

The Cost of Being Present: A Theoretical Framework of Teachers' Presenteeism and Well-Being in Malaysia Using COR Theory

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ABSTRACT

Teacher well-being is closely connected with teaching quality, student outcomes and the overall sustainability of education systems. One threat to that well-being is presenteeism, or attending work despite physical or psychological illness. The issue may be especially relevant in Malaysia, where collectivist values, hierarchical school structures and performance expectations can encourage teachers to place professional duties ahead of their health. This conceptual paper develops a framework, grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, to explain why Malaysian teachers engage in presenteeism and how the behaviour may affect their well-being. The paper draws together established research on teacher well-being, presenteeism, workplace culture and resource loss, and interprets these studies within the Malaysian educational context. The framework presents presenteeism as an attempt to protect valued resources, including professional identity, reputation, student progress and job security. Although working while unwell may reduce an immediate fear of resource loss, repeated presenteeism can consume the energy and emotional capacity needed for effective work and recovery. Over time, this may create a resource loss spiral involving stress, exhaustion, burnout and declining well-being. Leadership support, psychologically safe sick-leave practices, workplace culture and adequate opportunities for recovery may interrupt this process, whereas attendance-focused expectations and limited staffing support may intensify it. The framework extends COR theory into an under-researched cultural and occupational setting and reframes presenteeism as a response to systemic pressure rather than simply an individual choice. It offers practical direction for school leaders and policymakers seeking to create healthier, more sustainable working conditions for Malaysian teachers.

Keywords: teacher well-being, presenteeism, Conservation of Resources Theory, Malaysian education, workplace culture

INTRODUCTION

Teacher well-being has received growing attention because of its close connection with student outcomes, teaching quality and the long-term sustainability of education systems (Collie et al., 2015; Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Less visible, but no less important, is presenteeism: attending work despite being physically or psychologically unwell. In schools, and particularly in developing settings such as Malaysia, teachers may put professional duties before their own health. Doing so repeatedly can take an emotional, physical and cognitive toll (Johns, 2010).

Unlike absenteeism, presenteeism is difficult to observe and measure. It can also be reinforced by the culture of a workplace. Malaysian teachers operate in a setting shaped by collectivist values, respect for hierarchy and uneven support for mental health. They may therefore attend work while unwell because they feel guilty about burdening colleagues, believe that absence is socially unacceptable, or fear professional consequences (Hashim & Dorloh, 2017; Yusof et al., 2020). Over time, this pattern may harm teachers' health, weaken classroom performance and engagement, and contribute to decisions to leave the profession.

Despite these consequences, relatively little is known about the processes that sustain teacher presenteeism in Malaysia. Existing studies have tended to measure its prevalence or outcomes, while paying less attention to the

psychological calculations and workplace pressures behind it. This conceptual paper applies Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) to examine presenteeism as a form of resource management under stress. The framework links its likely antecedents with the mechanisms through which it develops and its consequences for teacher well-being.

The paper argues that teachers may work while ill to protect resources they value, such as job security, professional reputation and a sense of themselves as dependable educators. Being present may ease immediate concerns, but the reassurance can be short-lived. If the behaviour continues without adequate recovery, it may begin a cycle of resource depletion that gradually damages well-being. Leadership support, workplace culture and access to recovery can interrupt this cycle or make it worse.

Placing this COR-based model within Malaysian education adds a cultural and institutional perspective to the wider literature on presenteeism. It also has practical relevance. Recognising the hidden cost of constant presence can help policymakers, school leaders and those responsible for staff well-being create conditions in which teachers can recover without feeling that they have failed their colleagues or students.

Teachers' Well-Being: A Critical Concern

Teacher well-being is widely regarded as necessary for positive and sustainable educational outcomes. It covers emotional and psychological health, physical well-being, job satisfaction and a workable balance between professional and personal life (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). Research has consistently linked it with student achievement, teacher retention and instructional quality (Collie et al., 2015).

