

Professional Fulfillment and Work Engagement of Professors

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ABSTRACT – Professional Fulfillment and Work Engagement of Professors. This research sought to investigate the relationship between professional fulfillment and work engagement among university professors. Methodologically, a survey was administered to 220 university professors, whose results were analyzed using inferential statistics, and 12 interviews were conducted with professors, whose information was submitted to content analysis. The results showed that the studied constructs are statistically correlated, and the testimonies of the interviewed professors indicated that this relationship may be more strongly constituted based on the dimension of dedication of the construct of work engagement.

Keywords: Work Engagement. Professional Fulfillment. Teaching Career. Higher Education.

RESUMO – Realização Profissional e Engajamento no Trabalho de Docentes. Esta pesquisa buscou investigar as relações entre a realização profissional e o engajamento no trabalho de docentes universitários. Metodologicamente, foram realizadas uma *survey* com 220 docentes universitários, cujos resultados foram analisados por meio de estatística inferencial, e 12 entrevistas com docentes, cujas informações foram submetidas à análise de conteúdo. Os resultados evidenciaram que os construtos estudados estão estatisticamente correlacionados e os depoimentos dos docentes entrevistados indicaram que tal relação pode se constituir, mais fortemente, a partir da dimensão dedicação do construto engajamento no trabalho.

Palavras-chave: Engajamento no Trabalho. Realização Profissional. Carreira Docente. Ensino Superior.

Introduction

University teaching is unveiled as an object of scientific investigations that seek to understand the complex nature of the occupational activities of the profession and to analyze the working and health conditions of professors in the educational context. As part of the teaching-learning process, teachers play a fundamental role, as they connect students and society (Silva-Júnior; Ferreira; Valentini, 2020). In studies in the fields of education and psychology, one of the topics of emphasis in recent decades has been issues related to teacher malaise. This theme involves investigating suffering, dissatisfaction, high levels of stress, the desire to abandon the career, Burnout syndrome, among other adverse conditions faced by teachers (Mercali; Costa, 2019; Rebolo; Oliveira-Bueno, 2014; Vilela; Garcia; Vieira, 2013). Not by chance, studies show that teaching is one of the most stressful professions today (Costa; Souza Neto, 2020; Dalcin; Carlotto, 2018).

Conversely, teaching work, particularly in higher education, can also foster experiences of social recognition and fulfillment. These experiences arise, among other factors, from interpersonal relationships, emotional, ethical, and prestige-related experiences, as well as career development within the academic environment. Nonetheless, aspects related to precarious working conditions and labor relations often undermine the goals of the profession, exposing professionals to psychosocial risk factors (Costa; Souza Neto, 2020). Issues related to degree requirements and academic productivity, associated with the loss of autonomy, work overload, and the increasing devaluation of teaching work, can exacerbate physical and psychological exhaustion, even leading to abandonment of the profession (Araújo; Leal; Oliveira-Silva, 2019; Bianchetti; Zuin; Ferraz, 2018; Costa; Souza Neto, 2020; Rebolo; Oliveira-Bueno, 2014; Vilela; Garcia; Vieira, 2013).

Although efforts undertaken in investigations into aspects of teacher malaise and the consequent search for solutions to this problem are fundamental, the emphasis on this perspective can, in some cases, hinder the perception of its positive elements (Jesus, 2004; Rebolo; Oliveira-Bueno, 2014). An investigative approach that identifies conditions leading teachers to a greater perception of well-being, engagement, and personal and professional fulfillment may promote retention in the profession, teaching effectiveness, and good educational practices (Both et al., 2017; Jesus, 2004; Rebolo; Oliveira-Bueno, 2014). The current study was directed towards this perspective, with an emphasis on the relationship between work engagement and professional fulfillment of higher education professors.

Work engagement is a positive motivational construct that implies well-being and is characterized by the dimensions of dedication, absorption, and vigor (Magnan et al., 2016; Schaufeli; Salanova, 2014). Dedication is determined by notions of meaning, enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride in the profession, associated with the feeling that work provides pleasure, challenge, and recognition. Absorption refers to the

worker's complete immersion in his/her work, to the point of not noticing the passage of time. Finally, vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience applied during work and the desire to invest effort and persist in labor activities, even in the face of difficulties (Schaufeli; Dijkstra; Vazquez, 2013; Schaufeli; Salanova, 2014). As a dispositional psychological state, work engagement is associated with intrinsic motives that persist over time and lead people to invest intense energy and dedication, with a high sense of pleasure (Vazquez; Ferreira; Mendonça, 2019; Vazquez; Schaufeli, 2019).

