

2019

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### Recommended Citation

Turner, K., & Thielking, M. (2019). How Teachers Find Meaning in their Work and Effects on their Pedagogical Practice. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(9). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2019v44n9.5>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol44/iss9/5>

## How Teachers Find Meaning in their Work and the Effects on their Pedagogical Practice

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*Abstract: This study addresses a gap in current literature by applying a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how teachers with a calling orientation perceive meaning in their work. A calling orientation has been defined by Wrzesniewski, et al. (1997) as a commitment to one's work as it contributes to the greater good and makes the world a better place. Individuals' perception of participation in meaningful work has been closely linked to subjective wellbeing. The current study revealed that teachers' reported that they found meaning in their work through having an impact on their students' lives and through positive relationships with students and colleagues. However, there was an incongruence between activities that teachers find meaningful and the actual activities that they perform daily in their roles. Supporting teachers to find meaning in their work and to engage in meaningful work activities may serve to improve teacher wellbeing.*

### Introduction

This paper reports a portion of the findings of a larger phenomenological study which examined teachers' experiences of using positive psychology strategies to improve their wellbeing. How teachers found meaning in their work is the theme of this paper. This study uses a phenomenological approach to address a gap in current literature and aims to facilitate a better understanding of the dimensions of meaningful work for teachers. The results of this study provide direction for future research and can be used to support interventions that will increase and support meaningful work for teachers. In turn, this may lead to improvements in teachers' subjective wellbeing.

In 1959, Viktor Frankl asserted that striving to find meaning in life is, for human beings, a primary motivation (Frankl, 1959). Subsequently, research has confirmed that finding meaning in life is a well-established route to psychological wellbeing (Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli, & Waldman, 2009; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005; Steger, Kashdan, & Oshi, 2008). In the field of positive psychology, meaning is one of the five key elements of wellbeing (Seligman, 2012). Leading researcher in positive psychology Seligman (2012) describes wellbeing as a construct that includes the elements of positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and accomplishment. The five components of wellbeing are commonly referred to as 'PERMA'. Whilst cultural variations in the prescribed five building blocks of wellbeing may exist (e.g., Khaw & Kern, 2014) this multidimensional construct has been shown to be positively associated with better work and life outcomes in teachers (e.g., Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2014) and to correlate highly with other established measures of wellbeing (e.g., Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan, & Kauffman, 2017). Meaning, as defined in this paper, is the 'M' in PERMA, and is the subjective experience of

belonging to, or serving something which you believe is bigger than yourself (Seligman, 2012).

Previous studies have revealed that an individuals' ability to find meaning in their work has important benefits for both the individual and the organisation they work for. Researchers have found that individuals who find meaning in their work report increased workplace motivation and wellbeing (Damásio, de Melo, & da Silva, 2013; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012) and greater engagement in work (Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000; Fourie & Deacon, 2015). Individuals also experience greater professional commitment (De Klerk, 2005), improved work performance and enhanced job satisfaction (Bonebright et al., 2000).

Recently, there has been a call for qualitative research to be conducted in the field of positive psychology (e.g., Rich, 2017) to facilitate in-depth knowledge of individuals' experiences of wellbeing, such as finding meaning in work. Furthermore, Steger et al. (2012) in their development of a scale to measure the dimensions of subjectively meaningful work, highlighted the need for future research to clarify the experiential aspects of meaningful work. Rich (2017), notes a need for methodological diversification within the field of positive psychology. In particular he calls for qualitative research methods to facilitate depth of knowledge in this field. Similarly, Wrzesniewski (2003) expounds that the domain of work is a rich area for research around the meaning that people derive from their work, emphasising a need for understanding of individuals' experiences of meaning in work.

## **Work Orientation**

Sperry (2011) draws from the work of Bellah et al., (1985) to describe work orientation as "one's view and attitude toward work as determined by intrinsic values and aspirations and the experience of working" p. 163. Research has found that people have three basic orientations to their work. Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), in their study of 196 United States university employees, found that people view their work as either a job, a career, or a calling. A job is done for a paycheck, the work is not an end in itself but instead is a means for acquiring the resources needed to enjoy time away from the job (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). With a career orientation, the overarching goal is to maximize income, social status, power, and prestige in their occupation (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). A calling is a commitment to the work because it contributes to the greater good and makes the world a better place, the work is fulfilling in its own right (Wrzesniewski, et al., 1997). Dik and Duffy (2009) describe the central tenet of a calling orientation as "connecting an individual's activity within that role to a larger framework of meaning and purpose" p. 440. From a positive psychology perspective, having meaning and purpose in life is a key ingredient of wellbeing (Seligman, 2012).

There are many known benefits for individuals and organisations when people have a calling orientation to their work. People with calling orientations invest more time at work, report higher life satisfaction, and are more likely to be optimistic, conscientiousness and have a positive outlook on life (Wrzesniewski, 2002). Steger and Dik (2009), in their quantitative study of 231 United States undergraduate students, found that people who approached their careers as a calling reported greater meaning in life, life satisfaction, and career decision-making efficacy. In addition, they reported fewer depressive symptoms than people who did not approach their work as a calling.

