job. If the salary increases, the dissatisfaction can be lost, but it does not guarantee higher satisfaction with their job.

The second external factor, which emerged in our study, was *promotion*. It is contributed for *teacher’s professional development*. In previous studies, it was found the professional development of Estonian teachers is supported by professional standards and competency-based training system (Kallas, & Tatar, 2015). However, only eight primary school teachers paid attention to their professional development. Many of them described negative things: a lack of administrative support, few possibilities for career promotion etc. Some primary school teachers manifested their willingness for self-improvement: “I need permanent self-learning...” (T8).

4.3. Mixed factors group

Several sub-themes, which were placed into *mixed factors group*, were revealed in primary school teachers answers. Altogether 17 teachers interviewed highlighted the importance of *teachers’ communication skills*. These skills comprise teachers’ communication with students, parents and colleagues. When we analyzed these skills in stakeholder groups, we found that only six of 45 interviewees mentioned the communication skills in relation to students. It is surprising that teachers considered good communication with students unnecessary. Next, about 50% of the teachers acknowledged the importance of communication skills in relation to school principals and just over 50% the interaction with parents and colleagues. The cooperation between a primary school teacher and parents is especially important in primary grades; therefore, the enhancement of communication skills is important in the frame of students’ multifaceted development. Different communication techniques (e.g., individual and group interviews with students as well as parents, giving feedback, presiding over meetings) have been suggested (Salumaa, 2007). However, as Weiqi (2008) study has

shown, the relations with colleagues, parents and supervisors weakly correlated with teachers' job satisfaction.

The second sub-theme, which was located to the mixed factors group, was the **motivating of students**. Santisi et al. (2014) pointed out that teachers' work motivation highly correlated with motivating of students. One-third of interviewed teachers presented lack of communication skills and they did not highlight motivating of their students.

“The teacher must take into account their students' peculiarities and create the conditions for learning, which allows recognizing the instruction as an attractive, interesting and age-appropriate process.” (T9)

“I feel that I have to obtrude the recognition to my students. I think, we also have to say “Thank you!” to students.” (T4)

In contrast to Juurmann (2010), who indicated that about one-third of teachers were satisfied with feedback received from colleagues, we found that only three teachers highlighted the importance of **feedback from colleagues**. This result is surprising because of collegial feedback that may have significant impact on the implementation of teaching methods and to the development the syllabus. In short, it is important to learn from the feedback and make reasonable decisions for teacher's professional development and school performance (Uibu et al., 2016). Distribution of knowledge and skills with colleagues refers to the capacity to arrange supportive environment with emotional involvement and to analyze systematically individual actions from different perspectives (e.g., practical experience, theories of education, methodology, individual biography). Also, the ability to use alternative strategies has to be developed (Schratz, 2014). Teachers must be able to assess their levels of competence, to receive feedback about their development and performance as well as to be reward in concordance to their work performance and effectiveness (Programm “Pädevad ja motiveeritud õpetajad...”, 2016). Terek et al. (2015) study revealed that personal feedback has the greatest impact on teachers' productivity.

The next important sub-theme, indicated in teachers' interviews, was the **school's microclimate**. The present study showed that 29 teachers interviewed valued good school climate. For example: *“Our school principals welcome all members of our school every morning.” (T10)* It is in line with Ülbius et al. (2014) and Juurmann (2010) studies, which indicated that the majority of Estonian teachers are satisfied with the school microclimate. On the one hand, the teachers' professional work is mentally very tight and it causes lots of stress at work. The problems, connected to students' behavior, have strong impact on teachers' job satisfaction. On the other hand, good relations with colleagues, school principals and parents help diminish tension at work. It requires from teachers the skills and readiness to cooperate and communicate, to work consistently in team and solve conflicts. It helps to establish motivating microclimate at school (Chang, 1994). As Dinham & Scott (1998) pointed out, the recognition, support and respect from colleagues help to reinforce the teachers' satisfaction with their job.

The success of organization depends on decisions and behavior of each member (Mumford, 1992). As previous studies have shown, the job satisfaction is strongly related to the **organizational commitment** through their employees' loyalty (Matzler, & Renzl, 2006). Committed teachers also show greater effort and involvement (Dee, Henkin, & Singleton, 2006). Despite some orientation of dissatisfaction, 30 teachers of our study expressed great satisfaction with the situation in their schools. For example:

“I have worked here for 40 years, this is my school. All my relatives – my grandfathers, my great-grandfathers and grandparent's had studied there back to the sixth generation. One of my great-grandfathers had worked in this school as a bookbinder. I know the homes of all students I am teaching. It helps me to contribute a lot when I know how to approach my students.” (T11)

Organizational commitment supposes that all members wish to be active players in this organization; they feel that they have high status in organization, and are willing to contribute beyond what is expected of them (Bogler, & Somech, 2004). Hulpia & Devos (2010) found that teachers generally commit to schools; they are proud of their schools and are willing to exert themselves for the school. In line with these results, the majority of Estonian primary school teachers were satisfied with their job.

5. Limitations and conclusion

Our study had some limitations. First, data collection through structured interviews does not ensure complete anonymity of the interviewees and it might affect teachers' responses. However, the interviewer did not know the teachers previously and they met before the interviews, for the purpose of this study. Second, teachers' personal characteristics and factors related to the school environment were not observed in this paper. Third, alternative measurement techniques can be used for data collection.

Despite these limitations, several strengths of this study should be highlighted. Although TALIS 2013 survey (Ülbius et al., 2014) showed that 90% of Estonian teachers are generally satisfied with their job, our study indicated several internal and external and mixed factors influencing the primary school teachers' job satisfaction. While Herzberg et al. (1959) found that employees are more motivated by internal than by external factors, our study showed that various factors might influence teachers' satisfaction differently. Primary school teachers were not satisfied with the growth of work responsibilities, low salary and how they are recognized in schools. Teachers' overall satisfaction, however, depends on particular conditions and frame in the specific school. This must be kept in mind when concluding the results of the current study.

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