

The Teacher Satisfaction Project: The DECA Program's Effect on Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of using a strength-based approach to prevention in early childhood care and education settings on teachers' job satisfaction. Teachers who use many or all components of The DECA Program, a strength-based program designed to promote healthy social-emotional development in young children, reported greater job satisfaction compared to teachers using fewer or no components of this model. These findings indicate that using strength-based methods like The DECA Program may be an effective strategy to both enhance child outcomes and reduce dissatisfaction and turnover in early childhood settings. The results of this research may help early childhood providers begin to address the growing national concern about high teacher turnover in the field.

The DECA Program: Increasing Teacher Satisfaction in Early Childhood Education

Teacher turnover plagues the field of early childhood education with rates that are among the highest in the nation, estimated to be between 15-30% each year (Bloom, 1996; Whitebook & Sakai, 2003). High turnover presents a number of problems for the children in early childhood programs by interfering with consistency and effectiveness in the classroom. The *Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers* report (Helburn, 1995) notes that centers with low turnover rates had significantly higher quality ratings than those with more than 10% turnover per year. Todd & Deery-Schmitt (1996) conclude that job satisfaction is negatively correlated with job stress and turnover. That is, teachers who are unhappy are more likely to leave their jobs. Even when unsatisfied teachers stay in the classroom, it may have negative effects for students, in that unhappy teachers have been found to transfer that negative emotion to their students (Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-Waxler, 1985). Teacher satisfaction is a key element in providing high quality care to children.

Teachers indicate that one of their greatest sources of frustration is dealing with problem behaviors. In particular, teachers often feel a contradiction between their self-image as a nurturer and the need to serve as a disciplinarian, which can lead to feelings of role conflict and stress. In addition, teachers often feel apprehensive about talking to parents about their children's disruptive classroom behaviors. Strength-based approaches address these common sources of burnout by offering concrete strategies for preventing the development of behavior concerns and opportunities to discuss improvements with parents. This report presents The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) Program, one example of a strength-based prevention model that is designed to foster healthy social-emotional development in preschool-age children, and its relationship to teachers' job satisfaction. We hypothesized that teachers using The DECA Program would have greater job satisfaction than those

using typical problem-focused approaches, and that satisfaction will be proportional to the degree of program implementation.

Method

Participants

For this study, participants (n=34) are teachers in early childhood programs, half of whom currently use a strength-based method (The DECA Program) and half of whom do not. To control for such factors as personnel policies, pay scales, and program philosophies, researchers recruited DECA Program-users and non-users who were employed at different sites within the same program.

This preliminary analysis includes 34 participants, 19 of whom use The DECA Program and 15 of whom do not. Participants work at Head Start programs, not-for-profit child-care centers, for-profit centers, faith-based preschools, and lab schools at colleges.

Procedure

Participants completed a questionnaire on job satisfaction adapted with permission from Bloom's (2005) *Early Childhood Job Satisfaction Survey*, to assess satisfaction in the areas of *Co-worker Relations*, *Supervisor Relations*, *The Nature of the Work Itself*, *Working Conditions*, *Pay and Promotion Opportunities*, and *The Social-Emotional Development of Children*. Participants also provided basic information about their school, career, and (for those using The DECA Program) degree of program implementation.

Analysis

Satisfaction ratings from each of the two groups of teachers were compared using independent sample *t* tests. For DECA-users, satisfaction scores were correlated with the program implementation sum scores to determine if satisfaction varies with degree of implementation. Satisfaction was measured primarily by ratings on the individual satisfaction scales (Coworkers, Supervisor, The Work

Itself, Working Conditions, Pay and Promotion Opportunities, and The Social-Emotional Development of Children), an overall sum score of these areas (Total Satisfaction), and a sum score of the teachers' ratings of how their satisfaction in each area matches up with their ideal job (Ideals). Within the DECA group, a *t*-test was used to compare the satisfaction ratings of teachers with high implementation (more than 50% of the components) and teachers with low implementation (less than 50% of the components). Teachers' qualitative responses regarding their top sources of satisfaction and frustration were also reported.

Results

Results show significant correlations between degree of program implementation and many of the job satisfaction scales. The *t*-tests comparing the job satisfaction scores of teachers reportedly using the strength-based program and those not using the program were not significant. Due to variability in implementation among DECA-users, correlations between degree of implementation and satisfaction scores were also conducted. These correlations were significant for the following areas of job satisfaction: Overall Satisfaction ($r(12)=.78, p<.01$), The Work Itself ($r(12)=.69, p<.01$), Working Conditions ($r(12)=.75, p<.01$), Pay and Promotion Opportunities ($r(12)=.75, p<.01$), Satisfaction Compared to Ideals ($r(12)=.88, p<.01$), and Supervisor Satisfaction ($r(11)=.65, p<.05$). These results suggest that the higher the program implementation score, the higher the teachers' satisfaction. The correlations were not significant for Coworker Satisfaction, $r(12)=.27, p=.35$ or Social-Emotional Satisfaction, $r(12)=.48, p=.08$. The *t*-tests comparing DECA-users with high implementation of the program's components and those with low implementation were significant ($p\leq.01$) for all of the same areas of satisfaction. This is also true for the Social-Emotional Development of Children, but with significance at the .05 level ($p=.034$).

Implications

Strength-based approaches 1) are more consistent with teachers' self-images as nurturers; 2) guide positive collaboration with parents; and 3) are efficacious in developing social-emotional health and reducing problem behaviors, all of which contribute to greater job satisfaction. For these reasons, strength-based programs can be a useful tool for early childhood education programs. Consistent with the theory that the development of strengths is beneficial for children, teachers using The DECA Program report marked improvement in their students, particularly in reduced behavioral concerns. While some of the reported improvements can be directly attributed to the program, the present research also provides evidence of the indirect benefits of using a strength-based approach. Teachers with a greater sense of satisfaction and empowerment may be better able to serve students and may have increased commitment to the field. In addition to providing prevention and intervention strategies for behavior concerns in children, The DECA Program also includes strategies to facilitate positive parent-teacher relationships; this promotes consistency across settings for the children as well as relieves pressure in school-family interactions. Because many teachers report talking to parents about children's behavioral concerns as a major source of stress and frustration, this element of DECA may be especially salient in increasing teacher satisfaction.

This research suggests that using a strength-based program, like The DECA Program, that is easy and economical to implement, can result in increased satisfaction among teachers, potentially leading to better outcomes for children. Advocating for the implementation of strength-based programs may be a first step in addressing the national concern about high teacher turnover and dissatisfaction in early childhood education.

References

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