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Heliotropic Leadership: An Examination of the Role That Psychological Capital Plays in Enhancing Teachers' Morale

Sarah E. O'Brien¹ and Jolanta Burke² 

Abstract

Staff morale is a concern for many educational institutions, especially given the detrimental impact of Covid-19 on the school community. Despite the knowledge and interest in staff morale systematically growing, little is known about the relationship between teachers' morale and Psychological Capital (PsyCap). PsyCap is a construct comprising of four elements: (1) efficacy, (2) hope, (3) optimism, and (3) resilience. The current study aimed to address this gap by examining how well the components of PsyCap predicted employee morale, in a sample of 320 teachers most of whom were based in Ireland (76%), female (95%), aged 18-35 (63%) and working in primary school (87%). The Psychological Capital Questionnaire and the Teacher Morale component of the School Organisational Health Questionnaire were used. Standard multiple regression showed that the model explained 20% of the variance in teachers' morale with optimism demonstrating the strongest unique contribution, followed by hope and resilience. While staff morale was associated with higher levels of optimism and hope, it predicted lower levels of resilience. This finding may be due to the intricate nature of the PsyCap assessment rather than its individual components. Discussed are the implications of the current study that can inform the policy and practice of school leaders in Ireland and worldwide.

Keywords: Staff morale, teachers, psychological capital, school organisational health, heliotropic leadership

"Raising teacher morale level is not only making teaching more pleasant for teachers, but also making learning more pleasant for the students" (Miller, 1981, p. 485). This statement is as true today as it was four decades ago. Morale helps to maintain a higher standard of education in schools, through high levels of teacher motivation, productivity and enthusiasm (Judge et al., 2001; Holmes, 2005; Newman et al., 2014). While our knowledge about teacher morale has since expanded, we continue to search for methods to enhance it, so that it can benefit teachers and students alike. Recently, research on Psychological Capital (PsyCap: Luthans et al., 2004) has attracted interest from academics and professionals (Newman, Ucbasaran, Zhu, & Hirst, 2014). Specifically, a link has been established between PsyCap and staff morale (Louis & Murphy, 2018). However, no evidence exists in an educational context, which is what the current study aimed to address. This study aimed to examine how well the component of PsyCap predicted employee morale.

Staff Morale

Research on staff morale lacks a comprehensive and universally accepted definition. Morale is, therefore, viewed either as a group or individual phenomenon (Brion, 2015). Individual morale refers to the feeling the individual has towards their job, working environment and colleagues; it is subjective, thus relates only to that individual (Guion, 1958). In contrast, group morale is based on the 'spirit de corps' and relates to the feelings towards the job, environment and co-workers, as a group, and how they feel when working collaboratively (Hoy & Miskel, 1991). What almost all social scientists do agree on, however, is that morale is a vital foundation for an appropriate school climate (Getzels & Guba, 1957). Even though decades ago, leadership teams poorly understood and largely unacknowledged its significance to their organisations' effectiveness (Argyris, 1957), in recent years, high levels

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of morale seem to be the key to success and productivity (Paek et al., 2015). Thus, finding new ways to cultivate and promote morale in the workplace would be to the benefit of both the employer and the employee.

Three primary approaches have emerged in the development of a proxy for staff morale. The first one focused on employer and employee relationships (Brion, 2015), whereby staff morale could be viewed as the balance between the employer and employee relationship goal expectations (Brion, 2015). The second one focuses on job termination rate, grievances and strikes (Straka, 1993; Linz et al., 2006), given that grievances, upset and friction with staff members tends to be more common when low morale was evident in a workplace (Juneja, 2018). The third approach viewed staff morale as synonymous with job satisfaction and organisational commitment (McKnight et al., 2001; Reed, 2002; Linz et al., 2006). At the same time, theories such as PsyCap are rarely mentioned by staff morale researchers, even though theoretical links have been suggested (Louis & Murphy, 2018; Luthans et al., 2007).

