

The Role of Psychological Well-Being and Work Meaning on Teacher Loyalty in Private Vocational High Schools

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the interrelation between teachers' psychological well-being, work meaning, and loyalty in a private vocational high school in West Java, Indonesia. A descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was applied. Data were collected through reflective interviews using Google Forms from six permanent teachers with more than five years of teaching experience. The results revealed that teachers' psychological well-being is developed through gratitude, adaptability, and social support within the workplace. The meaning of work serves as the main source of emotional resilience, as teachers perceive their profession as a personal calling and a form of social-spiritual contribution. Teachers' loyalty is not determined by financial compensation but rather by psychological comfort and the family-like atmosphere of the school. These findings highlight that psychological well-being and work meaning serve as the core foundations of teachers' affective loyalty. Therefore, human resource management in education should prioritize psychological well-being as a strategic effort to enhance teachers' commitment and performance.

Keywords: Psychological Well-Being, work meaning, teachers loyalty.

Introduction

Teachers play a central role in the success of education, as the quality of teaching and learning largely depends on their psychological condition and overall well-being. In Indonesia's educational context, teachers often encounter less-than-ideal working environments—ranging from limited facilities, administrative burdens, and high workloads, to compensation that fails to reflect their professional contributions (Madiistriyatno, H., & Zakiyya, 2024). Despite these challenges, many teachers continue to demonstrate remarkable loyalty and dedication to their profession. This phenomenon suggests that teachers' well-being is influenced not only by material conditions but also by psychological factors such as work meaning, belongingness, and supportive relationships (Juwita, K., & Khalimah, 2021). Psychological well-being, as defined by Ryff (1989), refers to a state in which individuals can maintain balance between life demands and their personal ability to adapt to stress. Seligman (2011), through his PERMA model, identifies five key elements of well-being: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. In the educational sphere, teachers with high psychological well-being exhibit greater emotional resilience, empathy, and intrinsic motivation to sustain their teaching performance even under challenging conditions (Deci, E. L., & Ryan, 2000). Conversely, teachers with low well-being tend to experience burnout, work stress, and declining productivity (Collie & Martin, 2023).

Teacher well-being is closely tied to the overall health of the educational system. When teachers feel valued, supported, and psychologically balanced, they are more likely to engage positively with students and contribute to an empowering school climate. Dreer (2023) emphasizes that teacher well-being directly affects instructional quality, student achievement, and institutional effectiveness. However, much of the existing literature focuses on teacher

well-being in stable or well-resourced institutions. There remains a lack of understanding of how teachers maintain loyalty and professional engagement amid economic limitations, administrative pressure, and organizational instability.

Studies in the Indonesian context have begun to shed light on this issue. Hutasuhut et al. (2025) highlighted that economic inequality and bureaucratic pressure contribute to low teacher well-being, yet they did not examine the psychological resilience that sustains teacher loyalty. Similarly, Prasetyo, Bektiarso, and Sumardi (2025) found a positive link between professionalism, well-being, and performance, but their analysis did not explore how intrinsic meaning and moral commitment shape teachers' dedication under adverse conditions. These gaps indicate the need for a more nuanced understanding of teacher well-being as an internal source of strength rather than a mere reaction to external policies.

This study, therefore, introduces a new perspective by positioning psychological well-being as an intrinsic force that nurtures teacher loyalty and work meaning even in unsupportive organizational settings. It argues that teacher commitment is not only built through financial incentives or administrative directives but also through psychological fulfillment, spiritual satisfaction, and moral calling. By examining the lived experiences of teachers who remain loyal despite unfavorable circumstances, this study seeks to uncover the deeper meaning behind their professional endurance. Hence, the objective of this study is to analyze how teachers' psychological well-being shapes their sense of work meaning and loyalty in the context of private vocational schools in West Java. The findings are expected to contribute practically to human resource management in education and to provide insights for policymakers seeking to design school environments that promote long-term teacher well-being and commitment.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a light phenomenological design, aimed at exploring teachers' lived experiences in maintaining psychological well-being and professional loyalty under less-than-ideal working conditions. A qualitative method was considered appropriate because the focus of the research was not on numerical measurement but on understanding the depth of meaning that emerges from teachers' reflections and experiences (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological perspective was particularly useful for capturing teachers' subjective realities — how they interpret, internalize, and sustain emotional balance and loyalty despite professional challenges. The research was conducted in a private vocational high school (Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan, SMK) in West Java, Indonesia, which exhibits a unique phenomenon of high teacher loyalty despite limited compensation and organizational constraints. The school was selected as the research site due to its distinctive cultural environment and consistent record of teacher retention, providing an ideal setting to explore intrinsic motivation and well-being dynamics among educators.

