Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Retention of Rural Special Education Teachers

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This article will compare the relationship between rural special educator retention and perceived organizational support. Research indicates that special educators identified administrative support as the primary contributor to retention (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). POS asserts that in exchange for the belief that the organization cares about them, employees demonstrate job dedication (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986). Therefore, it is likely that there will be a positive relationship between rural special educator retention and POS. Results relative to special educator retention and POS may provide invaluable information for future research and practice. The fore mentioned results may well assist rural school divisions in crafting teacher support programs and professional development for building level administrators as well as serve as a springboard for future research using various methodologies to test assumptions pertaining to rural special educator retention and POS.

Keywords: Perceived organizational support (POS), organizational support theory, retention, rural, special education teachers

Reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Act*, federal special education legislation, state all special education teachers must be highly qualified and fully certified in order to teach in our nation's public schools (Prater, 2005). Meeting this requirement has been difficult for rural school divisions because of the considerable attrition rate of special education teachers (Ludlow, 2002) which has been partially attributed to lack of administrative support (Billingsley, 2004). Therefore, administrative support may greatly affect rural special education teacher retention. Teacher retention is defined as a teacher remaining in the education profession, in the same position (e.g. special educator). The deficit of qualified special education teachers has greater implications beyond that of adhering to federal regulations as lack of qualified personnel adversely impact the instructional program for students with disabilities (Kaff, 2004).

Organizational psychology is a branch of psychology that applies psychological theories and research methods to study human behavior within organizations (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2009). Organizational support theory, one of the many theories related to organizational psychology, proposes that there is a reciprocal relationship between employees and their organization in which employees develop beliefs concerning the extent to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The employees' beliefs relative to the amount of care the organization has for the employee is known as perceived organizational support or POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Organizational support theory further indicates that POS will impact employees' level of commitment to the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Hence, this article will examine rural special education teacher retention via social psychology using organizational support theory and POS as the conceptual framework. Given current research that identifies lack of administrative support as a significant contributing factor in special education teacher attrition (Billingsley, 2004) and POS as an underlying principle of organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), it is predicted that there will be a positive relationship between POS and rural special education teacher retention.

Justification of Study

The shortage of rural special education teachers impacts one-third of the nation's children who receive their instruction in rural school divisions (Prater, 2005). A variety of factors that contribute to lack of special education teacher retention have been identified to include frustration with working conditions, lack of qualifications, fragmented state licensing systems, and high stress perceptions (CEC, 2000). However, lack of administrative support is an overarching theme that adversely impacts teacher retention (Billingsley, 2004). More specifically, Whitaker (2000) found that administrative and peer support is significant in retaining novice special education teachers. Therefore, a need exists to develop further understanding of the employee-employer relationship which can be analyzed through organizational psychology.

Literature Review

Organizational Support Theory

Organizational support theory proposes that in order to determine an organization's readiness to reward increased work effort and meet socio-emotional needs, employees develop a sense of POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The premise of organizational support theory is that employees personify organizations by assigning them human-like characteristics (Levinson, 1965). Furthermore, employees equate the actions of representatives of the organization to the organization itself (Levinson, 1965). Hence, favorable or unfavorable actions taken by representatives of the organization are interpreted as positive or negative views of the employee from the organization (Levinson, 1965).

Antecedents. Fairness, supervisor support, and organizational rewards and job conditions have been identified as antecedents of POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Fairness, the most influential contributor to POS, is comprised of two components: procedural fairness and social fairness (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Procedural fairness encompasses the organizations' reasonable distribution of resources among employees and the rules and policies that effect decisions that impact employees, whereas social fairness is the ability to treat employees in a respectful manner (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

The second most significant contributing factor that affects POS is supervisor support (Eisenbeger, Stinglhamber, & Vandenberghe, 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Perceived supervisor support (PSS) is the general view that employees' supervisors care about their well-being (Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988). The concept of PSS is connected to POS because employees conceptualize supervisors' views to be representative of the organization (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Additionally, supervisors' responsibilities to serve in an evaluative capacity under girds the belief that supervisors' views will be conveyed to upper management and ultimately impact the organization's view of the employee (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Finally, research indicates that PSS has more influence on POS when the supervisor is perceived to have high informal status in the organization (Eisenbeger et al., 2002).