The relationship between a calling work orientation and career success was also demonstrated by Xie et al. (2016) in their study of 832 Chinese workers. Xie et al. (2016) found that having a calling orientation had significant, positive effects on work engagement

and career satisfaction. Likewise, Hall and Chandler (2005), in their case study of a career as a calling, find that people with a calling orientation reported the highest life and job satisfaction and lower work absenteeism. Further, Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), study of 196 United States university employees, found that workers who held a calling orientation, also had greater productivity, higher life satisfaction, and were more likely to be optimistic and conscientiousness.

Having a calling orientation is not dependent on an individual's occupation. To illustrate, Wrzesniewski (2002) offers the example of a physician who only wants to make a good income as opposed to the garbage collector who sees his or her work as making the world a cleaner and healthier place. A calling orientation refers to the way in which individuals approach their work rather than to the actual content of the job, as such, a calling orientation may be present in any career domain (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Individuals who approach their work as a calling often craft their jobs in ways that allow them to experience their work as meaningful, often in a manner that contributes to others' well-being (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Those with a calling orientation imbue their work with personal and social meaning, perceiving it as intrinsically enjoyable and as making valuable contributions to society (Berg, Grant, & Johnson 2010; Willemse & Deacon, 2015; Wrzesniewski, 2003).

### **Teachers' Meaning in Work**

Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) first proposed that teachers are more likely to experience their work as a calling and to believe that it contributes to making the world a better place. However, few studies have examined the experiences, features and impacts of calling orientations in the teaching workforce. Willemse and Deacon (2015), in their quantitative study of 270 South African school teachers, examined the relationship between a sense of calling and work attitude, and to test if meaningful work mediated these two factors. Firstly, they discovered that teachers reported having a search for calling (seeking calling in work activities) and/or a presence of calling (static phenomenon of a calling being already present). Furthermore, attitudes towards teaching improved when teachers with a sense of calling (both search of and presence of) indicated that their work was meaningful. They suggest that when teachers view their work as a calling and perceive their work as meaningful they are more likely to have a positive workplace attitude.

It appears that having a calling orientation is closely linked with Seligman's (2012) wellbeing dimension of M in PERMA (meaning), in that deriving a sense of purpose at work makes work a meaningful activity (Dik and Duffy, 2009) and may in fact contribute to wellbeing. In an Australian qualitative study of the meaning that teachers derive from educating trauma-affected students, Brunzell, Stokes and Waters (2018) argued for the development of pedagogies that incorporate domains of meaning that teachers bring to their work with trauma-affected students in order to reduce burnout and stress and improve teacher wellbeing.

Brunzell et al. (2018), Steger et al. (2012), and Wrzesniewski (2003) all highlighted the lack of research surrounding teachers' perception of meaning in their work and called for further research to be undertaken. To date, no studies have been located by the researchers that examine the pedagogical implications of teachers having calling orientations. This study is unique and addresses a gap in current knowledge around how teachers find meaning in their work and the effect of this on their teaching practice and student learning.

## Method

This research took a qualitative phenomenological approach to address a gap in current literature and answer the following research questions: (1) In what ways do teachers find meaning in their work? (2) How does this effect their pedagogical practice?

### Participants and Setting

Approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee and the Victorian State Government, Department of Education and Training. The researchers used typical sampling to select five primary schools in Victoria, Australia ensuring that the schools chosen varied in their geographical location and size of their student population. A researcher then contacted the principals of these schools for informed consent to conduct the study with one of the teachers in the school. The principals were asked to inform their staff of the study through email or in a staff meeting and ask any teacher who may be interested to contact the researcher. Teacher informed consent was then obtained. All participants who expressed interest in participating in the study were included. In the interest of anonymity, pseudonyms will be used.

'Kate' is the first teacher in this study, she has been teaching for seven years. Kate works in a government primary school, which has 520 students. She currently teaches a Year One class. Kate worked in a corporate occupation for seven years prior to becoming a teacher. She decided to return to university to study teaching as she was looking for more meaning in her work. Kate stated she had very positive experiences with learning as a child and has fond memories of her teachers and parents encouraging, supporting and empowering her to learn. Kate said she has had great mentors along her career and feels that she is a valued member of her current teaching team. Kate was self-identifying as having a calling orientation to her work.

'Ava' is the second teacher in this study, she has been teaching for two years. Ava works in a government Preparatory to Year Twelve school, which has 950 students. She currently teaches a Year Five and Year Six combined class. Ava stated that she had "a difficult childhood," and reflects "no-one showed me how to break my family cycle or helped me to get out of those difficult circumstances." Ava stated that she had to, "grow up and become independent quickly," having to, "figure out a lot of things by myself." Ava shared that most of the students in her class also experience a difficult childhood and that she enjoys working in this school because she knows she can make a difference by motivating and empowering her students to make a better life for themselves. Ava has previously used the 'reflecting on positive aspects of the day' strategy to help her students to have a positive mindset, but has not used it for herself. She stated that she has an interest in student wellbeing. Ava self identifies as having a calling orientation to her work.

