Accentuate the Positive:

Special Education Teacher Job Satisfaction and Joy

Joshua Z. Singer[1]

[1] College of Education, Central State University, USA

Correspondence: Joshua Z. Singer, College of Education, Central State University, Wilberforce, OH., 45384-1004, U.S.A.. Tel: 1-937-376-6315. E-mail: jsinger@centralstate.edu

Received: February 8, 2023 Accepted: March 7, 2023 Online Published: March 10, 2023

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v12n2p20 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v12n2p20

Abstract

Special education teacher attrition combined with declining college teacher preparation program enrollments has resulted in a teacher shortage of crisis proportion in America. Additionally, teachers are often underfunded, overstressed, and burdened with societal and political pressures that have been brewing since before the pandemic. In spite of this, teachers continue to value the work they do in their classrooms, and many even find joy in the work that they are doing. This paper examined both teacher job satisfaction by analyzing self-reported, Likert scale data, as well as teacher joy collected through open-ended questioning. Results indicated that teachers reported highest levels of teacher job satisfaction related to coworkers. Teacher joy, however, was reported almost exclusively as a product of working closely with students. These findings have the potential to impact teacher retention and recruitment in positive ways.

Keywords: teacher job satisfaction, special education, teacher recruitment and retention

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

America's schools are in crisis. There likely have never been as many classrooms without qualified teachers as there are today in the United States. Many states are reporting teacher vacancies in the thousands, and other states that do not report such data have begun the school year with college students, veterans, and other substitutes, many of whom have no qualifications beyond a high school diploma (Nguyen, 2022). In special education, the shortages are even more severe; attrition rates are double what they are for other teachers (Hawkins, 2022). The immediate future does not look much brighter, either, because teacher preparation programs across the country have been reporting declines for over a decade (Partelow, 2019; Will, 2022).

In addition to the pandemic, other factors that have led to this exodus of qualified teachers from the professional ranks include low pay, lack of respect, burnout, demoralization, and an odd mix of social and political factors that have fractured communities and set educators on edge (Natanson, 2022). Too many states have begun legislating what can and cannot be discussed in the classroom, sometimes even in post-secondary settings (Walsch, 2021; Krotoszynski Jr., 2021). School board meetings have become contentious, and some media portray teachers as enemy indoctrinators of our nation's youths. Is it really a surprise, then, that so few college students are declaring majors in education and related fields?

Despite these challenges, teachers continue to serve our students, families, and communities to the best of their abilities. It is the author's hope that this study will illuminate new ways to attract college students to the field of education. More specifically, this study will highlight what teachers find satisfying about being in the classroom, and (thank you for the term, Marie Kondo) what actually sparks joy related to being a hero-educator!

1.2 Research Questions

The present study sought to answer the following questions:

(1) What is the perceived level of job satisfaction among special education teachers?

(2) What aspects of being a special education teacher bring joy?

1.3 Related Literature

According to Clark and Keating (1995), the first study on teacher job satisfaction was completed more than ninety years ago in 1932, and most published studies since have found little correlation between motivation and performance. Teacher job satisfaction has been examined with regularity since theories of Maslow, Herzberg, and others in the 1950s helped give rise to its popularity as a topic.

The data collection instrument used for the present study, Pepe's (2011) Teacher Job Satisfaction Survey (TJSS), was influenced by Herzberg's dual-factor satisfaction theory (1966) and more recent works that identified factors that "mitigate …the adverse effects of teaching work" (Pepe, Addimando, & Veronese, 2017, p. 399). These factors include interpersonal relationships with coworkers, families, and students themselves. It is the relationships with students themselves that are of particular interest to the present study. Pepe, Addimando, and Veronese also reported that improved teacher job satisfaction is correlated with improved health among teachers and higher achievement among students, and further assert a consensus among researchers that student behaviors are the accepted source of much of the stress and burnout that has led, in part, to today's teacher shortage-related crisis. To build on this concept, this study sought to examine sources of joy, in addition to satisfaction, which might improve motivational factors and outcomes.

Other studies have also provided validation evidence of the TJSS. Chalghaf et al. (2019) described their Arabic adaptation to the instrument in a study of over 400 Tunisian physical education teachers' job satisfaction. Through factor analyses (fit) and an examination of convergent validity, as well as robust internal consistency the authors concluded that their adaptation of the TJSS "…is a good psychometric tool to quantitatively assess the job satisfaction of teachers…" (Chalghaf et al., p. 1). The authors also report high reliability coefficients for all three dimensions (> .90), as well.

