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ANALYTICAL CRITIQUE OF THE RESEARCH ARTICLE: "TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN: PERCEIVED SATISFACTION AND STRESS"

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Abstract

This article that we reviewed appears in the Educational Research Journal. The journal is interdisciplinary in its approach, and includes reports of case studies, experiments and surveys, discussions of conceptual and methodological issues and of underlying assumptions in educational research, accounts of research in progress, and book reviews.

This study is part of a project by Blatchford, Goldstein and Mortimore (1998), this article explores how early year teachers feel about their work; this study is a follow on from the project and looks at teacher stress, dissatisfaction and satisfaction in their jobs. The study also looks at external factors such as educational change and the current curriculum initiatives as the causes of stress.

The study focuses on teachers of the youngest children in school. During this period when the research was being carried out there was a rapid change in the education system. These questionnaires were distributed and completed by teachers in schools in England and Wales. The teachers at the time were coping with the new demands of the National Literacy Strategy and preparing for the introduction of the National Numeracy Strategy. The Literacy and Numeracy frameworks were established as a result of anxieties expressed by the Government. Especially, concerning standards of achievement in Literacy and Numeracy by children in primary schools. However, in the actual study there is no mention of teachers in Wales.

Keywords: *Critical Review, Teacher Psychology, Workplace Psychology, Motivational Psychology*

Overview of study

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Aims

The aim of the study was to obtain from teachers their own feelings, more specifically, their views on what they found stressful about their job and what the main reasons for feeling satisfied or dissatisfied with their job were.

Objectives

The study mainly focuses on teachers' feelings towards two questions in particular:

1. Teachers' reasons for being stressed in their job
2. Teachers' reasons for being satisfied/dissatisfied with their job

Literature Review

The purpose of this study by Blatchford et al (1998) was to give an insight into the working life of teachers and their issues with the profession. In particular looking at the direct impact of Government policies on teachers. The researchers argue that there have been many representations on behalf of teachers, for example, by the Teacher Associations; the researchers feel that it is less clear what the ordinary class teacher feels about their job in the context of so much externally imposed reform. I am unsure if the study took into consideration any male teacher's teaching of this age group. If the number of male teachers was too insignificant to record then they should

have mentioned this in the study, to make sure that the gender representation is clear.

In this study there is no critical evaluation of the literature, rather it is just an extension of the previous study. It takes a small element of the initial study, which is then analysed. The study is for its intended audience and for others who wish to read out of interest. The layout and setting, as well as the results are appropriately displayed and clear to read.

The research is logical and the study follows the same logical sequence, thus, why it adds to the body of knowledge on this topic. The paradigm or the approach this study follows is that of an interactive approach (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). This approach is considered a hard approach as it is trying to seek the truth, i.e; what causes stress, dissatisfaction, satisfaction etc., among teachers – so, it is quite subjective. The interpretative approach is about explaining the status quo, using individual perspectives about peoples lived experiences, thus why they have used the qualitative and quantitative approach but there is no clear justification for it in this study.

The study concludes that teachers need to be more actively involved with the consultation process that affects their work.

The study is easy to read and follow; the researchers don't discuss a lot of theory. The literature, which appears in the study, is limited, with only 13 primary sources. This analysis makes a lot of assumptions based on the initial study, but does not clearly relate those assumptions. The primary sources, which are part of the research, are up-to date for when findings were reported in the late 90's.

Ethics

The study mentions confidentiality for the teachers. However, it does not mention how the researchers gained access to the teachers in the schools. Another issue present is the fact that there is no copy of the actual questionnaire, hence why it makes it difficult to know how the participants were briefed before they began the questionnaire i.e.; were they told the purpose of the study? Did the teachers know they could withdraw? Did they teachers know where or from whom to obtain a summary of the findings etc.? (On p.44, when giving real quotes from the teachers the researchers withhold the names,

ensuring confidentiality. I believe the teachers did know where to send completed questionnaires.)

Methodology

The researchers use open-ended questionnaires as a basis for their study. Their participant sample is from primary school teachers who teach in Reception or Year 1. The questionnaires were sent out in the summer of 1998. 151 questionnaires were sent to Reception teachers and 208 were sent out to Year 1 teachers. The project had 10,500 children. Data was collected at the levels of the child, teacher, class and school. The teachers came from 350 schools from 14 different LEAs throughout England.

Questionnaires

The method of data collection for this research was questionnaires. Some of the strengths of questionnaires are: precision – i.e. researchers can be as fixed or open ended in their questions as they choose. For this study they used open-ended questions. Furthermore, questionnaires are time effective and in this large study they proved effective concerning time. The researchers feel that the questions invited an open-ended response and the answers were conceived to be the teachers' most salient views. Questionnaires are easy to fill, they can cover a lot of issues and they are highly efficient (i.e. a lot can be sent out). Accordingly, Coolican (1994) describes questionnaires as an instrument for gathering structured information from people. Also, they can be anonymous and confidential, hence the so-called 'Hawthorn effect' (The Hawthorne effect is a label first used in 1955 to give a new interpretation of the results of the original Hawthorne experiments conducted from 1924–1932. This so-called effect asserts as fact the idea that the mere act of observing/studying something can alter it and also asserts that this effect explains the results of the Hawthorne experiments) can be avoided. In essence questionnaires are most commonly used when there is a desire to gain information from a large sample of people. However, there is a minimum number, which must be reached if the sample is to stand a chance of being representative. Despite this, it is a necessary but not sufficient

basis for representativeness (Kirby et. al., 2000).

