

EXAMINING THE MENTAL HEALTH STATUS OF HUNGARIAN TEACHERS

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Abstract

Research on burnout examines the phenomenon from an individual, interpersonal, and organizational perspective. The individual approach focuses on the examination of personality, with particular regard to personality traits predisposing to the burnout syndrome, as well as the symptoms of burnout appearing at the individual level. The interpersonal aspects refer to the social environment, the relationship between the helping professional and his client. Research on the organizational level emphasizes the particularities of the given workplace, job title, and the organization.

Examining the causes of the burnout syndrome, Pines, Aronson, Kafry (1990) revealed three reasons for burnout based on their research with 4,000 people: emotional overload, client-centered orientation and certain personality traits. As a result of these findings, in our research we investigated the psychological immune competence of teachers, because they can be regarded as a particularly vulnerable group, and psychological immune competence is a good coping resource (Vargay et al., 2019). We analyzed the mental health status of teachers (N: 301) from individual and interpersonal aspects in 2022, in Hungary. Based on our results, among the 16 factors of the Psychological Immune Competence Test (Oláh, 2005), they achieved the weakest result in the field of emotional control. We measured weaker results in the areas of challenge/flexibility, inhibition of irritability and social creativity, too. However, their results in the field of sense of coherence and endurance are better. In the mobilizing-creating-executive subsystem, they achieved a much higher value than the standardized average (for Hungarians). In the self-regulating and approach-monitoring subsystems, the results of teachers are similar to the standard average. 92% of the teachers have a positive mindset, but 40% achieved poor results in terms of challenge/flexibility. In the field of emotional control, 20% of them have below average results, which can lead to burnout later.

Our results show that among teachers, psychoeducational training can play an important role in preventing psychosomatic illnesses and burnout. Our long-term goal is to device targeted trainings for Hungarian teachers to prevent and alleviate burnout.

Keywords: *Teachers, mental health, psychological immune competence, burnout syndrome.*

1. Introduction

In our study, we present the examination of the psychological immune competence related to the mental health status of teachers on a Hungarian sample. In Hungary, it is extremely important to deal with the support of teachers these days, since the number of students applying for teacher training is decreasing every year, as a result, the teaching cohort is aging significantly, and the number of people dropping out has also increased. That is why it is important to find the points of intervention that can help make the teaching career attractive. With the help of our study, we would like to draw attention to the areas related to mental health in which it is necessary to provide support to teachers with state or institutional strategies, thus contributing to their psychological well-being and supporting their retention in the field.

1.1. Burnout

Burnout is a psychosocial corpus associated with helping people in welfare societies. There are three main symptoms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a loss of personal efficiency at work. In the experience of emotional exhaustion, a person cannot get emotionally involved in his work. Depersonalization means the development of negative attitudes and emotions about clients. In the sense of a loss of personal efficiency, assisting experts believe that their performance is not sufficient to carry out their duties properly and are dissatisfied with their results (Montero-Marín et al, 2009).

1.2. Health psychology

Health psychology is one of the youngest fields of applied psychology, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) accepted it as an independent department in 1978 (Vargha & Szabó, 2015). According to Genrty (1984), the reasons for the development and prominence of the field include the fact that in recent decades the focus of medical treatment has shifted from infectious diseases to chronic diseases, that quality of life has become more prominent, the classic biomedical model is not very successful in health and in the interpretation of disease, and thanks to the behavioral sciences, learning theories helped to understand the behaviors associated with different diseases, as well as the etymology of the disease. The definition of the concept of health psychology is attributed to Matarazzo (1980). Health psychology includes "the combination of specific, educational, scientific and professional contributions of psychology to the support (health-promotion) and preservation of health, the prevention and treatment of diseases, the identification of the pathological and diagnostic correlates of health, disease and related disorders, and for the improvement of the health system and the development of an effective health policy" (Matarazzo, 1980, p.808).

1.3. Relationships between psychological immunocompetence, burnout and mental health

By getting to know the concept of the psychological immune system - the components of which are all those personality resources that enable the individual to be able to endure various stress effects and to deal with them effectively, so that his development potential is not damaged in the meantime, and coping with stress is much more enriched with the internalization of his experience (Oláh, 1995) - it is clear that psychological immunocompetence is closely related to mental health status and burnout. The personality factors that create the coping resource capacity form an integrated system, the psychological immune system, within the personality as a whole. The different personality components performing those functions are grouped into three subsystems: the Approach-Monitoring, the Creative-Mobilizing-Executive and the Self-Regulating subsystems. The main groups of psychological immune competence are called coping potentials. Such coping potential is the ability to control, optimism, fitness, learned ingenuity, self-awareness and sense of coherence (Oláh, 1995). Through their mechanism of action, the person's position is strengthened in various interactions, from the beginning of the coping process to the selection of the appropriate behavior to the increase of resilience (Szicsek, 2004). At what level and with what result a person can cope with stress depends on several factors: their psychological immune competence, their ability to cope, and the invulnerability and unpredictability of the situation (Jaiswal et al, 2020). Positive coping strategies have a significant buffering effect in preventing the development of psychological illnesses (Takács et al., 2021). At the same time, we must also consider the results of Fináncz and Csima's (2019) study among workers in early childhood education, which found mild depression symptoms in 73% of those who completed it using Beck Depression Inventory – 9 Item Version.

