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Meaning in work of secondary school teachers: A qualitative study

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In order to identify specific, shared sources of meaning and mechanisms with which individuals attempt to make meaning, the objectives of this study were to explore the way in which secondary school teachers perceive, conceptualise and attain meaning in their work. A qualitative design with a phenomenological strategy was used with a convenience sample ($n = 20$) of teachers. Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with open-ended questions were used to gather data. Participants were asked to diarise related issues for five working days following the interview, in order to strengthen and validate the interviews' results. The results showed that the participants conceptualise meaning as purpose and significance, and that the main sources of meaning related to work include the transfer of knowledge, and making a positive difference in the learners' lives. Forming relationships based on trust and receiving feedback was also important. The main mechanisms identified were putting effort into preparations, while this group of participants reported that meaning leads to the experience of happiness and personal satisfaction. Although most of these findings support those in the broader literature, there are differences in the emphasis placed on some of the findings, due to the context of education in South Africa. From the results, recommendations were made to create opportunities for teachers to experience more meaning in their work.

Keywords: education sector; meaning in work; meaning-making mechanisms; sources of meaning; teachers

Introduction

Research on understanding and improving teacher motivation is increasing (Wyatt, 2013). One reason for this could be that globalisation is resulting in economies competing globally, thus intensifying the search for evidence to develop high-quality, sustainable education systems (Peng, McNess, Thomas, Wu, Zhang, Li & Tian, 2014). The delivery of quality education is an international priority, as identified in Dakar 2000, but also a challenge worldwide, as the targets set to improve the delivery of quality education are likely to be missed in many countries (Sinyolo, 2010). Problems prohibiting the delivery of quality education in South Africa include a desperate shortage of teachers (Xaba, 2011) and low morale (Mentz, 2007). Other well-publicised issues leading to the crisis in South African education include poor performance and a lack of overall commitment by teachers (Modisaotsile, 2012).

Experiencing more meaning in one's working environment and personal life has been proven to lead to more positive work, health, and well-being outcomes (Day & Rottinghaus, 2003; Doğan, Sapmaz, Dilek Tel, Sapmaz & Temizel, 2012, Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006). By identifying the factors that increase meaning in work, meaning-making mechanisms, and the outcomes of meaning in work, this study could potentially assist teachers in addressing some of the above-mentioned issues.

Conceptualisation of Meaning

Positive psychology has been described as the scientific study of the conditions and processes that contribute to flourishing or optimal functioning of people and institutions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Kashdan and Steger (2007) suggested that one of the most important aims of psychology ought to be to discover mechanisms that enable individuals to achieve high levels of lasting well-being. Overall, meaning is an important construct in the field of positive psychology, as it improves the positive mental health outcomes of people (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992); heals the psyche (Yalom, 1980); promotes better psychological adjustment (Bonebright, Clay & Ankenmann, 2000); allows individuals to experience overall life satisfaction and fulfilment; and aids in building more positive emotions (Locke & Latham, 2002; Seligman, 2002).

The concept of meaning was discussed by Victor Frankl, who supposed that every individual has an instinctive inclination to search for the meaning of his existence and experiences and to discover the meaning in suffering (Frankl, 1963). Frankl's contributions have caused the concept of meaning to be more widely explored, but definitions of meaning have varied greatly across theoretical and empirical studies that discuss it. Meaning has been defined in terms of purpose (see Frankl, 1963 and Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) and significance and sense made of situations (see Steger, 2012 and Steger et al., 2006), as well as through multi-faceted definitions combining these two dimensions (Steger, 2012). Researchers have also made many attempts to measure meaning in life and meaning in work. Some of these measures include The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) by Steger et al. (2006), and The Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) by Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012).

