DEMOCRACY, DISCRIMINATION AND MOBBING IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

A factor which can contribute to the occurrence of conflicts in the workplace is discrimination, which is defined as “the unjust or prejudicial treatment of a person compared against other members of an organization on the grounds of race, color, religion, origins, age, physical or mental impairment or sexual orientation”. In fact, the reason for conflict is of little importance as compared to the manner in which the conflicting situation is approached. The role of the manager in solving workplace conflicts is cardinal. The existence of a job description for each position is important so that employees should know exactly their responsibilities for the job they do. The present study focuses on the findings of a survey carried out on a sample of 150 Master’s degree students of various specialization programs: Tourism Geography (Bistrița) and Curriculum Management, in 2014 and 2015. The respondents in the selected sample were full-time teachers of various disciplines (with classes at kindergarten, primary, lower and upper secondary education levels) doing their Master’s degree. The subjects answered the questionnaire anonymously so that the truer and more accurate opinions could be collected.

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1. Introduction

The concept of democratization belongs to reformist school of thinking and in sociology it defines a special process of social change.

Taking this view into account, we should understand democratization as a process of discovery of the limits of formal democracy: even though it is based on the principles of free access and equality of rights, it faces the existence of real inequalities and privileges. To measure the extent of the former and to identify and reduce the latter become the goals of democratization.
Generally, by the democratization of the educational system equal opportunities of access to education up to the higher forms for every social level individual, opportunities for each member of society to attain their full potential of development are claimed.

2. Theoretical aspects regarding mobbing

*The democratization of education* is determined by the nature of social relationships, the principles of organizing social life and is social process which aims at improving the quality of activity at all levels, especially in as far as organizing the necessary bodies for the implementation of equal access opportunity policies and promotion of legitimate and representative values.

The democratization of education involves re-evaluating the concept of “equal opportunities” from the perspective of its qualitative role which means not only ensuring formal equal access to education at various levels but also stimulating the school integration, professional and social integration of graduates.

The educational system can be viewed as a macro system (encompassing aspects focusing on the relationships between education and economic, social and cultural life) and as a microsystem (focused on the components of the school system and the relationships developed between them).

In a similar manner, a discussion on the democratization of the educational system involves approaching the two aspects: macro education and micro education.

Macro education occurs in an extended pedagogical and social context which does not allow for the development of direct relationships, of mutual knowledge of ones another of those involved in the learning process at the decision-making managerial level (Androniceanu, 2005).

The large communities from a pedagogico-social area designate their representatives for higher level educational bodies (The Ministry of Education and Research, School County Inspectorates, Teaching Staff Houses) who will take over the responsibilities of making decisions on their behalf.

Micro education occurs in well-defined social and professional pedagogical establishments which ensure the development of direct relationships among the members, even within “basic groups” (school, curricular area department, teachers’ council) (Androniceanu, 2005; Paoli & Merllie, 2001).

**Mobbing in the workplace**

Few people in Romania are familiar with the concept of mobbing. Mobbing in the workplace is a form of mental aggression, directed towards an individual over a period of a few months by one or more co-workers through a series of actions meant to isolate the targeted person. In effect, the role of the employee in the company, his/ her professional competences are systematically and wilfully underestimated by various discrediting tactics, humiliation rumours with the purpose of forcing someone out of the workplace. The victims of mobbing in the workplace often come to resign from their position, since they can no longer cope with the stress caused by aggressive behaviour and negative atmosphere. The consequences on the victim are psychosocial and health related, decrease in self-confidence about own professional competences, stress, deterioration of one’s family relationships due to stress problems, depression, other health conditions. There are also consequences affecting the workplace environment in the company, with effects on work performance.

Mobbing may also be defined as a form of coercion of a person to leave a workplace because his/ her presence is deemed as a potential danger in that place, by falsely emphasizing the inferior competence of
his/ her co-workers. More often than not, the purpose is to remove the targeted individual, but the aim may also be to demonstrate that the target is not such a competent professional as he/ she may seem. As a result, in mobbing, the removal of potential danger is done by attacking the credibility the target person enjoys or by undermining his/her performance (Friedman & Marshall, 2004).

Mobbing is not easy to identify through social studies research, for it is a phenomena that each individual experiences in a personal manner and may produce subjective evidence, which can be diversely interpreted. Many individuals who fall victims to mobbing actions are discredited by the aggressors who label them as being in unsound mental condition, weird, who come to have their self-assurance undermined and their capabilities questioned, whose credibility is doubted (Gates, 2004; Westhues, 2006).

The effects of mobbing on the employees’ overall well-being

Emotional harassment should be considered from various points of view: legal, medical, psychological, sociological, workplace management.

