Self-perceived Occupational Prestige among Romanian Teaching Staff: Organisational Explicative Factors

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Abstract. *Most studies discuss occupational prestige by stressing out the macro-social aspects related to specific social stratification models. This paper aims to address the impact of organizational aspects on how teachers perceive the prestige of their occupational group, moving the focus on the micro-social context of their daily activity. The way teaching staff evaluate the social prestige of their profession fulfils normative and motivational functions and is, hence, reflected in how they actually perform their professional roles, serving both explicative and prospective purposes. In trying to identify the main factors that can explain the self-perceived level of occupational prestige among educators and teachers, we conducted a national level study among Romanian teachers (N=2165) from preschool to high school educational stages. Within the explicative model ($R^2=0.38$), we were able to group the factors in three main categories: material conditions, bureaucratic and relational aspects. The findings reveal that teachers' involvement in bureaucratic activities such as elaborating different reports, as well as a lower level of satisfaction regarding the relation they have with students, parents and representatives of the school's management end up decreasing the self-perceived occupational prestige. Our study lays emphasis on the fact that organizational factors influence teachers' self-perceived prestige and, thus, can affect the overall quality of the educational act. Therefore, to improve this, a greater involvement of national and local authorities in providing better material conditions in schools, in supporting the de-bureaucratization of the educational system and re-evaluating the role of teacher-student-parent communication triad is needed.*

Keywords: *occupational prestige, organizational factors, education, teachers' social status, bureaucracy.*

Introduction

Prestige has been most commonly based on occupation (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007), thus discussed in terms of the socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the occupational groups. Whether it was approached within a rather functional framework, reflecting the importance attributed to a certain profession in a society, according to the social functions it serves, or in relation to the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1998) of the occupational groups, prestige was seen as a form of social recognition that reflects the social status afforded by a particular occupation (Fujishiro, Xu & Gong, 2010). Thus, most studies place occupational prestige in relation with wider social stratification and social mobility phenomena. Unlike social class, which is strongly economic-based, capturing differences in labour market positions in terms of wages, prestige, as alternative form of social stratification (Weber, 1978), is a symbolic sign of the degree of social honor attached to certain social positions.

Although the level of income and the occupational closure, that is, institutionalized barriers to entering particular occupations (Weeden & Grusky, 2005) remain constitutive elements in addressing occupational prestige, the concept covers a wider spectrum of aspects such as: "decision power, the level of qualification, value added to society, initiative and independence, work style, the level of responsibilities, training, education and abilities, personal independence, the degree of importance of a typical professional error, the intelligence level required, the scarcity of the qualified personnel" (Buzea & Scârneci, 2011, p.9). In this paper we use the terms "status" and "prestige" interchangeably, referring not only to "an occupation's distribution of wages, but also to the social perceptions of the relative merits of particular occupations" (Kim, Kim, Jaquette & Bastedo, 2014, p.768)

There is a strong comparative dimension embedded in this concept, as occupational prestige refers to "the public perception of the relative position of an occupation in a hierarchy of occupations" (Hoyle, 2001, p.139), thus comparing occupations among them. However, when teachers as occupational group are at stake, we are facing a secondary comparative dimension, as there are important variations within the same occupational group between primary school teachers, secondary school teachers and university school teachers. These categories have different statuses that are defined as positions in education system with collections of rights and duties. These differences in their within-occupational group positions bring along important consequences for their social status, which is seen as "an

effective claim to social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges" (Weber, 1978, p.305).

This paper discusses how Romanian educators, primary teachers (grades 1-4), and teachers from lower (grade 5-8) and upper secondary school (grade 9-12) evaluate their prestige given the specific organizational context they are working within, focusing on how the daily activities influence their self-perceived level of occupational prestige. Due to the fact that there are three kinds of professional categories, we will name all "teaching staff" in order to make the text more fluent, but we will test for the differences between them (i.e. "educators", "primary teachers", and "teachers").

