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An investigation into educational employee practices for finding and maintaining a sense of meaning in their work

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO EDUCATIONAL EMPLOYEE

PRACTICES FOR FINDING AND MAINTAINING

A SENSE OF MEANING IN WORK

A Research Project

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graziadio Business School

Pepperdine University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

In

Organization Development

by

Elizabeth P. Taylor

August 2020

This research project, completed by

ELIZABETH P. TAYLOR

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been

submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio Business School in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Date: August 2020

Faculty Committee

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Abstract

This mixed method study examined how educational employees in 3 public school districts in southeast Michigan make and/or create a sense of meaning in their work and sought to understand how relationships influence employee's sense of meaningfulness. Quantitative data collection came from a survey combining the Job Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ) and the Work and Meaning Index (WAMI). 266 employees completed the survey. Qualitative data collection included interviewing 17 employees with representation from each role category and each school district. This study found personnel working in the field of education in southeast Michigan find their work highly meaningful; and that relationships are a rudimentary factor, playing a significant role in how educational staff make meaning in their work. Additionally, findings have valuable implications for education systems informing approaches for staff engagement and retention, employee performance, internal organizational learning and building cultures of strong inter-personal and professional feedback.

Keywords: sensemaking, relationships, education, employee performance

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Public education has long been scrutinized, under-funded, and under fire. As of 2019, the rates of teacher burnout and turnover have skyrocketed as educators and administrators flee the field for a less stressful and pressure filled vocation. As employees in a 'helping profession,' educational personnel are not in it for the money. As a field known for low pay but high importance, understanding what drives employees to remain in education is not only critical to ensuring successful outcomes for children and our nation's future generations but for also ensuring the continuation of public education itself.

With innumerable issues perpetually plaguing public education, opportunity is ripe for creating substantially improved outcomes for children when complexity within a system is understood and systemic approaches to aligning components are used. An oft-used reactive approach to a singular problem keeps systems recycling through incomplete and maligned solutions. The greatest asset within any organization is always its people, and education is no different. Education has long focused on specific pockets (e.g., special or early childhood educators), inadequately addressing the wider view of how all the parts relate and influence one another. The present study seeks to understand how all employees in education keep up their morale, stay engaged, and continue to impact and influence children's lives despite the field's challenges. By studying the broader employee experience from secretarial, custodial, administrative, operations, instructional, and therapeutic personnel, the present study aims to understand complex, intra-personal to whole system components in order to offer systemic approaches for effective, sustainable change in education.

Introduction

Public education is a right for all children in America afforded under the United States Constitution. The United States Equal Educational Opportunities Act "Declares it to be the policy of the United States that all children enrolled in public schools are entitled to equal educational opportunity without regard to race, color, sex, or national origin" (House Bill 40, 1973). Chronic tensions in American public education include equal access due to race, ethnic background, religion, gender, ability, gender, socio-economic status, citizenship and non-citizenship. There is little doubt that for most American families, educating their children is a foundational and significant right.

Participating in the educational process as an employee can therefore be remarkably meaningful due to the importance of this right. But the role livelihood plays in a person's life varies widely. For some, they work simply to earn a paycheck. For others, their work is in pursuit of a sense of status, where they can achieve success, promotion, and the opportunity to prove themselves (2016 Workforce Purpose Index). For others still, work gives their lives a sense of meaning and contributes to a positive sense of identity and community.

This project is framed through a systems-lens, assuming greater opportunities for leveraging effective and sustainable change by understanding how individuals across systems inter-connect. Therefore, it focuses its attention on all employees in education, not simply the more traditionally studied role of teachers. It may be easy to see how a teacher cannot exist in isolation from the bus driver who brings the children, or the secretary who enrolls them. In other words, how employees are interrelated is often not visible. This study offers an exciting opportunity to understand what makes work meaningful across a school district and how employee relationships inform that meaning.

The literature related to meaningful work, calling, job crafting, employee engagement, performance, purpose, high quality connections, and relationships offers guidance in this endeavor. To contextualize this study in the research, a literature review surrounding the intersection of these concepts was performed. Meaningful work and job crafting are informative domains for understanding the employee experience and were the primary subjects for review. Subsequent tangential areas of study were examined as extensions of these primary targets as a way of zeroing in on the wholeness of an employee's experience.

Meaningful Work

Meaningful work can contribute positively to organizational culture, outcomes, engagement, and employee wellbeing, among others. One could argue that educational systems whose employees have heightened sense of meaningful work would therefore have a positive impact on youth within that school district and community. Albrecht (2015) found "employees who experience their work as meaningful can help organizations achieve optimum and sustainable individual, team and organizational outcomes" (p. Abstract). Fairlie (2011) found correlations with multiple organizational outcomes, including engagement, which are presented further in Chapter 2 (p. 518). The clear relationship between work meaningfulness and positive organizational outcomes is worthy of further examination.

Meaningful work can be found at the intersection between its two parts: the individual (i.e., behavior and psychology of the person creating the meaning) and the work itself. Hackman and Oldman (1980) examined how one might approach work tasks

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and the work environments through what they called Work Redesign. However, the focus of this study lies in the people and relationships versus the work itself.

Job Crafting

Since meaningful work optimizes organizational outcomes, various mechanisms used in the workplace to create and/or maintain work meaningfulness have been studied. One of the most widely recognized and researched of those is job crafting. In studying how employees make meaning out of their work, leading researchers Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) discovered a concept they called job crafting. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) define job crafting as the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work. They found employees will consciously or unconsciously change (or craft) the way they do their work and categorized them in three ways: a) the way they think about their jobs (cognitive), b) change their tasks in some way (task crafting), or c) adapt whom or how they interact with others (relational).

From the foundation of understanding what job crafting is and how it works, a process for formal job crafting has since been developed (Berg, Dutton, Wrzesniewski, & Baker, 2013). Regardless of whether job crafting as a process is used in an organization, it may appear this way: A potential employee sees a job description, applies, and is hired based on the job as outlined. As the employee seeks to understand the nature of the work, the organization, its people, and its culture, she/he will adopt their own way of doing the work. Thus, examining (conscious and unconscious) job crafting in public school systems in southeast Michigan offers a rich opportunity for understanding the intersection of how organizational structures, processes, and designs leverage job crafting and meaningful work in improving the systems. One of the foci in the present study is to

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understand how job crafting can help us understand how employees in education find and maintain meaningful work through this mechanism.

High-Quality Connections (HQC) and High-Quality Relationships (HQR)

Digging into job crafting and meaningful work further quickly reveals the power of relationships to also shape the course of an organization. Indeed, no work is meaningful without knowing it impacts others in some way. The practice of job crafting, and in particular relational job crafting, wherein employees change who they interact with and how, creates a greater sense of meaning in one's work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). According to Dutton and Heaphy (2003), human connections in organizations are vital. Whether these connections form as part of long-term relationships or brief encounters, human interactions leave indelible traces on the individuals involved. Organizations depend on individuals to interact and form connections to help accomplish the work of the organization. Thus, the quality of those connections influences how organizations operate (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). The present study investigates this complex and rich intersection of scholarship between meaningful work, job crafting, HQCs, and HQRs.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how educational employees in southeast Michigan discover and maintain a sense of meaning in their work. In particular, it seeks to understand how relationships impact an employee's sense of meaning in their work through the following four research questions:

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1. What makes work meaningful for educational employees in southeast Michigan?

2. What behaviors and thought patterns contribute to work meaningfulness?

3. What role do other people and relationships play in finding work meaningfulness?

4. What is the result of having meaningful work?

Chapter 2 begins by presenting a review of existing literature on meaningful work, the role of purpose and calling in work, job crafting, and of quality connections and relationships. Chapter 3 presents the research design used for this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings. In Chapter 5, the project summary, conclusions, and recommendations are given. Study limitations and suggestions for further research are also given.

Since the purpose of the study is to examine how educational employees find and/or maintain meaning in their work, and in particular what the role of interpersonal relationships is in creating that meaning, the primary subjects are educational employees' system-wide working for large public-school districts in southeast Michigan. The critical difference in this project from others like it is the inclusion of participants employed in various roles within and across school districts (e.g., administrators, administrative assistants, secretaries, operations, technology and business department staff, teachers, teaching assistants, and other related educational service staff). Since I have access to and experience with many educational institutions and want to utilize these research findings to improve the lives of generations to come by maximizing the passion, expertise, and potential in all employees, investigating a multitude of roles and levels within the educational systems was critical to the present study.

Study Implications

  All employee perspectives, experiences, knowledge, and skills contribute to the successes or challenges of a school district. This has a direct impact on the lives of the students and families they serve. This project in its entirety is conducted for the purpose of illuminating how public-school systems might improve outcomes for our youth through engaging employees with greater intention and evidence-based practice. By linking the research in this field of study, the operating supposition of this project is that by maximizing the meaningfulness of educational employee's work experience, we yield greater opportunities for improving school district (and student) outcomes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to understand how educational employees in southeast Michigan discover and maintain a sense of meaning in their work. In particular, it seeks to understand how relationships influence their work's meaning. This chapter reviews the pertaining research literature to contextualize the study's relevance.

This chapter starts with a brief overview of several related, overarching concepts including engagement, meaningful work, and calling. Tangential and highly relevant concepts are also reviewed, including job crafting (as a primary vehicle for cultivating meaningful work) and high-quality connections which fortify themselves into high quality relationships. Both topics are paramount to cultivating deeply meaningful work.