On a professional level, mobbing actions affect a targeted individual’s work capacity, his/her competitiveness, his/her capability to develop positive work relationships (Westhues, 2006).

Mobbing shakes one’s self-confidence, zest of life, and, over time, it can lead to depression, loss of interest in one’s work (Gates, 2004; Sarchielli, 2003).

On a psychological and physical level, the consequences of mobbing are worrying. The phenomenon falls under the category of occupational safety and health issues.

The individual subject to mobbing actions gradually develops mental instability. The higher the stress the targeted victim experiences, the stronger the mobbing actions are. Experts speak of a crisis the individual has to cope with: losing one’s job is a threat not only for the employee’s self-esteem, but also for his/ her living standard, supported by the income one earns by doing a job (Westhues, 2006; Sarchielli, 2003). The psycho-social and health state (overall well-being) effects may be multiple: migraines, depressions, acute stress reaction which may cause hospitalization, psychosomatic pathological state, impacted metabolism, high blood pressure, pre heart attacks, divorce, tobacco, alcohol or drug addictions, use of antidepressants, even getting to regrettable gestures, materialized in suicidal attempts (Stoica-Constantin, 2004; Sarchielli, 2003).

From a legal point of view, in 2004, the Romanian Government adopted Decision no. HG1258 regarding the approval of the National Action Plan to Combat Discrimination, and the National Council for Fighting Against Discrimination (NCFD) was established in 2003. Romanian legislation includes regulations with written specifications which, by legal interpretation, make references to the management of mobbing phenomena, too: Labour Code, the provisions of articles 5 and 171.

Discrimination of women refers to any differentiation, exclusion, or limitation on the basis of gender (or sex) whose effect or purpose is to compromise or annihilate acknowledgement, benefit or the exercise by the women, irrespective of their marital status, on the grounds of equality of men and women, of fundamental human rights and freedoms in the political, economic, social cultural, civil, or any other domain (Alston & Robinson, 2005).

We live in a society in which oftentimes the evil prospers, no matter how hard many people seek to do good. And yet, true heroes would stop being heroes at all if they came to boast about their deeds (Gheorghevici, 2006).
Therefore we believe that discrimination is the fear of being different. Assuming that each society defines itself by the ideas it promotes, the position of being a man or a woman, a member of a minority or of the majority, irrespective of what issue is considered, inevitably, is associated a whole range of expectations, identities, societal codes. Individuals have no choice but to perform in compliance with these assigned roles: to accept, adopt, reject or adjust to them. (Fritsch, 2008; Paoli, & Merllie, 2001). All these are necessary so that individuals may lead their lives within a constantly changing society. Some succeed in doing so, whereas other people do not, unable to cross the barriers, and others remain tributary to their own limited ideas or feelings (Debout, 2003; Paoli & Merllie, 2001).

**Forms of discrimination:**

- **Direct Discrimination.** It happens when a person is treated less favourably than someone else who has been, is or could be in a similar situation because of any personal characteristics mentioned as protected by the legislation in force.

- **Indirect Discrimination.** It occurs when a criterion, an employer’s policies or work practices, apparently neutral, places a particular employee or a group of employees at a disadvantage as compared with others because of the criteria specified by the regulations in force, except for the cases in which such work policies, criteria or practices are objectively justified by a legitimate purpose and the methods of reaching this purpose are appropriate and necessary for the way the business works. Indirect discrimination is also any active or passive behaviour which by the consequences it generates unlawfully favours or places at a disadvantage, applying an unfair or degrading treatment to a person, a group of people or a community compared with others who find themselves in a similar context.

- **Multiple Discrimination.** It happens when a person or a group of people are treated differently compared with others in a similar situation on the basis of two or more identities cumulatively (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Stoica-Constantin, 2004).

**Harassment.** It is any conduct that generates an intimidating, hostile, abusive or offensive work environment on the grounds of race, nationality, belonging to an ethnic group, language, religion, social category, gender, sexual orientation, belonging to a less favoured category, age, disability, being a refugee or asylum seeker or on any other grounds.

**Victimization.** It is any adverse treatment against an employee in retaliation for involvement in bringing, or supporting, a complaint of discrimination under the Equal Opportunity Act either to a law court or to other external agencies (Paoli & Merllie, 2001).

Authorizing and assisting discrimination. It is also considered a type of work discrimination and represents asking, instructing or encouraging a person or a group of persons to discriminate against another person or group out of submission to authoritarian personality (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004).

**3. Methodology**

The aim of this study is to show in our research that in our country, as well as in other countries in the West, the phenomenon of mobbing exists. In particular, this study concerns the educational sector.

