Indefinite vs. fixed-term work contracts: the impact over the teachers' work-engagement

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Abstract. *A teacher's work during the school year should be seen as a marathon or as a sprint? This paper intends to contribute to the expanding body of literature on the work-engagement issues of education employees from a perspective of strategic human resources management. It investigates how the length of their working contracts influences the level of engagement shown for their work. It was assumed that the existence of an indefinite or a fixed-term work contract brings up aspects such as stability, predictability and coherence for a teacher's work, all thought to be parts of a positive engagement state of mind. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement and the acceptance of a short time collaboration could bring just as good results if the focus remains on the present moment. In order to gain a better understanding it was performed a quantitative research materialized in a questionnaire, answered by school teachers employed under both forms of contracts. The findings of this study are of value for any of the educational field stakeholders as the system's human resources are the most valuable asset for a qualitative result. In the end, implications of a predominant engaged or disengaged staff will be discussed and human resources management suggestions will be made.*

Keywords: engagement, work-contracts, work, teachers, education.

Introduction

The growing interest in work engagement over the past decades is probably because research has shown that engagement is related to meaningful outcomes (Soares, Mosquera, 2019) both for institutions and for employees.

Researches within the field of work engagement have developed more and more over the past years, however there is evidence that suggests the fact that the same involvement has not been maintained for the human resources in the educational field (Klassen, 2013). One of the main reasons for which this phenomena happens is caused by the lack of relevant instruments capable to measure effectively in the educational system. Nevertheless, the research that has been done so far tends to agree that understanding the mechanisms of teachers' work engagement is essential as their attitudes and level of engagement have a strong influence over their students (Roth, 2007).

Even though some of the studies treat as a given fact the teachers' work engagement (Truta, 2014) and they only search for the motivation behind (Bratianu & Bejinaru, 2020), this paper focuses on a deeper investigation related to the secondary level teachers work engagement. As studies show (Marent et al., 2020; Toader, 2018; Szen, 2013) job security is an important aspect when choosing their career for people working as teachers. For this purpose, in Romania, teachers of pre-university level can be employed under two types of contracts according to the Labor Code and the Education Law no.1/2011: indefinite work contracts and fixed term work contract of usually one year length. However, starting April 3rd 2019, the Government has passed a law which indicates the possibility of transforming the fixed term work contracts into contracts available as long as the job remains available inside the school under certain conditions teachers need to fulfill. This new measure gave birth to a series of controversies according to media news,

as this new type of work contract is not defined in the Labor Code as the phrase “as long as the job remains available” is ambiguous.

Nevertheless, in the light of the above paragraph, de facto, in the pre-university system two types of work contracts exist, the indefinite and the fixed term ones. The purpose of this article is to investigate how the length of the contract influences the teachers’ work engagement.

Additionally, it is worth to point out that since the study has been conducted in Romania and the answers have been given by Romanian teachers, the later on discussed results might illustrate better a reality that belongs to the Romanian space and be of more significance to the Romanian educational system. However, Romania is a country that belongs now for more than thirteen years to the European Union. Moreover, given the fact we all live in a digitalized society where people have access to information from all over the world in a matter of seconds, it is not forced to assume that the results obtained in this study could characterize the teachers’ reality from many countries and could give useful hints for stakeholders that aren’t necessarily belonging to the Romanian space.

The starting point of this research paper is the work engagement’s definition (Schaufeli et al., 2002) which states that it is a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption.

For the purpose of this paper, the “work” of the pre-university teachers has been divided into two main sections – the pedagogical part, that includes activities such as teaching and evaluation of students, as well as the preparation in advance of the classes -, and the administrative-bureaucratic part, that includes activities such as preparing and filing in all sort of documents that are not directly related to the teaching activity.

Hence, the main hypothesis of this research paper is: *the type of work contract under which a teacher is employed has an impact over its work engagement.*

Literature review

In this part of the article, research on work engagement in the field of education will be briefly summarized, as well as a review on the state of knowledge about the impact of different types of work contracts.

