

MEANING IN LIFE AND WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY AS INTERVENTION ON PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF PRIVATE PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN MALAYSIA

(Makna Kehidupan dan Kerohanian Tempat Kerja Sebagai Intervensi Dalam Kesejahteraan Psikologi Antara Guru Prasekolah Swasta di Malaysia)

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Submitted: 03-Oct-2021
Accepted: 22-Nov-2021
Revised: 05-Dec-2021
Published: 27-Dec-2021

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Abstract

The increased level of stress and job turnover rate among private preschool teachers in Malaysia has led to low psychological well-being. Based on previous research, it is suggested that meaning in life and workplace spirituality can contribute positively to an individual's psychological well-being. The objective of this research is to understand the effect of meaning in life and workplace spirituality on preschool teacher's psychological well-being and therefore introduce them as possible interventions for Malaysian preschool teachers' psychological well-being. A qualitative approach with phenomenological design was adopted in this study, and online semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data from eight participants who were recruited from private preschools in Malaysia. This study found that factors that help preschool teachers to develop their meaning in life and psychological well-being included having harmonious passion and social support from their family and friends. Besides, meaningful work, sense of connection with others, alignment with preschool's values and perceived organizational support are elements from workplace spirituality that can also increase preschool teachers' psychological well-being.

Keywords: meaning in life, workplace spirituality, psychological well-being, preschool teacher

Abstract

Peningkatan tahap tekanan dan kadar pertukaran pekerjaan dalam kalangan guru prasekolah swasta di Malaysia telah membawa kepada kesejahteraan psikologi yang rendah. Kajian lepas telah mencadangkan bahawa makna kehidupan dan kerohanian tempat kerja boleh menyumbang kepada kesejahteraan psikologi individu secara positif. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk memahami impak makna kehidupan dan kerohanian tempat kerja terhadap kesejahteraan psikologi guru prasekolah dan seterusnya memperkenalkan mereka sebagai intervensi yang sesuai untuk meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologi guru prasekolah swasta di Malaysia. Pendekatan kualitatif dengan reka bentuk fenomenologi telah digunakan dalam kajian ini, dan temu bual separa berstruktur secara atas talian telah dijalankan untuk mengumpul data daripada lapan peserta dari prasekolah swasta di Malaysia. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa faktor-faktor yang membantu guru prasekolah mengembangkan makna kehidupan dan kesejahteraan psikologi mereka adalah mempunyai semangat harmoni dan sokongan sosial daripada keluarga dan rakan-rakan mereka. Selain itu, pekerjaan yang bermakna, perhubungan dengan orang lain, penajaran dengan nilai prasekolah dan persepsi sokongan organisasi adalah antara elemen

dalam kerohanian tempat kerja yang juga boleh meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologi guru prasekolah.

Keywords: makna kehidupan, kerohanian tempat kerja, kesejahteraan psikologi, guru prasekolah

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Past studies have been conducted on identifying factors of stress among teachers (Kim et al., 2020) as well as its effects on their psychological well-being (Jeon et al., 2018). It is found that high stress level is more likely to be associated with low psychological well-being among teachers (Helms-Lorenz & Maulana, 2016). This may be serious as it can deteriorate their overall teaching process, interaction with students, work productivity and relationship with people around him/her (Yu, 2015).

One way that the school management can help teachers to improve their psychological well-being is through promoting their meaning in life, which can help a teacher to understand clearly about his/her life's direction and the reason of him/her working as a teacher (Liang et al., 2017). This understanding can be related to a sense of meaning that can promote one's positive growth (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff, 1989), and this explains how meaning in life can help a teacher to increase his/her psychological well-being.

While meaning in life helps a teacher to understand why he/she works as a teacher, workplace spirituality helps a teacher to justify why he/she works in that preschool (Liang et al., 2017). With high workplace spirituality, teachers will feel more connected with their colleagues and employers (Daniel, 2014) and their organization's identity (Duchon & Plowman, 2005), which relates to positive relations to others and environmental mastery under psychological well-being (Indradevi, 2020).

The association between meaning in life, workplace spirituality and psychological well-being of teachers, as explained thus addresses the importance of studying this topic, especially among private preschool teachers in Malaysia. Early childhood education has been proven to be important as it greatly affects the physical, emotional, social and neurodevelopment of a child (Bakken et al., 2017). Thus, preschool teachers act as an important agent for this change (McClelland et al., 2017). Quality preschool teachers, according to Foong et al. (2018), are in high demand as Malaysian government aims to achieve 97% of preschoolers' enrolment rate by 2020. However, it appears that private preschools, which dominates the total number of preschools in Malaysia suffer from high staff turnover (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019; 2018).

