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Meaningful Work and Employee Loyalty among Low-Paid Childcare Workers: A Phenomenological Study of Job Embeddedness in Indonesian Childcare Settings

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ABSTRACT

Employee loyalty among low-paid childcare workers presents a theoretical paradox, as conventional retention models primarily emphasize financial rewards and career opportunities as key determinants of organizational commitment. This study explores how childcare workers construct the meaning of their work and sustain employee loyalty despite limited financial compensation. Adopting a qualitative phenomenological design, the study involved in-depth interviews with 21 childcare workers who met two inclusion criteria: (1) having at least four years of professional experience and (2) residing within a 0–5 km radius of their workplace. The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, enabling the identification of recurring themes that reflected participants' lived experiences and interpretations of their work. The findings reveal that childcare workers perceive their work not merely as a source of income but as a meaningful vocation shaped by spiritual beliefs, a sense of calling, maternal identity, and social responsibility. Employee loyalty emerged through the interaction of meaningful work, job embeddedness, and non-financial rewards, including supportive workplace relationships, social recognition, work flexibility, and a family-like organizational climate. Structural conditions, such as limited alternative employment opportunities and age-related constraints, further reinforced participants' decisions to remain in their current positions. These findings demonstrate that employee retention in low-paid childcare settings is influenced by the interplay of intrinsic motivation, social embeddedness, and structural realities rather than by economic considerations alone. This study contributes theoretically by integrating meaningful work theory and job embeddedness theory within the context of informal childcare employment, extending current understanding of employee loyalty in care-based professions. Practically, the findings suggest that childcare providers and policymakers should strengthen non-financial retention strategies while simultaneously improving employment conditions and financial well-being to support the long-term sustainability of the childcare workforce.

Keywords: meaningful work, employee loyalty, job embeddedness, non-financial rewards, childcare workers.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing participation of women in the labor force has substantially expanded the demand for childcare services, positioning early childhood care as an essential component of contemporary family support systems. Beyond enabling parents to participate in paid employment, childcare services contribute significantly to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Consequently, childcare workers perform not only caregiving functions but also contribute to children's developmental readiness and family well-being. Despite the strategic importance of this profession, childcare work continues to receive relatively limited social recognition, modest financial compensation, and restricted career opportunities. This creates a persistent paradox within the care sector. Although childcare workers face considerable physical, emotional, and psychological demands, many remain committed to their organizations for extended periods (Kim & Reifel, 2010; Harper et al., 2025). Recent evidence further suggests that employee retention in care professions cannot be adequately explained by financial incentives alone, as work meaningfulness and workplace connectedness substantially strengthen employees' psychological attachment to their organizations (Lei, 2024).

Indonesia provides a particularly relevant context for examining this phenomenon. Over the past decade, Early Childhood Education (Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini [PAUD]) has experienced substantial institutional expansion as part of the national commitment to improving educational access and human capital development (Rahman, 2002). PAUD serves not only as a foundation for children's developmental outcomes but also as an important support mechanism for working families (Febriantini et al., 2025). According to national education statistics, approximately 215,730 PAUD institutions operated during the 2024/2025 academic year, serving approximately six to seven million children nationwide. The workforce consists predominantly of women, accounting for more than 95% of all educators and childcare workers, reflecting enduring cultural associations between caregiving and motherhood (Dianita, 2020; Maulana et al., 2020). Despite this rapid institutional expansion, improvements in employment quality and worker welfare, particularly in non-formal childcare services, have not progressed proportionately.

Table 1. Tren Units Childhood Education in Indonesia

Year	Early Childhood Education (units)	Students/ Children (million)	Childcare workers
2019	± 190.000	± 6,3	± 620.000
2020	± 195.000	± 6,4	± 630.000
2021	± 198.000	± 6,5	± 640.000
2022	± 200.000	± 6,6	± 650.000
2023	± 205.000	± 6,8	± 670.000
2024*	± 210.000	± 7	± 700.000

Sources: *Ministry of Education & Culture – Central Bureau of Statistics per 2024*

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that teachers' financial well-being significantly influences emotional expressions, classroom interactions, and educational quality (King et al., 2016). Nevertheless, recent organizational behavior research indicates that employee retention is simultaneously influenced by meaningful work, job embeddedness, and social relationships that create a strong sense of belonging within organizations (Lei, 2024; Xue et al., 2023). Rather than relying solely on economic rewards, employees embedded within supportive organizational and community environments are more likely to remain despite adverse working conditions because leaving would require sacrificing valuable professional and social relationships (Mitchell et al., 2001; Xue et al., 2023).

