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What do Young University Professors (Still) Believe in Nowadays?

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Abstract

The study aims at identifying the young university professors’ values, which support the relationships with students. The method, the questionnaire-based inquiry, was applied to 56 subjects (less than 15 years experience in education) from “Vasile Alecsandri” University of Bacău and “Petrol şi Gaze” University of Ploieşti, Romania. The study helped to identify 3 aspects: 1. the values in which young university professors believe, regarding the relationship with oneself, with colleagues and with their activity; 2. the values that they regard as most important in the current and future society; 3. the values that they hand down to students.

Keywords: values, attitudes, motivation, university professors, students;

1. University professors and the issue of values

The professional quality and development of university professors in general, and particularly of young ones, is often limited to scientific, didactic and research expertise. The corporate vision and the pragmatic approach of higher education as an institution which provides services and has its own revenues sometimes estranges, unfortunately, the academic processes from the axiological level, from the values that professors (still) believe in, from the inner and deep levers that support and guide their behavior, from the (significantly) relevant impact that these have upon the students’ personal and professional development. In response, a series of analyses upon the building and development of the professional self have been conducted (Scanlon, 2011). The nucleus of the process is professional becoming, a process willingly undertaken and built. Asking herself what matters for professors in this process (of being and becoming a teacher?), Dianne Mulcahy orients self-reflection “to the inner life of the teacher, her self-work or subjectivity” (2011), as well as to axiological, epistemological and ontological aspects.

Brian Hall (1994) provides a synthetic perspective upon the values and their role in our behavior: “Values are the ideals that give significance to our lives, that are reflected through the priorities we choose, and that we act on consistently and repeatedly” (apud Atkin, 1996). If the idea is generally relevant for the axiological universe, it is even more significant in terms of the impact of the professors’ values upon the growth of their students.

Atkin, J. (1996) has studied the way in which schools could become “better places for learning”. He will argue that it resides in the effort “to live [as] a ‘learning community’, an effort whose result could appear in the context in which “we need to consciously adopt a different emphasis and approach to development” (as cited in Atkin, 1996).
What the author suggests is to axiologically reflect upon our own didactic acts. It is suggested that we should become aware of the values and beliefs guiding our didactic activities and ask for feedback within the school community in order to be able to evaluate the extent to which our actions ensure the incorporation of values. The change of paradigm that the author proposes implies passing from values and beliefs about learning to principles and practice (Atkin, 1996). Like Atkin, Scalflino, L. (2005) will be concerned with identifying a set of values working on the level of the school unit and the way in which these may turn into a vector for improving the didactic activity.

Other studies (rather few) refer directly to the values characteristic of young university professors. According to a study by Bexley, James and Arkoudis, S. (2011) they constitute authentic core academic values. These include values closely connected with the scientific and didactic aspect, the key ones being: opportunities for intellectually stimulating work; genuine passion for a field of study; opportunity to contribute to developing new knowledge; autonomy and control over working life; opportunities to research, write and publish; chance to work in a supportive and collegial environment; passion for teaching.

In all the cases invoked, we are witnessing the (direct or indirect!) call to explore the universe of the values professors believe in, to know and understand one’s axiological grid of approaching the didactic process, precisely because this expresses the professor’s personal professional view and unique identity that, together with his colleagues of different ages, constitute a formative community with a major impact upon the students’ entire evolution.

2. Study methodology

In its second stage, the study aims at identifying the values junior professors from the Romanian higher education believe in. Continuing a study conducted at the beginning of 2012 on a number of 56 university professors with more than 20 years of experience, this study investigates an equal number of professors with less than 15 years of experience. Just like in the first stage of the research, we intend to find the values that organize their life, that underlie their relationship with students and that they implicitly and/or explicitly hand down to these.