Although research on work engagement has become widespread in recent years (Camões; Oliveira Gomes, 2021; Martins; Machado, 2022; Mazzetti et al., 2023; Schaufeli, 2014), studies specifically focused on professors are still incipient. There are national studies showing that higher education professors, whether from public or private institutions, tend to exhibit high work engagement (Dessbesell et al., 2017; Schaufeli; Dijkstra; Vazquez, 2013). In turn, distance education professors tend to maintain work engagement associated with satisfaction factors arising from social relationships with colleagues and contentment with the nature of the work they perform (Caldas et al., 2013). More recently, Mercali and Costa (2019) conducted a study with professors from public and private higher education institutions who showed mean engagement scores, close to a threshold that could affect mental health. Regarding international studies, the results align with the Brazilian context. For example, a group of higher education professors in Portugal showed a high level of work engagement (Araújo; Esteves, 2016). A study with Italian professors showed that work engagement varies according to age (Guglielmi et al., 2016). Another study conducted with university professors in India, one of the few studies in the South Asian context, indicated that aspects of teaching work are significant predictors of work engagement (Kashyap; Nakra; Arora, 2021).

In turn, professional fulfillment is a recent construct located in the field of career and also relates to aspects of people's positive functioning at work. Its definition is based on the beliefs a person holds about his/her career, the goals he/she sets, and how he/she perceives his/her progress in achieving those goals (Oliveira-Silva; Porto; Arnold, 2019; Oliveira-Silva; Porto, 2021). This theoretical model has two dimensions: (1) the importance and achievement of career goals and (2) the assessment of progress towards these goals. Unlike work engagement, studies addressing this topic are still in their early stages (Geremia; Scapini; Silva, 2020). Notably, a study by Araújo, Leal, and Oliveira-Silva (2019) with public higher education professors found that planning the choice of a teaching career affected 74.1% of the perception of professional fulfillment among the studied sample.

From a conceptual perspective and based on recent studies, it is possible to suggest the existence of a potential relationship between the constructs of professional fulfillment and work engagement among higher education professors. Professional fulfillment is associated with

the teacher's identification with his/her professional activities, the freedom and autonomy to carry out his/her work, as well as enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride in the profession (Ribeiro; Silva, 2020; Vilela; Garcia; Vieira, 2013), elements that characterize the dimension of dedication in terms of work engagement. Starting from this assumption and aiming to contribute to the discussion of the phenomena under analysis, the main goal of this study was to understand the relationship between work engagement and professional fulfillment of professors from federal public higher education institutions.

Methodology

This is a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study, which involves conducting an initial stage of quantitative procedures, the results of which, in turn, assisted in the development of a second, qualitative stage (Creswell; Plano Clark, 2013). Accordingly, not only did the statistical results obtained in the first stage of the study guide the selection of the sample in the second stage, integrating the data collection from both stages, but there was also an attempt to provide a detailed understanding of the initial quantitative results through qualitative data. With regard to ethical considerations, all methodological procedures adopted in this study were assessed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under Opinion number 3.099.601.

Participants

In the quantitative stage, 220 professors from a federal public university in the southern region of Brazil participated. The inclusion criteria for the sample were: a) to hold a position in higher education teaching and b) to have a full-time employment arrangement in terms of teaching, research, extension, and institutional management activities.

The sample was composed of men and women, with 50.9% being male, with a mean age of 48 years ($SD=11$), 81.8% married, and 67.3% with children. This is a group of professionals with a high level of education, with 57.2% of the professors holding postdoctoral degrees. Regarding teaching career status, 42.8% were associate professors, and a large part of the sample (90.1%) worked in *stricto sensu* graduate programs. Additionally, 43% of the professors had between seven and 25 years of career experience at the surveyed university.

In turn, the qualitative stage involved participants who were selected through a non-probabilistic intentional sampling, based on the results obtained in the first stage of the investigation. Thus, the second stage included the voluntary participation of 12 professors from different teaching centers of the surveyed university, selected from the 18 who expressed interest in participating in this phase of the research. Of these, six were male and six were female, aged between 30 and 50 years, with a mean of nine years of teaching experience at the studied institution. In order to compose the sample, the considered inclusion criteria were: to have fully participated in the quantitative stage, to be active

in the institution during the data collection period, and to have indicated availability for the interview. No exclusion criteria were defined beyond the lack of interest in participating.

