

Understanding Teacher Optimism in the Workplace: A Qualitative Inquiry into HRM Practices

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ABSTRACT

Teacher optimism in the workplace is essential for fostering resilience and adaptability in educational settings. This qualitative study explores teacher optimism. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine vocational high school teachers. The findings reveal that teachers perceive challenges as temporary rather than permanent, maintain a clear boundary between work difficulties and personal life, and adopt a balanced perspective in attributing setbacks to both internal and external factors. Supportive HRM practices, such as professional development and adaptive policies, play a critical role in sustaining teacher optimism. These insights provide practical implications for school management to develop HR strategies that nurture a positive and resilient teaching workforce.

Keywords: *Teacher Optimism, HRM Practices, Qualitative Study, Vocational Education*

1. INTRODUCTION

Human resources (HR) in educational organizations are important because in the educational process, human resources (HR) have a major role, both in terms of administration and operations. Human resources are a continuous process, so this is in line with the educational process where human resources can get a special place in educational organizations (Tanjung, 2020). Effective human resources not only focus on administrative aspects but also on managing teacher psychological well-being, including building optimism in the workplace (Cooper et al., 2019). This optimism is closely related to positive psychology in the work environment, which can increase work engagement (Priyatama et al., 2018) and personal resources (Van Wingerden et al., 2017).

In particular, Vocational High School (SMK) teachers face unique challenges in the world of education. This is because vocational education is very important to prepare graduates, meet industry requirements, and ensure the skills and competencies needed in the industrial world. Focusing on industry needs is essential to reduce unemployment among vocational school graduates (Barliana et al., 2020). Therefore, optimism is a key factor in maintaining teacher resilience amidst dynamic work demands where teachers tend to be required to involve constructive steps to transmit knowledge to their students (Dong & Xu, 2022). Conversely, teachers who lack optimism tend to be less able to maintain a positive vision for their future, are less confident in their abilities, have not been able to take the positive side of the problems that occur, and give up easily when faced with a problem (Sihombing et al., 2025).

In the positive psychology theory developed by Seligman (2006), optimism is defined as an individual's belief that bad events are temporary, will not interfere with activities, and are not always caused by oneself, but also by situations, fate, or other people. According to Luthans (2002), optimism is a positive emotion and life drive. It refers to a person's ability and psychological developmental conditions that encourage them to have the assumption that they will be successful both now and in the future (Luthans et al., 2007). There are three dimensions of optimism according to Seligman (2006), namely permanence (view of challenges as something temporary or permanent), pervasiveness (ability to separate work challenges from other aspects of life, and personalization (how individuals attribute the causes of problems, both internally and externally). According to Forgeard & Seligman (2012), optimism can be influenced by several factors, namely genetics, environmental influences - parents, teachers, and the media, and socioeconomic status - which can be explained by the tendency of individuals born into certain families to be more exposed to stress and experience negative emotional states at a young age. In addition, self-acceptance is also a factor that can influence optimism (Asmayani, 2021; Mardhatika & Rozi, 2022).

In a preliminary study conducted in one of the vocational high school teachers showed that many teachers still showed a high level of enthusiasm, but faced limitations of change in educational institutions and guidelines. They tend to rely on adaptive HR guidelines to find creative solutions and to support their colleagues and maintain their motivation. With support for school management in the form of vocational training and flexible guidelines, teacher optimism can be maintained as an important factor in improving the quality of training.

Previous studies have mostly described the role of optimism in the workplace in general employment and secondary education contexts. However, there is still limited research that specifically examines teacher optimism in vocational schools, especially regarding HRM practices. In addition, most studies use a quantitative approach, so that teachers' perceptions and experiences are not examined in detail. Therefore, there is a need for qualitative research that can examine how optimism in the workplace is formed and maintained. The uniqueness of this study lies in its qualitative approach using data triangulation from teachers, school administrators, and foundation representatives. Unlike previous studies that mostly use quantitative surveys, this study explores the direct experiences of teachers in facing challenges at work and how they build and maintain optimism. In addition, this study focuses on one of vocational high school teachers in Surabaya, a context that has not been widely explored in studies of optimism and HRM in education.

