

Reconstructing the Meaning of Work to Promote Teachers' Mental Health


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#### Abstract

Aims Teachers often encounter work-related challenges that can compromise their mental health. We used a dual-factor model to evaluate the relationship between the meaning of work and teachers' mental health. Mental health is defined as a high level of psychological well-being and a low level of psychological distress. Participants \& Methods This qualitative study involved a survey completed by 261 elementary school teachers in East Java, Indonesia, and five teacher interviews. Data were collected through documentation, interviews, and a Mental Health Scale, and data analysis was performed through descriptive and thematic analysis. Findings Many problems of teachers in performing their duties and teachers' inability to interpret their behavior have caused the level of mental health to decrease. Conclusion Our results contribute to a better understanding of teacher challenges that can affect overall mental health and provide useful strategies to improve teaching conditions.


Keywords Mental health; Work; School Teachers; Teaching

## CITATION LINKS

[1] COVID-19 and teachers' somatic burden, stress, and emotional ... [2] Teacher procrastination, emotions, and stress: A qualitative ... [3] Are foreign language learners enjoyment and anxiety specific to the ... [4] Parent and teacher reports of comorbid anxiety and ADHD symptoms in children ... [5] Teacher depression as a dynamic variable: Exploring the nature and predictors of change ... [6] Contribution of mathematical anxiety, learning motivation ... [7] The meaning of work for people with severe mental illness: A systematic ... [8] Harnessing the power of spaced ... [9] Pengaruh Kreatifitas dalam bekerja ... [10] The benefit of meaning in Andrei Platonov ... [11] Doing meaning in work under conditions of new public management? Findings ... [12] The meaning of work in teachers' ... [13] Meaningful work as a moderator of the relation between ... [14] Investigating achievement and mental health through the dual- factor ... [15] Prevalensi depresi dan gambaran stressor psikolososial pada ... [16] The dual continua model: The foundation of the sociology of mental ... [17] Happiness and ... [18] Psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, and positive mental ... [19] Health and wellbeing of Māori secondary school students in New Zealand ... [20] Library anxiety among university ... [21] Mild depression detection of college students ... [22] Coping with a natural disaster: Losses, emotions, and impulsive ... [23] What makes the teacher ... [24] The meaning of work in a sustainable ... [25] Analisis faktor konfirmatori terhadap alat ukur kesehatan ... [26] Online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic: Reflection on self-efficacy of primar ... [27] Sustainable development education practices in elementary ... [28] The importance of principal leadership and context ... [29] Understanding the organizational implementation context of schools ... [30] Insights on how to shape teacher learning policy ... [31] The secondary technicalprofessional education in the ... [32] The core aspects of teacher's book content ... [33] Nurse competence in implementing public ... [34] A path to teacher happiness? a sense of meaning ... [35] Teachers well- being from the social psychological ... [36] Determinants of mental health status using depression ... [37] Entering professional teaching: Problems and ... [38] Dual-factor model of mental health ... [39] Measuring meaningful work: The work and ...