Within Indonesian childcare settings, these non-financial dimensions appear particularly salient because childcare workers simultaneously perform educational, caregiving, and emotional responsibilities while receiving relatively modest financial compensation. Previous studies have shown

that a supportive and positive work environment plays a pivotal role in fostering employee engagement and organizational commitment, particularly in early childhood education settings (Suratman, 2016). Such environments are further strengthened by organizational support, trust in leadership, and leaders' demonstrated integrity, competence, and benevolence, all of which reinforce employees' willingness to remain in their organizations (Hananta & Suratman, 2023). Likewise, gratitude and positive social exchanges have been found to enhance behavioral loyalty through organizational commitment, highlighting the importance of relational rather than purely economic exchanges in sustaining employee retention (Ting & Yeh, 2014; Oh & Chough, 2011). Beyond these organizational factors, many childcare workers describe their profession as an expression of religious devotion, maternal identity, social contribution, and personal fulfillment. They also develop close interpersonal relationships with children, parents, colleagues, and organizational leaders, creating a family-like organizational climate that strengthens their sense of belonging. Similar evidence has recently been reported among residential childcare workers, where professional pride, meaningful relationships with children, and emotional accomplishment were found to sustain long-term commitment despite challenging working conditions (Brend et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that employee loyalty in childcare settings is embedded within a network of supportive organizational relationships, meaningful interpersonal connections, and shared social values, rather than being determined solely by financial rewards.

The literature on early childhood education has expanded considerably over the last two decades, primarily focusing on curriculum quality, teacher professionalism, children's developmental outcomes, pedagogical competence, and educational policy (Colker, 2008; Herrera et al., 2005; Reid & Ready, 2013; Saracho & Spodek, 2006). More recent studies have shifted attention toward educator well-being, emotional exhaustion, burnout, workload pressures, and turnover intentions (Løvgren, 2016; Razman et al., 2025; Heilala et al., 2024). However, these studies largely examine formal preschool teachers, while non-formal childcare workers employed in daycare centers remain comparatively overlooked despite carrying equally demanding educational, caregiving, and emotional responsibilities.

Although previous studies acknowledge the importance of meaningful work and emotional attachment, these constructs are generally examined independently from job embeddedness and rarely within informal childcare settings. Existing organizational behavior literature predominantly explains employee loyalty through organizational commitment, job satisfaction, or compensation mechanisms, whereas studies on meaningful work mainly emphasize psychological fulfillment. Likewise, research on job embeddedness has largely concentrated on formal organizational contexts. Consequently, little is known about how meaningful work, job embeddedness, and structural constraints simultaneously influence employee loyalty among low-paid childcare workers. Recent evidence indicates that meaningful work moderates the relationship between occupational stress and turnover intention among preschool educators, suggesting that psychological meaning can become an important mechanism for employee retention under adverse working conditions (Zhang et al., 2024). However, this relationship remains largely unexplored within informal childcare services in developing countries.

Accordingly, this study addresses this gap by examining how childcare workers construct the meaning of their work and sustain employee loyalty through the interaction of meaningful work, job embeddedness, and structural constraints within low-paid childcare settings in Indonesia. Using a phenomenological approach, the study explores the lived experiences underlying employees' decisions to remain in economically constrained occupations. Unlike previous studies that primarily explain retention through financial incentives or organizational commitment, this study integrates Meaningful Work Theory and Job Embeddedness Theory to provide a more comprehensive explanation of employee loyalty in informal childcare employment. By doing so, the study extends organizational behavior literature beyond conventional economic perspectives while offering practical insights for childcare providers and policymakers seeking to develop sustainable retention strategies in care-based professions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaningful Work and Calling in Care-Based Professions

Meaningful work has become one of the central constructs in organizational behavior because it explains why employees remain committed to occupations that provide relatively limited economic rewards. Rather than viewing work solely as a means of obtaining financial income, meaningful work emphasizes employees' subjective perception that their work contributes to a broader purpose, personal growth, and social well-being (Duffy et al., 2018). Dik and Duffy (2009) conceptualized calling as comprising three interrelated dimensions: transcendent summons, purposeful work, and prosocial orientation. Individuals who perceive their work as a calling are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation, resilience, and long-term commitment, even when facing unfavorable working conditions. Building upon this perspective, Work Orientation Theory distinguishes between three orientations toward work: job, career, and calling (Wrzesniewski, 1999). Employees with a job orientation primarily seek financial rewards, whereas those with a career orientation emphasize advancement and achievement. By contrast, employees with a calling orientation perceive work as an integral part of their identity and a means of contributing to society. Consequently, they tend to demonstrate stronger persistence and psychological resilience when confronted with occupational challenges (Duckworth & Gross, 2014).

