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SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' WELL-BEING AMONG UNDER-ACTUALIZED PROFESSIONAL GOALS:

Promoting sustainable working conditions

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BACKGROUND



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- School principals are central to shaping the educational climate of their schools, having direct influence on teachers, students, and the school community (DeMatthews et al., 2022; Dicke et al., 2020; Riley et al., 2021).
- The demands and complexity of their roles is often coupled with inadequate support, contributing to heightened strain (Fang et al., 2025; Upadyaya et al., 2021).
- This complexity is reflected in high rates of occupational stress, burnout, and attrition (Riley et al., 2021; Darmody & Smyth, 2016).
- Supporting school principals' well-being is therefore essential to sustaining effective leadership and promoting healthy, thriving school communities.



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- An unexplored area is investigating the goals and expectations school principals had when entering the profession.
- Individuals are often drawn to helping professions because of their desire to contribute to the community, build meaningful relationships, or to grow and develop personally.
- The intense nature of the school principal's role may limit opportunities to connect with staff and students, or external policies and lack of resources, may restrict their visions to make a positive impact on the school.
- *Job Demands-Resources* model (Bakker et al., 2023) and SDT help to uncover the risk and protective factors for occupational well-being.



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SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

GOAL CONTENTS THEORY

‘Not all goals are created equal, for the *content* of people’s goals and life pursuits affects their integration and wellness.’

(Ryan & Deci, 2017)



INTRINSIC GOALS



EXTRINSIC GOALS





BACKGROUND



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- Intrinsic goals have been consistently linked to greater basic psychological need satisfaction and well-being (Bradshaw et al., 2023).
- In work context intrinsic goals have been linked with job satisfaction, well-being, lower turnover (Vansteenkiste et al., 2007; van de Broeck et al., 2010).
- Yet, no research has investigated the impact of under-actualized intrinsic goals of school principals.



THE PRESENT STUDY



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1. What is the link between intrinsic goal attainment and basic psychological need satisfaction, occupational well-being, and turnover intentions of school principals?
2. Which workplace conditions impact the attainment of school principals' intrinsic goals?



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- 26 interviews with school principals from different municipalities in Finland.
- The Finnish Principal Barometer Survey 2024.
- Interviews conducted online via Zoom by Dr. Mailis Elomaa.
- Two coders using inductive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2006).

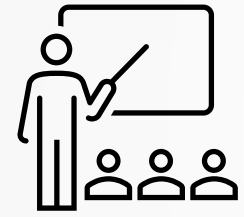
How did you end up as a principal?

Was there a specific reason why you chose the position of principal?

What kind of expectations did you have of the principal's work? Has the work met those expectations?



