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**RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TEACHERS' CHARACTERISTICS,
JOB CHARACTERISTICS AND WORK ENGAGEMENT: A PILOT
STUDY**

Maria Magdalena Stan (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) University of Pitești, Târgul din Vale 1, Pitești, Romania, magdalena.stan@upit.ro

Abstract

The quality of the educational act is ensured by the teacher's professional efficacy. The numerous demands the teacher has to face (high job demands, lack of job resources, competitiveness, learning to manage behaviour in the classroom, becoming aware about district policies and job expectations, and translating theory into practice, etc) have as direct effects either stress and burnout or engagement and involvement in the professional activity. The specialty studies assert the idea that a high level of work engagement has positive effects not only upon the level of professional performances and teachers' life quality but also upon the level of pupils' acquisitions and performances. Work engagement represents a multidimensional construct and is defined as a fulfilling state of mind in employees that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. The present study proposes to analyze the factors which contribute to work engagement – personal factors (self- efficacy) and factors related to job characteristics (job resources and job demands), as well as the relation established between them through different stages of the didactic career. The practical implications of the study target interventional modalities meant to increase the level of engagement in professional activity through the improvement of work tasks palpability in accordance with professional competences specific to the development level in teachers' professional career.

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Keywords: Work engagement, job characteristic, job demands, job resources, self- efficacy, teachers.



1. Introduction

The idea goes current that the contingent action of three categories of factors represent the motives which concurs to pupils' academic and personal development: characteristics of the participants (pupils and teachers) involved in the educational act, the learning context and the types of content which has to be acquired (Mih, 2010). Teachers are essential in the achievement of a quality education; teacher's engagement and teaching strategies, professional and personal abilities represent factors which contribute to obtaining pupils' academic performances and implicitly satisfaction in the learning activity. In order to perform successfully in the activity he develops, the teacher has to adapt permanently to social imperatives, to give evidence of flexibility, innovation and efficiency. Within an environment with multiple challenges and permanent changes, teachers have to manifest engagement, efficiency and performance in their professional activity (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007). Research from the last 30 years on the phenomena affecting employees' satisfaction at the workplace, had been centred upon a multiple-approached subject - burnout, whose negative effects reflect not only upon employees at an individual level (anxiety, breakdown, irritability, aggressivity) but also upon the organization as a whole because it associates with job performance, sickness absence, and turnover intention (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Burnout is a syndrome that afflicts people who work in "helping professions", as social work, health care, and education (Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Recent approaches on organizational behaviour are centred upon positive effects of the individual's well-being within the organization, especially upon work engagement trying to identify both potential causes and its consequences (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008), in numerous domains and industries (medical, business, psychology etc.), as well as in the educational domain (Parker & Martin, 2009).

2. Problem Statement

The didactic profession is considered to be a profession with a high risk of burnout, of professional fatigue which determines us to identify the factors that produce a high level of professional engagement with teachers, despite the considerable psychological stress and high decisional control manifested by them. This aspect had been explained by the fact that through the enthusiasm manifested by the teacher in the classroom, pupils become more motivated and more enthusiastic (Bakker, 2005; Kahn, 1990), in spite of the work load. Researches in the specialty literature underline teachers' predictor variables of professional stress: lack of autonomy, emotional demands, low social support, role ambiguity (Chang, 2009; Lee & Ashforth, 1996), student misbehaviour, poor colleague relations, lack of classroom resources (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995), pupils' disruptive behaviour.

The concept of work engagement appeared recently in the specialty literature, being promoted by the positive psychology conception and being considered as an opposite pole of the concept of burnout (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). Work engagement is defined as a positive and persistent state of mind which implies a personal or professional interest, as well as the satisfaction and the joy of fulfilled work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; van Beek, Hu, Schaufeli, Taris, & Schreurs, 2012; van Beek, Taris, & Schaufeli, 2011). The concept had been described differently. Kahn (1990) considers that work engagement is a personal characteristic, being different from one individual to another, according to the energy and dedication they show in achieving their work tasks. Another approach is completed by May, Gilson, & Harter (2004),

being described in terms of three dimensions: the *physical* component is described as energy used to perform the job; and the *cognitive* component is described as being absorbed in a job so much that everything else is forgotten and the *emotional* component is described as putting one's heart into one's job.

