

Meaning of work in a group of school principals: the role of organizational variables

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Abstract

Purpose – Principals' beliefs about their profession are of great interest for schools in terms of organizational development and success. Furthermore, as meaning is a dimension of eudaimonic well-being, studying the principal meaning of work allows us to deepen the knowledge about their professional well-being, too. According to studies on non-educational contexts, the meaning of work is influenced by several organizational variables (such as possibilities for professional development and organizational commitment). Despite this, several school workers still lack to recognize the role played in this regard. Trying to fulfill these gaps partially, the purpose of this study is to verify the incremental effect of organizational dimensions and positive feedback from colleagues above and beyond positive beliefs about work.

Design/methodology/approach – An Italian version of the COPSOQ II adapted to school principals was administered to 1,616 school principals. Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted, considering three blocks of variables, namely, positive personal beliefs about work (job satisfaction and self-efficacy); organizational dimensions (role clarity, possibilities for development and sense of belonging to the workplace); positive feedback from colleagues.

Findings – Overall, the variables explained 45% of the variance of the meaning of work. While organizational variables accounted for an incremental 24% of the variance, above and beyond the personal experience of work ($F(5, 1,610) = 267.378, p = 0.000$), positive feedback from colleagues did not show a significant effect originality. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study regarding the meaning of work at school with specific reference to school principals.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study regarding the meaning of work at school and with specific reference to school principals.

Keywords Education, Job satisfaction, Work experience, Commitment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Meaning of work and its role in the well-being literature

The construct of the “meaning of work” has been recently recognized in organizational psychology as a heterogeneous, complex dimension of work (Rothausen and Henderson, 2019). People sharing the same position, indeed, might feel different levels of meaningfulness in their job and, at the same time, the meaning of job may derive from several different factors (both individual and contextual) (Wrzesniewski, 2003; Judge, 2006; Hulin, 2014). Despite these varied conditions, it seems useful to define a “meaningful job” as a job relevant for the worker, and that, at the same time, may make a positive difference, even if in a small way (Rothausen, 2013).



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The meaning of work has been widely related to job well-being, although the dimensions constituting job well-being are highly modifiable according to the theoretical position assumed by authors. Thus, job-related well-being could be studied as part of hedonic well-being (i.e. related to job satisfaction, positive emotions and hedonic balance at work; [Stride et al., 2007](#); [Benevene et al., 2018](#); [Buonomo et al., 2019](#)), eudaimonic well-being (i.e. related to calling orientations, purpose in work, professional growth; [Peterson and Park, 2011](#); [Rothausen, 2013](#); [Tadić, Bakker and Oerlemans, 2013](#); [Rothausen and Henderson, 2019](#)) or stress-related approaches (i.e. job demands-resources model; [Bakker and Demerouti, 2007](#); [Ganster and Perrewé, 2011](#); [Tadić et al., 2013](#)). Furthermore, job well-being may regard work conditions and organizational contexts, as well as relationships between professional and personal life ([Dick and Wagner, 2001](#); [Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2008](#); [Fiorilli et al., 2019](#)). Among these approaches, the meaning of work seems to better fit the eudaimonic study of job well-being ([Rothausen, 2013](#)). Eudaimonic well-being, indeed, is described as the sense of authenticity, meaning and self-actualization that a person derives from living a life perceived as in line with the true self ([McMahan and Estes, 2011](#)). Coherently, the meaning of work could contribute to the individual perception of being motivated, committed and fulfilled in life, in general ([Rothausen, 2013](#); [Rothausen and Henderson, 2019](#)).

At the same time, literature about well-being is gathering consistent data about the potential overlapping between hedonic and eudaimonic approaches ([Huta and Ryan, 2010](#); [Robertson and Cooper, 2011](#); [Diaz et al., 2015](#); [Disabato et al., 2016](#); [Ochoa and Blanch, 2019](#)). For example, some authors showed that life satisfaction, commonly considered a hedonic dimension of well-being, may contribute to the sense of purpose and meaning in life (as eudaimonic dimensions) ([Diaz et al., 2015](#)).

