



Research paper

Teachers' value conflict in a highly centralized system: Evidence from Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the prevalence and patterning of teacher value conflict in Hungary's highly centralized public education system, interpreting findings through a moral-injury framework. Using latent profile analysis of 1370 Hungarian teachers and thematic coding of 1251 open-ended responses, we identified five educator profiles, including a value conflict with distress profile (18.3%) combining maximum job love with elevated system dissatisfaction and psychological symptoms. Profile distributions differed significantly by educational level ($p = .003$), though the effect was small (Cramér's $V = .081$), suggesting that systemic conditions shape value conflict across levels while modest level-specific variation also exists. Qualitative evidence corroborated values-mandate conflicts and child-welfare concerns, providing convergent validation of the quantitative classifications. Taken together, the findings suggest that sustained value conflict may reflect an experience that is not fully captured by traditional burnout models and may be more appropriately interpreted within a moral-injury framework, although the present data do not support diagnostic claims. Hungary's extreme centralization and post-socialist institutional legacy make it a critical test case for international debates on teacher wellbeing, professional agency, and systemic accountability.

1. Introduction

The work of teaching has long been recognized as one of the most demanding professions, characterized by a high degree of emotional labor, constant role conflict, and growing societal expectations (Kariou et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2025). Across diverse educational systems, teachers increasingly face the paradox of being held responsible for student outcomes while simultaneously experiencing diminishing influence over the structural and institutional conditions that shape those outcomes. This tension has fueled research on teacher stress (Jerrim & Sims, 2022), wellbeing (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Sohail et al., 2023), and professional attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Jiang et al., 2025). The global conversation surrounding teachers' work-related suffering has often been framed primarily in terms of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), which captures teachers' exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished personal accomplishment.

However, the sufficiency of burnout as a conceptual lens has come

under increasing scrutiny. Critics argue that burnout psychologizes what are often structural and moral problems (Sik, 2025). Teachers frequently describe being forced to enact policies they perceive as harmful to students, or experiencing denial of the professional autonomy necessary to act in accordance with their values (Chiu & Fleming, 2025; Santoro, 2019; Schutz et al., 2018). Such experiences point to a dissonance between teachers' moral commitments and systemic constraints.

This inconsistency has led researchers to investigate other models, particularly moral distress and value conflict. First formulated in nursing and bioethics, moral distress (Jameton, 1984; Maeckelberghe, 2021; McCarthy & Gastmans, 2014) denotes the emotional unease that occurs when an individual recognizes the morally correct course but is prevented from taking it. This perspective has been applied to teachers, in which comparable patterns of moral duty and institutional limitations are at play (Vehviläinen et al., 2018). Multiple researchers (Schwartz, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Yue et al., 2025) examine the value conflict emerging in such contexts. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2016:1788) described teacher value conflict as "a teacher's feeling that the

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prevailing goals and values at the school are incompatible with her or his personal goals and values.” We employ the term value conflict to characterize the persistent strain when educators’ vocational and individual obligations conflict with organizational or structural requirements.

Closely related is moral injury, which emerged in military psychology to describe lasting psychological, social, and spiritual harm when individuals perpetrate, fail to prevent, or witness acts that transgress their deeply held moral beliefs (Litz et al., 2009). Moral injury involves not only immediate discomfort but enduring damage to one’s moral framework and sense of integrity (Litz & Walker, 2025; Pan & Dai, 2021). Scholars have increasingly recognized its relevance beyond combat contexts to domains where systemic betrayal and ethical conflict are endemic (Dean & Talbot, 2018). Education, as an inherently moral practice, is an especially pertinent arena for exploring these dynamics. In this article, we treat moral injury primarily as an interpretive framework rather than a directly measured construct.

Although it holds promise, the use of value conflict as a central perspective continues to be underdeveloped in studies of teaching. The dominant burnout framework has been criticized for medicalizing educators’ distress and concealing its moral-ethical dimensions, reducing a structural and ethical problem to a matter of personal coping (Cohen Lissman et al., 2024; Sugrue, 2019). A related but distinct methodological critique concerns the measurement of moral distress itself: Morley et al. (2017), Sperling (2022), and Houle et al. (2024) demonstrate that widely used scales frequently conflate exposures (e.g., systemic constraints, ethical violations) with outcomes (e.g., psychological distress, demoralization), thereby constraining construct precision and underestimating the true prevalence of morally grounded suffering. These two critiques converge in their implication: whether the problem lies in the conceptual framing or in measurement tools, the moral essence of educators’ distress remains insufficiently captured.

Viewing teachers’ suffering through the lens of value conflict, and reading it within a moral-injury framework, may be analytically more useful than relying on burnout alone, especially because this perspective draws attention to moral agency, institutional responsibility, and the conditions of collective repair. The next section reviews the empirical and theoretical literature behind this reframing and then turns to the Hungarian educational context.

2. Theoretical approach and literature review

Empirical research suggests that teachers’ suffering is shaped less by individual shortcomings than by systemic conditions and moral conflicts. Three interrelated themes run through this literature: the importance of autonomy and value alignment, the limitations of current conceptual and measurement frameworks, and the potential of context-sensitive and collective responses to teacher distress.

Autonomy, value congruence, and the costs of systemic constraint. Jerrim et al. (2023) find that greater teacher autonomy—spanning pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, and broader professional decision-making (Salokangas et al., 2019; Tahirsylaj, 2018) is positively associated with both teacher satisfaction and student outcomes, while restrictive accountability regimes predict stress and attrition. Hascher and Waber’s (2021) review of 98 empirical studies demonstrates that wellbeing is a dynamic interplay of individual, relational, and organizational elements: supportive leadership and collaborative collegiality serve as protective factors, while bureaucratic oversight, absence of acknowledgment, and contradictory requirements intensify distress. Mahan et al. (2010) found that work environment stressors predicted anxiety and depression among secondary teachers, with social support from peers and administrators buffering these effects. Value congruence emerges as a distinct protective factor within this body of work. Santoro (2019) distinguishes demoralization from burnout: the former arises not from exhaustion but from ethical compromise, when teachers cannot practice in ways that align with their moral and professional values (Tsang & Liu, 2016). Newberry and Snyder (2024) provide direct qualitative evidence

of this mechanism: conflict between a primary teacher’s pedagogical ideals and demands from administrators and state-mandated curriculum was the primary source of dissonance, with surface-acting emotion regulation deployed to manage the misalignment and self-efficacy eroding as a consequence. The administration’s emphasis on procedural compliance over pedagogical judgment—identified by Newberry and Snyder as the structural driver of this misalignment—mirrors the systemic conditions that value-conflict theory predicts will generate the most persistent harm.

Conceptual and measurement limitations. Szigeti et al. (2017) critically examined the Maslach Burnout Inventory, finding inconsistencies in factor structures across cultural contexts and questioning its validity as a universal measure. Widespread reliance on the MBI has narrowed the field’s conceptual lens, with burnout becoming the default framework. Houle et al. (2024) extend this critique, demonstrating that commonly used scales fail to differentiate between causes and symptoms of moral distress—a limitation that reinforces what Morley et al. (2017), Morley et al. (2021) describe as the conflation of exposures with outcomes. The systematic consequence is that value conflict and moral injury remain underoperationalized, and their prevalence underestimated, precisely because the dominant measurement tradition was not designed to detect them.