The present study is conducted in the context of the Romanian public debate for a new law regarding the status of the teaching staff. The bill stipulates the rights, the duties, and the incompatibilities with the quality of the members of the teaching staff. The new law should improve the quality of the activity and the prestige of the Romanian teaching staff, as well. Previous studies show that teachers perceive that their prestige has decreased after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 (Frunzaru, Oprea & Parsachiv, 2014; Frunzaru, Pricopie, Corbu, Ivan & Cismaru, 2013). Moreover, the low level of teachers' prestige, as perceived by the pupils themselves, has become an important barrier in choosing this career path, as the attractiveness of this profession has been significantly diminished. Therefore, pupils' lack of motivation for studying is determined partially by the fact that there is "a high level of confusion within the teaching staff that are dissatisfied with their salaries, work conditions, and especially by the more and more decreasing prestige of the educator's profession" (Frunzaru et al., 2013, p.162). Authors explain the low level of the teachers' prestige by the negative media coverage of teaching, corroborated with a general lack of respect that they have to cope with from both students and parents, as well as authorities.

In this context, the study aims to examine how organizational aspects, such as material conditions, bureaucratic and relational aspects, influence the teaching staff self-perceived prestige. The paper is organized as follows: in the first part, it discusses the occupational prestige of teachers and the main insights brought forward by previous studies that have addressed this issue, while, in the second part, it presents the findings of a survey on Romanian teaching staff that examined the relationship between organizational aspects and the teaching staff self-perceived level of prestige.

Occupational prestige of teachers

The social and technological changes that our society have had to cope with during the last decades had come with significant impact in terms of social stratification and labour market dynamics. Hoyle laid stress on the "high consistency in the rank order of occupations across countries with different cultures and political systems and at different stages of economic development" (Hoyle, 2001, p.139), thus reaffirming the general stability of occupational hierarchies that most comparative studies on occupational status were convergent in showing (Everton, Turner, Hargreaves & Pell, 2007, p.254). However, we would argue that the last two decades came with disruptive technological changes in terms of socio-economic dynamics, which implicitly affected the labor market and the corollary occupational prestige hierarchies. Moreover, as Ballakrishnen (2012, p.381) noticed, "universality of professional prestige has traditionally not taken into consideration the effect of globalization as a prestige factor in and of itself".

Education is one of the main social fields that were not only forced to cope with both technological changes and globalization, but, moreover, it had to integrate them, as digitization and internationalization of the educational act had to be embraced in order to avoid becoming asynchronous with the general social dynamics. In this context of informational abundance and less knowledge-dependence on teachers, the role and, thus, the status of teachers has inevitably changed, as he is "no longer facing a static and homogeneous state, but a swiftly changing and highly heterogeneous social environment" (Ch'ing-Jiang, 1994, p.76). Moreover, this field has been "constantly urged by specific reforms, re-organizations, precariousness, resource reallocation, and subjected to both internal (from various organizational levels within the school) and external (e.g. students, families) demands" (Gozzoli, Frascaroli & D'Angelo, 2015, p.2241), which are not only more complex, but also more prone to accelerate change. There is also a secondary education-based phenomenon in terms of social stratification that could had affected the teachers' status, as "the gap in average occupational prestige between university graduates and individuals with lower educational attainment decreased and heterogeneity among graduates increased" (Klein, 2015, p.17).

The interest in the occupational prestige of teachers was related on the one hand to the general concern for the educational system and the evolution of the new generations, as the "social status of teachers is an important area of inquiry that provides insight into the significance attached to education in each country" (Fwu & Wang, 2002, p.211). On the other hand, it was seen as a reactive position to a symptomatic loss of attractiveness of this

occupation, as teaching, though playing a central role within the knowledge economy model, is now a profession that "more and more people want to leave, fewer and fewer want to join, and very few are interested in leading" (Hargreaves, 2003, p.2). Thus, studies about the recruitment and retention of teachers brought forward the teachers' occupational prestige as important explicative factor (Ingersoll, 2001; Santiago, 2005)

There are two complementary approaches of teachers' occupational prestige: an *outsider's* perspective that reflects the way teachers are perceived by the others in comparison with other occupations, and an *insider's* perspective that shows the self-perceived level of prestige, which, in turn, reveals "the extent of self-acceptance and self-expectation on the part of teachers, their willingness to commit to educational work, and their perception of the importance and professionalism of teaching" (Ch'ing-Jiang, 1994, p.77).