In Malaysia, burnout, work-related stress and declining job satisfaction among teachers have become increasingly visible concerns (Ibrahim & Ghavifekr, 2019). Heavy workloads, administrative demands and limited professional autonomy often contribute to these problems. Presenteeism adds another layer: teachers continue working when illness would otherwise justify rest or leave. When this becomes a regular pattern, it may impair mental health, emotional regulation and sustained engagement with teaching (Kinman & Wray, 2018).

Theoretical Lens: Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Conservation of Resources Theory offers a useful way to understand why presenteeism occurs and how it may affect well-being (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). COR theory proposes that people try to obtain, retain and protect resources they value, including time, energy, health, emotional stability and social support. Stress arises when these resources are lost, threatened or invested without a sufficient return. Working through illness consumes resources that are already weakened; without recovery, the result may be emotional exhaustion, burnout or withdrawal from work.

For teachers, the theory helps explain why staying at work can appear safer than taking leave. A Malaysian teacher may worry that absence will damage a hard-earned reputation, interrupt students' progress or place employment security at risk. In some schools, limited cover arrangements and weak support for recovery make these concerns more difficult to manage.

COR research also describes resource loss spirals, in which an initial loss makes people increasingly vulnerable to further losses (Bakker et al., 2014). An unwell teacher who continues working may use the energy needed for recovery, leaving fewer resources to meet the next day's demands. That reduced capacity may then produce more stress and further presenteeism. Although COR theory is increasingly used in educational research, few frameworks have considered how Malaysian cultural expectations and school systems influence this process. That omission matters both theoretically and practically.

The Malaysian Educational Context: Cultural and Systemic Influences

Teacher presenteeism in Malaysia cannot be separated from its cultural setting. Collectivism, respect for authority and a strong sense of professional responsibility may shape how teachers interpret absence and commitment (Hashim & Dorloh, 2017). Performance-based appraisal and relatively rigid institutional

procedures can reinforce these expectations. Together, they may create a climate in which being physically present is treated as evidence of dedication, even when a teacher's health suggests that rest is needed.

Practical constraints within the education system add to this pressure. Qualified substitute teachers may be difficult to secure, access to mental health support remains uneven, and teacher well-being does not always receive sustained policy attention. Although occupational health is becoming more visible in Malaysian education, research on the psychological cost of working while ill is still limited. As a result, both teachers' lived experiences and the structural conditions behind unhealthy attendance patterns remain poorly understood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL MODEL

At the centre of COR theory is a simple proposition: people seek to build and protect resources that matter to them (Hobfoll, 1989). These resources may be personal, such as energy and confidence; social, such as support from colleagues and leaders; or material, such as income and time. Stress occurs when valued resources are threatened, lost or not restored after sustained effort.

This process can move in either direction. Resource loss spirals occur when an early loss—for example, the energy spent working through illness—reduces a person's capacity to prevent further losses. Without time or support to recover, burnout and professional disengagement become more likely. Resource gains can also accumulate. Supportive leadership, adequate rest and practical assistance may strengthen resilience and improve well-being.

From this perspective, Malaysian teachers may attend work while ill to avoid an immediate loss. They may be trying to protect their reputation, meet professional obligations or prevent an unfavourable evaluation. Yet a strategy that seems sensible in the short term can become costly when repeated. Habitual presenteeism draws on limited physical and psychological resources, eventually undermining health and job satisfaction.

Conceptual Model: Applying COR Theory to Teachers' Presenteeism and Well-Being in Malaysia

The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 uses COR theory to show how contextual, organisational and individual conditions may lead to presenteeism and, in turn, influence teacher well-being.