The participants of this study consisted of six permanent teachers with teaching experience ranging from five to twenty years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) being an active full-time teacher, (2) having at least five years of continuous service, and (3) demonstrating willingness and reflective capacity to share personal experiences related to well-being and professional commitment. This selective approach ensured that the data reflected in-depth and meaningful insights rather than general opinions.

To complement the interview data, supporting information related to institutional policy and teacher development programs was obtained through document analysis. These documents included school regulations, teacher evaluation reports, and institutional profiles. Direct interviews with the school management were deliberately excluded to preserve the independence of the research process and to avoid potential bias or hierarchical pressure. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality of respondents' identities and institutional information.

Data were gathered through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. The interviews were conducted online through reflective open-ended questionnaires distributed via Google Forms, enabling participants to articulate their experiences in a comfortable and introspective manner. Non-participant observation was used to interpret behavioral patterns and contextual factors within the school environment. Meanwhile, institutional documents such as teacher performance reports, meeting notes, and policy documents were analyzed to provide contextual support for the interview findings.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three concurrent stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. During data reduction, significant statements were identified and coded according to emerging themes related to psychological well-being, work meaning, and teacher loyalty. These coded data were then organized into thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation. The final stage involved synthesizing and drawing conclusions that reflected the interrelation between the core variables studied.

Result and Discussion

The research process followed a sequential flow, beginning with the identification of the phenomenon, a comprehensive literature review, participant selection, data collection, thematic analysis, and finally, interpretation and conclusion drawing. Each phase was conducted ethically, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' identities and institutional data. All participants were informed about the research objectives, procedures, and their rights to withdraw at any time, thereby ensuring adherence to ethical standards of qualitative inquiry.

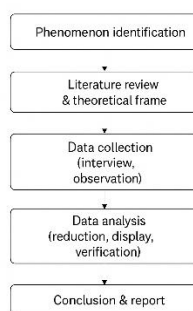


Figure 1. Qualitative research flowchart on psychological well-being

Figure 1. Flow of phenomenological qualitative research on psychological well-being and teacher loyalty in a private vocational high school in West Java.

Teachers' Psychological Well-Being: Resilience Amid Occupational Pressures

The findings revealed that teachers in this private vocational high school demonstrated remarkable psychological resilience despite limited facilities, inconsistent management policies, and the demanding nature of their daily responsibilities. Most participants described their sense of well-being not as the absence of problems, but as the ability to remain grateful, calm, and emotionally grounded in the face of ongoing stress. One teacher reflected that when the pressure of workload becomes overwhelming, she deliberately takes short breaks, shares her concerns with colleagues, and focuses only on matters within her control. Such small yet mindful actions illustrate a high degree of emotional regulation and adaptability — rather than merely surviving, these teachers continuously reconstruct meaning from their professional struggles.

This phenomenon suggests that teachers' well-being in this school is derived more from internal psychological strength than from external factors such as salary or formal recognition. Consistent with Ryff's (1989) theory of psychological well-being, self-acceptance, positive relationships, and personal growth were identified as the central sources of emotional stability. Teachers who embrace their professional realities with sincerity, perceiving teaching as both a personal journey and a form of contribution to society, tend to experience deeper tranquility and fulfillment. From Seligman's (2011) PERMA perspective, these teachers experience professional happiness through positive relationships and meaningful engagement, rather than through material satisfaction.

Moreover, the findings suggest that psychological well-being among teachers is a dynamic and reflective process, rather than a fixed state. Teachers continuously engage in internal negotiation between their expectations, professional identity, and the limitations of their work environment. Over time, this reflective adjustment fosters emotional maturity, self-compassion, and acceptance — qualities that are vital for long-term sustainability in the teaching profession. As one teacher noted, "We cannot change everything, but we can change how we see things." This mindset reflects the essence of adaptive well-being, where psychological health emerges not from external comfort, but from internal clarity and emotional flexibility.