'Steph' is the third teacher in this study, she has been teaching for four years. Steph works in a government primary school, which has 240 students. She currently teaches a Year Four class. Steph stated that her top priority in teaching is to build quality relationships with her students. She said she believes that if the students feel valued, then they will be much more ready to learn. Steph explained, "I really enjoy forming strong bonds with my students and making each school day as enjoyable as it can possibly be." She self identifies as having a calling orientation to her work.

'Naomi' is the fourth teacher in this study, she has been teaching for fifteen years. Naomi works in a government school which has 300 students enrolled. She currently teaches a Year Five class. Naomi explains that she completed a Bachelor degree in another discipline

and worked in a corporate job for nine years before deciding that she wanted to become a teacher. She was motivated by making a difference in her students' lives. Naomi explained that she still loves spending her days working with young people but feels that the education system and curriculum outcomes are no longer meeting the needs of today's students. Naomi is concerned at how busy educators have become in trying to meet all the demands placed on teachers. She is interested in student wellbeing and runs a 'Respectful Relationships' program in her class as well as using mindfulness and meditation in her classroom to support her students in feeling calm. Naomi self identifies as having a calling orientation to her work.

'Jayde' is the fifth teacher in this study, she has been teaching for four years. Jayde works in a government primary school, which has 180 students. She currently teaches a combined Years Preparatory and Year One class. Jayde stated that she loves teaching and feels blessed to be working in this school where she has been given a lot of opportunities, such as completing additional training as a mathematics specialist and training one of the school's sports teams. Jayde previously participated in a professional development workshop which raised awareness of her own character strengths but she has not used them in her teaching practice. She self identifies as having a calling orientation to her work.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This research took a qualitative phenomenological approach to obtain a view of participants' life-world. This research approach is useful in understanding and describing a specific phenomenon, and in reaching an understanding of the essence of participants' lived experience of the phenomenon (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Moustakas, 1994; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). In phenomenological studies, the major data gathering method involves in-depth interviews with participants (Creswell, 2007). Five is an acceptable number of participants in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007).

Each teacher participant was interviewed three times. The first involved a screening interview to determine participants' suitability for inclusion in this study. Specifically, the researchers were seeking participants who self-identified as having a calling orientation toward their work. Phenomenological research requires a relatively homogenous group of participants who all have similar experience with the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2007).

The purpose of the second interview was to ask the teachers to consciously look for meaning in their work each day for fifteen days. A pre-developed script was used by the researcher to ensure standardisation across all participants. This script included an explanation of the concept of 'meaning' and 'work orientation', as defined by Wrzesniewski et al. (1997). Participants were then asked to share their understanding through the provision of examples. Through this discussion the researcher was able to ensure the participant understood what they were being asked to do. Teachers were then asked to write a daily reflection for fifteen working days based on their reflections of how they found meaning in their work that day.

Participants were interviewed for the third and final time after fifteen consecutive teaching days of consciously looking for and recording meaning in their work. A semi-structured interview approach was employed (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In line with 'meaning' and 'calling orientation' as defined by Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), teachers were asked questions such as 'how did you find meaning in your work?'; 'in what ways does your work make the world a better place?'; and 'did consciously looking for meaning in your work change your teaching practice?' All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data were first analysed using phenomenological reduction in which the data is reduced to the constituent parts of the phenomenon (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). The constituent parts were then clustered into themes defined as the “core themes of the experience” of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). In this study the core themes were: teaching practice, student learning, relationships with students, and relationships with colleagues.

The data from the interviews and written reflections were then compared to achieve data convergence and to develop a clear representation of the participants’ experience of the phenomena. Descriptions of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon were constructed using verbatim excerpts from their interviews and written reflections. This facilitates the understanding of participants’ experiences (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015).

Reliability was ensured by cross checking participants’ written reflections with their interview statements. Where necessary, the participants were asked further questions to clarify the researchers’ understanding of the participant’s experiences. Validity was addressed through presenting the participants’ background information and experiences to enable readers to understand how the data was interpreted. Two sets of data were collected from each participant (daily written reflections and semi-structured interviews), to enable the researchers to compare the information and to eliminate any inconsistencies. Further, both researchers independently analysed the data to ensure validity.

## **Results and Discussion**

In this section, findings of this study will be presented, discussed, and where relevant literature is available, comparisons will be made. Many of the findings of this study are unique and to date, in that the researchers have not been able to locate other similar studies to compare the findings of this study.