Context-sensitivity and collective repair. Ebersold et al. (2011) highlight how teachers experience moral and professional strain when systemic expectations around inclusion are not matched by adequate resources, placing educators between ethical commitments and structural barriers. Hassler et al. (2018) show that wellbeing is shaped by cultural norms around professionalism and social valuation of teachers: in systems marked by public suspicion and bureaucratic micromanagement, wellbeing outcomes decline (Morris et al., 2025; Tzortzos & Anastasiou, 2025), a pattern that aligns with calls for context-sensitive moral distress research (Deschenes et al., 2020; Kovanci & Akyar, 2022). The systematic review by Morley et al. (2017) indicates that strategies addressing moral distress as a shared ethical issue—ethics rounds, guided discussions, and comprehensive ethics training—hold greater promise than individual-centered approaches. Heikkilä et al. (2023) confirm longitudinally that ethical dilemmas and institutional barriers, not workload alone, drive teacher distress, while Applebaum (2004) underscores that educators’ occupational identities are anchored in moral obligations toward learners and societies. Considered together, these studies suggest that the problem is unlikely to be resolved through individual resilience alone, because its roots seem to lie in institutional arrangements and in unresolved moral tensions within the profession. From this perspective, teachers’ suffering appears better understood as a multidimensional phenomenon arising from systemic conditions and value conflicts than as a straightforward case of burnout. The next subsection considers how these dynamics are shaped by the structural and historical features of Hungarian education.

Hungarian Educational Context. While the global literature highlights the importance of autonomy, recognition, and systemic support, these dynamics must be understood within specific contexts. In Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in post-socialist Hungary, structural conditions reflect unique historical legacies that intensify the ethical stakes of teaching (Kopp & Kálmán, 2023). Although formal governance structures were partially reorganized after the socialist period, the underlying bureaucratic logic—prioritizing compliance with state mandates over professional discretion—persisted in post-socialist education systems, shaping how teachers experience autonomy, accountability, and professional recognition (Gawlicz & Starnawski, 2018; Kopp & Kálmán, 2023; Silova, 2010; Szolár, 2015). This cultural-bureaucratic legacy created fertile ground for value conflict even before the formal structural reforms of the 2010s.

From the beginning of the 2010s, Hungary has undergone substantial centralization in its education system, whereby decisions on curriculum, assessment, and hiring have become progressively centralized within state-managed bodies. These centralization initiatives (2010–2013)

sought to mitigate disparities in educational opportunities and standards across regions but resulted in unanticipated impacts on the teaching profession. Studies indicate that Hungarian educators have perceived these changes as breaches of the ethical foundations of their professional roles (Büki & Fehérvári, 2024; Radó, 2011). Educators describe an inability to fulfill their duties toward students, especially in cases where prescribed curricula or evaluation methods clash with pedagogically or ethically sound practices.

These developments resonate with research on the “hidden marketplace” of education in post-socialist societies. Silova and Bray (2006) describe how informal practices—private tutoring, under-the-table exchanges, shadow education—flourished under socialist and post-socialist regimes, creating parallel systems of accountability. Teachers are caught between formal expectations and informal practices, leading to tensions between ethical responsibilities and system realities (Gordon-Györi & Bray, 2021).

Societies following socialism exhibit unique difficulties in areas of trust, authority, and ethics. Burawoy and Verdery (1999) contend that transitions in post-socialist settings interrupted conventional modes of authority and legitimacy, generating extensive cynicism and distrust of institutions. In the realm of education, this has surfaced as strains among educators, caregivers, and official authorities, positioning teachers in a vulnerable ethical role. They are anticipated to represent and impart societal principles, while organizational frameworks are commonly regarded as invalid or unethical. This intensifies value conflict: teachers bear ethical duty toward learners but are situated in structures that diminish their potential to behave accountably (Zounek et al., 2024).

The cultural dimension of morality in Hungarian society adds further complexity. Moral agency is relational and culturally situated (Applebaum, 2004). In Hungary, moral discourse is inflected by both religious traditions and secular legacies of socialism, producing a contested moral landscape (Neumann, 2022). The profession carries cultural weight as a moral vocation (Sokkett, 1993), yet actual institutional conditions frequently devalue and constrain teachers' agency. This gap deepens value conflict when teachers cannot enact their professional and ethical commitments.

Vehviläinen et al. (2018) demonstrate how academics experience deep frustration when institutions fail to uphold academic integrity, framing these as moral rather than psychological harms. Similar dynamics are observable in Hungarian schools, where systemic tolerance of informal practices undermines teachers' sense of professional integrity. When teachers witness or are compelled to participate in practices conflicting with their ethical standards—favoritism, shadow education, integrity violations—they risk experiencing heightened value conflict, which may be interpreted through a moral-injury framework.

Overall, the Hungarian case suggests that teachers' suffering may reflect the systemic erosion of their moral agency. Their distress is best conceptualized as value conflict, with patterns that remain consistent with—but do not establish—moral injury. Hungary's combination of extreme centralization, post-socialist institutional legacy, and documented erosion of professional autonomy makes it a particularly informative test case for value-conflict theory, with findings that carry implications for other centralized systems undergoing comparable governance pressures.

3. The present study: research questions, contributions, and significance

This study contributes to the still limited empirical literature on teacher value conflict by examining its prevalence and patterning in a large quantitative sample of educators. While existing research has documented ethical strains of teaching primarily through qualitative accounts and the limited framework of burnout, systematic quantitative evidence of value conflict in schools has remained absent. The study contributes in three closely related ways: it operationalizes value conflict within a convergent mixed-methods design, tests theoretical

expectations derived from moral-injury frameworks using large-sample person-centered data, and examines a highly centralized post-socialist educational system as an informative case for international research on teacher wellbeing. In doing so, it directly addresses calls for quantitative, context-specific evidence on value conflict and moral injury in education (Houle et al., 2024; Oberg, 2025). We examine value conflict among Hungarian teachers within a system characterized by strong centralization that magnifies structural constraints.

Building on theoretical foundations by Levinson (2015), Oberg (2025), and Cohen Lissman et al. (2024), we extend their insights to quantitative profiling. With a large teacher sample ($N = 1485$; 1370 complete cases), this research provides prevalence estimates of value conflict while identifying patterns distinguishing it from burnout. By employing convergent methodology—combining latent profile analysis, nonparametric validation, and qualitative data analysis—we address measurement concerns raised by Houle et al. (2024), demonstrating that value conflict can be reliably operationalized across multiple analytical approaches.

The Hungarian case contributes to international debates on teacher wellbeing. Hungary's high degree of bureaucratic centralization, limited teacher autonomy, and systemic inequities offer a stark context to test and refine theories of value conflict and related moral-ethical harms (Albright et al., 2023). Insights have broader applicability to educational systems experiencing similar trends of standardization, accountability, and erosion of professional agency.

Empirically, this study tests theoretical predictions distinguishing value conflict from burnout. Frameworks consistent with moral injury anticipate paradoxical coexistence of high job love with severe system dissatisfaction and psychological symptoms (Atuel et al., 2021; Grimell & Nilsson, 2020). Identifying such patterns in large-scale data provides critical evidence for treating value conflict as a distinct phenomenon.

Based on these considerations, our study addresses three guiding research questions.

1. What is the prevalence of value-conflict patterns among Hungarian teachers, and do these patterns align with theoretical predictions of high job love combined with severe system dissatisfaction and psychological symptoms?
2. Do latent profile distributions differ significantly across educational levels (nursery, kindergarten, lower primary, upper primary, and secondary), and what does this reveal about the systemic versus individual nature of value conflict?
3. What insights does large-scale quantitative profiling in a highly centralized educational system provide for international teacher wellbeing research and policy development?