Even if is not expressly covered by the Romanian legislation, or too little submitted for discussions by society, the mobbing exists in various forms. Is attempted the cover up of this, just because of the fear that is induced on persons which are under mobbing.
The applied method in this research was the survey based on a questionnaire. The questionnaire was applied to a sample of 150 Master’s degree students of various specializations: Tourism Geography (Bistrița) and Curriculum Management in 2014 and 2015. The sample had a mixed composition, including both male and female students aged 23-48. The selection comprised only those students who are full-time teachers of various disciplines (who are hired for undetermined time duration in preschool, primary, middle school or secondary school education). The questionnaire administered by researcher was anonymous.

Initially we have conducted a power point presentation through which were presented forms of mobbing briefly presented above, both theoretical and practical. Were presented examples from other countries, institutions etc., with duration of about 2 hours.

Then, open discussions were held, pros and cons opinions of those who wanted to involve anonymous (about 1 hour) - and finally was applied the questionnaire - anonymous.

The hypothesis of research - if there are dissatisfactions at work, psychological pressure on an employee, repercussions on health, it follows that in Romanian society there is present the "mobbing" - and must be taken measures to reduce or even remove this phenomenon.

The applied questionnaire

1. Do you think there is democracy at your workplace?
   Yes  No  Partially

2. Do you hold the opinion that a leader is always fair?
   Yes  No  Sometimes  Partially Depending on his/ her own interests.

3. How would rate the implementation of democracy in your workplace?
   Good  Absent  Impartial  Nonexistent

4. I am discriminated at my workplace on the grounds of:
   Not being of an appropriate age  Lacking experience
   Out of a desire to humiliate  Being incompetent.

5. Do you think that certain values to be held are decided depending on certain interests?
   Yes  No  Partially

6. Is there is a fair leader at your workplace?
   Yes  No  Sometimes  Depending on certain personal interests

7. Do you agree to the idea that the decisions made reflect the opinion of the majority?
   Yes  No  Partially  Never

8. Please list the most frequent causes and forms of mobbing at your workplace.

9. What would you really like to happen at your workplace so you may feel better? (Make a list of your wishes for a better work environment at your workplace in as far as relationships are concerned).

4. Results and discussions

Most of the questionnaire subjects considered that democracy at their workplaces was only partially practiced. This is shown by the fact that 93% of the students who responded the first question selected this alternative for their answer. Only 7% of the respondents felt that democracy is implemented in their workplace. The largest number of the respondent’s favor the idea that a leader is not just, but
provides solutions which best correspond to his own interests. This is illustrated by the fact that 92% of the students in our sample selected this variant out of three alternatives and only 8% opted for the idea that a leader provides partially fair solutions to problems.

When asked about how they assess the application of democratic practices in their workplace, only a small number of the respondents characterized the democracy in their workplace as good. Most of the respondents evaluated the level of implementation of democratic practices in their workplaces as partially good, whereas the ones who held the opinion that democracy in their workplace was nonexistent were slightly more than the ones who stated that it was good. This is demonstrated by the fact that 5% of the respondents appreciated the workplace democratic practices in their schools as being good, 87% of the respondents considered workplace democracy in their establishments as being partially good and 8% of the students questioned appreciated that democratic practices are nonexistent in their workplaces.

The fourth question relative to most frequent reasons for which respondents experienced workplace discrimination was solved in a relatively simple manner, the greatest proportion of the respondents indicating that the main criteria for experiencing mobbing in their workplaces were age, lack of experience, being incompetent and the desire to humiliate. 98% of the people questioned selected all the four reasons of discrimination as the criteria on which they experienced discrimination in the workplace: age, lack of experience, lack of competence and desire to humiliate a colleague. Only 2% of the respondents did not admit to have experienced any form of discrimination at their workplaces on any grounds.

The largest proportion of the respondents considered that the decisions taken in their workplace are only a partial reflection of reality. This is shown by the fact that 93% of the Master’s degree students in our sample held this opinion.

The views of the majority of those who completed the questionnaire items relative to leader’s fairness and whether the decisions taken at their workplace reflect the opinion of a majority or not are that the leaders have not always been fair and that leaders’ decisions at their workplaces have not always been an expression of a majority. This is demonstrated by the fact that 91% of those questioned considered that the leaders in their workplaces were not correct and that leaders’ decisions were not a reflection of the view of a majority whereas only 6% of the individuals in the research sample believed that their leaders were partially correct and their decisions partially express the opinions of the majority.

