

## PERFORMANCE RELATED PAY IN EDUCATION – ROMANIAN TEACHERS' STANDPOINT

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**Abstract.** *The introduction of performance-related pay in educational institutions is debated in many countries. Most of the performance-based educational grids were introduced as pilot programs in which teachers could choose whether they wanted to participate or not, or the schools were establishing their own performance criteria for teacher evaluation. In Romania, introducing a performance-based pay system sparked a wave of debate, especially regarding the evaluation criteria of teachers' performance. Thus, the present paper proposes to explore the opinions of Romanian teachers regarding introducing a performance-related pay system and the possible evaluation criteria that could be used for differential pay. We address the research objectives through a qualitative approach based on 58 semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers from the pre-university education system in Romania. The results show that Romanian teachers do not have a firm opinion against the introduction of the performance-related pay system, instead, they argue for differential pay while claiming that the implementation of performance-based pay is rather difficult to utopian. The main arguments regard legislative obstacles, and especially the heterogeneity of the Romanian education system. Moreover, the research shows that selecting evaluation criteria is one of the main concerns associated with fears of inequity. Based on the research data, we advance a few recommendations for a possible performance-based pay and add to the literature on issues concerning such a policy.*

**Keywords:** *performance-related pay, evaluation criteria, education, Romanian teachers' perspective*

## Introduction

There is an increased interest in performance-related pay (PRP) programs for teachers in Romania and around the world. This interest in PRP for teachers stems from the desire to improve the quality of educational systems and students' academic achievements (Liang, 2013). Therefore, the adaptation of PRP programs in education represents a subject marked by a multitude of opinions and divided attitudes. Considering this situation, most of the PRP projects were introduced either as pilot programs in which teachers could choose whether they wanted to participate or not or in the aftermath of education reforms, in which schools were given the task of establishing their own performance criteria for teacher evaluation (Lohman, 2011; Checchi & Mattei, 2021).

Romania uses a salary system in which teachers are paid according to the level of education and years of experience in the educational field (Law no. 153/2017 on the remuneration of staff paid from public funds). Discussions regarding the introduction of PRP began in 2019, when the Minister of Education at the time, Ecaterina Andronescu, argued that in the Romanian educational system, it is necessary to introduce a performance-based payment, but the proposal sparked an intense public debate (Peticilă, 2019). Also, in 2021, the Minister of Education Sorin Cîmpeanu returned to this proposal and argued that introducing this type of system is necessary to establish fair compensation in the educational field (Peticilă, 2021). These proposals led to a strong debate, one of the main dissatisfactions with PRP being the idea of rewarding teachers based on the performance achieved by their students. The teachers argued that the students' performance depends on several variables, and the PRP system focuses only on certain aspects (Dolean, 2021).

This paper brings a review of opinions regarding the use of PRP in education, highlighting the main obstacles to the implementation of PRP. Also, the paper presents the difficulties related to establishing performance criteria for teachers. In addition, the research provides useful insights regarding the opinion of Romanian teachers on the implementation and evaluation criteria of a performance-based payment.

## Literature review

### *Perspectives on a pay-for-performance model in education*

The idea of paying teachers based on their performance is a topic regularly analyzed in educational reform worldwide (Woessmann, 2011). The interest in this subject is fueled by public pressure and the broader demand for increasing teachers' effectiveness and improving students' educational achievements (Liang, 2013). Performance-related pay is considered a potential incentive tool for teachers, but the constant debates call into question whether the introduction of this type of incentive can be a solution for increasing student performance (Kingdon & Teal, 2002).

PRP is "a compensation system that rewards teachers with extra financial rewards beyond the annual salary raise on the salary schedule for outstanding performance in the performance evaluation" (Liang, 2013, pp. 100-101). According to Lavy (2007), performance-based pay is a salary scheme that depends on an assessment process. The variables evaluated in this process can be schools' or teachers' efforts, their achievements, or the students' measured performance. Thus, performance-based pay

can be organized as a system in which teachers are rewarded for individual performance, as a system based on group-level performance or school-level performance, and in this case, individual performance does not influence the value of the received compensation, because its value is calculated according to the level of group performance (Lavy, 2007; Liang, 2013). However, some studies claim that performance-related pay must be a compensation system based only on the teacher's personal performance (Lundström, 2011).