A 2018 study (Perera et al., 2018) suggests that the interest in studying the work engagement of teachers has increased in the last years. The previously mentioned study explains this interest by the gain of evidence that shows a connection between the behavior, the beliefs and the emotional dimension of teachers and the results obtained by their students.

Moreover, another reason for intensifying research on this topic is the rotation phenomena of teachers that has increased significantly over the last years which leads to social and educational costs (Soares, 2019; Marent, 2020). A third type of costs regards the financial costs. Recent researches (Wasilowski, 2018) shows that the degree of work engagement employees have, is generally very low and teachers make no exception. Studying closely this phenomena could bring useful answers both for the development of public policies and also for the optimization of costs especially in higher education institutions that usually have the structure of corporations.

When exploring the pedagogical dimension of the engagement (Kangas et al., 2017), according to the engagement model developed by Pittaway (2012) the intellectual, social, academic, professional and personal perspectives are to be taken into account for better work engagement researches. On the other hand, other researchers suggest that the work engagement of

a teacher is firstly given by the self-efficiency, a feature that will lead in time to deep engagement and high performance (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

Additionally, since this paper focuses on two different types of work contracts in the pre-university system, it is to be considered the fact that the discussion could go on by linking the employees under indefinite work contracts with experienced teachers, while the ones employed under the fixed term contracts to be regarded as early career teachers. In this light, there are studies to be considered that focus on understanding different aspects of what drives young people to the teaching career (Cuddapah, Stanford, 2015; Marent et al., 2020). Evidence show that (Cuddapah, 2015) teachers in their early career days enter the system by desiring to be caring, student-centered in a grounded way, organized, but flexible at the same time, knowledgeable and enthusiastic. However, in a more realistic light, besides the ideals of the profession, early career teachers, employed under fixed term work contracts tend to experience a lot of frustration because of the lack in security and stability and the lack of prospects for their career development and further promotions (Marent et al., 2020).

In terms of studies that link the types of contracts with the employees' engagement and a focused researched in the field of education, there is little evidence in this sense. Soares (2019) explores the dimension of the psychological contracts and their relationship with the work engagement.

Hence the present study intends to enhance the body of literature exploring the dimensions of work engagement in relationship to the type of contract under which a teacher is employed.

Methodology

This section is designed to present the steps taken in order to put together the present research paper for the purpose of answering the research question of this study. This research was designed to investigate whether the type of work contracts under which teachers of pre-university system were employed has any significant impact over their work engagement.

In order to answer the research question it was used a quantitative approach for developing the data collection. For this purpose it was preferred the investigation method developed through an online survey. The 24 question survey was designed and distributed through Google Forms platform. It was disseminated among an availability sample and a total of 199 pre-university teachers have anonymously answered the survey.

Sample description

In order to get some knowledge regarding the teachers' work engagement, the 199 obtained answers have been analyzed.

The 199 answers were obtained from pre-university Romanian teachers from across the country. 71.7% of the respondents were teachers under fixed term working contracts and the remaining 28.3% were teachers working under indefinite contracts. With respect to the gender of the respondents, 92.9% were females and the rest of 7.1% were males. This figures are no surprise at all as a 2018 report presented by the Romanian Ministry of National Education indicates the fact that at all pre-university levels the women are majoritarian, varying from 68.2% in technical schools to 99.7% at kindergarten level. According to the same report the trend is similar in all EU countries. With respect to the number of years worked in the pre-university system, the indefinite work contract group had on average 4.2 years, whereas the fixed term work contract group had on average 14.5 years.

A first observation on this availability sample leads us on the conclusion that almost three quarters of the answers belong to the teachers under fixed term contracts. Hence they will represent later on in the development of the results the main focus group, whereas the group of answers coming from the teachers under the indefinite work contracts will stand as the control group.

Survey description

The data has been collected in January 2020 and each teacher has answered benevolently at the survey.

The designed instrument for collecting the data of this study consisted of four sections (see Appendix 1). The survey was built in accordance to the purpose of the research and respecting the theoretical model of engagement given by the definition of work engagement (Schaufeli, 2002).

The first section includes three questions designed to obtain identification information of the respondents, such as the type of work contract under which they work, gender and number of years worked as teachers.

