



Article Let Them Shine: Associations of Schools' Support for Strengths Use with Teachers' Sense of Meaning, Engagement, and Satisfaction

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Abstract: The present research builds on the psychology of sustainability and sustainable development and on research demonstrating the contribution of perceived organizational support for strengths use (POSSU) to the quality of employees' work life. Specifically, we focus on teachers, whose training and development in schools often aim to narrow competence gaps and correct deficits. We propose that focusing on the development of their strengths may more positively impact their engagement, satisfaction, and sense of meaning at work. A total of 47 school principals (30 women; $M_{age} = 48.37$, SD = 7.31) and 235 of their teachers (197 women; $M_{age} = 40.73$, SD = 7.78) reported perceptions of their schools' organizational support for strengths use (POSSU), and of their school support for deficit correction (POSDC). In addition, teachers completed measures of their strengths use, sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction. Teachers' POSSU was associated (more strongly than POSDC) with teachers' strength use and positive work-related well-being. Teachers' strengths use mediated the associations of POSSU with the other variables. Principals' POSSU was not associated with teachers' POSSU or with teachers' strengths use, but was associated with teachers' sense of meaning and satisfaction at work. The findings highlight the potential benefits of a strengths-supporting school culture to teachers' work-life quality.

Keywords: strengths; strengths use; teachers; schools; school support for strengths use; principals; sense of meaning at work; engagement; job satisfaction

1. Introduction

Well-being and its maintenance and promotion among individuals, groups, and organizations are key in the psychology of sustainability and sustainable development frameworks [1,2]. It further poses the importance of organizations in creating and sustaining positive work environments that foster employees' sense of meaning and growth [1–3]. The present study focuses on the promotion of strengths use in organizations as a strategy that promotes these goals. Specifically, we focus on schools, in which employees' well-being and sense of meaning can have a notable impact on others, in the short and long term and in immediate and more remote circles (e.g., [4,5]). We propose, based on previous research on organizational and leadership support of employees' strengths use (e.g., [6,7]), that an organizational environment that supports educators' strengths use can contribute to their work-related well-being and sense of meaning.

Contemporary school development programs often promote teachers' proficiency by helping them overcome obstacles and difficulties in their work, extend knowledge, and improve skills that are weaker (e.g., [8,9]). Such processes have proved beneficial in the school context. However, recent research suggests that developing employees' strengths rather than merely improving employees' weaknesses in development processes may benefit the employees and the organization [6]. These studies suggest that when employees learn how to develop their strengths and increase their use at work, it may benefit their



Citation: Lavy, S.; Abu Ahmad, M.; Naama, E. Let Them Shine: Associations of Schools' Support for Strengths Use with Teachers' Sense of Meaning, Engagement, and Satisfaction. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 3832. https://doi.org/10.3390/ su16093832

Academic Editor: Jesús-Nicasio García-Sánchez

Received: 1 March 2024 Revised: 26 April 2024 Accepted: 29 April 2024 Published: 2 May 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https:// creativecommons.org/licenses/by/ 4.0/). well-being and growth and promote organizational goals [6,10]. These findings may be especially pertinent for teachers, whose use of personal qualities at work has been suggested as key to their performance and well-being (e.g., [11–13]).

Strengths may be viewed as a combination of talents, knowledge, and skills in which individuals excel or come naturally to them and assist in goal attainment [14,15]. Their nurturance was proposed as one of the paths for sustainability, promoting well-being among individuals and communities, increasing person–job/organization fit, and regenerating resources [1,3,16]. Studies have suggested that when people use their strengths, they follow their personal tendencies and natural capacities to fulfill their potential and achieve their goals in a way that also contributes to their sense of fulfillment and meaning [14,17,18]. Indeed, cumulative research has demonstrated that using one's strengths at work is associated with increased sense of meaning, work engagement, job satisfaction, productivity, and organizational citizenship behavior [17,19,20]. It was further suggested that since individuals have a natural tendency to develop their potential and improve their aptitudes, a supportive environment can enable them to thrive [10,14,21]. Thus, the present study focuses on the potential associations of organizational support for strengths use with teachers' reported strengths use at work as well as with teachers' sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction.

The support for strengths use may be especially relevant to educational organizations due to educators' job characteristics. Beyond the autonomous nature of the job (e.g., teachers typically teach alone and can often determine their teaching approach), educators' professional functioning relies heavily on their personal qualities as people, and these include their personal strengths and weaknesses (e.g., [11,22,23]). As Palmer [23] suggested, teachers' personal qualities have a notable impact on their students and the educational process in many ways, such as by their modeling behavior, their interaction with students, and how they design the learning setting. To our knowledge, this study is the first to empirically examine the associations of the organizational support for strengths use that teachers receive (reported by teachers and their principals) with teachers' self-reported strengths use and work-related attitudes. The findings can shed light on the potential benefits of organizations' and principals' support for strengths use on educators.

1.1. Personal Strengths and Their Use

Personal strengths, broadly construed, refer to individual characteristics, traits, and abilities [14]. Using one's strengths is energizing and promotes optimal performance, because it matches individuals' inner tendencies [14,24,25]. Thus, using one's strengths is also thought to increase feelings of autonomy, competence, positive self-regard, and fulfillment [14,26,27]. It may further promote career adaptability, which contributes to a sense of meaning and other positive outcomes (e.g., [28]).

Cumulative research has demonstrated the benefits of strengths use for individuals and organizations. Using strengths is linked to increased vitality, well-being, and progress [29,30]. At work, using strengths is linked to increased work-related well-being, reflected in increased sense of meaning [19], job satisfaction [17], and work engagement [31,32]. It is also associated with behaviors that contribute to an organization, such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; [17]), higher performance [10,33], and less withdrawal behavior [19]. Studies of interventions aiming to enhance employees' strengths use at work also indicated the positive effects of strengths use, as they demonstrated the interventions' contribution to employees' well-being (assessed in different ways), engagement, personal growth initiative, self-efficacy, hope, resilience, feelings of social worth, and to other positive mental health and functioning indicators (e.g., [21,34]; see [35,36] for reviews]).

