Character Strengths and Virtues of Mentor Teachers

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Abstract—Trainee and beginner teachers are introduced to the internal world of the school by mentor teachers, who also support their young colleagues during the process of their socialisation as teachers. Mentor teachers provide beginners with advice and suggestions as well as professional and personal support and models. In our study, we used the Values-In-Action (VIA) questionnaire to find out what strengths and virtues mentor teachers have. It is important to make mentors aware of their own strengths for several reasons. If they can apply these in their teaching work, it can become a calling and they can be fulfilled by it as well as be protected against burnout.

1 Introduction

In Hungary, trainee and beginner teachers are helped by mentor teachers to get to know the world of the school, to find their way in the maze of the education system and to apply the knowledge they had gained in theory to their everyday practice.

Qualified and experienced teachers can participate in a 4-semester specialised training to become teaching practice supervisor – mentor teachers.

We have been training teaching practice supervisor – mentor teachers at our university since 2011. The course is concluded by a professional examination [1]. The question often arises during the training what is expected of mentors and what virtues and strengths they should have in relation to their work.

These questions are approached form several aspects in the literature of educational science.

It is a basic expectation of mentor teachers to introduce trainee teachers and beginner teachers (interns), to the ins and outs of the school world and to support them during their teacherly socialisation process [2]. Mentors should provide trainee teachers with advice and recommendations during their school practice. Furthermore, they should also offer professional and personal support and a role model for beginner teachers [3].

During the past years, in a rapidly changing educational environment [4,5,6], mentor teachers have been faced with several requirements [7]. The fast-paced changes make qualified and trainee teachers rather uncertain about their exact roles and tasks. Therefore, mentor teachers must perform several roles: they should be advisor, model,

information source, instructor, teaching practice supervisor, consultant and expert, all rolled into one.

2   The Strengths of Mentor Teachers

Several sources in the literature draw attention to the importance of educators being aware of their strengths [8].

Positive psychology emphasises positive emotions, human strengths and institutions with a positive atmosphere [9, 10].

According to Seligman [11], we can experience greater satisfaction if we identify our character strengths and use them to the greatest possible extent in different areas of our life. He adds that if we can apply our strengths to our work it can become a calling and thus, we can be fulfilled by doing our job [12] as well as being protected against burnout.

Seligman identified the following six virtues that are accepted by "almost all religious and philosophical traditions" [13]:

- Wisdom and knowledge
- Courage
- Love and humanity
- Justice
- Temperance
- Spirituality and transcendence.

According to Seligman, a virtuous person not only possesses most of these six universal virtues but they are also manifested in their behaviour.

These virtues, which Seligman calls strengths, can be achieved through countless paths. As opposed to abstract virtues, these strengths can be acquired as well as measured. Seligman subdivided the virtues into 24 strengths [14].

These together make for a positive operation of existence, which, according to Peterson and Seligman's theory, makes life joyful, committed and meaningful [15].

3   The Methodology

The research question we posed was what respondent mentor teachers' virtues and strengths were.

To map mentor teachers' virtues and strengths, we used the shortened version of the questionnaire Values-in-Action (VIA) [11], which identifies 6 virtues and 24 strengths as the behavioural manifestations of the six virtues. The reliability of our measuring tool proved good (Cronbach-alpha=0,737).

We surveyed 86 teaching practice supervisor mentor teachers. 72 women (83.7%) and 14 men (16.3%) answered our questionnaire.

The average age of respondents is 46.6 years. The youngest respondent was 32 and the oldest 63 years of age. Most of them are in their 40s and 50s (Figure 1).
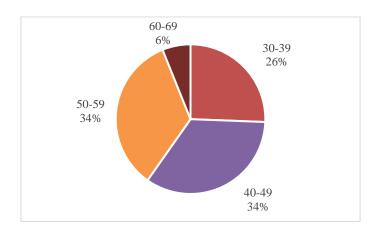
Fig. 1. The distribution of respondents by age (number of persons, %, N=86)

The average time subjects have spent in the teaching profession is 20.85 years. The shortest was 5, the longest was 39 years of teaching experience.

The majority of them (59 people, 69.4%) are teaching in schools in the capital, 3 of them (3.5%) in county seats and 23 of them (27.1%) in town schools.

26 of them (30.2 %) had already graduated from our training programme at the time of the survey and 60 of them (69.8%) were still in the programme at the time. 27 of respondents (31.4%) are already working as mentor teachers.

4 Main Results and Discussion

In our study, we surveyed the character strengths and virtues of mentor teachers on the basis of Seligman's theory [14].

4.1 Wisdom and knowledge

Wisdom constitutes the first group of virtues. Seligman described the following six different forms of the manifestation of wisdom and that of its prerequisite, which is knowledge, from the most basic form of development (curiosity) to the most mature (perspective) [13].

