

Appreciative approach in interaction with co-workers of teachers at x school in Surabaya

Pendekatan apresiatif dalam interaksi dengan rekan kerja para guru di sekolah x di Surabaya

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines how appreciation influences interpersonal relationships among teachers at X Senior High School in Surabaya, Indonesia. In response to increasing concerns about workplace stress, teacher conflicts, and emotional disengagement, appreciation is identified as a key factor in promoting emotional well-being and professional harmony. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with three teachers and analyzed using thematic analysis. Five main themes emerged: (1) positive dynamics of appreciative interaction, (2) appreciation as social capital, (3) the spiritual dimension of appreciation, (4) barriers to appreciative behavior, and (5) internal and external support factors. Results indicate that appreciation – expressed through simple acts like greetings, praise, or assistance – builds trust, motivation, and collegial solidarity. Teachers view appreciation not only as professional communication but also as a spiritual practice embodying gratitude and divine love. Internal factors such as proactive attitudes, emotional resilience, and past positive experiences support appreciative behaviors, while external factors like school culture and peer support reinforce them. The study concludes that embedding appreciation within school environments improves teacher morale, reduces emotional stress, and fosters a healthier, more collaborative culture. Recommendations include implementing emotional intelligence training, leadership that models appreciation, and further research across various school settings.

ABSTRACT

Studi fenomenologis ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana apresiasi membentuk hubungan interpersonal di antara guru di sebuah sekolah menengah atas X di Surabaya, Indonesia. Di tengah meningkatnya kekhawatiran atas stres di tempat kerja, konflik guru, dan keterasingan emosional, apresiasi muncul sebagai elemen penting dalam membina kesejahteraan emosional dan keharmonisan profesional. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan tiga guru dan dianalisis secara tematis. Lima tema utama diidentifikasi: (1) dinamika positif interaksi apresiatif, (2) apresiasi sebagai modal sosial, (3) perspektif spiritual apresiasi, (4) hambatan terhadap perilaku apresiatif, dan (5) faktor dukungan internal dan eksternal. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa apresiasi – yang diungkapkan melalui tindakan sederhana seperti salam, pujian, atau bantuan – membangun kepercayaan, motivasi, dan solidaritas kolegal. Guru menganggap apresiasi tidak hanya sebagai komunikasi profesional tetapi juga sebagai praktik spiritual yang mencerminkan rasa syukur dan cinta ilahi. Faktor internal seperti perilaku proaktif, ketahanan emosional, dan pengalaman positif masa lalu mendukung praktik apresiatif, sementara dukungan eksternal dari budaya sekolah dan tanggapan teman sebaya semakin memperkuatnya. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa melembagakan apresiasi dalam lingkungan sekolah meningkatkan moral guru, mengurangi tekanan emosional, dan mendorong budaya yang lebih sehat dan lebih kolaboratif. Implikasinya meliputi perlunya pelatihan kecerdasan emosional, pemodelan kepemimpinan apresiasi, dan penelitian lebih lanjut di berbagai konteks sekolah.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A workplace should be a place where people feel supported, respected, and encouraged to do their best. However, in many cases, including schools, the work environment can be full of tension, emotional stress, and conflict. Teachers, who are expected to be role models for students, sometimes face negative behavior from their own colleagues. This includes subtle actions like gossip, isolation, or being left out of communication, as well as more serious cases such as verbal abuse and even physical violence (Baillien et al., 2011; Jalali et al., 2020). In 2021, the Workplace Bullying Institute reported that 30% of workers in the United States had experienced bullying, 19% had witnessed it, and 66% were aware that it was happening around them. This shows that workplace bullying is a serious issue, including in the education sector.

In schools, how teachers treat each other affects not only their well-being but also their teaching performance and the overall school atmosphere. A preliminary interview with a female teacher from a private senior high school in Surabaya showed that she resigned in the middle of the semester due to ongoing emotional mistreatment by her colleagues. She said she felt belittled and emotionally drained, which made her choose to focus on her mental health instead of keeping her job. Similar incidents have happened in Indonesia, such as a physical fight between two teachers at SMAN 8 Medan (Dewantoro, 2020), and the case of a teacher in Lebak, Banten, who was assaulted by a colleague (Meilikhah, 2023). These cases show that teacher-to-teacher conflict is not rare and can lead to serious personal and institutional problems.

