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MEANINGFUL WORK AND EMPLOYEE WORK ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA.

By

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between meaningful work and employee engagement in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The cross-sectional research design was employed in the study. A structured questionnaire for meaningful work and employee engagement with Cronbach's alpha reliability scores above .80 was used to generate primary data for the study. The respondents to the research instrument were 312 public secondary school teachers out of a sample of 363 drawn from 144 public secondary schools in Bayelsa State, cutting across all 8 local government areas with the aid of the Taro Yamane technique, and the data generated were analyzed with Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) at the 0.05 level of significance. The results showed a significant relationship between meaningful work and the measures of employee engagement (.656, .604, and .438), respectively for hypotheses 1 to 3. Given these findings, it was concluded that a significant empirical relationship exists between meaningful work and employee engagement among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State. Based on this conclusion, it was recommended that heads of public secondary schools should enable their staff to develop a feeling of pride by making their jobs more meaningful. Meaningfulness was also found to be significantly linked to employee dedication. Increasing feelings of work-related meaning would therefore increase dedication. To do this, the government should offer incentives for teachers that give their jobs more meaning, which will in turn increase dedication. School administrators should also encourage their staff to feel meaningful by giving their work more value, which will increase absorption.

Keywords: *meaningful work, vigour, dedication, absorption*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Organizations largely depend on their employees to attain set goals. Employee engagement is thus an important tool in ensuring corporate goal achievement. The phrase refers to how much effort workers put in and demonstrate mental toughness when finishing tasks (vigor), how passionate they are about their work (dedication), and how completely absorbed they are in their work (absorption).

Hence, organisations need to attain active employee engagement, as a lack of engagement among employees is detrimental to the overall functioning of the organisation (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli& Bakker, 2010). Some new studies show that work meaningfulness, also known as meaningful work, is a key factor in keeping employees engaged, as shown by their energy, commitment, and interest (Soane et al. 2018; Lysova et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2019; Demerouti et al. 2020; Gong et al. 2020).

The meaningfulness of a job is a work is acknowledged as a job that is believed to be significant and purposeful (Rosso et al., 2010). According to the theory of psychological empowerment, meaningfulness enables employees to see a high value in their work thereby making them proud of their job (Spreitzer 1995; Thomas &Velthouse 1990) martela and Riekki (2018) reported that employees who find meaning in their jobs have a higher tendency to be motivated, committed and experience greater job satisfaction. Based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, the meaningfulness of a job doubles as a job resource that influences engagement positively by shielding job stress while inspiring intrinsic motivation (Bakker &Demerouti, 2017).

When employees recognise the meaning of their work, they expend more energy while completing tasks, thereby increasing their vigour. Such energy stems from the trust and belief that their efforts contribute to a greater purpose. This belief again could enhance the level of their mental resilience

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at work (Allan et al., 2019). Therefore, when organisations provide work environments that are conducive to meaningful work, employees can maintain their energy levels and prevent burnout. Dedication is also firmly linked to employees' perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work. Bailey et al. (2019) reported that employees who find meaning in their work usually report increased levels of pride and enthusiasm. Meaningful work can also breed absorption. Lysova et al. (2019) showed that employees who recognise their work as meaningful tend to be more immersed in it than those who find it meaningless.

