

The Impact of underemployment on Retention Intention among Pre-school Education Interns in Normal Universities in Hubei Province: The Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the impact of underemployment on retention intention among pre-school education interns in normal universities in Hubei Province, with job satisfaction as a mediating variable. As a research objective, the study seeks to explore the relationships between underemployment, job satisfaction, and retention intention during internships. The research sample consisted of 1,006 pre-school education interns. Research instruments included a structured questionnaire designed to measure levels of underemployment, job satisfaction, and retention intention. Data collection was conducted through a survey administered to the interns, and research analysis involved statistical techniques to examine the relationships among the variables.

The research results found that underemployment significantly affects both job satisfaction and retention intention among interns, with job satisfaction serving as a mediating variable.

Aims: As future key contributors to the field, pre-school education interns' intentions to stay and their career development aspirations are crucial for the ongoing progress of the early childhood education sector. This study aims to explore and analyze the significance of retention intentions among pre-school education interns from teacher training colleges, and to identify how underemployment and job satisfaction impact these intentions.

Methodology: This study utilized the underemployment Scale, the Retention Intention Scale, and the Job Satisfaction Scale to conduct an online survey of 1,006 interns from four teacher training universities in Hubei Province, China. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed for empirical analysis to examine the relationships among underemployment, job satisfaction, and retention intention.

Results: The findings indicate that when interns perceive a mismatch between their abilities and job requirements, their intention to remain in the position significantly decreases. Additionally, job satisfaction serves as a mediating variable between underemployment and retention intention. Specifically, even in the presence of underemployment, higher job satisfaction leads to a stronger intention to stay. In other words, underemployment influences interns' retention intention through the intermediary effect of job satisfaction.

Conclusion: In the context of internships for preschool education majors at normal universities in Hubei Province, both job satisfaction and underemployment are effective pathways to enhance retention intention. The findings suggest that improving job satisfaction can mitigate the negative effects of underemployment, thereby fostering a greater intention to remain in the position.

Keywords: Underemployment; Retention Intention; Job Satisfaction; Preschool Education Interns

Introduction

Education fundamentally emphasizes practical application (Tian, 2022), and practical application is central to shaping teachers' perceptions of overqualification and their professional growth. For teacher education students, graduation internships represent a critical process of integrating theory with practice. These internships not only offer opportunities to apply educational theories in real-world settings but also provide interns with essential experience needed for their future teaching careers. Consequently, researchers often view "internships" as a pivotal factor in assessing whether students successfully transition into professional roles (Zu & Yang, 2022). Educational internships offer teacher candidates a chance to merge theoretical knowledge with practical experience, helping them acquire the foundational skills required for their teaching careers. Through these experiences, teacher education students can deepen their understanding and engagement with the teaching profession, fostering their initial professional commitment in the field of education (Zhang & Zhao, 2018).

Tracing back in history, the Two-Factor Theory, proposed by Herzberg, identifies two distinct sets of factors that influence job satisfaction: hygiene factors and motivators. Hygiene factors, which include salary, working conditions, company policies, and management practices, are primarily related to the work environment. While deficiencies in these factors can lead to dissatisfaction, improving them does not necessarily increase job satisfaction. On the other hand, motivators, such as the intrinsic challenge of the work itself, recognition, and a sense of achievement, directly enhance employees' job satisfaction. Herzberg's theory challenged traditional management thinking by highlighting the significance of job content and employee growth. This theory has significantly contributed to the development of job redesign and employee motivation strategies.

According to Herzberg's research, the reasons for job satisfaction or dissatisfaction are linked to both the work environment and the nature of the work itself. In this context, if interns feel overqualified or underutilized, it is often related to hygiene factors, which include aspects such as working conditions, salary, and interpersonal relationships—primarily addressing external aspects of the work environment. Conversely, job satisfaction, driven by intrinsic motivators such as a sense of accomplishment, recognition, and responsibility, can enhance job performance and satisfaction, potentially influencing interns' willingness to stay. Therefore, understanding and applying the Two-Factor Theory is crucial for exploring interns' work experiences and retention intentions in this study (Dafydd, T., Yi, L., Chiagoziem, C.U., & Dossa, J. 2024).

