

MOTIVATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND THE TEACHING VOCATION: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper examines how educational management can support and sustain the teaching vocation in contemporary schools. Building on established motivational theories, including those of Maslow, Herzberg, and Deci and Ryan, together with recent Romanian research, the study argues that vocation should be understood not only as a personal trait, but also as a valuable organizational resource. When teachers experience trust, recognition, and appropriate working conditions, their intrinsic motivation becomes more stable and more visible in daily practice. The paper proposes a simple theoretical model that links two central dimensions: the teacher's internal motivation—expressed through autonomy, competence, and perceived meaning—and the external environment shaped by school leadership. Supportive, fair, and inspirational management strengthens these internal drivers, encouraging teachers to remain engaged, resilient, and professionally fulfilled. In contrast, a lack of managerial support can gradually weaken the sense of vocation, leading to lower motivation, reduced involvement, and declining educational quality. The paper concludes that leadership focused on collaboration, respect, and continuous development creates a climate in which teachers can grow and maintain their commitment to the profession. Future research should investigate how different managerial practices influence teacher motivation, vocational identity, and overall school performance

Keywords: educational leadership, intrinsic motivation, motivational management, professional meaning, teaching vocation

JEL Classification: I21, J24, M12

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary schools operate in a rapidly transforming social, technological, and cultural landscape. These changes reshape expectations regarding the role of education and place increasing pressure on teachers, who are now required to adapt to diverse learners, integrate digital tools, and respond to community demands while maintaining high levels of professional performance. As a result, teacher motivation has become a key determinant of educational quality, influencing not only classroom practices but also long-term professional commitment and well-being. At the same time, the labor market exerts significant influence on the teaching profession. Many teachers—particularly younger ones or those with specialized skills valued in the private sector—are attracted by the higher salaries and better career prospects outside education. This ongoing migration reduces the system's human capital, slows innovation, and contributes to a cycle in which declining educational quality further undermines broader social and economic development.

Although teaching vocation remains an essential foundation of the profession, it cannot compensate for inadequate working conditions or the perception of low societal value. When teachers are expected to rely exclusively on intrinsic motivation while facing material, emotional, and psychological strain, vocational commitment becomes fragile. Recent Romanian studies show that teachers' motivation is shaped not only by external rewards, but also by the degree to which they experience their work as meaningful, respected, and socially useful. Research on burnout and well-being further highlights that, in the absence of organizational support and recognition, vocational meaning tends to erode, leading to disengagement, stress, and reduced professional satisfaction.

In this context, school management plays a critical role. Beyond administrative coordination, leaders are responsible for creating a supportive institutional climate in which teachers feel valued, autonomous, and capable of growth. Management practices that emphasize trust, collaboration, and constructive feedback can strengthen intrinsic motivation and allow the teaching vocation to manifest sustainably. Therefore, understanding how leadership can nurture and protect vocational motivation becomes essential for improving both teacher well-being and the overall quality of education.

1.1 Purpose, objectives and hypotheses of the paper

The aim of this paper is to provide a theoretical foundation for a model of motivational management centered on the teaching vocation. The central argument is that the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of educational performance depend not only on material conditions, but also on the institution's capacity to create an environment in which teachers can express and develop their vocational motivation. By integrating concepts from motivational psychology with insights from educational management, the paper proposes that vocation should be understood as a strategic resource that can be actively supported through informed leadership practices.

The study pursues several specific objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between teaching vocation and professional motivation.
2. To identify managerial practices that can sustain and encourage the expression of teachers' vocational commitment.
3. To build a theoretical model of motivational management rooted in the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
4. To highlight the role of educational leadership in fostering intrinsic motivation.
5. To outline directions for future empirical research aimed at validating the proposed model.

These objectives are guided by a central question: **How can school management create conditions that allow the teaching vocation to emerge, develop, and contribute to higher levels of motivation and educational quality?**

From this guiding question, the paper formulates the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Teaching vocation represents a higher form of intrinsic motivation, expressed through engagement, professional satisfaction, and perceived meaning.
- **H2:** Management practices that promote autonomy, recognition, and collaboration facilitate the expression of teachers' vocational motivation.
- **H3:** Inspirational and authentic leadership strengthens motivation and enhances the organizational climate, creating conditions for vocational development.
- **H4:** In the absence of managerial support and a positive institutional culture, vocational commitment tends to decline, leading to reduced involvement and satisfaction.
- **H5:** A motivational management model based on vocation contributes to improved educational quality and reinforces teachers' professional identity.

