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Resilience and psychological flexibility levels and selected aspects of teachers' professional development

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Abstract

Research aims and problems: The study examines how such variables as length of service, level of professional advancement, the annual number of training courses, and the number of subjects taught relate to the psychological flexibility and resilience of the studied teachers. Both constructs are associated with coping strategies for dealing with hardship and for realizing professed values in the face of obstacles.

Research methods: The study uses the Polish adaptation of the AAQ-II questionnaire to measure the psychological flexibility index and the KOP-26 questionnaire to determine the residual index and its sub-components. Work-related variables and sociodemographic data were measured with a questionnaire of our own design. The group of subjects consisted of 87 male and female elementary school teachers from the city and municipality of Swarzedz.

Process of argumentation: The paper analyzes psychological flexibility, as defined by the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) theory, and resilience. A review of previous research reports on the relevance of these variables to the teaching profession is also presented. The adopted methodology and the obtained results are described and discussed, and finally, the conclusions are presented.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational studies: Statistically significant correlations were observed between the number of subjects taught and respondents' scores on

the family relations and personal competence scales. In addition, there were no correlations between indicators of resilience and psychological flexibility and such variables as length of service, level of professional advancement, or the annual number of training courses.

Conclusions and recommendations: The results indicate that the existing educational offer for teachers may be weak in fostering stress management competencies and personal growth. There is a need to expand this offer to include items from the indicated area.

Introduction

The role of the education system in Western cultural societies is undoubtedly not to be underestimated, regardless of individual assessments relating to its functioning (Feinberg & Soltis, 2004). In a world of change and widespread globalization, discernible in almost all spheres of human life, the pace of transformation and accompanying processes in the interpersonal sphere is becoming increasingly challenging (Leppert, 2009). This reality, as it were, forces education workers to constantly improve their competence. Education is also a profession that requires continuous training (Day, 2002). At the same time, both in Poland and around the world, education is marked by numerous physical, organizational, social, and emotional burdens (Pyżalski, 2010), and those who perform it are at risk of occupational burnout (e.g., Kocór, 2019).

This article addresses two theoretical constructs related to an individual's health and development in the face of adversity: psychological flexibility and resilience. This area of teacher education seems to be very important in the context of multiple didactic and educational paradigms (Klus-Stańska, 2018). Furthermore, developing teachers' personal resources can become crucial in the world of change (Bauman, 2007). The former variable derives from the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) theory (Harris, 2019), which describes psychological flexibility within the hexaflex model. It consists of six elements: cognitive defusion, attentiveness, self-as-context, acceptance (also known as readiness), committed action, and values. The construct is monistic and describes both

the mechanism of health and pathology (Hayes et al., 2013). A person who maintains well-being and the potential for development is someone who has a structured value system that they actively pursue. Their actions are subject to modification based on their awareness of which adversities associated with the pursuit of set goals they are willing to accept. They perceive their own person as an observer of their own experience rather than as a set of descriptive qualities. For them, thoughts and emotions are creations of the mind rather than objective clues about reality and oneself. At the same time, one can consciously notice one's own experience in the "here and now" mode (Harris, 2019; Hayes et al., 2013). In light of this view, psychopathology grows out of a strong focus of one's actions being on avoiding unpleasant experiences (which are inevitable in human existence). Humans overlook the pursuit of their own values, and their lives are marked by an escape from their experiences.

As an area of research in a group of teachers, psychological flexibility is an unexplored topic in Polish literature. However, Guzy (2021) found a positive correlation between the magnitude of the cognitive fusion index in surveyed speech therapists and the presence of symptoms of professional burnout. This topic is also poorly researched in foreign literature, but there are isolated studies that address it. For instance, a study conducted in Ghana (Dramanu et al., 2020) found that psychological flexibility may be a predictor of greater teacher engagement. An American study (Biglan et al., 2013) revealed that participation in workshops on developing psychological flexibility was associated with reduced tension and correlated with an increase in feelings of efficacy. Another study of a group of educational consultants found that a higher score on a scale measuring the variable in question was associated with lower levels of professional burnout, lower emotional burnout, reduced depersonalization, and higher achievement rates (Pfeiffer, 2023). It is also worth noting at this point that the psychological flexibility component of mindfulness can have a positive impact on students, but this can only be imparted by teachers who practice it themselves (Klon & Waszynska, 2020). Staff development in the aforementioned area is, therefore, not without impact on the students.

