GYANBODH
An International Multidisciplinary Peer Reviewed Journal
ISSN:3048-9792
Volume: 3
Issue: 3
May - June: 2026

The Role of Emotion Regulation and Meaningful Work among Special Educators

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Abstract

In recent years, the psychological well-being of special educators has received increased attention due to their significant contribution in the lives of children with special needs. The present study therefore aimed to examine the role of emotion regulation strategies like cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression in meaningful work among special educators. The sample included 176 special educators working in different special and inclusive schools all over Goa. Data was collected using self-report measures like the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire and the Work and Meaning Inventory and further statistically analysed using statistical measures. Results showed that meaningful work positively related to cognitive reappraisal and negatively to expressive suppression. Further, no differences were found in the use of emotion regulation strategies and the experience of meaningful work across professional contexts, indicating its importance throughout work experiences within special education.

Keywords: Emotion regulation, cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, meaningful work, special educators

Introduction

Special educators play a crucial role in the educational journey of children with special needs which requires them to fit into various roles within their profession. As children with special needs require personal attention, special educators provide each child with individualized instruction by tailoring and adapting the teaching methods depending on their diverse educational needs (Russell, 2003). During this process, special educators face numerous challenges within the classroom, as children often display aggression, frustration and other behavioural and emotional problems, a combined effect of which leads to emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation and burnout (Chermiss, 1980). Therefore, psychological

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ISSN:3048-9792
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factors like emotion regulation and meaningful work act as important resources to help them cope with the countless demands of their profession.

Emotion regulation is a crucial skill that refers to an individual's ability to take control of, modify and manage the communication of emotions caused by different factors (Colombo et al., 2021). Among the most widely studied strategies of emotion regulation, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are the most common. Cognitive reappraisal, involves reinterpreting situations in adaptive ways that make them emotionally less impactful while, expressive suppression involves suppressing one's emotional reactions.

Such emotional competence contributes to experiencing one's work with a deeper purpose and meaning. This sense of purpose is often conceptualized to be meaningful work and it reflects an individual's perception of their work as significant, valuable, fulfilling and intrinsically motivating (Rosso et al., 2010). Helping professionals are empathetic in nature and prolonged empathic involvement may make it difficult for them to distinguish between the emotions of others and their own. Therefore, effective emotion regulation can help achieve beneficial work outcomes, which are aspects of meaningful work which facilitate experience of work that is aligned with one's life's values (Steger et al., 2012).

Review of Literature

Oplatka and Harush, (2024) conducted a study to track the emotion regulation skill development process among teachers and special educators in their initial career stage, and found that, teachers initially used emotion suppression to handle their emotions, which gradually shifted to using better and more adaptive emotion regulation strategies with time and professional experience.

Moè and Katz (2021) examined the influence of emotion regulation strategies in shaping the teaching styles among a sample of 290 teachers and the results showed that teachers' need satisfaction increased reappraisal, and it was associated with motivating teaching styles, while suppression was associated with demotivating styles and need frustration, indicating that the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies leads to a supportive classroom environment.

Jeon and Ardeleanu (2020) examined the direct and indirect associations between teachers-perceived work climate, emotion regulation and teacher-perceived stress and the results showed that teachers, who used a higher degree of reappraisal than suppression when dealing

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ISSN:3048-9792
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with the challenging behaviours of the children within the classroom, reported better perceived work climate.

Research Method

Objectives

- To examine the relation between emotion regulation and meaningful work.
- To assess the differences in emotion regulation and meaningful work based on instructional domains and years of teaching experience.

Hypotheses

Ha1: There will be a significant positive relationship between cognitive reappraisal and meaningful work.

Ha2: There will be a significant negative relationship between expressive suppression and meaningful work.

Ha3: There will be a significant difference in cognitive reappraisal based on instructional domains and years of teaching experience.

Ha4: There will be a significant difference in expressive suppression based on instructional domains and years of teaching experience.

Ha5: There will be a significant difference in meaningful work based on instructional domains and years of teaching experience.

Variables

Emotion Regulation: Cognitive Reappraisal and Expressive Suppression

Meaningful Work

Tools

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

The ERQ was developed by Gross and John (2003) to measure the tendency of individuals to regulate their emotions using strategies like cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. The EQR demonstrates good internal consistency with Cronbach's coefficients ranging from 0.89 – 0.90 for cognitive reappraisal and 0.76 – 0.80 for expressive suppression, and a test-retest reliability of 0.69.

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Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI)

The WAMI was developed by Steger et al. (2012) to measure an individual's experience of meaningful work. The WAMI shows good internal consistency with a Cronbach's coefficient of 0.93. Moreover it has good construct validity as well as convergent validity.

Sample

The study consisted a total of 176 special educators from various special schools and inclusive schools from all over Goa. Special educators, who were above the age of 24 years and with at least one year of teaching experience, were selected for the study.

Data Collection and Processing.

After obtaining informed consent from the special educators, from various educational institutions, a demographic information sheet, and the self-report questionnaires were administered physically and also via Google Forms for the purpose of data collection. Data was further statistically analyzed in SPSS, employing Pearson product-moment correlation and the Two-Way ANOVA.

Results and Discussion

Ha1: There will be a significant positive relationship between cognitive reappraisal and meaningful work.