Yalin-Ucar and Bagatarhan (2022) provided further evidence of validity in their study of over 500 primary through secondary teachers in Turkey. The TJSS again solicited data that fell within goodness of fit criteria as determined by factor analyses and also provided good to excellent internal consistency or reliability measurements within all three dimensions (coworkers, students, and parents).

Though there are inferential statistical limitations that do not allow for directly comparing one ordinal data set to another (unless or until studies utilize Rasch analysis to appropriately convert ordinal data into interval data), there are some surface similarities between participant groups from the many countries that have been included in studies utilizing the TJSS so far. For the most part, previous studies found that teachers' perceived satisfaction from work was derived from colleagues. Tunisian teacher-participants, though, seem to be outliers in that they rated satisfaction with student behavior and discipline much higher than participants from other countries in other studies, including the present study (Chalghaf et al., 2019). In addition to statistical limitations and ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences between samples, teachers in some studies have been separated by discipline or grade band, and some have not.

2. Method

2.1 Participant (Subject) Characteristics

The target population of this study consisted of licensed special education teachers from schools serving grades K-12 in Ohio. To encourage the broadest sample possible, purposeful sampling included K-12 school teachers from public, private, and charter schools whose contact information was published on school websites.

2.2 Sampling Procedures

The sample pool included a mix of urban, suburban, and rural public school districts randomly selected from every corner of Ohio. Schools were randomly chosen from different geographical areas to ensure representation from diverse areas, including densely packed cities and the rural Appalachian foothills. Email invitations were sent directly to special educators identified from selected and published district directories.

2.3 Sample Size, Power, and Precision

In total, 435 invitations were sent via email to intervention specialists identified on staff directory pages accessible to the general public. A small number of invitations (23) were returned immediately as undeliverable. 32 responses were returned out of the 412 that were not rejected immediately, for a response rate of approximately 8%. It is likely that a portion of emails were never received due to spam protections or other defenses used to prevent emails from outside organizations. It is also worth noting that no incentives were provided for completing surveys other than an honest and brief explanation of why help was being solicited. Regardless, 8% is a very low response rate. Issac and

Michael (1995) suggest a sample size of 10-30 participants for non-experimental exploratory studies, and Hill (1998) suggests that 30 is an adequate minimum number for electronic surveys.

2.4 Research Design

To answer research question number one, a self-reporting (survey) instrument was used. In addition to non-identifying demographic information, a Likert-type scale was used to collect perceived levels of job satisfaction. Population variables considered include gender, age, and years of service. A total of nine questions probed three different components of the job satisfaction construct as defined by Pepe (2011), interactions with co-workers, interactions with students, and interactions with parents. Likert scale data (ordinal) was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Participants were also asked one open ended question to address research question number two, and were provided space to respond. Thematic coding was used to examine the qualitative data.

2.5 Instruments

To collect data related to teacher job satisfaction, the TJSS was used with permission by its authors. Pepe et al. (2017) provided evidence of validation following a robust study of almost three thousand teachers from six different countries. The original set of items (35) was scaled back to nine while a series of factor analyses improved the total number of dimensions from six to three. Analyses also revealed that across six sub-samples, dimensions were reliable and produced normal distributions. Ultimately, three items were written for each of the three identified factors that comprise Pepe's theoretical model of teacher job satisfaction, which include relations with students, parents, and coworkers (2017). Based on confirmatory factor analysis, these three domains explained 79.5% of variance in overall satisfaction.

To collect qualitative data related to research question number two, an electronic survey and database was used (Google Forms). No identifying data was collected or reported.

3. Results

3.1 Demographics

Of the 32 responses received, 29 were from participants who identified themselves as female, and only three identified as males. All participants submitted years of service, but one participant did not include their age. Demographic information is presented below in tables below.

Table 1. Demographics: gender

	Frequency	Percentage
Female	29.0	90.6
Male	3.0	9.4
Total	32.0	100

Description: Reported gender identification of participants

Table 2. Demographics: ages and years of service

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Range
Age	40.7	25.0	58.0	33.0
Years of Service	14.0	1.01	35.0	34.0

Description: Reported ages and years of licensed teaching (service) of participants

3.2 Statistics and Data Analysis Research Question Number One

Research question one was addressed with the nine question stems provided by Pepe's Teacher Job Satisfaction Survey (2011). A complete list of items from Pepe's TJSS can be found in the appendix. Results are presented below in table 3.