Szicsek's (2004) study, in line with international examples, found that it is not work-related stress factors, but rather the workplace atmosphere that contributes to higher levels of burnout and lower values of psychological immune competence. That is why the strengthening of workplace mental health processes plays a particularly important role, not only in the health sector, but also in the field of education.

1.4. The state of wellbeing of teachers in Hungary today

In recent years, the social perception and respect of teachers has gradually decreased in Hungary. Based on the results of the questionnaire research conducted by the education management among teachers in June and September 2022 - in which the participation rate was 24% - more than half of the respondents believe that with the current high class load, there is not enough time for proper preparation, the class sizes roughly correspond to what is considered ideal, however, it would be necessary to involve a pedagogical assistant in the daily work. The development of wages and the working environment, realistic performance evaluation and support for continuous professional development would also play a major role in making the teaching career attractive (Maruzsa & Kisfaludy, 2022).

2. Goals

Based on the literature and our previous research results, we believe that burnout is related to psychological coping mechanisms and psychological immune competence in the case of teachers too. In our present study, we are looking for the answer to which factors in the study population, which of the 16 scales of Oláh's Psychological Immune System Inventory, help to cope with emotionally stressful situations, and which factors make it difficult. The obtained results can be incorporated into institutional and even governmental mental health strategies supporting Hungarian teachers.

3. Methods

3.1. Study participants

A total of 301 people participated in the study. All of them work as teachers in Hungary. Of the 301 people, 281 are women and 20 are men. The age of the respondents was between 23 and 69 years old, they live in the capital, county seat, city, large village, or village. 285 people work in state and 16 private public education institutions. A significant part of the study population is represented by special education teachers, a total of 120 people. The number of primary school teachers (41 people), teachers (39 people) and psychologists working as teachers (29 people) is also high among those filling in, 72 people work in other pedagogical fields (e.g., development pedagogues, high school teachers, physical therapists, language teachers, vocational teachers, art subject teachers).

3.2. Data collection

Our cross-sectional, quantitative, situational profile analysis took place from January to October 2022. Data collection was based on voluntary completion. The compiled questionnaire was shared electronically. The fill-in link reached the fill-ins using a snowball method, by sharing them online. In addition, thanks to the cooperation in the Cooperative Doctoral Program, the questionnaire was sent to all the maintained institutions of my employer, the Educational District Center in Kaposvár, which resulted in 107 out of 301 people completing it. The present study and the cooperation with the employer were based on the research presented at the 2021 International Conference on Education and New Developments, which is the study of teacher burnout in the Somogy County Pedagogical Service (Szigeti, 2021).

3.3. Presentation of the test procedure

The Psychological Immune System Inventory (PISI) questionnaire, which was developed and standardized by Attila Oláh in 1997, was used to examine the immunocompetence of the teachers participating in the research. The questionnaire consists of 80 items. On a four-point Likert scale, the extent to which the respondent considers the given statement to be characteristic of him/herself must be indicated. 4 indicates "completely characteristic", 1 indicates "barely or not characteristic". The answers to the questionnaire are divided into 16 scales, which are as follows: positive thinking; ability to control; sense of coherence; self-respect; feeling of growth; flexibility, taking on challenges; empathy, social monitoring ability; ingenuity; sense of self-efficacy; capacity for social mobilization; social creativity; synchronicity; endurance; impulsivity control; emotional control; inhibition of irritability. The defined scale can be classified into the three subsystems of the self-regulatory system, such as the approach-monitoring, the creative-mobilizing-executive and the self-regulating subsystems, which provide the opportunity for further analysis of the data.

3.4. Research questions

1. Is there a difference between the study population and the standard results in any scale of Oláh's Psychological Immunocompetence Questionnaire, and if so, what can be the reasons for this?
2. What are the areas of psychological immunocompetence in which the results of the study population are worse than the standard average? How can teachers be supported in these areas?

