

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Strengths in Education: The Application and Developmental Opportunities of Character Strengths in the School Context

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Debrecen, 2025

1. The topic and the objectives of the thesis

The central theme of the dissertation is the examination of character strengths and their relationship to well-being. The classification of character strengths and virtues is the result of a research group led by Peterson and Seligman (2004), who identified six universal virtues and, within these, 24 character strengths. Compared to virtues, character strengths represent less abstract, well-defined, and operationalizable traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths can be defined as positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. (Park et al., 2004). The classification of character strengths and virtues quickly became one of the leading areas of positive psychology research. At the same time, the study of well-being also gained more attention, reflected in the rise of various theoretical models that capture different aspects of well-being (Zábó et al., 2023b). Another key concept in the dissertation is well-being, which we defined based on Martin Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). In this model, positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment are the pillars of well-being (Seligman, 2011). Given the definition of character strengths, they contribute to optimal functioning (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and according to Seligman (2011), character strengths are the building blocks of well-being. One of the main research questions of this thesis is to explore the relationship between character strengths and well-being. The PERMA model allows us to examine well-being as a multidimensional construct and thus interpret the relationships between character strengths and well-being dimensions more differentiatedly.

The primary target group of the research is teachers, for whom school serves as both a place of educational activity and a specific organizational environment. Therefore, the theme of this dissertation

lies at the intersection of school and organizational psychology, reflecting the evolving research interests in both fields.

In Hungary, most publications on character strength have primarily focused on theoretical aspects (e.g., Fodor & Molnár, 2020), with relatively little empirical data available (e.g., Holecz & Molnár, 2014; Zábó et al., 2023a). At the outset of our research, there was no validated Hungarian questionnaire to measure character strengths. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this dissertation is to validate a reliable measurement tool for assessing character strengths in an adult sample. This process led to the Hungarian validation of the VIA-IS-M questionnaire and an analysis of its factor structure.

Another key topic of the dissertation is exploring the relationship between character strengths and well-being. Specifically, in our research on teachers, we aim to map the relationships between character strengths and workplace well-being. We analyse which character strengths contribute to various aspects of workplace well-being and use person-centred analyses to uncover distinctive patterns of well-being. Additionally, the dissertation addresses teacher burnout, particularly focusing on identifying character strengths that can serve as protective factors against emotional exhaustion.

One fundamental aspect of strengths is that individuals can reflect on them, incorporate them into their goals and plans, and apply them in their everyday actions (Park et al., 2004). Recent research emphasises the distinction between possessing strengths (i.e., having varying levels of individual strengths) and actually utilising them (i.e., applying them in different life situations) (Dubreuil et al., 2021). Numerous empirical studies have confirmed the positive effects of strength use (e.g., Schutte and Malouff, 2019; van Woerkom et al., 2016); thus, the examination of

strength use was also included in the objectives of this dissertation. Based on an analysis of the literature on strength use, it is more expedient to assess it within a specific activity or area. Most studies have defined strength use in general terms, without reference to a specific framework. Therefore, we decided to focus on workplace strength use. Since no Hungarian language questionnaire was available to assess strength use, our primary goal was to validate the Workplace Strength Use Questionnaire, present initial results, and explore relationships between strength use and workplace well-being.

Positive psychological interventions aim to promote positive emotions, behaviours, and cognitions, as well as to enhance well-being (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009); one classic topic of these interventions is the identification and development of character strengths (Parks & Layous, 2016). The thesis also aims to apply the research findings on character strengths in practice. Accordingly, the final empirical chapter presents a positive psychological intervention for teachers. The intervention was implemented over four weeks and primarily aimed to increase participants' awareness of their character strengths and to foster the application of signature strengths. The study can be considered a pilot, as it primarily assesses the feasibility and initial effectiveness of the intervention. It also provides recommendations to help plan future interventions, particularly given the limited studies on teachers' character strengths.

2. Overview of the applied methods

The dissertation summarises the results of four empirical studies. The target group of the research consisted of adults: one study focused on the general adult population, one analysed a sample of adult employees, while two studies involved teachers working in primary and secondary

education institutions. Only individuals who met the predefined selection criteria (e.g., age, active teaching employment) and provided informed consent to participate were allowed to take part in the studies.