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Teaching background



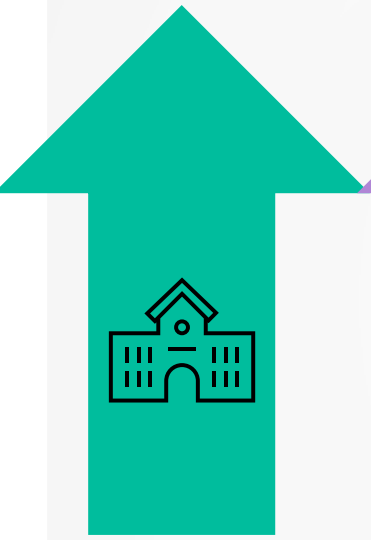
Incremental progression



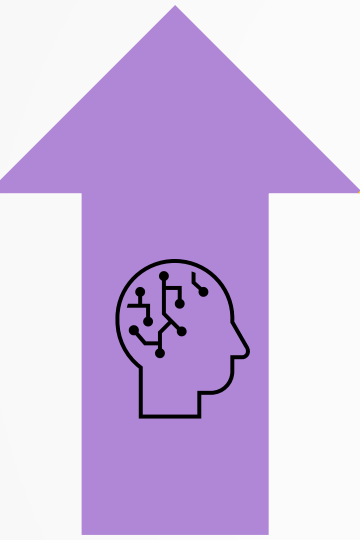
Contextual circumstances



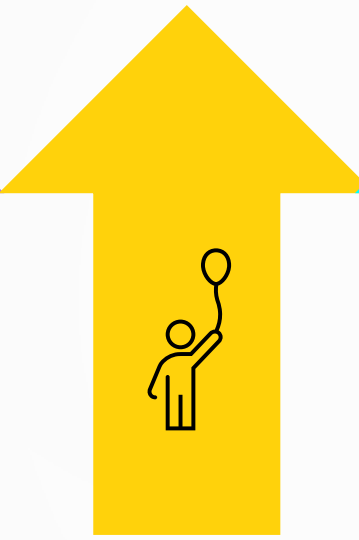
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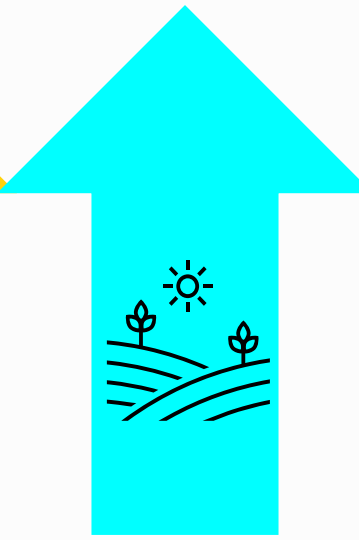
Positive impact
on school



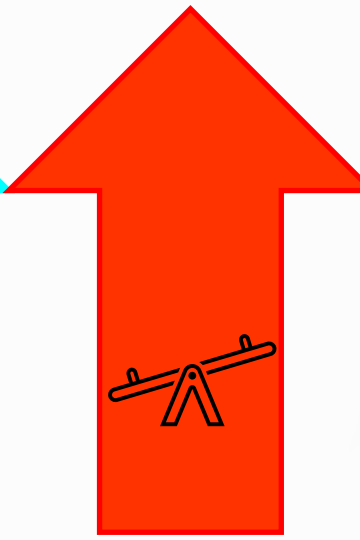
Interesting
work



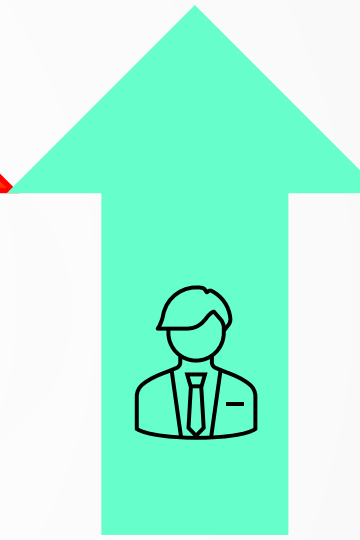
Support student
development



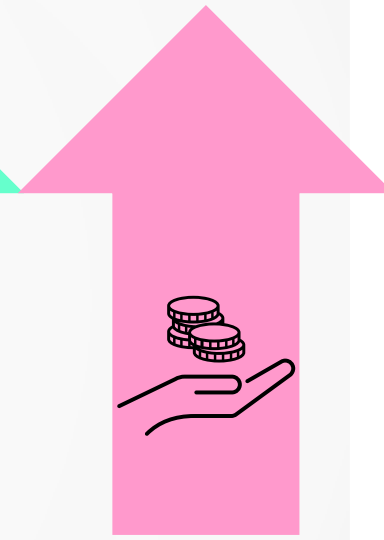
Community
giving



Equality in
education



Advance
career



Increase
income



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“I was interested in that profession because I could really influence the things that I thought were important, for example, for children”

“create the most wonderful school path possible for all young people and the future”

“I would like to be able to create a good workplace and work community through my own experiences. As a principal, there is a good opportunity for that”



Expected

- ☐ Diverse work
- ☐ Large workload
- ☐ Interpersonal engagement
- ☐ Positive impact
- ☐ Training and development



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Unexpected

- ☐ Reactive nature, amount of interruptions
“it surprised me that the work is quite fragmented and intermittent than I expected. There are a lot of interruptions every day.”
- ☐ Intensity of workload
“the workload is perhaps even greater than I could have imagined at the time. There is quite a lot of work to do”
- ☐ Can feel isolating
“surprised how really had to make and build...moments with students, moments with staff, present in everyday school life”
- ☐ Demands and limited resources limit the extent of impact, desired changes can be slow.
“things move forward surprisingly slowly, and that this kind of political decision-making affects these kinds of school matters”
- ☐ Not as much development for some parts of the role they were interested in.
“there hasn’t been such pedagogical or human resource management training for many, many years.”



METHOD



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- 405 Finnish school principals, 63% females, Mean age 52 years (SD = 7.37).
- The Finnish Principal Barometer Survey 2026.