Therefore, this study aims to understand the contribution of meaning in life and workplace spirituality on preschool teachers' psychological well-being by addressing the following research questions:

- a) How do preschool teachers define their meaning in life?
- b) How do preschool teachers view workplace spirituality in their organization?
- c) How do meaning in life and workplace spirituality affect psychological well-being of preschool teachers?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on past research, meaning in life refers to presence of goals and purposes to pursue in life, as well as the ability to understand and make sense out of chaos in life (Emmons, 2003). Steger (2012) claims that meaning in life can be understood by two factors: comprehension on how life should be ordered and linked to each other; and

purpose that are overarching. Another research suggests that coherence, purpose and significance is a more reasonable consensus to define meaning in life (Martela & Steger, 2016).

Meaning in life is found to be influenced by age (Allan et al., 2015), gender (Elizabeth et al., 2017), personality (Fave et al., 2013), spirituality (George & Park, 2017), passion (Zhang et al., 2014), volunteering activity (Lee, 2017) and social relationship (Shin & Zhooriyati, 2021). Looking into its effects, meaning in life can significantly improve a person's physical and mental health (Hedayati & Khazaei, 2014; Krause & Hayward, 2012), as well as their interpersonal relationship (Stillman et al., 2011).

Workplace spirituality, according to Ashmos and Duchon (2000) is related to inner life of employees, that is nourished by community and meaningful work. While Mitroff and Denton (1999) refers workplace spirituality as individual's ability to identify their purpose in life, form relationship with people in their workplace and align organizational values with their own values, Krahnke et al. (2003) defines this concept as values within the organization that promote employee's transcendence and feeling of completeness at work.

A commonly used model to define components under workplace spirituality is developed by Milliman et al. (2003), which include three dimensions: meaningful work, community and alignment with organizational values. Moore and Casper (2006), on the other hand, propose self-work immersion, interconnectedness and self-actualization as dimensions under workplace spirituality.

Workplace spirituality is affected by meditation (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012), personal and organizational values (Sorakraikitikul & Siengthai, 2014), and perceived organizational support (Islam et al., 2019). High workplace spirituality can enrich employee's work-family relationship (Hassan et al., 2020) as well as increase their positive feelings (Rego & Cunha, 2008) and behaviors (Djafri & Noordin, 2017) towards the organization.

Adapting knowledge from eudaimonic well-being (Delle Fave et al., 2011) and combining multiple frameworks of positive functioning (Erikson, 1994; Maslow, 1968), the researcher has proposed a six-factor model to define about psychological well-being, which consist of self-acceptance, personal growth, autonomy, purpose in life, positive relations with others and environmental mastery (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff, 1989).

In this model, purpose in life helps people to determine their life goals and future direction, while self-acceptance is the degree of understanding and acceptance that one has towards their own life. Besides, personal growth refers to the belief to improve and develop themselves to be a better person, and autonomy is the independence as well as ability to make their own decision without being easily influenced. While positive relations with others means the ability to form deep and meaningful connection with others in life, environmental mastery concerns more about the ability of a person to change and adapt to new environment as well as challenges.

Psychological well-being can be influenced physically (Hanawi et al., 2020), cognitively (Smith & Yang, 2017) and socially (Hill & Watkins, 2017). Its effects are mostly seen on reducing stress level and improving physical health of a person (Boehm et al., 2011).

In this research, six-factor model of psychological well-being can help to explain the association between meaning in life, workplace spirituality and psychological well-being among preschool teachers. With a great understanding on their meaning in life, teachers can cope better with the problems and obstacles they meet at work (Allan et al., 2016). Obstacles and mistakes can then be easily accepted and interpreted as a part of their learning and growing process. This thus explains how

meaning in life can relate to purpose in life, self-acceptance, environmental mastery and personal growth under psychological well-being.

With good workplace spirituality, it can create a feeling of being supported by the management and sense of belongingness in the preschools. If their personal goals are aligned with the preschool's values, it is very likely that they have chosen the right environment to work and believe that it can help to nourish their meaning in life. This then means that workplace spirituality can also promote meaning in life and psychological well-being among preschool teachers.