Why Is Strengths Use Relevant for Teachers?

Teachers' jobs are highly influenced by their personal qualities, capacities, and strengths [11,22,23]. Many teacher qualities are critical to their professional effectiveness

and their impact on students, such as their interactions with students, informal behavior, emotional expression, lesson construction, and the classroom setting [37–40]. Thus, teachers' personal strengths are a crucial component of their professional functioning [11,13] and are considered essential for the development and flourishing of schools [22,41]. It has been suggested that teachers' professional development and long-term thriving in the profession can improve if they identify and recognize their strengths and practice them in their day-to-day conduct [11,13,41]. For example, if a teacher has a good sense of humor, they can use it in their classes to create a good atmosphere and promote students' learning (or promote other educational goals). If they are creative, they can use this to surprise students with new ways of learning and connecting. The literature on teachers' strengths and their use supports these ideas. Teachers' endorsement of character strengths has been associated with their well-being [41,42], and interventions that target educators' strengths use contribute to their self-efficacy and personal growth initiative, and in some cases also to their performance [43,44].

Overall, researchers propose that using their strengths at work can enable teachers to be at their best, building on their competencies and abilities while promoting their well-being and contributing to a positive school culture [22,45]. These ideas correspond with OECD and UN statements about the goals of education institutions, which postulate the development of students' and staff's potential and well-being as key goals ([22,46], p. 3; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; CRC, 1989/1990; Article 29). In this sense, supporting teachers' strengths use corresponds with the core characteristics of teaching and with the fundamental goals of schools. Thus, the following section builds on organizational research to propose how schools can foster teachers' strengths use.

1.2. Organizational Support for Strengths Use

Research suggests that organizations and organizational environments play an important role in fostering employees' use and development of their strengths [47,48]. Supervisors/leaders and organizational climate seem to be key players that lead these effects, because they can assist employees in identifying their strengths, help them find ways to use them more in their jobs, redesign their jobs to facilitate the use of their strengths (i.e., job crafting), and show appreciation of their strengths use (e.g., [48]). These processes can benefit employees' well-being, and also promote organizational goals, as organizations make best use of their human resources [6,49].

Studies have linked specific supervisor characteristics such as supervisor general support [50], autonomy support [51], and supervisors' appreciation and encouragement of employees' strengths [52,53] with increased strengths use. In a similar vein, an inclusive climate in which different strengths are acknowledged and appreciated, and flexibility in task construction and assignment also seemed to encourage employees' use of their strengths at work [6,10].

Recent research has explored employees' perceived organizational support for strengths use (POSSU) [48,53], reflecting their perceptions about their employers' active support for their application of their personal strengths at work, which allows them to capitalize on their strengths in their work tasks [48] (p. 142). The rationale for these studies was that organizations that support their employees' strengths use can benefit from the positive effects of an empowering culture on employees' well-being and sense of competence [14,48], as well as from the effects of capitalizing on employees' best qualities for promoting organizational goals. The latter, in turn, is also expected to positively impact employees' well-being and sense of meaning, because they feel that their qualities are appreciated and nurtured [35,48,54]. Research supports these ideas, and indicates that POSSU and a strengths-based climate (which is closely related to it) are associated with employees' work engagement, work-related positive affect, and performance (self-reported and manager-reported) [35,48,53].

1.3. Organizational Support for Strengths Use in Schools

Based on previous research on POSSU, in the present research, we propose that it can have similar positive effects on educators' strengths use and well-being in schools, components that are associated with positive school climate and school achievement [22,45,55]. We propose that POSSU will be associated with teachers' strengths use, and thus also impact teachers' work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction, three indicators of work-related well-being that are associated with teachers' functioning, as detailed below.

Teacher work engagement, reflecting their vigor, dedication, and absorption in their job [56], has been associated with decreased teacher burnout [57,58] and increased teacher performance [59], job satisfaction [60], and well-being [61]. Teachers' sense of meaning at work reflects their feeling that their work has value and benefits others or "the greater good" [62–64]. A sense of meaning at work is a core motivator in educational organizations [65,66] and has been associated with increased teacher coping and well-being [67], better teacher–student relationships [4], and increased student engagement with the school, self-esteem, and well-being [5]. Teacher job satisfaction, reflecting teachers' overall contentment with their jobs and professional tasks [68], is associated with less emotional exhaustion [69], less intention to quit [70], and increased enthusiasm and interpersonal communication with students [71].

We expected teachers' work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction to be influenced by schools' support for teachers' strengths use. As detailed above, an empowering culture is thought to positively impact employees' work-related well-being and motivation [14]. Furthermore, substantial evidence suggests that acknowledging employees' strengths and encouraging their use at work promotes the feeling that what they do is meaningful and that their unique contribution is important, thus enhancing their work engagement and job satisfaction [17,19,53,72].

H1: *Perceived school support for strengths use (POSSU) will be associated with teachers' strength use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.*

1.4. Organizational Support for Deficit Correction in Schools

Organizational support for employee improvement generally has positive effects on employees' attitudes, even when its focus is narrowing identified competence gaps and remediating employees' and teachers' deficits [48,73,74]. It was proposed that such support for improvement can contribute to teachers' work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction, and also improve performance [73,74]. However, previous research has suggested that POSSU may have unique positive effects on employees beyond the effects of perceived organizational support for deficit correction (POSDC) [48]. We postulated similar stronger effects of POSSU on well-being among teachers. It is likely that POSSU validates teachers' sense of their unique contribution to performing their professional tasks, more than POSDC. This aspect of support may be critical for teachers, as their job entails motivating and influencing others daily (e.g., [23]). Thus, we compared the associations of POSSU and POSDC with strengths use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.

H2: The associations of schools' support for strengths use (POSSU) with teachers' strengths use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction will be stronger than the associations of schools' support for deficit correction (POSDC) with these variables.

