# The meaning of work from teachers' perspectives: A qualitative inquiry in junior high schools

*Umi* Anugerah Izzati*[1], *Ratna* Suhartini[1], *Bima* Yatna Anugerah Ramadhani[1], *Khorriyatul* Khotimah[2], *Meidina* Mahmudatus Sholikhah[1], and *Nacjwa* Alifia Annabila[1]

[1]Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

**Abstract.** Teachers play a vital role in ensuring school success. At the junior high school level, they face diverse demands, including administrative tasks, curriculum requirements, and community expectations for student achievement. In this context, understanding the meaning of work is essential, as it influences teachers' resilience in addressing professional challenges. This study explores how junior high school teachers construct the meaning of their work while navigating professional and psychological demands. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected from fifteen teachers through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically based on Steger's framework of work meaning. Findings reveal that teachers interpret their work through three interrelated dimensions: positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and motivation for the greater good. They gain personal satisfaction and emotional fulfillment from observing student progress, reflecting on personal growth and values in daily teaching, and recognizing their contribution to broader social purposes. Despite facing various challenges, a strong sense of work meaning sustains intrinsic motivation, resilience, and commitment. The study highlights the importance of fostering meaningful work among teachers to enhance well-being and professional sustainability, while offering theoretical and practical contributions to educational contexts and implications for supportive policies.

## 1 Introduction

At the junior high school level, the challenges faced by teachers become increasingly complex because students are in a period of intense emotional and social developmental transition. Research shows that most junior high school students experience various psychological problems, ranging from difficulties in social relationships, feelings of alienation, anxiety about achievement, to low social adjustment, which also affect their mindset and behavior in the classroom [2]. On the other hand, students with a growth mindset are better able to see obstacles as learning opportunities, so

*. Corresponding author: umianugerah@unesa.ac.id

they are more deeply involved in the learning process [3]. This condition makes teachers not only act as teachers, but also as emotional companions who are required to have high sensitivity to the psychological dynamics of students. Otherwise, teachers will experience stress and anxiety because they consider themselves less able to support students' mental health and well-being. Therefore, understanding the psychological aspects that support teachers' work enthusiasm, such as the meaning of work, is important to examine more deeply in order to maintain the sustainability of teacher professionalism and well-being.

Meaning of work has become an increasingly important topic in the work and organizational psychology literature. Meaning of work is seen as an effective way to reduce stress because it can increase motivation and encourage employees to be more willing to put in maximum effort at work [4]. Several studies have also found that meaning of work can reduce burnout and work-family conflict and increase work commitment [5]. This is because meaning of work is an important element that supports intrinsic motivation, psychological resilience, and satisfaction in carrying out professional roles.

When individuals perceive their work as valuable, purposeful, and meaningful, they tend to demonstrate higher engagement, persistence, and sincerity in carrying out their duties [6]. Furthermore, employees who feel their work is meaningful tend to be resilient, highly motivated, and actively seek to innovate in their work [7]. This is also relevant for educators, where the meaning of work is not only related to the teaching function, but also reflects personal relationships with students, long-term impacts on students' lives, and the fit between personal values and the professional role they hold.

Meaning in work can grow through a variety of sources, such as personal growth opportunities, value alignment, positive relationships, and contributions to the greater good [8]. For teachers, meaning in work emerges through various aspects of professional practice, including building students' self-confidence, helping them feel valued, supporting learning autonomy, and encouraging critical thinking skills. They also pursue professional learning opportunities and push themselves to improve their practice, which makes them feel more confident in their work with students.

Meaning of work refers to an individual's perception that their work has value, purpose, and significant contribution beyond mere instrumental function [8]. The meaning of work was developed by Steger, Dik, and Duffy [9], where this model describes the meaning of work in three main dimensions.: (1) positive meaning, namely the extent to which individuals find positive and valuable meaning in their work; (2) meaning-making through work, namely how work becomes a means of reflection and self-development; and (3) greater good motivations, namely the perception that work contributes to a greater purpose beyond personal interests. These three dimensions allow for a deeper understanding of the meaning of work in the context of the teaching profession.

Although research on the meaning of work continues to grow, most studies still focus on quantitative approaches and industry sectors. In Indonesia, studies on the meaning of teachers' work, especially using qualitative approaches, are still relatively limited. In the context of junior high school teachers, both in public and private schools who face classroom dynamics, administrative pressures, and high social expectations, understanding the meaning of work can provide deeper insights into their motivation and resilience in working. This research is important because it allows for the exploration of subjective meanings that cannot be fully captured through num-

bers, and provides space for teachers' voices to reflect on their personal experiences in carrying out their profession more authentically.