According to Liang et al. (2017), meaning in life and workplace spirituality are able to predict 62.70% of Taiwanese teachers' psychological well-being. This serves as a foundation research evidence that there is an association between these three elements. However, after reviewing previous literatures, it is found that there have been lack of studies conducted on effects of meaning in life and workplace spirituality among preschool teachers in Malaysia (Liang et al., 2017).

3.0 METHOD AND DESIGN

A qualitative research with phenomenological design was selected to conduct this study. To meet the research objectives, the researcher used online semi-structured interview to collect personal and in-depth data from participants.

3.1 Sample and Location

The participants of this study were recruited using convenient and snowball sampling technique, based on inclusion criteria such as (a) aged between 21-60; (b) Malaysian private preschool teachers; and (c) have at least three months of working experience in early childhood education field. A total of eight preschool teachers who were currently working in private centers around Selangor in Malaysia were recruited as participants for this study. Creswell (1998) suggests that an ideal sample size for phenomenological study should consist of 3 to 15 participants.

Table 1.0 - Demographic Background

P	Age	Race	Religion	Marital Status	Highest Academic Qualification	Position in Preschool	Preschool
1	23	Malay	Islam	Single	Diploma (Early Childhood Education)	Teacher	A
2	23	Malay	Muslim	Single	Diploma (Early Childhood Education)	Teacher	B
3	23	Chinese	Buddhist	Single	Degree (Corporate Administration)	Teacher	C
4	21	Chinese	Buddhist	Single	Diploma (Early Childhood Education)	Teacher	-
5	25	Chinese	Buddhist	Single	Degree (Unspecified)	Teacher	-
6	28	Chinese	Buddhist	Married	Degree (Early Childhood Education)	Leader	B
7	34	Malay	Islam	Married	Degree (Architecture)	Principal	D
8	57	Punjabi	Sikhism	Married	Diploma (Modern Montessori)	Director	E

Reference: Shuen, C. (2020).

All female participants are aged between 21 to 57 years old who hold diploma and degree in this field. Besides, the participants have also been involved in the field of early childhood education for at least seven months. Six participants have not faced any problems in their physical and mental health when they start their career

as a preschool teacher. One reported major improvement in her health, and another reported deteriorated health in the first one to three months of involvement in this field.

Table 2.0 - Teaching and Other Experiences

P	Experience in Early Childhood Field	Experience Working in The Current Preschool	Involvement in Volunteering Activities	Meditation	Issue with Mental and Physical Health
1	7 months	4 months	No	Yes	No
2	3 years and half	1 year and a half	No	No	No
3	9 months	9 months	No	No	No
4	15 months	8 months	Yes	Yes	No
5	3 years	8 months	Yes	No	No
6	6 years	4 years	Yes	No	No
7	2 years	2 years	No	Yes	Yes
8	17 years	1 year	No	No	No

Reference: Shuen, C. (2020).

3.2 Data Collection

The data of the study variables, in detail, were acquirable through the restructured interview questions from the revised Meaning in Life questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006), Milliman's Workplace Spirituality scale (Milliman et al., 2003) and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being scale (Ryff, 1989). Besides, some of the interview questions were also developed based on research questions and literature reviews. The field expert of qualitative research had checked the validity and reliability of the interview questions regarding the language, wordings, and relevance. A participant for the pilot test were recruited from Selangor to test the validity, reliability, and understanding of the interview questions before the actual study was conducted (Jamadin & Noordin, 2018).

As research was conducted during COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted online. Out of eight participants, four agreed to have phone calls with the researcher; one asked to be done through WhatsApp audio, and data of another three were recorded through WhatsApp word messages and Google Form. Follow-up session were conducted on the latter four participants to gather more information.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data of this interview were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Upon transcription of data, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading it carefully and repeatedly until it was fully understood. When interesting and important data was identified during reading, the researcher generated initial codes to those data. Codes generated were read thoroughly to identify common patterns across the codes and if found similar, the researcher grouped them under the same theme. After forming themes, the researcher compared and refined new themes with original coded data to ensure that coherent pattern of data was formed in the research. Upon comparing and refining themes, it was further defined and labelled. The researcher then used the themes developed and finalized by this stage to write a detailed report.

3.4 Ethical Consideration

An online consent form was sent to the participants to fill up before the interview. Participants were also given opportunities to ask questions regarding the research before the interview. Besides, participants were also informed that they may pause or stop the interview session or withdraw from the study at any time if they felt

uncomfortable in answering the interview questions. The researcher had also informed the participants that their data would be kept highly confidential, and would not be revealed to anyone outside of the research.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Meaning in life

Based on the result, preschool teachers define their meaning in life as having (i) passion, and (ii) social support.