Park (2010) conceptualises meaning in terms of breath of focus (the sense that life has meaning), depth of focus (underlying personal philosophies or worldviews) and dynamic understanding of meaning (meaning systems in action). Researchers who study meaning in work operationalise Park's conceptualisation in focusing on the same key issues, namely where the meaning in work comes from (the sources of meaning), how work

becomes meaningful (the mechanisms by which meaning is made), and what the outcomes are of experiencing meaning (Rosso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Sources of Meaning in Work

It has been postulated that each person derives meaning from different sources (Frankl, 1963), but that work is frequently an important source of meaning in life as a whole (Michaelson, Pratt, Grant & Dunn, 2014; Steger, Pickering, Shin & Dik, 2009). Several theorists have identified sources to meaning. Rosso et al. (2010) identified the self, other persons, the work context, and one's spiritual life as potential sources of meaning. Emmons (2003) believes that people find meaning through work/achievement, intimacy/relationships, religion/spirituality and generosity. Pleasure, personal growth (Ebersole & DeVogler-Ebersole, 1984), creative endeavours, experiential values and attitudinal values that influence the ability to think about and grow from bad experiences (Frankl, 1963) have also been described contributing to the production of meaning.

Meaning-Making Mechanisms

It has been pointed out that meaning can either be found or made (Heine, Proulx & Vohs, 2006; Steger, 2012), and a core question in meaning research revolves around how people make or develop meaning over a period of time (Steger, 2012). The main categories of the mechanisms through which work is perceived as meaningful, or by which meaning is made or acquired, include: authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, and cultural interpersonal sense-making (Rosso et al., 2010).

Outcomes of experiencing Meaning in Work

People experiencing meaning in their work are likely to invest more effort and energy into their work activities, and have higher levels of enjoyment than those experiencing less meaning (Bonebright et al., 2000). This investment of effort and energy can also be described as work engagement, which is a state of work-related well-being (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter & Taris, 2008) that indicates employees' individual performance (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001; May, Gilson & Harter, 2004; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá & Bakker, 2002). When employees are engaged in their work, they contribute to organisational success by showing higher levels of motivation and commitment (Burke, Koyuncu & Wolpin, 2012). Other important positive work outcomes include increased motivation, improved performance, and enhanced job satisfaction (Bonebright et al., 2000).

The context of this study is the education sector, which has been facing numerous problems

in South Africa, including a desperate shortage of teachers (Xaba, 2011) and low morale (Mentz, 2007). Other well-publicised issues leading to South African education being in a state of crisis include poor performance, and a lack of overall commitment by teachers (Modisaotsile, 2012). Experiencing more meaning in one's working environment and personal life has been proven to lead to more positive work, health, and well-being outcomes (Day & Rottinghaus, 2003; Steger et al., 2006).

Research pertaining to meaning can be found taking place under a variety of different theoretical perspectives, where, under related but distinct terms such as 'meaning in life', 'meaningfulness', 'meaning of work', 'calling' and 'purpose', to name only a few, various methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods) bring about lacking consensus (Rosso et al., 2010), which makes it difficult to interpret study results accurately, and to build on them. Rosso et al. (2010) recognised from this confusion that although the research has contributed knowledge in a diverse set of valuable areas, it has also led to uncertainty regarding what is essentially known about meaning. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experience of meaning by teachers. A number of studies has recently focused on interactions between several factors influencing meaning in work (see Jackson & Rothmann, 2006, Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013 and Willemsse, 2013), and this study aims to add to this body of knowledge by gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the factors that increase meaning in work, meaning-making mechanisms, and the outcomes of meaning in work as experienced by the participants in this group.

Method

Research Design

Qualitative research entails interpretive approaches, where the researcher studies phenomena in their natural environment, attempting to make sense of and interpret these phenomena in terms of the meanings individuals attach to them (Yin, 2011). A qualitative design with a phenomenological approach will be used to uncover the perceptions of the participants regarding meaning. According to Creswell (2009), this approach enables the researcher to understand and experience human behaviour better, to focus on phenomena that occur in their natural settings and in their complexity, and to obtain a deeper understanding of the individual's perspective as he or she experiences, understands or perceives these phenomena.