Mental resilience is often understood as a mechanism that describes how risk and protective factors present in a person's life project onto their well-being and functioning (Junik, 2011). It is also sometimes referred to as a "vaccine" for difficult events (Reich et al. 2010). According to Gąsior, Chodkiewicz, and Cechowski (2016), there are three key areas of life related to an individual's mental resilience: family relations, social competence, and personal competence. Resilience in the teaching profession is somewhat better described in both Polish and foreign literature, although it is still insufficiently recognized. Based on the results from Polish researchers, it can be concluded that there is a positive correlation between mental resilience and the subjects' creative attitude (Róż, 2013), level of satisfaction, and secure attachment style (Jabłońska, 2018). A negative correlation was found in the context of perceived stress levels (Glanowska, 2020) and the risk index for burnout (Załęska, 2020). Strutyńska (2022), on the other hand, noted only a partial effect of resilience on the level of fatigue experienced by the surveyed teachers. Foreign reports, however, observe positive correlations between the resilience index and such factors as good relationships in the workplace (Gu, 2014; Gu & Day, 2013), demonstrations of teachers' reflexivity and problem-solving skills (Leroux & Théorét, 2014), their ability to take advantage of opportunities that arise (Gu & Day, 2007), higher stress coping competencies and avoidance of aggravating situations (Richards et al., 2016), positive involvement in school activities (Polat & İskender, 2018), and a lower declared desire to leave the profession (Arnup & Bowles, 2016). However, inverse correlations were found with the subjects' level of professional burnout (Polat & İskender, 2018; de Vera Garcia & Gambarte, 2019).

To date, none of the variables specified in this study (level of professional advancement, length of service, annual number of training courses, and number of subjects taught) has been juxtaposed with an indicator of mental resilience or psychological flexibility either in Polish or in foreign research. In this respect, the results presented here are novel and fills a gap in the research literature.

Materials and methods

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Educational Studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan approved the research activities. The data collection procedure took place between June and September 2022 among subject teachers in grades 4–6 in elementary schools in the city and municipality of Swarzędz. Of the 10 elementary schools, six agreed to cooperate. A battery of questionnaires was posted on the Qualtrics platform, and audiovisual material was sent to the cooperating schools that included information about the research being conducted. Two head teachers decided to limit their activities to providing teachers with an instructional video and a link to the questionnaires. In the other four schools, the researcher had the opportunity to meet teachers in person during school board meetings and provide them with information about the research activities on site.

The KOP-26 questionnaire was used with the authors' permission to collect data on resilience (Gąsior et al., 2016). Psychological flexibility, on the other hand, was measured using the Polish version of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II) (Kleszcz et al. 2018). Data on the surveyed teachers' sociodemographic and work-related characteristics were collected using a questionnaire of our own design. It included questions on respondents' age and gender, length of service, level of career advancement, the average annual number of training courses they attend, and the number of subjects they teach.

Characteristics of the studied group

After removing incomplete responses (incomplete mean one or more than one unfilled questionnaire), the research sample totaled 87 participants. Table 1 provides detailed information about the study group's sociodemographic characteristics.

Tab. 1. Sociodemographic data of the studied group

| | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------|----------------|
| Age | 25–35 | 11,49% | 10 respondents |
| | 36–55 | 80,46% | 70 respondents |
| | 56–60 | 3,45% | 3 respondents |
| | Above 60 | 2,30% | 2 respondents |
| | No response | 2,30% | 2 respondents |
| Gender | Male | 8,05% | 7 respondents |
| | Female | 88,51% | 77 respondents |
| | I identify myself otherwise | 0% | 0 respondents |
| | I don't want to answer this question | 1,14% | 1 respondent |
| | No response | 2,30% | 2 respondents |
| Length of service | 2–43 years | Mean: 18,6 | |
| Number of training courses undertaken per year | 1–40 | Mean: 6,1 | |
| Level of career advancement | Trainee teacher | 3.45% | 3 respondents |
| | Contract teacher | 19.54% | 17 respondents |
| | Nominated teacher | 35.63% | 31 respondents |
| | Certified teacher | 37.93% | 33 respondents |
| | No response | 3.45% | 3 respondents |
| Number of subjects taught | No response | 13,79% | 12 respondents |
| | 1 subject | 62,07% | 54 respondents |
| | 2 subjects | 21,84% | 19 respondents |
| | 3 subjects | 2,3% | 2 respondents |

As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of those surveyed were women (88.51%), with an average age of 36–55 (80.46%). This statistic is similar to national data (Budzińska et al., 2021). The average length of

service in the sample was 18.6 years, and the average number of training courses attended annually by those surveyed was 6.1. The smallest group (3.45%) were trainee teachers, whereas 19.54% declared their level of career advancement as contract teacher. Nominated teachers accounted for 35.63% of respondents, and certified teachers for 37.93%.

Results

Table 2 presents the overall results for the research sample relating to mental resilience and psychological flexibility.