The interview highlights how harmful it can be to work in a psychologically unsafe environment. The teacher felt emotionally unsupported, which led to stress and a strong desire to leave. One major factor behind this situation is the lack of appreciation and positive communication among colleagues. Many teachers report that appreciation is often missing from their daily interactions, even though it plays an important role in building good relationships (Stocker et al., 2019; Semmer et al., 2019). In high-pressure environments like schools, where workloads are heavy, appreciation is often forgotten, even though it helps support emotional well-being and professional cooperation.

If this issue is not properly addressed, it can lead to serious consequences such as low job satisfaction, burnout, and high teacher turnover. Gunawan et al. (in Silviandari & Helmi, 2018) found that teachers who experience bullying in the workplace often feel angry, hurt, and isolated. They may also become defensive, lose commitment to their work, and eventually decide to resign. These outcomes not only affect individual teachers but also reduce the overall quality of education and harm the school's atmosphere. A school culture that lacks appreciation can lead to resentment, frequent complaints, and emotional distance between staff members (Chapman & White, 2019). Therefore, building a workplace where appreciation is regularly expressed is important to prevent long-term emotional strain and professional decline.

Past research has shown that appreciation can increase motivation, trust, and self-confidence (Stocker et al., 2014; Semmer & Jacobshagen, 2003; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). However, most of these studies have focused on corporate or healthcare settings. Research on appreciation in schools—especially among teachers—remains limited, even though teachers often face emotional pressure and high workloads. Chapman and White (2019) emphasized that appreciation plays a key role in developing stronger and healthier work relationships. The lack of focus on this topic in school environments shows a clear research gap that this study aims to address. Specifically, it seeks to understand how appreciation is perceived, experienced, and sometimes limited in the daily interactions between teachers.

This study explores how teachers experience giving and receiving appreciation at work. Using a phenomenological approach, it investigates how teachers define appreciation, how they express it, what obstacles they face, and how appreciation shapes their relationships with colleagues. It also examines the internal and external factors that support or hinder appreciation in their work environment. By focusing on private senior high school teachers—who often deal with limited time and heavy responsibilities—this study aims to offer practical insights for building a more supportive and appreciative school culture that benefits both teachers and students.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm sees reality not as fixed or objective, but as something shaped through social interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through this lens, the researcher aims to understand how individuals make sense of their social world by observing and listening to their experiences in real-life settings (Neuman, 2017). In this context, the study seeks to explore how teachers give meaning to their experiences of using appreciation in their interactions with colleagues.

A phenomenological approach was selected because it focuses on how individuals experience and interpret a particular phenomenon (La Kahija, 2017). Phenomenology is used to describe people's lived experiences and to uncover the essence of those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method is appropriate for the study, as the data collected will come in the form of personal stories—words, emotions, and behaviors—that reflect how teachers actually apply appreciation in their workplace. The goal is to understand the deeper meaning of these experiences from the teachers' own points of view.

The main focus of this study is the use of appreciation in professional interactions among teachers. It looks at what influences this behavior, what helps or hinders it, and what meaning teachers attach to the use of appreciation when dealing with their colleagues. By examining these areas, the study aims to provide insights into the relational dynamics that shape the professional environment within schools.

Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, based on specific criteria. The study involved three teachers who: (1) are currently working at a private senior high

school (School X) in Surabaya; (2) were identified through early observation as applying an appreciative approach in their interactions with peers; and (3) voluntarily agreed to take part in the research. This selection was intended to ensure that participants had meaningful and relevant experiences related to the topic being studied.