The first empirical study aimed to validate the Hungarian version of the VIA-IS-M questionnaire. During the validation process, four data collections were conducted, and after filtering out inconsistent respondents, data from a total of 1,867 individuals were analysed. In the first data collection (N = 1001), we tested the Hungarian translation of the VIA-IS-M questionnaire on a sample of adults. The study aimed to assess the scales' reliability and explore relationships between character strengths and criterion variables (well-being, satisfaction with life). The results indicated that several subscales (e.g., Gratitude, Humility, Judgment) did not demonstrate adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,53-0,59$). Based on the results of the first data collection, modifications were necessary, so in the second study (N=263), we developed a modified VIA-IS-M-H questionnaire that included additional items. The goal was to create a final version of the questionnaire that would reliably measure character strengths. In this study, we focused solely on character strengths. After item selection, we created a questionnaire version comprising 96 items, similar to the original one, and conducted an exploratory factor analysis. The objective of the third data collection was to examine the reliability and validity of the proposed final questionnaire among a specific population of elementary and secondary school teachers (N = 233). We analysed the correlations between character strengths and criterion variables (workplace well-being and burnout) and, similarly to the second study, performed exploratory factor analysis. In the fourth data collection, we tested the VIA-IS-M-H questionnaire on a general adult population (N=392). This time, we also used a different criterion variable than in

the previous studies (e.g., mental health) and performed an exploratory factor analysis. To assess correspondence among the factor solutions from the second, third, and fourth data collections, we calculated Rand index, which allowed us to evaluate the stability of the questionnaire's factor structure across samples.

In the second empirical study of the dissertation, we measured teachers' character strengths, workplace well-being, and burnout. The inclusion criterion for the study was current employment as a teacher. The sample consisted of 264 teachers ($M_{\text{age}} = 47,69$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 9,42$). We used Spearman's rank correlation to examine the relationship between character strengths and workplace well-being. Based on the workplace well-being subscales, Ward's hierarchical clustering procedure was applied, using squared Euclidean distances to distinguish 4 clusters. We analysed mean-level differences in character strengths among the clusters using the Kruskal–Wallis test, followed by Dunn's post hoc analysis for pairwise comparisons. Using emotional exhaustion as a dependent variable, we conducted linear regression and mediation analyses to explore the relationships in greater depth.

The third empirical study in the dissertation focused on workplace strengths use. Since no tool was available in Hungarian to assess strengths use, the Workplace Strengths Use Questionnaire was validated as part of this study. A total of 334 participants were involved ($M_{\text{age}} = 40,93$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 11,15$), with active employment being the selection criterion. In addition to strength use behaviour, we also measured workplace well-being, burnout, work engagement, and job satisfaction. As a first step in the statistical analysis, we examined the reliability and factor structure of the Workplace Strengths Use Questionnaire. We then explored the relationships among variables using Spearman's rank correlation, followed by linear regression

analyses in which workplace well-being dimensions were included as dependent variables. Finally, mediation analyses were conducted in which strength use behaviour and perceived organizational support for strength use emerged as predictor variables.

In the final empirical chapter of the thesis, we evaluated an online intervention designed to foster the application of character strengths. 79 teachers ($M_{\text{age}} = 46,74$; $SD_{\text{age}}=7,86$) participated in the study and were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group. During the pretest, we assessed participants' character strengths, workplace well-being, strengths use behaviour and perceived work-related stress.

Over four weeks, the experimental group completed two tasks per week. First, the task aimed to identify and explore character strengths and then encouraged the application of signature character strengths. After the intervention, we conducted a post-test to reassess the variables measured in the pretest, except for character strengths. The effects of the intervention were analysed using mixed-sample variance analysis.

3. Thesis of the results

Thesis 1: The VIA-IS-M questionnaire, designed to measure character strengths, shows reliable results in a Hungarian sample; the scales exhibit adequate internal consistency, and the 24 subscales are divided into three factors.

The VIA-IS-M questionnaire measures character strengths with 96 items (4 per subscale), and its reliability has been confirmed in previous international studies (e.g., McGrath & Wallace, 2021; McGrath et al., 2022). During the Hungarian validation process, the questionnaire was assessed across four independent datasets, yielding satisfactory internal consistency. There are conflicting results in the literature regarding the

factor structure of the VIA-IS questionnaires (e.g., Anjum and Amjad, 2021; McGrath, 2015; Höfer et al., 2019). In this study, the three-factor solution was found to be the most suitable for the data, consistent with the results of McGrath et al. (2018). To examine the consistency of the factor structures across datasets, we calculated the Rand index, which confirmed their stability and consistency.

