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Raising Awareness on Self-Concordant Goals, Coping Better in Hard Times – A Way out of Teacher’s Burnout

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Being a teacher is a profession that requires high responsibility. Teacher burnout is a current phenomenon, that affects not only teachers’ level of personal accomplishment, but also their connection with students, as one of its dimensions is depersonalization (i. e. handling students as objects instead of sentient beings). If the process of burnout could have been turned back, that would cause a major change in the quality of teaching, as teachers would become more committed in their work and radiate their own passion while educating the younger generation. In our research we examined what effect it has on burnout when individuals follow a self-concordant goal. It is known that self-concordant goals assume having an alignment between individuals’ unknown (unconscious) and known (consciously expressed) motivations, thus give a stable ground for the person to evolve. In our investigation we explored the concept of self-esteem as well in relation with burnout syndrome. Positive self-esteem implies that individuals are in a mentally healthy state, which can be a possible protecting factor regarding burnout. In this empirical research we investigated 332 public education teachers from all over Hungary. We included three inventories in our investigation: the MBI-ES (Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey); the Survey of Personal Goals at Work by Sheldon with the focus on self-concordant goals; and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. In data analyses, we applied the method of the non-parametric version of variance analysis, Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests. Our results estimated a strong significant relationship with low burnout level and positive self-esteem, and self-concordant goals. The analysis also pointed out the significant connection between self-esteem and self-concordant goals. Our results provided a fertile ground for further investigations in order to find a way to cope with teacher burnout, and a chance for teacher renewal.

Introduction

Being a teacher is a big responsibility. The education of the younger generation not only aims to educate students in their academic studies, but also to stand as a role model of a moral and ethical, yet loving person. Hochschild created the phenomenon "emotional labour" in his work (*The Managed Heart*), where this term refers to the situation, when one has to behave in a certain – expected – way in his or her job (Hochschild, 1983). In case of "deep acting", the individual identifies with the feelings that are to be expressed, and in case of "surface acting", one pretends as if she or he would feel like a presented emotion. The latter is more exhausting emotionally, therefore it is worth to explore the factors that can help for the individual to identify more with the authentic self, and thus stay enthusiastic in the job as a teacher.

Teacher's burnout

Due to emotional strain, a phenomenon, called burnout can develop. According to Maslach's definition about burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001), it has three major dimensions that characterize the phenomenon: *emotional exhaustion* (when one's energy is drained, and feels unable to respond to emotional requirements at work, feels angry, frustrated and dissatisfied), *depersonalization* (the process of dehumanization of relationships with others, objectification rather than treating others with respect and kindness) and (reduced) *personal accomplishment* (perceived level of self-efficacy, it is connected with one's self-evaluation) (Sas, Boroş & Bonchiş, 2011). Emotional exhaustion at teachers means that they perceive they are not able to be there for the students' emotional needs as much as they could before – teachers lose the sincere connection with their students. Depersonalization in the teaching profession refers to the development of a negative, cynical attitude toward students, colleagues and parents. Decreased personal accomplishment occurs at teachers when they perceive their ineffectiveness in being helpful to students and in other tasks at their work (Byrne, 1991). As can be seen above, developing burnout syndrome for teachers influence negatively not only teachers' perception of self and their mental health, but also students' academic achievement and emotional development.

In this study we examine the following phenomena connected to burnout: autonomy, self-esteem and self-concordant goals. Our assumption is that these concepts can serve as a protecting factor in burnout syndrome. Now we are going to introduce these phenomena focusing on their connection with burnout.

Autonomy at work

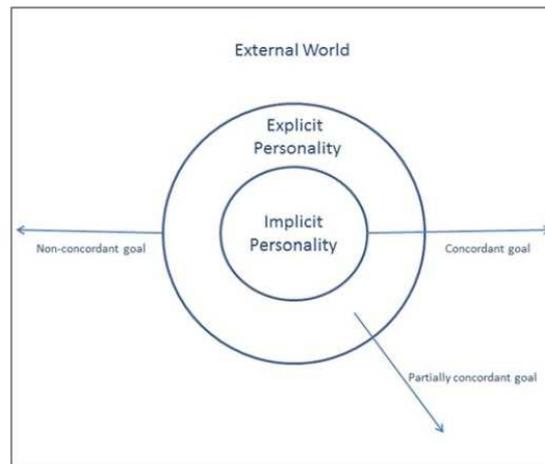
According to András Angyal, who dealt with the concept of autonomy: "The energy of the biosphere is supplied by the tensions that arise between the environmental pole and the organismic pole. These tensions arise because the environment pulls in one direction and the organism in another. These opposite directional trends of the organism and the environment within the biosphere are called *autonomy* and *homonomy* respectively. The trend toward autonomy consists of the expansion of the organism by assimilating and mastering the environment. It is analogous to an egoistic drive in which the person strives to satisfy cravings and advance interests by bending the environment to their needs" (Hall & Lindzey, 1978:263).