Measures:

School Principal Goal Content. (7-point Likert scale)

People often have different goals or aspirations that influence their decision to become a school principal. These goals reflect what individuals hope to accomplish through their work in this role. In this section, you will find a number of possible goals. For each goal, we ask you two questions:

- (a) How important was this goal in your decision to become a principal?
- (b) How much have you already achieved this goal in your role as a principal?

Intrinsic goal examples: “*Bettering the school community*” and “*to support student development*”

Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale at Work. (Chen et al., 2015)

Job Satisfaction and Turnover Intentions. (Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire II)



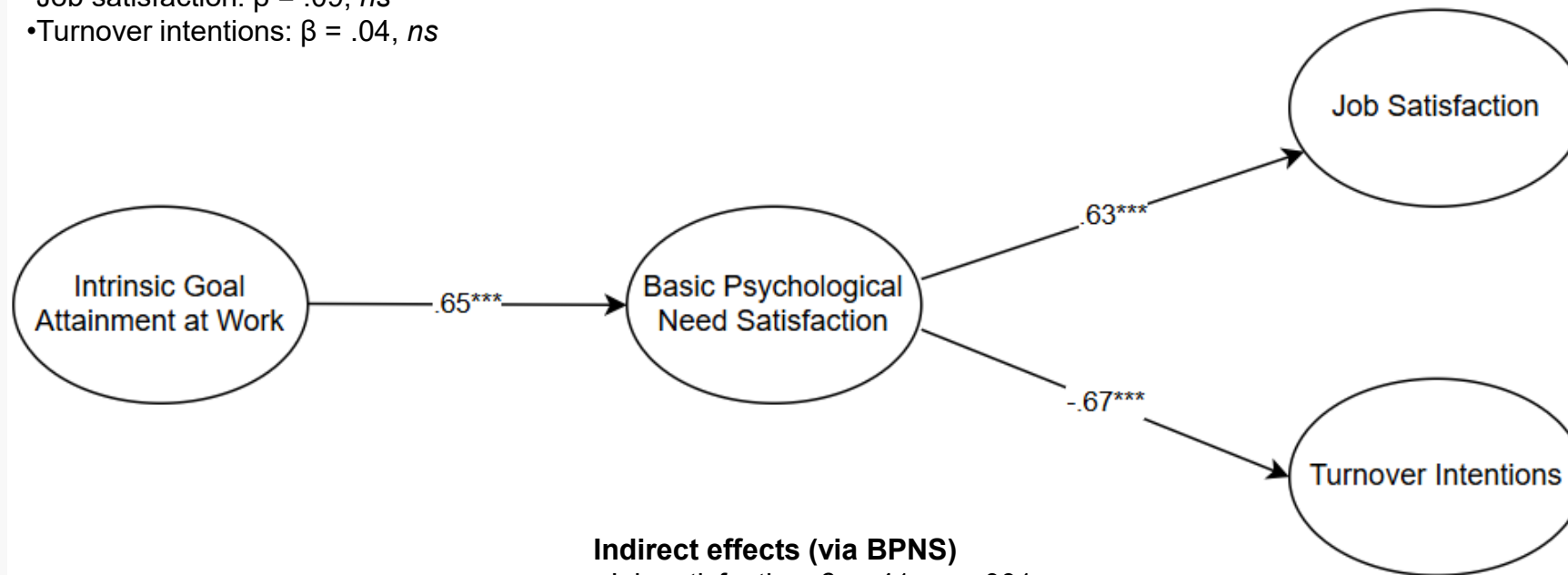
RESULTS



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Direct effects

- Job satisfaction: $\beta = .09$, *ns*
- Turnover intentions: $\beta = .04$, *ns*



Indirect effects (via BPNS)

- Job satisfaction: $\beta = .41$, $p < .001$
- Turnover intentions: $\beta = -.43$, $p < .001$

$\chi^2(221) = 525.71$, $p < .001$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05



DISCUSSION



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- School principals interviewed tended to have a background of teaching, incremental progression, contingent on context or circumstance.
- Drawn to the profession with goals of wanting to make a positive difference to school, support development of students, wanting to contribute to the community.
- There may be some barriers to the extent that intrinsic goals are actualized in the workplace, such as sufficient access to resources and the intensive nature of the role.
- Understanding how education systems enable or constrain the attainment of principals' intrinsic goals may help inform strategies to support principal well-being and retention.



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THANK YOU!

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