

# School principals growing positive affect and sustaining overall satisfaction with life contributes to engaging positively with school community

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## **General Description**

Over the last decade there has been a focus to improve student attainment levels and be inclusive of all students, especially our most disadvantaged. This improvement can be seen to occur through enhancing leadership capacity (Riley & Mulford, 2007), and opportunity, in order to improve outcomes. Simultaneously a cacophony of educational leaders have described issues with job complexity and difficulty sustaining personal well-being (Devos, Bouckenooghe, Engels, Hutton & Aelterman, 2007; Fullan, 2009, Lacey, 2007, Phillips & Sen, 2011) leading to shortages as people choose not to undertake leadership roles (Norton, 2015). Research has shown that principals are unlikely to confide in a college if they are having issues with sustaining their well-being (Lacey, 2007; Carter, 2016), and this can lead to serious stress (Riley, 2013; 2015) affecting job performance and overall satisfaction with life (De Nobile & McCormick, 2010). This concern has been voiced both nationally and internationally (Devos, et al., 2007; Engels, Hutton, Devos, Bouckenooghe, & Aelterman, 2008; Riley, 2015). In 2010, Hurrell raised the issue that researchers still have much to learn about well-being in the workplace and there is minimal research into how experienced educational leaders sustain their well-being (Carter, 2016). This paper contributes to this research gap.

Providing a concise definition for well-being is a complex pursuit with numerous meanings available. Therefore, it is pertinent to conceptually clarify the definition of well-being used in

this study which is based on Diener's (2009) work. The definition consists of three components and two domains, all of which involve *cognitive appraisal*:

- 1) life satisfaction, where one has cognitively appraised that one's life was good;
- 2) high levels of pleasant emotions; and
- 3) relatively low levels of negative moods.

Life satisfaction is considered a cognitive domain as it is based on evaluative beliefs and attitudes about one's life, where as positive affect and negative affect comprise the affective domain (Diener, 2009).

People's views and definitions are personal and dependent upon how each individual evaluates their life and includes what lay people call happiness, peace, fulfilment, and life satisfaction (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003, p. 403).

Given that some, not all principals were reporting they were experiencing issues with maintaining their SWB (Lacey, 2007; Riley, 2013; 2015), the focus question became: How do principals maintain their SWB? In considering this question four conceptual questions surfaced:

1. How do principals conceptualise SWB?
2. What were the factors that impact upon SWB?
3. What strategies or processes are utilised to maintain SWB?
4. What are the dynamics of the interplay between how principals conceptualise their role, perform their work and maintain their SWB?

(Carter, 2016)

The main purpose of this study was to understand from the perspectives of principals, their experiences and how they maintained SWB to competently perform their role (i.e., lead a quality school) and in so doing understand those factors, which influence school leaders' SWB and the various approaches used by the participants to maintain their SWB. Specific key aims that directed the study were:

- To reveal insights into how experienced principals maintained SWB.
- To identify potential mechanisms or strategies for maintaining SWB.

This paper illustrates a framework in action detailing how participants sought to grow positive affect and sustaining overall satisfaction with life in a manner that helped them to engage positively with the school community.

## **Methodology**

A case study approach was employed for this research with the phenomenon being *school principals' Subjective Well-Being*. This social inquiry method developed Stake (1978) was selected as “it provides a unique example of people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by representing them with abstract theories or principles” (Cohen et al., 2004, p. 181).

Stake makes clear that case study is useful in adding to humanistic understandings and that it has been used as a method of preliminary theory development. According to Stake, cases are an integrated system that is functioning, specific, yet complex with boundaries and working parts. Stake suggests using a flexible design which enables researchers to formulate changes even after they progress from design to research. Maxwell's (2009) *An Interactive Model of Research Design*, allowed me to do this in a way that was both procedural and organised, yet flexible. This model consists of five interactive components: method (i.e., case study); goals; conceptual framework; research questions; and validity.

The voluntary participants were drawn from Queensland, Australia in response to an email asking for competent experienced Principals able to maintain their SWB to participate in a study. Several of the participants had international experience as teachers and had been principals for at least eight years in two or more contexts, with four from socially disadvantaged communities.

Various types of data collection were utilised, primarily semi-structured interviews, and surveys, observations recorded in a researcher journal, and diagrams. All individual interviews were recorded, transcribed and offered back to participants for comment to confirm that written interpretations of data were true to intent.

Analysis of the data was undertaken at several levels. The first of these was an overview scan of all data and documentation of initial impressions viewed in connection with journal entries. Transcripts were coded, scripts individually analysed and themes extracted. The themes were

written into principal's lived experiences illustrated with participant quotes and presented back to participants for validation. The data set was then analysed as a whole.

With the principals' stories complete it was then possible to uncover the essence of the phenomenon and answer the research question. An explanatory framework was developed from the findings as a reflective tool for principals and education systems as they seek to understand ways to sustain Subjective Well-Being in a complex and ever changing educational environment.

### **Expected Outcomes/ Results**

Findings reiterated three concepts already in the literature: the definition of SWB; lack of sleep impacts cognition and SWB; and a balance point for SWB. This study has significance in relation to theoretical knowledge with two main contributions:

1. a process for maintaining SWB, captured in the explanatory framework; and
2. tacit knowing informs evaluations linked to SWB.

Principals experienced moments and either consciously or subconsciously acknowledged impactors to their SWB. The way principals experienced each moment depended upon the complexities involved, and their previous knowledge and experience of similar type events. The evaluation of the moment was informed by their tacit knowing and their mindset (i.e., management mindset; or control and influence mindset). The principals responded to the moment recognising the balance of their SWB and showed agency in endeavouring to maintain their individual levels of SWB through the utilisation of on-going evaluation and maintenance processes: FIT; ATER; and MegaPositioning.

The study data revealed that the Principals had developed tacit knowing, a way of working to grow positive affect and sustain overall satisfaction with life, so that they could feel better and be more competent at their job of making a positive difference in the lives of all students. Numerous structural, and individual level ways of working empowered leaders to engage with complex issues like inclusion-exclusion of religion practices (e.g., impact of Ramadan in a mainstream Christian schools) in a way that both promoted their quality of life, and the wellbeing of students and staff. Participants felt this way of working should be captured (i.e., the explanatory framework), and shared through professional development.

Principals who have maintained their own SWB can come from a position of strength to lead a school community and engage enthusiastically and passionately in their advocacy for others to enable quality education for all students.

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