Therefore, teacher well-being in this context represents a form of *cultural resilience*, deeply rooted in the interplay of gratitude, collective values, and spiritual awareness. It aligns with Dreer's (2023) assertion that teachers' well-being extends beyond individual emotion to encompass professional meaning and community belonging. By nurturing this inner resilience, teachers maintain their sense of purpose and continue to educate with sincerity, even when institutional conditions remain less than ideal.

Meaningful Work as a Source of Intrinsic Motivation and Professional Spirituality

The findings of this study highlight that meaningful work emerged as a dominant theme in teachers' professional experiences. Nearly all participants perceived teaching not merely as a means of earning a living, but as a form of *ibadah* (spiritual devotion), a personal calling, and an enduring moral obligation. One teacher expressed, "Teaching makes me feel alive and

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useful,” while another reflected, “*This profession is my way to plant values in the next generation.*” These expressions reveal that for many teachers, the sense of meaning derived from their work functions as an intrinsic energy source that sustains emotional endurance and reinforces their professional identity.

This finding strongly supports the Self-Determination Theory (Deci, E. L., & Ryan, 2000), which posits that intrinsic motivation — the drive that comes from personal satisfaction rather than external reward — is the core of psychological well-being and long-term engagement. When individuals perceive their work as personally and socially meaningful, their internal satisfaction remains stable even under adverse external conditions. Meaning becomes an inner compass that directs teachers’ efforts, resilience, and moral consistency.

Steger (2017) further explains that meaningful work serves as a bridge between one’s personal values and broader social contribution. It allows individuals to express their identity and connect to something larger than themselves — a sense of purpose that transcends material concerns. In this study, such meaning was expressed through teachers’ narratives of patience, compassion, and moral responsibility. Teaching was viewed not as a transactional task but as a vocation (*calling*) through which teachers could enact their faith, ethics, and humanity. In the Indonesian educational context, work spirituality and meaning are deeply intertwined. Teaching is often regarded as a sacred duty — *pengabdian* (service) — rather than a profession defined solely by performance metrics. Teachers’ motivation to persist often arises from this spiritual consciousness, which transforms everyday challenges into acts of devotion and personal growth. One teacher described this beautifully: “*Every student I guide is a form of worship; even when it’s hard, it brings peace to my heart.*” Such reflections show that meaningful work enables teachers to reinterpret hardship as part of a purposeful journey rather than an obstacle to satisfaction.

Moreover, meaningful work was found to act as a psychological anchor that prevents burnout and nurtures a sense of coherence between life and profession. Teachers who perceive their work as meaningful tend to experience a more stable emotional state, stronger empathy toward students, and greater moral commitment to their schools. The meaning they attach to their teaching acts as a filter through which daily stress is transformed into manageable experiences. This aligns with Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model, where *meaning* and *engagement* are identified as key dimensions of flourishing. Importantly, the findings also suggest that meaningful work directly influences teachers’ loyalty to their schools. Teachers who experience a deep sense of purpose are more likely to remain committed to their institutions, not out of necessity, but out of moral conviction and emotional connection. As Prasetyo, Bektiarso, and Sumardi (2025) observed, both psychological well-being and meaningful work positively correlate with teacher loyalty and performance. This connection indicates that meaning provides a moral and emotional foundation for sustained organizational commitment.

For these teachers, loyalty is not merely compliance but an expression of gratitude and self-alignment. They stay because they *believe* — in the value of their work, in the impact they create, and in the community they serve. Meaning transforms loyalty from a passive state of endurance into an active expression of devotion. As one teacher succinctly noted, “*I stay not because everything is perfect, but because I feel this is where I am meant to be.*” Thus, meaningful work serves as both a source of intrinsic motivation and spiritual fulfillment. It integrates emotion, value, and purpose into a coherent framework of professional identity.

When teachers perceive their work as meaningful, their psychological well-being flourishes, their moral energy deepens, and their loyalty becomes self-sustaining. In this sense, meaning is not a by-product of favorable conditions, but a *resilient mindset* that allows teachers to thrive despite them.