The scientific contribution of this paper lies in its integrative approach, which combines motivational theory with the principles of educational leadership. It also provides the conceptual foundation for the future development of tools designed to assess both vocational commitment and the organizational conditions that support it.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MOTIVATIONAL MANAGEMENT

II.1 CLASSICAL MODELS OF MOTIVATION

The earliest systematic attempts to explain human motivation were formulated within twentieth-century organizational psychology. Among the most influential are Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's two-factor theory, both of which, although not created specifically for education, offer valuable perspectives for understanding what drives teachers in their professional activity. Maslow (1954) proposed that human needs follow a hierarchical progression, beginning with basic physiological and safety requirements and advancing toward higher-level needs such as esteem and self-actualization. For teachers, the stage of self-actualization is strongly associated with the experience of professional meaning and purpose. They tend to feel fulfilled when they perceive that their work contributes to the growth of their students and to the broader social good, an experience closely tied to what is often described as the teaching vocation.

Herzberg (1966), in turn, distinguishes between **hygiene factors**—including salary, job security, administrative conditions, and workplace stability—and **motivators**, such as recognition, autonomy, responsibility, and opportunities for personal development. Insufficient hygiene factors typically generate dissatisfaction, yet improving them alone does not necessarily increase motivation. The elements that truly foster engagement are the motivators, which reflect intrinsic interest and align directly with vocational commitment. In the educational context, this distinction highlights the dual responsibility of school management: ensuring acceptable working conditions while also creating opportunities for teachers to experience achievement, value, and professional growth.

Taken together, these classical theories illustrate that effective educational management must go beyond administrative efficiency. It must provide structural stability and, equally important, cultivate an environment that supports teachers' intrinsic motivation, reinforces their sense of purpose, and allows their vocation to flourish.

II.2 SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), provides one of the most comprehensive contemporary explanations of intrinsic motivation and is highly relevant for understanding teachers' vocational engagement. SDT proposes that optimal motivation arises when three fundamental psychological needs are satisfied: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are universal and operate across different cultures, professions, and contexts, including education.

Autonomy refers to the feeling that one's actions are self-chosen and aligned with personal values. For teachers, autonomy is expressed through the freedom to design instruction, make pedagogical choices, and adapt practices to the needs of their students.

Competence involves the perception of being effective and capable in one's work. Teachers who receive constructive feedback, have access to professional development, and experience successful interactions with students tend to feel more competent and confident.

Relatedness reflects the sense of belonging and connection with others. In schools, this need is fulfilled through supportive relationships with colleagues, students, and leadership.

When these three needs are met, teachers are more likely to exhibit intrinsic motivation, persistence, and satisfaction—qualities strongly associated with the teaching vocation. Conversely, when autonomy is restricted, competence is undermined, or relational support is weak, motivation tends to shift toward extrinsic or controlled forms, leading to frustration and reduced engagement.

Recent Romanian research aligns with these theoretical assumptions. Dumulescu, Ilie, and Voicu (2025) demonstrated that "career calling" significantly predicts teachers' self-efficacy, perceived competence, and job satisfaction, confirming that vocational motivation is strengthened by supportive organizational conditions. Similarly, Bradea (2025) found that students who choose teaching are driven not only by security, but primarily by the desire to help others and to build meaningful relationships—elements that resonate with the SDT framework. At the same time, studies on stress and burnout (Duică, 2024) highlight how administrative overload, lack of recognition, and poor communication can obstruct the fulfillment of these psychological needs, thereby weakening vocational commitment.

Overall, Self-Determination Theory offers a valuable conceptual lens for understanding how school management can cultivate, maintain, or inadvertently diminish the teaching vocation. By designing policies and practices that enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness, school leaders can create an environment where teachers' intrinsic motivation becomes a stable and sustainable resource for educational quality.