## Introduction

The complexity and severity of teachers' workload at various levels of education have increased psychological disorders. For example, several studies have shown a tendency for increased stress experienced by teachers in carrying out their profession ${ }^{[1,2]}$. Teachers also experience anxiety with different work demands to complete ${ }^{[3,4]}$. There is a tendency of depression in teachers [5, 6]. These conditions indicate the existence of psychological problems that require a serious resolution. The meaning of work in teachers is one of the factors that are suspected to affect mental health $[7,8]$.
Some studies of meaning in the context of teacher mental health can be grouped into two types. The first focuses on the meaning of life in general. Research finds that the meaning of a teacher's life is influenced by creativity in teaching ${ }^{[9]}$. Other research has found that teachers' life meanings are influenced by performance ${ }^{[10]}$. The second type of study focuses on the meaning of work. Several experts have also carried out research on this theme [11, 12]. The relationship between these two types of meanings has a close relationship as meaning in work can be a moderator to achieve the meaning of life [13]. This article examined the meaning of work in teachers, involving mental health as a factor influenced by the meaning of teacher work.
We described three research objectives related to the meaning of work regarding the mental health of elementary school teachers. The first objective was to identify and describe teachers' problems recorded online in the last three years. The second objective was to describe and analyze the perceptions of teachers toward their profession. The third objective was to describe and evaluate the impact of teachers' problems regarding mental health.
The theoretical framework for the study depicts mental health based on a dual-factor model. This approach is defined as a state of a high level of psychological well-being and a low level of psychological stress. Through these three objectives, the study is expected to add scientific benefits by providing alternative solutions to support teacher's mental health by reconstructing the meaning of work as a teacher.
Mental health can be defined by two approaches: positive and negative. The first approach defines mental health as fulfilling positive aspects of a person's psychological state. The conditions in question include a sense of pleasure, experiencing satisfaction in life, and the growth of constructive social relationships ${ }^{[14]}$. The second approach defines mental health as avoiding mental illnesses, such as anxiety, depression, and loss of behavioral control ${ }^{[15]}$. These two approaches became known as the dual-factor theory of mental health [16]. Thus, individuals who have a healthy mentality, according to this approach, are those who have a high level of
psychological well-being and a low level of psychological distress.
The positive approach explains that healthy individuals are those with three positive characteristics. First, they are individuals who had a pleasant experience in their life ${ }^{[17]}$. Second, they have a sense of love as an expression of a positive feeling in cultivating relationships [18]. Finally, they are individuals who have a high level of life satisfaction. This means they can enjoy the experiences in their lives accompanied by joy ${ }^{[19]}$. Thus, it can be concluded that according to the positive approach, people with positive characteristics of mental health are those with pleasure, love, and satisfaction.
The negative approach explains that healthy people avoid feelings of anxiety, depression, and loss of control. Anxiety is a psychological condition representing characteristics of worry, heartache, or fear ${ }^{[20]}$. Depression is defined as a mood disorder characterized by deep feelings of sadness and a sense of indifference ${ }^{[21]}$. The loss of control is defined as a person's inability to control him/herself consciously; thus, they produce behaviors that harm others [22]. Thus, according to the second approach, the absence of anxiety, depression, and loss of control are characteristics of mentally healthy individuals.
Furthermore, the relationship between work meaningfulness and mental health in teachers has been demonstrated in various studies. Research on the meaning of work in teachers has found that a teacher's positive view of his/her work correlates with his/her level of happiness [23]. Other studies have found that the meaning of work has a very important role in various aspects of life ${ }^{[24]}$. The meaning of work can be used to predict teachers' high or low mental health. Some studies have widely studied mental health by linking to other variables (free and bound variables) and using different approaches.
This article was built on the premise that a psychologically healthy teacher will have a positive effect on his or her ability to perform professional and responsible duties. In addition, such teachers will also be able to educate and direct their students to become healthy individuals. Teachers' high level of mental health is influenced by their perception and behavior in interpreting their work; in other words, developing the mental health of teachers is a meaningful work as a teacher. Thus study was done to evaluate the relationship between the meaning of work and teachers' mental health.

