



Teacher well-being & engagement: The importance of teachers' interpersonal relationships quality at school

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Article Info

Manuscript Received

April 1st 2023

Revision Accepted

May 21st 2023

Accepted for Publication

June 1st 2023

doi:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.21831/pri.v6i1.61869>

Abstract

Relationships are a fundamental feature of human life, making the study of relationships a crucial point in psychology, including within the context of schools. In addition to being a place of learning for students, schools serve as a workplace where teachers establish and maintain relationships. However, the majority of research conducted in schools still focuses only on student-student and teacher-student relationships. Moreover, there is limited specific research examining the importance of the quality of interpersonal relationships among teachers. This quantitative survey study aims to investigate the role of teacher-student interpersonal relationship quality as a predictor of Well-Being within the PERMA framework, encompassing Positive Emotion, Work Engagement, Meaning in Life, and Innovative Work Behavior among teachers in schools. Data were collected through offline and online surveys involving 455 teachers in public schools in Yogyakarta. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the model of interpersonal relationships among fellow teachers. The model testing indicated a good fit with the indices: $\chi^2(35, N=455) = 132$; $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.977; SRMR = 0.041; RMSEA = 0.073, meeting the criteria set by Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson (2019). Furthermore, overall, the quality of teacher-student interpersonal relationships significantly predicted the elements of psychological well-being, including affect ($\beta = 0.631$; $p < 0.001$), meaning in life ($\beta = 0.549$, $p < 0.001$), work engagement ($\beta = 0.489$; $p < 0.001$), and innovative work behavior among teachers in schools ($\beta = 0.354$; $p < 0.001$).

Keywords: *interpersonal relationships, well-being, engagement, PERMA, teacher, school*

Suggested citation

Purwaningtyas, D. A., Adira, N., Kusmaryani, R. E., & Nurhayati, S. R. (2023). Teacher well-being & engagement: The importance of teachers' interpersonal relationships quality at school. *Psychological Research and Intervention*, 6(1), 7 – 17. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21831/pri.v6i1.61869>

Introduction

Relationships are regarded as fundamental features of human life (Orbuch & Sprecher, 2003) and serve the primary purpose of establishing connections among individuals within a social environment. Moreover, relationships are intrinsic goals within the realm of motivation (Downie, Mageau, & Koestner, 2008). Relationships can be formed within various social settings, including the school context. The social ecosystem of schools can be identified as comprising three main actors who interact continuously and intensively: students, educational professionals (teachers), and school principals. In recent decades, there has been a growing body of research examining relationships within the school context (Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). However, the majority of these studies have predominantly focused on students, while research specifically investigating teacher-to-teacher relationships remains scarce and infrequent. Nonetheless, it is equally important to thoroughly understand the dynamics of relationships among teachers.

Satisfying relationships have been shown to contribute to both mental and physical health (Orbuch & Sprecher, 2003). Mental and physical well-being are indicative of the attainment of optimal psychological functioning and experiences, commonly referred to as well-being (Deci, 1989). Among various approaches to explain well-being, one dominant perspective in positive psychology is the concept of flourishing, which encompasses several elements of well-being, including positive emotions, engagement (flow), positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishments (Seligman, 2013).

The interactions between teachers within the school context have been found to mitigate the negative effects of stressful events on teachers' well-being and mental health (Shahar et al., 2009). Interactions themselves are considered a manifestation of positive relationships within the concept of flourishing. Relationships are formed through prolonged patterns of interaction (Kelley, 1983) or ongoing transactional patterns (Acocella & Calhoun, 1990). Furthermore, the support and positive relationships obtained from colleagues have been positively correlated with job autonomy, work engagement, and negatively correlated with turnover intentions (Vera, Martínez, Lorente, & Chambel, 2016; Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2013). The findings of a study by Lawler, Thye, and Yoon (2006) also indicate that interactions in structured settings, such as the work environment, yield rewards or incentives when positive interactions occur among individuals (Blau, 1994). These research findings suggest that structure-enabled relations give rise to relational commitment, serving as a gateway to establishing close relationships.

Colleague relationships within the school context can be understood as encompassing two aspects: relationships among fellow teachers and relationships between teachers and their superiors, namely school principals. Relationships in the workplace are characterized by the presence of expectations. These expectations can influence interactions among individuals in various ways, affecting how individuals perceive others (Skrypnek & Snyder, 1982; Baldwin, Kiviniemi, & Snyder, 2009). A simple example of these expectations is that someone who is competent is more likely to be liked by their peers compared to someone who is not skilled in their work. This conclusion was tested in an experiment where participants had to listen to recordings of two individuals practicing for a quiz show (Aronson, Willerman, & Floyd, 1966; Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 2006). The subjects reported a greater liking for the participant who answered all the questions correctly compared to the one who consistently answered incorrectly. Relationships with colleagues are filled with expectations as both individuals are bound within a formal and professional setting, leading to expectations of professionalism and competence from their coworkers.