The external prestige ranking of teachers, which speaks about the society's general evaluation of the value of their work, place them in the upper quartile of the range, located amongst the semi-professions of social work (Hoyle, 2001), yet below other professions which require similar educational paths (i.e. doctors, lawyers, engineers etc.). The fact that the average salary levels tend to be lower than those of the other professions that require similar level of education, the low opportunity for promotion or the fact that teaching is now less restricted by occupational closure than other professions have led to a decrease in the prestige of this occupation. Another aspect that can be added refers to the large-scale familiarly with this occupational group as "all members of the population have experienced lengthy exposure to teachers, which leaves them with little in the way of professional mystique" (Hoyle, 2001, p.141). A more recent study showed that, among these factors, low prestige attribution and evaluation of teaching as a rather unattractive career are mainly based on the general perceptions on working conditions and financial rewards (Everton et al., 2007, p.253).

Moreover, there is a high and continuous potential for disorder in this professional field, which is translated into a latent image crisis source, as "no other profession faces the problem of control, with so few sanctions, as teaching. It is perhaps the ever-present need to maintain control, and the consequences of even the partial loss of control, which shapes the image of the teacher to the detriment of the prestige of the profession." (Hoyle, 2001, p.143). This high level of vulnerability plays is part in affecting the status of teachers.

Speaking about a professional field that mobilizes large-scale human resources, at all levels, brings out two main consequences: one related to the fact that the larger and less exclusive the occupational group is, the lower the prestige attached to membership of this group (Weber, 1978), and another one related to the within-occupational group prestige variation. In this regard it seems that "there are more significant variations *within* the semi-profession category when *primary school teacher* and *secondary school teacher* are presented as different titles. The former is invariably ranked below the latter, but the degree of perceived distance varies between countries" (Hoyle, 2001, p.140).

When addressing the insider's perspective, previous studies have shown that teachers' own perceptions were much less positive (Ingersoll, 2001). As prestige of professions performs regulative and motivational functions (Kaiumov, Kanikov & Iskhakova, 2014, p.44) and is also stronlgy related to job satisfaction (Kim et al, 2014), researchers have looked into the posible factors that can explain this occupational prestige uderestimation phenomenon. Although they seem to be rather satisfied with the intrinsic aspects of teaching, thus reaffirming the vocational commitment towards this profession, most teachers are dissatisfied with "extrinsic factors such as inadequate compensation, stressful workload, increased community criticism and a poor public image of teaching [...] their intrinsic satisfaction being often offset by the external constraints" (Fwu & Wang, 2002, p.212).

Nevertheless, prestige is merely about social representations and negotiation of social value based on both personal experiences and general storytelling emerged around an occupational group. Thus, the mere status of teachers is "an amalgam of a variety of impressions gained by members of the public from their own experiences as children, the interactions they have with their children's teachers and more importantly, the image that is conveyed by the media" (Simpson cited in Everton et al., 2007, p. 247).

Although many studies ended up laying stress on the financial aspects beyond the occupational prestige of teachers and on the macro-dynamics of the socio-economic contexts they were reflecting, we want to focus on a more organizational-related framework in addressing the self-perceived occupational prestige among Romanian teaching staff. In this regard, workload and lack of support, which were found to be strong predictors of job satisfaction, can explain not only the level of teachers' retention or attrition (Buchanan, 2010; Connell, 2007; Korthagen, 2004), but also the occupational prestige level, wheatear we are interested in the external or the insider's perspective. When it comes to the latter, the organizational

context and daily-based activities could play an important role in explaining the way teachers themselves perceive their status.