The integrated approach to well-being poses new questions on the study of job well-being and meaning of work: how hedonic or eudaimonic dimensions are related to the individual experience of meaning and well-being at work? Recent research suggests that studies on the overlapping between hedonic and eudaimonic variables remain valid for job well-being, for example, when considering satisfaction and professional growth as equally contributing to it ([Robertson and Cooper, 2011](#); [Ochoa and Blanch, 2019](#)). Consistently, some studies have shown that hedonic dimensions, such as positive emotions at work and job satisfaction, predicts eudaimonic well-being at work or overlaps with it ([Medeiros et al., 2018](#); [Janicke-Bowles et al., 2019](#); [Steger et al., 2019](#)). At the same time, some authors showed that eudaimonic dimensions of well-being are related to one another. From an individual point of view, workers with a high sense of mastery and efficacy in their mansions, indeed, are more likely to consider their job as meaningful ([Rawsthorne and Elliot, 1999](#); [Wrzesniewski, 2003](#); [Spinelli-De-Sà et al., 2017](#); [Santos and Fontenelle, 2019](#)). From an organizational point of view, the sense of belonging or affective organizational commitment has been connected to work meaning ([Spinelli-De-Sà et al., 2017](#); [Santos and Fontenelle, 2019](#)) and other practices, such as having chances for professional growth ([Nielsen et al., 2008](#); [Koyuncu et al., 2012](#); [Rahim and Siti-Rohaida, 2015](#)), role clarity ([Nielsen et al., 2008](#); [Cuéllar-Molina et al., 2018](#)) and positive feedback from colleagues and supervisors ([Merriman, 2017](#); [Sparr and Sonnentag, 2008](#)) have been linked to higher job well-being.

The importance of hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions has been confirmed in the literature about organizational policies, too. Current policies about workplace health, indeed, underlines the role of personal hedonic dimensions (i.e. feeling good from a physical, psychological and social point of view) and organizational conditions that foster eudaimonic well-being (i.e. being part of a work environment that foster self-actualization, goals and growth) when addressing research studies and interventions in the workplace ([WHO, 2010, 2017](#)).

To sum up, current research informs us about an integrated study of hedonic-eudaimonic well-being at work, by considering personal job experiences, as well as organizational practices and dimensions. This overlapping is mirrored by studies addressing the antecedents of the meaning of work.

This study aims to verify whether and how hedonic and eudaimonic variables related to personal experience of work, organizational aspects of the job and social relationships contribute to shaping the meaning of work in a sample of school principals.

Meaning of work at school

Several studies on the meaning of work state that meaning strongly relies on specific job roles (Bailey *et al.*, 2019; Lysova *et al.*, 2019). This field of research provided two findings. First, it showed that different workers allocate a different level of meaningfulness to their professional experience (Lips-Wiersma *et al.*, 2016; Malhotra *et al.*, 2016; Lysova *et al.*, 2019). Second, it showed that different professionals rely on different dimensions of their job when defining the meaning of their work (Bailey *et al.*, 2019). For example, it was shown that nurses, military forces and school-teachers activate different representations of jobs and different values when asked about the meaning of their job and their work experience in an organization (McCarthy and Friedman, 2006; Britt *et al.*, 2007; O'Connor, 2008). In other words, when studying specific occupations, peculiar definitions of what is meaningful may arise and these descriptions may not be easily adaptable to other job roles (Bailey *et al.*, 2019). Building on these considerations, and as this study is conducted on participants belonging to a specific occupation group (namely, school principals), it seems useful to tackle the specificity of school-related occupations and, more precisely, the peculiarities related to the school principal role.