Research Setting, Sampling and Participants

The setting of the study was secondary schools situated in Mpumalanga. Participants from randomly selected schools were chosen based on

voluntary availability, and where possible, arrangements were made to ensure the sample represents different genders and ethnic groups. The total sample included 10 male and 10 female participants, of which seven were African, 11 white and two Indian. Data collection was done until data saturation was reached.

Procedure and Data Collection

Permission to conduct research was obtained from the Department of Education and school principals. Interviews were conducted at a time suitable for the participants, and all interviews were done in Afrikaans or English, based on the participant's preference. The study, purpose and interview process were explained to all participants, and all participants gave written, informed consent. Semi-structured, one-on-one type interviews with open-ended questions were used, which included questions such as: "which specific factors give you meaning in your work?" or "which specific things make your experience of work overall to be meaningful?" The participants were allowed to ask questions during the process, and each participant was offered a beverage. Each interview was recorded and transcribed afterwards and field notes were made by the researcher. After the interview, each participant was asked to keep a diary of their experience of meaning for the following five days, which was collected by the researcher. All documents and recordings were stored securely, and backup copies were made of electronic files.

Upon completion of this study, the results were made available to the specific schools and participants, and participants were invited to arrange follow-up interviews to discuss the findings.

Data Analyses

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. This has been defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005:1278), and as a "qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2002:453). The researcher first conducted a full literature review, and then wrote a description of her own understanding of meaning, according to literature. During the data collection, data analysis was already taking place as on-going findings affected what data were collected and how, as explained by Suter (2012). Willig (2008) explained that all interviews should be transcribed, and initial main thoughts written down separately during the interview process and data analysis. The researcher read through all the transcribed interviews several times in order to gain an overall understanding of

them (Creswell, 2007). Field notes or memos were used to support all activities of qualitative data analysis, as suggested by Yin (2011) guiding the researcher from data reduction (extracting the essence), data display (organising for meaning), and drawing conclusions (explaining the findings) (Suter, 2012).

During this qualitative content analysis procedure, all text was coded, and then the significant statements found in the interviews and diaries were listed (each statement was treated as having equal value and the list was expanded, until there were no new or overlapping statements), grouped together, and then labelled according to common themes (e.g. good colleague relationships, acknowledgement) by the researcher. Trustworthiness was ensured by comparing the findings of the researcher with those of an experienced independent researcher, analysing the raw data by creating categories via themes and identifying patterns in a manner similar to those of the researcher.

Triangulation was implemented by referring to the initial main thoughts (field notes and memos) throughout the data analysis, to make sure that they were consistent with what was being extracted and how it was interpreted. Validity was thus increased through supplementing the analysis of the transcribed interviews with field notes, memos and diaries, as authored by the respondents themselves (Suter, 2012).

In order to verify the themes, a literature control was conducted by comparing findings with previous research. The literature control was integrated with the findings to ensure flow and easier reading. All relationships between major themes and labels were explored, and a final summary of findings was given. Member-checking was done to verify the level of accuracy of the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the data obtained from participants. The participants involved in the member-checking agreed with the main themes identified. A critical reader examined the research findings and advised, where applicable.

Ethical Considerations

The entire process was executed with due consideration for all ethical aspects in qualitative research. Permission was obtained from the Department of Education and ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the North-West University (FH-SB-2012-0046). Written informed consent was obtained and participants' right to privacy and anonymity was respected. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the process or if they wanted to withhold any information and upon completion of the research, all findings were readily available to all participating parties.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher took an inductive stance, which implies that the researcher attempts to set aside his/her own perceptions and experiences to stay as true as possible to how participants experience and describe the phenomenon (Yin, 2011). None of the participants were personally familiar with the researcher. In qualitative research, the researcher becomes immersed in the construct being studied, and in the specific context thereof, as 'an active participant' (Trochim, 2006). Throughout this process, the researcher aimed to act with integrity and in an ethical manner, whilst also being considerate, respectful and trustworthy.