Based on the explanation above, the formulation of this study is, how are the three dimensions of optimism (permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization) manifested in the context of vocational school teacher resources?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research method uses a qualitative method. Qualitative research is the study of the characteristics of a phenomenon. It is well suited to answering questions about why something is observed or not observed, assessing complex multi-component interventions, and focusing on how to improve those interventions (Busetto et al., 2020). This method was chosen to understand the experiences, perceptions, and factors that influence teacher optimism in facing work challenges and the role of HRM in supporting it.

2.1. Participants

The main subjects in this study were nine teachers from three different departments in a vocational high school. Each department was represented by three teachers who were selected based on the following criteria: having at least three years of teaching experience to ensure a deeper understanding of the dynamics of work in a vocational high school and showing active involvement in the teaching process and school activities.

2.2. Instruments

The instrument used in this study was an interview guide compiled by the research team themselves with reference to Seligman's theory (2006). There are three dimensions, namely permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. One of the questions for the permanence dimension is "How do you feel when facing challenges in teaching, such as students who have difficulty understanding the material? Do you feel that this challenge will continue to occur or is it only temporary?". One of the questions for the pervasiveness dimension is "If there is one aspect of the job that does not go as expected, does it change your view of the teaching profession as a whole?". And one of the questions for the personalization dimension is "If the school experiences a policy change that impacts your teaching methods, do you feel like you have failed as a teacher, or do you see it as a challenge that needs to be adapted?". In addition, for stakeholders (principals, curriculum vice principals, student affairs vice principals, and foundation representatives), interviews will focus on the role of HRM in supporting teacher optimism, with questions such as: "How do you see teacher optimism affecting the effectiveness of teaching and the school environment?"

2.3. Procedure

This study lasted for approximately two weeks. It took approximately 45-60 minutes to interview one subject. Interviews were conducted in between the teacher's teaching time and in a separate room to avoid unwanted disturbances. Observations were conducted by the researcher himself with permission from the teacher subject concerned. Observations were conducted in various social situations, both in class, outside class, and teacher interactions with fellow teachers and students. Field notes were also used to provide additional information for the research team regarding anything, especially those that could happen at any time related to the research.

2.4. Data Collection Techniques

Data is collected through three main techniques:

2.4.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine teachers and stakeholders to understand their experiences related to optimism in the workplace, the interviews covered aspects of permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization according to Seligman's (2006) theory of optimism, and for stakeholders, the interviews focused on HRM policies and strategies implemented in supporting teacher well-being.

2.4.2. Observation

Observations were conducted in the school environment to see firsthand how teacher optimism is reflected in daily activities, both in the classroom and in interactions with students and fellow teachers. In addition, field notes were used to document teacher behavior, expressions, and responses to work situations.

2.5. Validity of Data

The validity of the data in this study uses triangulation techniques. Triangulation is used to validate and confirm qualitative results with quantitative research results. In cases where the research phenomenon being studied has little theoretical basis, triangulation is also used to validate the instrument. Another advantage is that it can be used to determine whether a tool is suitable for studying a phenomenon (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023). Triangulation is also said to be able to make research or studies more credible (Morgan, 2024). Triangulation in this study uses source triangulation, where researchers also conduct interviews with stakeholders (principals, curriculum vice principals, student affairs vice principals, and foundation representatives) who are related to teachers as the subjects of this study.

2.6. Data Analysis

The analysis of this research data includes three steps, namely data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. The purpose of data reduction is to make the amount of data that has been collected easier to handle and understand. Making conclusions from the results and comments that have been given is the last phase.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

This study examines teachers' optimism in the work environment based on three main dimensions: permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization. Interviews were conducted with nine vocational high school teachers from various departments, as well as triangulation with the principal, vice principal for curriculum and student affairs, and representatives of the foundation. Data analysis was carried out through three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. This study aims to answer the problem formulation: How are the three dimensions of optimism (permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization) manifested in the context of vocational high school teacher resources?

Data Reduction: At this stage, interview data were selected and grouped based on the dimensions of optimism studied. Answers relevant to permanence, pervasiveness, and personalization were analyzed to understand the main patterns in teacher responses.

