

Leadership Opportunities in the School Setting

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To explore teachers' and middle school leaders' perspectives of promotional policies and practices within the schools where they work. Fifteen teachers and/or middle school leaders participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. Themes that emerged from the data included a mix of perceptions, in that promotions were sometimes perceived to be based on appropriate measures of merit such as experience, but at other times were perceived to be unfair or based on cronyism, with female staff perceived to be at a disadvantage.

educational leadership

culture

promotions

career advancement

1. Background

Promotions can be viewed as a product of organisational culture as they act as an indicator of organisational values [1]. Employees may look towards those who have been promoted with questions about what skills or qualities the successful candidate possesses to be deserving of promotion [1][2][3]. Promotions are integral to the very fabric of an organisation. They are indeed common practice but are often limited due to the pyramidal structure of organisations [4]. As such, there is only room for a select number of people to be promoted within an organisation, regardless of how many may be perceived to deserve one [4]. This is particularly true in the school setting, where there is less employee mobility. In light of this, opportunities for promotion are limited and can then become fraught. Whether accurate or otherwise, where there are limited opportunities for promotion and where competition is intense, the factors that determined who was successful may be perceived as meritless. Organisational leaders are also under pressure to have a "goodness of fit" in those who are promoted. Some may use promotion practices as a means to reward those who align with organisational values and goals [1] and/or to retain staff members [5][6]. Promotions are a complex organisational practice that has received relatively little attention in the research pertaining to the school setting.

When perceived to be fair, the promotion process can act as a motivational tool for employees to incentivise them to work harder and more efficiently [7][8]. Promotions also have the potential to promote job satisfaction [9]. However, when promotions are perceived to be unfair, the resulting sense of procedural injustice may have consequences for discouraging work efforts [10][11], causing job stress [12], and influencing turnover decisions [12]. In the context of school leadership, this is particularly relevant as a staffing crisis in school principalship has been identified, with fewer individuals seeking promotion and increasing school leader turnover [13]. It is, therefore, imperative to explore the perceptions of teaching staff on the motivators, barriers, and facilitators of workplace promotions.

2. School Leadership and Promotions

The attrition of principals is an emerging phenomenon in school leadership. In the United States, for example, a study conducted in 2015 indicated that among all public-school principals studied, six percent moved to a different school and

ten percent left the principalship [14]. In 2021, the numbers remain similar or even slightly increased in terms of intention to leave school principalship, with 13% strongly agreeing and 15% somewhat agreeing that they plan to leave the principalship as soon as they can [15]. In Ireland, a recent national study published by the Irish Primary Principals Network [16] found that in the last five years, there has been a change of leadership in 39% of the smaller schools who responded to their study and in 40% of the DEIS schools that responded. Forty-five percent of principals responded that it was unlikely or highly unlikely that they would be in their current role on five years, in addition to some giving reasons such as retirement, others cited hoping to be seconded to another role, to move schools or that they were not thriving in their current schools and intended to resign [16]. This indicates that in coming years, the growing trends of promotion opportunity and career mobility will continue to grow, and as such it is essential to bolster confidence in recruitment and promotional processes in order for sustainable leadership to thrive.

3. Reasons for Seeking Promotions

There are numerous reasons why employees seek out career progression. Firstly, intrinsic motivations [17] such as intellectual stimulation [18], a desire to learn more [19], and the opportunity to explore new roles [18][20] may act as motivators. The motivations may also lie in the hierarchical assumptions of seniority such as desire for greater organisational and/or occupational power [21][22] or a desire to lead [23]. Additional reasons may be more extrinsic in nature, such as greater job security [24], pay increases [25], and prestige [25]. These numerous motivations for career progression have been shown to differ across individuals based on gender [21][22][26], nationality [26], culture [27][28], and even simply differences in promotional aspirations across individuals [29]. In considering the numerous reasons as to why individuals seek out promotions, it is important to acknowledge that there is little literature in the existing literature pertaining specifically to motivations of school staff, a gap which is even larger when considering an Irish perspective. The current research seeks to bridge these gaps to identify why staff in this population seek out promotions. This is particularly important as a current staffing crisis has been identified in the role of school leadership [30][31], and to identify motivators could allow for these factors to be considered and embedded in progression opportunities.

4. Determinants of Promotion

Ruderman et al. [32] have identified that the reasons for promotion success can typically be broken down into five categories: "preparation, attitudes, people skills, personal attributes and context". Internal change agents are typically managers or employees who have been deployed to oversee change within their organisation [33]. In many innovative organisations, leaders and employees are expected to lead organisational change [34]. Frequently what is desired in candidates is a proven ability to be an effective change agent. [32]. Much time within organisations is work relating to others and that interpersonal dimension is frequently underestimated [35]. Successful leaders have a more natural or highly developed ability to read the behaviours of others [36]. This is a critical skill for middle leaders as, quite often, they are expected to manage up as well as manage down [37]. These interpersonal skills and ability to work in a team, which have in effect come to be known as social competence [38], are often viewed by promoting leaders as crucial to success [39]. In pondering why some people experience more career growth, Chen et al. [40] suggest that employees who have congruent characteristics with their organisations are more likely to be rewarded within the organisation by means of a promotion. In this way, promotions can often bolster and protect current organisational culture.

5. Work Politics

Workplaces are social places [41]. Leaders and followers often discuss non-work-related topics that can sometimes extend outside the working hours over lunch, evening socialising, or smoking breaks. Through these interactions, social bonds occur [41]. Networking behaviours, such as going out to talk shop informally, attending conferences, or keeping in touch with former colleagues, are essential to workplace mobility [42][43][44]. In line with this, the social nature of promotions has previously been acknowledged, leading to the identification of “work politics” as an indicator of promotional decisions within an organisation [45]. A political promotion is based around social negotiation between leaders and their followers [46][47] and heavily influenced by the interpersonal strand and connections. In a study of promotions, a person’s proximity to the hiring manager and/or the hiring manager’s superior was evident in 73% of promotions given [48]. Clearly, proximity to and familiarity with the hiring manager has been found to increase the likelihood of promotion, as found by London and Stumpf [49]. These social and political factors can then give rise to actual or perceived unfairness in the promotions processes.

Networking goes hand in hand with accelerated growth in career success as networkers [50]. In a politicised culture, perceived unfairness in promotions can be associated with social bonds and networking with managers and has also been found to have an adverse impact with regard to gender gaps in career development [41]. The gender gap challenges in career promotion are now well-established in the extant literature. Gender quotas on interview boards and unconscious bias training has now become common in many countries when engaging with recruitment. The literature indicates that women need to “push” more for a promotion than their male counterparts [32]. This “pushing” is described as playing “a major role in convincing the boss or company that they deserved a promotion” [32] (p. 8). The concept of “sticky floors” was observed by Booth, Francesconi, and Frank [51] to describe the challenges facing women in gaining promotion and/or career mobility. Obligations at home, lack of time to commute long distances due to home commitments or family, and not able to move for new job opportunities or promotions were reasons cited within the study. Women have a higher turnover rate in the workplace and are less able to signal their skills to their promoting superiors compared with their male counterparts. Caught between these “sticky floors” and “glass ceilings”, significantly more women than men remain static in the workplace.

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