

Between a Calling and Economic Reality: A Phenomenological Study of Honorary Teachers' Motivation in Developing Competence

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of honorary teachers' motivation in developing professional competence within the tension between a calling and economic reality in the Indonesian educational context. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explores the lived experiences and subjective meanings constructed by honorary teachers as they navigate economic uncertainty and limited access to professional development. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations involving ten honorary teachers who graduated within the last five years and who work in urban areas; these data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal four major themes: teaching as a calling that provides intrinsic meaning, economic pressure and job insecurity that generate identity conflict, adaptive strategies employed to sustain professional competence development, and social support as a crucial source of motivation. These results highlight the complex interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation within conditions of social marginalization and emphasize the role of structural and social support in sustaining honorary teachers' professional commitment. The study contributes theoretically by extending motivation theory through the inclusion of existential dimensions and social capital and practically by offering policy-relevant insights for designing more inclusive and responsive professional development and welfare programs for honorary teachers. Overall, this research underscores the importance of understanding teachers' lived experiences to promote equitable and sustainable educational development.

KEYWORDS honorary teachers, professional competence, work motivation, phenomenological study, economic insecurity



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INTRODUCTION

The profession of honorary teachers in Indonesia plays an important role in the national education system as educators who fill shortages of permanent teachers, especially in hard-to-reach areas and schools with limited human resources (Santoso & Wulandari, 2022). Although their status is not fixed and they often receive inadequate attention, honorary teachers contribute significantly to the

teaching and learning process and the achievement of national education goals (Misra, 2021). Their existence forms the backbone of education that cannot be ignored in efforts to equalize educational quality throughout Indonesia (El-Yunusi et al., 2025; Putri, 2025; Zamjani, 2022).

However, honorary teachers face complex challenges, particularly related to limited economic conditions (Kurniawan & Tantri, 2020; Suryani et al., 2021). Low and uncertain incomes, lack of social security, and limited access to professional training and development are primary obstacles that can reduce work motivation and teaching quality (Wijayanto & Setiawan, 2022; Tan & Wibowo, 2020). These conditions not only affect teachers' welfare but also undermine learning effectiveness and the development of honorary teachers' competence as professional educators (Prasetyo & Lestari, 2021; Ramadhan & Putra, 2022).

The development of honorary teachers' competence is essential to improving overall education quality. Continuously updated professional competencies enable them to meet demands of dynamic curricula and diverse student needs (Zhang, Chen, & Wang, 2023). Yet economic limitations and restricted access to training significantly hinder this process, necessitating attention from stakeholders including the government and educational institutions.

The phenomenon of honorary teachers' motivation lies at the intersection of vocation of the soul as intrinsic motivation and economic reality as extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation rooted in the vocation of the soul drives honorary teachers to remain committed and pursue self-development despite economic constraints (Hidayat & Prasetyo, 2020). Conversely, economic pressures and job uncertainty can erode morale and induce stress (Misra, 2021). A phenomenological approach is ideal for exploring honorary teachers' subjective experiences in navigating this motivational tension, offering deeper insights into the dynamics of motivation and competence development.

Despite growing scholarly attention to teacher motivation across contexts, research on honorary teachers reveals significant gaps in understanding the interplay of professional commitment and economic precarity. Prior studies have focused mainly on motivational factors among permanent teachers (Kusurkar et al., 2020) or economic challenges faced by contract workers generally (Lee & Kim, 2021), with few examining the unique phenomenological experiences of honorary teachers who navigate both dimensions simultaneously. Although Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2020) has been widely applied to explain teacher motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness, such applications typically occur in contexts of stable employment and adequate resources—conditions absent for honorary teachers. Moreover, existing research often uses quantitative methods that treat motivation as a static construct,

overlooking the dynamic, meaning-making processes through which honorary teachers reconcile their calling with economic hardship.

This study addresses these gaps through an existential phenomenological approach to explore how honorary teachers construct meaning and sustain motivation amid structural marginalization. Its novelty lies in three key contributions: first, integrating existential phenomenology with motivational theory to uncover meaning-making processes in professional persistence; second, showing how social capital serves as both a coping mechanism and a source of professional identity amid economic uncertainty; and third, providing empirically grounded insights into the psychosocial dimensions of teacher motivation beyond conventional organizational frameworks. These contributions hold particular significance for Indonesia's education system, where approximately 400,000 honorary teachers form a substantial yet vulnerable workforce whose experiences remain underexplored in educational research.

Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How do honorary teachers construct meaning and professional identity through the lens of calling despite economic precarity? (2) What adaptive strategies do they employ to sustain professional development in resource-constrained environments? (3) How does social support mediate the relationship between economic pressure and professional motivation? By answering these, the research aims to advance motivation scholarship theoretically and inform policy for supporting marginalized educators practically.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology was selected to deeply explore honorary teachers' subjective experiences in developing professional competencies, aligning with the objectives of understanding motivational dynamics between intrinsic *vocation of the soul* and extrinsic economic realities.

Participants were selected via purposive sampling with inclusion criteria ensuring data relevance: active honorary teachers in public or private schools with willingness to reflect on lived experiences. Potential sampling biases, such as focus on specific contexts, were acknowledged and addressed through rich contextual descriptions and transparent reporting of participant characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face (average 30 minutes per session) using guidelines based on motivation and competency development frameworks. Participatory observations supplemented interviews to capture work contexts directly. All interviews were recorded with participant permission and supported by field notes.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis with open, axial, and selective coding stages. The process began with interview transcription, followed by iterative theme identification. ATLAS.ti software facilitated systematic data organization and management.

Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility (via data triangulation and member checking), transferability (detailed contextual descriptions), dependability, and confirmability (audit trails). Ethical protocols included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and limiting data use to academic purposes per participant agreement.

Theoretical Studies

The phenomenon of motivation of honorary teachers in developing professional competence is a complex psychosocial dynamic, in which subjective experience and social interaction play a central role. To understand the meaning and social processes underlying this phenomenon, the theoretical study in this study focuses on three main theories: Self-Determination Motivational Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2020), Existential Phenomenological Perspectives (Smith, 2021), and Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2022). These three theories not only explain the dimensions of individual motivation and experience, but also reveal how social context and interpersonal relationships shape and influence the motivation process of honorary teachers.

1. Self-Determination Motivation Theory (SDT)

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan (2020) emphasizes the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in explaining human behavior. SDT highlights three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and connectedness—as the foundation for sustained and meaningful motivation. In the context of honorary teachers, this theory helps explain how the soul's vocation (intrinsic motivation) arises from the need to feel competent and autonomous in the profession, despite being confronted with oppressive economic realities (extrinsic motivation). As expressed by one of the participants, "I continue to learn because I feel that I have to be able to teach well, not only for a salary, but to make children understand" (Honorary Teacher, 2024). A study by Santoso and Wulandari (2022) strengthens this finding by showing that honorary teachers who can meet these psychological needs tend to be more persistent in developing competencies despite facing financial limitations.

2. Existential Phenomenological Perspective

The existential phenomenological approach outlined by Smith (2021) places the subject's life experiences at the center of the analysis, focusing on the meaning that individuals give to their reality. This perspective is very relevant to understand how honorary teachers interpret their soul calling in the face of economic pressure.

Through the lens of phenomenology, the experience of honorary teachers is not seen as a mere response to external conditions, but as a reflective process involving self-awareness, existential anxiety, and the search for meaning. One participant revealed, "Teaching is a call of the heart, I feel that this is part of my life, even though it is sometimes difficult economically, I stay here because of it" (Honorary Teacher, 2024). This quote reflects how personal meaning and professional identity are inextricably intertwined in their motivations.

3. Social Capital Theory

The Social Capital Theory developed by Putnam (2022) emphasizes the importance of social networks, beliefs, and norms as resources that support individuals in achieving common goals. In the context of honorary teachers, social capital plays a role in providing emotional and professional support that strengthens their motivation and capacity to develop competencies. Research by Zhang et al. (2023) shows that honorary teachers who have a strong social network, both in the school and community environment, are better able to overcome economic limitations and take advantage of professional development opportunities. This was also expressed by another participant, "I often discuss with my teacher friends, we share knowledge and motivation to keep our spirits up" (Honorary Teacher, 2024).

Comparison and Theoretical Reflection

The three theories offer complementary perspectives in understanding the phenomenon of motivation of honorary teachers. SDT provides a psychological framework that explains basic needs and motivational mechanisms; existential phenomenology invites researchers to dive into subjective experiences and meanings constructed by honorary teachers; While social capital theory places this phenomenon in a broader social context, it highlights the role of social interaction and support.