The study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it expands the evidence base on teacher value conflict beyond qualitative accounts, offering large-scale quantitative profiles consistent with, but not diagnostic of, moral-injury theory. Second, it develops a methodological framework strengthening measurement reliability and conceptual clarity. Third, it positions Hungary as a critical test case for international debates, providing insights relevant for contexts where administrative mandates collide with teachers' pedagogical values and professional agency.

We regard moral injury as a conceptual framework for interpretation rather than a quantifiable construct. Our data document instances of concurrent professional dedication, institutional discontent, and emotional strain—a configuration that aligns theoretically with moral-injury models—but we do not assert a diagnosis of moral injury, which would require assessment of specific potentially morally injurious events and ensuing harm to identity. Our results yield propositions concerning value conflict processes for subsequent studies.

4. Method

4.1. Research design

This study employed a cross-sectional design with mixed-methods components to examine patterns of teacher value conflict, interpreted within a moral-injury lens. Specifically, a convergent parallel mixed-methods design was adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative latent profile analysis and qualitative thematic coding were conducted independently and subsequently integrated at the interpretation stage to provide convergent validation of the quantitative profile classifications. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with GDPR-compliant data handling procedures.

4.2. Participants

All Hungarian kindergarten, primary, and secondary school leaders were contacted via publicly available institutional contact information from the Educational Office (Oktatási Hivatal). A total of 5686 invitation emails were sent from university servers, requesting institutional leaders to disseminate the survey link to their teaching staff. Participation was specifically limited to educators with direct classroom teaching responsibilities, as the study's theoretical focus on value conflict arising from the intersection of pedagogical values and institutional demands requires respondents with direct instructional experience; administrative staff without classroom roles face a structurally different configuration of value-mandate tensions. This approach created a national sampling frame encompassing classroom educators across the entire Hungarian public education system. Data collection occurred in three waves during May 2025, spaced one week apart, to maximize response rates.

From an initial 1485 responses, complete data on the four core value conflict indicators were available for 1370 participants (92.3% data completeness). The sample included educators working with different age groups: nursery educators ($n = 7$, .5%), kindergarten teachers ($n = 446$, 32.6%), lower primary teachers (grades 1–4, $n = 277$, 20.2%), upper primary teachers (grades 5–8, $n = 341$, 24.9%), and secondary teachers ($n = 299$, 21.8%). The distribution across educational levels is broadly consistent with the national structure of Hungarian public education, in which kindergarten and primary educators constitute the largest segments of the teaching workforce (KSH, 2024). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 76 years ($M = 50.8$, $SD = 14.2$). The sample was predominantly female (84.8%, $n = 1162$) with 15.0% male participants ($n = 206$), with 2 respondents (.1%) not reporting gender. This gender distribution closely mirrors the national composition of the Hungarian teaching workforce, in which approximately 85% of pedagogical staff are female (KSH, 2024), indicating that the sample is not distorted by gender-based selection bias. Educational qualifications included secondary education (.4%), bachelor's/college degrees (57.6%), master's/university degrees (40.3%), and doctoral degrees (1.6%). The regional distribution of respondents across Hungary was not systematically recorded, preventing a direct comparison with national regional breakdowns. Regarding career stage, the sample's mean age of 50.8 years ($SD = 14.2$) suggests a predominantly mid-to-late career composition, though no formal career stage categorization was applied; future studies should include region- and career-stage-stratified sampling to strengthen representativeness.

4.3. Ethical procedures

The study was approved by the University of Debrecen Human Sciences Ethics Committee (approval number GTK-KB-004/2025). All teacher participants provided informed consent for participation in the online survey. Survey responses were stored in coded form with individual identifiers removed. All data were archived in password-protected, closed systems accessible only to research team members.

4.4. Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The study group comprises Hungarian educational practitioners and scholars who have firsthand involvement in the centralization overhaul of the Hungarian education system after 2010. This internal perspective allowed us to sensitively grasp Hungarian educational jargon and cultural manifestations of organizational discontent. To counteract the dangers of confirmation bias, we implemented various measures: (1) applying a systematic coding structure with predetermined keywords instead of subjective analysis; (2) engaging external coders for validation purposes; (3) separating tactical professional commentary from signs of value conflict (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.5. Data collection

For data collection, 4- to 7-point scales were employed. Scale lengths varied to reduce common method bias by preventing automatic response patterns and encouraging thoughtful engagement with each item (Podsakoff et al., 2003), and to match theoretical and practical considerations for each construct domain-affective responses (job love, 5-point), institutional attitudes (system satisfaction, 7-point), and symptom frequency with sensitivity considerations (anxiety/depression, 5-point with explicit non-response option).

The survey instrument assessed four core indicators theoretically relevant to the identification of teacher value conflict, interpreted within a moral-injury lens, along with demographic variables and open-ended responses for qualitative validation. The selection of these four indicators was theoretically motivated by the core predictions of value-conflict and moral-injury frameworks: sustained professional commitment (job love) is expected to coexist with elevated institutional dissatisfaction and psychological distress precisely under conditions of values-mandate conflict, because vocational commitment persists even as systemic constraints generate psychological harm (Atuel et al., 2021; Levinson, 2015; Litz et al., 2009). Each indicator thus indexes a theoretically distinct component of the value-conflict configuration rather than serving as a general wellbeing proxy.

Job love was measured with a single item: "Mennyire szereti a jelenlegi munkáját?" (How much do you love your current job?) using a 5-point scale from 1 = "Nagyon szeretem" (I love it very much) to 5 = "Gyűlölöm" (I hate it). For analysis, this was reverse-coded so higher scores reflected greater job love.

System satisfaction was assessed with: "Mennyire elégedett összességében a Magyar oktatási rendszerrel?" (How satisfied are you overall with the Hungarian educational system?) using a 7-point scale from 1 = "Teljesen elégedetlen" (Completely dissatisfied) to 7 = "Teljesen elégedett" (Completely satisfied). This was reverse-coded to system dissatisfaction for analysis. Due to the absence of validated measures of educator satisfaction with educational systems as distinct from job satisfaction, we developed this single-item measure following established single-item measurement principles (Wanous et al., 1997).

Anxiety frequency was measured with: "Milyen gyakran tapasztal szorongást/félelmet a mindennapjai során?" (How often do you experience anxiety/fear in your daily life?) using a 5-point frequency scale from 1 = "Szinte soha" (Almost never) to 5 = "Szinte mindig" (Almost always), with an additional response option 6 = "Nem kívánok válaszolni" (Prefer not to answer) appended as a non-response category and treated as missing data in all analyses.

Depression frequency was assessed with: "Milyen gyakran tapasztal levertséget vagy depressziót a mindennapjai során?" (How often do you experience dejection or depression in your daily life?) using the same scale structure as anxiety (5 frequency points plus a non-response option), with the same missing data treatment.

Measurement strategy rationale. The use of single-item measures for the four core value conflict indicators was adopted for two methodological reasons. First, single-item measures can maximize participation rates and reduce respondent burden in large-scale surveys, particularly

when targeting time-constrained professionals (Wanous et al., 1997). Second, for global constructs with clear semantic meaning (such as overall job love or system satisfaction), single-item measures can demonstrate acceptable validity when the construct is sufficiently narrow and unambiguous (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007).