Recent organizational behavior studies have further demonstrated that meaningful work not only enhances employee well-being but also functions as a psychological resource that reduces turnover intention through increased work engagement and organizational attachment. Sánchez-Cardona et al. (2023) found that meaningful work mediates the relationship between job resources and employees' intention to remain within organizations. Likewise, Zhang et al. (2024) reported that meaningful work weakens the negative impact of occupational stress on preschool teachers' turnover intentions by strengthening work engagement. These findings suggest that meaningful work represents a critical psychological mechanism explaining employee retention beyond financial incentives, particularly within occupations characterized by intensive emotional labor. This perspective is particularly relevant to childcare workers because caregiving activities inherently involve nurturing, emotional attachment, empathy, and prosocial behavior. Consequently, many childcare workers perceive their occupation not merely as paid employment but as an extension of maternal identity, religious devotion, and social responsibility. Such perceptions create psychological attachment that extends beyond contractual employment relationships and contribute to sustained employee loyalty despite limited financial compensation.

Job Embeddedness Theory

Job Embeddedness Theory explains why employees choose to remain in an organization by emphasizing the combined influence of organizational, social, and community-related factors rather than economic incentives alone. Mitchell et al. (2001) conceptualized job embeddedness through three interrelated dimensions: links, representing employees' formal and informal connections with people and organizations; fit, referring to the compatibility between employees' personal values, career goals, and work environment; and sacrifice, reflecting the perceived material, social, and psychological costs associated with leaving. Employees who experience strong interpersonal relationships, high value congruence, and greater perceived losses are therefore more likely to remain in their organizations despite attractive external opportunities (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Subsequent research has consistently demonstrated the explanatory power of Job Embeddedness Theory across diverse organizational contexts. Lee et al. (2004) found that job embeddedness predicts not only voluntary turnover but also organizational citizenship behaviour, job performance, and reduced absenteeism. Building on this evidence, Holtom et al. (2014) and Lee et al. (2014) highlighted the theory's evolution into one of the most influential frameworks for explaining employee retention by integrating both on-the-job and off-the-job influences that traditional turnover models often overlook. More

recently, Nguyen and Andresen (2024) further expanded the theory by conceptualizing job embeddedness as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by organizational, community, and broader social environments, while Xue et al. (2023) confirmed its continued relevance in contemporary labour markets, demonstrating that organizational relationships, social support, and community attachment remain critical determinants of employee retention. Collectively, these studies suggest that Job Embeddedness Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding employee loyalty among childcare workers, whose decisions to remain are influenced not only by organizational attachment but also by meaningful interpersonal relationships, community proximity, and the perceived sacrifices associated with leaving.

Organizational Commitment and Emotional Labor

Employee loyalty has traditionally been explained through Organizational Commitment Theory, which conceptualizes commitment as affective, continuance, and normative attachment toward organizations (Meyer & Allen, 1990). Affective commitment reflects employees' emotional attachment to the organization; continuance commitment reflects perceived costs associated with leaving; and normative commitment reflects moral obligations to remain. However, organizational commitment alone provides only a partial explanation for employee retention in care professions because childcare work also requires substantial emotional labor. Emotional labor involves regulating emotions to display empathy, patience, and compassion during interactions with service recipients (Grandey, 2000). In childcare settings, employees continuously manage emotional expressions while responding to children's developmental needs and parental expectations. Such emotional demands often increase occupational stress while simultaneously strengthening interpersonal attachment, thereby contributing to both meaningful work and job embeddedness. Rather than functioning independently, organizational commitment, emotional labor, meaningful work, and job embeddedness complement one another in explaining employee retention. Meaningful work provides intrinsic purpose; emotional labor strengthens relational attachment; organizational commitment reflects employees' psychological bond with the organization; and job embeddedness explains why employees remain despite economic constraints. Collectively, these perspectives provide a more comprehensive explanation of employee loyalty than traditional economic or attitudinal approaches alone.

Research concerning early childhood education has predominantly concentrated on curriculum quality, pedagogical effectiveness, educator competencies, and children's developmental outcomes (Herrera et al., 2005; Colker, 2008; Reid & Ready, 2013). Other studies have emphasized teacher professionalism (Saracho & Spodek, 2006; Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008; Hernwall, 2016), workload pressures (Razman et al., 2025), burnout, and employment conditions (Løvgren, 2016). More recently, scholars have begun examining educator well-being and turnover intentions within early childhood education settings (Heilala et al., 2024). Despite these advances, two important limitations remain. First, most previous studies have focused on formal preschool teachers, whereas non-formal childcare workers employed in daycare and childcare centers remain substantially underrepresented, despite performing broader caregiving responsibilities that integrate education, physical care, emotional support, and child protection.Second, prior studies generally examine meaningful work, organizational commitment, emotional labor, or job embeddedness independently. Very limited attention has been devoted to understanding how these theoretical perspectives interact to explain employee loyalty among low-paid childcare workers operating within economically constrained environments.