The participants were identified by alphanumeric codes composed of the letter P followed by sequential numbers (P1 to P12), preserving the confidentiality of their identities. The results allowed different levels of professional fulfillment and work engagement to be identified, which made it possible to classify the sample into three groups: six professors with high professional fulfillment and high work engagement (P1 to P6); four professors whose results indicated low professional fulfillment but high work engagement (P7 to P10); and, finally, two professors with results indicating low professional fulfillment and low work engagement (P11 and P12). Among the 18 initially available professors, no participants were found whose results indicated a combination of high professional fulfillment and low work engagement. The definition of this composition aimed to include different professor profiles, facilitating the comparative analysis of perceptions between the groups.

Instruments

In order to collect the quantitative data, the following instruments were used: the Sociodemographic Questionnaire, aimed at characterizing the personal and professional profile of the participants; the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, Brazilian version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), which showed good content and construct validity for use in the country (Cronbach's Alpha of 0.95) and contains 17 items to assess the dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption on a seven-point importance scale; and the Professional Fulfillment Scale for Federal University Professors (ERP-DUF, as per its Portuguese acronym), developed for this study based on the Professional Fulfillment model by Oliveira-Silva, Porto, and Arnold (2019). The ERP-DUF revealed good evidence of content and construct validity (McDonald's Omega: 0.87) and is composed of 16 items that address career goals related to the work context and the careers of higher education professors from federal public universities (Geremia; Silva; Luna, 2023). On a five-point scale, each item is assessed regarding the importance attributed by the respondent to the respective career goal and the degree of achievement of that goal at the time of data collection. The final professional fulfillment score is obtained by multiplying the values attributed to importance by the values indicating the degree of achievement of each goal, ranging from 0 to 20.

In order to conduct the interviews, a semi-structured script with 10 guiding questions was used, developed based on the goal of the study and theoretical aspects of the literature on work engagement (considering its dimensions: dedication, absorption, and vigor) and professional fulfillment.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Data collection for both stages of the study took place in the first semester of 2021, during the Coronavirus (Sars-Cov-2) pandemic, which required social isolation measures and demanded new ways of teaching from education professionals through distance learning. In order to collaborate in the study, participants were invited via email with a message containing a brief introduction to the research and a link to access the instrument, composed of the Sociodemographic Questionnaire and the two previously described scales, made available on the SurveyMonkey platform.

As for the analysis of the results obtained from the scales, the choice to use non-parametric correlation was determined by the consideration that the three dimensions of work engagement (vigor, dedication, and absorption) did not show a normal distribution of the data ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, Spearman's correlation test was chosen, as it is a suitable technique for ordinal or interval variables that do not meet the assumptions of normality and also allows for the assessment of the strength and direction of the relationship between two sets of data. This test is also appropriate for small sample sizes, as is the case in this study (Corder; Foreman, 2014). Accordingly, Spearman's correlation tests were conducted to examine the existing correlations between: a) the professional fulfillment score of the sample, measured by the ERP-DUF, and the overall level of work engagement; and b) the scores obtained in the three dimensions of work engagement and the professional fulfillment score of the surveyed professors. The data were analyzed with the assistance of the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software, version 23.

Regarding the interviews with the 12 selected professors, the videoconferences were scheduled in advance according to the participants' availability and were recorded. The data collection process was carried out following the guidelines provided by Bardin's content analysis (2011) and followed the stages of pre-analysis, material exploration, and data treatment, as well as inference and interpretation. The thematic categories and subcategories, defined a priori, are described in Chart 1.

Chart 1 – Categories and subcategories for content analysis of the interviews

Category	Subcategory
Work engagement	Dedication
	Vigor
	Absorption
Professional fulfillment	Conceptions of professional fulfillment
	Most important career goals
	Subjective assessment of the achievement of the most important career goals

Source: Own elaboration.

Finally, the triangulation of data from both stages of the study was carried out in light of the theoretical framework (Yin, 2015), guided by the research goals.

Results

According to the guidelines for interpreting results obtained from the application of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Magnan et al., 2016) and considering the mean age range of the sample in this study, the results indicated moderate levels of work engagement ($M = 4.90$, on a scale ranging from 1 to 7), with strong convergence among respondents ($SD = 0.75$). Table 1 displays the mean and standard deviation related to the overall level of work engagement of the participants, as well as the dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Table 1 – Mean and standard deviation related to the overall level of work engagement and the dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Overall	4.90	0.75
Vigor	4.75	0.89
Dedication	5.02	0.91
Absorption	4.95	0.78

Source: Own elaboration.