1.5. The Mediating Role of Teachers' Strengths Use

As mentioned above, some of the effects of POSSU are expected to derive directly from the empowering culture it creates. However, additional benefits to employees' wellbeing are anticipated from their increased use of strengths, due to its encouragement by the organization [48]. Thus, we expected the associations between POSSU and teachers' As mentioned above, employees who effectively use their strengths at work can perform better, exert less effort, and express greater interest in the activity, leading to greater job satisfaction [76]. Thus, employees who utilize their strengths may achieve a sense of confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem [14]. In turn, this self-perception can lead to increased work engagement levels and simultaneously reduce stress [18,24]. Furthermore, employees who use their strengths can act congruently with their authentic selves [26], a quality critical for teaching [11,23], which can also increase teachers' sense of meaning and purpose at work, a sense that their unique contribution at work has a positive impact on the wider world [33,77]. Furthermore, research has indicated that experiencing autonomy, independence, and freedom to determine how to work fosters meaningful work experiences [77]. Hence, being cognizant of their potential and acting on that potential could play a vital role in shaping employees' sense of meaning at work.

H3: Teachers' strengths use in school will mediate the associations of schools' support for teachers' strengths use with their work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.

1.6. Principals' Perceptions of Their Schools' Support for Teachers' Strengths Use

We propose that the school principal plays a key role in determining the extent of the school's organizational support for strengths use. The school principal has been shown to have considerable impact on school climate and culture and teacher attitude and motivation [78–81]. Organization leaders' leadership style is generally considered crucial in shaping employees' opportunities to experience a positive, sustainable work environment, and in organizations' ability to develop employees' strengths and capitalize on them rather than exhaust them [82]. Supervisors' support has been generally linked to increased employee strengths use [50], and school leadership was reported to play an important role in schools leading a strengths-based culture [22,45]. Thus, we considered it valuable to examine principals' POSSU and POSDC and examine their associations with teachers' perceptions and with teachers' strengths use. We expected principals' and teachers' perceptions to be associated, and expected POSSU to be also linked to teachers' reported strengths use at work and with teachers work-related well-being indicators.

H4: *Principals'* POSSU and POSDC, will be associated with the corresponding perceptions held by teachers in their schools.

H5: *Principals'* POSSU *will be associated with teachers' strengths use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.*

1.7. The Present Study

1.7.1. The Research Question and Hypotheses

In this study, we sought to examine if schools' support for teachers' strengths use is correlated with teachers' work-related attitudes, and if such potential correlates are stronger than correlates of deficit correction with these attitudes. The study's theoretical framework is summarized in Figure 1. Our specific hypotheses were as follows.

H1: Perceived school support for strengths use (POSSU) will be associated with teachers' strength use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.

H2: The associations of schools' support for strengths use (POSSU) with teachers' strengths use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction will be stronger than the associations of schools' support for deficit correction (POSDC) with these variables.

H3: Teachers' strengths use in school will mediate the associations of schools' support for teachers' strengths use with their work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.

H4: *Principals'* POSSU and POSDC, will be associated with the corresponding perceptions held by teachers in their schools.

H5: *Principals'* POSSU *will be associated with teachers' strengths use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.*

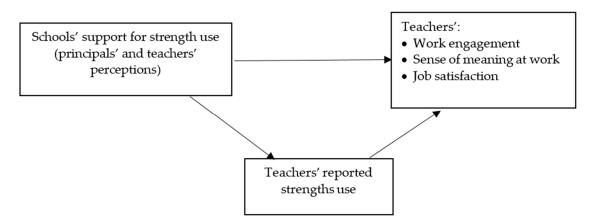


Figure 1. The theoretical model.

1.7.2. The Research Framework

The study's hypotheses were examined with school principals and teachers in 47 elementary schools in Israel. Elementary schools were chosen because they are smaller (student body and staff size) and more cohesive. They also employ less external staff and are subject to fewer externally imposed achievement requirements than secondary schools in Israel. Taken together, these are qualities that better facilitate identifying trends and phenomena related to the schools' culture and characteristics. In these schools, we assessed principals' and teachers' respective perceptions of their school's support for teachers' strengths use and for teachers' deficit correction. We also assessed teachers' self-reported strengths use, work engagement, sense of meaning at work, and job satisfaction.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

We surveyed 47 principals (30 women, 17 men) and 235 teachers (197 women, 38 men) from their schools (~5 teachers from each school). All the participants worked in elementary schools in Israel. Most of the schools (60.4%) were from the Arab-Muslim sector, over one third (37.5%) from the Jewish sector, and a few (2%) from the Arab-Christian sector (2%). The school principals' ages ranged from 37 to 62 ($M_{age} = 48.37$, SD = 7.31) years, and their tenure as principals was 4–50 years ($M_{tenure} = 25.71$, SD = 8.83). Teachers' age range was 21–64 ($M_{age} = 40.73$, SD = 7.78), their tenure was 6–30 years ($M_{tenure} = 16.94$, SD = 2.31), and they reported a workload of 4–40 weekly teaching hours ($M_{hours} = 21.6$, SD = 4.95).

2.2. Procedure

This study was part of a more extensive study led by the first author. After receiving ethics approvals from the authors' institution's ethics committee and from the chief scientist at the Ministry of Education, we contacted school principals in northern Israel. We briefly described the study to them, inviting their collaboration and permission to recruit teachers from their school for the study. Upon their approval and written consent, we asked the principals to complete the questionnaire, and then a member of the research team directly contacted teachers in their respective schools, inviting them to participate. Teachers who expressed interest were provided a more detailed explanation about the study, and those who agreed to participate provided their written consent and completed the research questionnaires individually, using paper and pencil.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Perceived Organizational Support for Strengths Use

The Perceived Organizational Support For Strengths Use (POSSU) scale [48] was completed by principals and teachers. This measure comprises seven items (e.g., "This organization gives me the opportunity to do what I am good at") that are presented on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always). The measure's internal consistency was high for both teachers (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.93$) and principals (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.86$). In this measure, 2% of the teachers and none of the principals had missing data.