Psychological Capital

Resource-based theoretical frameworks are becoming increasingly recognised and promoted as a foundation for effective organisations (Acedo et al., 2006; Newbert, 2007). This is promoted by the research showing the positive correlation between resources in the organisation and workplace productivity (Crook et al., 2008). Within this, human capital is said to be the most universally valuable resource (Kogut & Zander, 1992; Grant, 1996). However, organisations' understanding of human capital being advantageous continues to be poor (Foss, 2011), and there are calls for developing a better understanding of employees, their needs and the quality interactions between them. Thus, the influence of psychological capital on the individuals' performance is becoming increasingly recognised (Ardichvili, 2010).

PsyCap is a construct assessing individuals' positive psychological development and comprising of four components: (1) hope, (2) optimism, (3) resilience and (4) efficacy (Luthans et al., 2004). Hope involves having goals for self, staff and students and also having the will and the ways to achieve them (Knudson, 2020). Optimism refers to positive expectations for the future (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Resilience denotes a capacity to bounce back after adversity (Fuller, 1998), whereas self-efficacy indicates the probability estimation of success (Bandura, 1997). Overall, PsyCap is seen as one of the most important contributors to the effectiveness of a school and the wellbeing of those in it (Kitt, 2017).

When all these four aspects of psychological capital come together, the benefits are evident and substantial (Avey et al., 2010). Overall, leaders could build psychological capital within their staff members by acknowledging their achievements, encourage collegiality between staff, provide constructive feedback and offer assistance and support (Kitt, 2018). Leaders should extend autonomy to staff by having confidence and trust in the professional judgement of the teachers. Morale, job satisfaction and organisational commitment are linked to the components of psychological capital, and visa versa. Hope, optimism, resiliency and efficacy are all mentioned when explaining staff morale as denoted by job satisfaction and affective organisational commitment (Meyer et al., 2002; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009). For this reason, the four components of psychological capital were chosen to be included in this research study and to investigate how they might predict levels of morale.

PsyCap and Staff Morale

Staff morale and psychological capital both influence the wellbeing in the school environment (Hall et al., 1992; Avey et al., 2010; Kitt, 2017). Wellbeing is imperative for an effective and successful school (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000; Judge et al., 2001; Holmes, 2005; Kitt, 2017). In Ireland, the Wellbeing Policy Statement & Framework for Practice 2018-2023 has been released from the Department of Education and Skills (2018) and in this, the government have adapted the following definition of wellbeing from the World Health Organisation (2001), taking into account the multi-dimensional nature of wellbeing:

Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life (DES, 2018, p. 10)

The clear link between staff morale, psychological capital and wellbeing is evident in this definition. When teachers' wellbeing levels are high, they feel that they can bounce back from difficulties, life is in balance and we can deal effectively with daily challenges, similar to psychological capital. Positive staff wellbeing results in improved job

satisfaction, increased engagement, and reduced absence from work (Holmes, 2005), all of which are consequences of high staff morale (George & Jones, 2008). This in turn results in educators being better able to support the students and their learning.

Benefits from psychological capital can be seen for both the employers and the employees. It has been shown that employees who have high psychological capital outperform employees who have lower levels of the same (Avey et al., 2011). Performance of school staff is crucial to the effectiveness of a school. Therefore, this finding conveys the message that organisations should encourage and aid the development of employees' psychological capital. Organisations that prioritise creating and maintaining a positive culture and supportive environment, employees will have increased psychological capital and, thus, perform better (Newman et al., 2014). In addition to improved performance, employees with high psychological capital have also reported to have better wellbeing. It too was found that when these employees run into difficulties and have work-life balance issues, a burnout is less likely (Yang et al., 2012).

Even though the concepts of staff morale and PsyCap show significant contribution to teachers' wellbeing and outcomes, the relationship between them has yet to be researched in the educational context. Therefore, the research question for the current study is how much of the variance in staff morale can be predicted by the four components of PsyCap? Findings from this study can offer some important implications for practitioners and researchers a new direction to explore to help them enhance their teachers' staff morale. The purpose of this study is to examine how well the component of PsyCap predicted employee morale.