The research problem addressed in this study centers on understanding the factors that influence the retention intentions of preschool education interns, particularly focusing on the roles of underemployment and job satisfaction. The study aims to determine how underemployment negatively impacts interns' intentions to stay in the profession and to explore whether job satisfaction mediates this relationship. By investigating these dynamics, the research seeks to provide insights into the challenges faced by preschool education interns and to offer guidance for improving their retention rates, ultimately contributing to the stability and development of the early childhood education sector.

In summary, applying Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory allows researchers to gain deeper insights into how preschool education interns' experiences during their internships influence their job satisfaction, perceptions of their profession, and future career choices. Understanding these dynamic relationships can help enhance the internship experience, improve educational quality, and retain outstanding future educators.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the significant negative impact of underemployment on the intention to stay among preschool education interns.
2. To investigate the mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between underemployment and the intention to stay among preschool education interns.

Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

1. Participants and Procedures

The origins of the research field on perceived overqualification can be traced back to the mid-20th century, when scholar Hauser (1974) introduced the concept, primarily describing a state of low-quality employment. When individuals experience a mismatch between their qualifications and their job, this perceived underemployment can lower their self-esteem, make them feel powerless at work, and reduce their job satisfaction (Rifka, Fadhiilah, Arjuni, Aditya, Nanda, Priyatama, Pratista, Arya, Satwika, 2019). It can also negatively impact their personal health or prompt them to consider leaving their current position in search of a more suitable job (Feldman, Leana, & Bolino, 2002). Employees often aim to improve their working conditions to achieve better compensation and higher positions. When they find that the actual job situation does not meet their expectations after officially starting, they may experience severe feelings of relative deprivation. This can lead to a negative attitude towards their current job and organization, a reluctance to fully commit to their work, and a loss of enthusiasm and passion. In severe cases, they may even contemplate looking for other job opportunities to alleviate the discomfort caused by relative deprivation (Himani, Oberai, 2021).

Based on the above discussion, this study formulates the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): underemployment among preschool education interns has a significant negative impact on their intention to stay.

2. The Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction in the Relationship Between underemployment and Intention to Stay

Job satisfaction is widely regarded as an important predictor of turnover intention; research indicates that employees with high job satisfaction are more likely to stay in their current positions (Tett & Meyer, 1993). According to Herzberg's two-factor theory, the hygiene factors that perceived overqualification may trigger (such as salary and working conditions) are not sufficient to motivate employees, but their unmet state can cause employee dissatisfaction (Herzberg, 1959). This dissatisfaction can further reduce job satisfaction, especially when employees feel that their abilities and talents are not being fully utilized. Studies have shown that job satisfaction is closely related to employees' affective commitment, with those exhibiting high affective commitment more likely to show high turnover intention (Hafizu, et al., 2023). Further research indicates that the impact of perceived overqualification is not limited to directly lowering job satisfaction. It can also lead to job burnout, particularly in industries that highly depend on personal abilities and creativity (Frank, et al., 2022).

Therefore, in the long run, perceived overqualification not only directly affects job satisfaction but also may influence turnover intention through the mediating role of job satisfaction (Bagus, et al., 2023).

In summary, this study hypothesizes:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between underemployment and intention to stay among preschool education interns.

Based on the above two hypotheses, we have developed a hypothetical model to explore the relationship between underemployment and intention to stay, as illustrated in Figure 1.