In this case, the "organism" is the teacher, who has a special situation regarding his or her autonomy: on the one hand, she/he is in total control of the students when teaching a class, yet has relatively small autonomy as a member of the teaching staff due to the public educational regulations (defined by the parliament in Hungary) and school regulations (defined by the headmaster). According to the results of Colomeischi et al. (2015), autonomy has the strongest (positive) correlation with personal accomplishment among the burnout dimensions on a teacher sample. This means that autonomy is connected with the cognitive concept of self. Lee and Ashforth points out however, that high autonomy only acts as a protecting factor for burnout if the experienced work-stress is low (the tasks and responsibilities are clear) (Lee & Ashforth, 1993). In their study, Qu et al. (2015) found that nurses' burnout level is lower in case of being a team-leader or a manager.

Self-concordance model and Self-determination theory

According to the self-concordance model, it does matter what kind of goals individuals select and follow. There are goals that beneficial for the individuals' mental health, and there are goals that has an impeding effect regarding personal growth and happiness. Most of our goals are subconscious and run automatically. The key to find the right – self-concordant – goal is to align the conscious part of the personality (which is connected to the self-definition, sequence-based and controlled by the individual) with the non-conscious part (which is the "experiencing self", it is intuitive and automatic). Since the non-conscious part of the personality is faster and hard to be followed by the conscious part, it implies a high level of self-knowledge when an individual is able to align the efforts of these two (Sheldon, 2014).

Figure 1. Concordant and non-concordant personal goals



In order to find the right goal for a person, we have to investigate the question of person-goal fit, and this brings us to Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory. This is a motivational theory which implies a continuum of internalization, which claims to what extent a goal is integrated with the phenomenon of self. With self-concordant goals the individuals raise a chance for their goal attainment and at the same time fulfill individuals' needs and values thus make them happy. When a goal is external (not aligned with the personality), it causes an inner conflict, since the individual is not engaged in the activity. An external goal can be internalized by recognizing the value that it carries. The sequence is the following: introjected regulation (the external need gets an internal representation), identified regulation (the individual find value in the goal he/she chooses) and autonomous/intrinsic motivation (the individual does the activity and reaches the goal because it is interesting and enjoyable for him/her).

In connection with teacher burnout, Fernet et al. (2012) found that autonomous motivation works as a protecting factor for burnout, it influences the emotional exhaustion dimension in a positive way. Moreover, in the classroom environment autonomous motivation turned out to be a moderating factor for students' disruptive behavior and classroom overload (Fernet et al., 2012). This means, that intrinsic motivation empowers teachers to cope with difficult situations in the classroom environment.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is an evaluation of the self, it indicates how one thinks of him/herself, thus is a cognitive construct. It is a dual phenomena, it has a negative and a positive aspect. Self-esteem is an important concept in protecting the self from the general anxiety and fear of death. High level of self-esteem is accompanied with effective coping of work stress and

affects positively one's mental and physical health (Sallay, Martos, Földvári, Szabó & Ittész, 2014).

As a part of the core self-evaluation concept, self-esteem was investigated in connection with the burnout syndrome (Alarcon, Eschleman & Bowling, 2009; Mazur & Lynch, 1989). Self-esteem had the strongest connection with the personal accomplishment dimension of burnout. In this study, self-esteem can serve as a basis for protecting the individual from burnout, and at the same time it can indicate an integrated personality, thus can imply high personal accomplishment, goal attainment and the appearance of self-concordant goals.

Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis is in connection with autonomy and teacher burnout – interpreting Qu et al.'s result to the teaching profession (Qu & Wang, 2015):

(1) There is a linear significant relationship between being a team leader/headmaster at school and low level of teacher burnout.

In order to explore the connection between self-esteem and self-concordant goals, our second hypothesis is:

(2) There is a linear significant relationship between teachers' positive self-esteem and teachers' self-concordant (intrinsically or identically regulated) goals.

That would mean, that self-concordant goals – which are connected to the emotional aspect of burnout – are related to the individual's cognitive concept of self, in a way, that positive cognitive evaluation can protect the individual from burning out and encourage his or her internalized goal attainment.

