The school as a therapeutic community

Joanne Vaughan, Alison Rodriguez and Daniel Boduszek

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the facets of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the potential relationships with teaching satisfaction in a sample of secondary school teachers (n = 1,288). The study explored the potential of the school environment in fostering a beneficial community in which personal needs could be met and investigated potential disparities between male and female teachers.

Design/methodology/approach – The study utilised an electronic quantitative questionnaire to collect data from a representative sample. Structural equation modelling was applied and permitted an exploration of potential relationships between the facets of SDT and teaching satisfaction, while controlling for specified covariates.

Findings – It was shown that the specified model could be effectively applied to both male and female teachers. The results demonstrate that only competence was related to teaching satisfaction in both samples.

Practical implications – Future studies should focus on factors which contribute to teachers’ sense of competence within the professional role. Schools need to facilitate this need in order to promote wellbeing within the educational environment.

Originality/value – This is the first known research to explore the specified relationships and the ability of the school environment to foster wellbeing and satisfaction. It is suggested that competence is the more prominent need with regards to teaching satisfaction.

Keywords Wellbeing, Teachers, Motivation, Therapeutic community, Self-Determination Theory, Teaching satisfaction

Paper type Research paper

Teaching can be viewed as a personally rewarding career which may serve to enhance wellbeing through interaction within the school environment (Santoro et al., 2012). The teacher role is multifaceted and challenging, and may be influenced by the beliefs of the teacher, personal motivation and sense of job satisfaction (Klassen et al., 2008). The application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has often been utilised to explain motivation, emotion and behaviour in a variety of work domains (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Esdar et al. (2016) consider motivation as an important factor to individual wellbeing, performance and satisfaction in educational settings. Consequently, the school setting has the potential to act as a therapeutic community in promoting positive psychological benefits for teachers.

According to SDT, environmental conditions which facilitate the psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are beneficial to ensuring personal development and enabling optimum wellbeing (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) consider autonomy to be the perception of being in charge of one’s own behaviour and competence is understood as a feeling of personal effectiveness. The psychological sense of being with others encapsulates the concept of relatedness. Consequently, the school setting can provide opportunities to satisfy these needs through mutual participation and engagement (Wagner and French, 2010). In further support, Roth et al. (2007) noted that contextual factors have the ability to facilitate self-determined teaching motivation and contribute to satisfying the needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Similarly, research by Wininger and Birkholz (2013) reported that the job satisfaction within the teaching role was significantly related to the fulfilment of such innate psychological needs.

Being satisfied with teaching is of paramount importance as it is recognised that teacher wellbeing and student wellbeing is interrelated (Roffey, 2012). Rots et al. (2012) reported that the job motivation is dependent on the development of a sense of professional competence within

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the role. It has been documented that teaching is challenging (Hong, 2012) and Stoll et al. (2006) report that it is necessary for teachers to be proficient within their practice in order to meet the diverse demands of the job. Consequently, it may be necessary that teachers continually enhance their professional practice whilst also remaining fully informed of changing legislation which may affect their role (Polk, 2006). Continual reforms within the school sector have often been considered as a contributory factor in teacher overload with the evolving demands impacting teacher wellbeing (Fink, 2003).

Grenville-Cleave and Boniwell (2012) reported that educational reforms may reduce autonomy within the teacher role. This is potentially a cause for concern as Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) report that autonomous teaching enhances satisfaction at work. Conversely, Griva and Joekes (2003) suggest that psychological wellbeing is not necessarily related to obtaining job control within the teacher role. Wilkesmann and Schmid (2014) also noted that the intrinsic motivation of teachers, whilst facilitated by both competence and relatedness, was only partly facilitated by autonomy. It has been suggested that the overarching and structured attainment culture of contemporary education may offer some explanation of this finding (Brookfield, 2015).

In order to be effective in the professional role, Timms and Brough (2013) suggest that teachers often seek support through meaningful interactions with colleagues, although individual variation is noted. Alhija (2015) noted that female teachers report social support as more necessary in promoting a positive working environment than do their male counterparts. Liu and Ramsey (2008) found that females experience less overall job satisfaction than males. Related research by Guglielmi et al. (2016) found that younger teachers were driven by the opportunity for collegial relationships and personal development. It was further noted that having the opportunity to demonstrate professional competency was more dominant in older teachers.

Owen (2016) further notes that the reciprocal collegial relationships may promote a sense of fulfilment. Collaborative teacher working may enhance enthusiasm and confidence which promotes wellbeing and satisfaction; this is made possible within the school setting which fosters a beneficial community to teachers (Huppert and Johnson, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008). The establishment of positive peer relationships contributes to teachers’ capabilities by means of a providing a professional learning community (PLC) (Owen, 2016). Stoll et al. (2006) suggest that PLCs foster the enhancement of skills and pedagogical practice which further contribute to teachers’ sense of competence. From this perspective, the PLC acts as a therapeutic tool in promoting wellbeing for teachers within the school context.