The result of the measurement of professional fulfillment indicated that the professors achieved a mean of 9.93 points ($SD = 2.4$), approaching the intermediate position on the scale, which ranges from 0 to 20.

The result of Spearman's test, conducted between the overall score of professional fulfillment and the overall level of work engagement, indicated a positive, moderate, and statistically significant correlation between the two constructs ($\rho = 0.47$; $p < 0.01$).

Finally, the results of the Spearman's correlation tests, conducted between the three dimensions of work engagement and the overall score of professional fulfillment, can be observed in Table 2. The variable related to professional fulfillment showed statistically significant, positive, and moderate correlations with the dimensions of vigor and absorption in terms of work engagement, and a statistically significant, positive, and strong correlation with the dimension of dedication. The Fisher r-to-z transformation test showed that professional fulfillment was more strongly associated with dedication ($\rho = -0.55$, $p < 0.01$, $\rho^2 = 0.30$) than with vigor ($\rho = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$, $\rho^2 = 0.16$) ($z = -3.40$; $p < 0.01$) and absorption ($\rho = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$, $\rho^2 = 0.09$) ($z = 4.50$; $p < 0.01$). The Fisher r-to-z transformation test also showed that professional fulfillment was more strongly associated with vigor than with absorption ($z = 1.91$; $p < 0.03$).

Table 2 – Analysis of correlations between the dimensions of work engagement and professional fulfillment.

	Vigor	Dedication	Absorption
Professional fulfillment	$\rho = 0.4$ $p < 0.01$ $\rho^2 = 0.16$	$\rho = 0.55$ $p < 0.01$ $\rho^2 = 0.30$	$\rho = 0.30$ $p < 0.01$ $\rho^2 = 0.09$

Note: ρ = Spearman's rho; p = statistical significance. Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the content analysis of the interviews, the information was classified into categories related to the dimensions of work engagement and the elements that characterize the professional fulfillment model used in this study. The results introduced below encompass these categories.

Work engagement of the surveyed professors

The elements that characterize the dimension of dedication were observed in the speech of 11 interviewed professors. These professors expressed pride in their profession and the institution to which they are affiliated, introduced the meaning of transformation attributed to teaching, and the feeling of happiness in practicing their profession, as can be seen in the excerpts: "I am very proud to be at a federal public institution" (P2); "I feel happy. I really like my profession; I would not change it for any other" (P9). Through the analysis of the professors' speeches, it was also possible to observe that the possibility of engaging in activities that offer greater personal identification also involves greater dedication and, therefore, connection, inspiration, and added meaning to the performed activity. In this sense, eight professors mentioned teaching and research activities as the most rewarding, as exemplified by the speeches: "Seeing the students' progress and the beautiful things they accomplish until graduation, during their thesis defenses, is very rewarding for me. I think it is the most rewarding" (P3); "I see research as the most enjoyable activity I perform, especially when we see the results" (P10). Three other professors attributed positive significance to administrative activities, such as coordinating undergraduate courses and heading departments. In these cases, the professors highlighted the relationship with students as the most enjoyable activity to perform, as exemplified by the speech of P7, who said she enjoyed both giving lessons and coordinating the undergraduate course, taking the opportunity to interact with students. This perception was corroborated by P8, also an undergraduate course coordinator, who further emphasized the possibility of interacting with colleagues and the activity of revising course projects as generating meaningful exchanges. The professor who did not introduce elements characterizing the dimension of dedication mentioned that, at the time of the interview, he was "displeased" (P12) with the institution. According to him, in addition to experiencing relationship problems with colleagues, his only scheduled activity for the semester was a few hours of teaching, which led him, at that moment, to adopt a behavior of resignation: "[...]

Within this whole story, currently, I am more likely to ask myself: ‘What is there to do?’” (P12).

In turn, absorption was scarcely observed in the participants’ speeches. Among the interviewed professors, only one professor expressed complete involvement in the work. According to her, there were occasions when she worked continuously for long hours on the computer: “I wake up, sit in front of the computer at eight thirty in the morning, because I woke up at eight, and I go until one or two hours in the following morning” (P1). The other professors, except for P12, stated that they dedicate more time to work than is expected for a full-time employment arrangement and that, while working on activities they enjoy, time seems to pass more quickly. However, seven professors explained that there are work-related situations that hinder their focus on what they consider most important. In this sense, administrative activities were regarded as a necessary part of work but strictly bureaucratic, causing discomfort and making it difficult to immerse themselves in their work, as illustrated by the following speeches:

I am dedicating my time and energy to conducting my research and training good professionals. This is my main focus right now, where I have been concentrating. Currently, the administrative part prevents me from doing the main work, which would be teaching and research (P4).