The data for this study were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. This method allowed participants to share their personal experiences and emotions while giving the researcher flexibility to explore emerging topics during the conversation. An interview guide was used, containing open-ended questions designed to encourage detailed responses. Sample questions included: How have you used an appreciative approach with a fellow teacher? Why do you choose to use appreciation? What challenges make it difficult to use appreciation? What factors support you in doing so? What does appreciation mean to you? What happened after you applied appreciation in a real situation? All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The full interview guide is included in the appendix and was developed based on the conceptual framework of appreciative behavior and professional communication.

For data analysis, the study used thematic analysis following the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed six steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data by reading the transcripts multiple times; (2) generating initial codes by identifying repeated patterns or phrases; (3) searching for key themes that reflect important parts of the participants' experiences; (4) reviewing and refining the themes to ensure clarity and relevance; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) writing the final report with detailed explanations and direct quotes from the interviews. The goal of this analysis was to identify both shared and unique aspects of the participants' stories, in order to understand the deeper meaning of appreciation in their professional relationships.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were used: member checking (participants reviewed summaries of their own interviews), peer debriefing with other researchers, and keeping an audit trail that recorded decisions made during the research process. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, and all participants signed informed consent forms to confirm their voluntary participation.

3. RESULTS

This study was conducted at a senior high school (SMA X) in Surabaya, which was founded in 1951 and has since become one of the leading high schools in Indonesia.

The research process, including data collection, took place from February to October 2024 through face-to-face interviews and follow-up confirmations with the participants. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent using a voice recorder.

This study explores the dynamics of appreciative behavior among teachers, focusing on the background, supporting and inhibiting factors, and the personal meaning behind using

an appreciative approach in professional interactions. The following sections present each participant's experience with applying appreciation in their workplace relationships.

Subject A

Subject A is a 54-year-old female teacher. She has 29 years of teaching experience as a language teacher at High School X. She has had many experiences in giving and receiving appreciation. Subject A stated that generally, the interaction among teachers at High School X is very close, enjoyable, and intense. She added that joking with colleagues felt like finding a new family. She has experienced how traditions and respectful acts at school show love and appreciation. Another experience is how simple acts of sharing became a form of positive daily communication.

"Even new teachers sometimes say, good morning, ma'am, then stand and greet, sometimes even kiss the hand. I said, no need to kiss the hand, a greeting is enough, but maybe they're accustomed to it in sake of being respectful, maybe also love, that's how I see it." (A, February 2024)

Subject A uses various forms of appreciation, from verbal to symbolic gifts, to strengthen professional relationships. She also shows appreciation through verbal acts like prayer.

"Sometimes I expressed appreciation with words, but if someone needed something, maybe I'll also gave a small gift they want." (A, October 2024)

"Also praying, I brought my friends in prayer for their health, protection from God, and for them to stay as His best sons and daughters." (A, October 2024)

She realizes that appreciation for achievements and good deeds is more appropriate than physical compliments. Her appreciative approach aims to help fellow teachers recognize their own qualities.

Subject A said internal supporting factors include a personal initiative to create communication. She mentioned a habit of focusing on the positive as a support factor. She shared a metaphor often used in life: write goodness on stone and disappointment on sand, so energy is focused on positive things to create a harmonious atmosphere. She stated past experiences of being loved shaped her appreciative attitude. She recalled being loved by her parents in childhood, and many personal experiences where goodness felt like miracles that built confidence to praise others. Another internal factor is her resilience in facing misunderstandings when giving appreciation. She chooses pleasant greetings over focusing on negative responses.

"... I must choose pleasant greetings rather than the negative response to my appreciation." (A, October 2024)

The only external supporting factor she identified is the happiness of colleagues, which motivates her. She mentioned appreciation has a positive reciprocal effect.

"... it turns out what we did is not just pleasing but also inspiring." (A, October 2024)

External inhibiting factors include colleagues' negative perceptions of appreciation, misinterpretations, or viewing it as inappropriate.

She views appreciation as an expression of gratitude. Since childhood, she's tried to value small contributions as a form of gratitude and thanks. For her, appreciation is an expression of God's love, and she wants to share that love. She sees appreciation as a recognition of others' roles in personal happiness and development, and a simple act with great impact.