Table 3. Questions stem frequencies of responses

	Mean	HS	Sat	Neu	Dis	HD
CR1	4.2	31.3%	62.5%	----	6.3%	----
CR2	4.0	34.4%	40.6%	15.6%	9.4%	----
CR3	4.3	31.3%	53.1%	9.4%	6.3%	----
SD1	2.5	----	15.6%	28.1%	46.9%	9.4%
SD2	2.6	----	28.1%	15.6%	46.9%	9.4%
SD3	2.7	9.4%	21.9%	12.5%	43.8%	12.5%
PI1	2.5	----	21.9%	15.6%	50.0%	12.5%
PI2	2.8	3.1%	21.9%	28.1%	40.6%	6.3%
PI3	3.0	----	28.1%	43.8%	28.1%	----

Description: Question stems abbreviated as CR (coworker relations), SD (student discipline), and PI (parental involvement). Highly satisfied (HS) = 5; Highly Dissatisfied (HD) =1.

3.3 Reliability

Data collected from the TJSS for the present study indicate a high level of internal consistency (reliability) with an overall Cronbach's Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.87$ for all nine items combined. Subscale scores for colleague satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.92$), student satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.87$), and parent satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.89$) are also all very good indications that the instrument is producing reliable results, as others have reported. According to Gliem and Gliem (2003), Chronbach's Alpha values great than 0.8 can be interpreted as *good* and values greater than 0.9 are considered excellent.

3.4 Statistics and Data Analysis Research Question Number Two

Research question two was answered by participants with a single open-ended question. In total, 31 of 32 respondents answered the question, but four responses were not useful in that they seemed to be answering a different question (one related to joy, but not teaching). From the 27 responses that addressed the question meaningfully, several themes emerged. Overwhelmingly, participants included references to students (29 distinct statements). Three statements were included that related to parental support, one statement related to co-worker relations, and one more related to administrator encouragement and feedback.

References to students who bring joy to teachers included statements about general student success, as well as success with specific skills. Examples of this include, "seeing my students become successful," and "progress with behaviors and communication" from students with exceptionalities. Comments reflecting joy found from students showing empathy or compassion were included by several participants, including "students showing…empathy and respect to others," and "seeing them demonstrate compassion or empathy." Responses reflecting joy found from students who demonstrated intrinsic motivation or engagement were also reported, such as, "seeing students make intrinsically motivated progress towards happiness or confidence," and "watching the excitement of students learning new concepts."

The majority of student-related responses referenced positive connections and relationships ("building rapport with students"), or growth or change due to learning. Some examples include "when students get the concept they are learning," or "when students demonstrate understanding," or when students "break through and learn a concept that has been difficult for them to understand in the past." Most teachers can probably relate to the shared elation experienced during those rare and powerful lightbulb moments.

4. Discussion, Limitations, and Implications

4.1 Discussion of Results

What is initially striking from the data are the very high levels of perceived satisfaction derived from working with colleagues. For all three questions related to the construct of satisfaction with coworkers, the mean was higher than 4. The highest rated question by participants asked about overall satisfaction with co-workers ($M = 4.28$). Equally striking are the perceived levels of dissatisfaction related to student behavior and discipline. The means for all three student discipline-related questions were between 2.5 and 2.72.

The very lowest rated question, however, asked participants about their satisfaction with the interest of parents in their children's education (M = 2.47). Nearly half of all participants also reported feeling either unsatisfied (40.6%) or highly unsatisfied (6.3%) with parental support of schools and programs. Overall perceived teacher satisfaction with parents was perfectly neutral for this sample. These results divert from previous studies that have largely found students to be the greatest single source of dissatisfaction among teachers (Pepe, Addimando, & Veronese, 2017).

The special educators who participated in the present study rated satisfaction with student behavior and discipline so much lower than what is seen from other studies, questions naturally arise about the unique difficulties of working with exceptional populations. Curiously, students were also the most cited source of teacher joy, and by a wide margin. In addition to responses indicating that students and their successes were a source of joy, parental support, administrator encouragement, and collegial relationships were also identified, though far less frequently.