Demographic variables. The primary demographic variable assessed was educational level taught: “Milyen korcsoportú gyerekekkel foglalkozik elsősorban?” (Which age group of children do you primarily work with?). Response options included: Bölcsődésekkel (nursery/infants), Óvodásokkal (kindergarten), Alsó tagozatosokkal (lower primary, grades 1–4), Felső tagozatosokkal (upper primary, grades 5–8), and Középiskolásokkal (secondary school). Additional demographic variables included gender, age, and education level for multinomial regression analyses. These variables were selected on the basis of their established relevance as predictors of teacher wellbeing and occupational outcomes in prior research (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Jerrim et al., 2023).

Qualitative validation measure. Participants responded to an open-ended question: “Mit változtatna meg elsősorban a magyar oktatási rendszerben? Írjon le három dolgot!” (What would you primarily change in the Hungarian educational system? Write down three things!). The English translations of the four core survey items and the open-ended responses were produced by a bilingual researcher with expertise in Hungarian educational terminology and reviewed by a second bilingual expert prior to analysis to ensure semantic equivalence. Responses were available in Hungarian for 1251 participants and English translations for 931 participants. The qualitative component served a convergent validation function within the mixed-methods design, intended to corroborate and elaborate the quantitative profile classifications (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

4.6. Data analysis

All analyses were conducted in R (version 4.3) using the tidyLPA package (Rosenberg et al., 2018) with complete-case analysis on the four core value conflict indicators. The analytical strategy combined Latent Profile Analysis to identify distinct educator profiles with qualitative validation, demographic prediction analyses, and cross-educational level comparisons.

Data preparation. Variables were recoded to ensure consistent directionality: higher scores reflected more job love, more system dissatisfaction, and more frequent psychological symptoms. All four core indicators were standardized (Z-scores) before analysis to enable comparable scaling across measures.

Latent Profile Analysis. LPA was conducted using Model 1 (equal variances across classes, zero covariances) with solutions ranging from 2 to 6 classes examined. Model 1 was selected due to frequent convergence failures in Models 2 and 6 (varying variances) across multiple class solutions. All analyses used 20 random starts with 5 final optimizations and a convergence criterion of $1e-6$ (seed = 123). The theoretical expectation was to identify a value-conflict profile characterized by simultaneously high job love, high system dissatisfaction, and elevated psychological symptoms (anxiety and/or depression). This combination reflects the core prediction of frameworks consistent with moral injury theory: maintained professional commitment despite institutional conflicts producing psychological distress (Levinson, 2015; Litz et al., 2009).

Model selection was based on multiple criteria: (1) information criteria including AIC, BIC, and sample-size adjusted BIC (SABIC), with lower values indicating better fit; (2) entropy values, where values $> .70$ indicate acceptable classification certainty; (3) AIC and BIC weights indicating relative model support; (4) theoretical interpretability of profiles; and (5) model convergence without warnings.

Profile validation was conducted using BCH (Bolck-Croon-Hagenaars) methodology appropriate for mixture model frameworks. Unlike traditional post-hoc tests that assume hard classification, the BCH

approach accounts for classification uncertainty by weighting observations according to their posterior class membership probabilities, providing more accurate tests of profile differences. Classification quality was assessed through entropy values, average posterior probabilities, and the proportion of cases with posterior probabilities above conventional thresholds (.70, .80, and .90).

Demographic predictors and effect sizes. Multinomial logistic regression examined whether demographic characteristics (gender, age, educational level taught) predicted profile membership, testing the hypothesis that value conflict patterns reflect systemic rather than individual factors. Effect sizes between profiles were calculated using Cohen's d for continuous variables, with interpretive guidelines of small (.2), medium (.5), and large (.8) effects. Cramér's V was used for categorical associations, with values of .1 (small), .3 (medium), and .5 (large) effects.

Cross-level analysis. Profile membership was examined across educational levels (nursery, kindergarten, lower primary, upper primary, secondary) using chi-square tests to determine whether latent profiles differed significantly by the age group of children taught. Effect sizes were calculated using Cramér's V for categorical comparisons.

Qualitative validation. Open-ended responses in Hungarian ($n = 1251$) were systematically coded for seven theoretically derived value conflict themes, consistent with moral-injury interpretations: (1) values-system conflict, (2) professional agency violations, (3) administrative vs. pedagogical priorities, (4) system undermining of mission, (5) emotional distress language, (6) child welfare concerns, and (7) system reform urgency. Each theme was coded as present (1) or absent (0) using Hungarian-language keywords and phrases identified through initial inductive reading of responses. The coding scheme specifically sought to distinguish between strategic professional criticism (rational evaluation of system problems) and value conflict indicators (expressions of being forced to violate core values, powerlessness to act ethically, and identity-based distress).

The qualitative coding process followed a systematic three-stage approach. First, an initial inductive reading of 100 randomly selected responses identified recurring themes and Hungarian-language expressions related to value conflict. Second, a deductive coding framework was developed based on moral-injury theory, specifying seven target themes with corresponding Hungarian keywords and phrases. Third, systematic coding was applied to all 1251 responses using the finalized keyword lists.

To ensure reliability, two researchers independently coded a stratified subsample of 200 responses (40 from each profile group), achieving an initial agreement of 84%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and keyword refinement to produce a consensus codebook. The two coders then independently re-coded the same 200 responses using the refined keywords, achieving a final agreement of 89% (Cohen's $\kappa = .85$), confirming that the keyword refinement produced a more reliable coding scheme. The primary coder, fluent in Hungarian educational terminology, coded all remaining responses. A random quality check of 50 additional responses by the second coder maintained 91% agreement, confirming coding consistency throughout the dataset. A composite value conflict theme score was calculated as the sum of endorsed themes (range 0–7).

Theme prevalence was compared across the LPA-derived profiles to validate statistical classifications. Potential false negatives were identified as participants in non-value conflict profiles who endorsed multiple value conflict themes (≥ 3 themes), suggesting broader value conflict prevalence than captured by quantitative analysis alone.

Statistical assumptions and robustness. Distributional properties were examined for all variables, with ordinal scaling expected and accommodated in analyses. Classification quality was assessed through entropy values and minimum/maximum posterior probabilities for profile membership. In addition to the latent profile and mixture model analyses, we also computed pairwise correlations to examine the bivariate associations between system dissatisfaction and psychological

symptoms. Spearman rank correlations were estimated with bootstrap-based 95% confidence intervals, alongside Pearson correlations and significance tests. To account for potential confounding by vocational commitment, partial Spearman correlations were calculated, controlling for job love.

Missing data handling. The survey employed mandatory response fields for all four core value conflict indicators, eliminating missing data on these variables. However, response option 6 for anxiety and depression items ("Nem kívánok válaszolni"—Prefer not to answer) was treated as missing data to distinguish genuine non-response from low symptom levels. This resulted in complete data on all four indicators for 1370 participants (92.3% of initial respondents, $n = 1485$). The 115 cases with incomplete data showed no systematic patterns by demographic characteristics (χ^2 tests, all $p > .20$), supporting complete-case analysis. Open-ended responses were provided by 1251 participants (91.3% of the analytical sample), with non-response unrelated to profile membership ($\chi^2 = 3.42$, $p = .49$).

5. Results

5.1. Latent profile analysis: model selection and profile characteristics

Latent Profile Analysis was conducted on data from 1370 Hungarian educators with complete responses on four key value conflict indicators, interpreted within a moral-injury lens: system dissatisfaction, daily anxiety, daily depression, and job love. The analysis tested models with 2–6 latent classes using the tidyLPA package in R (Rosenberg et al., 2018), applying Model 1 (equal variances, zero covariances) with 20 random starts and 5 final optimizations. All models converged successfully without warnings using a convergence criterion of $1e-6$. Fit indices were compared across all class solutions using multiple criteria, including information indices, entropy, and theoretical interpretability (Table 1).