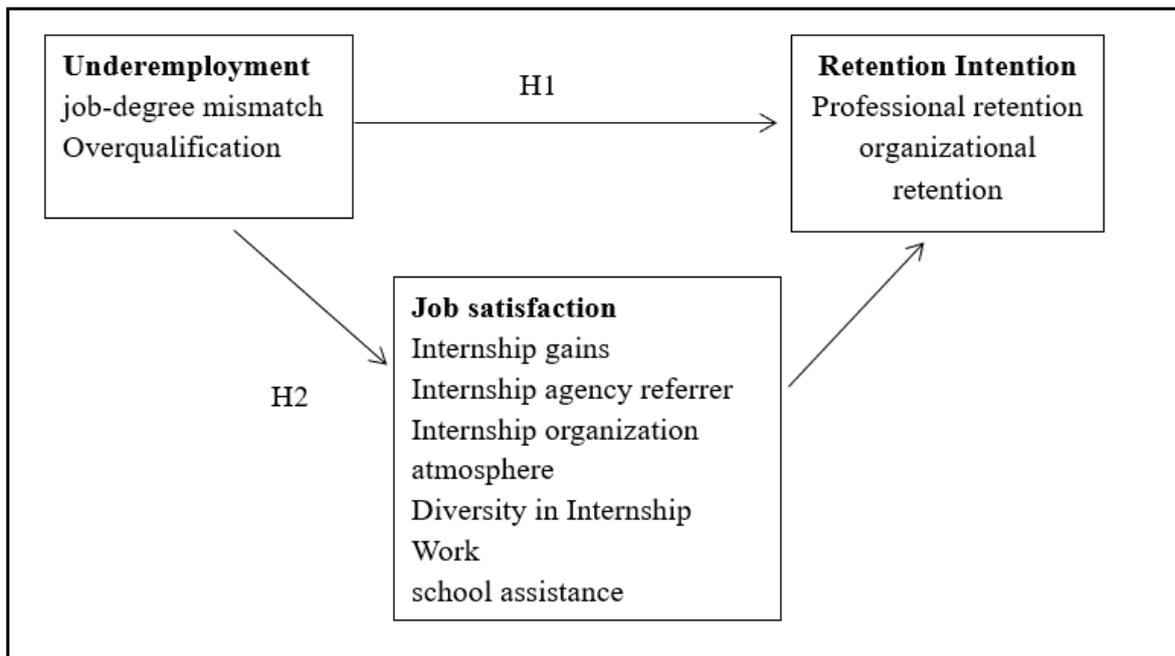


Figure 1 Hypothetical model. (Source: Constructed by the researcher, 2024)

Research Methodology

1. Research subjects

This study obtained the consent of the respondents and used the professional survey platform Questionnaire (<https://www.sojump.com>). In April 2024, the purposive (purposive) sampling method was used to select 4 normal universities in Hubei Province, China. Interns from four normal universities participated in sample surveys. This study informed college students in advance of the details of the survey and that they could terminate filling out the questionnaire at any time, and obtained oral informed consent from the college students. A total of 1,053 questionnaires were collected in this study. After excluding unqualified questionnaires such as missing data or regular responses, 1,006 valid questionnaires were collected, with a questionnaire effectiveness rate of 95.9%. The four universities tested are all colleges and universities in Hubei Province, including 3 undergraduate colleges and 1 college. All four universities offer preschool education majors, and all have preschool education major interns. The interns all participate in graduate internships organized by the school.

2. Research Tools

This study assesses perceived indignity, job satisfaction, and intention to stay as relevant concepts based on established theory and literature. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

(a) Perceived Condescension Scale (Maynard et al., 2006). In this study, we used a 9-item scale to assess the level of perceived condescension of interns during their internship. Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$.

(b) Job satisfaction scale (Chen Jingyi and Lu Yunlin, 2016). In this study, we used a 30-item scale to assess interns' level of job satisfaction during their internship. Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$.

(c) Intention to Remain Scale (Lin Huizhi (2005), Chen Wanzhi (2008), Li Qing (2011)). In this study, we used a 7-item scale to assess interns' willingness to stay during their internship. Level of willingness to stay. Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$.