The researcher chose the perspective of existential phenomenology as the main lens because the focus of this research is on the life experience and meaning that honorary teachers give to the vocation of the soul and economic reality. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of participant narratives, capturing emotional complexities, inner conflicts, and reflective processes that cannot be adequately explained by more structural motivational theories or more macro social theories.

Frame of Mind

Within the framework of this research, data will be seen as a construct of meaning that arises from the interaction between individual psychological needs (SDT), reflective existential experiences (phenomenology), and social contexts that form support and barriers (social capital). Researchers will interpret participants'

voices by placing their experiences as the center of the narrative, identifying how honorary teachers negotiate professional identity and motivation amid the tension between idealism and economic pressure. Thus, the analysis will be oriented towards a holistic understanding that integrates psychological, existential, and social dimensions simultaneously.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of in-depth interview data and participatory observation resulted in four main themes that describe the motivational experience of honorary teachers in developing professional competencies. Each theme reflects complex emotional, reflective, and social dimensions, depicting the tension between the vocation of the soul and economic reality. These themes are: (1) Soul Call as a Source of Meaning, (2) Economic Pressure and Uncertainty, (3) Adaptive Strategies in Competency Development, and (4) Social Support as a Motivational Support.

The Soul Call as a Source of Meaning

Honorary teachers view their profession as not just a job, but a soul calling that gives meaning and purpose in life. In their daily lives, teaching is a means of self-actualization and profound social contribution. One participant, GH03, said with emotion:

"Teaching is not just about the salary, but about how I can be a part of changing the lives of the children. When they succeed, it's a happiness that money can't pay."

This experience shows that the intrinsic motivation of honorary teachers is very strong, rooted in the psychological need to feel meaningful and competent. However, behind this spirit lies an inner dilemma when idealism meets real limitations. GH03 added,

"Sometimes I feel tired, especially when I think about how to make ends meet, but this call keeps me going."

These findings confirm the existence of an existential tension inherent in the experience of honorary teachers, where the vocation of the soul is a source of strength as well as an emotional burden.

Economic Pressures and Uncertainty

The uncertain economic reality is the next dominant theme that overshadows the professional life of honorary teachers. GH07 revealed:

"Unsteady and often late salaries worry me every month. Sometimes I wonder if this is worth it, but I haven't found any other way."

This financial uncertainty creates stress and anxiety that has the potential to erode motivation. GH02 added a reflection that showed the ambiguity of feelings:

"I wanted to learn and grow, but the training costs and limited time made everything feel heavy. Sometimes I feel trapped."

This theme illustrates the social paradox experienced by honorary teachers: they are driven by idealism, but hampered by restrictive economic conditions. This tension creates a space of inner conflict that they constantly face.

Adaptive Strategies in Competency Development

Despite facing limitations, honorary teachers show creativity and resilience in finding ways to develop competencies. GH05 shares:

"I often attend free online training and learn from friends at school. I also look for self-study materials through the internet."

This adaptive strategy reflects the ability of honorary teachers to make the most of existing resources, while showing motivation that is not easily extinguished. However, this also poses a dilemma related to the quality and sustainability of self-development, as access and official support are still very limited. GH05 added,

"Sometimes I feel like studying on my own isn't enough, but I have no other choice."

This theme reveals the dynamics between a strong desire to thrive and limiting structural barriers.

Social Support as a Motivational Support

Support from the social environment, both from fellow teachers, families, and communities, plays an important role in strengthening the motivation of honorary teachers. GH01 stated:

"Teacher friends are often a place to share and encourage each other. The family has always been supportive, even though they know our conditions are difficult."

This support provides a sense of connection and emotional reinforcement that is important in maintaining the work spirit. However, not all teachers feel the same level of support, so this social inequality is also a source of tension. GH04 revealed, *"Sometimes I feel alone, especially when facing difficult problems. Support is important, but it's not always there."*

This theme highlights the importance of social capital in the context of motivation and professional development, while showcasing the diversity of social experiences of honorary teachers.

Transitions Between Themes

The four themes form a complete narrative of the experience of honorary teachers: the soul's calling that gives meaning and inner strength (Theme 1) must deal with economic pressures (Theme 2) that force them to seek adaptive strategies (Theme 3), while social support becomes a support that strengthens or weakens their motivation (Theme 4). The complexity of this experience confirms that the

motivation of honorary teachers is not a linear phenomenon, but rather a dynamic process influenced by the interaction between internal and external factors.