2.3.2. Perceived Organizational Support for Deficit Correction

The Perceived Organizational Support For Deficit Correction (POSDC) scale [48] was completed by principals and teachers. It comprises five items that assess an organizations' focus on improving employees' weaknesses (e.g., "In this organization, I receive training to improve my weak points"). Items are presented on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always). For the current sample, the measure's internal consistency was good for both teachers (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.88$) and principals (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.92$). In this measure, 2% of the teachers had missing data, and none of the principals (in addition to their completion by teachers).

2.3.3. Strengths Use

The Strengths Use Survey (SUS) [76] was used to assess teachers' strengths use at work. In the present study, we asked the teachers to focus on their use of strengths at work (e.g., "I find it easy to use my strengths in the things I do at work"). The SUS's 14 items are presented on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). For the current sample, the scale's internal consistency was high (Cronbach's α = 0.92, McDonald's ω = 0.92). None of the teachers had missing data in this measure.

2.3.4. Work and Meaning Inventory

The Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) [64] is a 10-item measure used to assess teachers' sense of meaning at work (e.g., "I know my work generates a positive change in the world"). Items are presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (absolutely untrue) to 5 (absolutely true). For the current sample, the scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.81$). None of the participants had missing data in this measure.

2.3.5. Utrecht Work Engagement Scale

Teachers' work engagement was assessed with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) [56]. This scale comprises nine items (e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy") presented on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). For the current sample, the scale showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.84, McDonald's ω = 0.84). None of the participants had missing data in this measure.

2.3.6. Job Satisfaction

Teachers' job satisfaction was assessed with a three-item version of the General Job Satisfaction scale from the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) [4,68]. The items assess general job satisfaction (e.g., "Generally, are you pleased with your job?") and are presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (very displeased) to 5 (very pleased). For the

current sample, the scale's internal consistency was satisfactory (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$, McDonald's $\omega = 0.72$). In this measure, none of the participants had missing data.

2.4. Data Analysis

Preliminary analyses were conducted using SPSS 27 software. First, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; see Appendix A for factor loadings). Then, we assessed the average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR) and convergent validity (CV) for each study variable among teachers and principals (Table 1). All AVE values exceeded 0.5, CR values were larger than 0.7, and CV values were higher than 0.5, as recommended [83,84].

Table 1. Average variance extracted, composite reliability and convergent validity for teachers' and principals' study variables.

	Г	eachers' Leve	el	P	rincipals' Lev	vel
	AVE	CR	CV	AVE	CR	CV
1. Schools' support for strengths use	0.69	0.92	0.82	0.53	0.89	0.72
2. Schools' support for deficit correction	0.66	0.90	0.80	0.51	0.83	0.72
3. Teachers' strengths use	0.56	0.95	0.74			
4. Sense of meaning at work	0.57	0.93	0.75			
5. Work engagement	0.57	0.92	0.75			
6. Job satisfaction	0.51	0.73	0.71			

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; CV = convergent validity.

We examined variables' means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for teachers and principals, and examined initial associations with age and gender that may warrant controlling for these variables in subsequent analyses (when examining the research hypotheses). We also conducted intraclass correlation (ICC) analysis for teachers' variables that were to be included as dependent variables in a multilevel analysis (see below), to assess the proportion variance in the outcome variables attributable to between-group differences relative to within-group differences. The ICC values were 0.86–0.93 (see details in Appendix B), indicating potentially notable between-group differences (i.e., differences at the school level) for all variables.

To examine our first research hypothesis (H1), we conducted a set of four hierarchical regressions using SPSS 27 while controlling for teachers' age. In these regressions, teachers' age was entered at Step 1 as a control variable, and schools' support for strengths use (POSSU) was entered at Step 2. The dependent variables were teachers' strengths use, sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction. In order to examine our second research hypothesis (H2), we conducted similar regressions in which schools' support for deficit correction (POSDC) was entered as the independent variable in Step 2. Then, we compared the regression coefficients in the respective regressions in which POSSU was the independent variable using *t*-tests. To examine the role of teachers' strengths use at work in mediating the associations of POSSU with teachers' sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction (H3), we used PROCESS code for SPSS 27 (Model 4) [85,86]. This analysis has been recommended for exploring mediation in crosssectional studies of this kind (e.g., [87,88]), enabling the use of bias-corrected bootstrapping methods that make no assumptions of normality [89]. In the present analyses, we also controlled for teachers' age, entered in the equations as a covariate, due to its significant association with teachers' strengths use and job satisfaction (Table 2).

	Mean	SD		1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Schools' support for strengths use	6.11	0.80							
2. Schools' support for deficit correction	5.88	1.10	Pearson Spearman	0.34 ** (0.47 **)					
3. Teachers' strengths use	6.23	0.58	Pearson Spearman	0.49 ** (0.50 **)	0.35 ** (0.48 **)				
4. Sense of meaning at work	4.30	0.50	Pearson Spearman	0.33 ** (0.36 **)	0.14 * (0.19 **)	0.41 ** (0.40 **)			
5. Work engagement	6.10	0.70	Pearson Spearman	0.29 ** (0.29 **)	0.14 * (0.19 **)	0.42 ** (0.42 **)	0.55 ** (0.50 **)		
6. Job satisfaction	4.09	0.75	Pearson Spearman	0.43 ** (0.41 **)	0.17 ** (0.23 **)	0.42 ** (0.42 **)	0.51 ** (0.47 **)	0.62 ** (0.59 **)	
7. Age	40.72	7.78	Pearson Spearman	0.01 (0.04)	-0.09 (-0.03)	0.11 * (0.11)	-0.08 (-0.11)	0.11 (0.09)	0.18 ** (-0.15 *)
8. Gender	1.83	0.37	Pearson Spearman	0.11 (0.09)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.06 (0.03)	0.07 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.06 (-0.03)

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and Pearson and Spearman correlations of the teacher-level variables.

Note: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01. Spearman correlations are presented in parentheses.