Furthermore, by ensuring that each respondent is faced with an identical stimulus, i.e. an identical questionnaire, the method thus aims to be reliable. The variations in the answers will not be the result of any variations in the questions, or the order in which they were asked. According to May (1993) the theory behind questionnaires is that if all respondents are asked the same questions in the same manner, and if they express a difference of opinion in reply to those questions, the variations result from a true difference of opinion, rather than as a result of how the question was asked or the context of the interview. This justifies perhaps why the researchers decided on questionnaires.

Some of the limitations of this method of data collection are perhaps its length; there is no control over how responses are given, and the researchers have to be aware that there are no biases in their questions on the questionnaire. Lastly, sometimes it can prove a challenge as to how results will be analysed.

Open-ended questions

The researchers use open-ended questionnaires; they justify the open-ended, qualitative approach p. 35, by arguing that this approach produces rich data as used by Evans (1998), in his study of teacher morale and attitudes to work. The researchers feel that they can obtain a detailed insight of primary teachers' views about their job in this large-scale study. The researchers class this study as a qualitative study. However, due to the use of questionnaires, this study can also be looked upon as a quantitative study.

Open-ended questions allow respondents to answer or speak for themselves, thus why open-ended questions are not limited in their possible responses. This then creates a limitation as there is no possible way of making comparisons between the responses as there is no way of ensuring that respondents interpret the questions in exactly the same way. This then makes it difficult to allow comparisons (Kirby et. al., 2000). However, in the study the researchers do mention categorizing responses by looking at themes.

Kirby et al (2000) argue that it depends on the researchers and the responses they

would want to quote in their final report. They argue that questionnaires conducted by open-ended questions can therefore be criticized over their validity and representativeness, unless all results are included in a report, which they argue is unlikely. The researchers in this study use both statistics and comments from teachers, so they attempt to validate and make their study as representative as possible.

i. Positive aspects of the methodology in this study

Firstly, it is very useful for the reader to be given the correct reference to the previous project from which this new study has evolved and from where the new paper is drawing its data. The methodology section states clearly when the questionnaires were completed and gives clear (numbers) sample sizes of the project. The methodology section mentions that teachers could return their completed questionnaires directly to the project. This would ensure confidentiality. The questionnaire also asked questions about their attitudes, qualifications and working experiences, as well as factual questions of their class.

ii Limitations of the methodology in this study

Firstly, the methodology section does not justify why reception teachers were only sent 151 questionnaires and Year 1 teachers were sent out 208 questionnaires. Secondly the study does not explain how or why the 14 LEAs were chosen and on what basis, this is also the case for the 350 schools, i.e. if the schools are in Sure Start (Sure Start is a UK Government initiative, originating in the Treasury, with the aim of «giving children the best possible start in life» through improvement of childcare, early education, health and family support, with an emphasis on outreach and community development) 2 areas. The methodology section does not distinguish between the nature and background of the schools' teachers, i.e. a teacher's career, whether they are new or old to the profession. There is no mention to the background of the children, i.e. whether they were children with learning difficulties, children who were seeking asylum, children from working class homes.

The methodology does not mention this study being triangulated. However, because this paper concludes findings from another study it would have been useful to put the methodology section of the study in the appendices of this paper. This ensures that the reader can have a reference point. As the paper reads, the reader just has to trust what the researchers are writing and their assumptions.

It is not clear how the questionnaires were distributed to the teachers and if the schools were aware that the staff were taking part in a study. This article does not mention a pilot study.

Data analysis

What I found particularly helpful about this section was that the researchers acknowledge the fact that the questionnaires yielded a lot of information, but in the paper, they concentrate on the two questions they are most interested in. It would have been further useful to know what other types of information was yielded in brief, to put this study in context.

The researchers quantified the teachers' most prevalent views by using a coding frame, which was developed on the basis of an initial analysis of 50 questionnaires within each group. The answers were read through and categorized using themes – this is one of the benefits of qualitative data. The rest of the questionnaires were then read through, categorized and tallied with this framework in mind. For the individual categories they present the results in terms of numbers and percentages of teachers who gave that response.

The paper does not mention what package or coding frame the researchers used such as Atlas-Ti for instance or the use of SPSS software for statistics. It is not clear how this data can be validated i.e. what interpretation are the researchers using. However, the researchers acknowledge that because of the nature of open-ended questions, responses could be assigned to more than one category, so reliability is difficult to apply as mentioned earlier. The researchers thus point out that the categories were not mutually exclusive. They further acknowledge that this can present difficulties when seeking to add together related categories in order to arrive at a col-

lective category. Again, this affects reliability of the findings.