Manstead et al. (1996) propose that the existence of a relationship indicates that two or more individuals have formed an ongoing connection with each other, characterized by special properties, including a sense of shared history and awareness of the formation of the relationship. They exert influence on each other's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and hold expectations for future interactions. Reis, Collins, & Berscheid (2000) define a relationship as more than the sum of

its individual interactions, as each individual's behavior impacts their partner's subsequent behavior within an interaction episode, and each interaction episode influences subsequent episodes.

Positive interpersonal relationships have been found to be associated with mental health and well-being (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000), happiness (Thoits, 2011), physical health (Uchino, 2009), and increased lifespan (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Furthermore, the quality of interpersonal relationships has been extensively studied in various contexts, including schools, where teachers form relationships and carry out their work activities. Positive interpersonal relationships have been identified as a key element of well-being within the proposed concept of flourishing in positive psychology by Seligman (2013). Well-being, which refers to the most optimal psychological experiences and functioning, has been a topic of extensive research in psychological literature (Tov, 2018).

In response to this, a study was conducted to analyze the role of interpersonal relationship quality among teachers as predictors of teacher well-being and work engagement. The model of relationships between these variables serves as a comprehensive framework for identifying determinants of a more flourishing school life.

Theoretical Background

Well-Being & PERMA

Well-being, referring to the most optimal psychological experiences and functioning, has been extensively studied in psychological literature (Tov, 2018). Currently, the most popular measurement of well-being is based on the concept of well-being within the positive psychology approach. Five elements of well-being, proposed by Seligman (2011) in positive psychology, are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning, and Achievement, collectively known as PERMA. These five elements can be measured and examined within a multidimensional framework in an integrative model.

The measurement of well-being using the PERMA framework has received extensive validation in both theoretical studies and cross-cultural analyses (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Park et al., 2006; Dodge et al., 2012; OECD, 2013). However, variations still exist in the focus, levels, and patterns of relationships among the five components of well-being that can be modified by users for well-being assessment (Ryff and Keyes, 1995) and its application in policies (Huppert and So, 2013), intervention programs, and measuring well-being among school teachers (Dodge et al., 2012; Kern et al., 2015; Butler and Kern, 2016).

The aim of this study is to examine the interconnectedness of interpersonal relations among teachers in schools beyond the scope of PERMA, specifically focusing on the other elements of Positive Emotion, Engagement, Meaning, and Achievement. The rationale underlying this investigation is the need for a comprehensive exploration of interpersonal relations among teachers. Psychology maps interpersonal relations among teachers as collegial relationships that emphasize equality often characterized by fair exchanges (Faturrohman and Nurjaman, 2018). This research investigates the three types of interpersonal relations and their associations with other well-being elements within the PERMA framework, namely Positive Emotion, Engagement, Meaning, and Achievement, in the role of teachers within the school setting.

Interpersonal Relationship

Interpersonal relations constitute a crucial domain within the concept of social relations (Faturrohman and Nurjaman, 2018). According to Ryff and Singer (2000), flourishing interpersonal relationships are a key feature of a high-quality life. As social beings, humans are profoundly influenced by the quality and nature of their interpersonal relationships (Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated that the quality of interpersonal relationships

predicts various aspects of psychological and physiological well-being (e.g., Ryff, Singer, Wing, & Love, 2001; Segrin, 2001).

Teacher Interpersonal Relationships, Work Engagement, and Well-being

Not only the student-teacher relationship, but also the interpersonal relationship among teachers is an important focus in the concept of relational quality in schools. For many individuals, the presence of interpersonal relationships in the workplace can fulfill their needs. When individuals work in their respective workplaces and establish positive interpersonal relationships, it is within this context that they will find a social purpose. Having a negative perspective on one's interpersonal relationships will result in higher job dissatisfaction, intentions to switch jobs, social isolation, decreased physical and psychological health, and the emergence of aggression (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). However, if individuals have positive interpersonal relationships in their workplace, it will have an impact on their work outcomes and overall performance as well (Reich & Hershcovis, 2011).

Positive interactions can foster positive interpersonal relationships, and it is through the development and maintenance of these relationships that many individuals find job satisfaction in their workplace and fulfill their personal needs. High-quality interpersonal relationships predict high work engagement as well (Warshawsky, et al., 2012). Additionally, work engagement and interpersonal relationships together can enhance proactive behaviors that are associated with organizational performance improvement.