The research involved 56 subjects: 2 groups of 28 professors from “Petrol Gaze” University (PGU) of Ploiești and “Vasile Alecsandri” University (VAU) of Bacău, Romania. The structure of the groups was the following: women: 28 (7 from each university for the real/engineering sciences field, 7 from each university for the socio-human field); men: 28 (7 from each university for the real/engineering sciences field, 7 from each university for the socio-human field). All professors have a work experience between 4 and 15 years in higher education. We have set this criterion ourselves and we are consistent in keeping to it so as to eventually proceed to a face-to-face analysis of the two sets of values. The first group of professors grew and was trained before 1989, that is, before the fall of the communist regime in Romania. The second group of professors, although including teachers born only several years before 1990, is almost entirely the moral and professional product of a society in full and expanding process of transition from all standpoints, also a process of recovering the values of a democratic society. For the next stage, we intend to compare the values of the two generations of professors in order to identify a common nucleus of values (in case there is one!).

The qualitative research was conducted simultaneously in the two university centers, during September-October 2012. We have applied a questionnaire with open-ended items. For the items that required a hierarchization of the respondents’ options, the score of each value was established as follows: 3 points for the value situated on the first position, 2 points for the value from the second position, 1 point for the value situated on the third position.

3. Presentation, analysis and interpretation of results

Following the collection of data and the analysis of the respondents’ answers, we have obtained 8 data sets, corresponding to each item. Their systematization (except for item 6) is shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, being later synthetically analyzed.

Table 1. The centralized presentation of the obtained data
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no.</th>
<th>Values rank I/points</th>
<th>Values rank II/points</th>
<th>Values rank III/points</th>
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<td>VAU</td>
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For item 1, *The first three values that I believe in most, in order of relevance*, ..., the values professors regard as representative for their personal axiological system allow us to highlight the existence of an axiological dominant shared by the entire group of subjects, for rank I. Generically called equity, it scores significantly for the two subgroups (59p) even though in different weights (19p, respectively 40p), at PGU the value being appreciated more than doubly as compared to VAU. The following hierarchical ranks are dispersed for 5 different values that are nevertheless relatively close scores: rank II – respect, work assiduity, 13p each; professional competence, 15p.; rank III – faith in God, 8p.; respect, 9p.

For item 2, *In relation to my work, the value that concerns me most is*, ..., the comparative perspective upon the data led to an accurate highlighting of a shared axiological dominant called professionalism. The identity of the values and also their close scores is interesting (7p., respectively 8p). For the values situated on the following levels, the convergence has no longer been maintained, as other four, rather different, axiological anchors, yet with close scores have been pointed out: rank II - responsibility, 6p; equity, 4p; rank III – perseverance, 8p; desire for improvement, 9p.

For item 3, *The most important value for the activity of an academic professor is*, ..., the comparative perspective of the data does not indicate a shared axiological dominant for rank I values. On the contrary, the young professors’ options are very different, 11 values being highlighted by their answers, also leading to the dissipation of points. The rank I values were passion, 4p. and continuous professional improvement, 2p., respectively equity, 4p. For rank II values (equity, 3p. responsibility, 3p; respectively, responsibility, 3p; professionalism, 3p.) there is a value (responsibility) that is shared both in terms of hierarchy and score. For rank III, the number of values hierarchized at
VAU is high (dignity, 2p; work, 2p; honesty, 2p.), and the scores are similar, dignity being shared by both PGU and VAU, having the same score, respectively 2p.

For item 4, I believe that, in today’s world, the most dangerous counter-values are, the comparative analysis of the data leads to a shared dominant. The shared counter-value incriminated, with a high score, deceit (30p., respectively 40p), generates a significant score at the level of the entire group, by far the highest score accumulated throughout the study, 70p. The rank II incriminated counter-values are ignorance, 15p; respectively incompetence/superficiality, 24p. For rank III we find incompetence/superficiality, 7p. and money (probably as an absolute goal!), 22p. Although incompetence/superficiality has been identified on different ranks and with different scores by the young professors from the two universities, they are pointed out and incriminated to a significant extent, 31p. at the level of the entire group.

