RETENTION OF EDUCATORS: THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP, EMPOWERMENT AND WORK ENGAGEMENT

A. S. Stander
North-West University, South Africa
E-mail: annatjie.stander@nwu.ac.za
M. W. Stander
Optentia Research Focus Area, North-West University, South Africa
E-mail: marius.stander@nwu.ac.za

─Abstract ─

The teaching context in South Africa is continuously transforming. Consequently, there are numerous challenges that educators have to face, such as a lack of resources and funds, teacher turnover, dealing with discipline, lack of learner motivation and shortage of skilled personnel. It can be expected that educators will be negatively influenced by the above challenges and will therefore show turnover propensity, require the education profession to re-think and re-design its existing management processes in order to retain staff. The aim of this research was to investigate the extent to which leader empowerment behaviour (LEB), psychological empowerment (PE) and work engagement (WE) predict educators' intentions to leave (IL) the teaching profession. A cross-sectional survey design was used to achieve the research objectives, utilising four standardised questionnaires, namely the Leader Empowering Behaviour Questionnaire, Measuring Empowerment Questionnaire, Work Engagement Survey and Intention to Leave Questionnaire. Results showed that significant positive correlations were found between LEB, PE, WE and negative relations between IL and the other constructs. LEB and PE predicted a high percentage of the variance in WE, while LEB, PE, and WE predicted 28% of the variance in IL. PE indirectly influenced the relationship between LEB and WE, while WE had an indirect effect on the relationship between LEB and IL. The results indicate that school principals that empower educators can play a significant role in educators' wellness and their willingness to stay in the profession.

Key Words: *Leader empowerment behaviour, psychological empowerment, work engagement, educators, intention to leave.*

JEL Classification: J6, J63

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

South Africa is undergoing major changes in the social, political, economic, technological and educational environments. According to Bersin (2016:3), the SA landscape is characterised by a constrained economy, unstable currencies and socio-political challenges. Schools are not excluded from these changes; in fact, they need to become more transparent, empower people, reduce hierarchy and integrate new knowledge from employees into their core business processes in order to innovate and meet the demands of the environment (Austin & Harkins, 2008:105). A lack of resources and funds, educator turnover, and historical "machine-age" thinking all serve to make schools an unpopular environment that has to adapt to innovative practices (Austin & Harkins, 2008:105). New rules and policies that enforced different structures of governing bodies for schools, ways of dealing with discipline, uninvolved parents, racism, violence, antisocial behaviour, shortage of skilled personnel, lack of learner motivation as well as dealing with children with learning difficulties, are some of the challenges that educators face (Schulze & Steyn, 2007:692). Against this negative background, it can be expected that educators will be negatively influenced and thus express intentions to leave teaching. The education profession needs to re-think and re-design its existing leadership and management processes in order to retain educators.

Employee wellness and talent management have recently developed as critical success factors in the development of educational organisations (Aytaç, 2015:166). To be successful, schools need to attract, develop, engage and retain the best people and, at the same time, promote their wellness. Quiñones, Van den Broeck and De Witte (2013:133) identified psychological empowerment and work engagement as important concepts for wellbeing at work. Psychological empowerment as a motivational construct reflects an individual's active orientation to his/her work role, with his/her cognitions being shaped by the work environment (Spreitzer, 1995:1444).

Furthermore, the ability of schools to consistently perform and develop will be determined by the level of competence, energy and level of engagement of their people. Bersin (2016:3) identified engagement of staff as one of the top priorities for people management that cannot be ignored. Bersin (2016:3) states that the greatest impact of engagement is that employees stay with the organisation. Billingsley and Cross (1992:453), as well as Xaba (2003:287) states that educator turnover is a

reality and a global phenomenon. High turnover creates a shortage of educators, additional costs in recruiting new staff, re-investment in training and development, poor learner performance due to disrupted planning programs and lack of continuity as well as overcrowded classes (Xaba, 2003:287). The expense involved in replacing people who quit their jobs is costly and impacts negatively on outputs (Taplin & Winterton, 2007:5).