Accordingly, this study integrates **Meaningful Work Theory, Job Embeddedness Theory,** and **Organizational Commitment Theory** to develop a more comprehensive explanation of employee loyalty in informal childcare settings. Specifically, this study argues that employee loyalty emerges from the interaction between intrinsic work meaning, social embeddedness, emotional attachment, and structural constraints rather than from financial considerations alone. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study further contributes by revealing how childcare workers themselves construct these meanings

through their lived experiences, thereby extending existing organizational behavior literature within the context of care-based professions.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to explore how childcare workers construct the meaning of their work and sustain employee loyalty despite limited financial compensation. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it enables researchers to understand participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of a particular phenomenon through an in-depth exploration of their everyday experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on two inclusion criteria: (1) having worked as childcare workers for at least four years and (2) residing within a 0–5 km radius of their workplace. These criteria ensured that participants possessed substantial professional experience while remaining closely connected to the communities in which they worked. A total of 21 childcare workers from non-formal childcare centres located in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Central Java, East Java, and West Java participated in this study. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, indicating that no substantially new information emerged from subsequent interviews (Guest et al., 2020).

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions concerning participants' perceptions of work meaning, reasons for remaining employed despite limited financial compensation, perceived non-financial rewards, workplace relationships, and caregiving responsibilities. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and supported by field notes to capture contextual observations and researchers' reflections. The interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, construction of candidate themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the final analytical narrative. This approach enabled the researchers to identify recurring patterns while preserving participants' lived experiences and the contextual meanings attached to their work. Recent methodological literature emphasizes that reflexive thematic analysis provides methodological flexibility while maintaining analytical depth and transparency in phenomenological research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; DeJonckheere et al., 2024). To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed member checking, maintained an audit trail throughout the analytical process, and continuously compared interview transcripts with field notes during data interpretation. These procedures are consistent with recent qualitative research guidelines that emphasize credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency as key indicators of methodological rigor (Ahmed, 2024; Cena et al., 2024).

Table 2. Examples of Interview Questions

	Questions
The Meaning of Working as an Early Childhood Worker	
1	What do you think this job means to your life?
2	Do you feel like this job is a calling or just a job? Do explain, please?
Factors contribute to stay at workplace	
3	What factors contribute to staying despite the low wage?
4	What are the biggest considerations when deciding to stay here?
Non-financial benefits perceived from work	
5	Besides your salary, what are the advantages/benefits you experience from this job?
6	What makes you feel most "paid off," even if it's not financial?

	Questions
The meaning of great responsibility in childcare	
9	What are your main responsibilities as a childcare worker?
10	How do you deal with sick/fussy/injured children?

RESULTS

The findings reveal several interrelated themes concerning the meaning of work, employee loyalty, and survival strategies among childcare workers. The number of respondents spread across four provinces, such as Central Java (7 respondents), East Java (4 respondents), West Java (3 respondents), and the Special Region of Yogyakarta (7 respondents), who voluntarily provided their perspectives by answering 4 themes with structured questions, reflecting diverse yet comparable contexts of informal childcare work.

Table 3. Respondent Data

#	Respondent Initials	Age (y.o)	Length of service (years)	Commuting Distance (radius km)	Educational Background	Province
1	SD	52	23	1	Senior high school	Central Java
2	HRK	46	18	1	Senior high school	Yogyakarta
3	SL	34	17	2	Bachelor degree	Yogyakarta
4	SS	36	10	2	Bachelor degree	Yogyakarta
5	AM	38	18	2	Senior high school	Central Java
6	HT	45	15	5	Bachelor degree	East Java
7	SU	45	22	4	Senior high school	Central Java
8	HM	62	30	2	Master degree	Central Java
9	VN	45	17	3	Bachelor degree	Central Java
10	AP	51	20	5	Bachelor degree	West Java
11	AS	48	8	4	Vocational School	Yogyakarta
12	MF	50	13	4	Bachelor degree	West Java
13	CM	32	8	1	Junior high school	East Java
14	PT	25	5	3	Elementary school	West Java
15	TS	34	9	2	Elementary school	Central Java
16	ES	55	20	2	Senior high school	Yogyakarta
17	NY	54	25	3	Senior high school	Yogyakarta
18	KS	50	25	1	Senior high school	Yogyakarta
19	RM	25	7	1	Junior high school	East Java
20	HU	28	4	1	Senior high school	Central Java
21	DF	30	4	2	Vocational School	East Java

The analysis identifies four main thematic categories:

1. *Meaningful Work*
   Childcare work is interpreted as a form of devotion, a calling, and an extension of maternal roles. It also provides self-identity and personal fulfillment.
2. *Social Engagement (Embeddedness)*
   Strong social ties, proximity to the workplace, and a family-like environment contribute significantly to workers' attachment to their jobs.