### **Multiple Sources of Meaning in Work**

All teachers in this study shared multiple sources of meaning in their work. For example, Ava found meaning through helping her students experience personal, emotional and social success; providing social support to her colleagues; and focusing on the positive aspects of each day. Kate found meaning through helping her students to love learning; being flexible in her expectations of students; working with colleagues; and looking for positive aspects in each day. Naomi found meaning through conversations with her students, helping students learn to manage their own learning and tending to her students’ wellbeing. Jayde found meaning through supporting her students’ learning, promoting physical fitness to her students and attending professional development activities. Steph found meaning through ensuring her students know that being a good and kind person is important, supporting her students to take responsibility for their learning, and building relationships with students and colleagues.

As discussed in the following sections, all teachers found meaning through having a positive impact on students’ lives, providing their students with classroom learning opportunities, improving their pedagogical knowledge, relationships with students, providing social support to their colleagues and consciously noticing what was going well.

This supports findings from Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) who in their review of the sources and mechanisms of meaning at work, expound that individuals are likely to draw from multiple sources. By finding multiple sources of meaning in their work,

participants in this study were able to find meaning every day. If one of their sources of meaning was missing from their work environment on any given day, then they still had other sources of meaning to draw from. Further, meaning was often enhanced when sources of meaning combined. For example, collaborative work with a colleague resulting in students having an enjoyable learning experience was particularly meaningful for participants. So too, both Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) and Rosso et al. (2010) found that meaningfulness of work is enhanced through the combination or alignment of these multiple sources of meaning.

### Positive Impact on Students' Lives

In the context of this study, all teachers found meaning through having a positive impact on students' lives in ways which extend beyond the classroom. For example, Ava explains that helping students to experience personal, emotional and social success is meaningful for her:

*'Helping kids have success, not just academically, but also personal, emotional and social success is meaningful. These students really need positive influences from school in order to develop positive values in their life. Some of these students do not have this at home and this really adds a lot more meaning to the term 'teacher'. We are more than that and often are their only support system. I am trying to embed a sense of confidence and ability in my students. Education acts as their portal to great things and it is our job as teachers to guide them through this portal.'*

So too Steph offers an example of finding meaning through having a positive impact on her students' lives. She explains that she finds it meaningful to:

*'Give the students the skills to contribute to society in a meaningful way. For example, making sure that they know that being a good and kind person is important. Inspiring them to strive to do their best in all situations and teaching them to manage stress. I want to get the best out of every child.'*

Another example of finding meaning through having a positive impact on students' lives comes from Jayde. She explains that she finds meaning through promoting fitness to her students during an extra-curricular activity:

*'Training the energy breakthrough team is one of the extra-curricular activities that I run outside of my classroom teaching practice. This year I have dedicated myself to supporting the team and this makes the early mornings which are involved feel worthwhile. I was so proud of the team this morning, even though they were exhausted they all pushed themselves further than I have seen them do this year. The energy felt like a real team and I could see the smiles on their faces, showing how proud they were of themselves. It is these moments as a teacher that I don't take for granted and is why I love being a teacher. Starting the day on this positive note, allowed me to bring this positivity, fun and humour into my classroom for the rest of the day and my classroom students benefited from this also. It also gives me the chance to promote fitness, something that I feel very passionate about and enjoy myself. When training the energy breakthrough team, I am hoping that I am encouraging them to see the benefits in exercise. Not only is their fitness improving but they are also telling me that they are enjoying exercise and sports outside of school.'*



Naomi offered the following example of finding meaning through providing students with the tools that they will need in order to navigate the world:

*'Having real conversations with students where I feel like I am providing them with the tools that they will need in order to navigate the world is meaningful. I model the importance of lifelong learning. I use my life experience and wisdom to help equip them for the future, providing them with life-long learning skills such as the process of managing their own learning, makes teaching meaningful to me. It's not about how fast they can recite the times tables, I'm coming from wellbeing first. My calling is how do I equip students for this world so that they are positive and resilient? I strongly believe that wellbeing, mindfulness and meditation are skills we need to be teaching children. When I teach these skills I feel like I am answering 'the calling' that drew me to this profession in the first place, it's my passion and provides me with purpose in my career.'*

Kate found meaning by helping students to identify what makes them unique:

*'Helping the kids identify what makes them unique, who they are as a person, their strengths, and weaknesses. I want to inspire my students in a way that is memorable and changes something for them. To teach them to love learning, motivate them to be the best they can be, help them learn to be happy and set them up for success in life.'*

All teachers' perceptions of how they find meaning in their work included providing their students with classroom learning opportunities that the teachers perceived as meaningful. For example, Kate explains that she found meaning in being flexible in her classroom requirements which enabled her to support a student's intrinsic motivation:

*'I found meaning in my work today by being flexible and allowing a student to choose what he wanted to write about. He then wrote more than he usually would. This impacted my teaching practice as it reminded me that it is ok for students to write about anything, especially reluctant writers and that I need to encourage any writing they seem interested in doing. You can't push students to write, rather you need to help them find that intrinsic motivator that makes them want to 'have a go.'*

Naomi found meaning when classroom activities supported deep learning:

*'I found meaning in my work in making the process of learning explicit and giving students time to achieve a depth of learning. Creating opportunities in the day for students to pause and connect with how they are feeling in the process of learning, as well as what strategies they have in place to manage their learning, felt powerful and meaningful. Having a rich task (creating board games) provided many learning opportunities for all the students. Teaching students that mistakes are ok and how to have a growth mindset is important.'*

In another reflective journal entry Naomi explained that she found meaning through empowering her students:

*'A student asked why we needed to be doing the writing task we were doing. This student said 'but when we're texting we're not going to write like that.' Then another student stood straight up and said 'Yeah...he's right!' It was really powerful for me because it was them questioning how the curriculum is relevant to them, and knowing they felt safe to do so. We had a discussion about the purpose of writing and of giving them the knowledge so they are in a position to understand how language works. This is exactly how I find meaning in my work: to empower these children through education.'*

Jayde explains that she found meaning in asking the students questions to support their deeper thinking and metacognition abilities, whilst, Steph found meaning in using pedagogical practices that were supportive of building students' sense of confidence, feeling valued and having agency in the classroom:

*'I have formed a really nice partnership with my students where they are taking more responsibility for their learning. This has enabled more student agency in my classroom. For example, I enabled six students to teach the class throughout the day. This required them to be organised, communicate effectively and be able to think on their feet. My allowing the students this responsibility and privilege symbolises my trust in their abilities. It made the students feel valued and boosted their confidence levels.'*

Ava found meaning in teaching her students values such as gratitude:

*'In class we are talking about gratitude, I just leave the word 'Gratitude' up there so, when they're feeling glum I say, 'Right let's have a think what are we grateful for.' Father's Day is coming up on Sunday and that can be really quite a touchy subject for a lot of the students in here and I understand that because I don't have dad either. So, I talked to them about appreciating what you have actually got at home, like having someone at home who does two jobs, I think being open with my life experiences really helps them and allows them to see that I'm not a robot, I have feelings.'*

These findings are reflected in previous research which demonstrates that 'task significance' or the perception that one's work positively benefits others is one of the strongest predictors of meaningful work. Schnell, Höge and Pollet (2013) conducted a study of 197 Austrian employees aiming to identify the predictors of meaning in work. They concluded that task significance makes a substantial contribution to a sense of meaning in work. Seeing one's work as being of importance to others appears to be highly advantageous for meaningful work (Schnell, Höge and Pollet, 2013). In a longitudinal study of 632 United States working adults (including 11 teachers), Allan (2017) examined whether task significance predicts meaningful work over time. This study found that perceiving one's work as helping others, contributing to the greater good or improving the welfare of others, leads to the perception that it is personally meaningful, important, and valuable (Allan, 2017).

In the context of teaching, Fourie and Deacon (2015), in their phenomenological study of South African secondary school teachers, found that three quarters of their participants described finding meaning through having a positive impact or influence on their students. In addition, Yinon and Orland-Barak (2017) in their qualitative study of teacher attrition in Israel, found that teachers with a calling orientation are driven by a commitment toward fulfilling their sense of meaningfulness derived from a desire to make a difference in the lives of others. Brunzell et al.'s (2018) qualitative study of 18 teachers from Australian schools identified as having trauma-affected students within their cohorts, found that teachers stated their work was made meaningful through their pedagogical attempts to incorporate wellbeing into daily academic instruction. They concluded that there may be a direct relationship between implementing effective pedagogical practice and increasing teachers' perceptions of performing meaningful work.

### **Meaning Comes from Improving Pedagogical Knowledge**

All teachers in this study reported finding meaning through improving their pedagogical knowledge and learning from colleagues. Kate explains that she found meaning in professional discussions with her colleagues and in being able to contribute her ideas:

'I found meaning in my work when my colleagues and I bounced ideas off each other and shared our planners at our professional development day. We asked questions, answered questions, helped each other and looked at different programs. I learned lots. I feel like it is meaningful because I can contribute my own ideas without being criticised.'

Kate also reflected that making ongoing improvements in her lesson planning practices was meaningful:

*'I am still learning how to communicate and teach with more depth and enrichment. I found meaning in my work today by being thoroughly prepared for my lessons which impacted my teaching in ways that I never thought it would. By researching extra facts that I could confidently share with the students I had their full attention and I noticed myself making connections to previous lessons and concepts taught.'*

Similarly, Jayde comments that a professional development day was meaningful because it allowed to her work collaboratively and learn from her colleagues:

*'I found today very meaningful. Our professional development day allowed me to work with staff members I wouldn't normally get to work with. This is my fourth year of teaching and I'm constantly wanting to learn so, being able to take advice and learn from teachers who have been teaching for a long time is meaningful. I really enjoy that and really appreciate their advice.'*

Few studies could be located that reported on the relationship between teachers' perception of meaning in their work and improvement in their pedagogical practice. Fourie and Deacon (2015) conducted a phenomenological study of 20 South African secondary school teachers. Whilst their study did not address improvement in pedagogical practice, they did find that 80% of their participants mentioned transfer of knowledge and helping students to understand concepts as being meaningful aspects of their work. In a non-teaching context, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) reported that their participants found meaning in aspiring for improvement and noted that research was scarce on this topic.