School workers are frequently described as helping professionals, because of their focus on student care and growth (Graf *et al.*, 2014; Pereira *et al.*, 2015). While this dimension is consistent with teachers and principals' descriptions of their professional identities, it is commonly associated to representations of work as individual experiences, lacking a collective, organizational dimension (Buonomo and Fatigante, 2017). At the same time, a growing body of research is tackling the idea of schools as organizations (for example, by defining them as professional learning communities, Leclerc *et al.*, 2012; Antinluoma *et al.*, 2018). Several authors, indeed, report that organizational variables have a leading role in determining the quality of schools as institutions (Van De Grift and Houtveen, 2006; Cosner, 2009; Scheerens, 2013; Settlage *et al.*, 2015). The effect of such variables is confirmed even as an antecedent of school workers' well-being and stress (Chang, 2009; Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014; Ramos *et al.*, 2016; Buonomo *et al.*, 2017; Fiorilli *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Buonomo *et al.*, 2019). To sum up, from one side, school workers, because of the saliency of their relationship with students, tend to represent themselves as individual workers dealing with a caring profession; from the other side, literature inform about the importance of the organizational dimensions of schools as impacting both school performance and workers well-being.

This complexity requires school principals to cover a double role [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2014; Ainley and Carstens, 2018; Liebowitz and Porter, 2019]. First, they are required to be organizational leaders, by managing the school staff, dealing with workload and deadlines related to bureaucracy and administrative procedures, contributing to methodological and didactic choices (Kraft and Gilmour, 2016; Cansoy, 2018). Second, they are called to be care workers, when preventing and dealing with student misbehavior or when managing the relationships between the school, the teachers and the families (Dhuey and Smith, 2014; Liebowitz and Porter, 2019).

Consistently, studies addressing principal well-being showed that both organizational dimensions (e.g. sense of belonging, satisfaction with the work environment, professional identity/role and promotions) and caring relationships (with teachers and colleagues) are crucial to pursue it (Hu *et al.*, 2016; Andrade *et al.*, 2018; Liu and Bellibas, 2018; Dicke *et al.*, 2019). Besides, studies underlined the role of personal dimensions in school administrators (e.g. personality, self-efficacy and job satisfaction) (Darmody and Smyth, 2015; Hesbol, 2019), as well as in other school helping professionals (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2009; Viel-Ruma *et al.*, 2010; Granziera and Perera, 2019; Buonomo *et al.*, 2020) in improving both performance and well-being at work. Overall, principals may cover a unique position at school: as school workers, there are required to care and nurture their relationships at work with teachers and students; as administrators, they are required to manage and decide on the organizational facets of schools. Thus, it would be interesting to consider whether and how the organizational and relational dimensions of work have a role in shaping the principal meaning of work when compared to personal variables. Furthermore, building on the literature on meaning of work, it is likely that school principals may be included among the occupations requiring a specific characterization of the meaning of work (Bailey *et al.*, 2019; Lysova *et al.*, 2019).

Overall, this study aims to:

- Verify whether and how school principals' meaning of work is associated with personal (job satisfaction and self-efficacy), organizational (role clarity, possibilities for development, sense of belonging) and relational (positive feedbacks from colleagues) aspects of work.
- Verify whether mentioned organizational and relational factors incrementally predict meaning of work, when compared to the effect of personal dimensions.

Methods

Participants

The group reached was recruited through a collaboration with the Italian National Association of School Principals, which contacted 1,798 principals in the whole Italian territory. In total, 10% of the original sample did not complete the questionnaire. Thus, 1,616 school-principals (Female = 66%) were involved. Their age ranged from 36 to 66 ($M = 58.03$, $SD = 5.86$). Most of the participants (62.6%) worked as a principal in kindergarten or primary school. Years of experience ranged from 1 to 46 ($M = 29.46$; $DS = 8.46$).