3. *Non-Financial Rewards*
   Recognition, emotional satisfaction, social relationships, and small material benefits function as important sources of motivation.
4. *Job Demands and Challenges*
   High levels of responsibility, emotional labor, and workload characterize the profession.

The Meaning as Childcare Workers: Between Worship, Motherhood, and Self-Identity

Interview results indicate that childcare workers do not merely view work as an economic activity, but rather as a form of meaningful work embedded in personal and social values. The majority of informants viewed work as a means of worship, a form of devotion, and an extension of their domestic role as mothers. Several informants explicitly stated that this work was a *"calling of the heart,"* particularly because it involved childcare, a culturally closely tied to women's identity. Even for childless informants, this work served as an emotional substitute, conveying strong affective meaning. Furthermore, work was also interpreted as a means of achieving self-identity beyond domestic roles, such as feeling more independent, engaging in productive activities, and gaining social recognition from the community. These findings demonstrate that the meaning of work is not singular, but multidimensional: spiritual, social, and psychological.

For these childcare, work is perceived as much more than a mere source of income; it is a *"sacred trust" (Amanah)*, a *"field of worship" (Ladang Ibadah)*, and a *"calling of the heart."* While many initially entered the profession due to practical factors—such as proximity to home or referrals from neighbors—most have developed a deep emotional bond with the children, viewing themselves as *"second mothers"* who are vital to the children's growth and character development. The majority of informants began working at the daycare because it was conveniently located near their homes or because they were invited by acquaintances. For several, this was not their original dream; some desired to work in offices or big cities but were limited by family permissions or local job availability.

> *"Since 2003, because my house is close, just across the big road... rather than just staying at home, this work is like daily chores at home anyway, looking after kids."* (SD).
>
> *"Actually, it didn't match my expectations; originally I wanted to work in a big city. But at that time my mother didn't allow me to go far away."* (HT).
>
> *"I initially wanted to work in an office... but because jobs were limited, I ended up here."* (VN).

Work is a vehicle for financial independence, allowing these women to support their families or parents without being entirely dependent on their husbands. Beyond money, they feel a sense of pride and happiness from being trusted by the institution and the parents for many years.

> *"This work is a field of worship for me... It makes women more independent. I am happy and proud to still be here until now." (HRK).*
>
> *"This work is what allows me to have my own money besides depending on my husband. I am happy because when I started I already had one child and could bring them to work." (SS).*
>
> *"It's like a second life for me outside of the home. My world is now the world of children." (VN).*

Childcare do not see themselves as mere *"babysitters."* They define their roles as educators, facilitators, and *"second mothers"*. There is a profound realization that they are entrusted with a *"living mandate"* to ensure the safety and moral upbringing of the children.

> *"I play the role of a guardian, childcare, and educator; a sort of second mother to them." (AM).*
> *"My role is as a facilitator for child development; seeing them grow bigger makes me happy." (HM).*
> *"I am a childcare... God willing, I will guard this Trust (Amanah) truly." (SD).*

Interpretation: While some started the job just to *"fill time"* or *"earn a living,"* it almost universally evolved into a calling of the heart. The most memorable moments involve witnessing developmental milestones (a baby learning to walk or talk) or overcoming high-stress situations, such as a child briefly going missing and being safely returned.

> *"At first it was just working to fill time... but the longer I am here, the happier I feel. I am called 'mother' by the children." (SL).*
> *"Most memorable is seeing children who were once babies now growing up, walking, and talking. They get smarter." (Informant 6).*
> *"The most memorable was when a child briefly went missing because we had no fence... thank God someone found them and returned them to us." (SS).*

Interpretation: The defining difference is the *"object"* of the work: living human beings. Unlike factory or office work, this job requires extreme patience, affection, and constant vigilance. It is also characterized by a family-like atmosphere among the staff and a unique level of trust from the community.

> *"It's different because we are taking care of children who are small living beings. We have to be careful." (SL).*
> *"Meaning-wise, it's more peaceful for worship, not many targets; the important thing is to take good care of the children." (AS).*
> *"It's like being a mother to many children. Teaching goodness." (AP).*

A Complex Interplay Between Social Comfort, Geographical Convenience, and Economic

Although all informants acknowledged that their wages were below the minimum standard, they still demonstrated a high level of loyalty. This indicates beside economics factors, also a combination of non-financial and structural factors. The main factors driving loyalty include: a) proximity of the work location to one's residence, which minimizes travel costs and time; b) a comfortable and supportive work environment, which creates a sense of security, c) close social relationships, both with fellow childcare workers and with the owner, d) family support, especially from the husband, e) limited alternative employment opportunities, particularly related to age and education. These findings suggest that work loyalty in this context is more closely aligned with the concept of embedded work, where individuals remain because of social and environmental contextual differences, rather than solely satisfaction with compensation.