We conducted a set of hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analyses using HLM Standard software to examine associations of principals' perceptions of their schools' support for strengths use (POSSU) and for deficit correction (POSDC) with schoolteachers' perceptions of these supports (H4). We also used HLM to examine the associations of these principals' perceptions (POSSU and POSDC) with schoolteachers' strengths use, sense of meaning, work engagement, and job satisfaction (H5). In the HLM analyses, teachers' data (Level 1) were nested within principals' data (Level 2—school level). Principals' age was entered in the equations as a control variable (random effect). Then, principals' POSSU or POSDC were entered as independent variables (fixed effects), and teachers' perceptions and attitudes were entered as the dependent variables.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analysis

The study variables' means, standard deviations, and correlations are presented in Table 2 (teacher data) and Table 3 (principal data). The correlations among the teacher variables provided initial support for H1, indicating significant positive associations of schools' support for strengths use (POSSU), as perceived by teachers, with teachers' strength use (r = 0.56, p < 0.01), sense of meaning at work (r = 0.43, p < 0.01), work engagement (r = 0.35, p < 0.01), and job satisfaction (r = 0.47, p < 0.01). Also significant were positive associations of teachers' schools' support for deficit correction (POSDC) with teachers' strength use (r = 0.34, p < 0.01), sense of meaning at work (r = 0.17, p < 0.05), work engagement (r = 0.15, p < 0.05), and job satisfaction (r = 0.17, p < 0.01). The data also provided initial support for H2, as organizational support for strengths use (POSSU) yielded significantly stronger associations for all variables than support for deficit correction (POSDC), for teachers' strengths use, sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction (Z = 3.52, 4.07, 2.85, and 4.43 respectively; all p's < 0.01).

	Mean	SD		1	2
1. Schools' support for strengths use (principals' perceptions)	6.36	0.53			
2. Schools' support for deficit correction (principals' perceptions)	6.10	0.82	Pearson Spearman	0.63 ** (0.60 **)	
3. Age	48.3	7.32	Pearson Spearman	0.04 (0.04)	0.08 (0.10)
4. Gender	1.6	48	Pearson Spearman	-0.02 (-0.01)	0.05 (0.08)

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of principal-level variables.

Note: ** p < 0.01. Spearman correlations are presented in parentheses.

We examined the associations of the study's variables with teachers' age and gender. No variables were differentiated by gender, and the only significant associations concerning age were with strengths use (r = 0.14, p < 0.05) and job satisfaction (r = 0.18, p < 0.01) (Table 2). Thus, age was entered as a control variable in the subsequent analyses.

3.2. Teacher-Level Analyses

3.2.1. Correlates of Teachers' Reports on Schools' Support for Strengths Use and for Deficit Correction (H1, H2)

Four hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine H1. The results (Table 4) supported H1, indicating that schools' support for strengths use (POSSU) was positively associated with teachers' strength use (

mboxemph β = 0.56, *p* < 0.001), sense of meaning at work (β = 0.43, *p* < 0.001), work engagement (β = 0.34, *p* < 0.001), and job satisfaction (β = 0.46, *p* < 0.001), even when controlling for teachers' age. Interestingly, a similar set of four analyses conducted with schools' support for teachers' deficit corrections (POSDC) as the independent variable (Table 4) yielded similar significant positive associations with teachers' strength use (β = 0.36, *p* < 0.001), sense of meaning at work (β = 0.14, *p* < 0.05), work engagement (β = 0.15, *p* < 0.05), and job satisfaction (β = 0.19, *p* < 0.01).

Comparison of the regression coefficients of POSSU and POSDC (H2) indicated significant differences between the regression slopes in strengths use (t = 4.22; p < 0.001), sense of meaning at work (t = 4.40; p < 0.001), work engagement (t = 2.82; p < 0.01), and job satisfaction (t = 4.23; p < 0.001). In all the regressions, teachers' POSSU was more strongly associated with the dependent variables than their POSDC, supporting H2.

		Teac	hers' Strengt	hs Use			Me	eaning at Wo	ork			W	ork Engagem	ent			J	ob Satisfacti	on	
	Μ	odel 1		Model 2		Μ	odel 1		Model 2		М	odel 1]	Model 2		М	odel 1]	Model 2	
	R ²	β	R ² (Δ)	β	SE	R ²	β	R ² (Δ)	β	SE	R ²	β	R ² (Δ)	β	SE	R ²	β	R ² (Δ)	β	SE
Predicti	ng from t	teacher PO	SSU																	
Step 1 Age	0.01	0.11	0.04	0.10	0.00	0.01	-0.08	0.12	-0.08	0.00	0.01	0.11	0.00	0.10	0.01	0.03	0.18 **	0.01	0.17 **	0.01
Step 2			0.26 (0.25 ***)					0.12 (0.11 ***)					0.09 (0.08 ***)					0.21 (0.19 ***)		
POSSU			· · ·	0.50 ***	0.04			· · · ·	0.33 ***	0.04			· · ·	0.29 ***	0.06			· /	0.43 ***	0.06
Predicti	ng from t	teacher PO	SDC																	
Step 1 Age	0.01	0.11		0.15 *	0.01	0.01	-0.08		-0.06	0.00	0.01	0.11		0.12	0.01	0.03	0.18 **		0.19 **	0.01
Step 2			0.14 (0.13 ***)					0.02 (0.02 *)					0.04 (0.02 *)					0.07 (0.04 **)		
POSDC				0.36 ***	0.04			()	0.14 *	0.03			()	0.15 *	0.05			()	0.19 **	0.05

Table 4. Regression coefficients predicting teachers' strength use, work engagement, meaning at work, and job satisfaction from schools' support for strength use and for deficit correction (teachers' perceptions).

Note: POSSU = teachers' perceived school support for strengths use; POSDC = teachers' perceived school support for deficit correction; $\Delta = R^2$ change (adjusted); * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001; new steps and regression models are presented in bold.

The unstandardized correlations and bootstrap solutions of the mediation analyses are presented in Table 5 and Figure 2. All three mediation models for teachers' POSSU supported the mediation hypotheses (H3), indicating significant direct paths from teachers' reports on schools' support for strengths use to their sense of meaning at work and job satisfaction, and significant mediation paths from POSSU to teachers' sense of meaning at work, engagement, and job satisfaction via teachers' strengths use (see Figure 2 and Table 5; zero was not within the 95% confidence intervals in all three analyses).