"... I feel so loved by God, and this is my way to love others in whom God is present." (A, October 2024)

She believes the result of using an appreciative approach is happiness for the giver. Quality relationships produce happiness.

"Wherever we are, good relationships bring joy and above all, gratitude." (A, October 2024)

Positive communication creates a positive loop, enhances reputation, and affects personal behavior. It strengthens interpersonal relationships and promotes positive motivation in the workplace.

"... relationships become closer, not just as friends, but deeper due to respect, love, and feeling cared for..." (A, October 2024)

A positive work environment influences motivation and how individuals feel about their work.

Subject B

Subject B is a 34-year-old single male with 9 years of experience as a guidance and counseling teacher at High School X. He has had many experiences interacting with colleagues. He stated that relationships among teachers are very close, pleasant, and intense. He also sees solidarity in supporting colleagues in need.

"... if a colleague is sick, someone always tries to visit, pray, and some even give gifts – that really helps one another." (B, February 2024)

On the other hand, he recognizes differences in personality at work that can lead to miscommunication. He noted that heavy workloads also negatively affect positive communication and attention among teachers.

Subject B uses simple positive communication as his appreciative approach—smiles, greetings, checking in, advice, and support to build interaction. He adapts appreciation to make it meaningful and relevant to context. He emphasizes the importance of linking appreciation with real actions and gives it without expecting anything in return.

He identifies internal support as the initiative to start communication and open up.

"... when I try to build positive communication with others. First, I assess the situation." (B, February 2024)

His personal habit of focusing on the positive is a supporting factor. He considers sharing positivity a life principle. Past experiences of being appreciated motivated him to pay it forward.

"... in my life, I was always appreciated by many, and I want to return that appreciation to others who may have never even helped me..." (B, October 2024)

He believes appreciation brings positive feelings to the giver, too, enhancing the giver's happiness.

Internal barriers include fear of misunderstandings. External barriers include negative perceptions from colleagues, such as assuming he is being sarcastic or mocking. He sees appreciation as an expression of gratitude. He believes it shifts focus from self to others and shows self-respect.

"... if I can appreciate others, that means I can appreciate myself. If I can't, then I don't value myself." (B, October 2024)

He states that appreciation boosts interpersonal relationships and positive motivation at work. It inspires not only the recipient but also those around. Appreciation also motivates continued growth and eases interpersonal communication.

Subject C

Subject C is a 56-year-old male teacher with 28 years of experience teaching science at High School X. He was loved by his parents as a child, and playing with friends in the river made his childhood joyful. He sees teacher interactions as similar to spiritual interactions with God, with the same meaning as our interactions with ourselves and with God.

"... interaction between teachers, coworkers, is the same as our interaction with ourselves and with God." (C, February 2024)

He emphasizes openness and sincerity as the foundation of teacher relationships. However, he also acknowledges personality differences and heavy workloads as obstacles to positive communication.

"In my opinion, positive communication is important, so we need to learn it. I still see that it needs improvement." (C, February 2024)

His appreciative approach includes simple positive communication: smiling, greetings, checking in, offering advice and support. He aims to help colleagues realize their self-worth. He believes appreciation boosts confidence in both giver and receiver. He sees it as a spiritual act that honors humans as God's creation.

"... I want to share that we are images of God, we have goodness, and I must appreciate that – by appreciating others, we also appreciate God." (C, October 2024)

He identifies internal support as starting with oneself—opening up, praying with a spiritual commitment to serve others, and encouraging openness.

"Let's start with opening ourselves."

"Of course, I must start with myself..." (C, October 2024)

He sees appreciation as strengthening the giver as well and requires resilience to handle misunderstandings. He is learning to appreciate others regardless of their response.

External support comes from the happiness of colleagues—it motivates him to continue expressing appreciation.

Internal barriers include pride or awkwardness in initiating appreciation. External barriers include negative perceptions—being seen as seeking praise or attention.