The interviews reveal a complex interplay between social comfort, geographical convenience, and economic necessity that keeps these educators in their positions. While almost all respondents are fully aware that their salaries are below the regional minimum wage, they find non-monetary value that compensates for the financial shortfall, The most prominent factor for staying is the supportive work environment. Many respondents do not view their colleagues merely as co-workers but as a *"new family."* This social bond provides emotional support that is hard to find in more formal sectors like factories or offices.

> *"I stay because I know everyone here—the owners and the family—I have a new family with the women here." (SD)*
> *"I feel comfortable with my co-workers here; we can joke around, and work is done together (disengkuyung bareng)." (HM)*

The ability to work near their homes is a decisive factor. For many, the short commute allows them to balance their duties as wives and mothers, which they value over a higher-paying job that might require traveling far.

> *"I just walk out of the house and I'm at work... I can monitor the house and work easily." (SD)*

"Because it's close to home, my husband supports it, I don't have to worry about my kids at home, and I like the atmosphere." (HRK)

While the base salary is low, respondents highlighted additional income streams such as bonuses for high enrollment, overtime pay for late childcare, or even side businesses like catering orders from parents. For many, the income is seen as a necessary supplement to their husband's earnings rather than the primary source.

"From a financial side, it's because my husband's [income] isn't enough, while we are still supporting parents and helping my sibling." (SD)
"Sometimes I even get cooking orders from here or from the parents." (HRK)

A sense of resignation regarding the job market also plays a role. Many respondents are over 40 and feel that their age and education level (often High School/SMA) limit their chances of finding better employment elsewhere,

"I am not young anymore... and searching for a job is difficult now. At least I can work, do something, and be near home." (SD)
"Limited job opportunities truly restrict me from choosing other jobs." (SL)

For some, the work is viewed as a form of community service or worship. The interaction with children provides a sense of purpose and "blessing" *(berkah)*.

"I stay here because there is a sense of devotion (pengabdian)." (SL)
"Economy is always the main factor, but working here is also about seeking blessings (cari berkahnya), the worship of raising children." (HT)

The Role of Non-Financial Compensation in Improving Job Satisfaction

Results show that non-financial compensation plays a significant role in maintaining job satisfaction and commitment. These forms of exchange include: a) warm social relationships (a family-like work environment), b) recognition and appreciation from the child's parents, c) work flexibility, d) additional benefits such as meals, uniforms, and bonuses, and e) Opportunities to socialize and share experiences. For childcare worker, emotional experiences such as happiness, appreciation, and inner satisfaction are often considered *"rewards"* that are equally, if not more, important than financial compensation. This suggests that in service-based and care-based work (care work), the affective dimension significantly contributes to perceptions of occupational well-being. A communal work environment is one of the most dominant factors in fostering loyalty. Childcare worker describes the workplace as a *"second family,"* where there is: a) high solidarity among coworkers, b) a culture of mutual assistance and shared workload, c) space for sharing stories and emotional support. Furthermore, geographical proximity to the workplace also strengthens the social fabric, as most informants come from the same neighborhood. This creates a strong sense of social cohesion, so leaving a job means not only losing income but also losing a social community.

While salary is a primary factor, caregivers highlighted a variety of tangible perks that ease their daily lives. Many respondents mentioned receiving lunch, snacks, and uniforms, The proximity of the workplace to their homes and flexible working hours also appeared as significant advantages. Notably, several caregivers mentioned the ability to bring their own children to work, which provides both convenience and peace of mind.

"I can bring my child to work, there is lunch even if it's simple. There are new uniforms every two years... and my house is nearby." (SS)
"Easy to ask for leave. We can negotiate if there are sudden household matters." (AS)

A recurring theme is the supportive and communal nature of the workplace. Caregivers do not view their colleagues merely as co-workers, but as a *"new family"* where they can share stories and support one another. The relationship with the owners or leaders is often described as nurturing (*"ngemong"*), which contributes significantly to their happiness.

> *"The work environment is fun, it's all women, we can share stories... I found a new family here." (SD)*
> *"The leader likes to nurture us." (AP)*

The highest sense of *"repayment"* for these caregivers comes from emotional rewards. Seeing children grow, learn, and behave well provides profound inner satisfaction. Furthermore, simple gestures from parents—such as saying *"thank you,"* giving small gifts (parcels/souvenirs), or recommending the center to others—make the caregivers feel deeply valued.