Table 2. Mean values and standard deviations for the total sample

| | Mental resilience – general indicator | Mental resilience – personal competence | Mental resilience – family relations | Mental resilience – social competence | Experience avoidance (psychological flexibility) sten |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Mean value | 108,06 | 38,03 | 49,57 | 20,45 | 5,5 |
| Standard deviation | 11,54 | 4,39 | 6,25 | 4,62 | |

The analyses were carried out using the “Psychometric helper” (provided by the creators of the Polish adaptation of the AAQ-II for converting raw scores into standard ten [sten] scores), Microsoft Excel, and PS IMAGO PRO. Comparing the results with the norms provided by the authors of the KOP-26 and AAQ-II questionnaires, the data indicate that the results in Table 2 fall within the average range. For the “Psychometric helper” tool, the average results are in the following ranges: 98–109 for the general indicator, 33–39 for personal competence, 44–51 for family relations, and 18–22 for social competence. The average results for the AAQ-II questionnaire are at the 5th and 6th sten. It should be noted that the results obtained with the AAQ-II questionnaire are interpreted as the amount of experience avoidance. Therefore, the higher the total score obtained with this tool, the lower the predicted psychological flexibility of the person tested.

The next step was to verify the descriptive statistics for subsequent datasets. For the annual number of training courses, the mental resilience general indicator, and family relations, the kurtosis and skewness coefficients were obtained at levels that precluded correlation calculations using parametric tests. Therefore, Pearson's r was replaced by Spearman's rho rank formula.

The next step was to verify how mental resilience and its subscales, as well as experience avoidance, correlate with the subjects' length of service, level of career advancement, estimated number of training courses attended annually, and number of subjects they teach. The results are shown in Table 3. Statistically significant correlations are marked in gray.

Table 3. Correlations between work-related variables and resilience indicators

| | Resilience indicator | General indicator | Family relations | Personal competence | Social competence | Experience avoidance |
|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Length of service | Correlation coefficient (indicated in boxes) | Spearman's rho ,159 | Spearman's rho ,183 | Pearson's r ,060 | Pearson's r ,099 | Pearson's r -,065 |
| | Significance (double-sided) | ,156 | ,102 | ,594 | ,379 | ,567 |
| | N | 81 | 81 | 81 | 81 | 81 |
| Level of career advancement | Spearman's rho correlation coefficient | ,015 | -,047 | ,107 | -,041 | -,043 |
| | Significance (two-sided) | ,892 | ,671 | ,334 | ,715 | ,700 |
| | N | 83 | 83 | 83 | 83 | 83 |
| Number of training courses per year | Spearman's rho correlation coefficient | -,020 | -,047 | -,012 | -,064 | ,031 |
| | Significance (double-sided) | ,862 | ,683 | ,915 | ,575 | ,787 |
| | N | 79 | 79 | 79 | 79 | 79 |
| Number of subjects taught | Correlation coefficient (indicated in boxes) | Spearman's rho ,210 | Spearman's rho ,237 | Pearson's r ,245 | Pearson's r -,059 | Pearson's r -,093 |
| | Significance (double-sided) | ,071 | ,040 | ,034 | ,617 | ,425 |
| | N | 75 | 75 | 75 | 75 | 75 |

Statistically significant correlations were observed between the number of subjects taught by a respondent and the family relations and personal competence indicators. However, this variable did not show correlations with regard to the general resilience, social competence, or experience avoidance indicators. Length of service also did not form statistically significant correlations with resilience indicators or psychological flexibility. This was also the case regarding teachers' level of career advancement and the average annual number of training courses they attended.

Discussion and conclusions

As indicated, there is a relationship between teachers' level of personal competence, family relations, and the number of subjects taught. However, it should be noted that the methodology used in this study does not allow us to determine the direction of the observed relationship. Therefore, it is only possible to talk about a correlation without a specific vector of influence. However, the higher scores on the scales of family relations and personal competence, along with a higher number of subjects taught, encourage reflection. This is because we are not faced with the question of whether people with a wider range of resources in the aforementioned areas are more likely to further their education in new areas, or whether the mere act of undertaking more postgraduate studies promotes the development of their resilience. There is no doubt that expanding one's education poses new challenges, consumes an individual's resources, and requires the activation of coping mechanisms.

If we accept that resilience can be described as a mechanism for the interaction between risk and protective factors (see, e.g., Junik, 2011; Reich et al., 2010), another dilemma arises from the nature of the observed correlation. This dilemma concerns whether an unambiguous determination of what constitutes cause and what constitutes effect is even possible. When analyzing the nature of resilience, a picture emerges according to which an individual's path should be underpinned by successive

challenges that burden the person experiencing them in a way that encourages development without being so overwhelming as to contribute to psychopathology. If this is accompanied by motivation for further development, the increase in competence resulting from the hardships experienced would have the effect of increasing the individual's potential. This state of affairs could, in turn, enable further professional and personal steps while developing particular aspects of residual mechanisms in the area of family relations and personal competence. Perhaps, then, there is no simple relationship between having resilience-related resources and taking on more challenges relating to increasing one's professional competence. The two areas may grow in mutual interaction, their dynamics allowing a mechanism to emerge. Admittedly, these are only speculations, though such a picture inclines towards the neoliberal vision of resilience as a constant disposition towards positivity and the pursuit of self-optimization (Han, 2022).