Addressing aspects such as the bureaucracy (diversification of roles, reporting process, level of autonomy etc.) or dynamics of the social relationships (with the students, parents, other colleagues or representatives of the school management) have proven to be very insightful in understanding how teachers relate to their occupational status. Moreover, the need for improving their professional prestige, while coping with the lack of resources and institutional support (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Dick & Wagner, 2001), attest to the relevance of the organizational-related factors in discussing this issue, laying stress once again on the strong relation between the job satisfaction and the occupational prestige.

Method

In order to identify which components of the job satisfaction and to what extent can they explain the level of self-perceived occupational prestige of teachers, a quantitative study was conducted among Romanian teaching staff from the pre-university education system. The study covered several aspects regarding work conditions and security, materialism, stress and job satisfaction. In the present paper we will only discuss a set of job satisfaction indicators that refer to their daily activity and organizational dynamics, factors that can be grouped under three main categories: material conditions, bureaucratic and relational aspects.

The main hypothesis we test are, as follows:
H1. The lower the level of teaching staff' satisfaction regarding the material conditions within the organizational context they are working, the lower the level of self-perceived occupational prestige.
H2. The lower the level of teaching staff' satisfaction regarding the bureaucracy required by their daily activity, the lower the level of self-perceived occupational prestige.
H3. The lower the level of teaching staff' satisfaction regarding the relational aspects of their daily activity, the lower the level of self-perceived occupational prestige.

Sample

The sample (N=2165) comprised teaching staff from Romanian pre-university education system. They perform their activities in kindergarten (N=294), primary education (N=726), lower secondary education (N=806),

upper secondary education (N=752), and centres for special education for the pupils with disabilities (N= 106). The sum of all the subsamples is higher than the sample because teachers can do their activities in two or more schools, and in high schools with grades from 1 to 12 (that offer primary education and lower secondary education, as well) foreign language and religion teachers can have classes at all the education levels. Nevertheless, the majority of the teaching staff (87.9%) perform their activities in only one school, 10.5% teach in two schools, and 1.6% in more than two schools (usually in three schools). The respondents are generally women (77.1%), from urban area (73.9%). The distribution of the sample by age is between 20 to 70 years old, with an average of 43.2 years (S.D. = 9.9).

Questionnaire administration

A survey was administered in September of 2014 online (n=909) and on paper (n=1256), guaranteeing the anonymity of the respondents. The traditional paper-and-pencil administration of the questionnaires was done with the support of the Romanian trade union from the pre-university education and it took approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The teaching staff that was not able to complete it by paper-and-pencil was encouraged to fill out the online questionnaire form.

Measures

Teaching staff's self-perceived occupational prestige and level of satisfaction regarding material conditions, bureaucratic dimension of their teaching activity and relational aspects were measured with 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For the measurement of the teaching staff's self-perceived level of prestige we used the fallowing question: "Consider the school you work at, how satisfied are you with the teaching staff' prestige?".

Results

Using SPSS for statistical analysis, the research findings show that only 38,7% of the teaching staff are satisfied and very satisfied with the level of prestige. The way they evaluate their satisfaction with the level of occupational prestige does not have a significant relationship with gender (χ^2(4, N=2146)=8.60, p=0.07), nor with the size of the locality where their school is (ρ(2144)=.10, p=.66).

Regarding the level of education, the findings reveal that respondents that work in kindergarten and in lower secondary education are more satisfied with their level of prestige than their peers (Table 1), thus contradicting previous studies (Hoyle, 200). A possible explanation for these findings could be that these respondents have higher satisfaction regarding their activity and interpersonal relations, as both children and parents are more involved and interested in their (their children) educational progress at these stages.

Table 1. The relationship between the level of satisfaction regarding prestige and the education level (χ^2)

Education level	Chi-square value
Kindergarten	$\chi^2(4, N=2146)=14.67$, p<0.01
Primary education	$\chi^2(4, N=2146)=8.90$, p=0.06
Lower secondary education	$\chi^2(4, N=2146)=11.59$, p<0.05
Upper secondary education	$\chi^2(4, N=2146)=4.16$, p=0.38
Special education	$\chi^2(4, N=2146)=3.25$, p=0.52

Results of the regression analyses shown in Table 2 indicate clear support for all our three hypotheses that relate material conditions, bureaucratic and relational aspects with teaching staff self-perceived prestige. The independent variables explain about 37% of the variation of the dependent variable (R^2=.37).