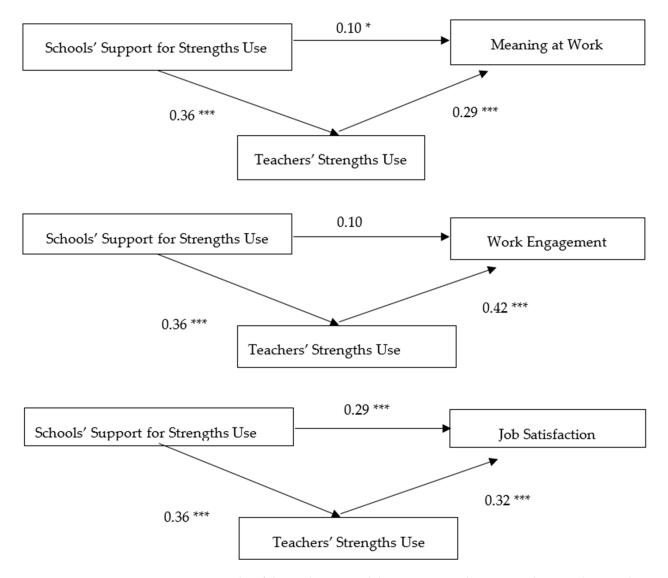


Figure 2. Results of the mediation model examining teachers' strengths use role in mediating the association between perceived schools' support for strengths use and teachers' sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction. Note: The analyses were conducted while controlling for teachers' age. * p < 0.05; *** p < 0.001.

	Sense of Meani	ng at Work	Work Engagem	ent	Job Satisfaction		
	Bootstrap 95% CIs (LLCI, ULCI)	Effect	Bootstrap 95% CIs (LLCI, ULCI)	Effect	Bootstrap 95% CIs (LLCI, ULCI)	Effect	
Direct effect of POSSU	[0.02, 0.18]	0.10 *	[-0.01, 0.22]	0.10	[0.17, 0.41]	0.29 ***	
Indirect effect of POSSU via teachers' reported strengths use	[0.06, 0.16]	0.11 ***	[0.09, 0.23]	0.15 ***	[0.05, 0.18]	0.11 ***	

Note: POSSU = teachers' perceived school support for strengths use; 95% confidence intervals are presented in brackets; LLCI = lower-level confidence interval; ULCI = upper-level confidence interval. Confidence intervals that do not include 0 (null association) are significant. * p < 0.05 *** p < 0.001.

3.2.3. Correlates of Principals' Reports on Schools' Support for Strengths Use (POSSU) and for Deficit Correction (POSDC) (H4, H5)

The first set of HLM analyses, examining the associations of principals' and teachers' POSSU, did not support H4, indicating that principals' POSSU was not significantly associated with teachers' POSSU. Principals' POSSU was not associated with teachers' strengths use either. Despite these non-significant associations, principals' POSSU was positively associated with teachers' sense of meaning at work and job satisfaction, but it was not significantly associated with teachers' work engagement (Table 6). The second set of analyses indicated that principals' POSDC was not significantly associated with teachers' POSDC either. However, whereas principals' POSDC was positively associated with teachers' reported strengths use, it was not associated with the remaining dependent variables (i.e., teachers' sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction; Table 7).

	Coefficient	SE	t-Ratio	<i>p</i> -Value
Teachers' perceived so	chool support for stren	gths use (POSSU)		
Age	-0.00	0.00	-0.51	0.61
Principals' POSSU	0.12	0.09	1.26	0.21
Teachers' Strengths U	se			
Age	0.01	0.00	1.07	0.29
Principals' POSSU	0.10	0.08	1.23	0.22
Teachers' Sense of Me	eaning			
Age	-0.01	0.00	-1.39	0.17
Principals' POSSU	0.15 *	0.06	2.45	0.02
Teachers' Work				
Engagement				
Age	0.01	0.01	1.31	0.19
Principals' POSSU	0.09	0.08	1.11	0.27
Teachers' Job				
Satisfaction				
Age	0.02 **	0.01	2.48	0.01
Principals' POSSU	0.18 *	0.08	2.05	0.05

Table 6. Unstandardized HLM coefficients for principals' reports on schools' support for strengths use associations with teachers' strengths use, sense of meaning, engagement, and job satisfaction.

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01. POSSU = perceived school support for strengths use; new regression models are presented in bold.

	Coefficient	SE	t-Ratio	<i>p</i> -Value
Teachers' perceived so	chool support for defic	it correction (POSDC)		
Age	-0.01	0.01	-1.54	0.13
Principals' POSDC	0.04	0.07	0.51	0.61
Teachers' Strengths U	se			
Age	0.00	0.01	0.81	0.41
Principals' POSDC	0.13 **	0.05	2.62	0.01
Teachers' Sense of Me	eaning			
Age	-0.00	0.00	-1.27	0.21
Principals' POSDC	-0.01	0.03	-0.45	0.65
Teachers' Work				
Engagement				
Age	0.01	0.01	1.29	0.20
Principals' POSDC	-0.02	0.03	-0.70	0.50
Teachers' Job				
Satisfaction				
Age	0.02 *	0.01	2.45	0.02
Principals' POSDC	-0.06	0.04	-1.63	0.11

Table 7. Unstandardized HLM coefficients for principals' reports on schools' support for deficit correction associations with teachers' strengths use, sense of meaning, engagement, and job satisfaction.

Note: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01. POSDC = perceived school support for deficit correction; new regression models are presented in bold.

4. Discussion

Research suggests that using our strengths can promote positive feelings, attitudes, motivation, and performance [20], and that supporting strengths use at work can contribute to employees' work-related positive affect and performance [32,48,53]. Supporting strengths use seems to be especially pertinent for the school setting, where teachers' use of their personal strengths is considered by many scholars as key to professional success [11,23]. Thus, in the present study, we examined how schools' support for teachers' strengths use (as perceived by teachers and principals) is associated with teachers' self-reported strengths use, sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction. We also compared these associations with these work-related variables' associations with schools' support for teachers' deficit correction. Thus, we sought to examine the differences and similarities of the potential effects of these two methods of teacher improvement on teachers' strengths use and work-related well-being, in order to gain insights about organizational practices that can foster sustainable well-being. Moreover, we examined the role of teachers' reported strengths use in mediating the effects of schools' support for strengths use.