The second group of results does not involve the observed correlations but their absence. As the statistical analysis showed, neither the participants' length of service nor their level of career advancement, nor the average annual number of training courses they attend, showed any statistically significant correlations with the overall mental resilience index, its subcomponents, or the psychological flexibility index. On the one hand, these results may seem disturbing or at least surprising. This is because it seems that neither resilience nor psychological flexibility increased among the surveyed teachers over the years spent working with students, nor did they increase in relation to the forms of career development offered to this professional group. On the other hand, the results seem to be in line with the conclusions of other studies on the issues discussed. Admittedly, none of these variables has been juxtaposed with levels of mental resilience or psychological flexibility in Polish or foreign studies, but we can refer here to studies of a slightly different kind. A teacher's length of service can be linked to the number of training courses they have attended. It is also indirectly related to the degree of career advancement.

The first of these variables, although poorly represented in the research, seems to be extremely important, given the need for continuous

professional development inherent in the teaching profession (Krupa, 2016). On the other hand, as Fazlagić (2012) notes, although elementary school students' education is highly coordinated and controlled, these characteristics are neglected in the teacher training system. Consequently, this can significantly reduce the quality of training items available in this area. In addition, such a state of affairs potentially increases the risk of wasting funds allocated for the professional development of education employees. This is because specifically targeted training is not included in any program that could be based on an analysis of current needs. At the same time, there are no standards to which entities responsible for organizing various forms of professional development can refer.

The level of career advancement and its relationship with the various dimensions of teachers' work has been considered in the literature somewhat more extensively. As Szostak-Joško (2023) points out, this variable was not significantly associated with the level of satisfaction of those surveyed. Szpatowicz (2018), on the other hand, notes the negative perception of professional advancement among teachers. Szpatowicz also reports a decrease in teachers' intrinsic motivation due to the requirements of the teacher professional advancement procedure. Other researchers (e.g., Skawinski, 2021) point to a strong need for thorough changes in this area.

These findings seem to confirm that the current system of teacher training (or, in fact, the lack thereof) and the low-rated procedure of professional advancement influence the fact that such factors related to teachers' well-being as resilience and psychological flexibility are not subject to development in this group as its members increase their length of service. As indicated in the Australian context (Stewart et al., 2004), building resilience at the level of the school organization and individual actions on the part of teachers facilitated the development of a sense of connection between students, teachers, and other adults, supporting good peer relationships and increasing the sense of autonomy and independence. On the other hand, educational staff's knowledge and competence in the field of psychological flexibility, grounded in functional contextualism and relational frame theory, can be useful not only for

understanding learning processes but also for understanding what occurs within the classroom team (Fox, 2006).

As shown in the earlier sections of this paper, the construct in question is also associated with teachers' positive functioning. Thus, the observed lack of correlation between length of service, the level of career advancement, the annual number of training courses attended, and mental resilience and flexibility indicators may not provide a basis for optimistic conclusions. At the same time, this situation can be improved if appropriate actions are implemented, not just by vocational training centers and school principals but also, and above all, by decision-makers managing the education system in Poland. Observing the Welsh Mindfulness in School Project, one can see that coordinated action to develop the well-being of teachers, students, and the school community is possible. Furthermore, teacher training and courses focused on personal resources and values can become a strong basis for their personal growth. Such training may also give teachers an opportunity to become more aware and flexible in everyday choices in their personal and professional lives. Courses in social skills, psychological flexibility, or even basic educational psychology may become even more important in the uncertain future (Bauman, 2007).

Limitations

When analyzing the composition of the research sample participating in the study described here, some limitations become apparent. Due to the size of the group and the limited geographical scope of the data collection, the conclusions of this study cannot be generalized. This is because the sample collected was not representative, and its low numbers may have negatively affected the quality of the results obtained in the statistical analysis. In addition, many of the observations described here cannot be related to the conclusions of other researchers due to the lack of such studies in Poland and the limited number of such works in foreign literature.

Further work on the issues discussed here should therefore extend the research area both geographically and in terms of sample size. It could also be interesting to extend the research by using additional tools, such as questionnaires measuring the intensity of individual components of psychological flexibility or other tools to measure subjects' resilience. Given the poor recognition of the issues at hand, qualitative studies could help fill in the observed research gaps. Despite these limitations, it is worth noting that this study lays the foundations for further research in an underexplored area of both Polish and global educational research.

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