Research on the meaning of work has not been fully mapped in depth in the context of the teaching profession, especially at the junior high school level which faces the challenges of student development and unique institutional pressures. Studies on the meaning of teachers' work at this level are still relatively minimal, both in educational managerial practices and in the academic realm. In particular, there are still limited studies that deeply explore the subjective experiences of junior high school teachers in finding and living the meaning of their work. Therefore, it is important to explore how junior high school teachers give meaning to their work in their daily lives, and how this meaning plays a role in supporting motivation, psychological resilience, and commitment in carrying out their roles.

Thus, this study was conducted to fill the gap by examining the meaning of work from the perspective of teachers in a real context in junior high schools through a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore the deep meaning of individual subjective experiences, which cannot always be revealed through a quantitative approach. In addition, a qualitative approach allows researchers to understand how teachers interpret their work in everyday life, and relate it to the psychological, social, and institutional dynamics that shape their work experiences.

## 2 Methods

This study was designed using a descriptive qualitative approach, with the aim of producing clear and descriptions of respondents' experiences. This qualitative approach seeks in-depth understanding of social phenomena by emphasizing context and participants' subjective experiences. This approach was chosen because it is able to explore perceptions and meanings that cannot be expressed quantitatively, and allows researchers to understand phenomena based on the perspective of participants directly.

### 2.1 Participants

The subjects in this study were Junior High School teachers from one of the schools in Surabaya. Participants were selected based on the criteria of having at least three years of teaching experience and a willingness to participate voluntarily. Fifteen subject teachers participated in this study, consisting of ten female teachers and five male teachers. All participants were permanent teachers employed by the foundation, with a length of service ranging from three to twenty years, and all were married.

### 2.2 Research Instrument

In the data collection process, semi-structured interviews were used, designed to provide a balance between question structure and flexibility in exploring participants' experiences in depth. Interviews were conducted individually outside of class hours. The interview guide was developed based on three dimensions proposed by [9], namely positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations.

### 2.3 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in how teachers construct the meaning of their work. The researcher first immersed in the interview transcripts and observation notes to gain a thorough understanding of the narratives. Meaningful statements and recurring ideas were highlighted, compared across participants, and gradually refined into broader categories reflecting positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations. The analysis process was involving repeated reviews of the data and discussions among the research team to ensure that the interpretations were consistent, credible, and firmly grounded in the psychological, social, and institutional contexts of the teachers' experiences.

### 2.4 Triangulation Data

To ensure the validity of the data, this qualitative study applies source triangulation as a strategy to strengthen credibility and minimize bias. In addition to the primary data obtained from interviews with fifteen teachers, supporting information was collected from key informants, namely the school principal, the vice principal, and senior teachers with more than twenty years of teaching experience. These additional perspectives were used to cross-check and confirm the consistency of the findings.

## 3 Results

This study aims to explore the meaning of work in junior high school teachers, with the participation of fifteen teachers from various backgrounds and teaching experiences. Data were obtained through interviews that were analyzed using four stages in the qualitative analysis process, namely familiarization, data reduction, data display, and report writing. The results of the data analysis are described based on three dimensions of the meaning of work, namely: positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations [9]. Although the study involved fifteen participants, only excerpts from three teachers (G1–G3) are presented, as they sufficiently represent the themes identified across all participants.

### 3.1 Positive Meaning

Most teachers stated that their profession provides a sense of personal meaning. Teachers feel that their work provides deep emotional and psychological value especially when they see students show progress or positive changes. One informant stated: "Sometimes I feel tired because there are always challenges, but when I see some students who have succeeded or changed for the better, I feel motivated to work as a teacher, to continue teaching children." (G1) They see this profession as a mission that is bigger than just a job, namely as a way to give a positive impact to society through education. The positive values found in the work make them persist, even though they face administrative pressure and limited facilities, they persist because they feel that what they do has real value and impact on others. This finding is reinforced by the statement of the school principal, who observed that teachers in his school generally maintain enthusiasm and pride in their profession whenever they see students' academic or behavioral progress, despite various limitations.

### 3.2 Meaning-Making through Work

For some teachers, teaching work is not only understood as a series of tasks, but as a reflective process and a means of forming the meaning of life. Through the teaching experience, they find new understandings about themselves, life values, or even aspects of spirituality. One teacher said:

"When I first started teaching, Sometimes, look the children were difficult to control and easily influenced by friends. But as time went on, I began to understand that they were still in a transitional period, their emotions were not yet stable, and they sought attention. I learned to be more patient, not to get angry right away, and to chat more one-on-one with them. From there, I began to feel closer to them, more open, understand the children's characters and know a little about how to handle them." (G2).

The experience shows that the role of a teacher is often a learning space that actually shapes the teacher's personality. Several teachers admitted that, over time, they became more patient, empathetic, and able to understand the complex backgrounds of their students. Daily interactions with students who are in the adolescent transition period make teachers face situations that are emotionally challenging, but also spiritually enriching.