> *"I feel 'repaid' when parents and children say thank you. The children are well-behaved and healthy." (SU)*
> *"When they [the children] get smarter, I feel happy too." (HRK)*
> *"Parents sometimes tell others to leave their children here (word of mouth). That means our work is good, right?" (AM)*

High Responsibility and Emotional Burden in Childcare

Although this work is often seen as an extension of domestic activities, informants recognized the enormous responsibilities they shoulder. They emphasized that children are a trust from their parents and must be cared for with great care. The workload is not only physical (feeding, cleaning, and looking after), but also emotional, such as: a) dealing with fussy or sick children, b) managing parental expectations: c) Maintaining patience in stressful situations. However, this burden can be managed through Teamwork among childcare workers, social support in the workplace, and internalizing the values of patience and sincerity. This demonstrates the existence of value-based and community-based coping mechanisms that enable individuals to persist in highly demanding jobs.

Their responsibilities are comprehensive, spanning physical care (bathing, feeding), domestic tasks (cleaning dishes, tidying rooms), and early education (singing, teaching). Most informants explicitly acknowledge that this is a *"big responsibility"* because they are entrusted with the well-being of other people's children.

> *"I am trusted as the head of this PAUD... this is a big responsibility especially regarding children; there are babies and toddlers, you cannot play around". (SD)*
> *"Being a second parent is heavy. Being trusted with so many children". (HU)*

While many childcares find joy in their work because they enjoy being around children or are mothers themselves, there is a recurring theme of anxiety and fear regarding the children's safety. Common worries include children falling, getting sick, or having accidents while under their care.

> *"If there's worry, there certainly is—fear of a child falling, or someone being mischievous". (DF)*
> *"It's stressful too... there is definitely a sense of worry; don't let the children get sick while being cared for here". (CM)*
> *"Sometimes I feel overwhelmed when someone cries". (PT)*

Collaboration as a Coping Mechanism The most vital factor that keeps these childcares resilient is the supportive environment and teamwork. Almost every informant mentioned that they do not work alone. When a child is particularly fussy or if they feel overwhelmed, they rely on their colleagues to share the burden. This sense of community helps them maintain the high level of patience required for the job.

"To stay, you have to be patient; there are many friends here, sharing, asking other mothers for help". (RM)
"I am strong because here we all work together". (NY)
"Strong because of the environment's support, husband is okay, and it's also for worship". (TS)

Expectations Childcares often face pressure from parents, ranging from specific dietary requirements and milk preparation to complaints about misplaced items. Managing these expectations requires meticulousness and a *"double dose"* of patience.

"They have many requests: can eat this, cannot eat that, how many spoons of milk... so I must remember this and that". (TS)
"Parents have complained, for example, if an item was left behind. So, I have to be thorough and ensure the child's belongings [are complete]". (DF)

Survival Strategies: Rationalization, Adaptation, and Religious Values

Childcare workers employ various strategies to survive in economically restrictive working conditions. These strategies include: a) rationalizing work conditions, such as being grateful for the available income; b) adapting to work demands, including multitasking; and c) internalizing religious values, such as viewing work as worship and a source of blessings. Values such as patience, sincerity, and a sense of responsibility as the main foundation for maintaining work commitment. In this context, religiosity functions not only as a personal value but also as a psychological mechanism for enhancing work resilience. There is a significant dichotomy in job satisfaction among caregivers. While some informants feel a deep sense of belonging and *"home" (betah)* in their current roles, a large portion of the respondents (at least 11 out of DF) stated they would not choose this job again or would seek other opportunities if available. This suggests that while there is emotional fulfillment for some, the heavy workload and low compensation make the profession less sustainable for many.

"If there is another choice, I would try that other option" (SL).
"I already feel at home here" (HT).
"No... I want to work in an office" (Informant DF).

The most consistent theme across all interviews is the inadequacy of current wages. Many caregivers acknowledge that their salaries are below the regional minimum wage (UMR). While they appreciate bonuses, meal provisions, and holiday allowances (THR), there is a strong collective hope for a more *"decent living"* and increased financial appreciation.

"I hope... the salary increases, welfare increases; this job should be recognized because looking after children requires extra patience" (SD).
"The owner did say the salary might not be enough, but at least I feel the burden is over once I go home" (SL).
"What needs to be improved? The salary, bonuses, and meal portions" (VN).

Beyond financial needs, caregivers express a deep desire for societal and parental recognition. They feel that the difficulty of their work—which involves intense emotional labor and patience—is often undervalued by the public and the parents they serve.

"I hope this work gets more recognition from parents. To be appreciated, that taking care of children is not easy" (SD).
"Hopefully society also understands that our work requires a lot of attention" (AP).

A recurring request for management is the improvement of physical facilities. This includes basic infrastructure like kitchens, water supply, and bedrooms, as well as operational support like first-aid kits

(P3K). Caregivers believe that better facilities would not only benefit the children but also make the staff more comfortable and willing to stay.