II.3 EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Educational leadership refers to the ways in which school leaders guide, support, and influence teachers, students, and the wider community in pursuit of meaningful educational goals. Unlike managerial approaches focused primarily on administrative control, contemporary perspectives highlight leadership that fosters collaboration, trust, and shared responsibility. Such leadership is essential for creating organizational conditions that encourage intrinsic motivation and the expression of the teaching vocation. Research at both international and national levels shows that effective educational leadership goes beyond procedural oversight. Leaders who articulate a clear vision, communicate transparently, and cultivate a climate of respect contribute significantly to teachers' sense of purpose and professional value. Inclusive leadership practices—such as shared decision-making, participatory planning, and open dialogue—promote a sense of belonging and agency among teachers. These elements align closely with the psychological needs identified in Self-Determination Theory, reinforcing autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Recent studies in Romania offer consistent evidence regarding the positive influence of collaborative leadership. Research examining inclusive and distributed leadership models indicates that involvement in decision-making enhances teachers' engagement and strengthens the school climate. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiration, authenticity, and a focus on long-term development, has been associated with higher levels of motivation, innovation, and organizational effectiveness. Such leaders tend to act as role models, encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice, pursue growth, and reconnect with the deeper meaning of their work. The importance of leadership is particularly evident in schools facing structural challenges, such as those in rural areas. Research shows that authentic, supportive leaders play a key role in maintaining teacher stability, building strong professional relationships, and fostering resilience. Furthermore, international reports

highlight Romania's growing investment in leadership development as a strategic direction for strengthening school performance and teacher well-being.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that educational leadership is a central mechanism through which motivational management can be implemented. Leaders who promote collaboration, recognition, and continuous development help create an institutional culture that supports teachers' intrinsic motivation and allows the teaching vocation to unfold in a sustainable and meaningful way.

III. TEACHING VOCATION BETWEEN MOTIVATION AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The concept of teaching vocation has long been associated with the moral and humanistic foundations of the educational profession. Although often described as an inner calling or a deep personal commitment to serving others, recent research approaches vocation as a multidimensional construct that integrates values, intrinsic motivation, and professional identity. This perspective highlights that vocation is not merely an individual disposition, but a dynamic resource shaped by both personal beliefs and the institutional environment.

Studies conducted in Romania reinforce this interpretation. Dumulescu, Ilie, and Voicu (2025) found that career calling significantly enhances teachers' sense of competence, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. Their findings suggest that vocation acts as a central motivational driver that supports both emotional resilience and professional engagement. Similarly, Bradea (2025) showed that many students who choose a teaching career are motivated by a desire to contribute to the well-being of others and to build meaningful educational relationships, indicating that vocational orientation emerges early in one's professional trajectory.

From a conceptual standpoint, teaching vocation lies at the intersection of personal values, social purpose, and professional identity. Neagu (2022) emphasizes that vocation operates on three interconnected levels:

1. **Personal level**, where the teacher aligns with the ethical and humanistic values of education;
2. **Social level**, manifested through engagement in the community and contributions to social cohesion;
3. **Institutional level**, where the teacher assumes responsibility within the school organization and its culture.

These dimensions highlight that vocation is simultaneously an internal source of meaning and an external expression of professional commitment.

Recent contributions to the literature also point to the role of vocation in sustaining teachers during periods of change or uncertainty. Zaharia (2024) notes that a strong sense of vocation supports emotional stability and strengthens professional identity, particularly during reforms or crises. Similarly, Vasilache and Radu (2023) observed that the post-pandemic educational environment intensified the importance of vocation, as teachers motivated by values and mission demonstrated greater adaptability and creativity. However, the presence of vocation alone does not guarantee sustained professional engagement. The organizational climate plays a crucial role in either reinforcing or undermining vocational motivation. Supportive leadership, recognition, and collegial collaboration help teachers maintain a sense of value and meaning. In contrast, environments marked by administrative overload, low recognition, or social devaluation can weaken vocational commitment and contribute to burnout, as highlighted by recent studies on teacher well-being.