### **Meaning Arising from Positive Relationships with Students**

All teachers in this study found meaning in their relationships with students. For example, Steph explains that she finds meaning through building relationships with her students and supporting them in feeling valued and trusted:

*'Each day on the way to school I thought about, 'how do I find meaning from work' and I realised that I find meaning through building relationships with my students and making them feel valued and trusted. Building relationships with students is my strength as a teacher, it is something I have always done well, I am very close with my students. It makes me feel good to know that every single student in this class has a joke with me on a weekly basis and comes and tells me things. It's a really special bond and a partnership. That's what's most important to me and because I really reflected on it made me feel good.'*

Four of the teachers in this study reported that they found it meaningful when their students were having fun and enjoying their learning. These teachers perceived that their relationships with students were strengthened through supporting their students to have fun and enjoy learning. Steph stated:

*'The students had a really fun day with lots of laughs, games and bonding. I feel like these activities strengthened the relationships between students and made*

*the students really enjoy their time at school. This makes me feel really positive about my role as their teacher.'*

Ava also stated that she found meaning in her relationships with students:

*'I use my relationships with the kids to help them. There are few kids here that are really needy and sometimes three quarters of your job is being a psychologist. So, using some of my strengths, like humour, kindness and generosity to build relationships with my students has helped me to find more meaning in my teaching, because at this school it's more than just teaching.'*

Interestingly very few previous studies could be found on the relationship between teachers' perception of meaning at work and their relationships with students. Fourie and Deacon (2015) found that three quarters of the teachers participating in their study referred to positive relationships and interaction with the learners as an important factor contributing to their meaning in work. There is a paucity of research around teachers' perception of meaning in work and their relationships with students. However, as discussed in the next section, more literature is available around teachers' perception of meaning in work and their relationship with their colleagues.

### **Providing Social Support to Colleagues Creates Meaning**

All teachers reported that providing social support to their colleagues was meaningful. For example, Jayde explained that she found meaning through offering support to a student teacher. Ava gave the following example:

*'A colleague has been absent due to illness, she went to hospital suddenly and needed someone to plan her lessons. I took this upon myself to do and ensured that her class were cared for. This filled me with a good feeling knowing that I was helping someone who really needed it.'*

The relationship between prosocial behaviour and having a calling orientation has been evidenced in previous studies. Wrzesniewski (2003) in her studies of calling orientations in the workplace reported that individuals with calling orientations engaged differently with their colleagues. These individuals reported greater identification with, and commitment to, their team of colleagues and experienced less conflict with their colleagues. Dik, Duffy and Eldridge (2009) found that appreciative and collaborative social interactions among colleagues instilled a sense of belonging and was associated with a high potential for meaningfulness and individual wellbeing. So too, Schnell, Höge and Pollet (2013) found that the way colleagues interacted and supported each other was of importance for the perception of work as meaningful. In addition, researchers such as Grant, Dutton and Rosso (2008) and Rosso et al. (2010) have affirmed that relationships with colleagues can have a strong influence on an individual's sense of meaning at work. Fourie and Deacon (2015) found that half of the teachers participating in their study indicated that they attained meaning from supportive relationships with colleagues. For these reasons, having team members with a calling orientation has benefits to group and organisational outcomes (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

### **Noticing Positive Aspects of their Work Improves Meaning**

All teachers in this study found meaning in consciously noticing what was going well. Kate reflected:

*'Before I started the study I was aware that there are some things that I do well, but I wasn't really unpacking them. Unpacking them in my daily reflections had*

*an impact, because it made me appreciate myself a bit more and notice the good things that I have done. I learned more about myself along the way, about my strengths and my relationships. It made me feel good about myself. I am probably a bit happier coming to school now and a bit more enthusiastic. I am being kinder to myself and I am a lot more positive about my teaching and in my mindset. Noticing what I am doing well has empowered me to change what I am not doing so well. After reflecting I might change a lesson a bit for the next day. My vision is more expanded, I am looking for the positives, I am more mindful of what is working and am noticing what I am doing well.'*

So too, Ava explained:

*'The days are hard here, they are very challenging and it can be overwhelming. Focusing on the tiny things that went well each day helped me to get through, because the tiny things built up and then overtook all the negative that might have been happening.'*

In addition, Naomi explained:

*'I am starting to see this process of reflection as beneficial because it provides me with some acknowledgment of how much I do every day. It gives me a moment to celebrate my successes. I am acknowledging my abilities in myself and not looking for as much external validation. This is important.'*

A review of current literature, failed to reveal any previous studies on the relationship between teachers perception of meaning in work and them consciously noticing the positive aspects of their work. This study has identified this as a gap in current knowledge.

This study also attempted to explore how teachers consciously finding meaning in their work effected their pedagogical practice.