## Participants and Methods

Qualitative research was chosen to understand teachers' problems in interpreting their work-related mental health at the basic education level. The selection of themes about the meaning of work and teachers' mental health using a qualitative approach was based on three reasons. First, online mass media
revealed the need to explain more about the problems of teachers in the last three years. Second, it is necessary to know the teacher's perception of work as a teacher, and finally, the need to know the level of mental health in carrying out his/her duties as a teacher. These three reasons make it possible to find solutions in solving teachers' problems
Research data was obtained from basic education level teachers in several cities in East Java province. The mental health survey was completed by 261 teachers from 15 primary schools ( 61 men and 200 women). Most subjects were married (67.5\%), had honorary teacher status (83.5\%), were uncertified (81.6\%), were under 30 years old (55.5\%), and had work experience under five years (42.1\%). Five teachers were selected for the interview regarding perceptions of the teaching profession and had three criteria, namely 1) having a high level of psychological pressure, 2) having a low level of psychological well-being, and 3) willingness to participate in the research. The method of determining the level of psychological well-being and psychological distress of the subjects was carried out through the analysis of mental health scales. The criteria for a subject having a high level of psychological well-being is when the subject's score is higher than the mean score, while the low criteria are obtained when the score is lower than the subject's mean score.
Three methods were used for data collection: Documentation, interviews, and psychological scales. Documentation was carried out to obtain information about the problems of teachers in carrying out their profession. The documentation in question was as documents on online mass media. The interview method was used to obtain information about the teacher's opinion of his/her profession. Interviews were conducted only on selected subjects on a limited basis. A psychological scale, based on Aziz and Zamroni's health measuring instrument, was used to determine the teacher's mental health ${ }^{[25]}$. This tool is called the Brief Mental Health Scale (BMHS-12), which reveals mental health from positive (positive emotions, positive social relationships, and life satisfaction) and negative (anxiety, depression, and
loss of control) aspects. The number of items in each aspect is 12 . The scale is scored on a Likert scale with five alternative answers: very often, often, sometimes, rarely, and never. The scoring process for the psychological well-being aspect ranges from one to five, while for the psychological distress aspect, it ranges from five to one. Content validity testing showed a Cronbach's alpha of 0.824 . Construct validity testing was done through confirmatory factor analysis and showed that the goodness of fit of the model meets the specified requirements.
Descriptive and thematic analysis was used according to the type of data obtained. A descriptive analysis was carried out to analyze the mental health profile of teachers, both in the form of psychological pressure and psychological well-being. Analysis was performed by grouping subjects into two categories: high and low. The high category was obtained when the subject obtained a higher score than the empirical mean, while the low category was obtained when the subject's score was equal to or lower than the empirical mean. The thematic analysis categorizes teachers' problems and perceptions of their work as teachers. The thematic analysis focused on aspects related to teachers' lack of rewards (both psychological and economic) and teachers' perceptions of unfairness. Both issues show the existence of teachers' problems related to the meaning of the teaching profession.

## Findings

## Teachers' work problems on online media

This section describes recorded online personal and professional teachers' problems. The presentation of the data focused on the problems recorded in the last three years. All data are presented in Table 1.
Table 1 reveals that teachers had psychological issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the numerous administrative requirements, teachers were under too much pressure and struggled with workplace issues. Also, the financial struggles of teachers and the lack of professionalism in teachers in performing their jobs due to personality problems are highlighted.

Table 1) Online recorded teachers' work problems

| No | Teachers' work problems |
| :--- | :--- |
| $\mathbf{1}$ | Teachers' distress issues, Sindonews.com, 2020; https://edukasi.sindonews.com/read/98396/144/cerita-guru-mengajar-dari- <br> rumah-tingkat-stres-tinggi-tekanan-darah-naik-15945541265 |
| $\mathbf{2}$ | Teachers' workload issues, Kapol.id, 2021, https://kapol.id/kondisi-guru-di-kabupaten-tasikmalaya-mengkhawatirkan <br> Teachers' financial issues, Liputan6.com, 2022, https://megapolitan.okezone.com/read/2022/06/15/338/2612251/10-juta- <br> buruh-dan-guru-honorer-ancam-mogok-nasional-ini-lima-tuntutan-demo-di-dpr |
| $\mathbf{4}$ | Teachers' personality issues, Liputan6.com, 2022, https://surabaya.liputan6.com/read/4873396/guru-smp-di-surabaya-pukul- <br> siswa-di-sekolah-begini-kejadiannya |

## Meaning of work

This section outlines two important findings from interviews with five primary school teachers who were selected purposively. The findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that there are two issues that indicate a tendency toward a lack of meaning in teaching. The first is the lack of rewards for teachers, both psychological and financial. The second is the unfair treatment of the teaching profession. The data

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showed that teachers feel a lack of meaning in their work. Both issues show the existence of teachers' problems related to the meaning of the teaching profession.