It follows that helping employees find meaning and purpose in their work will raise employee engagement levels. While this assumption could be true, there is no guarantee that meaningful work could effectively enhance work engagement among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State, as the cited studies were all carried out outside the shores of Nigeria. Hence, an implementation of the recommendations of these studies might not yield similar results, thereby leaving a gap in literature in the area of meaningful work and employee engagement. There is, therefore, a need to carry out a study on these variables in Bayelsa State, Nigeria to show how meaningful work can be used as a tool for enhancing work engagement among public secondary school teachers in the region. This study, therefore, examined the relationship between meaningful work and employee engagement of teachers in public secondaryschools in Bayelsa State.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Employee engagement is an essential contributor to organisational success, especially among educational institutions, where student outcomes are directly linked to teacher engagement levels (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Employee engagement is generally theorised through vigour (the employee's level of exertion of physical energy and mental resilience), dedication (a sagacity of significance, pride, and enthusiasm), and absorption (the employee's deep involvement and total concentration in the work) as dimensions or measures (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Rosso et al. (2010) have recognised meaningful work as a key driver of employee engagement, defining it as work that is significant, important, and purposeful. Nonetheless, regardless of the importance of employee engagement, there is a dearth of research on how meaningful work correlates with employee engagement among public secondary school teachers, particularly in the Bayelsa State context. Teachers in secondary schools usually face different challenges, including but not limited to resource scarcity, job stress, high workload, etc., that impact their engagement levels negatively (König&Rothland, 2022). Research studies have suggested that meaningful work can lead to more engagement by making people happier at work and more motivated to do their work (Steger et al., 2012). However, there aren't many studies that look at this relationship in secondary schools. This gap underscores the need for further studies on how meaningful work enhances vigor, dedication, and absorption among public secondary school teachers. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the link between meaningful work and employee engagement among public secondary school teachers. Specifically, it intends to find out whether meaningful work could significantly predict vigor, dedication, and absorption and to ascertain possible strategies for enhancing work engagement through meaningful work.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between meaningful work and employee engagement. The specific objectives are to:

1. Find out whether meaningful work enhances vigor among public secondary school teachers in Bayelsa State.
2. Determine whether meaningful work relates positively with dedication among public secondary school teachers in Bayelsa State.
3. Examine the relationship between meaningful work and absorption among public secondary school teachers in Bayelsa State.

1.3 Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in this study:

1. How does meaningfulness relate with vigour among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State?
2. What is the relationship between meaningfulness and dedication among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State?
3. To what extent does meaningfulness relate with absorption among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses stated in the null forms are formulated:

1. There is no relationship between meaningfulness and vigour among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State.
2. There is no relationship between meaningfulness and dedication among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State.
3. There is no relationship between meaningfulness and among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Meaningful Work

Meaningful work is an essential component of the psychological empowerment construct. It reflects the degree to which employees view their work as important and purposeful. According to Spreitzer (1995), meaningfulness is the alliance between an employee's work roles and his/her personal values and standards. Meaningful work therefore, reflects an employee's assessment of the worth or value of his work and duties linked to the job. Steger et al. (2012) demonstrated that the concept of meaningful work describes the innate value of the work to the employee together with positive attributes and significance. Moreover, Geldenhuys's (2014) reported that meaningfulness is the degree to which and employee views his work as inherently relevant,

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important and deserves their full attention. When a job is psychologically meaningful, employees can sense an alignment between the work and their personal ideals (May, et al. 2004).

Scholars have recognised the notion of work meaning, the importance of meaningful work experiences (Olivier &Rothmann, 2007), as potential predictors of significant work-related outcomes, including EE. According to Geldenhuys (2014), meaningful work involvement can serve as a catalyst for positive organisational outcomes, such as increased employee satisfaction, engagement, and commitment. Fairlie (2011) found a positive correlation between meaningful work and several employee outcomes-engagement, commitment, etc. on one hand and a negative correlation between meaningful work and employee disengagement, fatigue, and perceptions of turnover. This submits that feelings of meaningfulness in one's work is essential in increasing positive employee outcomes from a psychological empowerment point of view.

2.2 Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a complex construct that reflexes an employee's rate of excitement and dedication to his/her work. According to Schaufelli et al. (2002), its main components are—vigor, devotion, and absorption. Vigour, exemplifies an employee's readiness to put in necessary effort and tenacity in job related activities coupled with high degrees of energy and intellectual resilience. Jaya and Ariyanto (2021) show that vigour improves employee performance since active workers are more likely to put in effort and keep on in their jobs. Dedication mirrors feeling of significance, vitality, inspiration, pride, and challenge in a work. Dedication has a positive correlation with diverse employee outcomes such as commitment, job satisfaction, and an emotional bond with the organization which enables them to achieve objectives (Maisyuri&Ariyanto, 2021). Such dedication breeds absorption which distorts employee time perceptions thereby making it difficult for the employee to separate self from the work. Saputra and Ariyanto (2021) reported that absorbing helps to increase job satisfaction, according to empirical data since workers engaged in their activities feel more pleasure and fulfilment.