For them, the classroom is not just a place to teach, but a place where they grow with their students, learning to manage emotions, and find satisfaction from the small changes they see in their students. This process is what makes teaching work have a deeper meaning, because it not only contributes to the development of students, but also becomes an important part of the personal journey and maturation of the teacher himself. This finding is consistent with the perspective of the vice principal, who highlighted that teachers often undergo personal growth through classroom experiences, gaining patience, empathy, and reflective understanding that extend beyond technical teaching tasks.

### 3.3 Greater Good Motivations

The meaning of work is also understood by teachers through their contribution to the younger generation and society. Most teachers feel that teaching is a form of social service. One teacher said:

"I know that teachers' salaries are not big. But what makes me persist is because I know that I am planting something that can change the future of children." (G3)

Some teachers also mentioned that they continue to teach because they feel a moral responsibility towards the future of children, especially those from families with disabilities. Not a few associate their motivation with childhood experiences, having been helped by teachers, and now wanting to be the same figure for their students. In a very limited situation, teachers find meaning through social contribution, a sense of responsibility, and the hope that education can be a way out of the difficulties of life experienced by their students. This is also supported by a senior teacher, who emphasized that many teachers see their role as a moral duty and long-term investment in the nation's future, where teaching is considered a form of devotion rather than merely a source of livelihood.

## 4 Discussion

The results of the study showed that junior high school teachers have a high tendency to find positive meaning in their work. The positive meaning dimension measures the extent to which an individual feels that their work is satisfying and meaningful. Through research, it was found that positive meaning appears in the form of emotional satisfaction and feelings of pride in their profession [10]. They feel that the profession as an educator is not only a teaching routine, but also provides emotional value, pride, and personal satisfaction. This finding was also confirmed by the school principal, who observed that teachers tend to maintain their enthusiasm when they see students making academic or behavioral progress, despite limited resources. This shows that positive meaning is not only subjectively experienced by teachers but is also recognized by school leaders as a motivational factor that sustains teachers' commitment.

Other studies have shown that meaning of work increases a sense of responsibility and can significantly influence teacher motivation [11]. For example, [12] emphasized that highly motivated teachers tend to feel their work is meaningful and satisfying, so they remain enthusiastic and persistent in carrying out their duties even when facing pressure. Meaning-making through work describes the process by which a person uses his or her work to find meaning and personal growth. This dimension assesses the extent to which work contributes to an individual's growth and self-development [12]. Field findings also show that teachers use the dynamics of teaching and self-reflection in their work to grow professionally and personally. Teachers feel they learn patience, empathy, and understanding by dealing with adolescent students from different backgrounds. They develop emotionally and spiritually through the challenges of educating. Through interactions with students, monitoring their progress, and contributing to shaping their future, teachers feel they have a meaningful social responsibility, thereby strengthening their sense of meaning in their work. Furthermore, meaningful work can also indirectly increase teachers' resilience by encouraging deeper engagement and the ability to adapt tasks to better suit their personal and professional needs [13]. The vice principal also emphasized that many teachers undergo personal growth through classroom experiences, where they learn to be more reflective and emotionally resilient. This triangulation supports the idea that teaching is not only about transferring knowledge, but also about shaping the teachers' own character and personal maturity.

Meanwhile, greater good motivations emphasize teachers' motivation to provide a wider positive impact through their work. In the context of education, teachers often see the teaching profession as a social calling and gain personal satisfaction from this contribution, so they have a strong calling orientation and tend not to think about leaving the organization [14]. When teachers have a calling orientation, they will consider their work meaningful and have an impact on the greater good [15]. Field findings are consistent with this: teachers teach not only for themselves but for the benefit of their students and society. Working with students, monitoring their progress, shaping their future, and thus assuming meaningful social responsibilities can contribute to teachers' sense of meaningful work. Many of them see their work as part of a social mission, not just a career. This dimension is very strong and shows that their work motivation is not solely due to internal factors, but also because of the collective goals that they believe are important. A senior teacher reinforced this perspective by highlighting that teachers often consider teaching as a moral duty and long-term investment in the future. This external confirmation strengthens the interpretation that the meaning of work is deeply tied to social contribution and

intergenerational responsibility. This suggests that meaning in work is strengthened when individuals find value through social contribution, positive relationships, and alignment with personal life goals.

## 5 Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the meaning of work has an important role in supporting the motivation, psychological resilience, and commitment of junior high school teachers. Teachers give meaning to their work through emotional satisfaction when seeing positive changes in students (positive meaning), through the process of self-reflection and learning that occurs in teaching practice (meaning-making through work), and through the contribution they feel to broader social goals (greater good motivations). These three dimensions complement each other and strengthen teachers' perceptions that their profession is not just a routine, but a means to provide positive impacts for individuals and society. Thus, the meaning of work is proven to be a source of intrinsic motivation that helps teachers survive the pressures and professional challenges in their daily lives.