In this context, teaching vocation should be understood as a complex, evolving resource that depends on both individual motivations and the organizational conditions in which teachers work. When schools create spaces where values, purpose, and professional efficacy can flourish, vocation becomes a powerful driver of educational quality, resilience, and professional identity.

IV. VOCATION-ORIENTED MOTIVATIONAL MANAGEMENT

In the context of increasingly complex demands placed on schools, motivational management has become a strategic component of educational leadership. Rather than relying solely on extrinsic rewards or administrative control, a vocation-oriented approach focuses on creating an environment in which teachers can express, strengthen, and sustain their intrinsic motivation. This perspective recognizes that teachers' commitment to their profession is shaped not only by personal values but also by the structural and relational conditions created by school leadership. Vocation-oriented motivational management views teachers as professionals whose motivation is nurtured through meaning, recognition, autonomy, and opportunities for growth. The role of school management, therefore, extends beyond operational coordination to include the cultivation of a supportive climate that affirms teachers' identity, competence, and sense of purpose.

IV.1 PRINCIPLES OF VOCATION-ORIENTED MOTIVATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Drawing on theoretical models and empirical findings, several principles define effective motivational management in education:

1. **Professional autonomy** — Teachers need the freedom to make pedagogical decisions that align with their expertise and with students' needs. Autonomy reinforces intrinsic motivation and encourages innovation.
2. **Recognition and personal appreciation** — Acknowledging teachers' efforts and successes strengthens their sense of competence and value. Recognition can be formal or informal, but it must be authentic and consistent.
3. **Collaborative and emotionally supportive climate** — A workplace based on trust, collegial support, and open communication nurtures teachers' well-being and fosters cooperation.
4. **Continuous professional development** — Access to meaningful training, mentoring, and reflective practice helps teachers refine their skills and renew their commitment to the profession.
5. **Inspirational and authentic leadership** — Leaders who demonstrate integrity, empathy, and a clear vision can inspire teachers to connect their personal values with the broader mission of the school.

Together, these principles contribute to a professional culture in which motivation and meaning are treated as institutional resources rather than individual burdens.

IV.2 MANAGERIAL TOOLS TO SUPPORT THE TEACHING VOCATION

Implementing motivational management requires the use of concrete tools that align with humanistic and developmental principles. Such tools move beyond administrative procedures and focus on empowering teachers. Key examples include:

- **Formative and constructive evaluation** — Using evaluation to support growth, rather than merely to monitor compliance, enhances teachers' confidence and sense of progress.
- **Collaborative projects and interdisciplinary initiatives** — Engaging teachers in collective projects reinforces the relevance of their work and strengthens social connectedness.
- **Mentoring and professional counseling** — Providing structured support for novice teachers and facilitating peer-learning promotes the transmission of expertise and shared values.
- **Spaces for reflection and dialogue** — Workshops, professional learning communities, and reflective circles allow teachers to explore challenges, exchange practices, and renew their sense of purpose.
- **Symbolic recognition systems** — Certificates, public acknowledgements, or appreciation events, even if non-material, can reinforce teachers' identity and highlight the value of their contribution.

Through these tools, school management encourages a shift from control-oriented practices to a more holistic and motivationally meaningful approach.

IV.3 THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL LEADER IN VOCATION-BASED MOTIVATIONAL MANAGEMENT

School leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the environment that enables teachers to thrive. Their position requires them to function simultaneously as administrators, facilitators of growth, and inspirational figures. Research from Romania (Catalano, 2024; Tuțunaru, 2022) highlights that transformational and authentic leadership styles are particularly effective in promoting teacher engagement and well-being. Leaders who distribute responsibilities fairly, communicate transparently, and involve staff in decision-making contribute to a sense of ownership and belonging. Their empathy and relational competence help create a safe environment where teachers feel respected and supported. By modeling reflective practice and openness to learning, leaders reinforce a culture of professionalism and continuous development.

In this sense, motivational management becomes an integral part of educational leadership. It frames the school as a community of practice in which vocation is recognized, valued, and sustained.

IV.4 IMPACT OF MOTIVATIONAL MANAGEMENT ON EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

A school climate that nurtures the teaching vocation has far-reaching effects on the quality of education. Teachers who feel motivated, valued, and connected to the purpose of their work tend to display higher levels of engagement, creativity, and resilience. They are more inclined to adopt innovative practices, collaborate with colleagues, and invest in their own development.