Table 1. Correlation between cognitive reappraisal and meaningful work among special educators (N=176)

Variables	Meaningful Work
Cognitive Reappraisal	**.33***

The Pearson's product-moment correlation revealed a statistically significant weak positive correlation, r (174) = .33, p < .001 between cognitive reappraisal and meaningful work. Similar results were found in a study Oh (2026) among a sample of working individuals.

A number of challenges were reported by the special educators of the present study. However, despite the challenges, special educators reframe them and report that they feel joy even in the smallest improvements of their students, further, making their work experience meaningful.

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Ha2: There will be a significant negative relationship between expressive suppression and meaningful work.

Table 2. Correlation between expressive suppression and meaningful work among special educators (N=176).

Variables	Meaningful Work
Expressive Suppression	**-.097**

The results of the correlation analysis revealed a very weak non-significant negative correlation, r (174) = -.097, p = .059, between expressive suppression and meaningful work. Previous studies provide indirect support for these findings. Yeung and Wong (2020) found that expressive suppression was related to higher daily work-related stress and reduced job satisfaction among employees; and also linked with reduced work engagement (Ma, 2023). Within the special educational setting, the work demands and the various challenges require educators to manage their emotional responses. In such situations, they may hide their feelings of frustration and disappointment, so as to maintain a supportive classroom environment, further negatively influencing the experience of meaningful work.

Ha3: There will be a significant difference in cognitive reappraisal based on instructional domains and years of teaching experience.

Table 3. Inferential statistics of cognitive reappraisal for instructional domains and years of teaching experience among special educators (N=176)

Sources of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	*F*	Sig
Instructional Domain (A)	.15	(1, 170)	.15	.005	.942
Years of Teaching Experience (B)	30.90	(2, 170)	15.45	.53	.588
Interaction (AB)	115.24	(2, 170)	57.62	1.98	.140

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A two-way ANOVA was computed to statistically analyze the differences and the findings revealed no statistically significant differences in the use of cognitive reappraisal across the instructional domains, F (1, 170) = .005, p = .942, years of teaching experience, F (2, 170) = .53, p = .588, as well as no significant interaction between instructional domains and years of teaching experience, F (2, 170) = 1.98, p = .140.

Consistent with these findings Hernandez-Gonzalez et al. (2022) found that the use of cognitive reappraisal did not show significant differences among teachers based on their teaching experience. As special educators are faced with various challenges related to the difficulties of the children, they reframe them in more constructive ways to regulate their emotional reactions. The consistent need to handle the children likely reinforces its use as a coping mechanism regardless of the professional contexts as it also helps to maintain a supportive classroom environment

Ha4: There will be a significant difference in expressive suppression based on instructional domains and years of teaching experience.

Table 4. Inferential statistics of expressive suppression for instructional domains and years of teaching experience among special educators (N=176)

Sources of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	*F*	Sig
Instructional Domain (A)	2.32	(1, 170)	2.32	.10	.750
Years of Teaching Experience (B)	55.96	(2, 170)	27.98	1.23	.295
Interaction (AB)	28.08	(2, 170)	14.04	.61	.540

To statistically determine the differences a two-way ANOVA was computed and the findings revealed no significant difference, in the use of expressive suppression across instructional domains, F (1, 170) = .10, p = .750, years of teaching experience, F (2, 170) = 1.23, p = .295, as well as no significant interaction between instructional domains and years of teaching experience, F (2, 170) = .61, p = .540.

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Research by Donker et al. (2020) and Doyle et al. (2024) has shown similar findings. Therefore, special educators may suppress their emotions when dealing with the children in the classrooms and use similar strategies throughout various professional contexts.

Ha5: There will be a significant difference in meaningful work based on instructional domains and years of teaching experience.

Table 5. Inferential statistics of meaningful work for instructional domains and years of teaching experience among special educators.

Sources of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	*F*	Sig
Instructional Domain (A)	47.29	(1, 170)	47.29	2.56	.111
Years of Teaching Experience (B)	3.99	(2, 170)	1.99	.10	.897
Interaction (AB)	33.14	(2, 170)	16.57	.89	.409

The results of a two-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference, indicating the stability of meaningful work across instructional domains, F (1, 170) = 2.56, p = .111, years of teaching experience, F (2, 170) = .10, p = .897, as well as no significant interaction between instructional domains and years of teaching experience, F (2, 170) = .89, p = .409.

However, previous research by Williams et al. (2022) reported modest differences in meaningful work among workers in different roles. The purpose-driven nature of special education contributes a sense of commitment among special educators towards supporting their students that may necessitate them to view their job as meaningful.

Conclusion

Among special educators, cognitive reappraisal had a weak, but a significant positive relationship with meaningful work while, expressive suppression showed a non-significant, very weak negative relationship. No significant differences were found in the special educators' use of the emotion regulation strategies and meaningful work across instructional domains as well as years of teaching experience suggesting the need for these psychological resources within the profession.

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Limitations

- Sample of the study was taken from a single state and this can limit the generalizability of the findings.
- Use of self-report measures can introduce a social desirability bias,
- Quantitative nature of the study may provide limited insight.

Implications

- The findings emphasize the importance of introducing interventions, workshops and skill-enhancement training, to promote adaptive ways of managing emotions in the work setting.
- These interventions can be helpful to special educators at all stages of their careers, as a necessity of their profession.

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ISSN:3048-9792
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