Cunningham (2007:201) accentuates the manager's role in influencing the thoughts, behaviour, needs, goals and feelings of others in order to empower them. Van Niekerk and Van Niekerk (2006:94) state that the long-term leader should empower followers to perform by attending to their training, development and empowerment. Anitha (2014:315) found that leadership significantly predicts employee engagement. One should ask oneself if leadership empowerment behaviour (LEB) and psychological empowerment (PE) could impact on an educator's level of work engagement (WE), leading to lower levels of intention to leave (IL). There is a lack of research on the relationship between leader behaviour, PE, WE and educator retention in South African schools.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Leader empowering behaviour

The leader or 'school principal', can play an important role in creating a school environment that will be conducive to retaining and empowering educators. According to Stander and Rothmann (2008:12), leaders need to create work environments where people can optimise their potential and add value to the organisation. Principals, who are strong in the development of people, recognise and cultivate potential in others. They have the ability to observe small developments and derive satisfaction from these developments (Rath & Conchie, 2008:155). The leadership approach towards empowerment focuses on the leader who energises his followers to act with the leader, providing future vision (Menon, 2001:156). *Delegation of authority, accountability for outcomes, autonomy support, participative decision making, information sharing, coaching and developing of people* have been identified as leadership behaviours that will empower people (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015:319). De Klerk and Stander (2014:40) indicate that these leader empowering behaviours (LEB) leads to psychological empowerment (PE), work engagement (WE) and lower turnover intention.

2.2 Psychological empowerment

Quiñones *et al*. (2013:129) state that PE is an important contributor to employee wellbeing. PE exists when employees feel that they exercise some control over their work life (Spreitzer, 1995:1444). Thomas and Velthouse (1990:672) and Spreitzer (1995:1444) define PE as "a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact".

According to Spreitzer, Kizilos and Nason (1997:681), *meaning* "serves as the engine of empowerment", acting as the mechanism through which people get energised. Quiñones *et al*. (2013:128) describe meaning as the fit between the requirements of the task and employees' values. Quinn and Spreitzer (1997:41) state that empowered people have a feeling that their work is important and they care about what they are doing. *Competence* is measured by the person's confidence in his/her ability to do tasks skilfully; the degree of self-assurance about abilities to perform work activities; and a sense of mastery (Thomas & Velthouse 1990:672), that is "they have what it takes to do a job well" (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1997:682). Quinn and Spreitzer (1997:41) state that competence involves confidence about ability and the sense that one is doing good quality work. Quinn and Spreitzer (1997:41) state that *self-determination* relates to the opportunity that employees have to select how to do tasks and to perform those tasks in ways that seem appropriate. Leaders who strengthen this sense of self-determination of employees will make them feel more powerful (Conger & Kanungo, 1988:73). *Impact* is defined as the extent to which an individual can influence outcomes at work (Quiñones *et al*., 2013:128). It often manifests in employees' beliefs that they have significant influence over what happens in their work environment (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990:672). Wallach and Mueller (2006:97) are of the opinion that empowerment is a mediator between organisational factors and positive outcomes for workers. De Klerk and Stander (2014:39) found that LEB affected WE through PE.

2.3 Work engagement

WE can be defined as a persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfilment in employees that is likely to remain stable over time and is embedded in positive feelings such as vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzáles-Romá & Bakker, 2002:74). *Vigour* is characterised by high energy levels and mental resilience, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, not easily becoming fatigued, and persistence even in the face of difficulties (Schaufeli *et al*., 2006:702). *Dedication* refers to strong involvement in one's work, characterised by enthusiasm

and pride, and feeling inspired and challenged by work. Dedication indicates that an employee reaps significance from the execution of work, fostering feelings of enthusiasm, inspiration and pride (Schaufeli, 2012:4). *Absorption* is characterised by total concentration on one's work. It refers to a pleasant state where one is totally immersed in one's work, finding it difficult to detach oneself from the work (Bakker, Demerouti & Sanz-Vergel, 2014:19; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002:75).

WE is therefore an important component to individual performance and is associated with various individual and organisational outcomes. Specifically, a number of studies have linked high levels of WE with lower levels of IT. Therefore, principals could invest in promoting WE in schools as a possible mechanism to curb staff turnover.

2.4   Intention to leave

Kearney (2008:625) states that the best and brightest educators must not only be attracted to education, but must also be retained. According to Xaba (2003:287), the education system should develop strategies to retain top educators. People who are not happy in their jobs are likely to intend to quit (Spector, 2008:271). Various factors could aid in this process.