He believes appreciation helps avoid social alienation and affirms belief in the value of every human being. Not giving appreciation once made him feel isolated. He believes each person has positive value and is a reflection of God. The result of appreciation is happiness for the giver, emotional benefit, and improved communication. It increases openness and comfort among teachers.

4. DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the appreciative approach plays a role in building relationships between teachers in the work environment. Based on data obtained from the research subjects, five themes emerged:

1. Positive dynamics in appreciative interactions

This study identified that appreciation between teachers creates positive dynamics such as community unity, emotional well-being, and work motivation. In the context of this study, appreciation is reflected through positive communication such as smiling, greeting, giving praise, saying thank you, and offering help. A smile is a common non-verbal form of appreciation used to show gratitude, appreciation, or support (Givens, 2005). On the other hand, verbal appreciation tends to be more direct and explicit. Words of praise, gratitude, and offers of assistance provide clarity to the recipient about the intent of the appreciation. Research shows that verbal appreciation can increase intrinsic

motivation and self-confidence, because words directly confirm recognition of one's efforts. (Knapp & Hall, 2013). This supports the findings of Stocker et al. (2014), which stated that appreciation increases employee motivation and well-being. In the context of education, this dynamic is important for creating a work environment that supports professional development and healthy social relationships.

2. Appreciative approach as social capital in the workplace.

The appreciative approach in interactions between teachers shows an important role as a form of social capital that strengthens interpersonal relationships in the workplace. In the Social Exchange theory (Blau, 1964), a working relationship based on appreciation creates a reciprocal dynamic that strengthens trust and respect.

In the school environment, appreciation not only helps create a more harmonious workplace but also strengthens social bonds among teachers. Simple gestures – such as thanking a colleague for offering coffee or visiting someone who is ill – can build a sense of solidarity. These small acts foster a collaborative atmosphere where teachers feel valued and emotionally supported. This study highlights that appreciation plays a key role in building social capital in the workplace. It enhances not only individual relationships but also the overall effectiveness of the teaching team.

3. Spirituality perspective in appreciation.

The spiritual dimension of appreciation shows that it not only builds strong interpersonal connections but also links individuals to deeper spiritual values. Fry (2003) explains that spirituality in the workplace involves aligning human actions with universal values such as love and compassion. In this study, participants viewed appreciation as a spiritual act that reflects God's love and care for others.

This perspective adds a meaningful layer to the understanding of appreciation by introducing it as a way to strengthen spiritual awareness. For instance, Participant C described appreciation as a form of respect for others as fellow creations of God. This suggests that appreciation goes beyond recognizing someone's contribution – it becomes an expression of moral and spiritual values. This finding supports Stocker et al. (2014), who emphasized that appreciation enhances emotional well-being and contributes to a positive work environment. However, in this context, appreciation also has a transformative effect by deepening one's spiritual beliefs.

In the field of education, this form of appreciative spirituality offers a strong foundation for creating a positive and meaningful workplace. Teachers are not only responsible for educating students but also serve as role models who demonstrate universal values through their daily interactions.

4. Barriers to appreciative interaction.

The use of an appreciative approach also faces various challenges. A sense of prestige and fear of misunderstanding can hinder the implementation of appreciation (Stocker et al., 2014).

These barriers are not only internal but also external, such as negative perceptions from coworkers. In some cases, appreciation is considered excessive or has a specific purpose. To overcome these barriers, communication flexibility is key, as suggested by Bass & Avolio (1994). Adjusting the appreciative approach according to the individual's context can reduce the potential for conflict and increase the effectiveness of interactions. Communication flexibility can overcome barriers such as a sense of prestige and misunderstanding by allowing individuals to adjust their communication approach based on the context, needs, and characteristics of the person they are talking to.

5. Internal and external factors that support appreciative practices

Factors supporting teachers in implementing an appreciative approach include various internal and external aspects that encourage the creation of positive interactions in the workplace. From the internal side, self-initiative is one of the main elements. Teachers who are proactive in building communication, such as greeting first or giving simple praise, demonstrate behavior that reflects proactive behavior (Crant, 2000). According to Crant (2000), the factors causing proactive behavior are the presence of a proactive personality, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, organizational support, transformational leadership, and the opportunity to act.