An efficient system of performance-related pay uses performance targets formulated in accordance with the analyzed position. The set targets determine both the efficiency and equity of the performance-based pay system (Lavy, 2007). Moreover, in the educational field, there are different school environments and different demographic categories, which makes it difficult to establish performance targets that are attainable nationally (Nichols, 2018).

Those who support implementing this system claim that PRP increases teachers' motivation to perform, thus increasing their effectiveness if they receive additional compensation (Hulleman & Barron, 2010). In addition, previous research has reported that implementing the PRP system positively affects students' academic achievements (Figlio & Kenny, 2007). Another reason to introduce PRP in educational institutions is that this system can help recruit and retain more highly qualified teachers. Besides the fact that this program can attract more teachers with outstanding pedagogical skills, research shows that PRP can solve the problem of teachers in certain areas such as mathematics or science (Bueno & Sass, 2018). As for good practices, Breeding, Bêteille, and Evans (2021) analyzed a series of PRP programs from several countries and selected three characteristics related to the design and implementation of successful PRP projects that improved student performance. The first characteristic identified in this regard refers to matching the size of the reward (individual or group-based) and finding the types of incentives according to the context of each country. In this sense, the authors recommend that PRP projects start from a well-documented analysis of the types of incentives that teachers would appreciate the most, incentives can be both financial and gifts. The second characteristic refers to ensuring accountability using multiple forms of teacher performance evaluation, not just by analyzing student scores. Also, the third characteristic refers to the identification of plans regarding the sustainability of the PRP project.

Although such arguments show the positive effects of implementing the PRP system in schools, other opinions support that this type of system is unsuitable for the educational field. The main argument against using PRP for teachers is that this type of payment system would lead to the "commercialization of education" (Lingard et al., 2017). This type of compensation can favor dysfunctional behavior in the case of teachers because they are encouraged to focus only on those rewarded aspects (Lavy, 2004). Besides, the educational system is based on teamwork, while the introduction of PRP can favor decreased cooperation among teachers (Liang, 2013). Additionally, research shows no consistent effects of PRP on the academic achievements of students (Springer et al., 2009; Goodman & Turner, 2013). Therefore, the first research question addressed by the present study refers to:

*RQ1. What are the opinions of Romanian teachers on introducing performance-related pay in the education system?*

*Evaluation criteria for a performance-based pay system*

One of the most important aspects associated with introducing PRP programs is setting the performance evaluation criteria. Analyzing some PRP projects from the USA (Lohman, 2011), Italy (Checchi & Mattei, 2021), and the UK (Sharp et al., 2017), it can be observed that the performance evaluation criteria and the definition of merit vary. The PRP system applied in Denver, USA (Professional Compensation for Teachers or ProComp) uses four categories of performance indicators: school and student academic performance and growth, advanced degrees and professional-development activities, evaluation ratings, and market incentives if teachers work in hard-to-staff schools or teach essential disciplines (Lohman, 2011). In this program, the student academic performance and growth indicators are measured by comparing student results with a series of performance objectives set by teachers and school leaders at the beginning of the school year. These objectives can include multiple quantitative or nonquantitative measures: nationally standardized tests, and teacher-created tests, among other data sources. Also, the evaluation ratings obtained by the teachers in this program resulted from the evaluations made by the school administrators (Briggs et al., 2014).

In 2015, Italy carried out an important reform of the education system. The *Buona Scuola* reform introduced a PRP where schools can establish performance criteria. The evaluation criteria introduced by the schools can be classified into three areas of analysis: quality of teaching and contribution to school performance, improvement of students' basic competencies, and teachers' organizational responsibilities (Checchi & Mattei, 2021). Also, a survey conducted in 2015 among schools in England shows that the most used performance indicators are student progress, exceeding teacher standards, contributions linked to the school's self-improvement plan, student attainment, and feedback from students (Sharp et al., 2017).