To test if there is a chance for an underlying connection between burnout and the two above-mentioned constructs, in our third and fourth hypotheses we investigate data according to the findings that has been explored by former studies:

In order to investigate the connection between burnout and self-esteem, relying on the results of Alarcon et al. (2009) and Mazur & Lynch (1989), our third hypothesis is:

(3) There is an inversed significant relationship between positive self-esteem and the level of teacher burnout, especially in the dimension of personal accomplishment.

Our fourth hypothesis is based on the results of Fernet et al. (2012) regarding autonomous motivation and burnout:

(4) There is an inversed significant relationship between teachers' self-concordant goals and level of teacher burnout, especially in the dimension of emotional exhaustion.

Method

In our sample 332 teachers participated from all over Hungary. They were participants of a country-wide training program for teachers and educators in the public education. Our research also includes teachers of another training program called the "master leader class" where headmasters or deputy head teachers of schools and other educational institutions participated.

Demographic data about the participants

Among the general demographic questions, we asked the participants' gender, age, years of experience as a teacher/educator, place in the organizational hierarchy, how many subordinates the participant have, and location-type of the school (village/town/city/capital city).

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES-H)

In order to investigate the concept of self-esteem, we assessed with an alternative Hungarian translated version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, which was investigated by Sallay et al (2014), where the Scale's indicators of validity and reliability were found satisfactory. The structure of the factors fitted a bifactorial model in the study, where one general self-esteem factor and two "methodological" factors were found. Positive and negative items separated as the methodological factors, with 5-5 items per factor. The participants evaluated the items on a Likert scale (1=I completely disagree-4=I completely agree).

Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators Survey (MBI-ES)

For measuring burnout syndrome at teachers, we applied the Burnout Inventory created by Maslach and Jackson (1981). According to Maslach, the inventory measures on 3 dimensions: emotional exhaustion (9 items), depersonalization (5 items), and personal accomplishment, which is a reverse scale (8 items). In the inventory, the items ask about the frequency of the appearance of a certain situation or an emotion related to burnout. The participants evaluated the items on a Likert scale (0=never-6=every day). This inventory does not have a validated version for Hungary. Since this tool applies a Likert scale, it was not possible to calculate a Cronbach-alfa value for the items, thus we did a factor analysis, and it clustered the items of the inventory into four components that together explained the variance. Then we applied a Varimax rotation on the sample, and we worked with the rotated component matrix. The first component included items of the dimension of personal

accomplishment, the second and the third component together created the dimension of emotional exhaustion, and the fourth component was identical with the dimension of depersonalization (from the original model). There were two items (item 10 and item 11), that fell into the component of "emotional exhaustion" instead of "depersonalization", thus they are excluded in the further investigations of this study.

Personal goals at work

In order to measure the self-concordant goals including the self-determination theory, we applied the Personal goals at work Inventory, developed by Sheldon (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998), and validated in Hungary by Martos (Martos, 2009). In our investigation, by filling out this questionnaire teachers chose three goals that they would like to achieve in the next 3-6 months in they work, and answered the following question about the goals: "Why would you like to achieve this goal?" The teachers answered the question according to the three personal goals they chose, thinking of one goal at a time. The answers reflected Deci and Ryan's categories in the self-determination theory model:

- "Because someone expects that from me or the situation requires from me to do it" (external regulation).
- "Because I would be ashamed, feel guilty or be anxious if I wouldn't deal with this goal" (introjected regulation).
- "Because I consider this as an important goal" (identified regulation).
- "Because it gives me pleasure to deal with this goal, I feel simply joyful by doing it" (internal regulation).

Then we estimated identified regulation and intrinsic regulation as an estimation of self-concordant goal, and external regulation and introjected regulation as an estimation of non self-concordant goal – according to the factor-analysis results of Martos (2009). The participants evaluated the four goals on a Likert scale (1=not true at all-7=very true).

Results

Demographic data of the sample

There were 273 women and 59 men among the participants. The mean of their age was 42.5, and the standard deviation was 7.4. The mean of the years of experience as a teacher was 16.44, and the standard deviation was 8.32. As a leader, the mean of the number of subordinates was 18. There were 121 leaders, 204 teachers and 7 "other" according to the participants' place in the hierarchy ("other" referred to individuals who

work in other national educational institutions). According to the location-type of the school, 47 teachers worked in the capital, 74 in a county seat, 22 in a district seat, 121 in a town and 68 in a village.