The findings provided general support for the hypotheses, indicating that teachers are more likely to report more strengths use and to experience a greater sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction when they perceive their school as supporting strengths use. It appears that the supportive environment that encourages teachers to do what they do best contributes to positive emotions and work-related attitudes, similar to what was found among employees in other organizations. For example, a recent study of over 1800 employees in Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, Indonesia, and South Africa demonstrated significant associations of employees' POSSU with increased work engagement and life satisfaction and decreased burnout [72]. The present study further validates this association among teachers. Studies have suggested that teachers may not have extended knowledge about strengths and their use at work [10] and are not always able to readily identify their own strong points [90]. Thus, acknowledging teachers' strengths and encouraging them to apply them in teaching may be refreshing and energizing for teachers.

As hypothesized, the associations between schools' support for strengths use and teachers' work-related well-being were more robust than those of schools' support for deficit correction with these variables. These findings correspond with other studies indicating stronger positive effects of organizational support for strengths use among employees in other countries (e.g., [91]). A recent study conducted in Canada [92] indicated that these stronger positive effects of supporting strengths use may be related to its ability to increase employees' autonomous motivation and reduce controlled motivation, while supporting deficit correction seemed to favor controlled motivation.

The distinction between supporting strengths use and correcting deficits is noteworthy, given the traditional focus of teacher training on narrowing professional gaps. Whereas studies have shown that experience (i.e., informal on-the-job training) increases teacher productivity, formal professional development training to enhance teacher productivity yields equivocal outcomes [93]. It would be interesting to examine whether associations between schools' support for strengths use (POSSU) and various measures of teacher performance are stronger than those of performance with support for deficit correction. We suspect that teachers' motivation and satisfaction may increase when they discover how to capitalize on their strengths in teaching. Enhancing strengths awareness and their deployment may in turn contribute to teachers' performance, a phenomenon demonstrated for employees in other professions [17,94]. These processes may also extend to other staff members, creating a positive, productive school culture [22,45,95].

Some initial support for the mechanisms underlying these ideas can be discerned in the present findings: Teachers' POSSU was associated with their strengths use at work, and this use of their strengths at work mediated the associations of their POSSU with teachers' sense of meaning, work engagement, and job satisfaction. These findings align with previous studies that highlight the crucial contribution of supervisors' and organizations' support for employees' actual strengths use and the subsequent benefits of increased strengths use (e.g., [10,32,72,96]). These processes may be driven by a sense of fulfillment that employees appear to obtain from using their strengths at work, which can contribute to attaining school goals [10,29,76,94].

Interestingly, POSSU and POSDC of principals and teachers from the same schools were not significantly associated with each other. This may be due to methodological issues (e.g., only five teachers were surveyed in each school) or social desirability effects (i.e., of some principals' reports). However, it may also reflect a genuine gap between principals' and teachers' perceptions about the school's attitude toward improvement and the values that the school's (and principal's) activities, policies, and routines convey. Such gaps have been reported regarding other aspects of human resources and managerial practices [97–99], and were thus not unexpected. However, despite this non-significant association, principals' perceptions about schools' support for strengths use (POSSU) were positively associated with teachers' sense of meaning at work and job satisfaction, indicating that principals' intentions to support teachers' strengths use may positively impact teachers' feeling that they are meaningful or that their work is meaningful and satisfying. However, principals' POSSU did not yield significant associations with teachers' self-reported strengths use or work engagement. These findings suggest that although principals' intentions to support teachers' strengths use may be related to teachers' sense of fulfillment at work, teachers' POSSU is more clearly and broadly related to their strengths use and well-being. If principals' POSSU is merely more reflective of their intentions, then the findings indicate a need to examine how these intentions are pursued in reality and the extent to which others share these perceptions at the school.

Principals' perceptions about schools' support for deficit correction (POSDC) were associated with teachers' reported strengths use, but not with their reported work-related well-being. This finding was unexpected and is worthy of further exploration. It may suggest that in some way, principals' focus on improvement and narrowing professional gaps encourages teachers to reach into their strengths or restructure their jobs in a way that enables them to do more of what they do well. If this is the case, it would be valuable to deepen our understanding of the mechanisms underlying this process. Principals that focus on improvement may do so in different ways, e.g., focusing on strengths use and deficit correction are intertwined, rather than representing discrete approaches. The high correlation (r = 0.63) between principals' POSSU and their POSDC supports this idea.

4.1. Practical Implications

The current study holds practical implications for educators, school principals, policymakers, and teacher trainers for developing sustainable educational work environments. It highlights the benefits of focusing on teachers' strengths as a springboard for improvement that can potentially contribute to sustainable motivation and well-being over prolonged periods, while maintaining teachers' sense of meaning, engagement, and satisfaction at work. These benefits (and additional ones, like increased performance) have been demonstrated in other organizations [6,53]. However, these benefits seem especially pertinent to the teaching profession, a field that relies heavily on the teacher's personal characteristics and unique skills, beliefs, and identity (e.g., [11,23]). Furthermore, supporting teachers' strengths use may help combat the high rates of burnout and attrition [100,101] among teachers [70], as POSSU was consistently negatively associated with burnout [48,91]. The present study proposes that equipping educators with the tools to expand their strengths use at work and creating organizational environments that encourage this may be a promising path to sustainable teacher improvement and enhanced motivation in the long term. We propose that this strategy be implemented more regularly, possibly to supplement more traditional improvement routes aiming to narrow professional gaps.