The most frequently used approach in the specialty literature belongs to Schaufeli & Bakker (2003), who consider that work engagement is a distinct construct and not the opposite construct of the burnout concept. Engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. "Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge." Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work". (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, pp.4-5). Feelings of vigour lead to increased effort in one's work. An employee who is experiencing work engagement is dedicated, with a sense of pride and enthusiasm that pervades all work-related tasks. Employees who are absorbed in their work will be focused and may find themselves experiencing flow or loss of self-consciousness and a distortion in time, thinking that time is passing faster than usual (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

To assess work engagement, Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004 developed Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), an instrument used on a large scale. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) have argued that the total score for work engagement may sometimes be more useful in empirical research because of the moderate to high correlations between the dimensions (vigor, dedication, and absorption).

The specialty literature also describes the effects observed at the persons who manifest work engagement: on the motivational level, persons who manifest engagement are motivated by the activity they develop, being stimulated by it; they are related to the tasks they have to fulfill and are capable to invest much energy in fulfilling them (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011) and exploit personal abilities efficiently (Roberts & Davenport, 2002); also, persons who manifest work engagement are present and active, manifesting not only cognitive but emotional and social engagement with coworkers (Kahn, 1990). On the performance level, it is assumed that employees who manifest work engagement are more performant (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008; Roberts & Davenport, 2002), more productive in the activity they perform, which suggests that teachers demonstrated a better performance.

Many studies concentrated upon the identification of the factors which determine work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli, Taris, & van Rhenen, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Most studies, even if they are not carried out at the educational level, but related to different domains such as business, lead to the recording of two categories of factors which can be considered predictors of work engagement: factors that belong to job characteristics (work demands and work resources) and factors that belong to teachers' personal traits (self-esteem, self-efficacy, orientations towards innovation).

In the theories of work psychology, it is assumed that every occupation has its own specific work characteristics and these work characteristics can be classified in two general categories, job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to those physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job, which need sustained physical or mental efforts and which are associated with certain costs (working

conditions, job pressure, role ambiguity, etc.). Job demands implies two types of demands – hindrance demands associated negatively with work engagement (organizational policy, role ambiguity) and challenge demands – which are considered motivating factors associated positively with work engagement (challenging working environment, urgent tasks, multiple responsibilities become motivating factors if the employee considers that time and energy investment will bring him benefits and he will have a feeling of fulfilment). Very few studies refer to job demands with teachers, but they are related to stress, routine, social isolation and a high workload.

Job resources are necessary to cope with work tasks and refer to physical, psychological or organizational aspects of the job which can lead to attaining work objectives, to the stimulation of learning and personal and professional development. These can be placed at interpersonal level (team climate, leadership), at organizational level (salary, opportunities of professional development, etc.), at the level of the activity proper (autonomy, feed-back) or at the level of work organization (clarity of the role, etc.). Some studies have shown that job resources are positively related to work engagement (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006). This relation can be explained through the motivational process from the model Job Demands - Resources (JD-R) proposed by Bakker, Demerouti, Boer, & Schaufeli, (2003), which asserts that job resources influence work engagement through attaining the objectives of professional activity (extrinsic motivation) and through satisfaction of personal needs (intrinsic motivation). With teachers, the factors which belong to job resources and which favour work engagement are: job control, supervisor support, information, organizational climate, innovativeness, and appreciation (Bakker et al., 2007). Resources proved to enhance work engagement in case of high demands and teachers worked under stressful conditions.

Teachers' personal resources can anticipate work engagement. Personality traits have been identified as being predictors of work engagement. Personal traits which appear in the specialty literature studies and which represent powerful predictors of work engagement at teachers refer to: ability to manage obstacles, pressures and other challenges are the workplace, mastery orientation, failure avoidance, carefulness, patience (Parker & Martin, 2009; Kong, 2009), active coping strategies (Hultell & Gustavsson, 2011). Recent studies have been focused upon the identification of those personal resources which explain work engagement such as: optimism, hope, resilience and efficacy (Sweetman & Luthans, 2009). Self-efficacy represents an integral personal resource which ensures the success in professional activity as it determines the effort and persistency in relation to a specific work-related task, as well as aspirations and settled goals. (Cifre, Salanova, & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2011). The belief in one's own professional competences is a prerequisite to feel motivated and vigorous. Being absorbed by work requires belief in one's competencies; otherwise, one is not absorbed by the tasks (Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2007). Also, self-efficacy represents a prerequisite for dedication, as people tend not to engage in tasks if they feel they cannot fulfil it successfully. Teacher self-efficacy is confidence in the ability to promote students' learning. Teachers with high self-efficacy spend more time on academic learning, provide more help for students, and give more praise for accomplishments (Gibson & Dembo, 1984).