Curiosity or interest in the world means one's openness to experience and flexibility towards new information even if it contradicts previous ideas.

Love of learning means that one loves all situations, such as school, reading, museums, etc., where new things can be learnt. There is some area of which one is an expert. Often, one would like to learn as much as possible about something even without external motivation.

Judgment / Critical thinking / Open-mindedness means how important it is for one to think things through thoroughly and examine them from as many aspects as possible. One does not make rushed decisions and is also able to change their decision if need be.

Creativity / Originality / Ingenuity is one's ability to use unconventional yet effective tools to achieve a goal instead of being content with traditional solutions.

Social Intelligence / Self-knowledge / Emotional Intelligence means knowing ourselves as well as others. One is clear about others' feelings and motivation and can respond to them appropriately. It is not the same as introspection, a sense of psychology or speculation, as it is linked to social situations [16].

Perspective means that others turn to us for help and the broadening of their horizon. Our view of the world carries special value to ourselves and others alike [11].
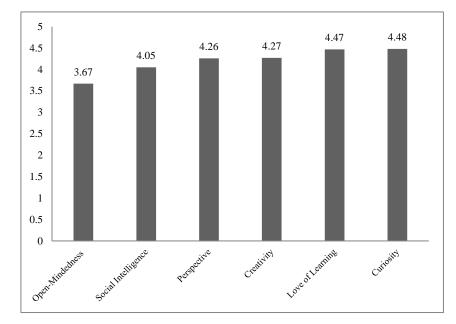

Fig. 2. 1st virtue: Wisdom and Knowledge (means, rated on a 5-point scale, N=86)

In our study, teaching practice supervisor mentor teacher students scored highest on curiosity (mean=4.48; figure 2). It means that they are interested in the world, open to different experiences and their thinking is flexible.

The love of learning has second place (mean=4.47 and Creativity / Originality / Ingenuity has third (mean=4.27).

4.2 Courage

The virtue of courage constitutes the broad practice of one's willpower in relation to desirable goals, which are nevertheless of uncertain outcome. The manifestations of courage are actions that are carried out despite great difficulty. The three widely accepted paths to achieve this virtue are bravery, persistence and integrity.

Bravery (Valour) means that one does not shy away from threats, challenges, pain or difficulties. Valour means more than bravery shown in situations when our life,

physical existence is in danger. It also includes taking unpopular, complicated or dangerous intellectual or emotional stands.

Persistence (Perseverance, Industriousness) means always completing what one started. An industrious person embarks on difficult tasks and completes them in good humour and without grumbling. They always try to do all they undertook and sometimes even more.

Integrity / Authenticity / Honesty shows whether our honesty is manifested not only in words but also in a credible way of life that is uniquely characteristic of us. It indicates whether we have both feet on the ground and whether we do not want to appear different from who we really are [11].
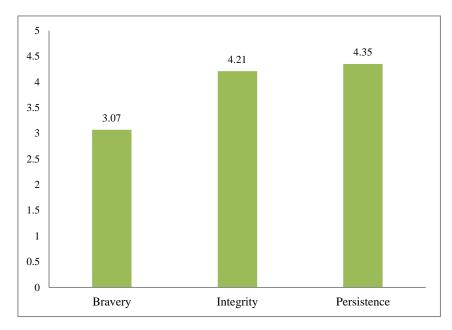

Fig. 3. 2nd virtue: Courage (means, rated on a 5-point scale, N=86)

For teaching practice supervisor mentor teacher students, perseverance was the most pronounced of the three strengths (mean=4.35; Figure 3). It means they are industrious and they persevere in their tasks.

4.3 Humanity

The strengths representing this virtue are shown in our positive interactions with others.

Kindness and Generosity means that we are kind and generous towards others. When asked for help, we are happy to do good to others. We acknowledge the other person's value. The most important elements of this strength are empathy and compassion.

Love means that we appreciate close and deep relationships. If the people we love truly and sincerely feel similarly towards us it is a strength indeed [11].
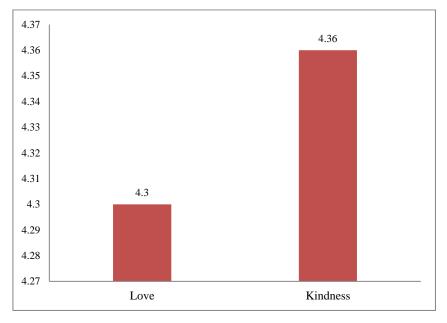
Fig. 4. 3rd virtue: Humanity (means, rated on a 5-point scale, N=86)

Of these two virtues, kindness is what characterizes mentor teacher students more (mean=4.36), that is, acknowledging the other person's value and keeping their interest in mind (Figure 4).