"Facilities should be fixed—the water, the kitchen too" (AM).
"Improve facilities so that both children and caregivers are comfortable" (VN).

When asked for advice for prospective caregivers, respondents emphasized psychological resilience. The job is described as demanding *"infinite patience" (sabar),* meticulousness *(telaten)*, and emotional stability.

"Must be patient, have love, and be willing to cooperate" (HT).
"Must be mentally prepared, patient, tough, and cheerful" (VN).

Discussion

The findings extend Job Embeddedness Theory by demonstrating that employee embeddedness among childcare workers is constructed not only through organizational relationships but also through community proximity, caregiving identity, and shared social values. While Job Embeddedness Theory traditionally conceptualizes retention through the dimensions of links, fit, and sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001), the present study suggests that these dimensions operate simultaneously within care-based occupations. Participants remained employed not merely because of organizational attachment but because leaving would also mean sacrificing meaningful interpersonal relationships with children, colleagues, parents, and surrounding communities. These findings therefore broaden the application of Job Embeddedness Theory to low-paid care professions, where emotional and social embeddedness may outweigh economic considerations.

Rather than functioning solely as an intrinsic motivational factor, meaningful work emerged as a mechanism through which childcare workers interpreted financial limitations as acceptable trade-offs for achieving spiritual fulfilment, caregiving identity, and social contribution. This finding extends previous meaningful work literature by demonstrating that work meaning may reduce the relative importance of financial rewards when employees perceive their work as socially valuable and personally significant. The present findings indicate that meaningful work and job embeddedness should not be viewed as independent explanations of employee loyalty. Instead, meaningful work appears to strengthen employees' psychological attachment to their work, whereas job embeddedness reinforces their social and organizational attachment. Together, these mechanisms explain why childcare workers continue to demonstrate strong organizational loyalty despite prolonged financial constraints.

The findings should also be interpreted within the socio-cultural context of Indonesia, where collectivist values, strong family orientation, and religious beliefs continue to shape employees' attitudes toward work and organizational commitment. Unlike conventional employee retention models that primarily emphasize economic exchange, participants viewed childcare work as a meaningful social and moral responsibility rooted in compassion, sincerity, and service to others. Family-like relationships with colleagues, emotional attachment to children, and supportive interactions with parents emerged as important sources of loyalty, indicating that employees evaluated their work not only through financial outcomes but also through its social and spiritual significance. These findings suggest that meaningful work in the Indonesian childcare context is socially constructed through cultural values that reinforce intrinsic motivation and long-term organizational attachment.

The Indonesian context also highlights how structural and cultural factors jointly strengthen job embeddedness. Many participants chose to remain in their positions because their workplaces were located close to home, enabling them to balance caregiving responsibilities with family obligations while maintaining strong connections with their local communities. Combined with limited alternative employment opportunities, particularly for middle-aged women in the informal care sector, these conditions increased the perceived sacrifices associated with leaving their jobs. Consequently, employee loyalty reflects not only organizational attachment but also the interaction between meaningful work,

community embeddedness, and labour market realities. This finding extends Job Embeddedness Theory by demonstrating that, in emerging economies such as Indonesia, employees' decisions to stay are influenced by a combination of organizational relationships, cultural values, and structural constraints rather than financial considerations alone.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that employee loyalty among low-paid childcare workers cannot be adequately explained by financial incentives alone. Using a phenomenological approach, the findings reveal that participants remained in their jobs because meaningful work, supportive workplace relationships, community proximity, and structural employment conditions collectively fostered a strong sense of attachment to their work and organization. Childcare was perceived not merely as paid employment but as a meaningful vocation associated with caregiving, social contribution, and personal fulfilment, enabling participants to sustain their commitment despite prolonged financial constraints.

The study contributes to the employee retention literature by integrating Meaningful Work Theory and Job Embeddedness Theory to explain employee loyalty in care-based occupations. The findings suggest that meaningful work strengthens employees' psychological attachment to their profession, while job embeddedness reinforces their social and organizational attachment through interpersonal relationships, community connections, and perceived sacrifices associated with leaving. Together, these complementary mechanisms provide a more comprehensive explanation of employee loyalty than economic perspectives alone, particularly within the socio-cultural context of Indonesia.

Practically, the findings indicate that childcare providers and policymakers should complement financial improvements with strategies that strengthen meaningful work, supportive organizational relationships, professional recognition, and flexible working arrangements to enhance long-term employee retention. This study is limited to childcare workers in selected Indonesian provinces and reflects the experiences of participants within a specific care context. Future research may examine whether the interaction between meaningful work and job embeddedness similarly explains employee loyalty across other care professions and different cultural settings.

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