I enjoy preparing all the lessons, every semester, again. Of course, some things go faster than others. And I do not find the time I like to dedicate to this. Both for class preparation and research. Meetings, administrative positions [...], I really think it is a big problem [...] (P10).

When I am in the laboratory, as I said, I am very focused. But then, there is always a call for a meeting, a committee [...]. What I would like to do requires time, requires thinking, requires reading and talking (P11).

Regarding the dimension of vigor, some interviewed professors reported experiencing a period of fatigue and discouragement in relation to their work. Of the 12 interviewed professors, six mentioned that the change from in-person classes to the emergency distance learning model, implemented at the surveyed institution due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, was the precursor of these feelings, as illustrated by the following excerpts: “I am tired of this pandemic, so I am in a bit of a blocked state. This has been troubling me a lot; that is the truth.” (P6); “With this situation of distance learning in undergraduate courses, cameras off, no one talks; it is discouraging to give a lesson” (P12). Conversely, two professors who reported feeling tired also described the efforts they made to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic context. Establishing rest periods, adapting to the use of technology, and acquiring equipment to facilitate virtual teaching and learning were among the mentioned strategies. In this regard, P11 stated that, in addition to having adapted positively to the situation, he managed to better organize his time to carry out different activities, avoiding wasting time in meetings, for example.

Nonetheless, this same professor also mentioned that the reduction of funding for higher education and research impacted his work, causing demotivation. Regarding this aspect, P2 reported that there is a lack of resources but that professionals should enable projects and

continue seeking funds from funding sources and research foundations. According to the speeches of three professors, the lack of resources not only affects the development of research but also the university's infrastructure. The professors cited, as examples, the lack of chairs in the classroom, the absence of physical space for student services, and the need for a personal computer to perform activities such as supervising student tasks. Faced with these difficulties, the three professors reported seeking alternatives to continue performing their work with quality, whether by borrowing equipment from other centers and laboratories or assisting students in the library, or even paying for the materials necessary for their work with their own resources. Accordingly, it is possible to understand that, for these professors, difficulties are inherent to the profession, particularly in the context of public administration, being perceived as challenges to be solved by the competent authorities and, more immediately, by themselves.

Professional fulfillment of the surveyed professors

Regarding the concept of professional fulfillment, half of the professors associated it with happiness. According to them, being able to do what they like and "give their best" in these activities makes them feel happy and professionally fulfilled, as illustrated by the following speeches: "Professional fulfillment is reaching Friday and not feeling happy about entering the weekend. Reaching Saturday and Sunday but missing Monday. I think I am on this path" (P5); "Being professionally fulfilled means being able to work on something important to oneself, focused, calm, and devoting your time to it" (P11). For three other professors, professional fulfillment would encompass both objective and subjective aspects. For them, the objective aspects were related to material and financial conditions, ensuring the livelihood that work can provide, while the subjective aspects were associated with the pleasure and satisfaction of performing work activities. P10 linked professional fulfillment to the development and analysis of one's career trajectory: "You always refer back to your previous possibilities, where you have reached, and the point you can reach. The further from the starting point in terms of progress, the more easily you will declare yourself fulfilled" (P10). Additionally, P2 and P12 associated professional fulfillment with recognition from students, peers, and society.

The professors were also asked about the main career goals they had set for themselves, as well as their perception of achieving them. Of the 12 interviewees, 10 revealed goals they considered important for their careers, mainly relating them to engaging in research and graduate teaching activities, gaining greater autonomy at work, publishing books, obtaining national and international recognition, and advancing in the career and position plan of the federal higher education teaching in Brazil. Nonetheless, it was observed that two professors did not have established career goals. P10 mentioned that he tried not to set goals because, from his perspective, there is a natural path to follow in an academic career, that is, there are goals to be achieved, but the university trajectory itself would lead him to these goals without the

need for urgent efforts. P12, on the other hand, stated that, at the time of the interview, he did not have any important career goals. Among the professors who indicated their main goals, only two considered themselves far from achieving them. In general, the others reported being close to or on the path to achieving the set goals.

Finally, the professors were asked about their sense of professional fulfillment. Ten of them stated that they felt fulfilled, while two (P11 and P12) reported feeling little or no professional fulfillment. P11, whose understanding of professional fulfillment was associated with happiness at work and “being able to do what he likes,” felt far from achieving his most important career goal and mentioned feeling unfulfilled because he spent less time than he would like on work activities he considered important. Meanwhile, P12, who did not have a defined career goal and whose understanding of professional fulfillment was related to recognition, expressed discouragement with distance learning, and stated that he did not feel professionally fulfilled, as he was underutilized in the activities he performed.