In the context of schools, not only do student interpersonal relationships play a role, but teacher relationships also hold significance. The influence of these relationships on teacher burnout is fully mediated by autonomy (Droogenbroeck, Spruyt & Vanroelen, 2014). Superiors play a crucial role in providing greater autonomy. Superiors have the power to involve teachers in decision-making and enable them to take initiatives. When teachers are involved in decision-making and maintain relationships with superiors and fellow teachers (colleagues), external pressures and demands can be better identified and reduced. Teachers experience greater autonomy when they receive detailed information about policy changes and experience support with policy implementation. When teachers experience autonomy, they can actively and creatively cope with workplace changes. Deci, Connell, and Ryan (1989) argue that leaders play an essential role in providing subordinates with empowering experiences. The interpersonal work climate created by leaders towards subordinates directly contributes to the subordinates' sense of self-worth and perceived locus of control (Deci et al., 1989, p. 580).

Method

Research Type and Design

This study is a quantitative research conducted in the form of a survey by administering questionnaires to respondents both offline and online.

Participants

The participants involved in this study were middle school to high school teachers in Yogyakarta. The teachers included in the study were those serving as educators in the selected sample schools. All participants were Indonesian citizens (WNI), considering the use of the Indonesian language and narrowing the scope of the research to the national level. Respondents who did not complete the questionnaire or withdrew from participation were not included in the analysis. Participant recruitment was conducted using probability sampling with a cluster sampling technique based on public schools in the Yogyakarta City and Bantul Regency areas. The target number of respondents was 300, considering the minimum required sample size for SEM with

CFA analysis as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) for a small number of factors.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted from January to March in a total of 16 public schools in Bantul and 22 public schools in Yogyakarta. The total number of respondents obtained in this study was 455 teachers. The research process began with obtaining informed consent from the participants, followed by administering the research instruments.

Research Instruments

1. Teacher Interpersonal Relationship Quality Scale

This measurement instrument aims to assess the quality of interpersonal relationships among teachers. The scale used is adapted from the scale developed by Purwaningtyas (2022), based on previous research by Kusmaryani, Purwaningtyas, Wicaksono, and Nurhayati (2021). It consists of three dimensions: character with 5 indicators (compatibility, kindness, cooperation, support, respect), professionalism with 4 indicators (collaboration, cohesion, sharing, communication), and emotional closeness with 4 indicators (good relationship, frequent activities together, attention, deep understanding), making a total of 42 items. The entire scale is based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Neutral), 4 (Agree), to 5 (Strongly Agree).

2. Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire, developed by Strack Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler (2006), is used to measure the element of meaning. This instrument is designed to assess an individual's sense of meaning in life. It consists of two subscales: (1) presence of meaning (how much individuals feel that their life has meaning) and (2) search for meaning (how much individuals strive to find and understand the meaning of their life). The instrument consists of 10 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Definitely Untrue) to 7 (Definitely True).

3. Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Short Form (PANAS-SF)

This scale, developed by Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. in 1988, consists of 20 statements that describe various types of emotions and feelings. It is based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Very Little) to 5 (Very Much), indicating the intensity of the emotional feelings.

4. Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)

Developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), this scale consists of 17 items rated on a 6-point Likert scale. The scale measures respondents' feelings in the workplace and comprises three dimensions: Vigor (energy and resilience related to enthusiasm, persistence, and dedication to work), Dedication (sacrifice of effort, involvement, and pride in the work performed), and Absorption (concentration, immersion, and enjoyment of work). The response options range from 1 (Never) to 6 (Always).

Data Analysis

The models in this study were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) performed with the assistance of the Jamovi software (The jamovi project, 2021), which was equipped with the SEMlj plugin (Galluci & Jentschke, 2021) and semPlot (Epskamp et al., 2019). The overall analysis was conducted using maximum likelihood estimation, robust standard error, and Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-square as the method for correcting the statistical model (Rosseel, 2012). The "fit" indices (the fit of the theoretical model to the field data) used as criteria were: Comparative Fit Indices (CFI) > 0.93; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) < 0.08, and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) < 0.08 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019).

The entire analysis was performed using the Jamovi software.