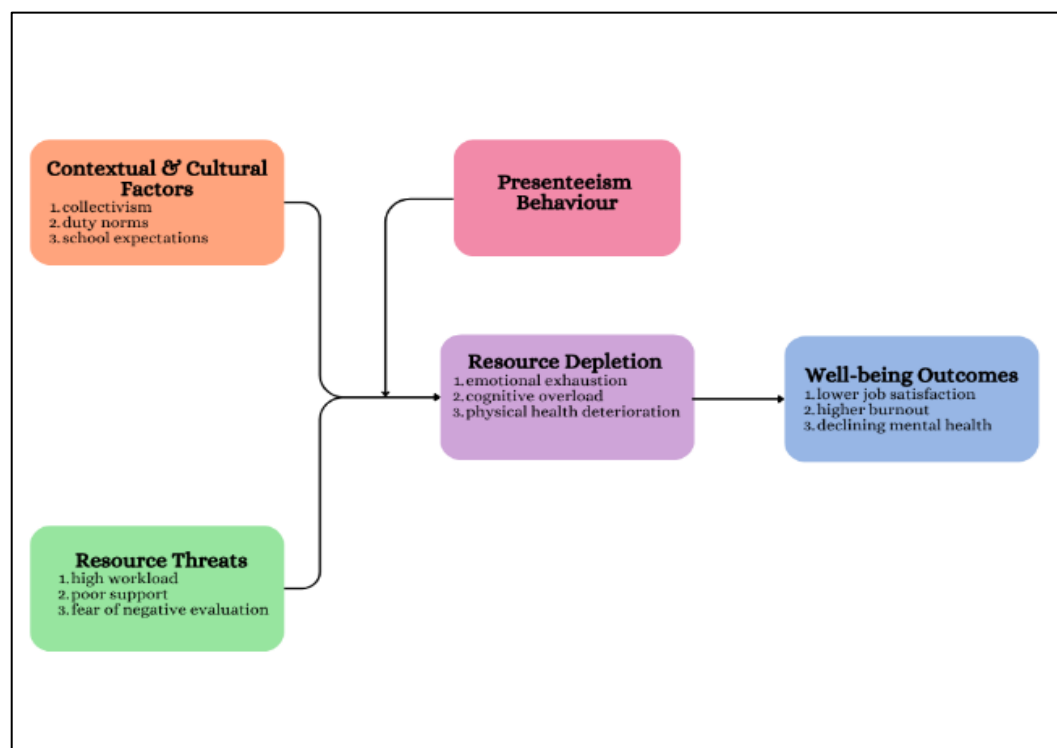


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Teachers' Presenteeism and Well-Being in Malaysia Using COR Theory

Explanation of Key Components

Contextual and Cultural Influences

Malaysian teachers work within a cultural environment that often values respect for hierarchy, loyalty to the group and moral responsibility. These collectivist expectations can increase the social and professional pressure to avoid absence during illness (Hashim & Dorloh, 2017; Hofstede, 2011). Over time, teachers may internalise the belief that taking leave is unacceptable or that it reflects poorly on their commitment (Yusof et al., 2020).

Resource Threats

COR theory holds that anticipated loss can be stressful even before any resource is actually lost (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Teachers may worry that absence will harm their reputation, lead to a negative appraisal or disrupt students' learning. Faced with these concerns, they may protect their professional standing by remaining at work, even at the expense of their health (Bakker et al., 2014; Kinman & Wray, 2018).

Presenteeism Behaviour

Presenteeism can initially look necessary, responsible or even admirable, especially where visibility is rewarded as evidence of commitment. The difficulty arises when occasional attendance during minor illness becomes habitual (Johns, 2010). Teachers may continue working through poor health to meet expectations, but the accumulated effects can gradually turn what seemed adaptive into a harmful pattern (Ferreira et al., 2019).

Resource Depletion and Well-Being

Chronic presenteeism can leave teachers emotionally exhausted, cognitively overloaded and physically depleted (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014). When recovery is limited, the loss of energy and well-being weakens their capacity to handle continuing professional demands, deepening the resource loss spiral (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Kinman & Wray, 2018). Lower job satisfaction, disengagement and mental health difficulties may follow.

Theoretical Contributions

The framework makes three main contributions. It connects presenteeism with teacher well-being through the explanatory logic of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Bakker et al., 2014). It also grounds that relationship in Malaysian education, where collectivist values, hierarchical norms and institutional pressures may shape decisions about working while ill (Hashim & Dorloh, 2017; Yusof et al., 2020). More importantly, it identifies conditions—such as leadership support, recovery opportunities and workplace culture—that may change the course of resource loss. Considering the psychological drivers alongside the structures that sustain them provides a fuller basis for school interventions and policy (Kinman & Wray, 2018; Acton & Glasgow, 2015).