## 6 Implication

The findings in this study provide important practical implications for the world of education, especially in efforts to support the meaningfulness of teachers' work. Educational institutions need to create a conducive work environment so that teachers can experience and maintain the meaning of work in depth. This can be done by strengthening the professional role of teachers which is not only structural but also psychological, so that they feel appreciated and have a real contribution. In addition, strong social support from colleagues and leaders plays an important role in maintaining teacher motivation and resilience. It is also important to provide a space for ongoing professional reflection, such as formative supervision activities or collegial discussions, which allow teachers to evaluate and strengthen their teaching practices constructively. Through these efforts, the meaning of work becomes not only an individual experience, but can also become a collective foundation for improving teacher welfare and the quality of education as a whole.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors gratefully acknowledge Universitas Negeri Surabaya and its Institute for Research and Community Service (Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat, LPPM UNESA) for funding this study. We also thank the junior high school teachers who participated in this research, as well as the principals, vice-principals, and senior teachers who generously provided their time and insights. **Funding (if any):** This work was supported by Universitas Negeri Surabaya. **Data Availability Statement:** The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. **Authors' Contributions Statement:** UAI conceived and designed the study, supervised all stages of the project, and drafted the initial manuscript. RS and BYAR contributed to the development of the methodology, conducted the fieldwork, and performed the statistical analyses. KK provided subject-matter expertise and critically reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content. MMS and NAN assisted with data collection, literature review, and preparation of tables. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript. **Competing Interest:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## References

1. A. Emeljanovas, S. Sabaliauskas, B. Mežienė, and N. Istomina, The relationships between teachers' emotional health and stress coping, Front. Psychol. 14, (2023). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1276431

2. O. Pozdnyakova and A. Pozdnyakov, Adult Students' Problems in the Distance Learning, Procedia Eng. 178, 243 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proeng.2017.01.105

3 Y. Karlen and S. Hertel, Editorial: The Power of Implicit Theories for Learning in Different Educational Contexts, Front. Educ. 6, (2021). https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.788759

4. H. S. Jung and H. H. Yoon, What does work meaning to hospitality employees? The effects of meaningful work on employees' organizational commitment: The mediating role of job engagement, Int. J. Hosp. Manag. 53, 59 (2016). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.12.004

5. G. Guidetti, A. Grandi, D. Converso, N. Bosco, S. Fantinelli, M. Zito, and L. Colombo, Funeral and Mortuary Operators: The Role of Stigma, Incivility, Work Meaningfulness and Work–Family Relation to Explain Occupational Burnout, Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 18, 6691 (2021). https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18136691

6. R. M. Ryan and E. L. Deci, Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness (Guilford Press, New York, 2017). https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1521/978.14625/28806

7. L. Feng, J. Li, T. Feng, and W. Jiang, Workplace ostracism and job performance: Meaning at work and family support as moderators, Soc. Behav. Personal. an Int. J. 47, 1 (2019). https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.8244

8. M. F. Steger, Creating Meaning and Purpose at Work, in The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of the Psychology of Positivity and Strengths-Based Approaches at Work (Chichester, UK, 2016), pp. 60–81. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118977620.ch5

9. M. F. Steger, B. J. Dik, and R. D. Duffy, Measuring Meaningful Work, J. Career Assess. 20, 322 (2012). https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711436160

10. S. Chamani, F. Safaeizadeh, and I. Xodabande, Investigating the relationship between language teachers' occupational self-efficacy, satisfaction and meaning at work, and their subjective wellbeing, Front. Psychol. 14, (2023). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1219130

11. E. Karataş and M. Özdemir, Examining the relationship between meaningful work and job engagement, Kuramsal Eğitimbilim Derg 15, 676 (2022). https://doi.org/10.30831/akukeg.1053090

12. T.-J. Chang and Y.-T. Sung, Does Teacher Motivation Really Matter? Exploring the Mediating Role of Teachers' Self-efficacy in the Relationship Between Motivation and Job Satisfaction, Asia-Pacific Educ. Res. 33, 1315 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-023-00803-4

13. J. Van Wingerden and R. F. Poell, Meaningful work and resilience among teachers: The mediating role of work engagement and job crafting, PLoS One 14, e0222518 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0222518

14. E. Fouché, S. Rothmann, and C. Van der Vyver, Antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work among school teachers, SA J. Ind. Psychol. 43, (2017). https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v43i0.1398

15. M. Willemse and E. Deacon, Experiencing a sense of calling: The influence of meaningful work on teachers' work attitudes, SA J. Ind. Psychol. 41, (2015). https://doi.org/10.4102/sajip.v41i1.1274