Data Presentation: After reduction, the data is systematically arranged to describe the tendency of teacher optimism. The data is presented in the form of thematic categories that reflect three dimensions of optimism.

Drawing Conclusions: From the data presented, a general pattern in the optimism of vocational school teachers is interpreted, which is then linked to previous theories and research.

3.1.1. Permanence

The majority of teachers see challenges as temporary. When faced with difficulties in teaching, they believe that the situation can be overcome with various solutions. Some teachers assert that every new policy or challenge in the job is not a permanent obstacle, but rather an opportunity to adapt and grow.

3.1.2. Pervasiveness

Teachers are able to differentiate between challenges at work and personal life. They do not let difficulties at work affect other aspects of life. This shows that teachers have a good balance between work life and personal life, so that there is no excessive spillover effect.

3.1.3. Personalization

Teachers showed a tendency to identify both internal and external factors when facing challenges. Although some teachers initially blamed themselves when experiencing difficulties, they also recognized that other factors contributed to the problems. In addition, they tended to view policy changes as challenges to be adapted to, rather than as personal failures.

3.2. Discussion

The results of the study showed that the Permanence dimension appeared to be the strongest and most positive. Teachers consistently viewed challenges in their work as temporary and believed that with time and effort, they could find solutions. The results of the interviews showed that their optimism was high, because teachers were not trapped in the idea that challenges would last forever. They believed that change and improvement would occur. The belief that challenges are temporary reflects a resilient and adaptive mindset. This attitude supports long-term performance (Alexander, 2023), increases work productivity (Yusrin & Kurniaty, 2023) and reduces the risk of burnout in work (Resma & Prastika, 2023). This is in line with the theory of optimism put forward by Seligman (2006), where optimistic individuals tend to see challenges as something that can be overcome and not as permanent obstacles.

The pervasiveness dimension also showed quite positive results, but was more neutral because it only showed that work problems did not impact personal life. This can be seen where teachers can maintain boundaries between challenges at work and personal life. This ability is important in maintaining the psychological well-being of teachers and preventing prolonged stress due to work problems. In line with previous research, the ability to isolate work problems from personal life is an important factor in maintaining work-life balance and improving mental well-being (Akbar & Zona, 2025).

Meanwhile, the personalization dimension shows a tendency to blame oneself before finally realizing that there are external factors that also play a role. It was found that although some teachers initially blamed themselves for failures or challenges, they also had the awareness to see external factors that had an influence. This attitude shows healthy self-reflection and readiness to adapt to changes in school policy. In the context of Human Resource Management (HRM) Practices, professional development strategies and organizational support can further strengthen teacher optimism by providing a more supportive work environment (Suratno et al., 2022).

The implications of these findings suggest that schools need to strengthen HRM practices that support teacher optimism, such as providing ongoing training, providing discussion spaces to address challenges, and ensuring transparent communication regarding organizational policies. Thus, teacher optimism can be maintained and have a positive impact on the quality of teaching in vocational schools.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study shows that teachers in vocational high schools have a high level of optimism in facing challenges in the workplace. In the permanence dimension, the majority of teachers view problems as temporary and can be overcome over time. In the pervasiveness dimension, challenges faced at work do not affect all aspects of their lives, because they are able to separate their professional and personal lives. Meanwhile, in the personalization dimension, teachers do not tend to blame themselves absolutely when facing difficulties, but also consider external factors that contribute to the problem. This optimism plays an important role in their resilience to work dynamics, both in interactions with students and in dealing with changing school policies. This shows that support for teachers, both from school management and the work environment, can further strengthen their optimistic attitude in carrying out their duties as educators.

Based on these findings, there are several recommendations for further research, including delving deeper into specific factors that contribute to teacher optimism, such as management support, work experience, or school culture. In addition, experimental research can also be conducted to test the effectiveness of various human resource management strategies in increasing optimism, such as teaching skills training, teacher welfare programs, or peer mentoring. Furthermore, to gain a broader perspective, research can be expanded to other school levels, such as elementary or junior high schools, or comparing teacher optimism in public and private schools. By understanding

teacher optimism more deeply, schools and policy makers can design more effective strategies to support the welfare and performance of educators.

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