Teacher Loyalty: Psychological Comfort and Emotional Attachment to the School

The findings of this study reveal that teacher loyalty in this private vocational high school is not transactional but affective in nature. The participants consistently described their attachment to the institution as being grounded in emotional connection and psychological comfort rather than material benefits. Several teachers openly admitted that they chose to remain not because of salary or job security, but because of the sense of belonging and familial warmth they experience within the school. One teacher stated, *“I stay because my colleagues here are like family — we understand and support one another.”* This statement captures the essence of affective loyalty, in which attachment arises from shared trust, empathy, and mutual respect that cannot be replaced by financial compensation.

This phenomenon aligns closely with Meyer and Allen’s (1997) *Organizational Commitment Theory*, which distinguishes three types of commitment: affective, normative, and continuance. Affective commitment, the most enduring form, develops when individuals feel emotionally bonded to their organization and identify personally with its values. In this case, teachers perceive themselves not only as employees of a school but as integral members of a community that embodies their moral and social identity. Their loyalty is thus rooted in emotional investment and collective belonging rather than contractual obligation.

Özdemir et al. (2023) similarly found that psychological comfort and a positive school climate serve as strong predictors of teacher loyalty. Supportive peer relationships, open communication, and mutual recognition enhance teachers’ sense of stability and satisfaction. Juwita and Khalimah (2021) further explain that loyalty grounded in shared values and emotional connection tends to be more stable and enduring than loyalty driven by economic dependency. Consistent with these perspectives, the teachers in this study demonstrate that affective loyalty emerges from interpersonal harmony and mutual appreciation — an invisible yet powerful bond that sustains commitment even amid institutional imperfections.

Beyond emotional connection, teacher loyalty also reflects a deep sense of purpose and moral alignment with the institution’s mission. Teachers described feeling that their continued service was a contribution to the collective good — an expression of integrity and gratitude rather than obligation. One participant described this sentiment poignantly: *“Even when policies change or challenges come, I stay because I believe what we do here matters.”* Such statements illustrate that loyalty, in this context, is an act of meaning-making — an embodiment of teachers’ psychological well-being and moral commitment.

The findings also highlight that affective loyalty develops cumulatively through positive daily interactions, supportive leadership, and shared struggles that foster solidarity. Teachers’ sense of comfort is reinforced through an atmosphere of empathy and openness, where individuals feel emotionally safe to express opinions and seek support. Over time, these experiences form a psychological safety net that binds teachers together. The loyalty observed here is thus not passive endurance but an active emotional bond sustained by mutual understanding, gratitude, and shared purpose.

From a broader perspective, the teachers' loyalty can be seen as both a reflection and an outcome of psychological well-being. Teachers who experience acceptance, appreciation, and interpersonal warmth are more likely to internalize organizational goals as their own. Their loyalty is not driven by external pressure but by internal alignment — a harmony between personal meaning and institutional mission. As Meyer and Allen's (1997) framework suggests, such affective commitment is the most sustainable form of organizational loyalty because it grows from genuine emotional connection rather than compliance or necessity. In this light, teacher loyalty within this school emerges as an integrated expression of gratitude, emotional stability, and professional purpose. It mirrors Dreer's (2023) notion that teacher well-being extends beyond individual satisfaction to encompass relational and organizational dimensions. Loyalty becomes the living manifestation of well-being — a sign that teachers find peace, belonging, and identity within their professional community.

The Interconnection Between Psychological Well-Being, Work Meaning, and Teacher Loyalty

The three core dimensions explored in this study — psychological well-being, meaningful work, and teacher loyalty — are deeply interconnected and form a holistic framework of professional resilience. Psychological well-being provides teachers with the emotional foundation necessary to navigate challenges with composure, while meaningful work functions as the spiritual and motivational fuel that gives their profession enduring purpose. Loyalty, in turn, becomes the tangible manifestation of both — a behavioral reflection of inner balance and moral commitment. Teachers who maintain psychological stability are better able to find meaning in adversity, and that sense of meaning, in turn, reinforces their willingness to remain loyal to the school and to their vocation.