Data collection and analysis

We collected self-report data using the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire II – COPSOQ II (Pejtersen *et al.*, 2010), adapted to the cultural and work setting of Italian principals. Seven scales were considered for this study, namely, meaning of work (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.824$, McDonalds' $\omega = 0.827$), job satisfaction (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.812$, McDonalds' $\omega = 0.817$), self-efficacy (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.869$, McDonalds' $\omega = 0.872$), role clarity (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.681$, McDonalds' $\omega = 0.711$), possibilities for development (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.800$, McDonalds' $\omega = 0.804$), sense of belonging to the workplace, positive feedback from colleagues (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.688$, McDonalds' $\omega = 0.718$).

Correlational patterns were calculated to verify whether the meaning of work was associated with social-demographic variables and COPSOQ variables. At this stage, gender was recoded as a dummy variable (1 = male, 0 = female). As socio-demographic variables did not correlate with other variables, these were not included in the further analyzes. A hierarchical regression model was conducted to verify whether three different blocks of variables predicted meaning of work:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) beliefs regarding the personal experience at work (job satisfaction and self-efficacy); (2) beliefs and regarding organizational variables (role clarity, possibilities for development, sense of belonging to the workplace); and (3) peer appreciation of ones' work (positive feedback from colleagues). | Meaning of
work in a group
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principals |
|---|--|

At each step, the regression equation was assessed for statistically significant variations in the coefficient of determination (R^2) along with variations in the coefficient of determination; all regression equations and (potential) determinants of job satisfaction were evaluated based on beta weights and their statistical significance. Predicted probability plots, residuals scatterplots and variance inflation factor <5 and Tolerance >0.80 criteria were used to test, respectively, the normality, homoscedasticity and non-multi-collinearity assumption for regression. All the variables for all the regression models fulfilled the assumptions. Finally, a $p > 0.001$ Mahalanobis distance criterion was used to identify and skip multi-variate outliers. Analyzes were run with the IBM SPSS (version 23) software and with the psych package in R (version 3.5.3) (Revelle, 2016).

Results

Correlations

Table 1 shows correlations among the studied variables. The meaning of work shows moderate correlations with all the predictors considered in the study.

Hierarchical regression

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to determine whether organizational variables (role clarity, possibilities for development and sense of belonging to the workplace) contributed incrementally to the prediction of meaning of work scores above and beyond that accounted for by personal experience of work (job satisfaction and self-efficacy) and whether positive feedback from colleagues contributed incrementally above and beyond personal experience of work and organizational variables. Job satisfaction and self-efficacy were entered in Step 1; role clarity, possibilities for development, sense of belonging to the workplace were entered in Step 2; positive feedback from colleagues was entered in Step 3. Table 2 shows partial regression coefficients and F for change in R^2 for each step. Results indicated that job satisfaction and self-efficacy explained 21% of the variance in meaning of work, $F_{(2, 1,613)} = 219.775, p = 0.000$.

Furthermore, role clarity, possibilities for development and sense of belonging to the workplace explained an incremental 24% of the variance in meaning of work scores, $F_{(5, 1,610)} = 267.378, p = 0.000$, above and beyond the variance in accounted for by job satisfaction and self-efficacy. Finally, positive feedback from colleagues did not explain an incremental variance of the meaning of work, as reported in Table 2.

Discussion

Our results showed that role clarity, possibilities for development and sense of belonging to the workplace contributed incrementally to explain the variance of the meaning of work scores above and beyond that accounted for by job satisfaction. At the same time, findings showed that positive feedback from colleagues had a non-significant effect on the meaning of work scores.

First of all, our finding about the role of job satisfaction confirms the effect of individual dimensions of work experience in influencing the meaning of work (Medeiros *et al.*, 2018; Janicke-Bowles *et al.*, 2019; Steger *et al.*, 2019). The saliency of job satisfaction is spread

Table 1.
Pearson's
correlations

Variables	M	DS	Meaning of work	Job satisfaction	Self-efficacy	Role clarity	Possibilities for development	Commitment to the workplace/sense of belonging	Social support from colleagues
Meaning of work			—						
Job satisfaction			0.420***	—					
Self-efficacy			0.323	0.333***	—				
Role clarity			0.395***	0.324***	0.337***	—			
Possibilities for development			0.447	0.327***	0.300***	0.362***	—		
Commitment to the workplace/sense of belonging			0.596***	0.459***	0.353***	0.327***	0.326***	—	
Social support from colleagues (appreciating)			0.348***	0.383***	0.374***	0.335***	0.253***	0.448***	—