Meaningful Work

As a 'helping profession', most employees do not enter education for the money. Dunn (2015) reported that according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, "teacher salaries, on average, are only 60% of the salaries for other college-educated workers in the United States" (p. 85). This begs the question: why is it that more employees do not leave the field? Dunn (2015) found teachers rate things such as "desire for autonomy in their curriculum, more and better resources, respect for their profession and time, less bureaucracy and paperwork and more administrative support" (p. 86) over wanting larger salaries. The literature on meaningful work investigates several of these alternative reasons for remaining in the field, despite its challenges and lower wages. More meaningful work, not more pay necessarily, leads to greater ease with recruiting and retention of teachers (Dunn, 2015, p. 86).

Fairlie (2011) found meaningful work leads to a multitude of beneficial outcomes and correlations with employee engagement as a strategic leverage point for employers. Compared to other work characteristics, meaningful work "had the strongest relationships with engagement and most other employee outcomes" (Fairlie, 2011, p. 508). This has great implications for an entire organization and, in particular, for human resources. Fairlie (2011) suggests organizations:

- Ensure opportunities for meaningful work are clearly communicated and understood within organizations.

- Create programs to develop deeper social connections among employees and clients; this could lead to several outcomes including a more thorough understanding of individual employee impacts.

- Support employees in changing their mindsets about their jobs. Personality traits and cognitive styles may predispose employees to perceiving higher or lower levels of meaning for work.

- Develop training programs to assist managers in undertaking models of human meaning that underline meaningful work.

- Revive career development programs to better assist employees in achieving their long-term career goals within their current organization.

- Assist managers and direct reports in their collaborative efforts to redesign jobs. For example, job crafting and brainstorming techniques could be employed to append job descriptions and tasks and responsibilities that provide meaningful work as well as serve organizational strategy.

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Aside from being related to engagement, meaningful work has been studied in a variety of other ways. This can be helpful to understand in contextualizing why meaningful work is an asset to organizations. Meaningful work is defined by Von Devivere (2018) as "living meaning, values, purpose and compassion in workplaces" (pp. 1-6). Other researchers have debated the definition (Albrecht, 2015; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzeniewski, 2010), ways of measuring it (Lopez & Ramos, 2017; Steger, Dik, Duffy, 2012), and its implications (Bendassolli & Tateo, 2018; Fairlie, 2011; Petrou, Bakker, & den Heuvel, 2017; Van Wingerden & Van der Stoep, 2017). Meaningful work has also been studied as it relates to organizational culture (Van Wingerden & Van der Stoep, 2017), leadership behaviors (Chen, Wang, & Lee, 2017), and employee engagement (Albrecht, 2013). Van Wingerden and Van der Stoep (2017) found:

Research in the field of work and organizational psychology increasingly highlights the importance of meaningful work… Meaningful work and performance are related in multiple ways...while makes the cultivation of meaningful work an important task for both management and Human Resources. HR could stimulate the perceptions of meaningful work, for example, by deliberately influencing how employees perceive their work and how the objectives of their work connect to their intrinsic values and beliefs. (p. 8)

Not only is meaningful work important to individuals, it is important to entire systems. According to Albrecht (2015):

Organizations need to address and understand the deeper needs of employees in order to attract them, retain them, and keep them motivated, engaged, and performing. Employees who experience their work as meaningful can help

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organizations achieve optimum and sustainable individual, team and

organizational outcomes. (Abstract)

These studies indicate that an examination of meaningful work in education could help

understand individual and organizational implications to increase engagement and

leadership.

Calling

If their work in education is not focused on financial gains, are employees in

education responding to an intrinsic calling? As defined in the literature, calling is "a

consuming, meaningful passion people experience toward a domain" (Dobrow & Tosti-

Kharas, 2011, p. 1001). Indeed, Hirschi (2012) found correlations with how calling

increases engagement: "callings have positive outcomes because they provide a sense of

meaningfulness and identity at work" (p. Abstract).

Calling at work as a tool for meaningful work was investigated by Hirschi (2012).

Hirschi (2012) found callings positively impact one's identity at work, increase

engagement, and provide a sense of meaningfulness at work. Callings allow people to

more often experience work engagement, or vigor, dedication, and absorption at work.

By following a calling into education, employees are likely to have greater work

engagement and positively impact their school districts.

Another intersection in the literature pertaining to the present study links calling

to job crafting. Berg, Grant, and Johnson (2010) point to an inverse relationship between

job crafting and calling. In employees with unanswered callings, they may work to shape

"the task boundaries of the job, the relationship boundaries of the job, or both"

(Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). Berg et al. (2010) reveal "three types of job

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crafting techniques... participants describe using to create opportunities for pursuing their unanswered callings; task emphasizing, job expanding and role reframing" (p. 973). In search for meaningful work, or in answering a personal calling, workers will make changes, consciously or unconsciously (i.e., job craft), to have those needs met.

Job Crafting

Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) created a basis for job crafting theory, defining it as "shaping the task boundaries of the job, either physically or cognitively, the relationship boundaries of the job, or both" (p. 2). In the nearly two decades since job crafting originated in the literature, many scholars have focused on its definition (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2008; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), measurement (Slemp, Kern, & Vella-Brodrick, 2013; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012), implications (Petrou, Bakker, & den Heuvel, 2017; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), relationship to callings (Berg, Grand, & Johnson, 2010), and meaningful work (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Van Wingerden & Van der Stoep, 2017). These studies indicate the value in using job crafting to create greater meaning; they utilize an employee's sense of calling to allow them to be more engaged at work.

The review of literature on job crafting focused primarily on Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001). Job crafting is neither good nor bad for an organization, but rather a function of human nature. Humans are social creatures with needs. Those needs can motivate a desire to make their job more meaningful, which can, in turn, also affect their sense of identity. These changes can impact the social nature of an organization through the changed task or relationship configurations.

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Perceived opportunities for job crafting come from two major sources including the level and form of task interdependence and the degree to which an organization's monitoring systems imply the discretion to do so (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 183). Additionally, there are three ways employees might go about shaping their jobs to create more meaning:

1. Task crafting - changing task boundaries.
    a. "Employees achieve this by changing the number, scope, or type of job tasks done at work" (p. 185).
2. Relational crafting - changing relational boundaries.
    a. "Changing either the quality or amount of interaction with others at work, or both" (p. 185).
3. Cognitive crafting - changing cognitive task boundaries.
    a. This can "take many forms, but one likely involves employees' altering how they parse the job – viewing it either as a set of discrete work tasks or as an integrated whole" (p.185).

Delving more deeply into how job crafting creates more meaning, Berg et al. (2007) provide practical applications in their research, not only outlining the three types of job crafting but also extending earlier explanations, discussing job crafting from an organizational systems lens. Traditional job redesign was a top-down process; job crafting enables the employee to design from the bottom-up. Berg et al. (2008) emphasize "job crafting theory does not devalue the importance of job designs assigned by managers; it simply values the opportunities employees have to change them" (p. 5). In that way, they advocate for job crafting on an organizational level: "job crafting, when

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enacted in the proper manner and context, can have a positive influence on job crafters and their organizations" (Berg et al., 2008, p. 7). Not only can employees work at things they value, need, and prefer, but they also create valuable connections with others as social beings.

Research around job crafting grew substantially since its origination. Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski (2010) explore potential challenges to, and elaborate on, job crafting theory. Paraskevas, Bakker, and den Heuvel (2017) compare job crafting with leisure crafting; they make similar connections to engagement and meaning making in leisure crafting. Hakanen, Seppala, and Peeters (2017) cite job crafting as having the ability to buffer employees from the negative impacts of work demands. Scholars have developed job crafting measurement tools to assist in measuring the ways and degrees to which employees job craft. Tims, Baker, and Derks (2011) share the development and validation of the job crafting scale and Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2012) examine a measurement technique dubbed the Job Crafting Questionnaire to measure "the extent to which employees engage in job crafting" (p. 145). Since job crafting includes three domains of potential adaptation of the work, the JCQ looks at factors related to those. These include task crafting, relational crafting, and cognitive crafting.

Finding its usefulness and validity, job crafting proliferated into the creation of The Job Crafting Exercise (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013). This tool "helps people identify opportunities to craft their jobs to better suit their motives, strengths, and passions" (Berg et al., 2013, p. 3). Berg et al. (2013) illustrate detailed examples of employees engaging in the exercise and offer visuals to reinforce the process. They outline several future directions for investigation in the form of questions:

- Are certain personality traits associated with specific forms of crafting (p. 21)?

- Are there particular managerial behaviors or group dynamics or practices that foster beneficial job crafting (pp. 21-22)?

- Can job crafting be contagious, meaning that when one-person job crafts it can set off a chain as others in the same network also engage in crafting (p. 22)??

- What is the role of organizational culture in enabling or constraining job crafting?

- Are there job crafting trajectories/patterns in organizational job crafting (p. 22)?

These suggestions informed the present study and the direction for useful, relevant action research in helping to understand the experience of employees in education and their potential use of job crafting.

Relational Job Crafting through High-Quality Connections (HRCs) & High-Quality Relationships (HQRs)

Employees use their experiences to job craft and proactively create greater meaning in their work (e.g., changing the tasks they do, cognitively restructuring the way they think of their work, relying on their relationships to impact how they conceptualize and carry out their work) (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Relational job crafting is of particular importance to the present study given the interdependent nature of employee roles. Employees in education do not work in isolation, but rather are required to interact with others to varying degrees. For that reason, a further literature review was done into relational job crafting.