The following three sections were designed in order to measure each of the three engagement components presented in the Schaufeli work engagement definition: the vigor, the dedication and the absorption. Whether to determine if the teachers present a positive state of mind related to this aspects or not the questions were inspired by the Utrecht work engagement scale, but additionally developed in order to meet the realities of the pre-university teachers. For each question, the respondents had the possibility to indicate their level of agreement, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 stood for total disagreement, whereas 5 represented the total agreement.

Hence, the second section includes five questions designed to offer data regarding the level of vigor, one of the key elements of the work engagement definition. The third section had nine questions that would measure the level of dedication of the respondents, dedication being the second key element in the work's engagement definition and last but not least the forth section of the survey had 7 question that were designed to measure the absorption each respondent had.

Results and discussions

This section of the research paper focuses on delivering an interpretation on the results that have been obtained after analyzing the answers received through the survey. It is of great importance to interpret the results in the context of the actual scientifically knowledge available so that they can help other researchers and different other stakeholders of the topic to better understand the issues and to further develop it.

Work's engagement vigor dimension

The vigor dimension is presented (Schaufeli et al., 2002) as a state characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working together with the willingness of investing effort into the work and a persistent attitude in front of difficulties.

Most of the questions dedicated for this section prioritized the levels of energy and for both categories of employees we can notice that they are characterized by vigor. All the answers had a median result of 4, meaning that the majority of the respondents have partially agreed with the statements.

Regarding the average values of the answers we can notice no big differences, however, it can be observed a tendency in the average results of the fixed term work contract teachers to slightly lower values. The exception is given by what is felt while arriving in the teachers' room, where

fixed term work contract teachers had a higher result values of 4.03 in comparison with the 3.93 obtained by the indefinite work contract teachers.

Another significant aspect can be observed in the values obtained for the fact whether teachers exchange ideas related to the teaching methods. The slightly lower result of fixed term work contract teachers could be explained by the fact that they are not as incentive to perfect their teaching methods over time since they do not have the certainty of continuing to teach in the future.

Table 1 – The average and median results of the answers related to the teachers' level of vigor

VIGOR	Indefinite work contracts teachers		Fixed term work contracts teachers	
	Average	Median	Average	Median
In my way to school I feel full of energy towards the start of a new work day.	3.95	4	3.94	4
In my way to school I think with enthusiasm about what I am going to teach.	4.04	4	3.99	4
When I arrive to the teachers' room I feel joyful and I am glad to see my work colleagues.	3.93	4	4.03	4
I exchange ideas related to the subject I teach with my fellow colleagues.	3.77	4	3.61	4
I exchange ideas related to methods of teaching with my fellow colleagues.	3.80	4	3.54	4

Source: Authors' own research

As a conclusion regarding the vigor dimension of the work engagement, the results of this survey suggest that both categories of employees show vigor in their work, however with a light tendency to higher average values for the indefinite work contracts teachers.

Work's engagement dedication dimension

The dedication dimension is characterized (Schaufeli et al., 2002) as the situation when someone is highly involved into its work and feels a sense of enthusiasm, pride, challenge, significance or inspiration while doing its job.

The median values of five out of seven questions are 5, meaning that the majority of the respondents totally agreed with the statements. These five questions all were related to the dedication teachers have for their work with students. The highest average values were obtained at the questions related to the degree in which a teacher is concerned by its students understanding. Both categories of students scored high at these two questions.

The questions that obtained smaller results were the ones dedicated to the assessment of the dedication's level related to the institution. Both categories of teachers obtained a value of 4 for

the median computation. It is worth to mention that the average values of how willing both categories of teachers would be to work over time if that would be in their students' interest are higher than the ones related to working overtime in the school's interest. This results suggest that both categories of teachers manifest a higher dedication to the students' interests than to the school ones. This particular piece of information could be of interest for the school's head teachers and the leaders above in how a teacher's dedication level could be increased in the institution's interest as well. It is to be noticed that the average results of the fixed term work contracts teachers are smaller than the ones of the indefinite work contracts teachers for this particular aspect.

