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## PROMOTING SOCIAL EQUITY AND PREVENTING TEACHERS' MALADAPTIVE SCHEMES

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### **Abstract**

*Through this article we aim to highlight the importance of social and educational policies for promoting equity in the Romanian educational system. The paper also contains an investigative study aimed at evaluating the personality traits of teachers and their level of anxiety and the role that certain maladaptive cognitive mechanisms have in the manifestation of counterproductive professional behaviors. The data of the study were collected based on online questionnaires from 31 teachers from the "Kemal Ataturk" National College in Medgidia, Constanta County, Romania.*

**Key words:** *social equity, educational system, adaptive and maladaptive professional behaviors of teachers.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The problematic aspects of the entire educational system in Romania, which particularly affect the students in disadvantaged social categories, are the insufficiency of the material resources, the poor motivation, the school dropout and the discrimination to which are added some dysfunctional attitudes of the teachers. These inequalities also derive from the ethnic, economic, social background and the students' residency environment.

Numerous studies point to the existence of inequalities in accessing and participating Romanian students in a quality education. Belonging to the Roma

ethnicity, residence in poor rural or urban areas, low economic resources are the variables that in Romania are negatively associated with access to education, as well as with the quality of education.

*Social inclusion* is one of the desiderata of educational programs and policies promoted at all levels of schooling. It is based on equal opportunities and aims to facilitate access to education granted to all young people regardless of background, health status, ethnic, religious or biological gender.

Through the Education 2030 Declaration "For inclusive education and quality equitable education for all, throughout life", at the World Education Forum in Incheon (*Republic of Korea, May 2015*) it was claimed that the recognition of the right to education is interconnected with all human fundamental rights.

Social exclusion has been recognized within the EU and the UN as one of the main barriers to economic growth and sustainable development (*Vrăsmaș T., 2014*).

*Discrimination* is identified as one of the reasons why equal opportunities are not respected as a social principle. The many aspects of discrimination show that it manifests itself in exclusion, restriction and differentiated treatment towards people, groups, community to the disadvantage of some of them.

The present work aims at evaluating the personality traits of teachers and their level of anxiety and the role that certain maladaptive cognitive mechanisms have in the manifestation of professional behaviors. The data were collected based on online questionnaires from 31 teachers from the "Kemal Atatürk" National College in Medgidia, Constanta County, Romania and were processed using statistical processing methods.

The complexity of the concept of psychological health in organizations makes it difficult to operationalize in a unitary, consensual form at the level of the international scientific community.

*Psychological health* relates to life experiences (life satisfaction, joy, happiness, etc.), and in the organizational field, it includes general work-related experiences (job satisfaction, attachment to the professional organization, etc.) and specific experiences (satisfaction in the relationship with colleagues).

Teachers need to outline a set of personality traits that will support them in multiple tasks and in various teaching activities. At the same time, a continuous emotional regulation is needed so that the wear and exhaustion of the physical and mental due to the excessive consumption of energy, forces and individual resources, do not disturb the teaching activity and the action potential.

Multiple researches on the topic of anxiety have shown that many factors affect the level and forms of anxiety perceived by teachers. The professional experience, the type of school, the physical condition of the class and school, the personality of the teacher, the characteristics of the students, the relationship with the students' parents, the context, the level of teaching of the class, the family

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concerns, the changes in the national or local curriculum are some of the factors that contribute to the level of stress and its consequences. Shillingford, Patel and Ngazimbi (2012) point out that teachers face a multitude of challenges, for example, legislation, school reform policies, teacher-parent relationships, conflict with other teachers, etc. that could induce symptoms of anxiety.

Studies in the international psychological literature highlight the link between personality traits and the level of anxiety felt by teachers during classes. Houlihan, Fraser, Fenwick and Fish (2009) investigated what are those personality traits that are associated with anxiety at a sample of teachers at an educational institution in Canada. The results indicate positive correlations between the trait of neuroticism and the high level of anxiety in teaching at the classroom. Considering that neuroticism includes emotional instability and self-awareness, the authors would expect such results. (*Houlihan, Fraser, Fenwick and Fish, 2009*).

International studies show various results as they consider higher seniority in work as a protective factor against anxiety in the workplace. Morteza and Morteza (2014) investigated differences between participants young teachers vs. teachers with work experience, indicating a higher level of anxiety as being present in young teachers compared to older ones (*Morteza and Morteza, 2014*).

The study conducted by Samfira and Palos (2021) on a sample of 284 teachers in Romania, identified conscientiousness and openness as predictors for coping strategies based on functional cognitive schemes as personal resources, these focusing on reflectivity, projection, strategic planning and preventive adaptation. (*Samfira and Palos, 2021*).