Discussion

Given the results found, it was possible to identify that the participants in this research exhibited moderate levels of work engagement (Magnan et al., 2016). Based on the mean values per dimension and the content of the interviews, it was observed that the analyzed group of professors was more dedicated to work than absorbed or invigorated. These results converge with similar evidence found in other studies conducted with higher education professors in Brazil and Portugal (Araújo; Esteves, 2016; Caldas et al., 2013; Dessbesell et al., 2017; Mercali; Costa, 2019; Paiva et al., 2017). Challenging jobs that grant greater autonomy and freedom of decision-making, and involve responsibilities related to social responsibility, in addition to having a more direct impact on people, such as those related to health and education, tend to provide higher levels of engagement for professionals (Schaufeli; Dijkstra; Vazquez, 2013).

The slightly higher scores identified in the dimension of dedication were reflected in the professors’ speeches through the expression of enthusiasm for their work, the attribution of positive meanings to the teaching and research activities they carry out, and, above all, the pride they feel for their profession and the institution to which they are affiliated. Such expression implies a high connection of professors with their work and effort in career development, leading them to care about what happens in their daily work (Mercali; Costa, 2019; Schaufeli; Dijkstra; Vazquez, 2013). At the same time, the greatest manifestation of the dimension of dedication may also be associated with the fact that the sample is limited to the public sector. National and international studies indicate that performing work that is useful to others is a very important value for public servants (Bakker, 2015; Santos et al., 2019).

The slightly lower scores in the dimensions of absorption and vigor, observed in the quantitative stage, were also confirmed in the speeches of the interviewed professors. The analysis of the dimension of

absorption revealed that many professors perceive administrative activities as counterproductive to immersion in professional activities considered more valuable and important, such as teaching and research. According to Santos, Pereira, and Lopes (2018), in addition to being considered an invisible task, management indicates excessive work and invasive bureaucracy, marked by constant meetings, completion of reports, and other administrative chores, representing an undesired aspect of the profession. The attribution of these activities not only represents a work overload but also contributes to a decrease in motivation, potentially leading to a professional “identity crisis” (Jesus, 2004, p. 197). The perception among teachers that these activities consume time that could be dedicated to higher-priority tasks, such as teaching and research, is supported by the literature in the field (Santos; Pereira; Lopes, 2016, 2018; Viana; Helal, 2023).

With regard to the activities considered most important by the majority of the interviewed professors, it is emphasized that giving lessons is the main activity in the teaching career in Brazil. In this sense, it is noted that the structure of the teaching career in public higher education institutions often favors research and teaching at the graduate level. The development of research and participation in *stricto sensu* graduate programs represent spaces of power and social recognition and enable, for example, greater access to funding (Viana; Helal, 2023). These aspects justify the relevance of these activities for the interviewed professors, to the extent that they are highlighted as the most important career goals to be achieved, directly impacting the progression process foreseen in the Federal Higher Education Teaching Career Plan in Brazil. In this context, it is important to consider the effects of the current academic productivity model, represented by intense and continuous publication demands, on the career and work engagement of professionals dedicated to teaching and research (Bianchetti; Zuin; Ferraz, 2018). Notably, its impact on the quality of work and the health of these professionals stands out.

The dimension of vigor, related to the manifestation of high levels of mental energy and resilience in the development of professional activities, as well as to the genuine desire to invest effort in performing a task and the persistence to overcome difficulties (Bakker; Albrecht; Leiter, 2011; Schaufeli; Salanova, 2014), seems to have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the effects of the pandemic on teachers’ work and health have already been documented in other studies (Diab-Bahman; Al-Enzi, 2020; Junges et al., 2021; Kashyap; Nakra; Arora, 2021). The fatigue and discouragement reported by participants in the qualitative stage of this research reflect the urgent need to adapt teaching methods, focusing efforts on distance teaching and learning. Considering that the usual way of performing teaching activities has been significantly reconfigured, it has become essential to make adjustments to routines and work tools, such as updating lesson plans, acquiring or updating software, and revising methodologies for the digital format.