4.4 Justice

This virtue is primarily expressed in the field of social activities. Going beyond situations only involving two people, it influences our relationships with greater groups such as the family, community, nation or even the whole world.

Citizenship (Social Responsibility, Teamwork, Loyalty) shows how good we are as team members, loyal and committed community people who, besides doing the tasks assigned to them, also work hard for the success of the group.

Fairness indicates that we do not let our personal feelings distort our decisions about others. We provide opportunities for everybody. Our everyday life is governed by higher moral values. We consider other people's wellbeing as important as our own, even in the case of complete strangers.

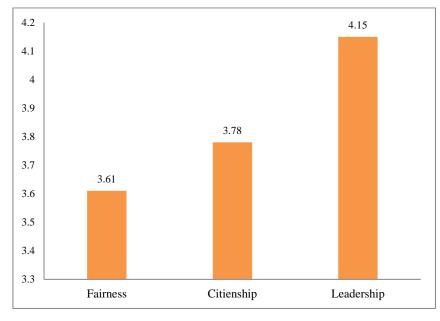Leadership is the ability to organise and conduct various activities [11].

Fig. 5. 4th virtue: Justice (means, rated on a 5-point scale, N=86)

Of the three strengths, leadership is the most prominent for future mentors (mean=4.15). They consider a humane leadership attitude to be the foundation of the relationship between mentor and mentee, in order to organise work effectively (Figure 5).

4.5 Temperance

In essence, it is the proper and restrained pursuit of our wishes and desires. A temperate person does not stifle their desires but waits for the moment when satisfying them does not harm themselves or others. [11].

Self-regulation (Self-control) means that if need be, it is not difficult for us to restrain our desires, needs and passion. It is not enough to know in theory what the right thing to do is, but we must also behave accordingly.

Prudence reveals how careful we are. We do not say or do things that we will regret later.

Humility and Modesty mean that we do not seek to stand out but are glad to let others be applauded. We do not consider ourselves special [11].
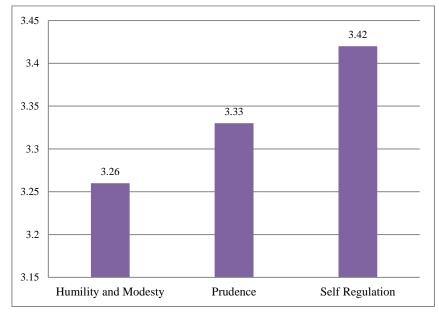
Fig. 6. 5th virtue: Temperance (means, rated on a 5-point scale, N=86)

Self-regulation is also an important strength of mentors (mean=3.42) (Figure 6). Results show that they are good at keeping their needs and desires under control. Not only do they know what is right but also act accordingly.

4.6   Transcendence

It is an important aspect in education that one's job can become a calling and one can experience great commitment to it. It is an interesting question to what extent transcendence and spirituality are present in teachers' work.

Transcendence is an emotional force pointing beyond us and connecting us with something greater and more permanent than us, such as others, the future, development, the divine and the universe. [11].

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (Awe, Wonder, Elevation) means that we value beauty, excellence and expertise in everything. At times, our feelings are intensified to awe.

Gratitude indicates that we are aware of the positive events happening to us and we do not take them for granted. We always take some time to express our gratitude. Our sense of thankfulness can be directed towards impersonal and non-human sources such as God, nature or animals but we ourselves should never be the target of it.

Hope (Optimism, Future-mindedness, Future orientation) raises the question whether we expect the best from our future and whether we plan and act according to this expectation. Do we trust that good things will happen to us and that our plans will be fulfilled if we persist with them and act on them?

Spirituality (Religiousness, Faith, Purpose) as a strength shows how deeply and thoughtfully, we are convinced that the universe has a greater purpose and meaning. Our faith governs our behaviour and provides us with a sense of security. We have a religious philosophy or one based on worldly beliefs that helps us define the place we occupy in the world.

Forgiveness and Mercy mean that we forgive those who harmed us and give another chance to everyone. Our guiding principle is not revenge but mercy.

Humour (Playfulness) becomes a strength if we like to laugh and make others laugh. We try to see the sunny side of life.

Vitality (Zest, Enthusiasm, Vigour, Energy) is our strength if we are full of energy. We wake up happily in the morning and look forward to the new day. We are full of ideas and imagination [11].
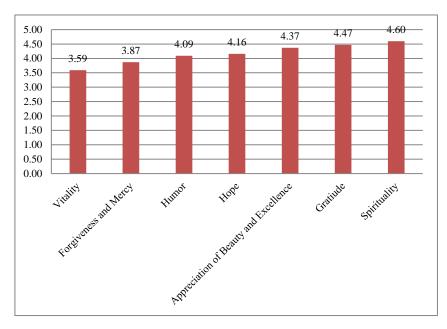

Fig. 7. 6th virtue: Transcendence (means, rated on a 5-point scale, N=86)

Of these seven strengths, spirituality stands out for future mentor teachers (mean=4.60; figure 7). They have a religious philosophy or one based on worldly beliefs which suggests that there is yet another need beyond self-realisation in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is that of transcendence [17].