A focus on teachers' strengths may present a better use of resources, because it need not require more resources than remediating deficits, but rather a different application of existing ones. Teachers' strengths use can be supported by identifying and acknowledging teachers' personal strengths (e.g., by the teacher, supervisor, principal, colleagues, and/or students) and suggesting opportunities for their use in teaching. This process can engage the teacher, team members, and/or their supervisor. Job-crafting techniques can be applied to redesign teaching and other tasks to facilitate more opportunities for teachers to use their strengths without requiring more effort [102]. Strengths use can also be encouraged in task assignments, allocating tasks among teachers or staff that better match each person's strengths and partnering teachers that can benefit from each other's strengths use [6,103]. Such practices do not require significantly more resources. However, they imply adopting a more open, creative conceptual framework that focuses on human capital and the desire to make the most of teachers' personal qualities. This framework can coexist with deficit correction and training for narrowing professional gaps. Indeed, including both approaches to professional improvement has been recommended by other researchers [48]. It may further be helpful in fostering sustainable development and well-being in education organizations in the long term, because it addresses both strengths and weaknesses, thus promoting opportunities for growth while also coping with issues that hinder development (i.e., prevention and promotion strategies) [1,2].

4.2. Study Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting its results. First, its cross-sectional design did not allow for a longitudinal examination of connections among the variables. Considering that this is a relatively new field, future studies should adopt longitudinal designs, which may prove beneficial in ascertaining the effects of school environments that support strengths use on teachers' actual strengths use and well-being. The relatively small number of teachers from each school and the self-report nature of the measures for principals and teachers represent additional limitations. It would be valuable to recruit larger samples from the surveyed schools and obtain external evaluations of teachers' and principals' behavior and school achievement. As the study was limited to an elementary school context, further exploration of the explored phenomena in secondary education frameworks would help substantiate the generalizability of the findings. In a

similar vein, it would be beneficial to examine the effects of POSSU and POSDC in schools in other countries.

4.3. Conclusions

The study is the first to explore associations of schools' support for strengths use with teachers' strengths use, their sense of meaning at work, work engagement, and job satisfaction, factors that are closely linked to teachers' professional performance and retention and positive student outcomes [5,57,59,70]. The study highlights the potential positive effects of such a supportive culture for strengths use on teachers' strengths use and well-being, and suggests that adopting such a supportive framework may prove effective in improving and retaining teachers, as well as promote sustainable positive organizational environments in education institutions.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.L. and M.A.A.; methodology, S.L.; formal analysis, E.N., S.L. and M.A.A.; data curation, M.A.A., E.N. and S.L.; writing—original draft preparation, M.A.A. and S.L.; writing—review and editing, S.L.; supervision, S.L.; project administration, S.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Haifa Faculty of Education, protocol code 016/17.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data can be provided upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Scale and items used in the study and their factor loadings.

		Factor Lo	oadings
Sca	le and Items	Teacher Data	Principal Data
Tea	cher Support for Strengths Use:		
1.	This organization gives me the opportunity to do what I am good at.	0.82	0.52
2.	This organization allows me to use my talents.	0.84	0.92
3.	This organization ensures that my strengths are aligned with my job tasks.	0.91	0.71
4.	This organization makes the most of my talents.	0.92	0.70
5.	This organization focuses on what I am good at.	0.79	0.76
6.	This organization applies my strong points.	0.82	0.67
7.	This organization allows me to do my job in a manner that best suits my strong points.	0.65	0.76
Tea	cher Support for Deficit Correction:		
1.	In this organization, I receive training to improve my weak points.	0.59	0.76
2.	This organization requires me to work on my shortcomings.	0.84	0.82
3.	In this organization, my development plan aims to better my weaknesses.	0.87	0.74
4.	In this organization, performance appraisals address my areas of development.	0.91	0.70
5.	This organization expects me to improve the things I am not good at.	0.80	0.51

Table A1. Cont.

		Factor Lo	oadings
Sca	e and Items	Teacher Data	Principal Data
Теа	cher Strengths Use:		
1.	I am regularly able to do what I do best.	0.72	
2.	I always play to my strengths.	0.70	
3.	I always try to use my strengths.	0.80	
4.	I achieve what I want by using my strengths.	0.81	
5.	I use my strengths every day.	0.78	
6.	I use my strengths to get what I want out of life.	0.78	
7.	My work gives me lots of opportunities to use my strengths	0.54	
3.	My life presents me with lots of different ways to use my strengths.	0.51	
).	Using my strengths comes naturally to me.	0.88	
.0.	I find it easy to use my strengths in the things I do.	0.82	
1.	I am able to use my strengths in lots of different situations.	0.82	
12.	Most of my time is spent doing the things that I am good at doing.	0.60	
13.	Using my strengths is something I am familiar with.	0.76	
14.	I am able to use my strengths in lots of different ways.	0.85	
Геа	cher Sense of Meaning:		
	I have found a meaningful career.	0.84	
2.	I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.	0.86	
3.	I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.	0.90	
1 .	I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.	0.74	
5.	I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.	0.59	
5.	My work helps me better understand myself.	0.77	
7.	My work helps me make sense of the world around me.	0.71	
3.	I know my work makes a positive difference in the world.	0.71	
9.	My work really makes no difference to the world. (R)	0.50	
10.	The work I do serves a greater purpose.	0.85	
Геа	cher Work Engagement:		
	At my work, I feel bursting with energy.	0.89	
2.	I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.	0.83	
3.	I am enthusiastic about my job.	0.00	
1 .	My job inspires me.	0.72	
5.	When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	0.62	
5.	I am happy when I'm immersed in my work.	0.70	
7.	I am proud of the work that I do.	0.54	
3.	I am completely immersed in my work.	0.81	
Э.	I get carried away when I am working.	0.91	
	cher Job Satisfaction:	0.71	
	Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with this job.	0.70	
2.	I am generally satisfied with the kind of work I do in this job.	0.69	
<u>-</u> . 3.	Circle the face that best expresses your general feelings towards your work.	0.68	
<i>·</i> ·	Note: Scale names are presented in hold.	0.75	

Note: Scale names are presented in bold.

Appendix B

Table A2. Teachers' intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) for dependent variables.

	ICC	
Teachers' POSSU	0.93	
Teachers' POSDC	0.86	
Teachers' strengths use	0.96	
Teachers' sense of meaning at work	0.95	
Teachers' work engagement	0.93	
Teachers' job satisfaction	0.89	

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