3. Reliability and validity test

SPSS 26 and AMOS 26 were used for data analysis. After conducting confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in this study, $\chi^2/df = 2.151$, RMSEA = .034, GFI = .986, and CFI = .991. The model fit is good (Bollen, 1989; Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). A CFA measurement model was constructed based on the three concepts of perceived humiliation, intention to stay, and job satisfaction (Table 2, Figure 2). The 21 valid items in the CFA measurement model exhibited reasonable factor loadings (all > 0.50 , Byrne, 2010). When testing for normality, a normal distribution was found for the 1006 participants, with both univariate ($-1.04 \leq$ skew values ≤ 0.96 ; $-0.05 \leq$ kurtosis values ≤ 2.59 ; Hair et al., 2010). The composite reliability (CR) values of the three latent constructs (i.e., perceived surrender, intention to stay, and job satisfaction) were .704, .732, and .892 respectively (all $> .70$; Hair et al., 2010).

Table 1 Model fitting

Fit index	Fitting results	Recommended standards
χ^2	81.725	/
GFI	0.986	>0.8 , acceptable; >0.9 , excellent
RMSEA	0.034	<0.08 , good; <0.05 , excellent
NFI	0.983	>0.8 , acceptable; >0.9 , excellent
IFI	0.991	>0.8 , acceptable; >0.9 , excellent
TLI	0.986	>0.8 , acceptable; >0.9 , excellent
CFI	0.991	>0.8 , acceptable; >0.9 , excellent
χ^2/df	2.151	$1 < \chi^2/df < 5$

Table 2 Convergent validity

Variables	Dimensions	Unstandardized Coefficients	SE	z	p	Standardized Coefficients	AVE	CR
Underemployment	job-degree mismatch	1	-	-	-	0.851	0.550	0.704
	Overqualification	0.736	0.063	11.709	***	0.613		
Retention Intention	Professional retention	1	-	-	-	0.801	0.577	0.732
	organizational retention	0.884	0.056	15.759	***	0.717		
Job satisfaction	Internship gains	1	-	-	-	0.805	0.622	0.892
	Internship agency referrer	1.073	0.038	28.331	***	0.812		
	Internship organization atmosphere	1.054	0.038	27.403	***	0.791		
	Diversity in Internship Work	1.01	0.04	25.3	***	0.743		
	school assistance	1.072	0.039	27.409	***	0.791		

4. Discriminant validity test

The average variance extracted (AVE) values of the four latent structures are .550, .577, and .622 respectively. (all>.50; Hair et al., 2010). Discriminant validity is judged by the square root of AVE (Hair et al., 2010). In this study, the square root of AVE of each variable is greater than the Peel of the corresponding rows and columns. Sen's correlation coefficient shows that the scale has good discriminant validity, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Variance

Factor	Eigen			% of Variance(Unrotated)			% of Variance(Rotated)		
	Eigen value	% of Variance	Cumulative % of Variance	Eigen Value	% of Variance	Cumulative % of Variance	Eigen Value	% of Variance	Cumulative % of Variance
1	17.591	30.329	30.329	17.591	30.329	30.329	8.442	14.556	14.556
2	3.823	6.591	36.921	3.823	6.591	36.921	5.141	8.864	23.42
3	3.567	6.15	43.071	3.567	6.15	43.071	3.915	6.75	30.169
4	2.668	4.601	47.671	2.668	4.601	47.671	3.716	6.407	36.576
5	1.969	3.395	51.067	1.969	3.395	51.067	3.441	5.932	42.508
6	1.653	2.851	53.917	1.653	2.851	53.917	3.336	5.751	48.259
7	1.381	2.381	56.298	1.381	2.381	56.298	2.707	4.667	52.927
8	1.161	2.001	58.299	1.161	2.001	58.299	2.466	4.252	57.178
9	1.096	1.889	60.188	1.096	1.889	60.188	1.744	3.007	60.186