4.7   The ranking list of mentor teachers' virtues and strengths

Our research results show that the main strength of the surveyed mentor teachers is Humanity (mean=4.33; SD=0.50) (Figure 8). The virtue they possess the least, according to their own judgement, is Temperance (mean=3.34; SD=0.46).
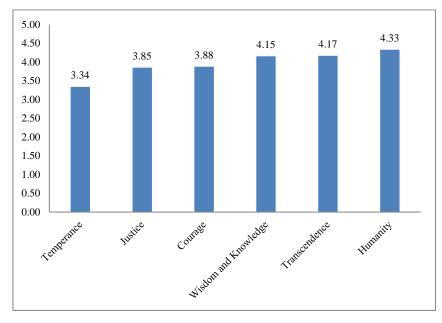
Fig. 8. Mentor teachers' virtues (means, rated on a 5-point scale, N=86)

The strongest correlation exists between Transcendence and Wisdom (r=0.555; p=0.000).

As for the relationship between mentor teachers' virtues and background variables, the only significant correlations were found with age. Respondents' age correlates with their humanity and transcendence. The 50-59 age-group proved to be the most humane (p=0,045) and the over 60 group was most characterised by transcendence (p=0.031).

In our study, the respondents' five greatest strengths are the following:

1. Spirituality (mean=4.6)
2. Curiosity, interest in the world (mean=4.48)
3. Love of learning (mean=4.47)
4. Gratitude (mean=4.47)
5. Appreciation of beauty and excellence (mean=4.37).

The above results were compared to those of an earlier Hungarian study [12], when 435 active teachers were surveyed with the VIA questionnaire.

In that study, the virtue of Transcendence scored the highest (mean=4.16). Our study resulted in a similar score (mean=4.17), but Transcendence only came second after Humanity (mean=4.33).

In both studies, the virtue of Temperance came last (in the 2014 study, mean= 3.50 and in our study, mean=3.34).

According to Seligman [11], everybody has 5 top strengths that they can call their own.

In Holecz-Molnár's study [12], teachers' five top strengths are the following:

1. Appreciation of beauty and excellence (mean=4.47)
2. Spirituality (mean=4.38)
3. Love of learning (mean=4.33)
4. Humour and playfulness (mean=4.31)
5. Curiosity, Interest in the world (mean=4.24)

Comparing the data, we can see that the two 5-point lists have common elements: Spirituality; Curiosity, Interest in the world; Love of learning; Appreciation of beauty and excellence. Whereas in our study, Gratitude was one of the top 5, in the previous study, it was Humour and playfulness.

In our study, subjects scored higher in Spirituality; Curiosity, Interest in the world and Love of learning than the teachers in the 2014 study, and lower in Appreciation of beauty and excellence.

The lowest score was reached for Bravery and Valour (mean=3.07). It indicates that our subjects may tend to shy away from threats, challenges, pain or difficulties. Thus, this area can be regarded as the main weakness of our mentor teachers.

Littman-Ovadia et al [18] called hope, enthusiasm, gratitude, curiosity and love "happiness strengths". Research [19, 20] has shown that these five strengths are the most closely related to one's satisfaction with life [21].

In our own study, the above values scored as follows: hope (mean=4.16), enthusiasm (mean=3.59), gratitude (mean=4.47) curiosity (mean=4.48), love (mean=4.3). Two of them are among the top five strengths: curiosity and gratitude.

5   Summary

We studied 86 teaching practice supervisor – mentor teacher students to discover their virtues and character strengths.

The shortened version of the Values-in-Action (VIA) questionnaire was used [11], which identifies 6 virtues and 24-character strengths.

The outcome of the research was that the main virtue of mentor teachers was Humanity.

Their top 5 strengths were:

1. Spirituality
2. Curiosity, interest in the world
3. Love of learning
4. Gratitude
5. Appreciation of beauty and excellence.

The results of our study can be applied in the training of teaching practice supervisor – mentor teachers in order to identify and analyse character strengths. Making teachers aware of their strengths can provide effective help in the teaching profession. If teachers can apply them in their work, it can become a calling and lead to self-realisation. Furthermore, the exploration of one's good qualities makes for the discovery of the positive

side of life and the maintenance of physical and mental health [22], which in turn can protect us from burnout.

A possible direction of the extension of the study is the mapping of virtues and strengths not only of mentor teachers but of mentees, too.

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