Researchers studying relational job crafting isolated an important element to interpersonal dynamics in the workplace. High-Quality Connections (HRCs) "are short-term, dyadic interactions that are positive in terms of the subjective experience of the

connected individuals and the structural features of the connection" (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011, p. 385). Stephens et al. (2012) expound upon relational job crafting theory by "identifying cognitive, emotional and behavior mechanisms and aspects of the context that build and strengthen HQCs in organizations" (p. 1). Dutton and Heaphy (2003) give historical perspective on relational studies and job design, emphasizing the critical nature of High-Quality Relationships (HQR) on an organization. They specify the differences between positive and negative HQR. Positive HQRs impacts whether an employee flourishes or flounders and correlates the individual's experience with its organizational implications. They term positive HQCs as life-giving (e.g., allowing for the transfer of vital nutrients) and negative HQC as life-depleting (e.g., damaged connective tissue) (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003).

Summary

The literature review helped to define meaningful work, calling, and job crafting and how they overlap. While some of the literature reviewed focused on measurement or implications for organizations, others sought to understand the phenomena, leaving application to the reader. Research illustrates interest in understanding the complex relationship between an individual's needs, job design, organizational culture, management styles, work identity, and more. Dutton and Heaphy (2013) studied one aspect of job crafting (relational job crafting) in an effort to dissect and understand how employees impact one another, positively or negatively, at work. The literature points to the significant role meaningful work plays in improving individual and organizational outcomes. The job crafting literature points to useful mechanisms employees can utilize

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to improve a sense of meaning in their work. The literature on HQRs and HQCs points even further to how relational variables contribute.

Given the interdependence of employees within education systems, this project sought to understand the ways people and relationships impact an employee's ability to create and maintain a sense of meaningful work.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study focused on how educational employees in southeast Michigan discover and maintain a sense of meaning in their work. In particular, it sought to understand how relationships influence their work's meaning. The implications of this study may be impactful for educational systems to consider in identifying leverage points for greater organizational impact through understanding how their employees make meaning at work, including how job crafting may be involved.

This chapter presents the research design used in this project. It includes an explanation of the subjects sampled, the measurement tools used, information about the data analysis processes, and an explanation of the steps taken to protect human subjects.

Research Design

The research for this project was conducted using a mixed method approach in the form of an anonymous, online survey and face to face interviews. This design approach was chosen due to the "strength of drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research and minimizing the limitations of both approaches" (Creswell, 2014, p. 218). Using a mixed method approach allowed me "to have a more complete understanding" (Creswell, 2014, p. 218) of the research questions. In other words, utilizing a mixed method approach enabled me to compare different perspectives drawn from quantitative and qualitative data with the expected outcome of merging the two databases to show how the data converges or diverges (Creswell, 2014, p. 231).

Quantitative data were gathered using an anonymous, online survey. The survey asked respondents to categorize their employee role in one of three ways (instructional,

administrative, or non-instructional), to provide their names if they were willing to be interviewed, and to rate 25 questions on a Likert scale. The 25 questions consisted of two validated measurement instruments: the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) (Appendix A) and the Job Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ) (Appendix B). The WAMI asked respondents 10 questions related to their sense of work meaningfulness, which they rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = Absolutely Untrue to 5 = Absolutely True. The Job Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ) consisted of 15 questions regarding the extent to which the respondent engaged in job crafting behaviors and to rate those on a scale of 1 = Hardy Ever to 6 = Very Often. The anonymous survey was sent to all employees in three school districts in southeast Michigan with an invitation to participate online.

Qualitative data were collected through in-person, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data collection was exploratory in nature, seeking greater insights related to how educational employees make and maintain meaning (using the WAMI to guide question generation), what thoughts and behaviors related to their jobs do they utilize in finding meaning (JCQ used to generate questions), and how relationships impacted this.

Research Sample and Setting

I am an education employee and therefore took care in "negotiating the research relationships" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 90). Maxwell (2005) states "the relationships that you create with participants in your study (and also with others, sometimes called 'gatekeepers' who can facilitate or interfere with your study) are in essential part of your methods, and how you initiate these relationships is a key design decision" (p. 90). Maxwell (2005) goes on to state, "the relationship you have with any participant in your

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study is a complex and changing entity… the researcher is the instrument of the research and the research relationships are the means by which the research gets done" (p. 91)

In consideration of these factors, I chose one domain of education (public) and geographical region (southeast Michigan) with relative access to employees given my connections in the area. Having representation from the entire employee body (administrators, instructional, and non-instructional staff) was paramount to gathering systems-wide data relevant to the research questions. Emphasis was placed on garnering participation from all three roles and from all three distinct districts. To reduce researcher interference through current relationships with participants, the survey was sent to all employees, not a select few. For the purposes of this study, educational employees are those employed by public school districts for wages or salary in any position. For purposes of research relationships, it should be stated that I am employed by a regional education service agency (RESA) which provides support to local school districts county-wide. Michigan has 56 RESAs operating state-wide. Access through the RESA enabled a greater breadth of participation

To protect the anonymity of individual participants, names of districts and interviewees are confidential. Due to my status as an educational employee, district superintendent approval was obtained with permission to send the survey and was sent to all employees. This reduced personal bias in analyzing the data. All participants were 18 years of age or older, employed by a public-school district, and volunteers in this study. The survey was sent via email to approximately 1,000 potential research participants between three participating school districts. Survey respondents were given a box to check indicating their interest in being interviewed subsequently. With more than 30

interview volunteers and a recommended range of 15-17 interviews for the scope of this project, I prioritized contacting interviewees which would yield the greatest diversity of roles across the 3-school district. This allowed me to maximize sample rigor.

To reduce setting influences on results, one-on-one interviews were conducted at a location of the interviewee's choosing, often at coffee shops or within the employee's job site. When employees chose off-site interviews, I extended appreciation to interviewees by providing a beverage. As Maxwell (2005) states "some acknowledgement of your appreciation is always appropriate" (p. 94). Each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviewees were notified in advance that for data analysis purposes the Otter.ai App would be used to record and transcribe the interview and that participation was voluntary. Prior to commencing all interviews, these protocols were reviewed, and verbal consent was granted.

Measurements

Aside from choosing one of three employee role categories, survey questions consisted of two validated measurement instruments including the WAMI and the JCQ. 10 semi-structured interview questions were researcher-generated using the WAMI and JCQ, both validated tools, as springboards for further investigation.

Data Analysis

A mixed-methods research design was selected "because of its strength of drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research and minimizing the limitations of both approaches" (Cresswell, 2014, p. 218). With this approach, "the researcher collects

qualitative and quantitative data, analyzes them separately, and then compares the results to see if the findings confirm or disconfirm each other" (Creswell, 2014, p. 219). Using the validated WAMI and the JCQ, I ensured consistent measurement results. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to "locate and obtain information from a small sample but to gather extensive information from this sample, whereas, in quantitative research a large N is needed in order to conduct meaningful statistical tests" (Creswell, 2014, p. 222).

Protection of human subjects was ensured by using an anonymous survey instrument and by labeling interviewee candidates into participant identification codes (PID). One handwritten list with interviewee names and PID numbers was used and kept in a safe in my home.

Qualitative data was collected from interviews focusing on a deeper exploration of the employee's experiences of making and sustaining work meaningfulness and how their personal and/or professional relationships factor into that meaning (Appendix C). This project used a four-step process of data analysis. First, nearly 700 pages of interview transcripts were reviewed. In a second review of the transcripts, a summary of themes was gathered for each transcript, with examples and detailed notes on each person's example of the theme. In comparing the 17 interviewee data sheets, five themes emerged. Finally, any examples of each theme were collected on a participant example sheet.

Themes were reviewed for inter-rater reliability over several phases. First, the project advisor read theme descriptions and examples and discussed the initial data themes with me. Various iterations honed the codes before another colleague was given

a transcript and the second edition of the code book and asked to code the interview using the codes. Inter-rater reliability was 78% for interview themes and sub-themes.

Interview transcripts were examined and coded across the total sample as well as within each of the three categories of staff. Finally, using data transformation (Creswell, 2014,), qualitative themes were counted to form quantitative measures and finally a comparison of the two examined confirmation variables versus disconfirmation results.

Summary

This chapter presented this study's research design, an explanation of the subjects sampled and setting, the measurement tools used, information about data analysis, and what steps were taken to protect the human subjects involved. Chapter 4 presents those findings.

Chapter 4: Results

This study examined how educational employees in southeast Michigan discover and/or maintain a sense of meaning in their work. Specifically, this project looks at what makes work meaningful for educational employees, what actions or thought patterns contribute to work meaningfulness, what role do other people and relationships play in finding work meaningfulness, and what is the result of having meaningful work?

This chapter presents the findings gathered from the mixed-methods approach. Section one presents quantitative data results from the survey that included the WAMI and the JCQ. The next section presents qualitative data gathered during face-to-face interviews. The five themes that emerged about how educational employees make or maintain a sense of meaning in their work are discussed.

Sample Quantitative Results

The survey was sent to nearly 1,000 educational employees in three public school districts in southeast Michigan and received 265 responses. 31 volunteered to be interviewed by providing their name and email. Respondents chose one of three job categories representing their role within their school district. The jobs across the three school districts generally aligned with their union units. The categories were Administrative, Instructional and Non-instructional employees. Examples of sample roles within the three categories are described further in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample Roles within each Category

Non-instructional examples	Custodial or maintenance/operations, transportation, administrative assistant, media specialist, secretaries, IT techs, teaching assistants
Instructional examples	Teachers, teacher consultant, school nurse, occupational/physical/speech therapists, psychologists
Administrative examples	Any employee who oversees other staff, programs or departments such as supervisor, superintendent, principal. Unusually non-union employees.