Basford, Offermann and Wirtz (2012:208) report that supervisory support and motivation are significantly related to the intention to quit. Swars, Meyers, Mays and Lack (2009:176) state that a lack of openness and shared decision making will impact on the employees' consideration to stay with the organisation. Research done by Kerr-Phillips and Thomas (2009:6) indicates that the quality of leadership plays a strong contributing role in employee turnover. Taplin and Winterton (2007:6) argue that managers can play a crucial role in neutralising the problematic aspects of the job and in creating a pleasant work environment. Takase, Maude and Manias (2006:1078) state that managers must create an environment where employees use more of their skills and are allowed to be involved in decision making in order to reduce turnover intentions. Organisations with a high degree of communication between managers and employees are characterised by a low staff turnover ratio and such management behaviours can be seen as empowering leadership (Taplin & Winterton, 2007:9).

3. AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research is to establish the relationship between LEB, PE, WE and its impact on the IL of educators in selected schools.

3.1 Hypotheses

Based on the model, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H_1: LEB relates positively with PE, WE and TI.

H_2: LEB affects turnover intention indirectly via PE.

H_3: LEB affects WE indirectly via PE.

H_4: LEB affects turnover intention indirectly via WE.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

A cross-sectional quantitative research approach was followed.

4.1 Participants

The population for this study can be defined as all educators teaching in selected primary and secondary government schools in a District. This District comprises 101 primary and 47 secondary schools. Seventy-two percent females participated in this study; 54% of the study population represents the white cultural group with their home language being Afrikaans. The largest group (38%) of participants is between 36 years and 45 years old and 65% of the participants are married. The majority of the study population has been employed for more than eleven years (65%); while 84% of the participants are members of a union.

4.2 Measuring instruments

Only standardised instruments that are valid and reliable have been utilised:

The Leader Empowering Behaviour Questionnaire (LEBQ) (Konczak, Stelly & Trusty, 2000) provides leaders with feedback on behaviour relevant to employee empowerment, measuring the following: delegation of authority, accountability, self-directed and participative decision making, information sharing, skills development and coaching and developing for innovative performance. The original questionnaire consists of 17 items, scored on a seven-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Two items from Arnold, Arad, Rhoades & Drasgow (2000:269) ("My manager explains his/her decisions and actions to my work group" and "My manager explains company goals to my work group") have been added to improve the 'information sharing' dimension, as these have only been measured by two items in the original questionnaire.

The *Measuring Empowerment Questionnaire (MEQ)* (Spreitzer, 1995) contains three items for each of the four sub-dimensions of PE, for example, *meaning*: "the work I do is meaningful to me"; *competence*: "I have mastered the skills necessary for my job"; *self-determination*: "I have significant autonomy in determining how to do my job"; and *impact:* "I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department" (Spreitzer, 1995:1465). Respondents indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

The *Utrecht Work Engagement Scale* (UWES) (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002) was utilised as a measure of WE. This seventeen-item questionnaire is arranged along seven-point frequency scales, ranging from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*daily*). This measure of WE has three scales, namely vigour (6 items), dedication (5 items), and absorption (6 items). Example items are: "At my job, I feel strong and vigorous" (vigour); "I find the work I do full of meaning and purpose" (dedication); and "When I am working, I forget everything else around me" (absorption).

The Turnover Intention Scale/Intention to leave (Sjöberg & Sverke, 2000), consists of a three-item scale devised to measure overall turnover propensity. The three items (responses) are measured on five-point frequency scales, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). High scores indicate an employee's intention to leave his/her current position (for example, "I am actively looking for others jobs").

4.3 Statistical analyses

The statistical analysis was carried out with the SPSS 21 program (IBM Corporation, 2012) and the Mplus 7.4 statistical modelling program (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2015). With structural equation modelling (SEM) a variety of data, designs and models can be analysed (Schreiber, 2008:83) to test the measurement and structural models. When a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is conducted, "the researcher uses a hypothesised model to estimate a population covariance matrix that is compared with the observed covariance matrix" (Schreiber, Nora, Stage, Barlow & King, 2006:323). The structural model displays the interrelations among latent constructs and observable variables in the proposed model (Schreiber 2008:95). To determine whether mediation did take place, the bootstrapping procedure, explained by Hayes (2009:409), was used to evaluate mediation effects.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Testing the measurement model