Adding to this are the budgetary restrictions faced by federal higher education institutions (IFES, as per its Portuguese acronym) in recent years, identified in interviews as factors that hinder the accomplishment of work, thus impacting motivation. In 2016, in a context of economic crisis, Constitutional Amendment nº 95 was approved, which limited public spending for 20 years, directly affecting mandatory expenses in the areas of health and education. In higher education, in 2021, the federal government withheld more than half of the initially planned budget, creating financial difficulties and spending cuts that impacted the quality of the provided education (Henning; Brittes, 2021; Santos; Pereira, 2022). Despite this, the demands for productivity and the provision of high-quality educational services remained, regardless of the involved costs (Santos; Pereira, 2022).

Regarding the data on professors' professional fulfillment, whose results from the quantitative phase indicated levels considered median, some discrepancies were found in the interviewees' speeches. Ten professors stated that they not only feel fully professionally fulfilled but also mentioned having important career goals, which they were close to or on the path to achieving. It is noteworthy that professional fulfillment is a dynamic process, which can undergo changes depending on personal and professional events (Oliveira-Silva; Porto; Arnold, 2019; Oliveira-Silva; Porto, 2021). There are career goals that may not be feasible or may require time, experience, and maturity to be achieved, such as the position of full professor, the highest rank in the Federal Higher Education Teaching Career Plan in Brazil. However, Oliveira-Silva and Porto (2021) emphasize that professional fulfillment does not only occur when established goals are fully achieved but also when an individual perceives that he/she is on the path towards them or, moreover, when he/she perceives that he/she is contributing in some way to this progress. Accordingly, even if the achievement of the goal is not yet concrete, if there is some level of satisfaction with the progress in that direction, there is also evidence of professional fulfillment (Oliveira-Silva; Porto, 2021). Similarly, when a person has a career goal but believes he/she is not on the path to achieving it or that he/she is far from it, he/she tends to experience lower professional fulfillment.

Another important aspect is that the personal and professional satisfaction of professors working in federal universities, as well as their career, are essential dimensions of these professionals' lives and need to be considered (Zabalza, 2014). In this regard, studies indicate that the pursuit of fulfillment is one of the main reasons for choosing a teaching career, as well as for remaining in the profession, being considered a source of satisfaction (Alves; Azevedo; Gonçalves, 2014; Campos; Carvalho; Souza, 2019; Cardoso; Costa, 2016; Colares et al., 2019; Masson, 2017; Viana; Helal, 2023).

A divergence is observed between the median results obtained by applying the ERP-DUF and the speeches issued by the interviewees, who expressed high professional fulfillment. This difference may be related to the professors' personal conception of professional fulfillment, which differs from the theoretical model underpinning the scale used

to measure the construct. For half of the interviewed professors, professional fulfillment was associated with the psychological state of happiness, which connects to the origins of the term “fulfillment.” Studies on happiness are guided by two traditional perspectives: hedonic and eudaimonic. The first is based on the pleasure principle, understanding that happiness would result from a set of positive and gratifying feelings and emotions; in turn, the second is related to experiences of personal and professional fulfillment and development and the expression of each person’s maximum potential (Oliveira-Silva; Porto, 2021; Silva et al., 2022).

Furthermore, from an epistemological perspective grounded in humanism, the pursuit of fulfillment is understood as the force that drives people, being considered the greatest and ultimate human need, since it involves the individual’s desire to become what he/she essentially wishes to be and achieve. In the professional sphere, happiness involves predominantly positive beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and feelings, as well as recurring and lasting experiences of pleasure and purpose, combined with the inherent desire to become what one wishes to be (Budde; Silva, 2020; Ribeiro; Silva, 2020; Silva et al., 2022).

According to Silva et al. (2022), the psychological state of happiness encompasses three interrelated dimensions: the material dimension of existence (objective conditions of the work environment), the psychosocial dimension (human relationships at work), and the transcendental dimension (spirituality, human development, and meaning in life). The last dimension is directly connected to professional fulfillment, as it encompasses the desire to become what one aspires to be. Among the interviewed professors, this was expressed as the opportunity to “do what one enjoys” and to “give his/her best” in activities, giving meaning to the work he/she performs.

As indicated in the section dedicated to the methodology, the 12 participants interviewed in the qualitative stage were intentionally selected based on the results of the quantitative stage. Thus, although the overall quantitative results indicated moderate levels of work engagement and intermediate scores on the professional fulfillment scale, the results of the scales of the interviewed participants, assessed individually, are consistent with the three groups stratified in the sample selection (P1 to P6: high professional fulfillment and high work engagement; P7 to P10: low professional fulfillment and high work engagement; and, finally, P11 and P12: low professional fulfillment and low work engagement). While the standardized instruments measured the constructs objectively and comparably among respondents, the interviews captured personal narratives laden with meaning.