Table 2 demonstrates the total sample size by employee job category. The results were roughly the same distribution as the sample population.

Table 2

Total Survey Sample Size by Employee Job Category

Employee Job Category	N	Percentage of Total Survey Responses
Total	265	
Non-instructional Employees	45	17 %
Instructionally related Employees	199	75 %
Administrative Employees	21	8 %

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The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) Results

The Work and Meaning Index measures three subareas of work meaningfulness: Positive Meaning (PM), which reflects the degree to which people find their work to hold personal meaning, significance, or purpose; Meaning-Making through Work (MMW), which reflects the fact that work is often a source of broader meaning in life for people, helping them to make sense of their life experience; and Greater Good Motivations (GGM), which reflects the degree to which people see that their effort at work makes a positive contribution and benefits others or society. Meaningful Work (MW) is a composite or overall score reflecting the depth to which people experience their work as meaningful, as something they are personally invested in, and which is a source of flourishing in their lives (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Respondents rate 10 questions on a Likert scale of 1 = Absolutely Untrue to 5 = Absolutely True.

Low scores on any of these factors reflect overall less work meaning, and may be predictive of poor work engagement, low commitment to one's organization and intentions to leave, low motivation, a perceived lack of support, and perceived lack of adequate guidance from leadership or management. People who score low on these scales are also more likely to be absent from work and experience both low levels of well-being and higher levels of psychological distress (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Table 3 shows the WAMI results.

Table 3

Total Sample WAMI Results

	Positive Meaning	**Meaning Making Through Work**	**Greater Good**	**Meaningful Work**
Administrative Employees N = 21	4.59 (0.39)	4.29 (0.51)	4.65 (0.49)	4.51 (0.37)
Instructionally related Employees N = 199	4.32 (0.59)	4.08 (0.68)	4.42 (0.65)	4.27 (0.55)
Non-instructional Employees N = 45	3.91 (0.91)	3.61 (0.94)	4.19 (0.81)	3.90 (0.76)
Total Sample N = 265	4.28 (0.67)	4.02 (0.74)	4.40 (0.68)	4.23 (0.60)

The Greater Good subcategory was highest, followed by Positive Meaning and Meaning Making Through Work.   The total sample reported relatively high degrees of work meaningfulness overall, greater than 4.0, indicating that, on average, educational employees surveyed found their work highly meaningful.

Administrative employees reported the highest levels of work meaningfulness across WAMI sub-categories and overall. Greater Good was their highest rated sub-category. Among the 21 administrators who responded to the survey, they had similar degrees of work meaningfulness. This indicates that administrators have a high sense of meaning in their work.

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Instructionally related employees reported the second highest levels of work meaningfulness across the three subcategories and among the overall score. Across the 199 employees in this category, there was greater variability between responses in their ratings than with administrators. This indicates some find their work less meaningful and some find it more meaningful. Non-instructional staff reported the least sense of work meaningfulness across all subareas and among the overall score. In addition, there were far higher rates of variability within that job category.

In sum, administrators find their work more meaningful than other groups and non-instructionally related employees find it least meaningful. Of the types of meaningful work measured, Meaning Making Through Work was the lowest, while Greater Good was the highest for employees in all roles. This indicates that making a positive contribution to society is what makes educational employee's work the most meaningful.

Survey Results from the Job Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ)

Regarding the JCP, Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2014) said,

Employees are frequently presented with opportunities to make their work more engaging and fulfilling. These opportunities might be as simple as making subtle changes to your work tasks to increase your enjoyment, creating opportunities to connect with more people at work, or simply trying to view your job in a new way to make it more purposeful. While some jobs will provide more of these opportunities than others, there will be situations in all jobs where one can make subtle changes to make it more engaging and fulfilling. (p. 967)

The five JCQ questions regarding task crafting include introducing new approaches to improve work, changing the scope or types of tasks, and giving preference to tasks that suit one's skills and interests. The five cognitive crafting questions investigate how the employee thinks about their job, its significance for organizational success, importance

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for the community, or the ways it gives their life purpose and well-being. The five

relational crafting questions look at how employees relate to others. In other words, how

they get to know others at work, interests, degrees of personal relationships with

colleagues, mentoring, and their degree of participation in work events to celebrate others

(e.g., birthday party).

   This study sought to understand the relationship between job crafting (as a

meaning-making mechanism at work) and employee roles. Table 4 presents the results

from the JCQ portion of the survey.

Table 4

Job Crafting Mean Scores by Educational Employee Types

	Task Crafting	**Cognitive Crafting**	**Relational Crafting**
Administrative Employees N=21	4.68 (0.79)	4.55 (0.80)	4.39 (0.97)
Instructionally related Employees N=199	4.42 (0.83)	4.34 (1.07)	3.91 (1.07)
Non-instructional Employees N=45	4.17 (0.98)	3.94 (1.28)	4.11 (1.03)
Total Sample N=265	4.40 (0.86)	4.29 (1.09)	3.98 (1.06)

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Administrators engage in job crafting most often and with the least variability across their role. These findings indicate that administrators choose the tasks they do, how they think about their work, and how they work with others more than employees in other roles. This finding aligns with greater positions of authority and power, yielding more opportunities to job craft. It also aligns with the WAMI results indicating administrators find their work most meaningful compared to other employees. Instructional employees had the next highest task and cognitive crafting rates and non-instructional staff had the least. However, the single data anomaly came with relational job crafting; wherein non-instructional staff had the second highest rate of relational crafting after administrators, and instructional staff the least relational crafting of all employees. These results indicate non-instructional staff are less likely to change what they do and how they think about their work (task and cognitive tasking), but that they can and do change who and how they work with others (relational crafting) to a greater extent than instructional staff do.

Compared to relative invariance in WAMI results, the JCQ standard deviation scores indicate a wider dispersion in data. Administrators were relatively consistent compared to each other with cognitive crafting (i.e., how they think about their jobs), but non-instructional respondents had a wider spread between them. This means some non-instructional employees have very high work meaning while others rate their work with very little meaningfulness. This data aligns with qualitative data from the project's interviews wherein, for example, a technology specialist found great meaning in repairing a classroom audio distribution system (speakers) so the students could hear, thus learn,

better. On the other hand, there were references to people who "punch-in and punch out" of their jobs (i.e., low work meaningfulness).

JCQ data indicated instructional staff have relatively similar amounts of task crafting between them, but wider ranges within cognitive and relational crafting. These findings suggest those who directly instruct students change the things they do and how they do them more than any other way of making meaning with relative consistency; whereas how they think about their jobs and how they relate with others varies more widely amongst them. These findings also align with interview data presented in the next section where staff compared themselves with others in their position and took note of how differently they do the same job.

Survey Results Summary

Survey results established that administrators have the highest degrees of both work meaningfulness and job crafting. Furthermore, non-instructional staff have the lowest work meaningfulness and degrees of job crafting, with one exception. The exception being that instructional staff reported the least relational job crafting.

Interviewee Quantitative Results

Total sample WAMI and JCQ mean scores were compared to interviewee scores to establish if there were significant differences in the data pools. Table 5 presents those results.

Table 5

Comparative Survey Data, Interviewees and Total Sample

	Positive Meaning	Meaning Making Through Work	Greater Good	Mean-ingful Work	Task Crafting	Cognitive Crafting	Relational Crafting
Total Sample N=265	4.28	4.02	4.40	4.23	4.40	4.29	3.98
Interviewees N=17	4.25	4.33	4.33	4.30	4.40	4.20	4.20

The comparison shows interviewee scores on both instruments differed only slightly and are thus representative of the total sample. These findings suggest interviewees and non-interviewees engage in comparable degrees of job crafting and find their work similarly meaningful.

Qualitative Data

The interview guide was given to each interview participant. These questions examined concepts of work meaningfulness and job crafting in greater depth. They examined things such as an employee's sense of purpose in his/her work and sense of the difference their work makes on their organization, the broader community, and him/herself. These questions similarly extracted notions from the JCQ about the things employees do and think about, the types and scopes of their tasks, how their work impacts themselves and others, and explored mentoring and socializing.

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Interviewee Demographics

      31 survey respondents volunteered themselves to be interviewed and 17 were interviewed. To obtain the most diverse perspectives for the study, interviewees were selected to represent as equal a distribution of employee roles and as equally distributed across the three participating school districts as possible. Google search procured volunteer interviewee work positions and email addresses indicated which school district they belonged to, to make this diversity intentional. To demonstrate this optimal spread, Table 6 presents interviewee positions across the three job categories and Table 7 presents the spread of interviewees across the 3 school districts.

Table 6

Interviewee Position by Job Category

Interviewee Job Category	Interviewee Position
Non-instructional Employees N=4	Bus driver, secretary, Instructional Technology Technician, Para-Professional (Assistant Teacher/Classroom Aide)
Instructionally Related Employees N = 12	Registered Nurse, Teachers, Teacher Consultants, Occupational Therapist, School Psychologist, Speech & Language Pathologist
Administrative Employees N=1	School District Program Supervisor

Table 7

Number of Interviewees per School District

School District	1	2	3
Interviewees	6	7	4

Interview Results

The first question, "Why did you start working in the field of education?", sought to understand the link between if and how an employee's entry into education related to the nature and quality of their work's meaningfulness. Responses revealed four paths into education: they always knew they wanted to go into education or that they were good with kids, influenced by family, encouraged by others (recommended or recruited), and others came by way of another profession or college degree. Some respondents cited multiple factors. Table 8 highlights employee pathways into education.