This research aimed to explore and describe participants' experiences regarding meaning in work; to compare and test the findings against previous research; and to maintain a high standard of rigour throughout. Different requirements and standards for qualitative research were considered, including descriptive clarity, analytic precision, theoretical correctness, and methodological comparison (Burns, 1989). These factors were taken into account during the entire research process. Rigour was considered to meet the stated objectives of the research. The data collection method (interviews and diaries) produced information that addressed all the research questions with enough detail. This research attempted to clearly describe to readers what was done and how, with theory embedded throughout the process.

Results and Discussion

Themes identified from interviews and supported by the diary entries will be discussed.

Conceptualisation of Meaning

A quarter of the participants (25%) viewed meaning as having a sense of purpose, e.g. "*Purpose to me it is about finding meaning in your life...the deeper insight into why you are really here*" [sic] (Participant 5) and "...to me another word, in a word could be purpose. Just in a word: purpose" [sic] (Participant 16). This is in line with the purpose-driven definitions inspired by Frankl (1963) and Steger et al. (2006). Another approach given by another quarter of participants (25%) was significance-centred, where participants described that meaning is experienced when one has a positive impact or influence on, or contributes to something larger than oneself. "*Anything that has an impact on...a positive impact on things, or on someone*" (Participant 10); while Participant 14 referred to "*the value and importance of something. The benefit of something you do to others*" [sic].

In the theoretical framework presented by Rosso et al. (2010), the concept of 'contribution' appears, which is described as the perceived impact and significance of things. Steger et al. (2006) define meaning in life as the sense made of and

significance felt with regard to the nature of one's existence. In other words, meaning is created through people's interpretations of their experiences, where the overall significance or impact of these experiences give meaning to their lives (Steger, 2012). For this reason, it may be concluded that the most holistic definition to support the participants' conceptualisation of meaning in this study might be that of Steger (2011), who described meaning as the extent to which people understand and see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life. This definition combines the two main themes in the definitions of meaning, namely purpose and significance.

Antecedents of Meaning in Work

Transfer of knowledge was mentioned by more than three quarters (80%) of the participants, e.g. "*...to unlock or to open up the knowledge for the learners...*" [sic] (Participant 2), where Participant 8 explaining that meaning refers to a situation "*...when they finally [sic] understand something*". This source of meaning is closely related to the main tasks of an educator, but also exceeds this. Cortese (2003:17) have stated that "education institutions bear a profound, moral responsibility to increase the awareness, knowledge, skills, and values needed to create a just and sustainable future". Making a positive difference or having a positive influence on others, was indicated by three quarters (75%) of participants as giving them a sense of meaning, e.g. "*...If you can just spread a little light, that's a big thing to me...*" [sic] (Participant 5). Every learner develops a different relationship with his/her teachers, which ultimately assisted in the professional working relationship between the learner and the teacher (Pianta, 1999). Three quarters (75%) of the participants in this study referred to positive relationships and interaction with the learners as an important factor contributing to their meaning in work, e.g. "*it fulfils me as a human being to have that interaction with them*" (Participant 1). Because teachers are able to influence the learners through their relationships with them, participants mentioned that teachers ought, furthermore, to act as role-models (Participants 3, 17 and 18). Positive relationships also extended to collegial support and good relations with half of the participants (50%), indicating that they attain meaning when they experience good support and relations with colleagues, e.g. "*team work is utterly important in education*" [sic] (Participant 5). Trust was mentioned by more than half (55%) of the participants, who further described relationships, e.g. "*...when you see they trust you and are opening up to you...*" [sic] (Participant 3); and "*trust, a relationship of trust*" (Participant 6).