Rewards and job conditions are the third antecedent for POS (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Examples of rewards and job conditions that impact POS include, but are not limited to, recognition pay and promotion, job security, autonomy, role stressors, training, and organization size (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The provision of rewards or recognition, knowledge that the organization wishes to continue future employment, freedom relative to how to carry out one's job, and the discretionary provision of training increases POS (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). However, the presence of stress that is perceived by the employee to be within the control of the organization and large organizational size lead to reduced POS (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Consequences. Like antecedents, there are multiple consequences of POS. Desire to remain at work, affective commitment, job satisfaction, felt obligation, and positive mood at work are consequences that have a strong positive relationship with POS (Eisenberger, Armeli, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Conversely, turnover intention and absenteeism has

a negative relationship with POS (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Comprehension of why the identified antecedents lead to POS and why certain consequences occur as a result of high POS may be increased with a general understanding of components of social exchange theory.

Organizational Support Theory, POS, and Social Exchange

Organizational support theory is cradled in the concept of reciprocity or social exchange (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). It is believed that if employees have strong POS they are more likely to reciprocate support with increased performance, commitment, and loyalty to the organization (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). The fore mentioned trade of effort and loyalty for tangible benefits and social rewards is termed *work* by social exchange theorists (Bateman & Organ, 1983) who believe that social behavior is the result of the exchange process (Cherry, 2011). Social exchange theorists also propose that resources received from others are more highly valued if the provision is made as a discretionary act as opposed to one that is required as a result of policies or procedures (Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher, 1992).

Akin to organizational support theory, many employees believe that there is a reciprocal obligation between them and their work organization that goes beyond the formal responsibilities for both parties (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997). The employees' implicit understanding that their employer will think of each of their needs when considering actions that will affect both the employer and the employee is frequently referred to as a psychological contract (Rouseau, 1989). The concept of a psychological contract within the framework of social exchange theory provides added information in understanding the relationship between employees and employers and supports the concept of organizational support theory. Research indicates that employees who have high exchange ideologies, demonstrated by their belief in psychological contracts, will often exhibit stronger relationships between POS and some of the

aforementioned consequences of high POS such as commitment, reduced absenteeism, and felt obligation when compared to those who have low exchange ideologies (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Eisenberger et al., 1986). Additionally, POS is strengthened by the discretionary provision of resources such as pay and promotion (Eisenberger et al., 1997; Eisenburger et al., 1986). In short POS can be better understood through the lens of organizational support theory with the understanding that organizational support theory is grounded in some fundamental principles of social exchange theory (Aselage & Eisengberger, 2003). Because of the emphasis on exchange in the employee-employer relationship and identified consequences of high POS, organizational support theory and POS can be used to examine teacher retention to further investigate how teachers' POS impact their commitment to schools.

Teacher Retention

Teaching is a relatively large professional occupation in the United States. However, the teaching occupation suffers from chronic and somewhat high annual turnover compared to other occupations (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Total teacher turnover encompasses teacher attrition, teachers totally leaving the teacher profession, and teacher migration, teachers moving from one teaching position to another (Ingersoll, 2003). For that reason, researchers and policy makers have expressed concern about the shortage of special education teachers (Zabel & Zabel, 2001). A national survey of over 1,000 special educators conducted by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) concluded: "Poor teacher working conditions contribute to the high rate of special educators leaving the field, teacher burnout, and substandard quality of education for students with special needs" ("CEC Launches Initiative on Special Education Teaching Conditions," 1998, p.2).