1. Passion

According to most teachers, they involve themselves in the field of early childhood education because they love children. However, according to some teachers, they choose to study degree in early childhood education initially because they like children, but soon regret after graduation.

Actually in the beginning, I study early childhood because I like kids, but once I study I kind of regret, because I would say this is a very difficult course la, and then you earn also a little bit only...[but] since I already study in early childhood, I should put all my effort in this field, so that's why I tahan until now. (P6, 26)

2. Social support

From the result, it is found that some young participants aged between 21 to 23 define their meaning in life through social support from their parents and colleagues. A participant stated, "My parents especially my father, he always support me, give me [a lot of] advices. Without those encouragement, I am not going to be who I am right now" (P2, 23).

4.2 Workplace spirituality

Preschool teachers view workplace spirituality in their organization through (i) meaningful work, (ii) alignment with preschool's values, and (iii) perceived organizational support.

1. Meaningful work

Some participants mention that they are involved in the field of early childhood education because they find meaning in the work that they do. Another participant who studies architecture and design also describes her reason of involvement in this meaningful field.

Arts and crafts are great for learners of all ages. They make its learners think about things they would never have thought of. I believe in creating a creative person, and it has to start from a very young age. So, [architecture and early childhood education are] not a totally different path. Both are still in creative fields. (P7, 34)

2. Alignment with preschool's value

Some participants report to have almost similar values and expectations as the preschool, such as discipline, cleanliness, independent learning, and creativity. However, some has experienced conflicts with their preschool management because of value difference. A participant mentioned, "For teacher, we think that our personal value is [that] we want the kids to learn, to have fun, but for my organization they think that they need to earn. So we care about kids, they care about money" (P6, 28).

3. Perceived organizational support

Most of them report fairly good support from their management. Most mention that the preschool's headquarter or their own preschool provide training to teachers to teach them on how to better conduct their lesson and ways to manage their classroom. Some participants also describe that their preschool support their learning process and give them the authority to make decisions and improvements in their preschool. However, some teachers describe another experience that they have with their management from the leader's perspective as well as from her own.

[Teachers] will feel that they cannot share everything to [the] leader or manager even though they cry when they [are] teaching or anything... [And for myself] I don't think they support me, because most of the time my boss will just throw everything, give idea, then we are the one [who] need to do. (P6, 28)

4.3 Meaning in life and workplace spirituality on teachers' psychological well-being

According to the result, preschool teachers' psychological well-being can be affected through their (i) physical health, and (ii) personal growth.

1. Physical health

After working in the field of early childhood education and their current preschool, many participants report to have better physical health, especially one of them who recently resigned from a corporate company.

You know working in big company, I have to work overtime every day and I usually skip my dinner in order to finish my work. By the time I join preschool, I had my breakfast, lunch, tea break and dinner on time, and I got a chance to take a nap as well [during children's nap time]. (P3, 23)

However, a participant who comes from architecture background, describes negative changes in her health condition as soon as she involves in the preschool field.

First few months was so stressful as I'm not used to be with kids 24/7 and to control them is impossible. Then I started to change the way I think about them and try to understand their behavior and tackle them one by one. (P7, 34)

2. Personal growth

All participants report positive personal growth throughout their career and life. They recognize the gaps between their current abilities and their ambitions, and they are actively looking for opportunities to grow and improve their skills, either through post graduate studies, working experiences or involvement in volunteering activities.

Before this I bawah latihan mengajar I masuk preschool pun I macam eh kenapalah I masuk sini, eh I tak yakin, apa yang I nak buat esok tu I akan tanya kawan kawan I...Bila dah masuk tadika baru, kadang kadang I tak tanya pun, I dah tak malu malu. (P1, 23)

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 Meaning in life

Out of eight, six preschool teachers involve into the field of early childhood education because they love children and discover their passion when they are working in another field that is not related to education. This is being proven by a study

conducted by Zhang et al. (2014) on the discovery of harmonious passion in work. In addition, the result from current study suggests that obsessive passion and continuance commitment such as money and contract can also keep teachers working in the field that they do not like, which is found to be consistent with past research (Zhang et al., 2014).