These elements of employee engagement taken together have been connected to a number of favourableorganisational results including lower turnover, higher productivity, and better employee well-being. Companies trying to build a highly engaged workforce should take into account techniques meant to improve employees' absorption, energy, and dedication.

2.3 Empirical Review

Organisationalbehaviour research has focused on meaningful work and employee engagement. Research shows that meaningful work—work that is viewed as purposeful and contributes to a greater good—increases employee engagement in various industries. Vigour, dedication, and assimilation are key to employee engagement, which affects productivity, work satisfaction, and organisational success. Research consistently shows that meaningful employment increases employee engagement.

Bailey et al. (2019) found that meaningful work predicts employee engagement. Meaningfulness mediates the association between employment features (task diversity, autonomy) and engagement. When work is meaningful, employees are more likely to work hard, be dedicated, and be fully absorbed. A longitudinal study by Lysova et al. (2019) showed that meaningful employment boosts long-term employee engagement. Their research showed that meaningful work makes employees more resilient to occupational pressures and keeps them engaged in difficult situations. This finding highlights the relevance of meaningful work in long-term engagement.

Soane et al. (2018) found that employees who find their work to be meaningful are more motivated and display more vigour. The effects of meaningful work on employee engagement—vigor, devotion, and absorption—have also been thoroughly examined. When employees feel like their work is helping others, their vigor—mental resilience and vitality—is often boosted.

Allan et al. (2019) found that meaningful employment fosters purpose and increases job commitment. Important employees are more likely to work hard and be proud of their achievements. Meaningful work also boosts devotion, which is a strong sense of involvement and pride in one's work.

Demerouti et al. (2020) found that meaningful work engages employees, improving job satisfaction and performance. This deep job commitment is often linked to intrinsic motivation from meaningful duties. When individuals find their work important, Rosso et al. (2021) found that employees are more engaged, more inclined to display organisational citizenship behaviours, reduce turnover intentions, and perform better. This means that meaningful work has been linked to organisational outcomes beyond employee engagement. These findings show that promoting meaningful employment can boost organisational efficiency.

Breevaart and Zacher (2019) stressed the importance of leadership in creating purposeful workplaces. Leaders who offer meaningful contributions, link organisational goals with employees' beliefs, and present a compelling vision are more likely to engage colleagues. Organisational culture and leadership affect how employees view their work.

Research consistently shows that employee engagement and meaningful work are linked. It showed that meaningful work boosts engagement—vigor, devotion, and absorption—and enhances organisational outcomes like turnover and performance. Thus, public secondary schools may need to offer instructors meaningful employment to develop an engaged staff. The empirical studies evaluated above did not show how meaningful work could promote teacher job engagement, leaving a key gap in the study.

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3.0 METHODOLOGY

The cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. Data for the study were generated through a well-structured questionnaire. The variables for the study were measured using scales that were adapted from literature. The scales for meaningful work were drawn from Sppreitzer (1995) while the employee engagement scales were adapted from the ultra-short measures for work engagement (UWES-17) scales created by Schaufelli et al. (2017). The respondents to the questionnaires involved 312 secondary school teachers out of 363 teachers drawn from 144 public secondary schools in Bayelsa State. The scales were tested for reliability. The results of these tests are presented in the next section. Data generated were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis.

4.0 RESULTS

The results of the tests are presented below in Table 1. Items in "**bold" and** in the **"diagonals"** are reliability coefficients.