More than half (65%) the participants indicated tangible results as a prominent source of meaning, e.g. "...if my results they are good and my learners pass my tests and exams..." (Participant 10); and Participant 11, who revealed "[...] feel[ing] great if I see someone from my class being [sic] in the top position". This is closely linked to feedback, indicated by more than half of the participants (60%), as this seems to lead to much of the meaning created in the work of teachers. Feedback in this research study specifically referred to receiving both appreciation and recognition: "*appreciation for the things you do. The children that say thank you...*" (Participant 6); and "*I think the more recognition you receive for the effort you put in, the more effort you will want to put in*" (Participant 1).

The above themes resonate the work done by Emmons (2003) and Frankl (1963), as well as Pratt and Ashforth (2003), who identified task significance as important in an individual's search for meaning. The task of teaching can be seen as the transfer of knowledge, connected to feedback and tangible results, as well as making a positive difference, which can be linked to meaning through work/achievement (Emmons, 2003). Having positive relationships at work (either with the learners or colleagues), resonates with Emmons' (2003) writing on a desire for close, reciprocal relationships, where trust can be seen as a characteristic of a positive relationship. Positive relationships and trust appear commensurate with the experiential values as described by Frankl (1963). Trust might furthermore lead one to being selfless, generous or kind (acts of altruism). Having open and trusting relationships with an altruistic attitude also supports Frankl's (1963) attitudinal value and Emmons' (2003) 'generosity' (kindness/selflessness), as sources of meaning in work.

Meaning-Making Mechanisms

Effort/conscientiousness was indicated as a mechanism to create meaning by at least half (55%) of the participants, with responses such as "*when I get something to do, I do it as soon as I can*" (Participant 4); and "*more dedication to my work... I am trying to be 100% [sic], to be perfect*". These reports stand as examples of preparation as a mechanism to create meaning, as indicated by half of the participants (50%), including planning, goal setting and attaining the necessary knowledge or skills, e.g. "*in my work, there should be preparation, otherwise without any preparation then [sic] there is no meaning*" (Participant 14 illustrating planning); "*in order to reach one's goals you have to go out and make the change [sic]; you have to work for it*" (Participant 5 illustrating goal setting); and "*knowledge is power*" (Participant 5, illustrating attaining knowledge).

Less prominent mechanisms included building relationships (Participant 12: "*I know what they want, because I speak to them*"), practising spirituality (Participant 9: "*...the only thing that still keeps me in education is the fact that I am still allowed to pray with the learners*"), and altruism, (Participant 7: "*...by helping any way that I can*").

Some of the meaning-making mechanisms found in literature include authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, 'belongingness', transcendence, and cultural/interpersonal sense-making (Rosso et al., 2010). The main meaning-making mechanisms identified in this study, effort/conscientiousness and preparation, appear connected to authenticity, defined as the alignment of one's true self with one's behaviour (Rosso et al., 2010). This can be observed where a participant values hard work, commitment, and an interest in teaching others. Preparation could result in one's self-esteem (evaluation of one's own self-worth) and self-efficacy (belief in one's own ability) being enhanced, as well as contributing to a sense of purpose.

Outcomes of experiencing Meaning in Work

More than half (60%) of the participants clearly stated that having meaning in one's work makes them happy or provides an overall sense of feeling good, e.g. "*of course it makes you happy*" (Participant 1). This happiness could be through positive relationships, or making a positive difference (Wallis, 2005). Meaning in work provides intrapersonal satisfaction to just less than half (40%) of the participants, e.g. "*it gives me self-confidence. I feel good about myself...*" (Participant 3), while 35% of participants indicated that they feel meaningful in their roles as teachers (Participant 14: "*it makes you feel meaningful...*").

A group of the participants surveyed (35%) seem to be motivated and willing to invest effort and energy into their work (work engagement) if they experience meaning in work, e.g. "*it inspires you to do more and to go further and to actually put in a greater effort...*" (Participant 1). Participants also indicated that having meaning in work leads to higher work enjoyment (35%): "*...you enjoy your work and you are happy...*" (Participant 13).