Discriminant validity: Pearson correlation and AVE square root value

	Underemployment	Retention Intention	Job satisfaction
Underemployment	0.741		
Retention Intention	-0.334	0.760	
Job satisfaction	-0.371	0.486	0.789

Note: The values listed on the diagonal are the square roots of the average variation extracted (AVE) of the variable

5. Common method deviation test

Since the measurement of all variables in this study comes from the subjects' self-reports, in order to avoid common method bias, Harman's single-factor test method was selected to conduct a common method bias test on the variables involved in the study. The data results show that the number of factors extracted by exploratory factor analysis is greater than 1, and the variance explanation rate of the first factor is 30.329%, which is less than the critical value of 40% (Podsakoff et al., 2003), indicating that there is no serious problem in this study. common method bias.

Research Results

This study explored the retention intentions and career aspirations of early childhood education interns, focusing on the impact of perceived underemployment and job satisfaction on their retention intentions. The findings are as follows:

Result 1: Perceived underemployment has a significant negative impact on the retention intentions of early childhood education interns. When interns perceive that their skills and qualifications exceed the job requirements, their willingness to stay in their current position significantly decreases. This result aligns with theoretical expectations, suggesting that perceived underemployment leads to dissatisfaction and decreased motivation, ultimately affecting retention intentions.

Result 2: Job satisfaction plays a mediating role between perceived underemployment and retention intentions. Specifically, when job satisfaction is high, the negative impact of perceived underemployment on retention intentions is reduced. Even if interns feel underemployed, their willingness to stay can be maintained if they are satisfied with their work. Therefore, job satisfaction serves as a crucial buffer against the adverse effects of perceived underemployment on retention intentions.

These results indicate that simultaneously addressing perceived underemployment and job satisfaction is essential for enhancing the retention intentions of early childhood education interns.

Discussion

This study extends previous research by providing valuable insights into the factors affecting retention intention during the internship process for teacher education students. By examining retention intention in the context of teacher training internships, we designed a mediation model that investigates the influencing factors of retention intention and offers empirical evidence for effectively enhancing retention intention. The model specifically explores the roles of underemployment and job satisfaction in shaping retention intention.

The effect of underemployment on retention intention.

Based on the empirical results of this study, it has been confirmed that underemployment can effectively diminish internship students' retention intention during their internships, thus validating Hypothesis H1. This finding is consistent with previous perspectives (Chhabra, 2019; Yang & Lee, 2020; Nguyen & Malik, 2019). Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959) posits that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction arise from different factors. Motivators, such as achievement, recognition, and the nature of the work itself, enhance job satisfaction, while hygiene factors, such as company policies, supervision, and salary, if not properly managed, can lead to job dissatisfaction. This theoretical model helps explain why underemployment may reduce employees' retention intention.

This result is consistent with numerous studies on job satisfaction, which indicate that a lack of motivators can lead to job dissatisfaction and, consequently, affect employees' retention intention (Chhabra, 2019; Yang & Lee, 2020). However, this finding contrasts with some research that suggests the impact of underemployment on retention intention is minimal (Nguyen & Malik, 2019). This discrepancy suggests that the effect of underemployment on retention intention may be moderated by other personal or organizational factors.

Mediating Role of Job Satisfaction in the Relationship Between Underemployment and Retention Intention

In this study, job satisfaction serves as a mediator between underemployment and retention intention, validating Hypothesis H2. This finding aligns with previous research (Chhabra, 2019; Yang & Lee, 2020). The study reveals a significant negative relationship between underemployment, defined as employees perceiving their education, skills, and experience as exceeding job requirements, and job satisfaction (Maynard et al., 2006). This sense of overqualification can lead to dissatisfaction with the work environment, thereby reducing job satisfaction (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). Job satisfaction is widely regarded as a crucial predictor of retention intention, with research indicating that employees with higher job satisfaction are more likely to remain in their current positions (Tett & Meyer, 1993).