## An overview of the teacher's mental health

This section describes the teacher's mental health through the psychological measurement scale of mental health. The data obtained from 261 teachers were categorized into high and low categories (Table $3)$.

Table 3 explains that out of 261 teachers surveyed on mental health, there were teachers who experienced high psychological distress, both in the aspects of anxiety and depression and in the aspect of loss of control. Some teachers had a low level of psychological well-being regarding positive emotions, satisfaction, and positive social relationships. Teachers' mental health problems needing more attention were about psychological well-being rather than psychological distress.

Table 2) Teachers' perception of the meaning of work

| Subject | Statement | Coding |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 1 | I had intended to devote myself to religion and state, but a leader did not appreciate it. | Feelings of being underappreciated by the leadership |
| 2 | Being a teacher in a private school is only sometimes economically guaranteed. Therefore, there are many things to sacrifice. Not to mention administrative obligations that I don't think are very important but are required by the government. | Lack of appreciation economically. |
| 3 | The teacher is a very noble job. It's a great devotion where there's an experience or something new we must do. Although the teacher does not guarantee to get rich. | Lack of appreciation economically. |
| 4 | Teaching is a noble job. However, the teacher's well-being is often overlooked. Lack of attention from the central government about the welfare of especially non-civil servant honorary teachers. | Feeling unfairly treated |
| 5 | There are people who behave inconsistently with their goals but get an award that is not appropriate. | Feelings of underappreciated |

Table 3) Teacher's mental health

| Teachers' mental health | High |  | Low |  | Total |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  | $\bar{\Sigma}$ | \% | $\Sigma$ | \% | $\Sigma$ | \% |
| Psychological distress |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Anxiety |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| a. Feeling confused about the current state | 72 | 27.59 | 187 | 71.65 | 261 | 100 |
| b. Feeling helpless | 95 | 36.40 | 166 | 63.60 | 261 | 100 |
| 2. Depression |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| a. Feeling at its lowest point | 73 | 27.97 | 188 | 72.03 | 261 | 100 |
| b. Enjoying the desperate atmosphere | 43 | 16.48 | 218 | 83.52 | 261 | 100 |
| 3. Loss of control |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| a. Loss of control of thoughts and behavior | 55 | 21.07 | 206 | 78.93 | 261 | 100 |
| b. Despair in looking to the future | 98 | 37.55 | 347 | 62.45 | 261 | 100 |
| Psychological wellbeing |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Positive emotion |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| a. Daily life is full of something interesting | 207 | 79.31 | 54 | 20.69 | 261 | 100 |
| b. Enjoying what he/she does | 49 | 18.77 | 212 | 81.23 | 261 | 100 |
| 2. Positive social relationship |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| a. Feeling comfortable communicating with friends | 76 | 29.12 | 185 | 70.88 | 261 | 100 |
| b. Feeling valuable because of friends | 51 | 19.54 | 210 | 80.46 | 261 | 100 |
| 3. Satisfaction |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| a. Feeling happy in living life | 231 | 88.51 | 30 | 11.49 | 261 | 100 |
| b. Enjoying what is happening in life | 67 | 25.67 | 194 | 74.33 | 261 | 100 |