Table 2 - The average and median results of the answers related to the teachers' level of dedication

DEDICATION	Indefinite work contracts teacher		Fixed term work contracts teachers	
	Average	Median	Average	Median
I search for new information related to the subject I teach.	4.64	5	4.65	5
I explain to my students the utility and the practical importance of the subject I teach.	4.59	5	4.49	5
I am concerned if my students understand or not a notion.	4.95	5	4.87	5
If one of my students asks for additional clarifications, I offer solutions until the moment it understands.	4.88	5	4.90	5
I care about the way my students think and which are their preferences and interests.	4.75	5	4.72	5
I would be willing to work over time if that would be in my students' interest.	4.21	4	4.10	4
I would be willing to work over time if that would be in my school's interest.	3.82	4	3.51	4

Source: Authors' own research

In conclusion, regarding the dedication dimension of the work engagement, the way the respondents of this survey answered indicates the possibility of a very high level of dedication for both categories of teachers, with a higher dedication feeling regarding the activities that involve the students and a slightly reduced dedication for the aspects non-related directly with the students. This piece of information can be backed up with the answers of the question "what I mostly like about my work is..." In their high majority, they contain the words "children" and "my students" suggesting the fact that people choosing to teach have a passion for working with

children and teenagers. Additionally, they feel fulfilled by their feedbacks and results that highly increases their dedication levels.

Overall, it can be noticed a slightly difference in the average results in favor of the indefinite work contracts teachers.

Work's engagement absorption dimension

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The absorption dimension in Schaufeli's definition (Schaufeli et al., 2002) proposes the following characteristics for an employee: the manifestation of full concentration, happiness while working, the difficulty to detach from work and the feeling that time passes quickly while working.

Two out of the four questions that were intended to test the teachers' level of absorption pointed mainly at the pedagogical activities of a teacher. For both of the questions, both categories of teachers obtained a median result of 4, with a higher average result for the fixed term work contracts teachers in terms of losing the time while preparing the upcoming classes. This result could be explained by these teachers' less amount of experience and their need to invest more time in being sure they will be capable to deliver to the students quality materials and information.

The following question, that tested the teachers' loss of time while spending the breaks with their fellow colleagues, indicates similar results for both categories of teachers. The median result is 2 for all the teachers, 2 being due to moderate disagreement, and with an average result in favor of the fixed term work contracts teachers suggesting they would spent more time in the breaks possibly seeking pieces of advice from their more experienced fellow colleagues.

Last but not least, the forth question of this section shows the fact that in their majority, both categories of teachers would see themselves performing this profession for the rest of their working life, fact suggested by the result of the median computation, where the value 5 was obtained. However, there is a slightly difference in favor of the indefinite work contracts teachers.

Table 3 - The average and median results of the answers related to the teachers' level of absorption

ABSORPTION	Indefinite work contracts teacher		Fixed term work contracts teachers	
	Average	Median	Average	Median
I lose the track of time when I am in the classroom and I teach.	3.89	4	3.75	4
I lose the track of time when I prepare the materials for the upcoming classes.	3.89	4	4.06	4
I lose the track of time during the break time and I engage in conversations with my fellow colleagues.	2.05	2	2.50	2
I can see myself working as a teacher for my entire life.	4.52	5	4.31	5

Source: Authors' own research

As a conclusion, the results obtained through this survey suggest the fact that both categories of teachers are absorbed during their work with students.

Additionally, one of the survey's questions asked the respondents to self-evaluate their work and to give themselves a mark for the work they perform daily. Both categories of employees gave themselves similar marks, hence the average result of the teachers under fixed term contract was 8.63 while the teachers under indefinite time contract awarded themselves 8.64.

In conclusion, after presenting the results of the survey, the obtained evidence suggests that the paper's hypothesis *the type of work contract under which a teacher is employed has an impact over its work engagement* cannot be confirmed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand better whether the type of contract under which a teacher is employed has any significant impact over its work engagement. Hence, the evidence gained suggest the fact that the hypothesis cannot be confirmed.

One possible explanation for the results presented above, could be the design of the survey and the concept under which it was built. Schaufeli's work engagement definition (Schaufeli et al., 2002) that underlie this study, focuses on aspects that are mainly related to the core of the work, in this study, the teaching activities. Hence, when it comes to dedication, absorption and vigor related to the teaching side of the teachers' work, no matter under which type of contract they are employed, they show very similar behaviors and so, we could assume they feel engaged in the same measure.