Moreover, students benefit directly from teachers who experience satisfaction and meaning in their work. Research consistently shows that teacher well-being and intrinsic motivation correlate with improved student outcomes, stronger classroom relationships, and a more positive learning environment.

On an institutional level, schools that foster vocational motivation tend to develop stronger identities, better organizational cohesion, and higher reputations within the community. Thus, vocation-oriented

motivational management becomes not only a strategy for supporting teachers but also a pathway to long-term institutional effectiveness.

IV.5 CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF VOCATION-BASED MOTIVATIONAL MANAGEMENT

The proposed conceptual model views the teaching vocation as a dynamic resource situated at the intersection of personal and organizational factors. It integrates two key dimensions:

1) I. The Individual (Internal) Dimension

This dimension includes teachers' personal autonomy, values, intrinsic motivation, and sense of professional meaning. It reflects the internal drivers that sustain long-term commitment.

2) II. The Organizational (External) Dimension

This dimension captures the conditions created by school leadership, including organizational climate, recognition practices, opportunities for development, and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

The interaction between these two dimensions forms a **motivational ecosystem** that supports:

1. **Support function** — Providing emotional, relational, and material support.
2. **Development function** — Facilitating continuous professional learning.
3. **Valuation function** — Recognizing teachers' contributions and achievements.
4. **Meaning function** — Reinforcing shared values and institutional purpose.

When these functions operate in balance, vocational motivation becomes sustainable and contributes to high levels of engagement, satisfaction, and professional resilience.

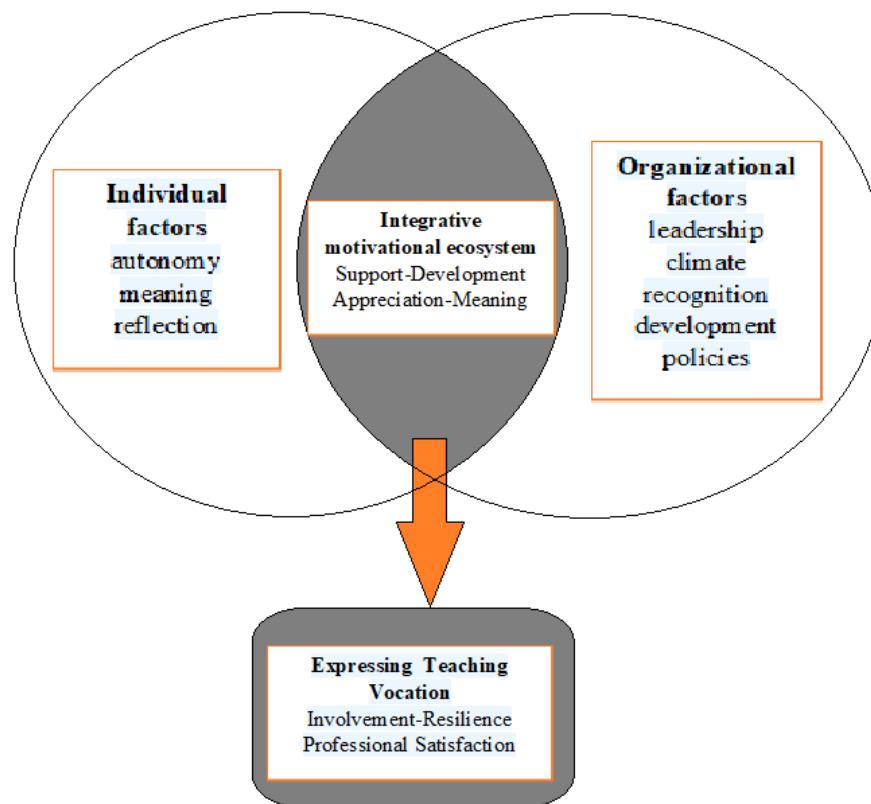


Figure 1 – The motivational ecosystem of the teaching vocation

V.1 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has several limitations that should be acknowledged, as they also open important directions for future research. First, the study is primarily theoretical in nature and is based on the analysis and integration of existing motivational theories and recent Romanian research. While this approach allows for a comprehensive conceptual understanding of the teaching vocation and motivational management, it does not provide empirical validation of the proposed model. As a result, the relationships between vocational motivation, managerial practices, and educational outcomes are discussed at a conceptual level and cannot be generalized without further empirical evidence.

