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The impact of the world financial crisis on Romanian educational system
Case study on teachers' professional motivation

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Abstract

Romania is included in the category of countries where, because of the economic crisis, the education funding was reduced, the working conditions of teachers have worsened, wages were reduced, and professional training has similarly been reduced. All these problems are beginning to be increasingly reflected in the teachers' lower professional motivation, a situation that can have unpleasant repercussions in terms of quality of the educational process. The study we conducted aimed at evaluating the motivational system of the Romanian school teachers, trying to identify the factors that underlie the increase of professional motivation and satisfaction as fundamental elements of quality performance.

Keywords: Professional motivation, economic crisis, teacher, education, professional satisfaction, hierarchy of needs;

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1. Introduction

The very difficult period of global economic crisis represents a general backdrop that is beginning to have a considerable impact on Romanian education. We are not the only country affected by the negative impact of the economic crisis. More advanced educational systems have been suffering such consequences. According to the survey conducted in 2010 by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (Gheorghiu, 2010) regarding the impact of economic crisis on education, the countries where the economic crisis had a negative impact on education are: Romania, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy and Britain. Romania is included in the category of countries in which education funding was reduced, the working conditions of teachers have worsened: wages were reduced, extra hours are unpaid, and professional training has been reduced. Many other problems can be added to the list, from the education quality in a period in which there is increased world-wide concern for quality, to the decrease of education credibility among the school population. All these issues start to be increasingly reflected in the decline of teachers’ professional motivation, a situation that can have relatively unpleasant repercussions in the near future in terms of educational product quality.

Dealing with specific elements of school organization in general and teachers’ professional motivation in particular, the interest or accountability of such a topic is even greater as the focus of analysis is the most important organization generating national values. School should be understood as a basic component of national economy, all dimensions of individual and social life depending on the level, structure and quality of education. Furthermore, as it has been acknowledged by previous psychological, pedagogical, and sociological research, motivation - due to internal resources unknown even to the teachers themselves - provides the energy required for the quantity and quality of the teacher's engagement.

1. Research Methodology

1.1. Objectives

The current study aims to evaluate the motivational system of Romanian pre-school teachers with a view to identifying the elements or factors underlying the increase in professional motivation and satisfaction as fundamental elements of enhanced performance.

Specifically, the study targeted the following objectives:
- Capturing the multidimensionality of teachers’ professional motivation.
- Identifying sources of professional satisfaction and dissatisfaction.
- Identifying the encouraging / discouraging factors involved in the teaching process.
- Identifying the place and role of financial incentives in professional motivation.

1.2. Research instruments

The research survey was based on a 14-item motivational questionnaire (Petelean, 2004), the questionnaire items falling into several categories:
1. Satisfying the five categories of labor-linked human needs (according to Maslow’s pyramid);
2. Nonfinancial internal and external satisfaction and stimulation factors (group membership, organizational climate);
3. The role of financial incentives in professional motivation (financial incentives, the degree to which work is perceived as being rewarded according to its face value);
4. Encouraging/discouraging work factors;
5. Worrying factors in the workplace (i.e. what do teachers worry about when at work).

Although anonymity of the questionnaire was ensured, subjects were requested to provide data regarding their age, work experience and teaching in that specific school, specialization and didactic rank.
1.3. Sample

The research included Romanian pre-university teachers, proper investigation being conducted on a sample of 284 subjects, teachers of various specialties, with experience in education ranging from one to 35 years and age average of 45 years, most of them (79%) having its degree (top) professional development rank. As to gender distribution, 74% percentages of this group was females and 26% males.

2. Results and interpretation

Results converge towards considering motivation an acute problem in the Romanian education for several reasons. Firstly, on the scale of human needs many teachers declared they had unmet physiological needs (Figure 1). It is a reality that affects work in general and professional performance in particular, which, in turn impact on the quality of teaching as seen through the pupils’ achievements. The desire to satisfy other needs, such as those of belonging, security or self-accomplishment is somewhat forced by the realities of the Romanian education, requiring quality work at very low salaries, offering teachers, from this point of view, only spiritual satisfaction. Construction of a positive educational environment should respond to the individuals’ real and expressed needs: meeting the physiological needs, providing physical and emotional safety, facilitating integration into appropriate social groups, offering respect, independence and especially opportunities for self-accomplishment, which constitute the essence of A. Maslow’s theory of human motivation (Cimpean, 2005).

![Figure 1. Level of human needs satisfaction](image)

Similarly, the fact that for some teachers group membership does not represent a motivational factor for their individual behavior shows a lack of motivation, rather satisfaction of basic needs, with negative impact on performance. Group membership determines certain values, rituals, norms that contribute to the individual’s development through the group, and to the group development through the individual, with large positive valences on work quality growth (Cimpean, 2005). Therefore, 57.5% of the examined teachers and primary school teachers admitted that they are influenced by membership in the department they belong to, whereas for 42.5%, group membership was not perceived as influencing their behavior. Starting from the assumption that teachers’ group membership also determines positive behaviors, our results are hardly encouraging in this respect. The percentage of 42.5%, although below average, is quite large to be considered significant in terms of group membership needs and achievement within the group, which ultimately translates as a climate of motivational work rendered by the group cohesion.