This dynamic interaction represents a circular relationship in which each component continuously reinforces the others. When teachers perceive their work as meaningful, they experience greater psychological well-being; this enhanced well-being deepens their professional engagement and emotional attachment to the school. Likewise, teachers who feel psychologically fulfilled are more capable of interpreting professional challenges as opportunities for growth rather than sources of frustration. The cycle of well-being, meaning, and loyalty thus creates a self-sustaining system that supports teachers' long-term motivation and moral endurance.

The model that emerges from these findings demonstrates that teacher loyalty is not merely a byproduct of institutional policy or financial incentives. Rather, it is rooted in the inner harmony that arises when psychological, moral, and spiritual dimensions align. As teachers find meaning in their work, their sense of purpose expands beyond personal goals and merges with the collective mission of education itself. This harmony produces what might be called *affective sustainability* — a state where commitment endures because it is nourished by emotional balance and ethical conviction.

These findings resonate with previous research by Ozturk et al. (2024) and Steger (2017), which emphasize that teachers' sense of purpose and well-being are mutually reinforcing components of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In this study, that connection is expressed through culturally grounded values such as gratitude, communal care, and moral duty. For Indonesian teachers, professional meaning is inseparable from emotional and spiritual fulfillment; hence, loyalty becomes not an obligation but a heartfelt choice.

The implications of this interconnectedness extend to how educational institutions should manage and nurture their human resources. A purely administrative or compensatory approach is insufficient to sustain teacher commitment in the long run. Instead, schools need to cultivate psychological and spiritual dimensions of well-being by creating environments that encourage belonging, trust, and self-actualization. Schools that foster a culture of appreciation, mutual respect, and personal growth will not only produce competent teachers but also loyal, passionate, and emotionally resilient educators. Ultimately, the synergy among psychological well-being, meaningful work, and loyalty forms the essence of teachers' professional vitality. When these elements coexist harmoniously, they generate a profound sense of balance that enables teachers to endure difficulties with dignity, to find joy in service, and to remain steadfast in their devotion to education.

Conclusion

The results of this study affirm that psychological well-being, meaningful work, and teacher loyalty are three interdependent dimensions that collectively shape the professional resilience of educators in private schools. The teachers demonstrated an exceptional capacity to maintain emotional stability amid less-than-ideal working conditions. Their psychological well-being was nurtured through gratitude, adaptability, and strong social support from colleagues. These findings underscore that mental strength and collegial solidarity play an essential role in sustaining teachers' motivation and psychological endurance within challenging educational environments. Furthermore, meaningful work proved to be the intrinsic source of energy that enables teachers to remain dedicated to their profession. They do not perceive teaching merely as a formal duty or a means of earning income but as a moral and spiritual calling that gives purpose to their lives. Within this context, teaching becomes both a form of self-actualization and social contribution — a profession that embodies empathy, devotion, and moral integrity. This inner sense of meaning allows teachers to endure stress, policy changes, and institutional constraints with a renewed sense of purpose and emotional balance.

Teacher loyalty, in this study, is not rooted in material reward but in emotional attachment and a deep sense of belonging to the school community. Close interpersonal relationships, a family-like atmosphere, and a supportive work climate emerged as the dominant factors shaping affective commitment. For these teachers, the school is not merely a workplace, but a space for collective growth and shared humanity. Their loyalty is born not from compulsion, but from love, meaning, and mutual respect — a genuine commitment that transcends transactional motives. To strengthen teacher well-being and loyalty, schools can implement three key strategies. First, foster a supportive and inclusive work environment where openness, empathy, and respect are embedded in daily practice. Second, provide reflective spaces and professional development opportunities that help teachers continually rediscover meaning in their work. Third, establish non-material recognition systems that cultivate a sense of appreciation and trust — such as public acknowledgment, training opportunities, and participatory decision-making. Through these approaches, teacher loyalty will not only emerge naturally but also endure, even amid dynamic organizational changes. Ultimately, this study highlights that psychological well-being and meaningful work are not merely personal issues but strategic imperatives in educational human resource management. A teacher who is both

happy and fulfilled becomes the school's most valuable asset — one who nurtures inspiration, builds human connections, and shapes future generations grounded in compassion and integrity.

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