Considering the specifics of the institution in which we carried out the psycho-pedagogical research, it is important to mention the importance of ensuring a cohesive climate of cooperation between teachers and students belonging to different ethnic minorities. As Tusa E. (2020) notes, "ethnic minorities have a fundamental role in building social capital due to the contribution they bring to the societies in which they coexist together with social and political majorities. The accumulation of social capital also includes the set of political and cultural rights that minorities can enjoy. There is a direct relationship between the granting of minority rights and the social balance that makes a direct contribution to the construction of social capital."

### **1. INVESTIGATIVE STUDY: THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS' MALADAPTIVE COGNITIVE MECHANISMS ON STUDENTS**

#### ***1.1. Research objectives***

The aim of the research is to evaluate the dimensions of the teaching staff's personality and the relationship with the level of anxiety, the maladaptive cognitive mechanisms that could influence this level of anxiety, as well as other individual factors (level of enrollment in education, age group).

The objectives of the research were aimed at evaluating the dimensions of the teaching staff's personality in relation to the level of anxiety, as well as at evaluating the influence of the professional experience as a factor of mental stability in the teachers with seniority in work.

### ***1.2. Study design***

This study is a transversal, correlational and comparative one that aims to study the relationships between the described variables.

### ***1.3. Lot of participants. Procedure***

The population included in this research consists of teachers ( $N = 31$ ) selected according to levels of professional experience: the first group 1 is made up of teachers with up to 5 years of experience ( $N = 12$ ); the second group comprises teachers with experience between 6 and 14 years ( $N = 9$ ) and the third group includes teachers with professional experience of more than 15 years ( $N = 10$ )

Of the total teachers, we have  $N_{\text{women}} = 27$  and  $N_{\text{men}} = 4$ . A non-probabilistic method of sampling was used, namely sampling by convenience and identification, as these populations were available at the time of distribution of the questionnaires. The research was carried out at the "Kemal Atatürk" National College in Medgidia between 15.02-2022-15.05.2022.

### ***1.4. Research methods. Tools***

For the purpose of collecting and interpreting the research data, the CP5F Personality Questionnaire, the Beck Anxiety Inventory and the Young Test for the evaluation of maladaptive cognitive schemes were used. The data collected is processed through IBM SPSS Statistics 20.

The Personality Questionnaire with 5 Factors (CP5F Questionnaire), adapted and calibrated on the Romanian population and provided by Cognitrom Romania Cluj-Napoca is intended to evaluate the five factors of the Big Five model (Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, Kindness and Openness to Experience). It can be used for the diagnosis of personality, in the educational field, in the clinical field and in the field of health psychology.

The J. Young YSQ test evaluates early maladaptive schemes and examines them as vast themes about oneself and one's own relationships with others that develop in childhood, develop throughout life, and can come dysfunctional to some extent in adulthood. They were classified into five types of counterproductive attitudes in professional relationships: separation and rejection, autonomy and diminished professional performance associated with a sense of vulnerability.

The Beck Anxiety Inventory developed by Beck and collaborators (1988, 1990) aims to identify the severity of anxiety symptoms in adults.

### ***1.5. Hypothesis testing***

***Hypothesis no. 1:*** It is presumed that there are correlations between the dimensions of the personality and the level of anxiety of the teachers.

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In order to test this hypothesis we would check if the scores obtained are normally distributed. From the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the statistical threshold at Extraversion, Conscientiousness and Courtesy was  $p = 0.15$ ,  $p = 0.03$ , respectively  $p = 0.003$  ( $p < 0.05$ ), so the distributions of the scores at these dimensions do not meet the position of normality. That's why we used the Spearman correlation coefficient to verify the association between the dimensions to be investigated (personality traits and anxiety) in the study. The Spearman rho coefficient indicates a significant negative correlation between *the professional opening* variable and the *teacher anxiety* variable ( $\rho = -0.638$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

Openness to experience represents the personality dimension of teachers that reflects their predisposition and motivation for the activity of cognitive exploration in the field of profession 1. It is associated with the openness to fantasy dimension that involves didactic innovation, based on the ability to see new possibilities, solutions, unexpected and innovative combinations of active-participatory and problem-solving didactic elements and strategies.

Education professionals identify new possibilities for the development of personal and professional resources. Taking into account the last period, the pandemic one, when teachers have made lessons in the online environment, they have been open to the use of methods and procedures specific to digital education, different software and materials compared to those frequently used in the teaching activity. The dimension of the evasion towards the acceptance and awareness of their feelings represents the ability to differentiate a large range of emotions, a permanent contact with their own inner feelings. Teachers have this inclination to identify, differentiate the complexity of emotional experiences and to accept this important side of life. Openness to action involves an inner motivation to always do new things, to bring new teaching strategies to students, to do various activities, to spend time in a pleasant way putting into practice hobbies, various activities of students, promoting project-based learning. The openness of teachers' values highlights the need to re-examine social, political, religious values, promoting interculturalism and the values of democracy.

### ***Hypothesis no. 2***

It is presumed that the level of anxiety differs depending on the age groups; young teachers (ages 25 to 39) have a higher level of anxiety compared to older ones (40 and 65 years).