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

across several work contexts, namely, from medical professions (Lu *et al.*, 2019) to the banking sector (Belias and Koustelios, 2014), from police officers (Julseth *et al.*, 2011) to volunteers (Benevene *et al.*, 2018). To the best of our knowledge, a scarce number of studies have addressed principals' job satisfaction, mainly regarding its effect on stress or self-efficacy (Bauer and Brazer, 2013; Darmody and Smyth, 2015; Bauer and Silver, 2018). The effect found in this study is particularly interesting when considering the literature on job satisfaction in other school staff members. In studies on teachers, indeed, job satisfaction is generally low (OECD, 2014; Ainley and Carstens, 2018). A possible explanation for this effect regards the lower saliency of organizational dimensions of work, that are usually considered when evaluating ones' own job satisfaction (Buonomo *et al.*, 2020). While needing further research (as detailed in the limitations section), our study begins to shed light on this topic, showing that job satisfaction influences how principals give meaning to their job and confirming the specificity of the principal role within the educational context.

Regarding the significant effect of organizational variables, our findings support previous literature on the contributions of organizational culture and structure on the meaning of work (Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Koyuncu *et al.*, 2012; Rahim and Siti-Rohaida, 2015; Spinelli-De-Sà *et al.*, 2017; Cuéllar-Molina *et al.*, 2018; Santos and Fontenelle, 2019). Most part of these results can be explained by broadening findings on meaning in life and psychological well-being to the organizational context.

More specifically, about the significant effect of role clarity, previous research about the sense of meaning in life underlined that individuals construct the meaning of their activities based on the purpose of their activity, and the way they understand it (Brief and Nord, 1990; Noguchi, 2019). As a job role is a cohesive set of actions and activities, the mentioned definition of meaning may apply to the work context, too. Consistently, the incremental effect of role clarity in explaining work meaning may be since the higher the control and understanding the principals ascribe to their job, the higher the significance they attribute to it. This aspect is further confirmed by studies addressing the connection among eudaimonic well-being dimensions. Both meaning and sense of environmental control, indeed, contribute to perceived eudaimonic well-being, according to Carol Ryff's theory of well-being (Ryff, 2005). It is likely that, given the double role ascribed to the school principal profession, the more aware the principals are about their role, the higher they feel in control of their impact on the school context, the higher they give meaning to their profession.

Table 2.
Summary of
hierarchical
regression analysis
for variables
predicting meaning
of work ($N = 1,616$)

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Job satisfaction	0.355	0.024	0.352***	0.089	0.022	0.088***	0.087	0.022	0.086***
Self-efficacy	0.211	0.024	0.206***	0.032	0.021	0.031	0.029	0.022	0.029
Role clarity				0.155	0.023	0.138***	0.153	0.024	0.136***
Possibilities for development				0.272	0.027	0.214***	0.272	0.027	0.214***
Commitment to the workplace/ Sense of belonging				0.460	0.023	0.430***	0.457	0.024	0.427***
Social support from colleagues (appreciating)							0.014	0.024	0.013
R^2		0.214			0.454			0.454	
F for change in R^2		219.775***			235.273***			0.350	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

About the incremental effect of possibilities for development at work, previous literature about personal growth, as for the sense of control, includes this dimension in the eudaimonic well-being theory (Ryff, 2005). Accordingly, this approach stated that job is an important context to construct and pursue personal development in life (Keyes *et al.*, 2002; Ryff, 2005), as it represents about the half of waking life for most adults (Wrzesniewski, 2003). By building on this approach, we showed that having chances to grow at work gives meaning to the school principal role. According to other authors, indeed, meaning derives from the learning experiences occurring during professional development paths and is inherently related to the personal crafting of the job (Peel, 2005; Trede *et al.*, 2012). Thus, having chances to satisfy professional development needs may help principals to have a complete understanding of their double role at school. This point was recently raised by OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 reports, in which great space is given to the analysis of the professional development needs of principals (Ainley and Carstens, 2018).