Table 8

Employee Pathways into Education

Pathway to Education	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of Interviewees
Education *not* original profession or college degree	11	65%
Family influenced (current or family of origin)	10	59%
Non-family influence (recommended or recruited)	4	29%
Always knew wanted / Was good with kids	4	29%

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14 interviewees went into education due in part to someone influencing them. 10 interviewees grew up around relatives who were in education or currently have family circumstances leading them to choosing education (e.g., partner in education, good schedule for raising children). Four were influenced by a non-family member, such as the secretary at their child's school telling them about a position in the building or they were recruited because someone thought they could contribute to the field. A key finding with these results is that people and relationships play a significant role in how employees begin working in the field of education.

Interview Themes

Data coding showed five key themes relative to the research questions. Those were: Impact, Co-creation, Appreciation, Identity, and Comparison. Impact refers to employee actions, thoughts, or feelings related to influencing the behavior, character, or development of others because of the actions of self or others. Co-creation refers to employee actions or thoughts in which there was shared sense-making, yielding new meaning. This was either within the employee or between s/he and others as a way of making meaning of their work. Appreciation refers to the thoughts or actions of an employee in response to recognition; feedback is exchanged or there is awareness of having been appreciated for his/her work. Identity indicates an employee's beliefs, perceptions, or understanding of his/her character, personality, race, ethnicity, nationality, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religious / spiritual self, abilities, class, age, or body type. Lastly, Comparison refers to the meaning an employee has made which influences his/her thoughts, actions, feelings, or identity. Table 9 captures a summary of the themes.

Table 9

Interview Themes & Sub-Themes for Ways of Creating & Maintaining Meaningful Work

Theme	Sub-theme
Impact	Thoughts or feelings about having an impact / influencing Actions made to have impact / influence Actions or experiences that impacted interviewee positively Actions or experiences that impacted interviewee negatively
Co-Creation	Co-Creative actions with and by others Co-Creative thought patterns Co-creation of meaning between work and home
Appreciation	Positive feedback, appreciation or recognition Negative, absence of, or insufficient feedback or recognition
Identity	Thoughts or actions which impacted interviewee's individual identity (now or as influenced by past experiences) Thoughts or actions which impacted interviewee's group identity (now or as influenced by past experiences)
Comparison	Comparison of another relative to *self* - (I) Comparison of self-relative to *others* - (we)

Theme One: Impact

The second major theme from the interviews in this study was Impact. This refers to an employee influencing behavior, character, or development of others; or being influenced. Impact has four sub-themes, including: the ways employees think and feel about the importance of them positively impacting children and families through their work, the things they do to create that impact, the things that have positively impacted the employee's meaning about their work, and the things that have negatively impacted their sense of work meaningfulness.

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Of primary importance for every interviewee, which was corroborated by high Greater Good WAMI scores, was that they work in education to have a positive impact on others. This is the first subtheme of Impact; the thoughts, reflections, or feelings related to influencing / having an impact on others. Respondents often referred to the "Aha Moment" where the things they said or did shifted something for someone, or the student finally "got it." This sub-theme refers to the nature of the feelings and thoughts an employee has when someone has benefited from their actions; that what they did made a difference. This sub-theme relates to the value the employee places on having an impact.

A second sub-theme refers to the specific actions the respondent has taken to create impact or be influential in creating change/growth/learning, etc. For example, a high school teacher recalled when a student,

> Had very low academic skills…and just kept getting passed through. He was an amazing artist. So, I said to him "Ok, for the final exam you're not going to write an essay. I want you to draw or paint a book cover. And on it, I want to see tone, symbolism, those things… He painted this great cover for an Edgar Allan Poe story… Well, now he's an artist, he lives in New York. I didn't start that in him, but what was meaningful was helping him recognize he doesn't have to fit into *my* framework. He can tap into *his* skill set and still produce the work.

The teacher shared how changing their instructional approach positively impacts their students and is thus a very meaningful action they can take to impact their students.

The third sub-theme refers to experiences or reflections which impacted the respondent and influenced the meaning they made of their work. For example, an elementary teacher spoke about the positive impact a student teacher had on them. They

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said "I like to share knowledge and she was very receptive and wanting to try new things … it was really great. We missed out in the district when she got snapped up by another. I really enjoyed it because doing that kept me on my toes… it made me constantly reflect, too." In sum, the teacher was positively impacted by their student teacher in ways that surprised them.

The fourth and final sub-theme refers to the same notions of impact, but in negative ways. It refers to the negative attribution the employee makes out of their experiences as an employee in education. For example, one teacher referred to working in a school where the norm was to send misbehaving students to the office and that meant the office was usually swarming with students. In this case, they lamented the negative influence of this policy on their students and on expectations of them as a teacher. They and their co-teacher worked to keep students in the classroom, even if it meant taking turns with struggling students. This kind of situation negatively affects the teacher's experience as an educational employee. Table 10 presents the Impact theme and it's four sub-themes.

Table 10

Impact Sub-Themes

Sub-theme	Description	Sample Data
Thoughts or feelings about having an impact / influencing other	Relates to the value educational employees place on having an impact through their work.	"I know exactly how they're helping kids. Their/our product is good citizens." "Even if it's just fixing a speaker so that student can hear, I know that's helping that student. That gives [my work] meaning, even if they don't know the tech guy cares. All that matters is that what wasn't working is now working and learning can now happen." "Kids feel safe with me." "I've had many teachers tell me "This [job] is hard enough for me. I don't know what I'd do if I was driving, never mind in the snow, and some kid freaks out in the back?!" I tell [new bus drivers]… you've got to learn who [the kids] are and what they're about, and what their triggers are." "I'm prepared to have hard conversations, to listen, realize someone is expressing what's happened to them." [present listening as an act of impact] "It's meaningful when I see specific progress. Some [kids] make quick progress, some not. But when you re-evaluate a kid you see every day, you can see "Wow! You've changed!" "This one guy has his picture on the wall because he was *that kind* of guy… *I want to do that*. I've never had it before where we put a dead person's picture up on the wall… but I want to be able to say, "I got things done. I did things, I helped people."

Actions taken to have an Impact / influence	Things the interviewee does to create impact / be influential.	"I asked if my debate students would moderate this discussion with a panel of candidates. It took place at … school and it was televised! They got to make the rules and everything." "I lead a lot of Professional Development for small groups of staff at the building level. I help them understand." "I like to plant seeds, to give people food for thought." "When you're able to be present and patient, the kids really respond to that." "Mentoring helped me be more intentional. She came in theoretical and she learned the practical from me. And I get new ideas. It was a reciprocal experience."
Positive Impact	Experiences, reflections, on situations which had a positive impact on the employee.	"I'm helping people. I've been in situations [trying to problem solve a tech issue] … and suddenly we get it to work. [A student] was struggling through learning...and now they won't struggle as much because that variable [not being able to hear the teacher from the speaker] was lowered." "I had to break things down into smaller chunks...and get them to the point where they finally understood - seeing that lightbulb go on is really kind of a kick! It's a rush!" "I had a student teacher and I was asking myself "Do I know enough??" but then I shocked myself with how much I do know, how much this job is ingrained into my being. It was an eye-opener."

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| Negative Impact | Experiences or reflections, on situations which had a negative impact on the employee's sense of work meaning. | But there are things I have sacrificed. When I started [teaching &] coaching, I was running 20-30 miles a week. I ran marathons. I've given that up pretty much. I haven't run in two years now. It's something I definitely miss."

"If there are decisions that are made top down that did not include a voice from the stakeholders...this happens where...they don't take into account the voice of a student. They don't have any of their input; and they just made a decision. *That* has a negative impact on my sense of meaning."

"I dreaded going to his office. I was not undermining him. I was sticking to my own little area."

"Our kids are not little robots. They are people. Do you see staff refraining from talking in the halls? No. It's not disrupting the classrooms if kids stop in the hall [and chat]. Do you see that in the general workplace? No!" |
| --- | --- | --- |

Theme Two: Co-Creation

Every interviewee referred to one form of co-creation or another as their single-most form of meaning making, in one or more ways. The first subtheme refers to the action's employees take to create meaning from, or to understand something in their work or home lives. This includes co-creating meaning about things in education (e.g., attending trainings together and discussing application to shared work) or about things in one's personal life (e.g., swapping stories about loved ones). For example, one participant said, "I mentor student teachers. Their enthusiasm and idealism perk me back

up. They're so in tune with new tools and internet things….it feeds me!" This indicates the social nature of sensemaking and meaning making and to the fact that employees make meaning out of not just their work together, but also their lives as a whole as well. This personal aspect of co-creation is different from sub-theme three in which work is used to make sense of home or home is used to make sense of work and refers to how colleagues make sense of things together.

The second co-creation subtheme refers to the thoughts employee's use to create meaning within themselves, with someone else or through an experience. It refers to the resulting co-created meaning. For example, one participant who travels between schools for their job and has witnessed a wide variety of ways building staff treat kids mentioned how critical it is to treat children well. They talked about how they see the difference it makes in school culture when children are spoken to with respect and not talked down to. This example indicates the participant's thoughts and reflections as co-created over time. Another aspect of this internal co-creation process included reflections with God or spirit within (e.g., reflection, prayer).   One participant spoke of their need for quiet reflection and prayer on their way to school, sending prayers to people in their life who are having trouble. This participant said, "to make sure that what I feel is important in my life has been taken care of first thing".