Overwhelmingly, the special educators in this study identified students as their sole source of joy related to teaching. "Seeing my students become successful…" and "seeing positive change and growth in my students…" reflect common themes reported by this sample. Also common were statements similar to "making connections to my students…" and "building rapport with my students." However, the most frequent responses related to students were associated with student learning. "When students finally break through and learn a concept…" or "…when students understand a concept they were having difficulty with…" are examples of this. "I love the aha moments students have…" and "the moment a skill 'clicks' for a student" were also reported. These statements demonstrate some of the most powerful rewards of teaching. Not a single teacher mentioned any concrete or material payoff, instead, these small and singular moments are contributing to what helps to keep good teachers in the classroom. Additionally, students who appreciated what their teachers were doing for them, and students who demonstrated kindness and compassion were also reported as sources of joy.

Also interesting is that relationships with coworkers were the highest rated dimension of satisfaction for the present sample of special educators, yet as a source of joy, coworkers were mentioned only once ("Relationships with my coworkers."). Is it simply a difference in how the two words- satisfaction and joy- are defined by participants? Or is it possible that students can be sources of both dissatisfaction and joy simultaneously?

Schmidt (1976) noted that relationships with students were one obvious outlier when examined through the lens of Herzberg's two-factor job satisfaction theory. Interpersonal relationships were initially described as an attribute of hygiene, rather than motivation. Hygiene elements can reduce dissatisfaction, according to Herzberg's theory, but do little to motivate individuals to put forth their best effort or do their best work. This study echoes the reporting of Schmidt in that teachers from the present sample clearly indicate that their greatest occupational rewards originate from relationships with students.

4.2 Limitations

The present study is limited by a number of factors, not the least of which is a sample size that reflects its exploratory nature. Conclusions generated from this sample's data should not be overgeneralized to broader populations. The study is also limited by its reliance on descriptive, ordinal data. Applying Rasch analyses in related follow-up studies might yield important information about samples studied, instruments used, and underlying theories themselves.

4.3 Implications and Future Research

The word satisfaction is generally defined as having needs fulfilled, or the enjoyment that comes from having one's needs fulfilled. Joy can be defined as happiness, pleasure, or delight that comes from having one's desires fulfilled (Merriam-Webster, Cambridge Dictionary). This is a slight but notable difference, and one that might be best left for expert Semantics. Regardless, an inevitable truth remains- neither joy nor satisfaction can easily be observed and measured, if at all. For argument's sake, if it can be assumed that both joy and satisfaction do exist beyond theory, and furthermore that they are distinct constructs from one another, then does the presence or absence of one of these attributes affect the other? In other words, can joy exist where there is no satisfaction, and vice versa? For those who are interested in dissecting such semantics, there is plenty of room for more clarification of these terms, as well as the pursuit of measurement of such abstract and worthy ideas.

For the present study, however, identifying sources of joy seems to be something different than identifying sources of satisfaction. This sample was satisfied most with colleagues and coworkers. Satisfaction derived from students rated lower than satisfaction stemming from both parents, and colleagues. Yet joy was found primarily from students. More specifically, Special Educators found joy in the successes, even small, that students were able to achieve with the facilitation of their teachers. In addition to the connections and relationships teachers developed with students, what really brought teachers joy was bearing witness to their students' growth and development in academic, social,

behavioral, and vocational skills. One respondent stated what brings joy in the clearest terms possible, “My students. Nothing else about teaching brings joy.” It doesn’t get any simpler than that.

There are lessons here to be learned by both school districts and college teacher preparation programs. Of course, few teachers are joining the ranks of educators to become financially rich, so what is it about teaching that attracts new candidates and helps retain valuable veterans? Certainly teachers enjoy their colleagues, and it is satisfying to work with like-minded people who have the same drive to make the world a better place through education; but, it is the students who bring us outright joy in our most-important work. Results from this study indicate that school districts and colleges might benefit from marketing and messaging related to the sheer joy working with young people can bring in order to reverse the simultaneously disastrous trends of growing teacher attrition and shrinking program enrollment.

Examining teaching job satisfaction might not be adequate in finding solutions to a dwindling workforce. Future research examining theoretical and semantic relationships between the constructs satisfaction, happiness, and joy might benefit education stakeholders at all levels by clarifying what teachers find attractive about their work, and what encourages them to persist, or even thrive. Satisfaction (and dissatisfaction) has long been the focus of efforts to retain or attract teachers, but perhaps it is time for this focus to shift. Practices of school districts and college teacher preparation programs that have successfully retained and recruited candidates should also be identified and emulated in order to reverse the crisis that our country is now facing. The present study additionally warrants further comparisons of what teachers in a variety of disciplines find attractive about teaching.