Result and Discussion

Result

The model, using SEM, was conducted to test the model of teacher-teacher relationships. The quality of peer relationships as predictors (X) was measured by three indicators: character, professionalism, and emotional closeness. The teacher-teacher relationship model also measured elements of psychological well-being, namely affect (Y1) measured by two indicators of positive affect and negative affect (Y1.1 & Y1.2), work engagement (Y2) measured by indicators of vigor, absorption, and dedication (Y2.1-Y2.3), and meaning in life (Y3) measured by two indicators of presence of meaning and search for meaning (Y3.1 & Y3.2). The model testing showed a good fit with the following index values: $\chi^2(35, N=455) = 132; p < 0.001$, meaning ($\beta = 0.549, p < 0.001$), and work engagement ($\beta = 0.489; p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the quality of teacher-teacher relationships also predicted innovative behavior in the workplace ($\beta = 0.354; p < 0.001$).

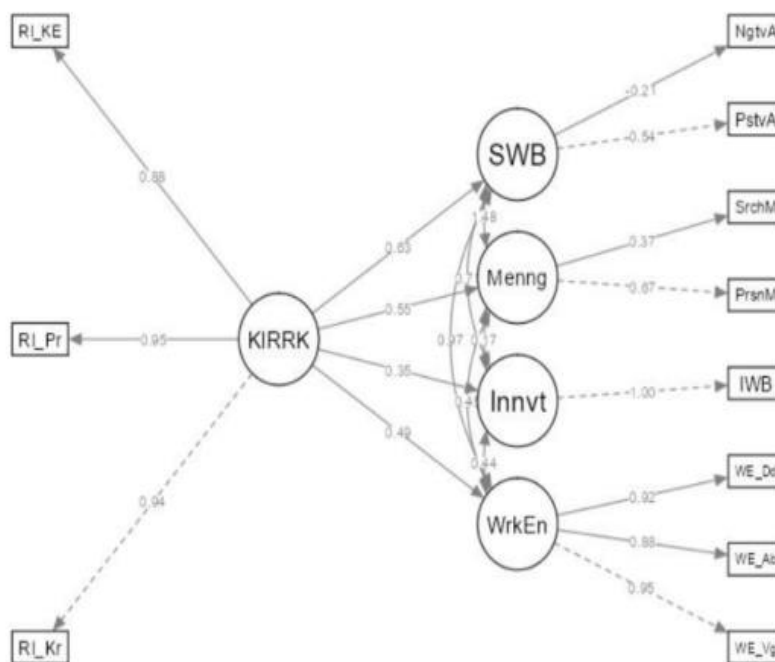


Figure 1. SEM Model of Teachers' Relationship

Discussion

Overall, the results of the model testing of the quality of teacher's peer relationships significantly predict the elements of psychological well-being (PWB) in teachers, meaning in life, and work engagement. In relation to psychological well-being, the findings indicate that teachers who have positive quality relationships with their peers experience an increase in psychological well-being. This is consistent with previous findings where individuals who have good quality relationships with their colleagues at work positively and significantly affect psychological well-being (Gong et al., 2021).

In the field of education, positive interpersonal relationship quality has an influence on both the physical and psychological aspects of individuals (Yamaguchi, 2013). When colleagues

have positive interpersonal relationship quality, it indicates that they have mutual trust, provide benefits to each other, and share common values (Gillbert, 2003). The presence of positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace also facilitates individual needs during work and helps individuals find a social purpose. Additionally, better work outcomes are achieved when positive interpersonal relationships occur (Reich & Hershcovis, 2011). Furthermore, this research also demonstrates that individuals who have positive interpersonal relationship quality with their colleagues also have a higher level of work engagement.

These findings are consistent with previous research conducted by Warshawsky et al. (2012), which found that the quality of interpersonal relationships can predict individual work engagement. This can be interpreted as individuals with high-quality interpersonal relationships will also have high levels of work engagement, and vice versa. When individuals have low-quality interpersonal relationships with their colleagues, their level of work engagement is also low. Moreover, when individuals have good interpersonal relationship quality and high work engagement, they are more likely to exhibit proactive behavior in the workplace, experience job satisfaction, and have their personal needs fulfilled.

Conclusion

This study has successfully examined a comprehensive model of relationships in the school context, specifically the peer relationships among teachers, and how the quality of these interpersonal relationships can serve as predictors of psychological well-being, aligned with Seligman's (2011) PERMA concept of affect, engagement, meaning, and achievement in teachers at schools. The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights to various stakeholders involved in schools, teachers, and school administrators, regarding the dynamics of peer relationships among teachers and its consequences on the psychological well-being of teachers in schools. As a follow-up, this information is expected to serve as a reference for the promotion of developing thriving schools through the strengthening of protective factors in the form of healthy and high-quality relationships within the school.

Further research suggestions may explore the relationship between the quality of relationships and the elements of psychological well-being by considering other contextual factors such as school demographics, interaction intensity, and other variables that may influence these outcomes to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of thriving school environments.

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