3. Research Questions

The following research questions had been formulated:

- Are there significant differences among teachers as regards work engagement according to the variable professional experience? Are there significant differences among teachers as regards self-efficacy according to the variable professional experience?

- What is the nature of the relation among teachers' personal traits, job demands and job resources according to the variable work engagement?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study proposes to analyze the factors which contribute to work engagement – personal factors (self- efficacy) and factors related to job characteristics (job resources and job demands), as well as the relation established between them through different stages of the didactic career.

5. Research Methods

5.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 94 Romanian teachers working in different elementary and secondary school: 18 males and 76 females, with an average age of 38.31 years ($SD = 7.84$), and didactic experience between 1 and 40 years.

The questionnaires had been administered online, the participation being voluntary and unpaid.

5.2. Instruments

The following measures were used:

The Utrecht Learning Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Baker, 2003) assesses students' academic engagement and it is composed of 17 items that assess: vigour (6 items, $\alpha = .89$), absorption (6 items, $\alpha = .93$) and dedication (5 items, $\alpha = .92$), each item is assessed using a Likert scale that ranges between 0 (Never) and 6 (Every day). Cronbach's Alpha for the total scale is .96.

Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) assesses teacher efficacy and it is composed of 24 items grouped into three subscales: efficacy for student engagement - SE (8 items, $\alpha = .89$), efficacy for instructional strategies – IS (8 items, $\alpha = .91$), and efficacy for classroom management - CM (8 items, $\alpha = .96$), and total scale- TSES (24 items, $\alpha = .96$). According the manual's instructions, each of the items questions using a rating scale, ranging from 1 (Not well at all) to 5 (Very well).

Job Content Questionnaire– adapted version for teachers, is a self-administered instrument designed to measure social and psychological characteristics of jobs; it is composed of 49 questions grouped into four subscales: decision latitude (11 items, $\alpha = .83$), psychological demands and mental workload (5 items, $\alpha = .63$), social support (8 items, $\alpha = .85$), job insecurity (3 items, $\alpha = .60$). Items in the scales were recorded using the Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

6. Findings

Teachers' professional experience fell into two categories: the first category comprises teachers whose didactic experience ranges between 1 and 5 years, the second category includes teachers with a didactic experience ranging from 7 and 18 years and the third category includes teachers with a didactic experience between 20 and 40 years. It has been observed that there are significant differences as concerns

work engagement at the teachers from the three analyzed groups $F(3,91)=8.539$, $p=0.000$. Also, significant differences have been registered between the groups category 1 ($m_1=55.29$, $SD=15.93$) and category 3 ($m_3=74.21$, $SD=16.61$) and 1 ($m_1=55.29$, $SD=15.93$) and category 2 ($m_2=68.19$, $SD=15.89$). No significant differences have been registered between the groups 2 and 3, which determines us to affirm that after the beginning and accommodation period in profession (in our case after 5 years) there are no significant differences at teachers in point of work engagement. As regards the personal variable self-efficacy significant differences have been registered among the 3 analyzed groups $F(3,91)=55.355$, $p=0.000$. The analysis POST HOC shows us that there significant differences among teachers and in terms of every stage of professional evolution ($m_1=51.24$, $SD=9.90$; $m_1=88.07$, $SD=18.42$; $m_1=97.32$, $SD=11.90$).

Determining the relation among personal resources (self-efficacy), professional resources (job demands and job resources) and work engagement led to the analysis of the regression model in which work engagement is the dependent variable and independent variables are self-efficacy, job resources (social support and decision latitude) and job demands (psychological demands and mental workload and job insecurity). The analysis of the correlations between predictors and criterion is achieved in table 01. In order to avoid the multicollinearity effect in the regressive analysis, we have eliminated the variable job security as significant correlations have been registered between it and other predictor variable (decision latitude, psychological demands and mental workload, social support and self- efficacy).

