Lessons from the private sector: the importance of addressing teacher’s intrinsic motivation

Is a pay raise enough to curb the teacher motivation crisis? A look into the usefulness of an intrinsic motivation-driven approach in the private sector shows how education policies can benefit from an investment in autonomy, teamwork, and teacher career models.

Why Intrinsic Motivation Matters

How can we encourage a teacher to perform well in the classroom? Finding an answer to this question is a priority to education policymakers and the center of debates in the international education community. For years, education leaders held teachers responsible for student performance, prioritizing an accountability-driven approach to drive student success. However, this tactic proved unfruitful; it did not lead to improved learning and put teachers under stress, just as poor working conditions and unattractive salaries resulted in escalated teacher attraction and retention issues. Education leaders had to recognize the development of a ‘teacher motivation crisis’ that risked impairing quality education. Although the debate has crystallized around salary levels, it is beneficial to also consider the role intrinsic motivation plays in this context.

There is a widespread consensus that, if we want to improve the quality of education, we need to improve teacher motivation. Yet, in countries where the status and motivation of teachers have declined, how can we reverse this phenomena and ‘reprofessionalise’ the profession? Looking at it through a management lens, creating a more sophisticated career structure might be part of the answer. Motivation theories highlight the importance of motivation factors such as a sense of achievement, personal growth, recognition, status, autonomy, self-determination, fair wages and job stability (among others). All these aspects have a link to the way the career is organised. Teacher careers can thus, potentially, act as a powerful leverage to influence teacher motivation.

IIEP-UNESCO’s recent research on teacher careers and motivation shows that the introduction of career ladders bears a particularly motivating effect on teachers by promoting professional growth and linking salary to additional responsibilities. This is in line with previous research findings. Granting teachers professional autonomy, thereby strengthening their decision-making role, has been
shown to increase teacher motivation (Kefalidou, Vassilakis, et Pitsalidis 2015). Continuous professional development (CPD) initiatives and increased collaboration in the workplace also increase teacher motivation. For instance, shared responsibility for student achievement in collaborative environments has been shown to motivate teachers to achieve instructional goals (Anderson 2010). Countries that confer high importance on collaborative dynamics also increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession, as evidenced in New York City’s Teacher Career Pathways program.

These research findings mirror what motivation theorists Maslow, Herzberg, Deci and Ryan found in the 1950s. They argued that individuals working in organizations that fulfill their intrinsic need of autonomy, competence acquisition and relatedness will be more motivated, satisfied and well-performing in the long term. On the contrary, the sole use of extrinsic motivation stimuli like bonus pay may decrease motivation and performance (Maslow 1943; Herzberg, Mausnek, et Syndebman 1959; Deci et Ryan 1985) (Table 1).

Table 1: Definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation according to Deci and Ryan’s Cognitive Evaluation Theory (1985)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of motivation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Associated with</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Acting because the action is inherently interesting or enjoyable.</td>
<td>Creativity, problem solving, cognitive flexibility, persistence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Acting because the action leads to a separate desirable outcome, such as a reward.</td>
<td>Initial increase in frequency of action, but leads to decrease in intrinsic motivation.</td>
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Source: Crehan, 2017

Although hard to measure, addressing intrinsic motivation issues is valuable because it is universal and pervasive. Education sector leaders should thus look to other sectors for advice on how to drive motivation in their workforce. Analyzing approaches adopted in the private sector, for instance, helps to draw interesting lessons that can be adapted to teachers. Not surprisingly, a look into private sector approaches to improving intrinsic motivation matches IIEP-UNESCO’s research findings on teacher careers and motivation.

What we can learn from the private sector

Much like the education sector, the private sector has similarly experienced a shift away from a purely accountability-driven approach, instead considering factors that drive intrinsic motivation. Starting in the 1950s, formative assessment models were integrated into employee management structures to help build on employee skills and potential. Companies like General Electrics invested in this process as early as the 1960s, with the goal of distinguishing between accountability and development issues. However, as the “accountability movement” dominated teacher policy in the 1980s, global economic crises led private management policies to reembrace an accountability-driven approach. Companies introduced forced-ranking management systems that afforded promotion opportunities to top performers only. Until the early 2000s, the importance of standards,
scoring and financial incentives reflected the same focus on extrinsic motivation stimuli that were observed in education policies.

A shift then occurred, as companies realized that traditional performance management was not only costly but also an ineffective way of attracting and retaining new talent. The Agile Manifesto, created by software developers in 2001, urged companies to introduce principles such as collaboration, self-organization, self-direction and regular reflection on effective work practices. As a result, major companies like Adobe and IBM kick-started a “performance management revolution” which prioritized performance motivation (Capelli and Travis 2016). Companies realized that intrinsic motivation factors led to greater employee productivity, satisfaction, and loyalty.

For example, teamwork and collaboration efforts have become ‘must haves’ in private companies. Research shows that engagement increases when employee collaboration is encouraged and employee effectiveness becomes interdependent. Likewise, a greater level of autonomy increases the overall perception of employee accountability towards their organization and performance (Brown et al. 2015). Many companies have also adopted Individual Development Plans (IDPs), which extend training opportunities to employees and increase chances of promotion. This strategy has increased employee retention and deemed more important than salary incentives (Deloitte, 2012).

The adaptation of leadership positions in management is another key approach to increasing intrinsic motivation. Managers who present themselves as mentors are more effective leaders and may impact 70% of employment motivation (Gallup Inc 2015). The top-down approach has progressively been abandoned in favor of distributed decision-making that contributes to a sense of participation and membership. Instead, managers are increasingly expected to be leader-mentors who set predictable and clear expectations, provide quick feedback, and are transparent about employee paths to promotion.

Finally, a focus on intrinsic motivation has ignited change in recruitment processes. Companies now prioritize hiring employees who fit the culture and share the company’s core values. James Heskett, a Business Professor at Harvard University, recommends that education systems also reconsider their recruitment policies, focusing on hiring administrators and instructors who are “genuinely interested in others and their individual needs, able to set and meet expectations in ways that build trust through ‘no surprises’ leadership, generous, and good at sharing and collaborating” (2018). Heskett also promotes the involvement of current staff in recruitment efforts because they may be best positioned to assess whether candidates have the above-cited qualities.

The parallel between motivation issues in the education and private sectors shows that the “teacher motivation crisis” should not be narrowed down to debates around salary levels and working conditions. However, any debates around teacher motivation will be annihilated as long as these ‘hygiene factors’ (1) or prerequisites are not in place. Intrinsic motivation is related to a need for greater autonomy, knowledge acquisition and relatedness in the workplace. Fifteen years of experience and research findings in the private sector support the conclusion that career schemes and modalities that favor a development-focused approach and collaboration can lead to higher motivation and performance in the long run provided basic conditions are satisfactory.

(1) In Herzberg’s dual factor theory (1959), ‘hygiene factors’ are so named because, just like a hygienic environment does not improve health, its absence can aggravate health. Job satisfaction therefore begins when basic hygiene factors are satisfactory.

Bibliography


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