Model selection favored the 5-class solution, which demonstrated optimal balance across multiple fit criteria: lowest AIC (14142.37), competitive but not lowest BIC (14288.61 vs. 14265.09 for the 3-class model), good entropy (.708), and strong theoretical coherence. The 5-class model showed the highest AIC weight (.863), whereas the 3-class model exhibited the lowest BIC (BIC weight ≈ 1.00). Alternative models with varying variances frequently failed to converge, while the 6-class solution produced a problematic smallest class size (10.4%) with unclear theoretical interpretation. The five-class solution revealed distinct educator profiles (Table 2).

Profile 5 demonstrated the theoretically predicted value-conflict pattern consistent with moral-injury frameworks: maximum professional commitment combined with high system dissatisfaction and the highest levels of psychological distress among all groups. This profile comprised 18.3% of the sample ($n = 251$), representing a substantial proportion of educators experiencing values-based conflict. This paradoxical combination of unanimous maximum job love with elevated symptoms and dissatisfaction defines Profile 5's distinctiveness and aligns with predictions that individuals can maintain commitment to their professional calling while suffering psychological harm from enduring value conflict within constraining systems, consistent with a

Table 2

Profile characteristics: Five-class solution with interpretive Labels.

Profile number and Label	N (%)	Job Love M (SD)	System Dissatisfaction M (SD)	Anxiety M (SD)	Depression M (SD)
1 High Symptoms/Moderate Love	395 (28.8)	3.85 (.46)	5.25 (1.22)	3.70 (.91)	3.52 (.95)
2 High Love/Moderate Dissatisfaction	397 (29.0)	5.00 (.00)	4.57 (1.19)	3.16 (.63)	2.77 (.65)
3 High Dissatisfaction/High Love, Low Symptoms	133 (9.7)	4.93 (.25)	5.75 (.77)	1.68 (.62)	1.50 (.55)
4 Low Symptoms/High Love/Low Dissatisfaction	194 (14.2)	4.95 (.22)	3.25 (.84)	1.76 (.63)	1.47 (.55)
5 Value Conflict with Distress (profile consistent with moral injury theory)	251 (18.3)	5.00 (.00)	5.23 (1.16)	4.24 (.57)	3.98 (.66)

Note. $N = 1370$ complete cases. Descriptive statistics on original scales: Job Love 1–5 (higher = more love); System Dissatisfaction 1–7 (higher = more dissatisfaction); Anxiety and Depression 1–5 (higher = more frequent symptoms). Profile 5 exhibits the theoretically predicted value-conflict pattern, consistent with but not diagnostic of moral injury.

moral-injury interpretive lens (Levinson, 2015; Litz et al., 2009).

Profile 2 and Profile 5 both exhibited ceiling effects on the job love measure ($M = 5.00$, $SD = .00$), reflecting that all members endorsed the maximum possible value. This indicates genuine homogeneity but mathematically inflates effect size calculations (Cohen's d) when comparing these profiles to others.

Profile 2 (High Love/Moderate Dissatisfaction, 29.0%) represented the largest group, combining maximum job love with moderate system dissatisfaction and moderate psychological symptoms, suggesting value-related strain at a less severe point on the continuum. Profile 3 (9.7%) showed strong job love and the lowest psychological symptoms but high system dissatisfaction, representing critically aware but psychologically resilient educators. Profile 4 (14.2%) exhibited low symptoms and dissatisfaction alongside high job love, representing well-adjusted educators. Profile 1 (28.8%) showed moderate job love combined with high psychological symptoms, potentially representing burnout-like experiences distinct from the value-conflict pattern.

Classification quality metrics supported the robustness of the 5-class solution. Average posterior probability was .825, with 78.2% of cases showing posterior probabilities above .80. The entropy value of .708, while moderate, is acceptable for exploratory research (see Fig. 1).

Using quartile-based cut-offs, elevated symptom load concentrated in Profiles 5 (Anxiety 85.4%, Depression 99.6%) and 1 (Anxiety 63.1%, Depression 55.3%). System dissatisfaction was highest in Profile 3 (65.5%) and negligible in Profile 4 ($\sim 0\%$). Low job love was universal in Profile 1 (100%, $\leq Q1 = 4$) and virtually absent in the other profiles (see Fig. 2).

Table 1

Fit indices for the latent profile models (2–6 classes).

Classes	AIC	BIC	Entropy	Δ AIC	Δ BIC	AIC weight	BIC weight
2	14646.47	14714.37	0.759	504.10	449.28	0	0
3	14171.08	14265.09	0.856	28.71	0.00	0	1.000
4	14165.98	14286.10	0.769	23.61	21.01	0	0
5	14142.37	14288.61	0.708	0.00	23.52	0.863	0
6	14146.05	14318.40	0.661	3.68	53.31	0.137	0

Note. Model 1 (equal variances, zero covariances) was used throughout. Δ AIC and Δ BIC represent differences from the best-fitting model. AIC and BIC weights indicate relative model support.

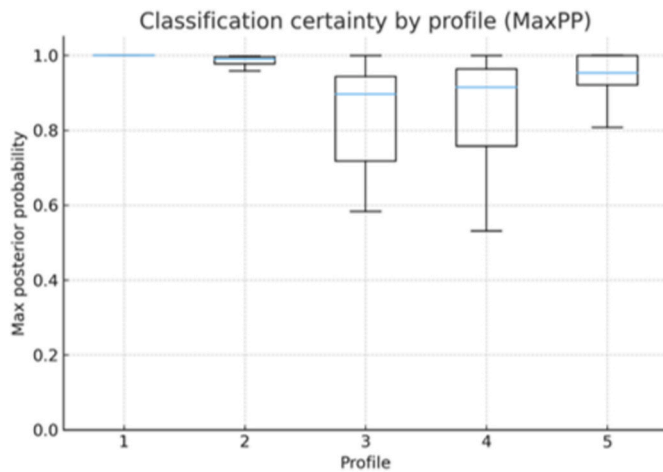


Fig. 1. Classification certainty by profile (MaxPP).

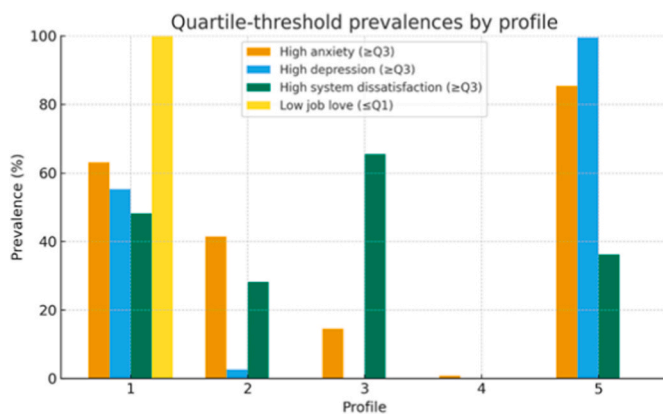


Fig. 2. Quartile-threshold prevalences by profile.

Profile validation through mixture model testing. To assess statistical differences in value conflict indicators across the five latent profiles, we employed the BCH (Bolck-Croon-Hagenaars) methodology, accounting for classification uncertainty by weighting observations according to their posterior class membership probabilities. BCH tests revealed highly significant differences across profiles for all four core indicators (all $p < .001$), confirming that the profiles represent meaningfully distinct patterns (Table 3).