The eight item of the questionnaire requested the subjects to enumerate causes and forms of mobbing in the workplace. The causes of aggression in the workplace are diverse. The most frequently mentioned causes of mobbing were: poor management in the workplace, involvement in multiple projects or school activities at the same time, excuses for getting off work, lack of cooperation, lack of motivation or incentives, lack of coherence in management, tight deadlines for certain work duties to be performed, etc. In as far as forms of aggression are concerned, most participants mentioned verbal conflict as a form of aggression in their workplaces.

The last item of the questionnaire asked the participants to make a list of their wishes for feeling better in their workplace. The participants’ wish-list included the following: calmness, developing and completing projects in a reasonable number, fair distribution of tasks to be solved among colleagues, setting a reasonable deadline for solving tasks, peace, quiet, more mutual respect, giving more credit to young members of the teaching staff etc.
Among the inadequate forms of building relationships in the workplace the respondents mentioned:

1. Setting oneself apart from others as a clearly different personality; the individual does not attempt to integrate himself/ herself in the team – in the context of workplace relationships
2. The person is made fun of, colleagues play tricks on him/ her; the person is the subject of colleagues’ gossip – this may be the expression of an immature behavior, yet not dangerous from the part of workmates, or it may be a precisely focused malicious attitude
3. The person is criticized, is reproached certain things
4. The person has often been offended and hurt by superiors or peers.

More explicit forms of a tendency of marginalization are the following:

1. The person is not invited to join the informal meetings of workmates outside the workplace, he or she does not socialize with workmates during brakes – to the limit, this may be a consequence of one’s inability to adapt to a regular routine of conduct, blocking the opportunities for making conversation with peers, getting to know one another better, being open to socializing;
2. The person is ignored, is not allowed to give one’s opinion, is constantly interrupted when speaking, his/ her ideas do not seem to matter;
3. Tasks given to him/ her are changed; he/ she is being taken away the responsibilities for certain tasks without being informed.
4. The person is given difficult tasks to solve; heavy load of work; is requested to spend extra work hours at the workplace or is given tasks which are beyond his/ her competencies or qualifications.
5. The person has been ridiculed or humiliated in front of workmates.
6. The person is given tasks that others avoid doing.

5. Conclusions

As was evidenced by the applied questionnaire, doubled by the preceding discussions, all the persons recognize that they faced with this mobbing - even if they didn't knew this nomenclature - mobbing.

And regretted that it is not expressly anchored in the Romanian society, from a legal standpoint. And that unfortunately many covers it intentionally - because there is no other alternative.

The purpose of research and research hypothesis was confirmed.

The largest part of the people interviewed admitted in a direct or indirect manner that the persistence of a certain atmosphere in the workplace environment of a school largely depends on the leader, in this case, the principal (seen as ‘the boss’) as it is his/ her responsibility to objectively analyses the conflicts or disagreements which may occur between or among various members of the teaching staff. It is his/ her responsibility to closely address the problem with fairness, without taking sides with any of the parties involved. At the same time it is a leader’s duty to manage the professional problems the employees may have. School principals are often blamed for being unable to direct their attention to these difficulties employees may experience, or they are blamed for being unable to motivate teachers to be effective, and this is owing to the principals’ adopting an authoritarian, counterproductive attitude in their relationship with the teaching staff.

We should not overlook the fact that the job of teaching is not an easy one: it involves a lot of intellectual and emotional input. To this we may add the alarmingly low interest of pupils for studying
and the low payment received in exchange for all the work teachers do to have a complete demotivating picture.

In most of the cases the decisions are made without too much talking done with the teachers as a working group, and often these decisions are favorable to only a small part of the staff and unfavorable to the majority. Human resources specialists speak about the risk to teachers of developing the burnout syndrome (chronic stress at the workplace), the phenomenon of psycho-mental/ psycho-social and physical exhaustion due to exaggerated involvement and long-term emotional strain of employees.

The lack of democratic management and the existence of discrimination in the Romanian education system is closely related to the political color of the leader, that is the management is dependent on the political party governing the country at a given moment. We believe that the relationships between employees and the school manager can be improved if the leader (manager/ school principal):
- provides proper work conditions;
- shows an interest in knowing each and every individual of the staff as much as possible;
- creates the conditions for a positive work atmosphere;
- creates a pleasant work atmosphere without wasting time and energy on disputes.

A teaching staff group is one which reunites people of different ages, different types of personality, various work styles and different motivations. By the nature of their work teachers are constantly requested to interact. Sometimes conflicts may seem normal to occur, but their solving should be a group process, done through communication among members of the group, with mutual respect, tolerance and through cooperation. The job of teacher involves a high level of adaptation capacity, a developed ability to identify a conflict situation and the capacity of finding the appropriate solution to every given problem.

As a group we can succeed.

References