From the research, it appears that passion is really important for teachers to determine their reason of involvement in early childhood education field and whether they will continue to work in preschools. Harmonious passion can motivate teachers internally to wake up every morning, go to their preschool and teach their students. On the other hand, if obsessive passion becomes the one that motivates the teachers, they will rarely be happy or even enjoy what they are doing because they feel pressured to be a teacher. This may be due to sunk cost fallacy, that they continue their behavior because of previously invested resources such as time and money into the field, and thus feel obligated to be a teacher even if they do not like to be one.

Young teachers aged between 21 to 23 define their meaning in life through social support, and this is consistent with previous research (Fave et al., 2013). This can be explained by Erikson's psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1968) which explains that young adults may view relationship as their priority and therefore have more tendency to cite social support as their source of meaning in life.

5.2 Workplace spirituality

Discovery of meaning and calling at work help teachers to understand their workplace spirituality. This result is also supported by past research (Brunzell et al., 2018) that teaching is meaningful if teachers can connect their authentic selves to their work and have strong work-role fit. The feeling of satisfaction and appreciation that they get from teaching help them to realize that they can support their students' growth and contribute positively to their development. In short, when teachers understand their meaning at work, they will experience higher workplace spirituality.

In this study, it is also shown that seven teachers have higher workplace spirituality towards preschool that shares high degree of similarities in values with them. This result is consistent with the findings from previous research (Rego & Cunha, 2008). It can be expected because both parties with same values tend to have similar expectations and goals towards the quality of tasks in preschool. Therefore, teachers will be happy and enjoy to work in that place, as they can understand the reason behind certain policy in the preschool and will not be forced to do things that are not aligned with their value. Hence, to summarize, the alignment between preschool's values with theirs is a contributing factor to teachers' workplace spirituality.

Preschool teachers also prefer to work in a preschool which they think is able to support their development as a human being. Past studies have also supported that perceived organizational support leads to higher workplace spirituality (Islam et al., 2019). Teachers' perception on the support provided by their preschool can make them feel that the preschool really cares for their well-being and gives them space to foster their inner life. This understanding will help teachers to create a sense of connectedness with the work that they do with their preschool, which can increase their workplace spirituality.

5.3 Meaning in life and workplace spirituality on teachers' psychological well-being

All teachers experience improved physical health when they identify their meaning in life and workplace spirituality clearly. This result is being proven by past research (Choi & Sung, 2013). This may be because teachers have strong religious beliefs and engage in regular meditation. As teachers are clear about the goals and directions in their life and have good working experience in their preschool, they know how to use the

resources around them effectively to cope with the stressors that arise throughout their life and career. Therefore, when their meaning in life and workplace spirituality is high, their overall psychological well-being will increase, and this can promote better physical health among preschool teachers.

All teachers experience positive personal growth throughout their life and career. It is proven that personal growth can contribute positively to psychological well-being (Ayub & Iqbal, 2012). When teachers obtain more life and career experiences, they will begin to discover differences in their life and recognize their own weaknesses. If they have a clear purpose and meaning in their life, they will quickly take action to improve on their problems, so that they can adapt and adjust better. This helps to explain the constant changes that happen in teachers' behaviors and personality through different life phases.

6.0 CONCLUSION

There are some limitations in this study. First, all participants in this study are females, therefore the researcher might not be able to explain and differentiate the result from the perspective of gender. Besides, due to coronavirus outbreak and enforcement of Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia starting from March 2020, it has deeply affected the data collection process, especially recruitment of participants into the study. Most preschools and teachers who are approached mention that they become busier with online classes when MCO is introduced and preschools are forced to close, hence not willing to contribute to this research. In addition, there are two participants in the research who answered the interview questions through Google Form, but refused to be followed up further to obtain more information about their answer. Therefore, the answers provided by these two participants are relatively limited compared to other participants.

This research has potential theoretical implication on meaning in life, workplace spirituality and psychological well-being. First, it helps to identify that discovering passion and goals in life can help teachers to define their meaning in life. This study may also suggest that perceived organizational support can be considered as one of the factors under workplace spirituality for preschool teachers because of strong literature support and participant's answers. Besides, this research also suggests that environmental mastery can be substituted by workplace spirituality, because it is believed that if teachers know their goals well, they will be able to identify the workplace that can nourish their inner life (Milliman et al., 2003), or even adjust well to their environment. Further research is needed to test the two suggestions in this research.

Practically, this study can help the preschool management, counselors and psychologists in Malaysia by contributing to the design of better development workshops, trainings that focus on teachers' well-being and orientation programs in the preschool, as well as mindfulness training and spiritual activities in the community.

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