Table 1. Reliability and Correlation Scores

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Meaning	Vigour	Dedication	Absorption
Meaningfulness	3.5833	1.14234	**.82**			
Vigour	3.6667	1.36485	.656**	**.85**		
Dedication	3.6282	1.18521	.604**	.460**	**.86**	
Absorption	4.0417	.60133	.438**	.453**	.622**	**.87**

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Table 1 presents the mean scores of the study variables, standard deviation values, reliability coefficients and correlation results of the hypotheses tested in the study reflecting the relationship between the meaningfulness dimension of PE and the three measures of EE. As shown in the table, all reliability coefficients are above the Nunally (1978) bench mark of .70 which suggested that the scales are reliable. Again, all mean scores are above the mid-point value of 3.0. This is suggestive of a general agreement amongst respondents to the statements measuring meaningful work and the three indicators of employee engagement. The low standard deviation scores further reveal that there are minimal variations among responses as the data clusters around the mean. It follows that teachers in public secondary schools trust that their job is meaningful and are believed to be actively engaged.

As further indicated in the table, correlation between meaningfulness and vigour is positive and moderately strong at r = .656 which is significant @ p = .000 < .05. This results implies that meaningfulness is significantly related to employees' vigour. Given this finding, the null hypothesis (Ho_1) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

The results for hypothesis two (Ho_2) as displayed in the table reveal that correlation between meaningfulness and dedication is positive and moderately strong at r = .604 which is significant @ p = .000 < .05. This results implies that meaningfulness is significantly related to employees' dedication. Given this finding, the null hypothesis (Ho_2) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

The results for hypothesis three (Ho_3) as displayed in the table reveal that correlation between meaningfulness and absorption is positive and moderately weak @ r = .438 which is significant @ p = .000 < .05. This results implies that meaningfulness is significantly related to employees' absorption. Given this finding, the null hypothesis (Ho3) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

5.0 Conclusion and Discussions

The study examined the relationship between meaningful work as a component of the psychological empowerment construct and the three measures of employee engagement. The result of the first hypothesis indicated that there is a positive and significant relationship between meaningfulness and vigour. This means that the more employees (i.e. teachers) perceive their jobs to be meaningful, the more they exert efforts in executing tasks. This is based on the trust that a meaningful job offers a lot of psychological benefits to an individual. It gives the job holder some feeling of pride which makes the job holder to find it easy to talk about his/her job (Spreitzer, 1995b). This feeling of pride therefore inspires the individual to put in more physical effort in the execution of their assigned tasks. Such physical effort is what vigour as a measure of EE represents. Meaningfulness therefore compels the job holder to be more vigourous in his/her job ensuring that assigned tasks are completed within the required time. This finding agrees with Tandon et al. (2020) that meaningful work inspires commitment in which employees physically exert the necessary efforts to execute assignments. Yilmaz (2015) also reported significant correlations between meaningful work and employees task performance which to a large extent is accomplished via employee vigour. The current study had also shown that the respondents trust that their jobs as teachers is meaningful and thus to show such pride in their job, they become more and more vigourous. Meaningful work therefore, influences employee job satisfaction which in turn sways engagement. This is because the psychological empowerment construct is motivational and its meaningfulness dimension motivates by making the employee to experience value in his work, such perceived value moves the employee to put in more physical efforts.

The link between meaningfulness and dedication was also found to be positive and significant. Dedication as shown earlier is that aspect of engagement that represents an employee's emotional attachment to his/her job. It is closely related to the commitment concept. To demonstrate such commitment, employees become dedicated to the organisation by even going the extra mile to complete tasks. Meaningfulness thus provides the kick that pushes employees to be dedicated. This study is therefore showing that

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meaningful work significantly influences dedication among teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State.