The third and final subtheme showed the exchange of meaning making between home and work or work and home, where application of life lessons co-creates meaning with an employee's work and vice versa. For example, one participant said "[Work] helps me with my life... I want to see the positive in every day... then, that continues when I go home, and when I see my neighbors. Also, we could get pretty down and out

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[at work] with all the stuff that goes on at home; the money and family issues."

Likewise, another participant stated, "We share perspectives on our spouses, she understands my husband's point of view and vice versa". The interviewees use home life experiences to inform how they show up at work in education, and their work in education to inform how they live their personal lives. Table 11 presents other sample responses regarding Co-Creation and its relationship to creating meaning.

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Table 11

Co-Creation Sub-themes and Examples

Sub-theme	Description	Sample Data
Actions with and by others	Doing things with others to create meaning for yourself or together. Ie. sharing, mentoring, co-teaching, co-coaching, attending PD together, talking together, attending board meetings	"I get to share my *experience"* [when I mentor or & co - teach]. "I actually enjoy mentoring. It can be challenging and some [experiences] didn't go well but I like watching other people do things and then having a conversation about it. I would ask student teachers "Why did you choose to do this? Why are you doing it this way? What was your thinking?" We'd talk about the purpose of doing things a certain way." "We're very good together. I'm a bit more structured and she's more fun and way less structured. So, we're very good together. It's a real joy to have her." "I co-taught and [so] you have that other person you share a lot of the same ideas with and how you're going to teach, what you want to teach… Even sharing the workload, it does create a wonderful environment and gives more meaning to your job." "I don't like to go to PD (professional development) alone… when I don't agree with what the speaker said, I'll say "What do you think?" and we can think together right on the spot, "How will this work for so and so?"". "Those friendships… help make the day-to-day meaningful, and they've helped clarify my

Thoughts or reflections as a form of creating meaning internally	Employees reflecting on their thoughts or perceptions about someone or something else.	internal meaning of things outside [of work] too."
		"I spoke out a lot. I went to a lot of board meetings… in support of the support staff and not to cut their wages or privatize them. Support staff run the school!"
		"The things that are really meaningful seem to come out in the activities, the extras, the things that aren't necessarily part of my classroom, but the ways I make my class come alive outside the room."
		"Take kids seriously. You can't have a school without them. Don't dismiss or treat them as lesser people."
		"We create systems where we judge people instead of making meaning together (e.g. teacher evaluation system). It's not conducive to shared learning when you're being evaluated that way."
		"These kids really don't have enough executive function development yet to plan to be evil. They're acting out for some reason. It's not that they're bad. They're experiencing something (at school or home). But I don't think that's always taken into account."
		"…. what we're going to do more than anything [in life] is speak. And yet, it's the least often taught Language Art. It's so fascinating. You're supposed to just know how to do it, but no one teaches you how to do it well. So, it's been fun to teach [speaking/Forensics]. It makes so much sense, it's profound. And yet it's so simple."
		"That's why I'm here. I'm here for the kids. I'm here to get them to school safely and get them home safely, and at the

		same time, to make an impression on them, to show them that people are always, no matter who you are, always willing to listen."
		"I believe there are higher powers working through me, that allow me to do what I do."
		"I'm constantly trying to touch base [with God] and make sure that I'm clear on my thoughts and… asking for guidance, and if there's anything there that I'm missing, or I need to see. I am welcome to see it. I'm open to seeing anything."
		"It's almost spiritual when you're dealing with kids, and with education. It had me really doing a lot of soul searching. Who am I? What am I about? What's my commitment? What do I want out of life?"
		"I do a lot of self-reflection."
Work & Home	By bringing home thoughts, ideas, experiences from work, returning with new meaning made at home, or sharing things that happen at home with colleagues, thereby making new meaning of one's own family/ personal life.	"Being in education, you hear a lot about what's happening in schools, and I take that and wonder if those things are happening at the schools my children are in. And then the things that are happening in [my children's] schools, I bring to work, and we have a discussion and try to apply that to a situation at work." "My husband said "Why aren't you doing what you love? You should probably get back into [teaching]!" And so, I did. It was awesome." "I've got people with special needs in my family and extended family. I've always been around them, so I'm more aware, I know [when a child has special needs. My colleagues] will tell me "I've got this kid. What do I do? How do I do it?"".

Arabic text

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Theme Three: Appreciation

The third theme that emerged from the interviews was Appreciation. Appreciation refers to thoughts or actions related to the employee in which recognition or feedback is exchanged or perceived thus impacting the employee's sense of meaning in his/her work. Appreciation has two sub-themes presented below. The first are experiences where the employee has a sense of value, respect, admiration, appreciation, and gratitude acknowledgement. The second refers to the absence of such, or to negative feedback, which affects the employee's sense of meaning, identity, future actions, or thoughts. This includes perceived feelings from or for others related to a sense of criticism, apathy, disregard, neglect, or depreciation which impacts the employee's sense of meaning, identity, future actions, or thoughts. Table 12 presents this theme and its two sub-themes.

Table 12

Appreciation Sub-Themes

Theme	Description	Sample Data
Appreciation & Recognition	Receiving positive feedback, appreciation or recognition for one's work as a way of making meaning.	"My parents are very acknowledging, praiseful of all the work I do and the effort I put in, so that's nice. My mother-in-law thinks I'm the best thing in education since it was created!" "They made me a priority sub. We really need you. You're exactly the kind of teacher we need. I'm glad you're here. Hang in there!" "I was introduced as "the one I was telling you about…" [made me feel valued]." "I think they placed her [student teacher] with me because it would be a safe placement." "It's things like when we're out in public and the kid [is excited to see me] and says "Hey this is my mom and dad! Or they do other special things, they come and tell me about things they've done… give me a new recipe they tried at home or a school project they're doing, they'll bring me pictures, samples…whatever…" "I met her right as I started driving [school busses]. Her daughter was in a wheelchair… and she just loved me. Whenever she saw me over the years she would [light up and say hi!] When she graduated, I got an invite. I've had numerous graduation

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		invites and it really makes you feel special that they even wanted to [invite me]!" "She had breast cancer and I'd send her cards. Check-in on her. You know, because we had that relationship through her [kid]."
An absence of feedback or recognition and/or negative/insufficient feedback or recognition	Feeling or being disregarded, criticized, unnoticed, not appreciated or thanked, etc.	"I got a lot of flak [about advocating for support staff]." "The administration doesn't really understand what I do. It's hard for them to appreciate that sometimes I wish I would get a little more recognition. Not in front of people but just "Hey! You're doing a great job!" When I don't get that recognition, I feel badly that I wanted it." "If someone is undermining my work, it makes me not want to be there any more." "It's hard when you work with teachers where you feel your work doesn't matter." "… with the new high school. They built it; had an architect… laid it all down… build it and then somebody said "Where's the bus loop?! It never even played a part in their planning!"

Theme Four: Identity

The fourth theme that emerged from the interview data was Identity. Identify refers to an employee's beliefs, perception, or understanding about his/her character, personality, race, religion / spiritual practices, ethnicity, gender, abilities, nationality, sex,

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sexual orientation, class, age, or body type. This includes an employee's sense of how they got that way or how they have come to understand who they are now. Identity has two sub-themes: individual identity and group identity. Some employees made references to 'I' or 'me' such as when one employee said, "That's the kind of person I am. I was raised that way …." In other cases, there was a sense of him or herself within a group, as in their sense of 'we' or 'us'; their team, of togetherness. Both Identity sub-themes are presented in Table 13.

Table 13

Identity Sub-Themes

Sub-Theme	Description	Sample Data
Individual Identity and Background	An employee's beliefs, perceptions or understanding of his/her character, personality, race, religion / spiritual practices, ethnicity, gender, abilities, nationality, sex, sexual orientation, class, age or body type. "I" or "me"	"I was very much in the identity of a teacher. That's all I thought I could do...What I saw was my skill set; good and bad. That was the career I thought I'd have the rest of my life…" "What else could I do? I just can't imagine [leaving Education]. I would really miss it if I didn't do this." (Bus driver): "I *am* a teacher. I may not be in a classroom. My classroom is mobile. I teach them a lot of things." "I'm not that kind of person. I don't step on other people to advance." "In my first school, I don't know how I did this. I coached Debate…. *and* Forensics *and* I was a JV coach, too. I wasn't married, didn't have kids yet. It was a totally different life."

Theme Five: Comparison

Interviewees referred to others as a way of making sense of themselves and their work. This theme emerged as Comparison and refers to the thoughts, feelings, observations, beliefs, opinions, and reflections as exchanged or perceived on the part of others which contributes to his/her sense of meaning in their work. Comparison is divided into two sub-themes: on the individual level (whereby the employee compares himself to another person as a way of situating their own sense of their work) or on the group level. Group level refers to when the employee compares how their job category/team/district operates in relation to another. For example, a teacher may compare how they perceive another school district to operate, or how other teams operate. Table 14 presents Comparison and its two sub-themes.