Five measurement models were tested. Model 5 had the best fit with the data (lower AIC and BIC values) and was specified with five first-order latent variables: PE, as a two-factor structure which included: a) Attitude (measured by 5 items); and b) Influence (4 items); LEB (16 items); WE (14 observed indicators); and IL (3 items). A χ^2 value of 1209.045 ($df = 644$) was obtained for Model 5: CFI = 0.910, TLI = 0.902, and RMSEA = 0.053, indicating the best fit. Standardised coefficients from items to factors ranged from 0.69 to 0.98. The fit statistics for testing the various models are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Fit Statistics of Competing Measurement Models

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	AIC	BIC
Model 1	4606.077	1218	0.728	0.715	0.093	48632.436	49231.101
Model 2	4245.884	1215	0.757	0.745	0.088	48278.243	48888.204
Model 3	4184.318	1214	0.761	0.749	0.088	48218.677	48832.403
Model 4	2237.772	1077	0.864	0.852	0.058	45314.277	46056.019
Model 5	1209.045	644	0.910	0.902	0.053	34584.215	35089.087

χ^2 = chi-Square statistic; df = degree of freedom; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayes Information Criterion.

5.2 Testing the structural model

The descriptive statistics, alpha coefficients and Pearson correlations for all the constructs are illustrated in Table 2. Table 2 shows that for all the scales, the Cronbach alpha coefficients were acceptable, according to Wang and Wang (2012:43), with a cut-off value of 0.70.

Table 2:   Correlation Matrix including Reliabilities, Means and Standard Deviations

Variable	M	SD	A	1	2	3	4
1. LEB	5.45	1.19	0.95	-			
2. PE: Attitude	5.96	0.98	0.85	0.40† **	-		
3. PE: Influence	5.34	1.23	0.85	0.32† **	0.56‡ **	-	
4. Work Engagement	4.25	1.11	0.94	0.50‡ **	0.58‡ **	0.33†**	-
5. Intention to leave	2.66	1.35	0.85	0.32† **	0.40†**	0.31†**	0.45†**

Statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$ and ** $p < 0.01$; Practical significance: † $r > 0.30$ and ‡ $r > 0.50$

The structural model was tested using Model 5 (see Table 1), which was the best fitting measurement model. The hypothesised relationships were tested using latent

variable modelling. Three competing models were tested to improve model fit. The standardised path coefficients estimated by Mplus are illustrated in Table 3 (fit statistics for model 1) and Figure 1.

Figure 1: The hypothesised model
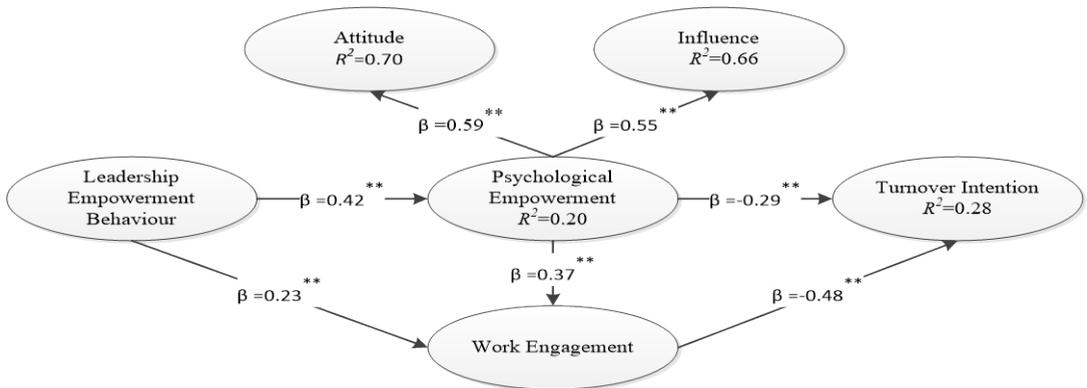
$^{**}p<.01.$

Table 3: Fit Statistics of Structural Model

Model	χ^2	df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	1209.64	645	0.90	0.91	0.05

The model fit indices suggest that the relationships posited in the model account for substantial covariation in the data (20% of the variance in PE; 46% in WE and 28% in IL).

Hypothesis 1: LEB related strongly positively with PE and WE and together they predict turnover intention. The ML-estimated equation counted for a large proportion of the variance in turnover intention ($R^2 = 0.28$). Hypothesis 1 is, therefore, accepted.