From an economic point of view, performance monitoring is considered a process that involves significant costs (Langbein, 2010). Thus, in the private sector, as performance is hard to measure as the costs of monitoring performance are increased, performance-based pay is, consequently, less used (Langbein, 2010). In the case of public schools, teachers' salary is not necessarily aligned with their productivity level, as happens in private organizations that operate according to standard economic models in which companies must maintain a competitive salary. Schools are not prone to go out of business if they do not pay their teachers an adequate salary, but performance-related pay represents a retention mechanism for performing teachers (Hanushek, 2011). As PRP programs are costly to maintain and can put pressure on the budget, it is necessary to establish clear performance criteria in accordance with each country's characteristics (Breeding et al., 2021).

Although in Romania an integrated system of PRP has not been introduced in public schools, there is a form of compensation based on merit, called merit grading. This form of merit pay is obtained after a competition to which teachers can apply if they have more than 5 years of experience and have obtained the qualification "very good" in the evaluation carried out by the school inspectors (Ministerul Educației, 2022). Teachers awarded with this merit pay receive a salary increase of 25% of their basic salary. In this competition, teachers are rewarded for their outstanding performances, which are measured in terms of student results, didactic innovation, or the use of technology/internet in the student training process, outstanding student results in school competitions results in preventing and combating school dropout or the integration of students with special educational needs (Ministerul Educației, 2022). The

second research question focuses on the different evaluation criteria used in educational institutions:

*RQ2. What criteria should be used for performance-related pay from the perspective of Romanian teachers?*

### **Methodology**

The overall research objective is to identify the opinions of Romanian teachers on performance-related pay, especially the reasons for a possible introduction of performance-based pay or the counterarguments, and the criteria that should be taken into account for this type of assessment.

A qualitative method was employed to address the research questions, based on a semi-structured in-depth interview with 58 teachers in the pre-university education system in Romania, in April 2020.

The interviewees are teachers from all forms of education, with or without management positions at the level of the school or at the trade union level. Also, in order to capture the diversity of opinions, we interviewed people from rural and urban areas, from schools in classical and special education.

Most interviewees (43) are women, and in terms of status, most interviewees are school principals (21), union members (19), and union leaders (14). The subjects are predominantly secondary education teachers (18) and high school teachers (16), and 10 of them work in kindergartens. The interviewees are from 16 counties (including the capital, Bucharest), from all historical regions. The shortest interview lasted 20 minutes, and the longest lasted 72 minutes (the average was 36 minutes).

### **Results and discussion**

#### *Teachers' opinions regarding performance-related pay*

There has been no strong opinion expressed against performance-related pay at a general level, irrespective of the school's residence environment or the educational level, the position in the hierarchy of the syndicate, or the leadership position of the teachers at the school level. In fact, most of the respondents consider PRP as necessary, but all raised the issue of implementing such a policy which would enable legislative arguments or reasonings related to the Romanian educational system's heterogeneity.

The secondary school principal considers that performance-related pay would be useful because it motivates the employees to be more involved in the teaching activity and harmonizes employee engagement levels. A middle school teacher touches on the issue of auxiliary teachers and non-teaching members, who deal with heavy workloads and can be even more motivated if performance-related pay exists.

Some union members and leaders hold a similar point of view, believing that it is normal for those who carry out more activities and who sign up for different courses to develop their abilities to be paid for their achievements, thus taking into account their professional training as well, not only the activities as such.

However, the idea that the teaching quality differs from one teacher to another is, for some people, hard to accept. A trade union leader affirms that accepting "the performance-related payment means that we accept that some people do their work

better than others, and we cannot accept this when it comes to education. Everything has to unfold very well". But the reality which is emphasized by union members or school headmasters is that some academic members "get involved more or don't get involved at all". Besides the delicate problem of differentiating among teachers regarding teaching quality, a teacher brings to attention the problem of envy between colleagues. As the principal of a highly-prestigious kindergarten affirms, "people are very sensitive when it comes to the financial aspect and possibly, in some schools, this idea may not be very well received and it can lead to animosities between colleagues", thus, affecting the balance of the work environment. This view is supported by previous work on destabilizing cooperation in the educational system (Liang, 2013). Lavy (2009) supports that the nature of the working environment in educational institutions determines the prevalence of the use of salary systems based on group performance compared to those based on individual performance, because the educational process involves teamwork, which leads to the need for a group-level evaluation.