## Discussion

There are at least four fundamental issues that basic education teachers must deal with to practice their profession. These four problems can be grouped into two categories: personal problems $[2,5]$ and professional ones ${ }^{[26]}$. Several studies have shown that teachers' inability to solve their problems will result in various mental problems ${ }^{[7,8]}$. Therefore, the efforts of different parties are necessary to resolve the practice of their profession.
This research reflects the importance of attention and development of teachers' knowledge and skills in their profession. Schools and policymakers in the field of education should address this issue [27]. The
principal has to provide opportunities for teachers to develop professionalism through various training and education programs ${ }^{[28,29]}$. The education office is responsible for making policies that favor teachers for growth opportunities. The policy in question can be in the form of providing scholarships or the existence of rules that provide opportunities for teachers to develop professionally [30, 31]. Both policies can overcome problems experienced by teachers in carrying out their professional duties.
Psychological and financial rewards and injustices felt by teachers are the main problems in carrying out their profession. These results align with several previous studies ${ }^{[32,33]}$. Addressing both issues should
be a priority for all parties. Several studies have shown that happy teachers can complete their duties and obligations satisfactorily ${ }^{[23,34]}$. In other words, the handling of psychological and financial problems of teachers must be a priority in formulating policies in educational programs. Teachers who have a low level of mental health, that is, those who have a low level of psychological well-being and have a high level of psychological stress, are less likely to be able to carry out their professional tasks satisfactorily, including their ability to perform learning in the classroom ${ }^{[5,6]}$. Ignoring these conditions will lower the academic performance of students and have a greater impact on the low quality of education [37]. This study assessed teacher mental health studies by examining the two positive and negative aspects together in a study. Our results provide a further understanding that the teachers' meaning of work affects their level of mental health. In other words, teachers with a high level of meaning of work tend to have a high level of psychological well-being [13, 35] and a low level of psychological pressure ${ }^{[8,36]}$. These results provide an important understanding that teachers' interpretation of work can influence their high level of psychological distress and low level of psychological well-being.
The findings of this study demonstrated the importance of supporting teachers' mental health to be optimally developed. Based on the theory of dual mental health models, development can be carried out in two ways: optimization of aspects of psychological well-being and minimization of psychological distress [14, ${ }^{38]}$. Optimizing psychological well-being and minimizing teacher psychological pressure can be done by developing the teacher's meaning toward his/her work [12, 13]. In other words, the results of this study provide an understanding of the importance of meaningful work to develop teachers' mental health.The development of mental health through the meaning of work as a teacher can be done through three strategies: developing motivation to work, seeking to have meaning, and contributing to meaning ${ }^{[39]}$. The first technique requires the principal to encourage teachers to work professionally. This encouragement can be both financial and psychological support. In the second approach, educators are given a chance to explain and contextualize each task. This tactic is used to help teachers get meaning out of each piece of work they produce. The final possible strategy is allowing the teacher to contribute to work that is considered significant for the teacher.

## Conclusion

The high problems experienced by teachers in performing their duties and the inability of teachers to interpret their behavior resulted in low levels of mental health. They experience psychological distress as anxiety, depression, and loss of control. In
addition, they also had a low level of psychological well-being. This condition is characterized by a low level of positive emotions, disturbed social associations, and a low level of satisfaction with living life. Teachers' high level of mental health can be overcome by their ability to reconstruct the meaning of work as teachers. The results of this study reflected the importance of improving and developing the teaching profession to be carried out with various models. Leaders at the school and government levels, especially the education office, should follow up on the results of this research by providing opportunities for teachers to improve their insights and skills as professional teachers. Education and training are strategies that can be carried out for this purpose. In addition, the level of the economic welfare of teachers that is felt to be still unsatisfactory should receive attention from policyholders.
This research was conducted qualitatively to describe the condition of the meaning of work and teachers' mental health. Both concepts were only studied descriptively without statistical testing of the relationship between them. Therefore, subsequent studies can consider using a mixed-method type of research as sequential models to test the relationship between the two variables while proposing alternative models for mental health development through the meaning of working as teachers. Another area for improvement lies in taking research subjects that only involve teachers at the primary education level. Further research should involve teachers at all levels of education; thus, the generalizations are getting wider.

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