Second, the paper focuses mainly on the perspective of school management and leadership, without directly examining teachers' perceptions through quantitative or qualitative data. Teachers' experiences of autonomy, recognition, and organizational support may vary significantly depending on institutional context, school level, or regional characteristics. Future studies could address this limitation by using surveys, interviews, or mixed-methods approaches to explore how teachers perceive motivational management practices and how these perceptions influence their sense of vocation, job satisfaction, and professional identity.

Another limitation concerns the contextual focus on the Romanian educational system. Although many of the theoretical principles discussed are universal, specific organizational, cultural, and policy-related factors may limit the applicability of the model to other national contexts. Comparative studies across different countries or educational systems could provide valuable insights into how cultural and institutional differences shape vocational motivation and leadership practices.

Future research should therefore aim to empirically test the proposed conceptual model, examine the impact of specific leadership styles on vocational motivation, and explore the long-term effects of vocation-oriented motivational management on teacher retention, well-being, and educational quality. Such studies would strengthen the practical relevance of the model and contribute to a deeper understanding of how teaching vocation can be sustainably supported within contemporary schools.

V.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

The conceptual model proposed in this paper has several practical implications for educational management and school leadership. First, it suggests that teaching vocation should be recognized as a strategic organizational resource, not only as an individual personal trait. School leaders can actively support vocational motivation by creating working conditions that encourage autonomy, professional trust, and meaningful involvement in decision-making processes. Allowing teachers to participate in shaping educational practices strengthens their sense of ownership and reinforces intrinsic motivation.

Second, the model highlights the importance of recognition and constructive feedback as key managerial tools. Regular acknowledgment of teachers' efforts, transparent evaluation processes, and supportive communication contribute to a positive organizational climate in which teachers feel valued and respected. Such practices can help prevent motivational decline and reduce the risk of burnout, especially in demanding educational contexts.

In addition, vocation-oriented motivational management emphasizes the role of continuous professional development. School managers should facilitate access to relevant training, mentoring, and collaborative learning opportunities that allow teachers to develop their competencies and reflect on the meaning of their work. By aligning professional growth with institutional values and educational goals, leadership can strengthen teachers' professional identity and long-term commitment to the profession.

Overall, these practical implications underline the need for a managerial approach that balances organizational requirements with human-centered leadership. When educational management integrates motivation, meaning, and professional development, schools are better positioned to maintain teacher engagement and improve educational quality.

VI.CONCLUSIONS

The teaching vocation represents a significant source of motivation and professional energy within the educational system, yet it can flourish only when supported by an environment that values and nurtures it. This paper has argued that school management plays a crucial role in enabling teachers to express and sustain their vocational commitment. Moving away from a control-oriented model toward one focused on trust, meaning, and professional recognition allows schools to cultivate intrinsic motivation as a stable organizational resource.

The theoretical frameworks examined—ranging from classical motivational theories to Self-Determination Theory and contemporary perspectives on educational leadership—underscore the importance of autonomy, competence, and positive relationships in maintaining teachers' motivation. When these conditions are met, teachers tend to display higher levels of engagement, resilience, creativity, and satisfaction with their work. Conversely, environments marked by administrative pressure, lack of recognition, or insufficient support can erode vocational motivation and contribute to burnout, disengagement, and reduced educational quality. Leadership grounded in collaboration, empathy, and authenticity is essential for shaping a school climate in which teachers feel valued and able to grow. Such leadership fosters shared purpose, strengthens professional identity, and encourages teachers to remain connected to their mission, even in challenging contexts.

The paper also highlights the need for further research to examine how teachers perceive managerial support and how these perceptions influence vocational motivation, professional identity, and institutional performance. Empirical studies could offer deeper insights into the mechanisms through which motivational

management impacts educational outcomes and help refine strategies for developing supportive and effective leadership practices.

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