One very fascinating aspect of dedication is that employees through it are able to align their professional growth with the success of the organisation. They thus believe that as long as the organisation is succeeding by achieving set goals and objectives, they too are growing professionally. It follows therefore that when the organisation makes the job more meaningful to the employee, the employees are ready to reciprocate that with dedication fulfilling the assumptions of the social exchange theory. No wonder, Spreitzer (1995) showed that psychological empowerment is a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions. The meaningfulness cognition is that aspect of psychological empowerment that demonstrates the extent to which the employees see value in their jobs. hence, the more the value employees see in their job, the more dedicated they become. Thus, psychological empowerment as represented by meaningful work is significantly related to employee well-being which overlaps with employee engagement. And this is what the current study had also shown that teachers in public secondary schools in Bayelsa State are dedicated owing to the value they attach to their jobs.

The result of the third hypothesis examined the relationship between meaningful work and employee absorption and the findings indicated a positive and significant relationship between the variables. While meaningful work as shown earlier is a reflection of an employee's perceived value of his/her work, absorption is the extent to which an individual is immersed in his/her work. The study revealed that the two concepts are empirically connected. To be absorbed in one's work means that an employee does not allow anything to distract him while executing tasks. As a result, employees that are absorbed takes no notice of time spent in their works as the concern is on completing tasks rather than on when one is supposed to close from work. The study is thus showing that, when teachers perceive their jobs to be meaningful, they become immersed in their duties devoid of any form of distraction. Such employees display a heightened cognitive engagement to their job. This finding agrees with Ambad and Bahron (2012) that psychological empowerment influences employees' cognitive attachment as they are both emotionally and behaviorally attached to their organisation.

It follows that meaningful work is an important driver of EE. Hence, by improving on the work meaningfulness perceptions of employees will result in increased absorption among employees.

Organisations are thus expected to identify factors to can drive work meaningfulness perceptions of their employees and implement them. These will make the jobs more meaningful and thus spur active EE. Since public secondary schools are run by the government, the government should equally identify and implement such drivers of work meaningfulness. Working on important projects, having a positive impact, and feeling valued are all hallmarks of meaningful work. Having a meaningful connection to what we're doing and why we're doing it is crucial for boosting our motivation and efficiency. The search for fulfilling employment is not without its obstacles, though. Inadequate resources can cause us to lose focus on our primary tasks while we search for what we need to move forward. Furthermore, unfavorable responses to novel concepts have the potential to halt innovations and deter effort. Furthermore, these may have a negative impact on EE. Thus, in order to create a setting where meaningful work flourishes, it is necessary to embrace self-determination, which enables employees to freely experiment and explore without fear. When employees are supported in addressing challenging tasks and given the flexibility to develop, it can lead to significant breakthroughs.

Hence, teachers must be encouraged to provide one another with emotional support and work to form strong ties. This could be accomplished by creating an environment that is welcoming and supportive, which not only helps employees feel more at home but also boosts morale and productivity; offering workers the emotional support they need to form bonds; and expressing gratitude for their efforts. In order to build a workplace where each individual feels appreciated and inspired, these factors are essential for driving meaningful work. It is possible to greatly increase productivity and innovation in the workplace by cultivating a feeling of purpose and promoting an environment of mutual support and safety. As individuals and as a team, employees can reach their full potential when they engage on meaningful works. Ensuring that every employee could acquire satisfaction and fulfillment from their job demands a thorough understanding of the obstacles to and facilitators of meaningful work. This is what fosters employee engagement.

Organisational research has devoted significant attention to the correlation between employee engagement and meaningful work. There is a strong positive correlation between the two, as evidenced by a multitude of empirical studies. This suggests that employees who perceive their work as meaningful are more likely to demonstrate elevated levels of engagement. Insights into the reasons why meaningful work promotes engagement and its implications for organisational practices are provided in this discussion, which synthesizes findings from recent studies.