Some research participants affirm that there is already a form of PRP by simply considering the seniority in education, the teaching degree level, or the merit grading pay bonus. Regarding the seniority in education, a syndicate member from a secondary school points out that the last level of payment is for 25 years of experience in the educational system whereas, in the past, it was for 40 years, and therefore, there is no PRP for teachers who have more seniority in education. Some professors consider that since there is already a form of performance-related pay, implementing a performance-based pay system is not truly needed.

Regarding implementing a performance-related pay system, most interviewees consider that even though it might be a useful idea, putting it into practice is a "utopia". A union leader raises the issue of quantifying professors' activities and taking into consideration the heterogeneity of the undergraduate education system. Many arguments relate to the difficulty of finding performance indicators that can capture the diversity of school situations.

Some interviewees consider that the impossibility of putting a differential pay system in practice drifts from the frequent legislative changes, but keep an optimistic view regarding a possible future implementation - "in a few years, we can think about the performance related payment, based on well-established performance-related criteria." These concerns are in line with previous studies (Lavy, 2007; Nichols, 2018).

Differential payment, based on performance criteria, is mostly perceived with reluctance since there is a constant fear related to the fact that the evaluation criteria would favor the schools where students achieve significant performances. A high school principal says implementing this idea would lead to discrimination because teachers who work with good students attain better results. This would create "chaos" as the teachers from the technological high schools will be dissatisfied and will demand to exchange places with their colleagues from high schools with good educational results. We should mention that all the interviewees, including those from highly-prestigious high schools, with students who acquired great educational results, raised the problem of fairness in terms of criteria for performance-related pay.

Overall, we can say that there is generally a favorable opinion regarding performance-related payment. At the same time, there is the fear that this system would generate inequities determined by the evaluation criteria and who conducts the evaluation. Some teachers mentioned that performance-related pay already exists, due to merit grading.

This last aspect was often mentioned by the interviewees, and while some of them perceive it as a form of accurate financial motivation, others perceive it as an artificial method, at the border of fraud and political implications. The discussion related to merit grading reveals opposing views as well. A trade union leader at a central level affirms that the merit grading was “a good solution that the syndicate proposed to the Ministry”, but the problem is that this should be offered based on performance-related criteria, with regard to non-teaching activities as “teachers are already paid for their class activity”. The criteria for this type of salary differentiation are also disputed among the research participants. While some teachers considered that the merit grading should not be given for the teaching activity, some interviewees believe that the evaluation has to be done on the basis of the teaching activity as questionable evidence is provided for other activities and “not all papers conform to reality”.

There are also opinions about the political implication or other external influences on granting the merit bonus. The interviewees connected the merit grading to the so-called bureaucracy (paperwork load), the debatable and subjective evaluation criteria, and the politicization of education. The experience of the merit grading is diverse and explains the mistrust in implementing performance-related pay.

#### *Evaluation criteria for performance-based pay*

The interviewees raised many questions regarding the evaluation criteria for a performance-based pay system which emphasizes the fears and concerns of the school personnel regarding equity. The most addressed issue refers to the differences registered regarding the students’ performances when comparing schools from rural and urban areas, technological high schools and highly prestigious schools, and even classes in the same institution.

The respondents have raised the issue of schoolchildren’s interest in learning, parents’ poor material resources, and even the parents’ educational level as important factors that can impact evaluating teachers’ performances. Also, private tutors increase the students’ school progress, making it difficult to assign merits.

The concern regarding the subjectivity of evaluation led to multiple discussions based on the centralization of the educational system, if the criteria should be established on a central level, the same for the entire system, or if the criteria have to be established at the Inspectorate level and even at the school level. With respect to this last point, the teaching personnel discussed the transparency of the evaluation criteria and most interviewees would welcome a mixed system.