However, there could be aspects that draw them apart based on the status each has based on the work contract they are employed. Some evidence can be seen in the answers given by the teachers under fixed term work contract versus the ones given by the indefinite work contracts teachers at the question "what I mostly dislike about my job is..." The teachers under the indefinite time work contract accuse the bureaucracy, the immense number of papers that need to be filled in and sometimes the difficulty to manage the relationship with the pupils' parents. On the other hand, the teachers under fixed term work contracts predominantly complain about the exams they need to pass every year in order to keep their jobs, the pressure of continuous assessments and generally an atmosphere of unpredictability about their jobs' security.

This situation could lay the ground for future researches and exploring other angles of the teachers' work engagement and discover the full spectrum of factors that contribute to it.

In terms of stakeholders that could get interest from the present research paper, among them we name the schools' head teachers, their hierarchical superiors, the Ministries of Education and Labor, the teachers themselves and last but not least the parents and the students. According to reports of the Ministry of National Education, there are little under three million students in Romania and little over two hundred thousand teachers. Any other categories of stakeholders are welcomed to study thoroughly this research and further develop on its premises. Business professionals or fellow researchers might explore in greater details the factors that influence teachers' work engagement and dig deeper the relationships set by any of this research's hypotheses.

Additionally, it must be acknowledged the fact that this research has some major limitations and its discoveries cannot be given the rank of general truth. First of all, the surveyed sample of teachers is rather small (i.e. 199 teaches) and it does not cover a representative geographical area for the Romanian space or for the characteristics of teachers' demographics.

There are great chances that a replication of this study on a bigger sample or in a different geographical area lead us to slightly different results and observations and a greater variety of perspectives regarding the relationship between the teachers' work engagement and the type of contract under which they are employed.

Last but not least, the question the main stakeholders should bear in mind is how this strategic human resource of a country, the teachers, can be even better engaged in its daily job.

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Appendix 1

I. Identification questions

1. I work under _____ fixed term contract _____ indefinite contract
2. I am _____ woman _____ man
3. I have been working as a teacher for _____ years now.

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II. Questions about the level of VIGOR

1. In my way to school I feel full of energy towards the start of a new work day.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

2. In my way to school I think with enthusiasm about what I am going to teach.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

3. When I arrive to the teachers' room I feel joyful and I am glad to see my work colleagues.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

4. I exchange ideas related to the subject I teach with my fellow colleagues.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

5. I exchange ideas related to methods of teaching with my fellow colleagues.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

III. Questions about the level of DEDICATION

1. I search for new information related to the subject I teach.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

2. I explain to my students the utility and the practical importance of the subject I teach.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always

3. I spend hours per week to prepare the upcoming classes.

4. I am concerned if my students understand or not a notion.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

5. If one of my students asks for additional clarifications, I offer solutions until the moment it understands.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

6. I care about the way my students think and which are their preferences and interests.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

7. I would be willing to work over time if that would be in my students' interest.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

8. I would be willing to work over time if that would be in my school's interest.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

		neither disagreement		
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9. Prioritize the following activities from the most important (1) to the least important (6) so that at the end of the day you feel at peace with the work you had done.

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I check the annual planner of the topics.	
I go to the book store to buy the latest exercise book on the market.	
I talk on the phone with the parent of one student with learning issues.	
I work on the last assesment's statistics.	
I prepare the materials for the upcoming classes.	
I work on the last month absenteeism's statistics.	

IV. Questions about the level of ABSORPTION

1. I lose the track of time when I am in the classroom and I teach.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

2. I lose the track of time when I prepare the materials for the upcoming classes.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

3. I lose the track of time during the break time and I engage in conversations with my fellow colleagues.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

4. I can see myself working as a teacher for my entire life.

1	2	3	4	5
Total disagreement	Moderate disagreement	Neither disagreement / neither disagreement	Partial agreement	Total agreement

5. What I like mostly about my profession is

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6. What I dislike mostly about my profession is

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