Despite the recognised potential barriers, the school setting has the potential to act as a therapeutic community in promoting positive psychological benefits for its members. Related research has recognised the therapeutic potential of the primary school setting and draws attention to the concept of the school to act as a therapeutic community (MacDonald and Winship, 2016). Such research introduces new avenues for future research to utilise the therapeutic community ideology within educational settings. With this in mind, the context of the school may provide a platform for facilitating teacher wellbeing, positive functioning and the satisfaction of personal needs. To date, research has not explicitly utilised this framework to explore satisfaction in secondary school teachers.

Furthermore, the decline in the teacher workforce at the secondary school level in England (Department for Education, 2017) make this particular teacher population noteworthy of further study. With this in mind, it is necessary to explore factors which may foster a positive school environment in order to promote satisfaction within the teaching role. As it has been shown that the innate needs as advocated by SDT are applicable to the teaching domain, this theoretical framework is consequently suitable for further exploration.

The aim of the current study is to explore the facets of SDT and their relationship with teaching satisfaction. Given that satisfaction within the professional role is necessary for teachers’ wellbeing, professional performance and student outcomes, it is necessary to illuminating factors which relate to satisfaction so that future practice can be better tailored for the interests of those within the school community. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the potential gender diversity that may exist when exploring the impact of psychological needs and teaching satisfaction as previous research has suggested a potential gendered disparity in the teaching experience.
Method

Participants

Participants were 1,288 (468 males and 820 females) secondary school teachers currently employed in the secondary education sector in England. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 67 years ($M = 41.35, SD = 10.85$). Years of teaching practice ranged from 0 to 43 years ($M = 13.57, SD = 9.86$). In order to reduce sampling error, the sample was stratified by region and by local education authority; there are 150 local education authorities which are contained within nine larger regions. A 30 per cent drop out rate was recorded.

Procedure

E-mails were sent to potential participants requesting them to complete the online questionnaire which encompassed demographics, the basic psychological needs at work scale (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and the teaching satisfaction scale (TSS) (Ho and Au, 2006)

Measures

Basic psychological needs at work scale (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This is a self-report measure of psychological needs in the workplace consisting of 21 items which are scored on a seven-point Likert scale ($1 = $not at all true to $7 = $very true). There are three subscales (autonomy, competence and relatedness). First, autonomy (AUT) consists of seven items (e.g. “I am free to express my ideas and opinions on the job”). Second, competence (COM) consists of six items (e.g. “People at work tell me I am good at what I do”). Third, relatedness (REL) consists of eight items (e.g. “I get along with people at work”).

Teaching Satisfaction Scale (TSS) (Ho and Au, 2006). This is a self-report measure consisting of five items which assess satisfaction within the teaching role. Each item is scored on a five-point Likert scale ($1 = $strongly disagree to $5 = $strongly agree). Scores range from 5 to 25, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of teaching satisfaction. Items on this scale include, “In most ways, being a teacher is close to my ideal” and “I am satisfied with being a teacher”.

Analysis

Preliminary analysis was conducted in SPSS 22 to ensure the suitability of data for structural equation modelling (SEM). Descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were analysed for all continuous variables.

The model of teaching satisfaction was specified and assessed in AMOS 22 using SEM (see Figure 1). SEM is a multivariate approach which employs a confirmatory approach to data analysis; permitting testing of a specified model (Kline, 2013). Simultaneous analysis of regression coefficients, means and variances is achieved through the application of SEM. The SEM technique involves a combination of both factor analysis and path analysis.

The first stage is concerned with the measurement level. Using confirmatory factor analysis techniques, factor loadings were determined. The fit between the collected data and the specified model was assessed using goodness-of-fit indices: $\chi^2$, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Steiger, 1990) with 90% confidence interval (90% CI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI; Tucker and Lewis, 1973) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990). The structural level relates to correlations between the defined variables which are presented pictorially in a path diagram (Cohen and Cohen, 1983).

The SEM technique allows simultaneous testing of the measurement level and structural level and promotes theory testing by verifying associations between observed and latent factors in the specified model (Byrne, 2013). Unlike regression analysis (where only the dependant variable has an error term), SEM is advantageous in providing explicit estimates of error variance parameters for all latent factors within the specified model (Blunch, 2008). The latent factors of SDT were autonomy, competence and relatedness (measured by scores obtained
from the basic psychological needs at work scale), and teaching satisfaction (measured by scores on the TSS). Co-variables included in the model were participants’ age and years of teaching practice. The specified model was initially applied to the full sample of teachers to analyse the overall model fit. This incorporates all direct paths from predictors (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and covariates (age and years of teaching practice) to teaching satisfaction. This testing was then repeated on a gender split sample in order to test the model on male and female teachers separately.