To overcome this problem, they use statistics for individual categories in their study. This ensures that data is not lost. From this they then work out frequencies and percentages, irrespective of teachers involved. This also justifies why they use statistics. For the collective or main categories, they give a measure as to the extent to which responses are mentioned. Subsequently, due to the results being expressed numerically the study then becomes a quantitative study. On p.36, the researchers also mention a selection of real quotes used by teachers to illustrate the nature of the teachers' views in the response categories. The researchers are trying their very best to make this study as transparent for their audience as possible.

Results

Before all the results are tabulated the researchers ask the first question 'What do you find most stressful about your job?' and then they list the main responses and then put the percentage of similar responses. This seems very systematic. However, they categorized the responses into 5 main categories on conceptual grounds, i.e.; what it was judged that they belonged to. On the other hand, it is interesting to note who may have judged these categories and it is not clear whether these 5 categories are fully representative.

i. Table 1: 'Teachers' reasons for being stressed with their job?'

The tables are clearly set out with a column for 'Collective categories' and the 5 categories listed underneath and the 'Response categories' with all the responses listed underneath, which I assume were filtered through by the coding system. The table then has two columns for Reception and Year 1 teachers. These two then split into 'Frequency', 'Percentage of teachers (%T)' and 'Percentage of overall response (%R)'. When I read the table, it was unclear as to what the 'Frequency' column meant. I am not sure whether it means the number of teachers, or the number of times the issue flagged up in the questionnaires. However, what is clear is that the percentage of the responses in the (%R) column are quite low in relation to the

percentage of teachers (%T). This then makes the study appear possibly unrepresentative.

ii Table 2: Frequency and Responses

Table two is a summary of Table 1, however, it is still not clear what the frequency is in relation to the percentage of responses and how this reflects on the Collective Categories. Furthermore, there seems to be no commentary on the above findings. The researchers say before they expand, they want to have a look at the questions about 'What are the reasons for being satisfied/dissatisfied with teaching?' The researchers 'lump' these two questions together without justifying the reasons.

They should have mentioned in the study that these two questions were inter-linked rather than treating them as separate. Instead, they link dissatisfaction with the satisfaction question in the introduction of the study.

iii. Table 3: 'Teachers' reasons for being dissatisfied with their job?'

In this table the responses seem to representative of what the study is trying to find out. However again Frequency is hard to understand. From the results on p. 40, by using actual quotes from teachers they justify the view that the teachers do not value recent initiatives and feel negatively disposed towards the changes that are taking place in early years education.

iv. Table 4: Frequency and Responses

Reflects the findings in Table 3; the findings seem fair, but it is unsure how exactly they added the responses together.

v. Table 5: 'Teachers' reasons for being satisfied with their jobs?'

In Table 5 a whole new set of collective categories are given, without really indicating as to how these categories were decided upon. The number of Frequency and teacher percentage (%T) correlates closely with the response percentage (%R). So, it seems to be representative.

vi. Table 6: Frequency and Responses

When the reader looks at Table 6 on p. 44, under the collective category of 'Job satisfaction', there is a huge gap between the Frequency and Responses. It is not clear

what is meant by these figures and how the researchers are drawing their conclusion.

The tables are all well labeled but there is lack of clarity and discussion of these tables.

Discussion

The researchers have a lengthy discussion and try to look at the reasons for dissatisfaction. The researchers point out three difficulties that were causing the dissatisfaction. The main one was making compromises; firstly, having to implement policies that they did not believe were valuable to the children; secondly, teachers had less time to spend on children's needs because they had to spend more time on bureaucratic and external tasks; lastly, teachers felt that they were delivering innovations that were different to their own pedagogical understandings.

These are excellent points and can be tested in further studies. Also, the researchers point out the idea of disempowerment that teachers feel, rather than expressing feelings of empowerment – this is interesting, as it makes a good basis for another study. I feel that the discussion relates to the findings well. However, I also feel that overall, the researchers are simply proving their own hy-

pothesis. It is difficult to understand why the researchers would want to flag up this specific aspect of the job and what they would want to achieve at the end of their findings.

Conclusion

Overall, this study has been an interesting read, as it has brought the issues of teacher stress and dissatisfaction to the forefront and has tried to look for its underlying factors. The most prominent being external pressures and the constant changes the government brings about in education. The limitations of this study for the reader as mentioned earlier are; firstly, the lack of review on the previous study; there is no major focus on the methodology or ethics of that study, and secondly, the limited explanation of the results. Furthermore, the study proves its hypothesis that teachers are certainly dissatisfied and more ominously even stressed in their profession. A possible way to overcome this would indeed be by teachers having a greater degree of say in decision and policy-making. This study encourages further research in this area, particularly as teaching is such an important issue facing the country today.

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