Special education teacher retention in rural areas. Attrition of special education teachers is a problem that plagues schools across the nation, but even more so in rural areas where the demands for qualified teachers are not met (Ludlow, 2002).

In fact, rural school systems face attrition rates as high as 100% every three years (National Rural Education Association, 2004). This astonishing attrition rate impacts a number of students because approximately 43% of all schools in the United States are located in rural areas or small towns and these schools educate about 31% of all of the students in our country (Rural School and Community Trust, 2003). Numerous studies have highlighted the chronic difficulties that rural districts face in recruiting and retaining special education personnel. (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005). Barriers to hiring and retaining special educators in rural areas include obstacles such as poor salaries, social isolation, multiple subject area responsibilities, lack of assistance or support for new teachers, and fewer opportunities to participate in professional development trainings (McClure, Redfield, & Hammer, 2003). Rural special education teachers are also hindered in their practice by geographic barriers that may add to the lack of educational and therapeutic specialists needed to assist students with disabilities (Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). Research indicates that consequences of special education teacher shortages are inadequate education experiences and reduced achievement levels for students with disabilities (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). Therefore, addressing special education teacher attrition is important because of the instructional implications for students with disabilities.

Special Education Teacher Retention and POS

Research on special education teacher retention, when reviewed in isolation, indicates lack of support as a significant contributing factor to special educator attrition (Billingsley, 2004). Boe, Barkanic, and Leow (1999) state that teachers who stay in their positions are almost four times more likely to perceive that they have experienced strong administrative support when compared to those who leave their positions. Additionally, research on POS indicates that consequences of low POS are lower levels commitment and felt obligation (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). As a result of the similarities between the reported causes of special education teacher attrition and the underlying principles of POS and

organizational support theory, it is likely that there will be a positive relationship between special education teacher retention and POS. The potential relationship between POS and rural special education teacher retention might lead one to believe that rural special educators who remain in the profession have high levels of POS while those who leave the profession or change roles have low levels of POS. The aforementioned hypothesis can serve as a springboard for future research and provide implications for professional practice.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between POS and rural special educator retention may provide a forum for additional discussion in the K-12 arena about how to provide additional support for both special educators and administrators in rural school divisions. Departments responsible for division-wide professional development might incorporate additional training for administrators on providing support to their special education staff who are often presented with challenges that may not be evident or as pronounced in other school divisions. The above mentioned training might encourage building administrators to do the following: provide additional opportunities for special educators to attend professional development, use of professional leave to afford special educators additional time to accomplish their varied tasks, and demonstrate a sense of fairness within the school. Human resources within rural school divisions might also use information about the hypothesized relationship between POS and special educator retention as a rationale to revisit new teacher programs. Central administration may want to ensure adequate support is embedded in the new teacher program for special educators via use of formal mentors, frequent meetings with immediate supervisors, and formative opportunities for teachers to provide feedback on their level of POS. Whereas the hypothesized relationship between POS and rural special educator retention creates many opportunities for future practice, additional empirical data is needed.

The hypothesized relationship between POS and rural special education teacher retention might be tested via a correlational study using novice rural special education teachers as participants. Researchers could obtain data relative to special educators' levels of POS and retention intentions utilizing instruments such as the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (University of Delaware, 1984) and the Special Educator Teacher Survey (Levine, 2001) to make the determination. If there is a positive relationship between POS and rural special educator retention, researchers may want to take their research a step further with a causal-comparative study to determine if high levels of POS lead to retention or if retention leads to high levels of POS. Both the correlational and casual-comparative study would add to the body of research on POS and rural special educator retention and inform future practice.

Conclusion

Data relative to organizational support theory and POS may increase understanding of retention of rural special education teachers. Previous research on rural special educator retention and POS suggest that there are numerous similarities between the fundamental concepts of POS and the connection between administrative support and rural special educator retention. Therefore, the hypothesis is that there will be a positive relationship between POS and rural special educator retention.

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