In many work environments, interpersonal relationships significantly impact employees' job satisfaction and retention intention (Nguyen & Malik, 2019). Therefore, in a work setting, underemployment affects job satisfaction, and when employees feel that their self-worth is recognized and their job satisfaction is high, their retention intention is likely to increase (Yang & Lee, 2020; Nguyen & Malik, 2019). Conversely, if employees perceive underemployment, feel that their self-worth is not recognized, and experience low job satisfaction, their retention intention is likely to decrease (Chhabra, 2019; Nguyen & Malik, 2019).

Conclusion

The simple mediation model constructed in this study effectively explains the impact of underemployment on retention intention, supporting related theories. The model includes the following conclusions:

(a) Underemployment has a significant negative impact on retention intention. When employees perceive that their education, skills, and experience exceed job requirements, they often experience dissatisfaction with their work, which consequently lowers their intention to stay.

(b) Job satisfaction serves as a significant mediator between underemployment and retention intention. Underemployment affects job satisfaction negatively, which in turn influences employees' retention intention. High job satisfaction helps mitigate the negative impact of underemployment, thereby increasing retention intention.

(c) The results explain why enhancing job satisfaction can effectively reduce the negative impact of underemployment on retention intention. Improving job satisfaction is an effective way to increase retention intention by alleviating the negative effects of underemployment.

Based on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, we developed a mediation model to estimate the mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between underemployment and retention intention. Structural equation modeling was used to evaluate the quality of the model, and the results showed a satisfactory model fit, with an overall explanatory power of 29.4%. Based on the findings of this study, we propose the following recommendations to improve the retention intention of interns during their internship:

1. Enhance Job Satisfaction: Underemployment refers to employees perceiving that their qualifications exceed job requirements, which often leads to reduced job satisfaction. To increase retention intention, organizations should focus on improving job satisfaction. This can be achieved by optimizing job content, providing appropriate challenges, and offering career development opportunities to alleviate the negative impact of underemployment.

2. Address Hygiene Factors: According to Herzberg's theory, hygiene factors such as compensation, work environment, and company policies are crucial for job satisfaction. Improving these hygiene factors can prevent a decline in job satisfaction and subsequently enhance employees' retention intention.

3. Strengthen Motivational Measures: Motivators, as outlined in Herzberg's theory (e.g., achievement, recognition, and responsibility), have a significant impact on job satisfaction. By strengthening these motivational measures, organizations can effectively enhance job satisfaction and, in turn, increase retention intention.

4. Establish Feedback and Communication Mechanisms: Regular employee satisfaction surveys and effective feedback mechanisms can help identify and address workplace issues in a timely manner, thereby improving job satisfaction and retention intention (Kulik & Perry, 2021).

These recommendations aim to mitigate the negative impact of underemployment on retention intention by enhancing job satisfaction, thereby improving the retention intention of interns during their internship period.

Suggestions

1. Theoretical Suggestions

Firstly, the data is limited to self-reports from internship students in the preschool education programs at four universities in Hubei Province. To enhance the theoretical generalizability of the findings, future research should expand the scope to include the effects of underemployment on retention intention across different educational and professional contexts. Additionally, it is recommended that future studies explore different types of perceived overqualification and their impacts on various populations to further enrich the existing theory.

2. Policy Suggestions

In terms of policy formulation, educational institutions and enterprises should pay attention to the job satisfaction and perceived overqualification of interns, and implement targeted measures to improve their professional experience. Specific measures include improving the work environment, increasing job challenges, and providing more career development opportunities to enhance interns' retention intentions.

3. Further Suggestions

This study relied on single-source data from self-reports. Future research should incorporate multi-source data, including peer assessments and manager evaluations, to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies should be conducted to track the career development of interns, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of perceived overqualification on retention intention.

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