Results
The model was first tested on the full sample. This was then repeated on a gender split sample to assess if the model could be fitted to a male only sample and female only sample.

Descriptive statistics and correlations
Descriptive statistics including means (M), standard deviations (SD) and ranges for all variables included in the study are presented in Table I, along with Cronbach’s α reliability statistics for the utilised measures (Cronbach, 1951). Correlations between the continuous variables included in the study were assessed using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient.
Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

The first step was to analyse the overall fit of the model which incorporates all direct paths from predictors (autonomy, competence and relatedness) and covariates (age and years of teaching practice) to teaching satisfaction.

Full sample

In the full sample, the fit of the specified model indicated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 (337) = 2119.12, p < 0.05, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.061 (90\% CI = 0.061/0.067)$).

At the measurement level, all observed variables were significantly correlated with the latent factor they represent (all values were $p < 0.001$). All regression weights ranged from $\beta = 0.41$ to 0.89, indicating moderate to strong correlations. These are presented in Table II.

The relationships between teaching satisfaction and the latent factors of SDT were investigated while controlling for the specified covariates. These are displayed in Table III.

### Table I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Possible range</th>
<th>Chronbach’s $\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>28.46</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>7–49</td>
<td>7–49</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>29.06</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>7–42</td>
<td>6–42</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>41.07</td>
<td>7.98</td>
<td>13–56</td>
<td>8–56</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching satisfaction</td>
<td>15.44</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>5–25</td>
<td>5–25</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Full sample</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TSS1</td>
<td>0.761***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSS2</td>
<td>0.764***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSS3</td>
<td>0.890***</td>
<td>1.206</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSS4</td>
<td>0.826***</td>
<td>1.027</td>
<td>0.038</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSS5</td>
<td>0.760***</td>
<td>1.148</td>
<td>0.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT20</td>
<td>0.636***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT17</td>
<td>0.587***</td>
<td>0.893</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT13</td>
<td>0.753***</td>
<td>1.232</td>
<td>0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT11</td>
<td>0.456***</td>
<td>0.704</td>
<td>0.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT8</td>
<td>0.737***</td>
<td>1.172</td>
<td>0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT5</td>
<td>0.412***</td>
<td>0.629</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT1</td>
<td>0.761***</td>
<td>1.286</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM19</td>
<td>0.544***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM14</td>
<td>0.535***</td>
<td>1.008</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM12</td>
<td>0.821***</td>
<td>1.464</td>
<td>0.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM10</td>
<td>0.590***</td>
<td>1.108</td>
<td>0.071</td>
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<tr>
<td>COM4</td>
<td>0.451***</td>
<td>0.838</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>COM3</td>
<td>0.457***</td>
<td>0.822</td>
<td>0.063</td>
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<tr>
<td>REL21</td>
<td>0.699***</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>REL18</td>
<td>0.615***</td>
<td>0.910</td>
<td>0.047</td>
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<tr>
<td>REL16</td>
<td>0.524**</td>
<td>1.166</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL15</td>
<td>0.740***</td>
<td>1.345</td>
<td>0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL9</td>
<td>0.707***</td>
<td>1.364</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL7</td>
<td>0.446**</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL6</td>
<td>0.703**</td>
<td>0.958</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL2</td>
<td>0.800***</td>
<td>1.364</td>
<td>0.055</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: TSS, teaching satisfaction scale; AUT, autonomy; COM, competence; REL, relatedness. ***$p < 0.001$
A significant direct effect was noted for the relationship between competence and teaching satisfaction ($\beta = 0.785$, $p < 0.001$). All other predictors and covariates were not significantly associated with the outcome variable.

**Male sample**

In the male only sample, the fit of the specified model indicated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 (337) = 1113.14, p > 0.05, \text{CFI} = 0.85, \text{TLI} = 0.85, \text{RMSEA} = 0.070$ (90% CI $= 0.066/0.075$)).

At the measurement level, all observed variables were significantly correlated with the latent factor they represent (all values were $p < 0.001$). All regression weights ranged from $\beta = 0.38$ to 0.90, indicating moderate to strong correlations. These are presented in Table II.

The relationships between teaching satisfaction and the latent factors of SDT were investigated while controlling for the specified covariates. These are displayed in Table III.

A significant direct effect was noted for the relationship between competence and teaching satisfaction ($\beta = 0.843$, $p < 0.001$). All other predictors and covariates were not significantly associated with the outcome variable.