For item 5, I believe that the main values that higher education should inculcate to students are... (Name three values in the order of relevance), there is not a set of shared values. For rank I, young professors, appreciate professionalism with 9p. at VAU and to a much wider extent, responsibility, with 30p. at PGU. Also regarding the rank II values (dignity, 5p and professionalism, 19p.) all the representatives form PGU are more convergent in their answers (although there occurs the value of professionalism, there is a high difference in rank and score!). The situation is the same also in the case of rank III values (equity, 4p., respectively knowledge, 7p.).

The professors’ notes for item 6 provides an interesting series of suggestions that they would make to their students during a hypothetical last meeting, in response to the requirement, If I cease my activity tomorrow, the last thing that I would tell my students would be ..., also as an expression of the value that they offer to the future. Here are some of them:

a. Women, engineering sciences, VAU: “Believe in yourselves and always look for the right path although it may be difficult!”; “Choose a job that you would practice skillfully and passionately!”; “Be kind!”; PGU: “Never stop being kind; “Overcome all life’s challenges and be victorious!”; “Hard work is always rewarded!”; “Be responsible, demand a lot from yourselves!”; “Life should be lived in moderation!”

b. Women, socio-human sciences, VAU: “Always do your best to be better professionals and better men!”; “Reflect upon whatever you are reading!”; “Do not forget to be worthy men!”; “Nothing is impossible as long as you are self-confident!”; PGU: “Respect your values!”; “Choose the job that would be most satisfying!”; “Keep a clear conscience!”; “Follow your dreams but without stepping on the dreams of others!”

c. Men, engineering sciences, VAU: “Never lose your trust, hope and faith!”; “Aim higher!”; “Meditate!”; “Trust in your own worth, keep working, cherish the authentic Romanian spirit and promote it by all means!”; “Be moral!”; PGU: “The future depends on you!”; “Youth gives courage and science gives efficiency to work!”; “Search for self-satisfaction!”


For item 7, I believe that the value that will always preserve (save) mankind is..., the comparative approach to the results does not allow the identification of a shared axiological opinion. Nevertheless, although a different value is highlighted for each rank and university, it is interesting to note that the ranks are appreciated, with few exceptions, with the same number of points: rank I – faith in God, respectively love for people, 11p.; rank II – love for people, respectively faith in God, 4p., there is a crossed balance of values as the rank I values can be found in reverse position in the rank II values, so that for the total of the 2 levels, their mirroring score is identical, 11p. The rank III values include equity and knowledge, 2p. each, respectively education, 3p.

For item 8, The future society needs the following 3 values..., the comparative analysis enables the identification of the following 6 axiological options, one for each rank and university, in their order: faith in God, 14p.; responsibility, 22p.; respect, 12p; love for people, 12p; professionalism, 11p. and kindness, 9 p.
4. Conclusions and further actions

The synthesis data of the study indicate a set of 6 shared values that the entire group of investigated professors cherish (implicitly, values that they incriminate!): truth, 70p.; equity, fair play 44p; professional competence/professionalism, 37p; respect, 25p.; financial success, 22p.; professionalism 11p.

On this basis, we may appreciate that there are two dimensions to the set of values characteristic of the professional life that junior professors esteem: the cognitive/scientific aspect and the moral aspect. According to the accumulated scores, the dimension of the moral values prevails, with 139p. as compared to only 48p. Therefore, we consider that their axiological world is built on values essential to the good functioning of a democratic society and of a high self-exigency. However, there was low occurrence of values such as: creativity/originality, initiative, courage, kindness, team-spirit, human solidarity, although this category of professors grew and was formed within an academic, political (and ideological) context open towards change and free choices. It is no less true that they insist upon being responsible and serious. Thus, we regard as timely the further continuation of the research with a view to identifying the values and the principles reflecting the desire for (authentic) self achievement, closely correlated with the values of cooperation, dignity and human solidarity. Also, excessive esteem of material values (and materialism) is particularly rejected by those investigated as values that narrow and deform the view upon an accomplished life. Another recommendation concerns the shaping of the dimension of university professors’ activity through specialized research because – through it – the subjects find themselves in the situation of clarifying, ordering their values, principles and beliefs that they bring in front of students and – as a consequence – challenges a regular self-evaluation of options, certainties, interpersonal relationships, priorities, self dedication.

References


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