### **Looking for Meaning Changed Teachers Pedagogical Practice**

All teachers in this study observed that consciously looking for meaning changed their pedagogical practice. To illustrate, Steph stated that through the practice of looking for meaning in her work, she has consciously spent more one-on-one time with her students:

*'Looking for meaning has changed my teaching. I have spent more time consciously building relationships with my students and having one-on-one conferences with students. As a result, some of the students became more confident, taking more risks with their learning, becoming more engaged in learning and being more confident in sharing their work. By making time to speak one-on-one with each student about their Maths, I felt that I was able to give really specific feedback and gain a deeper understanding into how the students are feeling. Giving them positive feedback about their learning capabilities boosted their confidence. I also did a survey with the students that included questions about their feelings of belonging and feeling valued These responses will help me to understand how my students are feeling and will hopefully enable me to build even stronger relationships with them. I definitely think my relationships have strengthened. The better my relationships are, the more important I see my role as a teacher.'*

Similarly, in looking for meaning in her work, Naomi discovered that she can find personal meaning by making learning more meaningful for her students. This led to her engaging more closely with her students and becoming more student centred in her pedagogical approach:

*'I tried to make learning meaningful and relevant to students. My practice was relaxed, we had fun doing various learning activities throughout the day.'*

Changes in teachers' pedagogical practice as a result of them consciously looking for meaning in their work, may be described as teachers 'crafting' their job. Job crafting can be defined as the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Individuals crafting their work to make it more personally meaningful has been observed by previous researchers. Employees do not simply impute meaning from the characteristics of their jobs, but instead proactively design or redesign the task and relational boundaries of their jobs in order to shape the meaning of their work (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010; Leana, Appelbaum, & Shevchuk, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Research on job crafting emphasises the personal agency exercised by employees in shaping the meaning of their work by actively crafting their jobs and the social environment to fit their personal goals, skills, and values (Berg et al., 2010; Rosso et al., 2010). Peral and Geldenhuys (2016) studied the relationship between job crafting and subjective wellbeing amongst 251 South African high school teachers finding that teachers who crafted their work experienced an increased perception of meaning at work.

### **Incongruence Between Meaningful Activities and Actual Activities**

Findings from this study highlight the contrast between the demands of teachers' workloads and the ways in which teachers find meaning in their work. To illustrate, Steph commented that looking for meaning helped her to gain perspective on what are the most important aspects of teaching:

*'Looking for meaning has helped me to gain perspective and think about what is the most important part of my job. I focused on looking at all of my students having a great time and performing well academically. I reminded myself not to focus on the constant 'to do' list because I was never going to get through it. Reflecting on what went well instantly lifted my mood and made me feel calmer. I wasn't so focused on the content because I knew that it's more important that the students are enjoying their learning, feeling valued and having choice and power in the classroom. I am really happy with what I have been doing. I felt a bit less stressed and overwhelmed by the curriculum content because I know it is not the most important thing to me.'*

In another comment Steph demonstrated agency by prioritising individually meaningful activities over administrative work:

*'I find that I am actively looking for more opportunities to strengthen my relationships with colleagues. I am focussing how I support my colleagues drawing on my character strengths of kindness and teamwork. This has made me feel really positive about myself, impacting on my colleagues and sometimes lessening their workload. I have prioritised strengthening my relationships over completing more administration work. I definitely think my relationships have strengthened and I feel like I have gotten to know a wider range of colleagues. Relationships are the most important thing to me, so I am feeling less overwhelmed by administrative workload and more positive about my role as a teacher.'*

Kate reflected that looking for positives in herself helped her to look for positives in the students:

*'I guess because I am looking for positives in myself, I am looking for positives in the students too. So, I have stepped back little and I am more positive, I am not getting so caught up in what they need to do. Sometimes you get really dug*

*down in data and caught up in this expectation where everything has to be done and ticked off and you forget the real authentic parts of learning. Instead, I have been thinking about how to help my students to actually shine or grow in some way.'*

Naomi reflected that looking for meaning helped her to find her calling again:

*'I was really grateful for the opportunity to find my calling again, when you're at the coal face it can 'wear off.' How do teachers discern on a day to day basis what is important and at the same time simultaneously meet all the students' learning needs, expectations of the parents and the criteria of the annual implementation plan and the department. It's impossible actually. There was a real shift in meaning for me because reflecting on what is meaningful for me made me appreciate what I have and fine tune what it is that I want to add.'*

Whilst not directly related to the context of teaching, Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) also found that when participants looked for meaning in their work they began to notice discrepancies and mismatches between their ideal reality and the current reality. They suggest that organisational practices should be developed to assist individuals to engage with such tensions in meaningful ways. Rather than pretending that everything is okay (inauthenticity), meaningful work is often based on an authentic engagement with the often less than perfect reality (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).