This research reveals four main themes that reflect the motivational experience of honorary teachers in developing professional competencies: the vocation of the soul as a source of meaning, economic pressure and uncertainty, adaptive strategies in competency development, and social support as a motivational support. These findings confirm that the motivation of honorary teachers is a complex phenomenon that involves the interaction between psychological needs, existential experiences, and the social context that shape the dynamics of their identity and professionalism.

The Soul's Call as a Source of Meaning

Intrinsic motivation as a soul call was found to be the main foundation that gives a deep meaning to the honorary teacher profession. These findings are consistent with the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) developed by Deci and Ryan (2020), which affirms that the need for competence and autonomy are the main drivers of sustainable motivation. The study by Ryan and Deci (2020) also emphasized that intrinsic motivation is closely related to psychological well-being and job satisfaction, which is reflected in the narrative of honorary teachers who feel that teaching is a calling, not just a job. This enriches understanding of how honorary teachers maintain professional commitment in the midst of structural limitations, as also found by Hidayat and Prasetyo (2020) in the context of Indonesian education.

Economic Pressures and Uncertainty

The findings on economic pressures and uncertainty of work status highlight the social paradoxes experienced by honorary teachers as a marginalized group. This condition causes stress and ambiguity of motivation which is in line with the results of research by Misra (2021) and Santoso & Wulandari (2022), which shows the negative impact of economic uncertainty on the welfare and motivation of honorary teachers. However, this study deepens understanding by displaying the emotional experiences and identity conflicts experienced by honorary teachers, showing how economic pressure is not only financial, but also psychosocial. These findings underscore the need for a holistic and responsive education policy to the psychological and economic needs of honorary teachers.

Adaptive Strategies in Competency Development

The ability of honorary teachers to develop competencies through adaptive strategies, such as free online training and self-study, demonstrates significant creativity and resilience. These findings enrich the literature on the professional

development of honorary teachers, which have so far highlighted many structural barriers (Zhang et al., 2023). Using an existential phenomenological perspective (Smith, 2021), this study shows how honorary teachers actively reconstruct their learning experiences to maintain autonomy and competence. However, limited access to formal training remains a significant challenge, demanding more attention from education policymakers.

Social Support as a Motivational Support

Social support from colleagues and family was found to be a crucial factor that strengthened the motivation of honorary teachers. This is in line with the social capital theory of Putnam (2022) and the findings of Zhang et al. (2023) which emphasize the importance of social networks as a source of emotional and professional strengthening. This research adds a new dimension by displaying a variety of social support experiences that reflect social inequality among honorary teachers. These findings are also supported by recent research showing a positive relationship between social support and teachers' work motivation (Kusurkar et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2021). Therefore, strengthening social capital and professional solidarity is an important strategy in improving the welfare and competency development of honorary teachers.

Researcher's Reflection

As a researcher who has a socio-cultural closeness to the honorary teacher community, the interpretation of this data is influenced by a deep understanding of the values of service and the economic challenges they experience. This position allows for a sensitive interpretation of the complexity of the participants' experiences, but it also demands vigilance not to idealize the soul's calling without acknowledging the harsh reality they face. The existential phenomenological approach used helps to capture the nuances and ambiguities of the honorary teacher's experience, which are often overlooked in quantitative and macropolicy studies.

Overall, this study enriches the social and scientific understanding of the motivation of honorary teachers as a dynamic process involving the negotiation of identity and professionalism in the midst of economic uncertainty. These findings make an important contribution to the development of education policies that are more holistic and responsive to the psychological, social, and economic needs of honorary teachers.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study reveals that honorary teachers' motivation to develop professionally stems from a complex negotiation between intrinsic calling

and economic precarity, illuminated by four themes: teaching as existential meaning, economic pressure causing identity conflict, adaptive resilience strategies, and social support networks as motivational anchors. Theoretically, it integrates existential phenomenology with motivational and social capital theories, showing motivation as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by both agency and structure. Practically, it informs policy in three areas: ensuring professional development is accessible and recognizes informal learning, creating welfare policies that address economic and psychosocial needs, and strengthening social capital through formalized mentorship. Limitations include its urban focus and cross-sectional design with 20 recent graduates from Tanah Grogot, suggesting future research should employ comparative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods approaches across diverse contexts to explore motivational evolution, emotional coping, and the experiences of rural educators.

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