Effect sizes ranged from medium to very large ($|d| \approx 0.5$ – 4.3) when comparing the value conflict with distress profile (Profile 5) with other profiles. The strongest differences appeared for anxiety and depression ($d \approx 4.1$ – 4.3) and for system dissatisfaction versus Profile 4 ($d = 1.91$). These findings support the distinctiveness of the value-conflict pattern, although some of the very large d -values are likely to reflect variance restriction rather than substantive differences alone (see Table 4).

Table 3
BCH tests for profile differences on core indicators.

Variable	F(4, 1365)
Job love	1203.4
System dissatisfaction	75.0
Anxiety	400.5
Depression	371.9

Note. All tests: $df_1 = 4$, $df_2 = 1365$; $p < .001$. F-statistics are based on one-way ANOVA on modal profile assignments, consistent with the BCH approach in direction and significance.

Table 4

Selected effect sizes: value conflict with distress profile (Profile 5) vs. other profiles.

Variable	Profile 5 SD	Compared profiles	Cohen's d	Interpretation ^a
Job love	.000	5 vs 1	3.182	Very large effect
		5 vs 2	NaN	Not computable ^b
		5 vs 3	.456	Small effect
		5 vs 4	.352	Small effect
System dissatisfaction	1.164	5 vs 1	-.018	Negligible
		5 vs 2	.562	Medium effect
		5 vs 3	-.497	Small effect
		5 vs 4	1.913	Very large effect
Anxiety	.572	5 vs 1	.673	Medium effect
		5 vs 2	1.775	Very large effect
		5 vs 3	4.338	Very large effect
		5 vs 4	4.131	Very large effect
Depression	.660	5 vs 1	.545	Medium effect
		5 vs 2	1.844	Very large effect
		5 vs 3	3.981	Very large effect
		5 vs 4	4.071	Very large effect

^a Note: Cohen's $d > .8$ = large, $d > 1.2$ = very large.

^b Zero variance.

5.2. Cross-level analysis

Profile membership varied significantly by educational level; $\chi^2(16, N = 1370) = 36.34$, $p = .003$, Cramér's $V = .081$. Because the nursery group ($n = 7$) produced expected cell frequencies below 5-violating chi-square assumptions-we reran the analysis excluding this group: $\chi^2(12, N = 1363) = 31.79$, $p = .001$, Cramér's $V = .088$, with no assumption violations. Although the result is statistically significant, the effect size is small ($V = .081$ – $.088$), indicating that educational level accounts for only a modest proportion of variance in profile membership.

Multinomial logistic regression examined whether demographic characteristics predicted profile membership. The overall model was statistically significant ($\chi^2(24) = 79.6$, $p < .001$), but effect sizes were small, supporting the systemic rather than individual nature of profile patterns. Bivariate associations between demographic predictors and profile membership were small: Cramér's $V = .098$ for gender and .081 for educational level. Age showed weak associations with profile membership. Taken together, these results suggest that value conflict patterns may be more closely related to systemic conditions than to individual demographic characteristics.

5.3. Correlational associations between system dissatisfaction and symptoms

System dissatisfaction was positively associated with both anxiety and depression (Spearman $r_s = .232$ [.184, .288] and .212 [.167, .269], respectively). These associations remained significant when controlling for job love (partial $r_s = .189$ and .160; both $p < .001$), indicating that the systemic dissatisfaction-symptom linkage persists beyond simple vocational commitment.

5.4. Qualitative validation of profile classifications

Analysis of 1251 open-ended responses in Hungarian provided convergent validation of the quantitative profile classifications and

detailed evidence of the specific working conditions, administrative burdens, and institutional constraints theorized to create value conflict.

Systematic coding identified seven theoretically derived value conflict themes (consistent with moral-injury interpretations): values–system conflict, professional agency violations, administrative vs. pedagogical priorities, system undermining of mission, emotional distress language, child welfare concerns, and system reform urgency. Theme prevalence followed the predicted gradient across profile groups, with educators in the value conflict with distress profile showing the highest endorsement of theoretically relevant themes (Table 5).

Administrative priorities conflicting with pedagogical values emerged as the most frequently endorsed theme among educators in the value conflict with distress profile (31.6%), followed by child welfare concerns (19.1%). The gradient pattern across profile groups—with the value conflict with distress group showing the highest theme endorsement ($M = .84$), followed by other high-symptom profiles ($M = .65$), and low-symptom profiles ($M = .49$)—provides convergent validation for the quantitative classifications.

Representative responses provided concrete evidence of the theoretical mechanisms creating value conflict. Participants explicitly reported experiencing excessive administrative burdens: “Reduce the administrative burden of educators. We spend more time on paperwork than teaching, which prevents us from actually helping children learn.” They described perceiving institutional constraints limiting professional agency: “Teachers have become powerless against bureaucratic demands that serve no educational purpose.” Values conflicts were directly articulated: “The system forces us to teach against our pedagogical beliefs, prioritizing compliance over student needs.”

Qualitative analysis also identified potential false negatives—participants classified in non-value-conflict profiles but expressing strong value-conflict themes. Among the 1022 participants not meeting quantitative criteria for value conflict (1251 – 229), 65 (6.4%) endorsed three or more themes, suggesting possible underestimation of true prevalence. Including these qualitative indicators yields a revised estimate of approximately 23.1% of Hungarian educators experiencing significant value conflict indicators (316/1370), consistent with moral-injury theory.

The convergent validity between quantitative profile membership and qualitative theme endorsement strengthens confidence in the value conflict construct’s applicability to educational contexts. The systematic gradient in theme prevalence across profiles, combined with the theoretically coherent content of participant responses, provides robust evidence that the statistical classifications capture meaningful

psychological and professional experiences rather than methodological artifacts.

6. Interpretation of findings

Value conflict as a distinct phenomenon in education. Our findings add to the still limited large-scale empirical literature on value conflict patterns in teaching that have been discussed in relation to moral-injury theory, and they respond to recent calls for frameworks that explain teacher distress beyond burnout or job dissatisfaction models (Brandenburg et al., 2024; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). The profile we identified as “value conflict with distress”—representing 18.3% of our sample—exhibited the theoretically predicted combination of high system dissatisfaction, strong job love, and elevated psychological symptoms. This pattern points to a paradox that is not easily captured by resource-depletion models of stress or by simple misfit accounts. Instead, it reflects a values-based conflict at the heart of professional identity, consistent with moral-injury frameworks. These results are corroborated by the bivariate correlations, which showed consistent positive associations between system dissatisfaction and both anxiety and depression, even after controlling for job love, reinforcing that psychological distress is not merely an artifact of low professional commitment but is directly linked to systemic conditions.

This tension may be interpreted in light of Atuel et al.’s (2021) notion of moral harm. The Hungarian educators in our value conflict with distress category persisted in their emotional and vocational investment in their roles, despite disavowing the validity of the institutional framework in which they functioned. In contrast to burnout—frequently characterized by skepticism regarding the occupation—value conflict with distress maintains occupational dedication while associating it with indicators tied to sensed ethical breaches.

The difference from simple organizational discontent becomes clearer when three empirical observations are considered. First, the intensity of anxiety and depression ratings suggests possibly heightened degrees of strain that surpass ordinary occupational irritations. Second, the coexistence of strong vocational dedication and substantial strain forms the “identity threat” aligned with moral injury theory, as opposed to the degradation of identity common in burnout. Third, narrative accounts displayed terminology of compulsion and moral concession, including phrases like being “forced to act against pedagogical beliefs” or “powerless against bureaucratic demands that serve no educational purpose.” These descriptions highlight the nonvoluntary aspect of the value conflicts that sets them apart from deliberate occupational dissent.