References

Chalghaf, N., Guelmami, N., Slimani, M., Del Puente, G., Re, T. S., Zerbetto, R., ... Bragazzi, N. L. (2019). Development and preliminary validation of the “teacher of physical education burnout inventory” (TPEBI) in Arabic language: Insights for sports and occupational psychology. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 456. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00456

Clarke, R., & Keating, W. F. (1995). *A fresh look at teacher job satisfaction.* National Council of States on Inservice Education. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED391795.pdf

Gliem, J. A., & Gliem, R. R. (2003). Calculating, interpreting, and reporting Cronbach’s alpha Reliability coefficient for Likert-type scales. *Scholarworks.iupui.edu*. Retrieved February 28, 2023, from https://hdl.handle.net/1805/344

Hawkins, B. (2022, September 15). Yes, there's a shortage of special education teachers. and that's nothing new. *The 74*. Retrieved from https://www.the74million.org/article/yes-theres-a-shortage-of-special-education-teachers-and-thats-nothing- new/

Hill, R. (1998). What sample size is “enough” in internet survey research. *Interpersonal computing and technology: An electronic journal for the 21st century, 6*(3-4), 1-12.

Isaac, S., & Michael, W. B. (1995). *Handbook in research and evaluation: Educational and industrial testing services.* San Diego, CA.

Krotoszynski, R. J., Jr. (2021, May 26). Laws against teaching critical race theory in college are unconstitutional. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/26/laws-against-teaching-critical-race-theory-college-are-unconstitutional/

Natanson, H. (2022, August 4). ‘Never seen it this bad’: America faces catastrophic teacher shortage. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/08/03/school-teacher-shortage//

Nguyen, T. (n.d.). *US Teacher Shortage*. https://teachershortages.com/

Partelow, L. (2019). What to make of declining enrollment in teacher preparation programs. (2019, December 3). *Center for American Progress*. Retrieved from https://www.americanprogress.org/article/make-declining-enrollment-teacher- preparation-programs/

Pepe, A. (2011). *Measuring teacher job satisfaction: A quantitative empirical tool*. Paper presented at the 8th International Conference of European Research Network About Parents in Education, Milano, Italy.

Pepe, A., Addimando, L., & Veronese, G. (2017). Measuring teacher job satisfaction: Assessing invariance in the teacher job satisfaction scale (TJSS) across six countries. *Europe's journal of psychology, 13*(3), 396. https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v13i3.1389

Schmidt, G. L. (1976). Job satisfaction among secondary school administrators. *Educational administration quarterly, 12*(2), 68-86. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013131X7601200206

Syptak, J. M., Marsland, D. W., & Ulmer, D. (1999). Job satisfaction: Putting theory into practice. *Family practice management, 6*(9), 26. Retrieved from https://www.aafp.org/pubs/fpm/issues/1999/1000/p26.html

Walsh, M. (2021, September 21). If critical race theory is banned, are teachers protected by the First amendment? *Education Week.* Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/does-academic-freedom-shield-teachers-as-states-take-aim-at-critical-race-theory/2021/06

Will, M. (2022, March 29). Fewer people are getting teacher degrees. Prep programs sound the alarm. *Education Week.* Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/fewer-people-are-getting-teacher-degrees-prep-programs-sound-the-alarm/2022/03

Yalin-Ucar, M., & Bagatarhan, T. (2022). The teacher job satisfaction scale – Turkish form: Psychometric properties and construct validity. *International Online Journal of Educational Sciences, 14*(4), 945-956. Retrieved from https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=f8c2e130-80f7-4f09-81b4-1e9c0ad6a4b5%40redis

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance and support I have received from my Central State University colleagues while writing this article, and in particular, the help with proofreading and editing from Professor Katrina Swinehart Held, who has been selfless with her time even though she is in the midst of fulfilling her own PhD requirements at time of writing.

Appendix

Items from Pepe's TJSS

1. Please rate the quality of your relations with coworkers.
2. Please rate the extent to which your coworkers encourage and support you in our work.
3. Please rate your level of overall satisfaction with your coworkers.
4. Please rate the extent to which students act in a self-disciplined manner.
5. Please rate your satisfaction with the behavior or students in your school.
6. Please rate your overall level of satisfaction with student discipline in your school.
7. Please rate the degree of interest shown by parents in the education of their children.
8. Please rate the extent to which parents are supportive of the school and its programs.
9. Please rate your overall level of satisfaction with parents of students where you work.