Method

Participants

A total of 320 participants took part in this quantitative study. A very large percentage of these participants were female (95%). The majority of these participants were aged between 18 and 35 years of age ($n=201$, 63%) and 76% of the individuals who took part in this survey were from Ireland ($n=243$). Most of the participants had the role of 'teacher' in their schools (87.8%) and primary schools were the educational level most frequently chosen ($n=278$, 87%). There was a good spread of responses from small schools ($n=99$), middle-sized schools ($n=150$) and large schools ($n=71$). A summary of this demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of participants at baseline ($N=320$)

Baseline characteristic	Full sample	
	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Female	305	95.3
Male	14	4.4
Other	1	.3
Age		
18-35 years	201	62.8
36-50 years	80	25.0
51-65 years	38	11.9
66+ years	1	.3
Country of Work		
Republic of Ireland	243	75.9
UK	55	17.2
Other	22	6.9
School Level		
Primary school	278	86.9
Secondary school	42	13.1
Role in School		
Teacher	281	87.8
Special Needs Assistant	18	5.6
Other	21	6.6
School Size		
Small school	99	30.9
Middle-sized school	150	46.9
Large school	71	22.2

Measures

Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ). This tool was constructed by Luthans et al. (2007), and is rooted in the theoretical foundation of positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It connects the four constructs of psychological capital: hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism. Psychological capital was self-reported using the 24-item version of the Psychological Capital (PCQ-24) questionnaire by Luthans et al. (2007). Instrument items were displayed and scored on a Likert scale from one to six; *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. These were individually entered into the measurement model. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha value for this questionnaire is .92. The current Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .74 to .87.

School Organisational Health Questionnaire. To assess general staff morale in the participants, the morale segment of the School Organisational Health Questionnaire (Hart et al., 2000) was used. This morale segment was made up of five statements in which the participants self-reported using a five-point Likert scale, one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree. These were individually entered into the measurement model by the participant. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha value was .92.

Data Analyses

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 26) Statistics, a software programme for quantitative data analysis, was used in the analysis of data. Multiple regression was used to assess the ability of the four control measures of psychological capital (hope, resilience, optimism, and efficacy) to predict levels of staff morale.

Results

The overall mean of the PsyCap construct was $M = 4.53$, $SD = .69$. Of the four components, the mean for Hope was the highest ($M = 4.66$, $SD = .84$), followed by Efficacy ($M = 4.61$, $SD = .90$), Resiliency ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .76$), with Optimism scoring the lowest ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .83$). The mean for Staff Morale was $M = 3.95$, $SD = .90$. Table 2 provides further detail.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics ($N = 320$)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. General Psychological Capital (PCQ-24)	1.54	6	4.53	.69
2. PsyCap - Efficacy	1.67	6	4.61	.90
3. PsyCap - Hope	1.17	6	4.66	.84
4. PsyCap- Resiliency	1.5	6	4.44	.76
5. PsyCap - Optimism	1.5	6	4.42	.83
6. Staff Morale	1.2	5	3.95	.90

Multiple regression was used to assess the ability of four control measures (Efficacy, Hope, Resiliency, and Optimism) to predict levels of staff morale. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Detailed correlation statistics are available in Table 3.

Table 3. Pearson correlation statistics for PsyCap variables and staff morale ($N = 320$)

	Staff Morale	PsyCap Efficacy	PsyCap Hope	PsyCap Resiliency
PsyCap Efficacy	.24*			
PsyCap Hope	.38*	.65*		
PsyCap Resiliency	.21*	.44*	.63*	
PsyCap Optimism	.42*	.48*	.69*	.59*

* $p < .001$

The model explained 20% of the variance in the amount of stress leaders experience ($F = 20.06$, $p < .001$). Only three control measures were statistically significant, with Optimism recording a higher beta value ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) followed by Hope ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$) and Resiliency ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$). Further detail and a summary of this regression analysis for psychological capital variables predicting staff morale can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of regression analysis for PsyCap variables predicting staff morale

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Efficacy	-.02	.07	-.02
Hope	.27	.09	.25**
Resiliency	-.17	.08	-.14*
Optimism	.36	.08	.34***
R^2		.20	
<i>F</i> for change in R^2		20.06***	
<i>df</i> (Regression)		4	
<i>df</i> (Residual)		315	
<i>df</i> (Total)		319	
<i>F</i>		20.06***	