The profile examination uncovered subtlety within the overarching pattern, as categories varied not just in indicator intensity but also in the interplay among passion for the job, institutional discontent, and emotional strain. This variability bolsters Grimell and Nilsson’s (2020) continuum framework, wherein moral distress builds progressively along a range prior to surpassing limits into full moral injury. The distinctiveness of value conflict in education could be further clarified by contrasting it with emerging constructs such as moral resilience (Rushton, 2018) and occupational calling (Duffy et al., 2018). Moral resilience emphasizes the capacity to preserve or restore moral integrity in the face of ethical adversity; our value conflict with distress profile’s elevated symptom burden suggests that such resilience processes are either blocked or insufficiently supported in the current system. Occupational calling might explain the persistence of job love despite systemic disillusionment, but our data indicate that calling alone does not protect against psychological harm when institutional conditions repeatedly violate core values.

Systemic roots and institutional mechanisms. The profile analysis revealed nuance within the broader phenomenon. Profile 2 (High Love/Moderate Dissatisfaction, 29.0%) occupied an intermediate position, suggesting that value-related strain may manifest along a continuum of severity. Profile 1 (High Symptoms/Moderate Love, 28.8%) showed a

Table 5
Qualitative theme prevalence by profile classification.

Theme	Value conflict with distress (n = 229)	Other high-symptom profiles (n = 361)	Low-symptom profiles (n = 661)
Values–system conflict	12.5%	8.6%	5.2%
Professional agency violations	8.8%	6.3%	4.1%
Administrative vs. pedagogical priorities	31.6%	28.9%	23.8%
System undermining of the mission	2.2%	1.6%	.7%
Emotional distress language	5.1%	2.3%	1.4%
Child welfare concerns	19.1%	14.8%	11.7%
System reform urgency	4.4%	3.1%	1.9%
Average theme score	.84	.65	.49

Note. Theme scores range 0–7. Administrative vs. pedagogical priorities were the most frequently endorsed theme (31.6%) in the value conflict with distress profile.

distinct pattern that warrants further investigation, while Profile 3—despite exhibiting the highest system dissatisfaction in the sample ($M = 5.75$)—maintained low psychological symptoms, demonstrating that psychological distress is not an inevitable consequence of values-system clash; and Profile 4, combining low dissatisfaction with low symptoms, demonstrates that the clash itself is not inevitable for all educators working within this system.

The breadth of our sample, covering educators from across the Hungarian public education system, strengthens the argument that these patterns arise from systemic rather than localized issues. Profile distributions differed significantly across educational levels ($p = .003$), though with a small effect size (Cramér's $V = .081$). This pattern suggests that while value conflict manifests across all educational levels—consistent with system-level mechanisms—the specific configuration of profiles is modestly shaped by the age group taught. The effect is too small to undermine the systemic interpretation but indicates that level-specific dynamics also merit attention in future research.

This pattern is closely consistent with the features of the Hungarian educational context outlined earlier. The centralization reforms implemented after 2010—through the KLIK system and subsequent governance structures—systematically eroded pedagogical autonomy while increasing administrative compliance demands. Qualitative evidence confirms that these are the very mechanisms fueling value conflict: teachers report that administrative burdens displace instructional time, curricula are imposed against their professional judgment, and institutional indifference to student welfare persists. This is not merely generalized occupational stress but a structurally embedded form of values-mandate conflict, rooted in governance decisions that prioritize compliance over professional ethics.

The proportion of teachers affected—with 18.3% in Profile 5 and a further 29.0% in Profile 2 showing related strain—points to systemic rather than isolated causes. It points to features of the national governance model that consistently place teachers in ethically compromised positions (Bükkí & Fehérvári, 2024; Radó, 2011).

This interpretation is also consistent with comparative education research showing that centralization and compliance-driven accountability often coincide with reduced professional autonomy, lower job satisfaction, and higher attrition (Ingersoll, 2003; Sahlberg, 2011).

Theoretical contributions and international implications. Our findings contribute to the developing discussion of value conflict in professional contexts, especially when these experiences are interpreted through a moral-injury lens. First, this study contributes large-scale empirical evidence suggesting that value conflict patterns in education may share characteristics with mechanisms described in moral-injury theory, showing that these dynamics apply beyond frontline crisis professions (Atuel et al., 2021; Litz et al., 2009). Analogous patterns in healthcare show that clinicians' distress is most strongly linked to perceived ethical compromise rather than workload volume (Dean & Talbot, 2018), reinforcing our interpretation that the content of institutional demands—values-violating versus values-congruent—is the pivotal mechanism.

Second, the profile heterogeneity we observed provides empirical support for theoretical models that conceptualize value conflict as existing along a continuum of severity (Grimell & Nilsson, 2020). Profile 2 occupies an intermediate position on this continuum, sharing high job love and substantial system dissatisfaction with Profile 5 but showing notably lower psychological symptoms. This gradient pattern suggests that value-related distress manifests in gradations rather than as a binary condition, supporting prevention-oriented interventions that address the entire spectrum of value-related distress before it consolidates into more entrenched psychological harm (Pietarinen et al., 2013).

Third, the application of person-centered analytical methods—particularly LPA—in tandem with thematic qualitative analysis yields important methodological insights. The overlapping posterior probability distributions across profiles reflect the continuum model of moral injury (Grimell & Nilsson, 2020), in which distress accumulates

along a spectrum rather than segregating into discrete categories. Crucially, however, the person-centered approach identified qualitatively distinct, non-linear configurations that variable-centered techniques such as factor analysis or SEM would not readily detect—most notably Profile 3, which combines the highest system dissatisfaction in the sample with very low psychological symptoms, a pattern that a simple severity gradient would obscure (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). This contribution extends a growing body of person-centered research in education. Kılınc et al. (2026), using multilevel latent profile analysis, demonstrate that different principal leadership styles influence teacher resilience and wellbeing in ways that vary across profile groups—a result that aligns structurally with our finding that profile membership reflects systemic conditions rather than individual traits. Kılınc et al. (2023) show that motivational climate profiles mediate the relationship between transformational leadership, teacher commitment, and alienation, underscoring that person-centered methods uncover subgroup dynamics often overlooked by traditional variable-centered approaches. These studies collectively highlight the value of profile-based analysis in revealing how systemic factors shape individual experiences in educational settings.

Sezgin et al. (2024) extend this logic to cultural value profiles, demonstrating that teachers' value orientations moderate the effects of leadership on job satisfaction in centralized Turkish schools—a context that shares structural features with the Hungarian case and underscores the cross-national relevance of profile-based approaches to teacher value research.

Fourth, our findings advance the discourse on construct validity concerning whether the identified patterns embody true value conflict consistent with moral injury or a broader form of institutional critique. The concurrent occurrence of strong job affection, heightened psychological indicators, and pronounced system discontent—substantiated across quantitative and qualitative data—satisfies the conceptual benchmarks for identity-endangering value conflict (Atuel et al., 2021), thereby differentiating it from burnout or everyday job discontent.

Internationally, these findings intersect with debates on teacher autonomy and professionalism. Evidence that autonomy and collaboration can co-exist as “reflective autonomy” (Vangrieken et al., 2017) suggests one theoretical route for repair: systems that expand genuine pedagogical discretion while cultivating collaborative professional cultures may reduce values-mandate collisions that precipitate value conflict. In high-trust, high-autonomy systems such as Finland, conflicts may center on equity-resource tensions rather than day-to-day compliance (Sahlberg, 2011); in more centralized systems such as Hungary, England, or parts of the United States, high-stakes accountability and prescriptive curricula have been linked to erosions of purpose and professional agency (Apple, 2018; Ball, 2016). The Hungarian case thus occupies a position of particular analytical clarity on this spectrum: extreme centralization, documented erosion of professional discretion, and a post-socialist institutional legacy produce a concentration of value-mandate collisions that other systems exhibit only partially, making it a valuable reference point for comparative research.