In addition, a positive focus attitude is also a significant supporter. By focusing on the strengths or achievements of colleagues, teachers create a harmonious work atmosphere, in accordance with the concept of positive organizational behavior which emphasizes strengthening positive aspects to improve individual and team well-being (Luthans, 2002). Furthermore, Luthans (2002) explains that one of the factors that influences this attitude is the psychological capital (Psychological Capital/PsyCap) owned by individuals, namely H.E.R.O (Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, Optimism) or hope, self-efficacy, resilience and optimism.

Life experiences and personal values also play an important role. Teachers who have had previous experiences of being loved or appreciated tend to have better abilities in giving appreciation to others. Based on Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) shows that the experience of giving or receiving positive things can encourage someone to continue using this strategy.

Emotional resilience and communication flexibility are also key supporting factors. From an individual perspective, emotional regulation skills, emotional intelligence, and optimism and self-efficacy are important components that help someone deal with life's pressures and challenges (Masten, 2001). Teachers who are able to adapt their approach to the characteristics of their co-workers and remain positive in the face of potential misunderstandings can maintain the sustainability of appreciation in the work environment.

From the external side, the happiness of co-workers is a strong motivation for teachers to continue to provide appreciation. According to the Social Exchange theory, the reciprocal effect of this appreciation creates a circle of positive interactions that strengthen team solidarity and cohesion (Blau, 1964). A supportive work environment, where a culture of mutual respect has been built, also provides encouragement for teachers to apply an appreciative approach consistently. Schools that encourage positive communication and cross-division collaboration create a work atmosphere that is conducive to strengthening interpersonal relationships.

5. IMPLICATION

The implications of these findings are both practical and theoretical:

A. Creating Structured Appreciation Practices

Schools should formalize appreciation as part of staff culture. This can include structured activities such as peer recognition moments, appreciation boards, or routine reflection sessions. Integrating appreciation into performance feedback and professional development activities can reinforce its importance.

B. Leadership Modeling

School leaders must actively model appreciative behavior. By openly acknowledging the efforts of teachers, leaders can set the tone for an emotionally safe and motivating workplace. This aligns with transformational leadership practices that foster psychological safety and mutual respect.

C. Training in Emotional Intelligence and Communication

Teacher training programs and in-service workshops should include modules on emotional intelligence, communication flexibility, and appreciative leadership. Educators equipped with these skills are more likely to sustain positive interactions even under pressure.

D. Emphasizing the Spiritual and Cultural Dimensions

Especially in values-based or religious school contexts, recognition of the spiritual value of appreciation can reinforce its importance. Schools can draw on spiritual or moral frameworks to promote appreciation as a reflection of shared values like respect, compassion, and gratitude.

E. Further Research

Future studies should explore appreciation in broader educational settings across public and private institutions, varying levels of school leadership, and different cultural environments. Quantitative studies may also be useful to measure the impact of appreciation on job satisfaction, teacher retention, and student outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION

This study shows that using an appreciative approach in interactions among teachers plays an important role in building relationships, supporting emotional well-being, and improving professional performance in schools. Appreciation, expressed through positive communication like praise, smiles, and gratitude, helps strengthen team unity and creates a positive work environment.

The study also reveals that appreciation is more than just a communication tool; it has a deep spiritual meaning. Teachers see appreciation as a reflection of God's love, which promotes values such as love, respect, and harmony. Factors that support the use of appreciation include personal initiative, focusing on positive aspects, past positive experiences, and flexibility in communication. External factors like coworkers' happiness and a supportive work culture also encourage appreciation.

However, the study found challenges such as concerns about prestige, fear of being misunderstood, and negative reactions from colleagues, which can limit how effective appreciation is. To address these barriers, teachers need to use adaptable and flexible communication strategies.

Overall, this study highlights that appreciation is not only a way to communicate but also has a powerful role in creating an inclusive and caring educational community. Appreciation is a vital element in building a work environment that fosters both educational growth and shared well-being.

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