In order to test this hypothesis, we divided the sample represented by teachers into two age groups: group 1 comprising teachers aged between 25 and 39 years (35.48%) and group 2 comprising teachers aged between 40 and 65 years (64.52%).

Since the distribution of scores in the variable "Anxiety" meets the assumption of normality, we will use the student t test to compare the two age groups to the anxiety variable. The 25-39 age group obtained a higher average of anxiety scores ( $M = 33.73$ ,  $SD = 2,284$ ) compared to the average score of the age

group 40 – 65 years ( $M = 23.00$ ,  $SD = 1.806$ ) The student test  $t$  for comparing age groups indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups ( $t(29) = 14.402$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 2 is confirmed – younger teachers have a higher level of anxiety compared to older ones, in other words, the experience gained in work is one of the factors of mental stability in teachers who have more seniority.

Anxiety refers to subjective feelings of nervousness, fear, panic, turmoil and worry (Spielberger, 1966, 1983). "This arises in response to the uncertainty of a future event/assessment and/or to the concern about the consequence of an event." Spielberger (1966) proposed and differentiated her anxiety as a state of anxiety and a personality trait.

Anxiety as a state engages the feeling of fear as a result of activities in the autonomic nervous system triggered as a result of concrete circumstances perceived as threatening, while anxiety as a trait is an "acquired behavioral disposition that predisposes an individual to perceive a wide range of objectively non-hazardous circumstances as threatening" (Spielberger, 1966, p. 17). So, the age of teachers influences the level of anxiety. The process of training as professionals in the educational system is extensive and continuous. As the years go by, adult teachers regulate their emotional state much better, identify their emotions more easily and manage them successfully in front of students, so that the lessons or the presence of the teacher in front of the class are at the level of their expectations, but also that of the students, and anxiety is only an easily manageable emotional state.

This aspect can be explained from the point of view of how to manage emotions, by a better knowledge of one's own personality. Also, the level of communication and relationship with other important factors of the educational process is developed, and the management of one's own emotions is much more effective.

*As for hypothesis 2*, a weak level of association between maladaptive cognitive patterns (failure, vulnerability, addiction and protectionism) and the level of anxiety of teachers was obtained.

***Personal emotional regulation*** is a skill that allows the teacher to develop and assimilate approaches and strategies to manage stress, thus leading to satisfaction in the educational process. The teaching profession really involves aspects of patience, empathy, adaptability. The multiple transformations of the last period within the education system have increased the resistance to stress of teachers.

The context of Romanian education is a great challenge. Continuous changes, multiple requirements lead to increased anxiety levels of younger teachers. But over time, career development, professional satisfaction, time spent at work, performances obtained are aspects that influence the well-being of adult

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teachers. The multiple transformations of the last period within the education system have increased the resistance to stress and anxiety of teachers.

In recent years, education has undergone a number of transformations. The training courses have the role of training the teachers from a professional point of view. In parallel with these courses, it would be interesting to carry out some programs of mindfulness in order to improve well-being, diminish anxiety and find an inner balance, as an important resource of life.

### CONCLUSION

*Openness to experience is the personality dimension of teachers that reflects their predisposition and motivation for cognitive exploration, both in the perceptual and in the rational field. The questionnaires were applied in an educational institution that promotes multiculturalism and equity in education.*

*Multiculturalism takes into account the simple recognition of the existence of the cultural variety of the contemporary society and refers to the totality of the steps taken in order to preserve and value this variety individually, respectively the differences that characterize the various cultural areas. From this perspective, multicultural education has the role of allowing each culture to promote, through adequate instructive-formative actions, its own values and cultural specificity. In other words, multicultural education "involves a restructuring of the educational phenomenon in the sense of multiplying the activities it subsumes according to the typology of the various cultural identities specific to a particular society" (Stan C., 2010)*

*Multicultural education focuses on promoting the rights to education of all citizens regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation and plays an important role in ensuring fairness for learning opportunities and mitigating the effects of racism. It is based on the convergence of three educational practices: group diversity, interactive training and practicing the effectiveness of teaching-learning styles in different cultural contexts.*

*What kind of social change do we want from teachers? We want them to promote humanistic values: participation in social and cultural life, empowerment of, and dependence and belonging to national and ethnic values, acceptance of cooperation, positivism, valorization of empathy, his respect and dignity. We encourage teachers to implement an educational curriculum centered on moral and social values, to value the realistic personal and professional development of young people and to encourage them to achieve rational law based on critical thinking.*

*In order to promote the values of social solidarity, Professor Văideanu G. (1996) stated: "We consider that one of the main objectives of modern education must be to prepare children and adolescents to participate in a conscious and active way in building a world community rich in different aspects but united in*

*the pursuit of common goals such as peace, security and a more harmonious life for all human beings".*

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