## **Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations**

This study applied a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand how teachers with a calling orientation perceive meaning in their work. The findings from this study may be applicable in other similar contexts, both nationally and internationally. In the context of this study, teachers found meaning in their work in the following ways:

1. Having a positive impact in students' lives in ways which extend beyond the classroom. For example, teachers found meaning in tending to their students wellbeing, ensuring that students know that kindness is important and helping students to experience personal, emotional and social success.
2. Through providing students with classroom learning opportunities which the teachers perceived as meaningful. For example, teachers found meaning in building students confidence, helping students to feel valued, supporting student agency and teaching students to think deeply.
3. Ongoing improvement in their pedagogical practices. Teachers found meaning in professional discussions with colleagues, contributing ideas in team discussions and working collaboratively with colleagues.
4. Building positive relationships with students and creating experiences where students have fun and enjoy their learning.
5. Providing social support to colleagues.
6. Noticing positive aspects in their workplace.

In addition, this study found that teachers derived meaning in work through multiple sources. Often these sources of meaning would combine to increase teachers' feelings of meaning. Alternatively, when one source of meaning was temporarily absent, teachers would shift their focus to another source of meaning. Although not specifically addressing teachers' meaning in work, Rosso et al. (2010) and Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) also found that meaning at work is enhanced through the presence of multiple sources of meaning.

When teachers in this study were asked to consciously look for meaning in their work they reported that it changed their pedagogical practice. Teachers stated that they focused

more on building relationships with their students, spending more one-on-one time with students and ensuring that classroom activities were meaningful, relevant and fun for their students. Teachers shared that they became more student centered in their pedagogical approach and sought to give their students more agency in the classroom. Teachers also provided evidence of beginning to craft their work environment to make it more personally meaningful for them. For example, one teacher prioritised providing social support to colleagues over administrative tasks. Another teacher sought to give her students agency by allowing them to teach the class. Although not addressing teachers' meaning in work, Berg et al. (2010), Leana et al. (2009), Rosso et al. (2010) and Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) also found that individuals craft their work to make it more personally meaningful.

Providing teachers' with support to find meaning and craft their work may lead to improved teacher wellbeing outcomes. The perception of meaning in work is a well-established component of individual subjective wellbeing (Allan, Duffy & Collisson, 2018; Peterson, Park & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, 2012; Steger, Kashdan & Oishi, 2008). In addition, Bonebright et al. (2000), Duffy, Allan, Autin and Douglass (2014), Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) and Steger et al., (2012) all find that supporting individuals to identify meaning and craft their work, empowers them to tap into their agentic capabilities, improving their job satisfaction, productivity and wellbeing.

There is some incongruence between activities which teachers find meaningful and the actual activities which they perform daily. Teachers commented that positive relationships with students, students enjoying their learning, students feeling valued and students having choice in the classroom were more meaningful than 'ticking off' the curriculum requirements. This is particularly important under the growing concerns surrounding the 'crowded curriculum' (Australian Primary Principals Association, 2014; Comber, Woods, & Grant, 2017; Gonski et al., 2018; Hurst, 2015), as when teachers feel pressured to meet the demands of a crowded curriculum, they may forgo activities which are personally meaningful to them, such as taking time to build relationships with students. This reduced focus on meaningful work activities could negatively impact teacher wellbeing. In addition, teachers found relationships and collaboration with colleagues meaningful. This perhaps signals that teachers' wellbeing would benefit from greater time spent in 'team teaching' environments, rather than the traditional sole teacher per classroom approach. Further, all teachers found meaning in improving their pedagogical practice, possibly indicating that teacher wellbeing could be improved by enabling teachers to engage more frequently in professional development activities. One teacher signalled that having the opportunity to consider what was meaningful to her was valuable as often she is striving to do what has been deemed meaningful by other stakeholders such as, parents, school leadership and the local department of education. Giving teachers more agency to implement personally meaningful pedagogical practices in their classrooms may support an improvement in teacher wellbeing.

Limitations of this study include the short time frame and small number of participants. Further large scale studies which run over a longer period of time are recommended to confirm or add to the findings. Furthermore, all participants in this study were female, and future studies should also include male participants to ensure gender differences are captured. This small study only examined teachers with a self-identified calling orientation to work. Future research could also include teachers with job and career work orientations, and to compare sources of meaning for these groups.

This study responds to the call for further research around how teachers perceive and achieve meaning in their work. It addresses a gap in current literature by using a phenomenological approach to obtain a deep understanding of five teachers' experiential perception of meaning in their work and how this effects their teaching practice. The findings



of this study have implications for future research and in informing changes to pedagogical practices which are supportive of teacher wellbeing. For example, providing teachers with more agency to craft their work, to work collaboratively, to facilitate student agency in the classroom and to spend a greater amount of time working individually with students.

Individuals' perception of meaningful work has been closely linked to their subjective wellbeing. In fact, meaning is an integral component of Seligman's (2012) multidimensional PERMA wellbeing model. Supporting teachers to find meaning in their work may be expected to improve teacher wellbeing. Such a strategy may perhaps buffer the impact of the stressful nature of teaching. Findings from this study will inform future research into teacher perception of meaning in work and its effect on teachers' wellbeing and pedagogical practice.

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