The standardized coefficients show that the creation of documents (reports, assignments, verbal process, etc.) and the union members' involvement have the highest negative impact on respondents' evaluation of their prestige. Among the possible explanations for the fact that the involvement of trade union members is a variable that has a negative impact on the self-perceived prestige of the respondents is that union involvement is an evidence of the lack of confidence that the unity has on the teachers' capacity to make a change (by themselves) in the organization where they work and in the education system in general.

Even if previous findings show that teaching staff that work in kindergarten and in lower secondary level of education are more satisfied with their prestige, when holding constant all other variables from the model, these two characteristics do not have a significant impact on the dependent variable. Therefore, Romanian educators are more satisfied with their prestige compared with their peers because they are more satisfied with the material conditions, bureaucratic and relational aspects. For example, educators are more satisfied with the number of pupils in class ($\chi^2(4, N=2149)=16.65$, p<0.01), creating documents ($\chi^2(4, N=2143)=10.91$, p<0.05), and union members' involvement ($\chi^2(4, N=2143)=15.35$, p<0.01).

Table 2. Linear regression with dependent variable "teaching staff's self-perceived prestige"

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-0.802	0.206		-3.899	.000
Material conditions	0.16	0.022	0.143	7.216	.000
Number of pupils in the class	0.094	0.022	0.086	4.337	.000
Relationship with pupils' parents	0.141	0.025	0.112	5.653	.000
Relationship with school management	0.152	0.026	0.125	5.924	.000
Timetable	0.137	0.028	0.102	4.96	.000
Creating documents	0.222	0.02	0.221	11.07	.000
Union members' involvement	0.179	0.022	0.166	8.175	.000
Work in kindergarten	0.028	0.067	0.008	0.42	0.68
Work in lower secondary school	0.01	0.047	0.004	0.209	0.83

Adjusted R^2=0.37

Discussion

The fact that only about one third of the teaching staff is satisfied with prestige in their school is explained, *inter alia*, by a number of issues that respondents have to cope with in their daily school activity. The results showed that the level of satisfaction regarding aspects such as: the creation of documents for school, the union members' involvement, the material conditions, the timetable, and the relationship with school management, pupils or pupils' parents, affects the self-perceive occupational prestige.

Among these factors, it seems that creating documents has the strongest effect on the self-perceived level of prestige. On the one hand, this can be explained in terms of workload that teachers are facing in trying to cope with both didactical and administrative requirements Connell's (2007). Moreover, the fact that the size of the classes has increased during the last years makes these bureaucratic activities more and more time-consuming. On the other hand, despite the fact that it seem to compete with the didactical activities in terms of energy and time resources, this bureaucratic process of creating documents might also be perceived as unchallenging

and beneath their educational attainment (i.e. as being rather unqualified work). Spending time with these activities instead of focusing on the didactic process *per se* can be thus perceived as a way of diminishing the role and social value of the teaching profession, which has become as much, if not too much, bureaucratic than vocational.

The satisfaction with material conditions and the impact that it has on the level of self-perceived occupational prestige can be related to the lack of support from both authorities and school management representatives, which is consistent with previous studies (Korthagen, 2004). Improper material conditions are not only barriers in job performance, affecting the overall job satisfaction, but also a sign that their work is not very much appreciated and respected by the others.

In terms of relational aspects, teaching staff seems to be caught up into a complex set of interdependencies, which involves constant interactions with pupils, pupils' parents and school management representatives. Nevertheless, the higher the power status of the significant-others, the higher the impact in terms of self-perceive occupational status. This is why the school management, which has a higher decision making role and impact in the teachers' daily-activity, has also a higher influence in terms of their self-perceived occupational prestige level. However, pupils' parents are as well involved in providing feedback and building the public image of teachers within the community, contributing to their overall self-perceived prestige. Therefore, their relationship with both school management and pupils' parents are important predictors for the self-perceived level of occupational prestige.