The testing of the hypothesis has been done through regression analysis. We have found that 45 % of the variation of the variable work engagement ($R=.667$, $R^2=.445$) is due to the cumulated effect of the dependent variables (self-efficacy, job demands, mental workload and social support). The analysis of the variation of the predictor variables and of work engagement has the value $F(3,66)=17.605$, $p=.0000$. Predictors which explain the variation of work engagement are self-efficacy ($\beta=.430$, $p=0.000$; β standardized=.546, $p=0.000$), social support ($\beta=.365$, $p=0.000$; β standardized=.197, $p=0.000$) and job demands, mental workload and social support ($\beta=.508$, $p=0.000$; β standardized=.216, $p=0.000$).

Table 01. Pearson correlation coefficients between self-efficacy, job demands, job resources and work engagement

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Self-efficacy (1)	1	.127	.170	-.043	-.556**	.553**
Decision latitude (2)		1	.378*	-.030	-.387**	.227**
Psychological demands and mental workload (3)			1	.630*	-.340**	.378**
Social support (4)				1	-.606	.309**
Job security (5)					1	-.609**
Work engagement (6)						1

Note: $N = 94$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

6.1. Discussions

The study proposed to identify if there are significant differences between teachers' experience and the personal resource self-efficacy, and equally to determine if teachers manifest work engagement according to professional experience. The results showed that teachers perceive professional self-efficacy

(the capacity of an individual to act competently in initiating changes in his working environment) according to didactic experience. The belief in one's own professional competence, which in this case it is formed temporally, through networking in practical situations with pupils and also with the diverse demands of the didactic profession leads to the exercise of proactive behaviours if they believe they can act competently. Self-efficacy is a preliminary condition necessary for the teacher to feel vigor and motivation in his work. Moreover, to be focused on the work tasks needs the belief that you can fulfil the respective activity. Studies on the subject confirmed the fact that the development of such professional behaviours is achieved in a spiral: self-efficacy increases work engagement which in its turn determines an increase in self-efficacy (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Equally, we have observed that work engagement is associated with professional experience ($r=.361$, $p=0,00$). The relation established although not powerful, is significant and supported by the specialty studies presented above.

Concerning the nature of the relation established among teachers' personal characteristics, job demands and job resources, the variation of the variable work engagement is best explained by the personal component, namely self-efficacy. According to the specialty literature (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008) we observe that engagement implies high levels of energy, persistency, direct objectives which predetermine self-confidence and confidence in one's own professional competence. Moreover, the social support received not only at organizational level (relations with colleagues, relation with the school manager), but also with pupils and their parents explain the behaviours of work engagement. Equally, job demand represents a predictor of work engagement. The demands related to didactic activity associated with elements of responsibility and self-efficacy can explain behaviours of work engagement.

The present study demonstrated that the interlacing of the three categories of factors (personal resources, job demand and job resources can explain professional behaviours such as dedication for the didactic profession, efficiency and concentration in obtaining professional satisfactions and performances.)

7. Conclusion

The study proposes to determine the relation established at teachers among personal resources, job resources, job demands and work engagement, according to their didactic experience. The results are consistent with previous studies from the specialty literature (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Hakanen et al. 2008; Simbula, Guglielmi, & Schaufeli, 2011). The identification of work engagement predictors with teachers has not only theoretical and methodological but also practical implications. Through quality and durable educational policies, the academic institution can contribute to the modernization of the educational environment which stimulates and allows flexibility, innovation, and implementation of new ideas and working modalities; these will bring an increase in teachers' engagement and professional performances and also in pupil's implication in the learning activity and achievement of academic success. Cognizance and activation of teachers' personal resources by the decision factors of the institution can be exploited as modalities of intervention between work demands which are difficult to achieve and engagement in teachers' work. The participation in professional formation programs and to activities through which they can manifest professional competence lead to the activation of self-efficacy, associated with a rise in work engagement. Teachers' professional experience as asserted by Rutter & Jacobson (1986) and Kong (2009)

represents an important indicator of work engagement. Teachers with a greater work experience tend to have higher levels of work engagement at the level of all dimensions (vigor, absorption and dedication).

The present study had been carried out on a limited sample of participants which did not allow the achievement of refined statistical processing. Concurrently, the results of the present study directs attention to the need of developing new directions of research through widening the number of variables in the area of personal characteristics (orientation to innovation, self-esteem), also of external resources (salary, supplementary benefits) and through the interconnection with consequences of work engagement (professional performance and professional satisfaction).

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