Data analysis

In order to investigate data about our hypotheses, we applied the non-parametric version of ANOVA, which in the case of 2 independent variables is Mann-Whitney U test, and in the case of more than 2 independent variables is Kruskal-Wallis test. Due to the results, we could estimate, whether the distribution of the cases was similar or different among the groups, by creating rank numbers of the investigated data. In the case of multiple variables, a significant value estimates that at least one population median of one group is different from the population median of at least one other group, meaning that one sample has stochastic dominance over another sample.

Teacher burnout

Firstly, we describe our teacher sample from the aspect of burnout syndrome. Among teachers the dimensions of burnout distributed as the following: 181 teachers had low level, 93 of them had medium level, and 58 teachers had high level of emotional exhaustion. Regarding the second dimension, 307 teachers had low level, and 25 had medium level of depersonalization. On the third dimension of burnout, 42 of the teachers had low level, 55 had medium level, and 235 of the teachers had high level of personal accomplishment (see Table 1.). The above values are only estimations, as there are no valid standard values for the scales in Hungary. We applied the intervals of the dimensions according to the USA standards.

Table 1. Distribution of the sample within the burnout dimensions

<i>N=332</i>	<i>Emotional Exhaustion</i>	<i>Depersonalization</i>	<i>Personal Accomplishment</i>
<i>Low</i>	181 (54,5%)	307 (92,5%)	42 (12,6%)
<i>Medium</i>	93 (28%)	25 (7,5%)	55 (16,6%)
<i>High</i>	58 (17,5%)	0 (0%)	235 (70,8%)

Autonomy and burnout

In order to test the first hypothesis – whether autonomy has a significant relationship with burnout – we investigated the “number of subordinates” variable of the sample, this way we could differentiate between teachers without subordinates (N=177), teachers with low number of subordinates (N=78), teachers with high number of subordinates (N=76) and teachers

with extremely high number of subordinates ($N=1$). We distributed the categories according to the median and standard deviation of the sample. In the Kruskal-Wallis test we investigated this variable in relation with the MBI. According to the results, there was no significant relationship between the degree of autonomy (and responsibility) and the burnout dimensions. This may imply, that there is a relatively high work stress in the teaching occupation, and high level of autonomy does not only mean more freedom but more work stress as well.

Self-esteem and self-concordant goals

To test our second hypothesis, we investigated all four questions about personal goals. By summarizing the scores of the self-esteem scale, high score on the positive factor and low score on the negative factor estimated the sum of the "positive self-esteem" score. First, we created a low, average and high group of the summarized score of this scale considering the median and the standard deviation of the sample. In the results, with one exception (external regulation) all variables were in significant relationship with positive self-esteem. The relation between introjected regulation and positive self-esteem (Asymp. Sig.=0.010) and identified regulation and positive self-esteem (Asymp. Sig.=0.000) was the strongest. Positive self-esteem (category 3.) was related with high identified regulation and internal regulation (Asymp. Sig.=0.012), and low introjected regulation – according to the tendency of the mean ranks (see Table 2).

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis test on positive self-esteem and self-concordant goals

Ranks			
	Pos. Self-esteem	N	Mean Rank
Identified Reg.	1	77	143,45
	2	107	161,64
	3	148	182,00
	Total	332	
Internal Reg.	1	77	144,12
	2	107	160,53
	3	148	182,46
	Total	332	
Introjected Reg.	1	77	206,74
	2	107	179,74
	3	148	135,99
	Total	332	
External Reg.	1	77	181,08
	2	107	166,92
	3	148	158,61
	Total	332	

Positive self-esteem and burnout

Our third hypothesis was also proven to be true by the data analysis. We applied the same groups of positive self-esteem as in the previous test, and the results showed a particularly strong relation between positive self-esteem and burnout. All the burnout dimensions – emotional exhaustion (Asymp. Sig.=0.000), depersonalization (Asymp. Sig.=0.000), and personal accomplishment (Asymp. Sig.=0.000) – were in significant relationship with self-esteem. The tendency of the mean ranks imply that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization has an inversed relationship with positive self-esteem, and personal accomplishment has a linear relationship with positive self-esteem (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test on positive self-esteem and burnout

Ranks			
	Pos. Self-esteem	N	Mean Rank
Emotional Exhaustion	1	77	215,43
	2	107	169,64
	3	148	138,77
	Total	332	
Depersonalization	1	77	193,92
	2	107	175,42
	3	148	145,79
	Total	332	
Personal Accomplishment (reversed scale)	1	77	127,62
	2	107	153,86
	3	148	195,86
	Total	332	