As Liao et al. (2023) indicated, employees who perceive their work as meaningful report higher levels of motivation and job satisfaction. Increased intrinsic motivation and a stronger sense of purpose is an offshoot of perceived work meaningfulness that is consistent with the personal values and objectives of employees. This intrinsic motivation is a critical factor in the development of engagement, as employees are more inclined to devote their energy and enthusiasm to tasks that they consider to be valuable and consistent with their personal values. Employees who regard their work as significant are inclined to demonstrate a greater emotional investment in their positions. This emotional connection improves their engagement by increasing their enthusiasm, commitment, and involvement in their responsibilities (Saks, 2023). The emotional attachment of employees to their

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employment is further reinforced by the sense of personal accomplishment and recognition that meaningful work fosters. Gallup (2023) has found that meaningful work is significantly correlated with reduced attrition intentions and increased organisational commitment. Employees who perceive their work as significant are more inclined to remain with their organisation, as they experience personal fulfilment and a sense of alignment with their professional goals. This increased retention rate contributes to organisational stability and mitigates the expenses associated with employee turnover.

These results indicate that organisations should prioritise the improvement of the significance of their work in order to increase employee engagement. This can be accomplished by ensuring that employees comprehend the influence of their work on organisational objectives, providing opportunities for skill development, and aligning job roles with employees' values. Organisations that effectively establish a meaningful work environment are likely to experience enhanced employee retention, improved performance, and increased engagement.

The significance of creating work environments that are consistent with the values and aspirations of employees is emphasised by the positive and substantial correlation between meaningful work and employee engagement. Organisations can improve employee contentment, performance, and retention by prioritising meaningful work, thereby contributing to the overall success of the organisation. Recent empirical research studies had in line with the results of this study consistently indicated a positive and substantial correlation between employee engagement and meaningful work. The perception that one's work has purpose and contributes to greater objectives is a defining characteristic of meaningful work, which has a substantial impact on various aspects of employee engagement, such as vigour, dedication, and absorption. Psychological and motivational theories are the foundation of the concept of meaningful labour. In accordance with self-determination theory (Deci& Ryan, 2000), meaningful work is essential for the development of high levels of engagement, as it fulfils fundamental psychological requirements, including autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan &Deci, 2017). In a similar vein, job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) argues that intrinsic motivation is bolstered by occupations that are perceived as meaningful, thereby increasing engagement.

This also aligns with Wrzesniewski et al. (2023), who assert that perceptions of meaningful work have an impact on a variety of aspects of employee engagement. Additionally, Mauno et al. (2023) discovered a robust positive correlation between employee engagement and meaningful work. The research emphasises that healthcare professionals who perceive their work as meaningful are more inclined to demonstrate elevated levels of engagement, which has a beneficial effect on job satisfaction and patient care.

Hirschi et al. (2022) discovered that employees who perceive their work as meaningful exhibit higher levels of engagement, including increased vigour, dedication, and absorption. The research emphasises that meaningful work serves as a catalyst for engagement, resulting in favourable work outcomes in a variety of industries. Green et al. (2022) discovered that employee engagement is positively correlated with meaningful work, with engaged employees exhibiting higher levels of motivation, productivity, and job satisfaction. The study underscores the strategic significance of creating positions and responsibilities that instill a sense of significance and purpose in employees (Green et al., 2022).

The findings highlight the need of companies creating surroundings in which employees feel their work is important. This could be accomplished by ensuring that individual roles and responsibilities are in accordance with the broader organisational objectives and values, by establishing opportunities for employees to connect their work to a broader purpose or societal impact, and by designing jobs that incorporate elements of autonomy, skill variety, and significance to improve the perception of meaningful work. Therefore, businesses can greatly increase employee engagement, which in turn leads to higher performance, job satisfaction, and overall organisational success, by emphasizing meaningful work.

5.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the results of results of the study:

1. Heads of public secondary schools should enable their staff to develop a feeling of pride by making their jobs more meaning. This act will inspire vigour among teachers.
2. Meaningfulness was also found to be significantly related to employee dedication, hence, enhancing feelings of work meaningfulness would enhance dedication. The government should thus provide incentives for teachers that would add meaning for the job as this will in turn enhance dedication.
3. School administrators should cultivate in their staff feelings of meaningfulness by adding value to the work which will in turn promote absorption.

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