Another problem covered by the survey relates to the relationship between accountability and job satisfaction, i.e. whether increased responsibilities will lead to increased job satisfaction. 42.5% of teachers responded positively, while 57.5% gave negative answers, which clearly indicates the need for change, since this critical period that characterizes the educational system has conducted to enhance teacher disavowal. Job enrichment, assumption of new tasks and rewards associated with them may lead to changes in the motivational system.
Likewise, teachers realize that the need for achievement, recognition, importance of the performed work and the responsibility or the competence they have, represent sources of professional satisfaction. The importance attributed to personal valorization ranks as a top need, its absence representing a real deterring factor for the performed work. Salary, however, is not a currently stimulating factor due to significant decrease. In other words, teachers are in a position to seek higher spiritual satisfaction in order to overcome the material shortcomings although they are similarly aware of the importance of financial incentives and have the feeling of not being rewarded according to their true value. This is relevant in that most subjects of the investigation group, i.e. 62.5%, believe that a higher salary in the same position would contribute to increased motivation and performance.

Job insecurity generated by the unemployment phenomenon in education due to financial crisis derives from another element of our study. When they have to choose between a safe workplace with a small salary and an uncertain job with a high salary, 65% of the investigated teachers prefer a lower salary but a safer workplace, compared to 35% which prefer the latter. This fact correlates with the results of surveys on the entire workforce in Romania, demonstrating that the Romanian worker is satisfied with „a little, but constantly.” Under conditions of staff redundancies taking place, it is understandable why a safe workplace is preferred. Definitely, a third option would be desirable, namely job security with higher or at least decent salary.

Within the same context of retribution we have determined the degree to which work is perceived to be rewarded at face value. It should be noted that there is no positive answer to the relationship work fairness – reward, 47.3% believe that their work is not rewarded at true value and 52.7% respond that they are only partially rewarded.

The main coordinates of an ideal work as seen from the teachers’ perspective, in order of importance should be: a lack of routine work that would, however, allow enough time for family, followed by a real contribution to the success of the institution, and tasks representing incentives for achieving significant outcomes and freedom of labor structuring.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to identify which were the most important / encouraging aspects in the work they perform. For 37.5%, interesting work, meaning lack of routine, represented a perfect coordinate of the ideal work since it is very important in ensuring satisfaction, in raising the interest degree for the conducted activity. A percentage of 27.5% chose team work satisfaction, which translates in little interest for developing cooperation and group work, while 22.5% chose promotion opportunities as a priority issue. Only 12.5% looked for higher autonomy.

Discouraging labor issues were also identified: for 46% of respondents these was represented by disregard for the person and his/her results; for 37% disregard from colleagues and superiors is perceived as demotivating and discouraging, while a lower salary than a colleague’s in conditions of similar effort was the third issue considered by 17% of the surveyed teachers.

Regarding fears that teachers experience at work, results show again that job insecurity caused by the current state of crisis in education is the primary concern. Other factors considered by respondents are: non-cooperative attitudes (22%), labor inefficiency (14%), and bias in the system (14%).

At the end of the study respondents were asked to score their current degree of satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 10. Results are shown below (Figure 2):
Some teachers have felt the need to further elaborate on the following aspect: should there have existed two distinct categories: spiritual satisfaction and material satisfaction – they would have scored 9 for spiritual and 2 for material satisfaction, respectively. The average of these two values would be situated in the interval 5-6 which, indeed, would be an extremely worrying result. Nevertheless, taking into account the questionnaires that did not include any details and considering the majority, the fact that 62.5% of the subjects scored 8 for their job satisfaction, allows us to think positively about the professional involvement and interests. Scores of 5 and 10 represented extremes (2.5%), whereas 17.5% scored 7 for their job satisfaction and 12.5% evaluated it with 9.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

Maintaining teacher motivation for the profession has become increasingly difficult due to the diversified problems they face, ranging from social to those specific to educational micro-groups. People are the most important category of assets that a company can use. Unfortunately, however, people are also the only asset that may act against the objectives of the organization (Cole, 2000). Given these considerations, the effort to motivate and stimulate teachers’ effort is crucial so that they consider school an outlet of their latent energy and creativity in the process of carrying out their educational responsibilities. Educational stakeholders should recognize that success in education can be achieved only when each employee/teacher feels that he/she is valuable and important for the institution.

Human resources are equally important and expensive in any organization, regardless of the field of activity. Current realities of education systems around the world show that education will achieve its goals only if it operates a performance management in human resources. Within these resources, individual performance must be high enough to achieve excellence as a school organization. Individual performance depends on teachers’ motivation and willingness to perform the necessary work, to improve and develop continuously as well as to be able to capitalize on their pedagogical talent.

Education in Romania will become a true national priority provided that the educator’s condition is improved and the system of education be included in the income-producing sectors of economy. It is obvious that the overall economic condition generated by the global crisis and the system’s incapacity to stimulate creative and value-generating staff work, go hand in hand. Let us not overlook that the most important long-term investment is the investment in human capital whereas low investment in education, which currently characterizes the system, can only have extremely serious repercussions in terms of educational outcomes.

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