Table 14

Comparison Sub-Themes

Theme	Description	Sample Data
Individual level Comparison	Observations or reflections in which the employee compares him/herself to another person as a way of making sense of his or her work. I/me compared to s/he/them/they	"There are other teachers … who will stand up and leave in the middle of a meeting… Sometimes I think to myself, "That's a real shame" and then other moments, I think "Who's the smart one??" I look at these people and I'm not sure they're actually happier than I am." "She's definitely someone I would get together with, but she's in a complete other spot in her life."
Group level	Reflections or thoughts the interviewee has that refer to a group, team, school system, culture, district, etc. How other groups, teams or school districts do things compared to the way 'we' do. We or us compared to they/them or theirs	Being in Tech Dept versus being an Administrator: "I'm not convinced that any of the people in positions that are higher or better paid than me know anything more than me. A higher position does not make your ideas better or more worthwhile or mean that you're smarter or better equipped." How schools discipline children compared to the way the employee believes it should be done: "Why do [they] send a kid to the principal's office if they're misbehaving? That takes away the power of the teacher. That's useless because the kid will come back, and they'll know that teacher has no power." "It's hard when other districts are poaching our best staff members!"

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the study. Quantitative data findings from the WAMI and the JCQ were discussed. On the WAMI, results indicated the total sample of educational employees in southeast Michigan find their work highly

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meaningful (top 20% of the inventory). When comparing employee categories, administrators perceived their work as most meaningful, followed by instructional staff, and non-instructional staff perceiving it as least meaningful. On the JCQ, results indicated the total sample of educational employees in southeast Michigan reported high levels of job crafting overall (top 33% of the inventory). Within the study, compared with one another, administrators had the highest rates of job crafting across all types. Task crafting and cognitive crafting were second highest for instructional staff and least for non-instructional staff. The data found that instructional staff relationally job craft the least, breaking the pattern of administrators, instructional, and non-instructional. Data comparing interviewee scores on both instruments differed only slightly from the total sample.

Qualitative data gathered from 17 interviews produced five main themes: Co-creation, Impact, Appreciation, Identity, and Comparison. Each theme was presented with their associated sub-themes and accompanying examples from the interviews.

All interviewees spoke of co-creating meaningful work in one or more ways. Some spoke of shared sensemaking with another, within themselves, with God/spirit, or work informing home life and home life creating meaning at work. The second highest theme, also mentioned in every interview in some way, referred to employee actions, thoughts, or feelings related to impacting or influencing others, or about being impacted and finding meaning in that. Interviewees spoke of how acknowledgement from others, in the form of feedback, appreciation, or recognition helped create a greater sense of meaning in their work. Identity was the fourth highest theme, indicating how the employee views/understands themselves and/or their team/group. Lastly, the least

frequent theme, Comparison, was presented. Comparison referred to the act or thought process of correlating herself with another employee or group to make sense of their work. Chapter 5 describes study conclusions, limitations, provides application ideas, and suggestions for further studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 5 provides the study's final summary, a discussion with implications for the results, the study limitations, and recommendations for organizations and future research. This study examined how educational employees in southeast Michigan discover and/or maintain a sense of meaning in their work. Specifically, it examined:

- What makes work meaningful for educational employees?
- What actions and/or thought patterns contribute to work meaningfulness?
- What role do other people and relationships play in finding work meaningfulness?
- What is the result of having meaningful work?

Using a mixed method approach to data collection, the study found that creating and maintaining work meaningfulness is on-going and involves multiple behaviors and thought patterns. The employees studied had high degrees of both work meaningfulness and each of the three types of job crafting measured. This data supports the supposition that employees knowingly or unknowingly job craft to make their work more meaningful. Additionally, educational employees habitually seek to understand their work through understanding their work's impact on students and other adults including parents, colleagues and mentees (Impact), active engagement in reflection and sensemaking within themselves and with others (Co-creation), reflection or conversation to make sense of themselves (Identity), observations of other people or groups relative to themselves (Comparison), and hearing from others and/or receiving acknowledgment of their work (Appreciation and Feedback).

Discussion

Based on an examination of quantitative results, the five themes that emerged from interview transcript analysis, and the academic research in this arena presented in Chapter 2, four main conclusions can be drawn. These conclusions are presented through the research findings which supported the conclusion.

Based on the finding that impacting others, especially students, is what makes work most meaningful for employees in education in southeast Michigan and that creating and maintaining work meaningfulness is an on-going, active process with specific patterns of thinking and behaving, the first conclusion is: School districts can increase engagement, performance, and retention through developing ongoing, explicit systems to assist employees in building and reinforcing their sense of impact.

This conclusion is supported by research on the rewarding benefits of work meaningfulness by Van Wingerden and Van der Stoep (2017) who validate the critical nature of meaningful work and purpose and organizational engagement. They state, "meaningful work and performance are related in multiple ways" (Van Wingerden & Van der Stoep, 2017, p. 8) and endorse employee benefits from deliberately cultivating meaningful work.

Dutton (2014) also supports this conclusion through connecting explicit meaning-making behaviors with their importance in an organization: "Take small actions that encourage each of us to be psychologically present in virtual and in-person meetings…. Cultivate cultures, reward systems and reporting structures that encourage respectful engagement, trust and mutual help" (p. 9).

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Schuyler (2014) also supports this conclusion, citing the ongoing nature of our need to have meaning: "we need to know whom we serve, why we serve them, and how to serve them" (p. 9).   Reinforcement of why and how meaningful an employee's work is can be an extremely powerful vehicle for motivating, engaging, and retaining employees. When a system contains intentional mechanisms for connecting employees with what's important to them (having an impact), they are more likely to stay, saving districts substantial money by decreasing turnover costs.

Berg, J. M., Dutton, J. E., & Wrzesniewski, A. (2008), research on Job Crafting also supports this conclusion by providing a useful mechanism for increasing an employee's sense of meaningful work; which school districts could employ as part of this mechanism. Multiple studies (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2008; Berg, Dutton, Wrzesniewski, & Baker, 2013; Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010) tie meaningful work to job crafting and its usefulness including the JCQ correlated positively with indices of proactive behavior (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior, strengths use, self-concordant goal setting) and positive work functioning (e.g., job satisfaction, work contentment, work enthusiasm, positive affect), all of which would benefit educational entities in meeting their missions.

The present study found that educational employees actively engage in things that will help maintain their sense of meaning in various ways, including through job crafting (consciously or unconsciously). Meaning making is strongest when it is active (versus fixed), engaged with (co-creation with others, comparison, reflection, or dialoguing with others), and being recognized or appreciated. Therefore, a second conclusion is that there are rich opportunities to capitalize on these natural propensities toward creating meaning

for educational employees. Prime examples would be creating structures for co-creation or intentional ways of impacting students. This might be through organizational learning, such as meaningful mentorship programs, student teaching, or collaborations with area schools of education, co-teaching, university research studies, etc. It is recommended that districts create more focused and robust learning opportunities such as these.

Relationships play a vital role in the creation of meaning; from how employees enter the field and how they behave and/or think about their work during their tenure in the field. Thus, the third conclusion is that school systems would benefit from investing in concrete mechanisms for fostering high quality relationships district-wide for all employees. Relationships are a rudimentary factor and play a significant role in how educational staff generate meaning in their work. The underlying variable in all five major themes of this study involved a correlation in some way to employee relationships, with strong implications for the peril of negative relationships and the affirming nature of positive relationships.   Starting with how employees find their way into the field, the data showed relationships were an overwhelming factor, with 88% of those interviewed referencing the influence of someone in their life leading them to the vocation. In particular, non-instructional staff in particular used relational job crafting to make meaning from their work. This indicates that high quality relationships are the lifeblood of creating meaningful work for educational personnel in general but that school districts have an opportunity to utilize the importance of relationships differently across job categories.

This conclusion aligns with Stephens et al.'s (2011) research on High Quality Connections (HQCs) being the building blocks for High Quality Relationships. They state:

> HQCs among members of organizational units are associated with greater levels of psychological safety and trust. Higher levels of psychological safety, in turn, contribute to greater unit-level learning from failures. Higher levels of interpersonal trust can spawn spirals of increasing cooperation and trustworthiness…. And improving organizational processes such as coordination and error detection. (Stephens et al., 2011, p. 3)

This conclusion is also supported by Dutton and Heaphy (2003). The authors present four lenses for understanding high quality connections: exchange, identity, growth, and knowledge. These themes have a high correlation to the five themes presented in this study (co-creation, impact, appreciation, identity, and comparison). Human connections matter in the workplace for a multitude of reasons including, an exchange of resources useful and valuable to their work, by helping employees make sense of their identities, and by allowing employees to experiment and co-construct to try on new and growing identities (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). High Quality Connections and High-Quality Relationships have been linked to positive organizational outcomes, including positive effects on performance. Therefore, we know that meaningful work results in employee retention, higher quality connections and relationships amongst employees and lends itself to a stronger sense of identity within themselves and their communities.

Limitations

This study has three central limitations. First, the sample size and the diversity of perspectives were limited. In particular, no demographic information was collected and diversity of interviewee perspectives and experiences was not analyzed. With only three school districts studied, the findings and conclusions cannot be generalized to educational employees with different demographics than found in southeast Michigan. A second limitation is the range of interviewee roles. While 22 administrators responded to the survey, only one was able to be interviewed. A greater number of administrators would have enhanced the study. A third limitation is me having familiarity with the school districts studied; thus, data may be different if they were gathered from a researcher with different background.

Recommendations

Recommendations for this study are provided in two sections. The first part gives recommendations for educational employees, such as those in this study, to use immediately. This study showed that working in the field of education is meaningful to employees in education. The findings of this study indicate ways to make use of this. The second part gives recommendations for district wide change; where organizational, system-wide design can support and even create more of those behaviors and thought patterns we know work, as evidenced in this study.

Micro level recommendations. For those educational employees, like the ones in this study, who would like to utilize the findings to experience heightened engagement,

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meaning, and higher quality connections and relationships at work, the following more immediate recommendations might be taken.