Well-being has been approached from two angles in the available literature. The hedonic tradition focuses on happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008), with Peterson, Ruch, Beermann, Park and Seligman (2007) adding that meaning builds happiness. The participants in this study described that the experience of meaning in work gives an overall sense of feeling good, or of happiness. Outcomes related to the eudaimonic tradition were indicated by participants who saw meaning as leading to higher levels of intrapersonal experiences, since meaning is related to life satisfaction (Zika &

Chamberlain, 1992), better well-being and overall health (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006). Meaning further adds to the experience of higher motivation, which is aligned with work engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002), as well as work enjoyment.

Optimal psychological functioning, or well-being, entails happiness, satisfaction and actualising one's potential (motivation, engagement and flow) (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The outcomes of meaning in work also integratively correlates with eudaimonia, as it places a large emphasis on living a full and deeply satisfying life through living well and actualising one's potential, and hedonia, where happiness is the main focus (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Both meaning and happiness have been proved to contribute to well-being (Jayawickreme, Forgeard & Seligman, 2012); therefore, the findings of this study indicate that the outcomes of experiencing meaning are understandable, and fit in well with existing literature on the outcomes of meaning.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current research study was to explore and describe how individuals in the educational environment approach meaning in their work. The aim was to conceptualise meaning and to explore the main sources, meaning-making mechanisms and outcomes of experiencing meaning in work. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was followed, during which the 20 participants were interviewed and given diaries to understand and explain their conceptualisation and experiences of meaning in work. The interviews produced most of the valuable information, with the diaries supporting these findings. Major themes were identified, and compared with existing literature. The main conclusions and contributions will be discussed.

Participants' conceptualisation of meaning was mainly divided into purpose and significance-centred approaches, as predicted by the literature. The main antecedents of meaning in work for teachers was strongly linked to the main task of education, including the transfer of knowledge and making a positive contribution to their future through a strong, trusting relationship. The need for feedback (both tangible and intangible in the form of appreciation and gratitude) were found to be related to the transfer of knowledge, making a positive difference, and tangible results, as all of these are indicators of how well teachers are performing.

The main meaning-making mechanisms identified in the study were effort/conscientiousness, preparation and building relationships. It became evident that the sources of meaning and meaning-making mechanisms are interlinked, with a large degree of overlap between them. A good example of this is positive relationships, viewed as both an antecedent of meaning, and also a pathway

towards making meaning. This close link between sources and mechanisms of meaning was also indicated by Park (2010) and Rosso et al. (2010) in an integrative, theoretical framework.

In order to motivate teachers to be proactive and engaged, rather than passive and alienated (Wyatt, 2013), efforts ought to be made to create an understanding that meaning is not just the result of working conditions, but also a continuous effort to find meaning in spite of a given set of working conditions (Isaksen, 2000). The current lack of delivery of quality education could easily be ascribed to poor working conditions, but opportunities for teachers to experience meaning could be created, which might lead to experiencing more work enjoyment and engagement. Attention ought to be given to helping teachers experience more meaning in their work, by focusing on the transfer of knowledge, and making a positive difference in learners' lives through building positive, trusting relationships with learners and between teachers as colleagues; and by investing effort in their daily tasks, acting conscientiously, preparing well, building relationships, practising spirituality, and adopting an altruistic attitude.

This study thus contributes to literature by providing a deeper understanding of the lived experience of meaning for teachers. Schools and teachers can focus on incorporating or re-crafting more of the identified sources or antecedents of meaning into their practice, in order to be able to reap the benefits of experiencing meaning in work.

Limitations of this study include the limitation to the potential generalisation of the results, due to the qualitative nature of the study, which focuses on a specific group of participants' lived experience of meaning, and the voluntary participation of teachers. As the study was dependent on the interviewee's willingness to share their experiences, time available for each interview, and on the depth of experiences shared, this could also have limited our insight to some extent. Although the abovementioned could be seen as limitations to the study, findings from the study may contribute to the improvement of quality education, through creating opportunities for teachers to both discover and create meaning through education.

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