Research Gaps and Further Theoretical Contribution

Presenteeism research has grown, but much of it comes from Western corporate and healthcare settings. Teachers, particularly those working in developing countries, have received far less attention (Johns, 2010). One study in Morocco reported that more than half of teachers had worked while unwell, yet comparable evidence remains scarce across Southeast Asia. Malaysia presents a distinctive setting. Collectivist expectations, hierarchical school structures and performance pressures may all encourage teachers to attend work regardless of their health, but the interaction between these factors has not been studied systematically. Malaysian research on teacher well-being has also tended to examine stress, burnout and job satisfaction separately, rather than considering how they may be connected with less visible behaviours such as presenteeism. The framework addresses this gap by treating presenteeism as a response to threatened resources. A teacher may remain at work to protect professional identity, job security or reputation and thereby avoid an immediate loss. Sustained attendance during illness, however, can create deeper depletion. This argument extends COR theory into an under-researched cultural and occupational setting. It also brings together behavioural and psychological aspects of teacher well-being, presenting presenteeism not simply as an individual choice or disciplinary problem but as

a potentially adaptive response to systemic pressure. This view opens useful directions for theory, empirical research and institutional action.

Practical Implications

The framework suggests that schools and education authorities should be careful about using attendance as a simple measure of commitment. Presenteeism may indicate hidden stress, fear of professional consequences or inadequate support rather than dedication. Sick-leave arrangements should be sufficiently flexible for teachers to recover, and access to mental health days or routine health support may be useful where resources allow. Culture is just as important as formal policy. Teachers need to know that taking legitimate leave will not damage their standing or shift an unmanageable burden to colleagues. School leaders can strengthen psychological safety by responding consistently and without stigma when staff disclose health concerns. Professional development may help teachers recognise early signs of fatigue, although self-care training should not substitute for manageable workloads or adequate staffing. Appraisal systems also deserve review if they inadvertently reward physical presence while overlooking teaching quality, creativity and student engagement. Peer mentoring, counselling and open conversations about mental health can add further support. Taken together, these measures may reduce avoidable resource loss and create more sustainable working conditions for teachers, with benefits that extend to their students.

Future Research Directions

As this is a conceptual paper, the proposed relationships require empirical testing. Survey research could examine whether particular resource threats—heavy workload, poor cover arrangements or fear of evaluation, for example—predict presenteeism among Malaysian teachers. Emotional and cognitive depletion may explain part of the relationship between working while ill and poorer well-being and should be tested as possible mediating mechanisms. Interviews and focus groups would add teachers' own accounts of the cultural expectations, emotions and practical constraints involved. Mixed-method studies could then connect these experiences with measurable patterns across schools. Comparative work would be valuable in identifying which parts of the model are specific to Malaysia and which extend to other national contexts. Intervention studies should also assess whether leadership development, improved recovery practices or mental health support can interrupt resource loss. Longitudinal designs are especially important because they can trace how occasional presenteeism develops over a school year or career and whether its consequences accumulate over time.

CONCLUSION

This paper uses COR theory to explain the cost of being present among Malaysian teachers. Cultural expectations and organisational pressures may lead teachers to work while unwell because doing so appears to protect resources such as reputation, professional identity and job security. What looks responsible in the moment, however, can gradually drain the energy and emotional capacity needed to teach and recover. Viewing presenteeism as a response to threatened resources, rather than as a personal failing, changes the practical question. Attention shifts from asking why teachers do not simply take leave to examining whether school policies, staffing arrangements and workplace norms make recovery possible. The framework addresses an important gap in the literature and offers a basis for more culturally grounded research and support. Protecting teacher well-being is not only a matter of care for employees; it is closely tied to teaching quality, student outcomes and the sustainability of Malaysian education.

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