As for the negative impact of the union members' involvement over the self-perceived occupational prestige of the teaching staff, this involvement can be perceived as limiting the autonomy of teachers and lack of trust in their power as "public voice". In other words, the higher the union members' involvement, the weaker the teachers in terms of decision making and pressure factor in relation with school management or authorities. This comes to confirm the role of decision power, initiative and independence (Buzea & Scârneci, 2011, p.9) in discussing the self-perceived occupational prestige of the teaching staff.

Based on these findings we can, thus, recommend the improvement of schools' material conditions and the decreasing of the number of pupils in class. These recommendations are strongly related to the funds dedicated to education that are, in relative terms, the lowest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2015). According to the National Education law no. 1/2011, the

public expenditure on education should be at least 6% of GDP, but since this law entered in force, this investment has never been higher than 5%. The increasing of funds allocated per student is a solution for school principals to lower the number of pupils in class, as well as to invest in better material condition in schools.

Considering the high negative impact of creating documents on teaching staff self-perceived prestige, it can be recommended the simplifying and the reducing of the number of documents that teachers have to prepare. Models of reports, assignments, verbal process, etc. can be provided on the websites of the schools or school inspectorates, to decrease the workload that the teaching staff has to cope with on a daily basis.

Improving the relationship with parents can be achieved not only by communicating face to face or by telephone, but also via email or online groups. The fact that the teaching staff express dissatisfaction with some parents' behaviour, such as lack of involvement in children' school life or making unfounded complaints against teachers (Frunzaru et al., 2014), is a strong argument to establish not only the rights and duties for the teachers and the pupils, but for the parents, as well. The educational law stipulates "the principle of participation and parental responsibility", but it does not specify the parents' rights and duties.

In this general context, to compensate for the public underfunding, the main area that the school management could bring its contribution to is improving the material conditions through attracting private investments or European funding. Moreover, an organizational culture that encourages constant communication and feedback between teachers, pupils, parents and school management representatives can improve the relational aspects embedded in the teaching ecosystem. However, much of the problems that the Romanian educational system is now coping with and has to find solutions for go beyond the responsibility of the school management. Therefore, we argue that the changes need to follow a top-down flow, starting with a significant process of de-bureaucratization of the educational system.

Conclusion

The present study is consistent with previous studies in revealing a rather low level of self-perceived occupational prestige among Romanian pre-university teaching staff. In explaining this we have focused on three types of organizational aspects: material conditions, bureaucracy and relational

aspects. The lower the level of satisfaction with these three components that are constitutive for the daily activity of the teaching staff, the lower the level of self-perceived occupational prestige. Nevertheless, it seems that, a comparative approach of the three groups of explicative factors show that the bureaucratic aspects have a higher impact on the self-perceived prestige, as this workload and time-consuming unqualified type of work brings lower job satisfaction. Moreover, when it comes to the relational aspects, what seems to be beyond the actual evaluation of the relationships they have with the school management representatives, the pupil's parents or the union members' involvement is the way they perceived their decision power and autonomy is affected. Thus, a good communication needs to be supported by a constant feeling of respect and empowerment shown by the significant-others (school management, education union, parent etc.) towards the teaching staff, which will not only reflect higher external validation and occupational prestige attributed to them but will also increase their self-perceived level of prestige.

As these findings are part of a wider omnibus study on the teaching staff, there were some limitations in terms of the number of dimensions and items used to measure our variables, so we consider that future studies could improve the validity of our measures and introduce further variables such as the evaluation of the teachers media image or the attractiveness of the teaching profession. Moreover, comparative studies between the external and the insiders' perspective in terms of teachers' occupational prestige or qualitative exploration of their positioning towards this issue could bring in-depth understanding of how the macro and the micro-contexts work together in explaining the level of their occupational prestige.

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