5.3 Indirect Effects of Psychological Empowerment and Work Engagement

To determine whether any relationships in the model were affected by PE and WE, bootstrapping (with 10 000 samples) was used. Two-sided bias-corrected 95% CIs were constructed to evaluate indirect effects. Table 4 indicates the lower and upper CIs, as well as the estimates and standard errors of the tested indirect effects.

Table 4: Indirect Effects of Psychological Empowerment and Work Engagement

Variable	Psychological empowerment	Work engagement

	Est.	SE	95% BC CI	Est.	SE	95% BC CI
Turnover intention	0.11*	0.05	[-0.23; 0.004]	-0.10*	0.03	[-0.19; -0.02]
Work engagement	0.16*	0.05	[0.07; 0.36]			

Est.: Estimate, SE: standard error, BC CI: bias-corrected confidence interval * p < 0.05 ** p< 0.01

Hypothesis 2: Table 4 indicates that the bootstrap-estimated indirect effects of PE on the relationship between LEB and turnover intention were statistically significant (p < 0.01) and include zeros (Preacher & Hayes, 2008:886). This suggests that PE does not have an indirect effect on the relationship and Hypothesis 2 could not be accepted.

Hypothesis 3: The indirect effects of PE on the relationship between LEB and WE were significant and did not include zeros. This suggests that PE has an indirect effect on the relationship between LEB and WE. These results provided support for Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4: According to Table 4, the indirect effects of WE on the relationship between LEB and turnover intention were significant and did not include zero. These results provided support for Hypothesis 4.

6. DISCUSSION

LEB has statistically significantly positive correlations with attitude, influence (practically significant – medium effect) and WE (large effect) and a negative relationship with turnover intention (medium effect). PE has statistically significantly positive correlations with WE (large effect) and a strong negative relationship with turnover intention (medium effect), while psychological empowering influence is significantly related to WE (large positive effect) and showed a negative relationship with turnover intention (medium effect).

The strong positive relationship between LEB, PE and WE implies that LEB affects employees' perceptions of the work environment to a great extent. When leaders empower their employees, employees will have a more positive attitude, experiencing that they can influence their work environment. LEB predicted 20% of the variance in PE. The results of this study are in line with various studies confirming that when leaders empower their people, employees will experience PE (De Klerk & Stander, 2014:40). The results indicate that school principals that allow educators to make their own decisions; give staff members the authority to make decisions that improve work processes and procedures; and encourage people to

develop their own solutions to problems, will add to educators' perceptions of being in control and having an impact in the school.

Previous studies have found that psychologically empowered employees are more engaged, supporting the results of this research (Nel, Stander & Latif, 2015:7). LEB and PE predicted 46% of the variance in WE. The results in this study confirmed that PE has an indirect effect on the relationship between LEB and WE. This implies that increased LEB will result in higher levels of PE which, in turn, will increase WE. Previous research supports the mediating effect of PE on the relationship between LEB and WE (De Klerk & Stander, 2014:39). When leaders increase employees' degree of authority, allow decision making, expect employees to accept accountability, share information and develop employees, these employees will experience positive feelings of competence and meaning while having influence on the environment.

Strong negative correlations were found and supported in literature between IL and LEB (Mendes & Stander, 2011:7), empowerment (Bhatnagar, 2012:938) and WE (De Villiers & Stander, 2011:409). Du Plooy and Roodt (2010:11) found that WE was a significant predictor of turnover intention. The results of this study show that LEB, PE and WE predicted 28% of the variance in turnover intention, supporting the findings of De Klerk and Stander (2014:40). WE has an indirect effect on the relationship between LEB and IL. This implies that increased LEB will result in higher levels of WE which, in turn, will decrease educators' intention to quit. This research did not find PE to have an indirect effect on the relationship between empowering behaviour and IL.

7. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Based on the findings of this research and the challenges to retain educators in the profession, it is important that the school pro-actively develops strategies to improve leadership as well as the levels of perceived empowerment. It is the researcher's opinion that this will influence the employees' IL, ultimately reducing turnover rates. School managers should create an environment where educators can optimise their potential and add value. The researcher is of the opinion that the principal (as leader) should play a primary role in creating such a culture within a school.

The research has some limitations. The cross-sectional study design allows for the existence of relationships between variables that can be identified, but also implies that more complicated forms of infrequent connections could not be examined.

Longitudinal data will allow for a better understanding of the true nature of the concepts and will also enable the development of causal models. Measurements that were based on self-report are another limitation of this study, because of the subjectivity of self-assessment.

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