Practical implications and intervention targets. Our results suggest that, if value conflict in education is read through a moral-injury framework, effective responses are likely to require a shift away from individual-level strategies toward systemic reform. The configurations observed in our profiles—particularly the simultaneous occurrence of robust professional dedication alongside substantial institutional discontent and psychologically significant symptoms—emphasize that value conflict with distress arises not from deficiencies in personal resilience but from inherent tensions between teachers' principles and organizational imperatives.

Standard interventions such as resilience instruction, mindfulness sessions, or stress mitigation initiatives may deliver short-term solace but overlook the underlying structural sources of the challenge (Price et al., 2012; Slater, 2022). Levinson (2015) contends that distress resonant with moral injury requires “moral repair” at the institutional

scale—a restructuring of the environments that oblige educators to contravene their ethical obligations. Our data highlight three key structural levers: reducing non-instructional administrative burdens, restoring pedagogical autonomy, and implementing participatory governance. In Hungary, this would mean reversing aspects of the 2010–2013 centralization—such as returning curriculum control to schools, cutting mandatory reporting, and formalizing teacher input in policy. Finland's trust-based reforms show that professional autonomy improves both teacher wellbeing and student outcomes (Sahlberg, 2011), offering a practical model for adapting centralized systems. Additionally, policymakers should consider embedding explicit ethical impact assessments into education reform processes, as trialed in Canadian healthcare policy under the “ethics review” model (Glavinovic et al., 2022; Hagen et al., 2007).

Implications for teacher education and professional development. The value conflict patterns identified have direct implications for both pre-service and in-service teacher education. Traditional teacher preparation programs emphasize pedagogical skills and subject knowledge but provide limited preparation for navigating ethical conflicts between professional values and institutional demands.

Pre-service programs should include dedicated coursework on professional ethics in education, covering scenarios where institutional policies conflict with student welfare or pedagogical best practice. Case-based learning using authentic dilemmas from centralized systems could help prospective teachers develop frameworks for ethical decision-making under constraint, with practicum experiences incorporating structured reflection on values-practice alignment.

For in-service teachers, the 18.3% experiencing value conflict with distress represent a substantial population requiring targeted support that moves beyond individual resilience training toward collective ethical inquiry. “Ethics rounds”—structured peer discussions of moral dilemmas adapted from healthcare settings—could provide safe spaces for teachers to process value conflicts collectively. Leadership preparation programs should address how administrative decisions create ethical strain and develop skills in values-sensitive policy implementation, including recognition of when compliance demands may violate professional ethics. Such responses recognize that individual teachers cannot resolve systemic value conflicts on their own, but they may be better equipped to navigate them and to advocate for conditions that support ethical practice. The relevance of these recommendations extends beyond Hungary to any centralized system in which governance pressures systematically place institutional compliance above pedagogical integrity.

7. Conclusion and limitations

This study examined patterns of teacher value conflict in a highly centralized education system, asking whether these patterns differ across educational levels and whether they are consistent with expectations derived from moral-injury frameworks. Using person-centered analysis with qualitative validation, we identified five educator profiles. The ‘value conflict with distress’ profile (Profile 5, 18.3%) exhibits the theorized coexistence of strong vocational commitment with elevated psychological symptoms and system dissatisfaction, while Profile 2 (High Love/Moderate Dissatisfaction, 29.0%) suggests a less severe but related form of value-related strain—together indicating that value conflict affects a substantial proportion of Hungarian educators at varying levels of intensity.

Profile distributions differed significantly by educational level, though the effect size was small, indicating that value conflict manifests across all grade-band contexts while modest level-specific variation also exists. Qualitative evidence corroborated the latent profiles: teachers most affected described administrative demands displacing pedagogy, violations of professional agency, threats to child welfare, and systemic erosion of professional trust. A gradient of theme endorsement tracked profile severity, and triangulation suggests the quantitative estimate

captures the core pattern, though qualitative analysis identified borderline cases that may represent additional manifestations of value conflict.

Theoretically, the findings support value conflict in education as conceptually distinct from burnout: distress co-occurs with preserved job love, consistent with identity-threat accounts in moral-injury frameworks rather than resource-depletion models. Practically, the results locate levers for systemic repair at the structural level – reducing non-instructional administrative load, expanding genuine pedagogical discretion, and aligning accountability with professional ethics and child welfare. These recommendations apply beyond Hungary to any centralized system in which governance pressures systematically subordinate pedagogical judgment to institutional compliance.

Limitations. Several limitations must be considered when interpreting these findings.

The recruitment approach—sequential distribution via school administrators reached through openly accessible organizational records—imposes substantial limitations on the applicability of results. This method yielded an indeterminate participation rate, since we are unable to ascertain the number of individual educators who were effectively invited beyond the initial outreach to 5686 school leaders. The sequential structure generates potential selection distortions: administrators' choices regarding survey distribution, educators' choices about engagement, and conceivable systematic variations between involved and uninvolved organizations. The 18.3% prevalence of value conflict with distress should therefore be regarded as an approximation from a convenience sample rather than a definitive population estimate.

As a cross-sectional study, the design does not permit causal inferences among the variables examined. The observed co-occurrence of high system dissatisfaction, elevated psychological symptoms, and strong job love is consistent with value-conflict theory, but longitudinal or experimental designs would be required to establish temporal sequencing and rule out third-variable explanations. Prospective studies are needed to examine whether early indicators of value-related strain forecast progression toward more entrenched forms of psychological harm, in line with moral-injury models (Griffin et al., 2019; Mantri et al., 2021).

Our measures of anxiety and depression assessed general daily symptoms rather than work-specific distress. This prevents us from establishing whether observed psychological symptoms are consequences of work-related value conflicts, antecedents that influence perceptions of system satisfaction, or products of third variables unrelated to the educational context. Future research could employ hybrid instruments capturing both general and context-specific symptomatology, as has proven effective in healthcare research (Koenig et al., 2018).

The reliance on single-item measures for all four core indicators represents a significant methodological constraint that limits construct validity and reliability assessment. While this approach was necessary to minimize respondent burden and was partially compensated through convergent qualitative validation, it prevents assessment of internal consistency and may increase measurement error. Future research should employ validated multi-item scales with work-specific symptom measures to strengthen causal inference and construct validity (OECD, 2020).

Data collection occurred in May 2025, approaching the 2026 elections. While our measures focused on work-related experiences rather than political attitudes, electoral cycles may influence institutional perceptions. Future research should examine whether value conflict patterns vary systematically across electoral periods and include measures of political orientation as potential confounders.

Finally, future studies could investigate the potential buffering role of moral community—collegial networks—where teachers collectively affirm shared values and resist ethically compromising mandates. Research in healthcare has shown that structured peer support can reduce the intensity of moral injury symptoms (Dean & Talbot, 2019);

testing similar models in education could reveal whether collective agency provides partial protection in high-risk systems.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Attila Lengyel: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Anetta Müller:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Ferenc Mező:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Éva Bácsné Bába:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **László Erdey:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Software. **Veronika Fenyves:** Writing – review & editing. **Katalin Mező:** Writing – review & editing, Resources, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal interests that could have influenced the results or interpretation of this research.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Further reading

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