Finally, regarding the incremental effect of the sense of belonging, studies about the meaning of work showed that feeling to give a valuable contribution to others through ones' job gives purpose to professionals (Rosso *et al.*, 2010; Rothausen and Henderson, 2019). Previous literature, indeed, showed that relationships at work highly contribute to shaping the meaning of work, by addressing peer connections (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2003; Kahn, 2007), as well as relationships with supervisors (Podolny *et al.*, 2004; Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006) and the extended work community (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 2003; Grant *et al.*, 2008). This point may be particularly relevant for school principals, too, as they are required to manage several relationships because of their leadership position: from colleagues in professional associations (Relja *et al.*, 2019) to teachers and other school staff members (Ponec and Brock, 2000; Lassila *et al.*, 2017), from students to their families (Lam, 2000; Quezada, 2016). This plurality requires principals to differently perceive and manage their role at school according to their interlocutors, thus shaping the meaning of their job at school.

As for job satisfaction, participants reported some peculiarities regarding the saliency of organizational dimensions of their role, when compared to literature about other school workers. Consistently, despite some studies reported a significant impact of role clarity (Lejonberg and Christophersen, 2015; Shepherd *et al.*, 2016) in the work experience of school teachers, few studies are available on teachers' beliefs about their development and growth at school and show a low saliency of this construct in this professional group (Buonomo *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, most of studies about sense of belonging at school tackles the role of teachers in influencing student experience of school (but not of school workers' one) (Osterman, 2010). Overall, such findings confirm the specificity of principal role among school workers, thus showing a peculiar subset of dimensions influencing their meaning of work.

These findings have both theoretical and practical implications, regarding the study of meaning of work in general, as well as the specific context studied, namely, the meaning of work of school principals. Regarding the implications for the study of meaning of work, our findings shed a light on the occupation-specific approach to the study of meaning of work. Some dimensions emerged as salient for the description of meaning of work in principals, indeed, are unique when compared to the description that other school workers, namely, teachers, make about their professional identities. This work partially covers a gap individuated by Bailey and colleagues (2019) regarding the need to focus on different roles within the same occupational type (e.g. caring occupations). Further studies are needed, above all with regard to the direct

comparison of models on meaning of work in professional roles sharing the same organizational context. For example, future studies could compare teachers and principals' explanations of meaning of work, to better tackle the mentioned gap. At the same time, more information about the role of previous work experiences could help to differentiate the meaningfulness of work at school. Principals have usually been teachers before reaching such role, as happens with department heads and their previous role as ward doctors. It would be of great interest to deepen our knowledge about whether and how reaching a leading position changes or adds something to the meaningfulness of ones' own job. Regarding the implication for the specific context analyzed in this study, a better understanding of principals' meaning of work and eudaimonic well-being would be helpful to promote school effectiveness, as well as teachers and students' performance and well-being. International surveys such as OECD TALIS (OECD, 2014; Ainley and Carstens, 2018) and Programme for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2016, 2017) show that principal characteristics have a role in shaping the school experience for school workers, students and families. Consequently, the more we understand how principals perceive and value their job, the more we can tailor effective trainings regarding school leadership.

At the same time, our study is not without limitations. First of all, despite studying a representative sample of Italian school principals, the choice of a cross-sectional design does not allow us to infer causal links among the variables. Second, our data refer to self-reports only: while the meaning of work relies on personal representations of work, a cross-informant approach could have helped in explaining non-significant effects (i.e. relationships at work). Similarly, the non-significant effect of self-efficacy and relationships with colleagues calls for a qualitative approach to the study of the meaning of work in school principals.

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