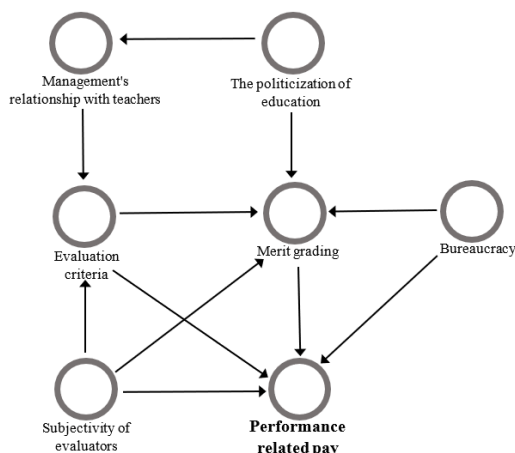
Another problem raised by the interviewees concerned whether or not the evaluation criteria would refer to the teaching activities and/or the extracurricular activities such as the involvement in auxiliary projects, courses, committees, administrative tasks, etc. Many teachers consider that the evaluation system should ponder the pupils’ performances, the prizes won at national/international contests, the number of pupils who managed to pass the class especially if they were at risk of dropout or the number of children with special educational needs that were integrated into the class group. The interviewees emphasize the differences registered between disciplines in terms of importance.

Nonetheless, there are both for and against arguments for evaluation criteria based on extracurricular activities and the ones related to class work. Mistrusting the possibility

of correctly measuring the academic personnel's performance concerning the educational objectives represents a hurdle in implementing performance-related pay. This view is in line with the literature and the concerns of a fair system, and also with the fear of enabling a dysfunctional behavior pattern as teachers might start focusing only on the rewarded indicators (Lavy, 2004; Lingard et al., 2017).

Generally speaking, the interviewees without a leading position reckon these indicators should be established at a central or inspectorate level. A high school teacher states that finding the right indicators should be in the Institute of Education Sciences service, which "is no longer taken into consideration as it should be" and suggests that the indicators should be set at a central level. Most interviewees think there should be some general indicators, set by the Ministry and the labor unions, and some individual indicators specific to the school institution, considering the school's needs and development strategy. Beyond finding the right set of indicators, the fear related to the subjectivity of the school's management was often expressed and brought to attention.

The liaisons between different problematic aspects mentioned by the interviewees as interfering with a performance-based pay system can be consulted below:



**Figure 1. Performance Related Pay - Conceptual Map**

## Conclusions

Considering altogether the heterogeneity of perspectives regarding the evaluation criteria, the possibility of having a reliable and fair measurement grid, the fear of subjectivity at the school management level, and the varied experiences with the merit grading, a possible differential payment should accommodate all these concerns. Therefore, even though there is openness to having performance-related pay, the implementation raises skepticism among teachers, and a vast communication effort is needed to address the current fears. These aspects are also emphasized by teaching and auxiliary personnel in a survey-based study that tackles the differential pay issue among 3304 respondents at the pre-university level, in Romanian schools (Frunzaru & Ștefăniță, 2021). As Luebchow (2008) puts it, such a system's success depends on whether it is viewed as a reward mechanism that can increase engagement and



performance, and not as a punitive or discretionary system that would favor the installation of a sense of injustice.

Considering the research results, we advance further recommendations for implementing performance-related payment. To begin with, performance-related pay should not be the main goal in evaluating the school personnel, but alternatively, inquiring about the reality in order to implement policies for boosting teachers' performances. The criteria must be clear and transparent to present a minimum risk for subjective evaluation, and should remain consistent for a complete evaluation cycle. The set of indicators should consider the wide diversity of situations in regard to the teaching activity such as schools' residence environment, the evolution of students' performances, the number of students in a class, the number of students who have special educational needs, the number of students in the school (for the evaluation of headmasters), etc. The evaluation could consider both the indicators that relate to the teaching activity and those that are connected to the extracurricular activity. A possible system of criteria might be established at a central level. Only part of the assessment can be based on specific indicators developed at the level of educational institutions, eventually with the help of joint committees. All in all, the development and implementation of a performance-based pay system require efficient communication and consultation sessions with all the possible public, beginning with employees in educational institutions and trade unions.

The research could be expanded by including the auxiliary personnel in schools to broaden the perspective on differential pay. The time frame for collecting the data was a limitation of the study as several changes were in place during the pandemic, which could have led to a higher reluctance to change or to a more pessimistic view concerning the possible implementation of a performance-based pay system. Moreover, while the qualitative approach allows for the collection of insightful information, for future research, a quantitative method could add to the database and allow for generalization and data-driven public policies.

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