In this regard, it is observed that the results obtained in the two stages of the study generally show consistency and complementarity. For example, P11 and P12, who had professional fulfillment scores below the mean values, described themselves as being far from their most important career goal (P11) and without defined career goals (P12), respectively, which reinforces the consistency between the quantitative measurement and their reports in the qualitative stage. Conversely,

some inconsistency was observed in the report of P9, who expressed pride and a strong identification with the profession (elements that characterize the dimension of dedication in terms of work engagement), although his scores did not achieve high levels of work engagement. This contrast highlights the value of qualitative analysis in understanding nuances that quantitative data alone cannot capture.

Finally, analyses were conducted on the correlations between work engagement and professional fulfillment, as well as between the dimensions of dedication, vigor, and absorption and professional fulfillment. The results highlighted a significant moderate positive correlation between work engagement and professional fulfillment. Specifically, professional fulfillment showed significant moderate positive correlations with the dimensions of vigor and absorption of work engagement, and a strong significant correlation with the dimension of dedication. These findings, supported by the speeches of the interviewees and by the pertinent literature, reinforce the connection between professional fulfillment and work engagement, especially through the dimension of dedication.

The interviews revealed that, when professors can devote themselves to activities that are most meaningful, identifiable, and prioritized for them, aligned with their career goals, they tend to feel more professionally fulfilled. Although it cannot be stated that they are fully absorbed in their work, the participants showed greater dedication, expressed in enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride in their profession, as well as vigor, reflected in effort and persistence in the face of difficulties. Similar results were found in other studies, which show that the professional fulfillment of higher education professors is associated with pride in their career, identification with teaching and research activities, and autonomy at work (Ribeiro; Silva, 2020; Viana; Helal, 2023; Vilela; Garcia; Vieira, 2013). Furthermore, professors who showed higher levels of dedication and professional fulfillment tend to exhibit feelings of belonging to the organization, affective connection, and inspiration with their work, as well as greater proactivity, commitment to achieving institutional goals, and effort in developing their own careers (Bakker, 2011; Magnan et al., 2016; Schaufeli; Dijkstra; Vazquez, 2013).

Final Considerations

Based on the exposed results, it was possible to observe that work engagement and professional fulfillment of the surveyed professors are statistically correlated. The testimonies of the interviewed professors highlighted how these relationships are constituted in the context of public higher education, particularly through the dimension of dedication of the work engagement construct.

Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate the psychological construct studied here, called work engagement, from organizational discourses of engagement associated with domination and work alienation, which lead the worker to assume many responsibilities and tasks that benefit the functioning of the organization to the detriment of his/her well-being and health. In the current study, work engagement is understood as a positive

dispositional mental state, characterized by pleasure and connection with work activity, thus constituting a construct directly related to well-being and occupational health (Magnan et al., 2016).

It is worth mentioning that the effects of the pandemic on the work and health of education professionals may have influenced the results of the quantitative stage of this study. Regarding this fact, the interviewed professors highlighted the impact of the pandemic on the dimension of vigor, manifested by fatigue and discouragement, especially with distance learning. In addition, the budget cuts for universities during the same period contributed to a negative perception of the faced situation.

The theoretical contributions of this study are aimed at a greater understanding of work engagement and professional fulfillment in the context of higher education, both constructs still little explored in the field of education. In this sense, the relevance of these constructs is highlighted for understanding teacher well-being and guiding the development of university management programs that promote more meaningful teaching career paths. At the same time, the results of this research reinforce the evidence regarding the value attributed to the meaning of work in the context of public service. In this regard, practical contributions point to the structuring of management policies that promote a work environment in which professors feel proud, motivated, and engaged.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge some methodological limitations of this study. The fact that the phenomena were investigated specifically at a federal public university in the southern region of Brazil should be considered when assessing the scope of the conclusions. Due to this delimitation, the results cannot be directly extended to the reality of other institutions and educational structures. It is also necessary to consider the influence of biases inherent in the applied information collection procedures, which may explain differences between the results of each stage of the research. These aspects reinforce the need for caution in interpreting the findings and highlight the importance of future research conducted in different contexts, with larger samples and a methodological design that allows exploring various profiles of work engagement and professional fulfillment. Thus, it will be possible to gain a broader understanding of the relationships between work engagement and professional fulfillment in the context of an academic career in Brazilian federal universities, as well as to investigate the potential association of these constructs with other variables related to teacher well-being.

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