Finding ways to acknowledge and celebrate impact on students and colleagues could help boost meaning and engagement. Recommendations for doing such might include staff or student sharing about impact made on you by others as a regular practice. Work with trusted colleagues around you to create more robust systems for giving and receiving feedback. Even when the feedback was challenging, the present study found that educational employees find feedback meaningful and helpful as a vehicle for creating greater impact. This could be between yourself and a trusted colleague or as a department to set up more formalized ways of exchanging feedback.

Another recommendation falls under the larger umbrella of developing greater teamwork. This study found a correlation between an employee's sense of meaning and their use of both Comparison and Identity. Take time to get to know those around you better by increasing your capacity to communicate and ask questions. Take time to understand your identity as an individual and a team member. Compare strengths, weaknesses, interests, and experiences with your teammates as a way of solidifying your meaning fullness with your work. Dialogue about better ways of doing your work to have greater impact and ask how others are doing similar tasks as a way of strengthening your connection to your work.

The final recommendation centers around this project's findings about the importance of recognition and feedback. Educational employees want to be recognized and given praise, appreciation, and feedback about their work. Teams should discuss the kinds of feedback they find most meaningful and how they can support each other. For

instance, create ways in your district to recognize and celebrate one another. If there is a strong desire for co-creative feedback talk as a team or with your administrator about ways you might exchange more substantive feedback.

Macro level recommendations. School districts are in perpetual states of change and can utilize the findings from this study to design more efficient and effective school systems for its students. Working together, public school boards, administrators, staff, community members, and organization development specialists can design community school systems that actively create ways of facilitating employee impact on students, feedback and recognition within and across schools, co-creation of meaning, stronger identity, and comparison practices.

It is therefore recommended that school systems use systemic level change management tools, such as Galbraith's Star Model (2011) as a tool. This model "consists of a series of design policies that are controllable by management and can influence employee behavior. The policies are the tools with which management must become skilled in order to shape the decisions and behaviors of their organizations" (Galbraith, 2011, p. 1). Simply put, people will behave the way the system tells them to. Aligning strategic planning, structures, work and communication processes, human resources, and reward systems leverages greater change across a school district.

Secondly, considering the recent coronavirus pandemic forcing school districts worldwide to close their brick and mortar buildings, strategic planning should pivot to creating alignment between emergent educational performance criteria and innovative socially just and inclusive instructional systems. Many schools in America converted to virtual instruction. Current proposals for delivery of instruction through hybrid routes is

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well under way as the education system is likely now in a new normal after this pandemic. Thus, strategizing for such is recommended. Worley (2020) reports "most organizations are designed for stability rather than change and thus can be rendered unsustainable and insufficient" (Personal Interview, May 2020). Based on the findings in the present study, this is an opportune point in history to leverage employee desire for impact and propensities toward the social aspect of co-creating meaning: collaborative, systemic efforts toward creating hybrid instructional designs. There are important implications in the wake of this pandemic with regards to the present study's findings. Creative ways to support connection and relationships are strongly encouraged.

As co-creators of meaningful work, who naturally compared themselves to others, educational employees demonstrated a strong desire to impact others (as indicated by project themes of co-creation, comparison, and impact) and thus mid-level systems work to address ways of leveraging this information is recommended. Organization Development specialists might work with school districts to design leadership training models to support the natural ways educational employees operate to optimize what they bring. As was indicated in the interviews employees who were empowered to act with autonomy by their leaders rose to the challenge with greater passion and motivation. This indicates untapped potential in employees and therefore creating mechanisms to support greater engagement through leadership would be to a district's advantage.

Suggestions for Future Research

The project itself and its findings revealed several areas for further research in the domain. First, demographic information was not collected as part of the survey, other than employees categorizing their roles. Collecting more detailed demographic

information would allow for a more striated view of the employee experience and enable the researcher to ensure a greater diversity of perspectives.

The present study revealed that educational employee's find recognition, appreciation, and feedback as powerful means of meaning-making. Further research into educational employees and feedback, including what kinds of feedback employees find useful across various roles, when and how its delivered, and how to give feedback could be useful in substantiating the results of this study. Teacher evaluation systems are nearly universally used in public school systems; however, not every district productive feedback for other employees. Advancing studies into techniques for ingraining feedback and recognition could substantiate this study's data and help build more robust mechanisms in schools.

This study's literature review and qualitative data analysis led to reasonable conclusions about school district improvements being possible through relationship building and leveraging employee's sense of meaningfulness to engage staff more deeply. Future research regarding how these findings correlate to student achievement would be beneficial for school systems to be clear about. This could be useful research to fortify the findings of this study more.

Project Summary

This project examined how educational employees in three public school districts in southeast Michigan make and/or create a sense of meaning in their work and sought to understand how relationships influence employee's sense of meaningfulness. The study used four research questions regarding what makes work meaningful for these

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employees: (1) What makes work meaningful for educational employees in southeast Michigan?, (2) What behaviors and thought patterns contribute to work meaningfulness?, (3) What role do other people and relationships play in finding work meaningfulness?, and (4) What is the result of having meaningful work?

266 employees completed a survey combining the JCQ and the WAMI. 17 employees were interviewed in greater detail about their experiences with the topic. Data analysis concluded that personnel working in the field of education in southeast Michigan find their work highly meaningful and that relationships are a rudimentary factor, playing a significant role in how educational staff make meaning in their work. Of the five themes that emerged from the interviews (Co-Creation, Impact, Appreciation, Identity, and Comparison), all require a relationship of some kind as a vehicle.

This study has valuable implications for education systems including being able to inform directs for both systemic design considerations, to work processes, people management (such as approaches for staff engagement and retention, employee performance, and internal organizational learning) and for building cultures for impacting children and families in meaningful ways.

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Appendix A

The Work and Meaning Index (WAMI)

The Work and Meaning Inventory

Work can mean a lot of different things to different people. The following items ask about how you see the role of work in your own life. Please honestly indicate how true each statement is for you and your work.

1 = Absolutely Untrue / 5 = Absolutely True

1. I have found a meaningful career

2. I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.

3. My work really makes no difference to the world.

4. I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.

5. I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.

6. I know my work makes a positive difference in the world.

7. My work helps me better understand myself.

8. I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.

9. My work helps me make sense of the world around me.

10. The work I do serves a greater purpose.

Appendix B

The Job Crafting Questionnaire

The Job Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ)

Employees are frequently presented with opportunities to make their work more engaging and fulfilling. These opportunities might be as simple as making subtle changes to your work tasks to increase your enjoyment, creating opportunities to connect with more people at work, or simply trying to view your job in a new way to make it more purposeful. While some jobs will provide more of these opportunities than others, there will be situations in all jobs where one can make subtle changes to make it more engaging and fulfilling.

Please indicate the extent to which you engage in the following behaviours using the following scale:

1 = Hardly Ever, to 6 = Very Often. (Note: 'Very Often' means as often as possible in your workplace)

1. Introduce new approaches to improve your work*

2. Change the scope or types of tasks that you complete at work

3. Introduce new work tasks that you think better suit your skills or interests

4. Choose to take on additional tasks at work

5. Give preference to work tasks that suit your skills or interests

6. Think about how your job gives your life purpose

7. Remind yourself about the significance your work has for the success of the

organisation

8. Remind yourself of the importance of your work for the broader community

9. Think about the ways in which your work positively impacts your life

10. Reflect on the role your job has for your overall well-being

11. Make an effort to get to know people well at work

12. Organise or attend work related social functions

13. Organise special events in the workplace (e.g., celebrating a co-worker's birthday)*

14. Choose to mentor new employees (officially or unofficially)

15. Make friends with people at work who have similar skills or interests

Note: Items 1 to 5 reflect task crafting, items 5 to 10 reflect cognitive crafting, and items 11 to 15 reflect relational crafting.

* indicates items that were adapted or taken from Leana, Appelbaum, & Shevchuk (2009).

Appendix C

Interview Guide

An Investigation into Educational Employee Practices for Finding and/or Maintaining a Sense of Meaning in Their Work

Prior to the interview, the researcher has received consent (including awareness that it will be audio recorded) to participate from the interviewee and confirmation of being 18 years of age or older and that s/he is a current employee in the field of [public] education. Each will check if they are an Administrator, Faculty (instructionally related) or Staff (business, human resources, operations, facilities, administrative support, etc.).

Interview Introduction:

I'm interested in learning about how your relationships relate to your sense of meaning at work as an employee in the field of education. In this 45-minute interview, I'll ask you questions related to what your work means to you and how your relationships impact you and your work. Your participation is optional, and you may stop your participation at any point.

1. Why did you start working in the field of education?

2. What makes your work meaningful? Can you give me some examples of things/events that stand out for you as particularly meaningful?

3. How do other people impact your sense of meaning at work? (Students, colleagues, family growing up, your family now, community, etc.)

4. How often have you had the opportunity to mentor (formally or informally) and what was/is that like for you?

5. Tell me about the relationships you have at work. Tell me about some of the social things you do with the people at your work. How often do you meet together socially? How often do you contact each other?

6. How do your relationships at work contribute to your sense of meaning in your work and in life?

7. As you reflect on your work in education, what long-term effects have your work relationships had on you, your approach to your work, or to your life in general?

8. What is the result of your work being meaningful on your life?

9. Tell me about a time when you felt your actions at work positively impacted someone else and made work more meaningful for you and/or them.

10. What impact do the students your district serves have on your sense of meaning in your work?

CLOSING

Is there anything else you'd like to share before we end our time together?

Would you like a copy of the findings when we are finished with the analysis?