**Female sample**

In the female only sample, the fit of the specified model indicated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 (337) = 1384.12, p < 0.05, \text{CFI} = 0.89, \text{TLI} = 0.87, \text{RMSEA} = 0.062$ (90% CI $= 0.058/0.065$)).

At the measurement level, all observed variables were significantly correlated with the latent factor they represent (all values were $p < 0.001$). All regression weights ranged from $\beta = 0.47$ to 0.89, indicating moderate to strong correlations. These are presented in Table II.

The relationships between teaching satisfaction and the latent factors of SDT were investigated while controlling for the specified covariates. These are displayed in Table III.

A significant direct effect was noted for the relationship between competence and teaching satisfaction ($\beta = 0.736$, $p < 0.001$). All other predictors and covariates were not significantly associated with the outcome variable.

**Conclusion**

This is the first known research to apply SEM to investigate the association of SDT (Deci and Ryan, 2000) and teaching satisfaction (Ho and Au, 2006). The results demonstrate that only competence is significantly related to teaching satisfaction. Consequently, previous research which has reported that all components of SDT relate to satisfaction (Wininger and Birkholz, 2013) is not supported by the current study findings.
With regards to autonomy, one explanation of this finding could be as suggested by Grenville-Cleave and Boniwell (2012) whereby innovative teaching is restricted due to the structured framework of the schooling environment. Alternatively, it may be that autonomy is not necessarily related to wellbeing as teachers may prefer a predefined framework for teaching (Griva and Joekes, 2003). However, the importance of autonomous teaching has been advocated in the related research which has focussed on teacher wellbeing (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2014). Future studies would be advantageous to further illuminate the importance of autonomy from the teacher viewpoint.

Similarly, the relationship between relatedness and teaching satisfaction was non-significant, although previous research has reported the importance of this relationship (Timms and Brough, 2013). It has previously been suggested that positive relationships with colleagues contribute to teachers’ sense of competence within a PLC (Owen, 2016). In this sense, the significance of competence and its association with teaching satisfaction as reported in the current study findings may incorporate elements of such relatedness. It would be beneficial for future research to assess the views of teachers to ascertain the importance of peers in contributing to their professional practice.

What is evident from the current study findings is the therapeutic potential of the school environment to facilitate satisfaction through permitting the need for competence to be achieved. When needs are met, this contributes to individual wellbeing (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This standpoint aligns with the therapeutic ideology previously noted within the primary school context (MacDonald and Winship, 2016). The recognised association of competence and teaching satisfaction also demonstrates that the school setting is equally beneficial to both male and female teachers. This is advantageous when considering developing strategies and initiatives in light of the research findings.

The findings of this research support the need for continuing professional development for teachers. This would ensure that teachers remain up to date with the evolving demands of the job and would contribute to competence and impact teaching satisfaction. The results further support previous related research which has highlighted the importance of competency to ensure job satisfaction (Stoll et al., 2006). Furthermore, training which is collaborative would further promote collegial relationships in a PLC framework (Owen, 2016). Development programmes which inspire innovative practice may permit greater teacher autonomy and could further contribute to teaching satisfaction. Such inclusions into a development strategy would further allow schools to act as a therapeutic community by fostering motivation and positive emotions which would not only be of benefit to teachers but may also have positive effects on learners.

A potential limitation of the current study is the application of self-reporting which may not reflect the views of others within the school. Given that the relationship between competence and satisfaction was shown to be significant this is noteworthy of further exploration. An objective measure of competence based on supervisory report or measured performance may consequently contribute to enhancing knowledge on the relationship between competence and satisfaction at work. In addition, relatedness as measured in the current study refers to “people at work” and whilst this is intended to assess collegial relationships it may be that some teachers have interpreted “people” as students. Future research which explores relatedness with colleagues and students as independent factors may be beneficial as previous research has noted that both are important to wellbeing (Wininger and Birkholz, 2013).

Despite the potential limitations, it is necessary to explore more specifically competence and satisfaction within the teaching role. Research which could illuminate the factors which promote competence from a teacher perspective would be beneficial to guiding relevant training tailored to the needs of teachers. This may serve to explain how a teacher’s ability to perform effectively can impact teaching satisfaction, which in turn may positively impact on the wellbeing of teachers. This would be further advantageous as the link between teacher wellbeing and student performance has been previously demonstrated (Roffey, 2012). Thus, the therapeutic potential of the school community is not limited to the micro level, but is beneficial on a more macro scale. Such work is needed if schools are to adopt a therapeutic community ethos to facilitate teacher wellbeing.
References


Timms, C. and Brough, P. (2013), “‘I like being a teacher’: career satisfaction, the work environment and work engagement”, Educational Administration, Vol. 51 No. 6, pp. 768-89.


Further reading


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