4. Results

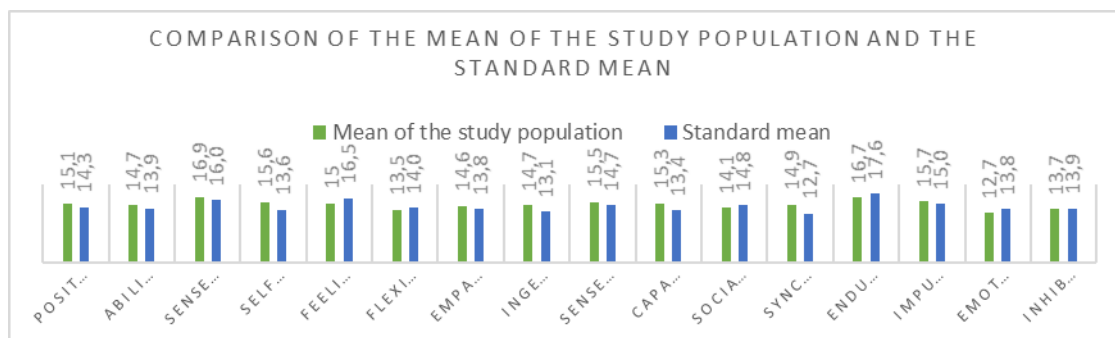
For the statistical analysis of our results, we used the SPSS V27 Statistical Program and MS Excel. Table No. 1 contains the averages and standard deviations for each scale determined based on the descriptive statistical analysis of the obtained results.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations in the scales of the PISI in study population (Oláh, 1997).

	Positive thinking	Ability to control	Sense of coherence	Self-respect	Feeling of growth	Acceptance on challenges,	Empathy, social monitoring ability	Ingenuity	Sense of self-efficacy	Capacity for social mobilization	Social creativity	Synchronicity	Endurance	Impulsivity control	Emotional control	Inhibition of irritability
Mean	15,1	14,7	16,9	15,6	15,0	13,5	14,6	14,7	15,5	15,3	14,1	14,9	16,7	15,7	12,7	13,7
SD	3,427	2,549	2,826	3,318	2,035	3,436	3,336	3,253	2,688	3,614	3,585	3,421	2,502	2,754	3,361	3,252

We compared our results obtained in the 16 scales of the Psychological Immune System Inventory with the standard values, using the ‘summary independent-samples t-test’ of SPSS. Based on this, it can be concluded that no significant differences were found between the standard group and our sample in the case of the Acceptance of challenges, flexibility and the Irritability-inhibition scale. In the case of three scales (Endurance, Social creativity and Emotional control) we found a significant negative difference, in all other cases we measured a significant positive difference ($p=001$). A positive deviation indicates a higher psychological immunocompetence. 92% of the teachers participating in the study have a positive mindset, but 40% achieved poor results in terms of taking on challenges and flexibility. In the field of emotional control, 20% of them have below average results, which can lead to burnout later on. Lower average values were also obtained in the field of Irritability inhibition, but this is also lower in the case of standard values. In our previous study, which we conducted in a group of university students, the students achieved the best results in the Endurance scale of the PISI questionnaire, but in their case we also measured weaker results in the Emotional control and Social creativity scales (Di Blasio, Szigeti, 2022). A comparison of our obtained test results and the standard averages is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Comparison of the average of the study population and the standard average in the 16 scales of the PISI (Oláh, 1997).



In the Mobilizing-creating-executive subsystem, they achieved a much higher value than the standardized average for Hungarians. In the self-regulation and approach monitoring subsystems, the results of teachers are similar to the standard average.

Based on the obtained results, we can give the following answers to our research questions:

1. With the exception of two scales (Challenge Acceptance, Flexibility and Irritability Inhibition), in all scales of Oláh's Psychological Immune Competence Questionnaire, we found a difference between the results of the study population and the standard values, mostly in a positive direction. In our opinion, teachers have better mentalization and empathy skills than the average population, and this helps them to cope better, and results in better psychological immunocompetence.

2. We experienced a negative deviation from the standard average on three scales: the Emotional control (controlling negative feelings in case of failures, Oláh, 2005), Perseverance and Social creativity (exploring the latent abilities in others, Oláh, 2005) scale. To support these areas, teaching relaxation methods, ensuring participation in supervisions, and practical knowledge of talent recognition and care can also be suitable strategies for teachers.

5. Conclusion

In our study, we presented a psychological immunocompetence test conducted among Hungarian teachers. Summarizing the results of the study, we can conclude that the psychological immunocompetence of the study population is better than that of the average Hungarian population, their sense of coherence, their self-respect, their sense of growth, their ingenuity, their self-efficacy, their ability to mobilize socially and their ability to synchronize are outstanding, but they have difficulties with emotional control, endurance and in the field of social creativity. Based on the investigation, we formulated recommendations regarding mental health support for teachers, e.g. providing the opportunity to learn relaxation techniques and participate in supervision. Our other plans include getting to know teachers' psychological coping strategies, which may be important in terms of both the prevention of burnout and the determination of our further focus points for mental health support.

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