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Discussion

This research is the first study that has provided evidence of the relationship between PsyCap and staff morale in the context of educators. The results showed that higher levels of optimism and hope, and lower levels of resiliency predicted staff morale in the educational workplace. Of all of the components of PsyCap, optimism was found to be the greatest predictor of staff morale. This is line with previous research showing that optimism plays an important role in maintaining staff morale (Kirk & Koeske, 1995; Seroka, 2009). Within the PsyCap framework, the component of optimism is based on the theory that focuses on the individual's expectancy of positive outcomes (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Optimists are seen as people who are not afraid of failure, who are great communicators and who use the language of motivation, as well as their behaviours being infectious (Sandford, 2021). They create a positive energy in this way and their positive outlook could be contagious (Jarzabkowski, 2002). In an Irish context, past research showed optimistic teachers see the best in their colleagues and face change with energy and enthusiasm (Kitt, 2018). All these positive actions are able to boost the morale and general atmosphere experienced in the educational workplace, which may be the reason why optimism was reported as the greatest predictor of staff morale, compared to the other PsyCap components. However, given the various approaches to defining and conceptualising wellbeing (e.g. Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009; Seligman, 1990), these results are limited to the definition of optimism as per PsyCap, which is based on dispositional optimism theory (Carver & Scheier, 2009), not optimism as a general concept. Further research needs to be carried out to understand its impact on various theories to optimism.

Similarly, hope has also been found to be a significant predictor of staff morale in the current study. This is consistent with previous research according to which teachers experiencing low morale and high anxiety in the workplace tend to struggle to maintain or build hope (Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011). Hope also tends to lead to better problem-solving, elevated work performance and satisfaction, greater optimism, higher levels of wellbeing and staff morale (Snyder et al., 1997). Therefore, the findings in relation to hope are not surprising. Although, it is the first study that considered the four components of PsyCap and their contribution to staff morale in tandem.

The surprising finding, however, related to the resiliency component of PsyCap, whereby lower levels of resiliency predicted staff morale. These findings contrast prior research showing that resilience and effective coping contribute to staff morale (Morgan et al., 2009; Paul et al., 2016; Abraham et al., 2018). The differences may be due to the definition of resilience and the assessments and analyses other studies used. The current study's findings are therefore limited to the regression model applied, into which 4 components of PsyCap were entered. More research is required with a larger sample of participants to confirm this finding, as well as further exploratory research that identifies the reasons for it.

Implications for Practice

Following on from this study, hope and optimism could be encouraged and promoted within the school environment. Evidence-based interventions can be applied (Lopez, 2010; Seligman, 1990). For example, when a challenge arises, leaders could focus on past successes of their staff member, identify strengths from those successes that could be used and help to overcome the challenge and help them achieve the new goal (Knudson, 2020). Furthermore, PsyCap interventions that aim to develop hope and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007) should be considered as part of regular

educational programmes preparing school leaders and managers for their future employment. Finally, government and school-based policies relating to staff morale and evidence-based techniques to enhance it should be introduced and regularly updated to ensure that PsyCap and staff morale are part of ever-growing developmental strategy for school improvement. Nonetheless, it is recommended that further research is carried out to confirm the current research findings before major changes are applied in practice.

Limitations

There are some limitations recognised in this research study. The current study recruited teachers using social media. Given that there are differences in the type of participants who use social media compared to snowball sampling (Chambers et al., 2020), other sampling methods should be applied in future research. Also, a considerable number of participants were female. Further research should consider more gender balance. Even though, the research targeted teachers worldwide, due to the social media bias, 76% of participants were from the Republic of Ireland, 17% from the United Kingdom, and only 7% represented the rest of the world. Future research should consider a broader international sample. Another limitation was the fact that the work environment was constrained to primary and post-primary educational work settings, the sample consisted solely of volunteer participants, and independent and dependent variables were collected at the same time. Finally, data was collected during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Many school staff around the world were working from home at the time, and it was a very uncertain and unsettled period for all. Further research is required in post-pandemic times to examine whether the global situation had an influence on the results found.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Standards

All study procedures involving human participants followed institutional and/or national research committee ethical standards and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The ethical approval also was obtained by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Maynooth University.

Author Contributions

The authors developed the concept for this manuscript, carried out the literature review, critically analysed the data, wrote the manuscript, and proofread it.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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