Self-concordant goals and burnout

Our fourth hypothesis was investigating if burnout has a significant relationship with autonomous/intrinsic motivation through the examination of self-concordant goals. In this case, we applied Mann-Whitney U test, since there were two independent samples in the analysis. We summarised the scores of the four goal-achievement categories (external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and internal regulation), and then split the results per the median of each sample, forming number 1 ("low") and number 2 ("high") group in every case. The results of the analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between all the burnout dimensions and internal regulation (Asymp. Sig. of emotional exhaustion and internal regulation=0.000; Asymp. Sig. of depersonalization and internal regulation=0.000; Asymp. Sig. of personal accomplishment and internal regulation=0.000), introjected regulation (Asymp. Sig. of emotional exhaustion and introjected regulation=0.002; Asymp. Sig. of depersonalization and introjected regulation=0.007; Asymp. Sig. of personal accomplishment

and introjected regulation=0.007), and identified regulation (Asymp. Sig. of emotional exhaustion and identified regulation= 0.003; Asymp. Sig. of depersonalization and identified regulation=0.009; Asymp. Sig. of personal accomplishment and identified regulation=0.000). There was no significant connection between burnout and external regulation. The mean ranks estimated that there is a linear relationship between identified regulation and internal regulation regarding burnout (which are the components of autonomous regulation, and indicators of a self-concordant goal), and there is an inverse relationship between burnout and introjected regulation (see Table 4-6.).

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test on internal regulation and burnout

Ranks			
	Internal Reg.	N	Mean Rank
Emotional Exhaustion	1	186	188,45
	2	146	138,53
	Total	332	
Depersonalization	1	186	183,46
	2	146	144,89
	Total	332	
Personal Accomplishment (reversed scale)	1	186	138,29
	2	146	202,43
	Total	332	

Table 5. Mann-Whitney U test on identified regulation and burnout

Ranks			
	Identified Reg.	N	Mean Rank
Emotional Exhaustion	1	167	181,99
	2	165	150,82
	Total	332	
Depersonalization	1	167	179,35
	2	165	153,49
	Total	332	
Personal Accomplishment (reversed scale)	1	167	144,48
	2	165	188,79
	Total	332	

Table 6. Mann-Whitney U test on introjected regulation and burnout

Ranks			
	Introjected Reg.	N	Mean Rank
Emotional Exhaustion	1	183	151,79
	2	149	184,56
	Total	332	
Depersonalization	1	183	154,47
	2	149	181,28
	Total	332	
Personal Accomplishment (reversed scale)	1	183	179,33
	2	149	150,74
	Total	332	

Discussion

Through the analysis, we found that autonomy does not relate to burnout in the case of teachers. As Lee and Ashforth (1993) discovered in their research, autonomy only impacts the level of burnout on a positive way if the work stress is low. According to our results, we can estimate that in the case of teachers, they have to cope with a relatively high level of work stress (the components of work stress are role conflict and role ambiguity). This way, autonomy not only brings them more freedom in the decision making about their job, but also more stress. The reason of this can be a volatile environment regarding the national regulation of education, where a new rule or obligation can be introduced or abolished day by day, and nothing is fully stabilized in the system. This issue was mentioned by many of the teachers during the training, when we had the chance to meet them personally.

Self-esteem and self-concordant goals had strong connection with each other, that means, that goal achievement relates to the individuals' consideration about themselves. In the case of teachers, it means that high self-esteem can help to internalize goals that are externally regulated at the moment. Thus, teachers can become more authentic in their work and in the teaching activity.

Regarding burnout, both self-esteem and self-concordant goals indicated a strong relationship. However, no differentiation was made by the Kruskal-Wallis or the Mann-Whitney U test within the burnout dimensions. This result strengthens our hypothesis that burnout is connected with one's authentic goal achievement and also, one's self-esteem. In order to reveal the connections with the emotional and the cognitive aspects of burnout, a more detailed analyzing method is recommended in the future.

A further result beyond our expectations was, that one component of the extrinsic motivation factor in goal achievement (introjected regulation) related strongly with burnout and self-esteem as well. This means that if the teachers' goals are not completely internalized, it estimates a higher level of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and a lower level of personal accomplishment and positive self-esteem.

Conclusions

In order to investigate the relationship of teacher burnout and autonomy, a test that measures teachers' coping skill is recommended to be taken in the future, which could point out an important factor regarding the personality characteristics and would explain more about the connection of the above-mentioned phenomena.

In order to discover the relationship between burnout, positive self-esteem, and self-concordant goals, a path analysis is recommended, which could reveal the connections and the underlying factors among these phenomena.

The relationship between burnout, positive self-esteem and introjected regulation was an interesting finding of this study, and may be the object of further investigations.

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