The results related to this thesis are detailed in the following publication: Molnár, A., Kurucz, Gy., & Fodor, Sz. (2025). Assessing character strengths in Hungary: exploring factor structure and reliability of VIA-IS-M. *BMC psychology*, 13(1).

Thesis 2: Teachers' character strengths are positively related to workplace well-being.

Spearman's correlation analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between workplace well-being and most character strengths, highlighting the importance of these strengths in enhancing well-being. Among the character strengths, Hope and Vitality showed the strongest correlation with various dimensions of workplace well-being. Additionally, specific positive correlations were noted, such as between Teamwork and positive relationships, and between Perseverance and accomplishment. However, the positive relationships showed weaker and fewer correlations with character strengths compared to other dimensions of well-being. Of all the character strengths, only Humility had a negative relationship with workplace well-being.

The results related to this thesis are presented in the following publication: Molnár, A., & Fodor, Sz. (2024). Pedagógusok karaktererősségeinek és munkahelyi jóllétének feltáró elemzése. *Iskolakultúra*, 34(9), 39-60.

Thesis 3: Based on scores from the workplace well-being subscales, teachers can be grouped into four distinct clusters, and there are significant differences among the clusters in terms of character strengths.

Using Ward's hierarchical clustering method, we identified four clusters that align with Wagner et al.'s (2020) findings. These clusters were named based on their distinctive well-being patterns: 'flourishing', 'work-motivated', 'socially supported', and 'struggling'. Significant differences were observed between the clusters in mean scores for most character strengths. In clusters characterised by higher workplace well-being ('flourishing' and 'work-motivated'), the average scores for Hope and Vitality were significantly higher. In comparison, in clusters with lower well-being ('socially supported' and 'struggling'), these strengths had lower mean values. The differences between the clusters were particularly pronounced in character strengths related to positive emotions and social relationships (e.g., Teamwork, Humor, Forgiveness). The results support the relevance of person-centred approaches and emphasise that teachers' diverse well-being profiles can serve as a basis for planning targeted, personalised interventions.

The results related to this thesis are detailed in the following publication: Molnár, A., & Fodor, Sz. (2024). Pedagógusok karaktererősségeinek és munkahelyi jóllétének feltáró elemzése. *Iskolakultúra*, 34(9), 39-60.

Thesis 4: The character strengths of Vitality and Hope have a significant negative effect on teachers' emotional exhaustion, both directly and indirectly through positive emotions.

The mediation analyses indicate that both Vitality and Hope directly reduce teachers' emotional exhaustion, and their effects are also

indirectly mediated by positive emotions. Hope emerges as a stronger predictor; both its total and indirect effects exceed those of Vitality. The mediating role of positive emotions is of paramount importance, as a significant part of the effect of both character strengths was exerted through this pathway. These findings suggest that fostering the character strengths of Hope and Vitality, and promoting positive emotions at work, may be an effective approach to preventing and reducing emotional exhaustion among teachers.

The results related to the thesis can be found in Chapter 5.6 of the dissertation.

Thesis 5: The Workplace Strengths Use Questionnaire is a reliable and valid measurement tool for employees, demonstrating high internal consistency and a clear two-factor structure.

The Strengths Use Questionnaire is based on two subscales adapted from the Strengths Use and Deficit Correction (SUDCO) questionnaire developed by van Woerkom et al. (2016). These subscales measure strength use behaviour and perceived organizational support for strength use. The subscales exhibited very high reliability, and exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses confirmed that the items could be organized into two distinct factors. The results indicated that both strength use behaviour and perceived organizational support for strength use were positively correlated with workplace well-being. Overall, the questionnaire proved reliable within an employee sample; however, it would be beneficial to test it on a larger and more diverse employee population as well.

The results related to this thesis are published in the following article: Molnár, A., & Fodor, S. (2024). Erősséghasználat, mint erőforrás? A

munkahelyi erősséghasználat és a munkahelyi jóllét kapcsolatának feltáró elemzése. *Alkalmazott Pszichológia*, 26(1), 37-60.

Thesis 6: Strengths use significantly increases accomplishment both directly and indirectly, by reducing perceived work-related stress.

The results of mediation analyses show that the direct effect of strength use on accomplishment is significant and stronger than the indirect effect. At the same time, the mediating role of perceived work-related stress was significant, suggesting that strength use not only directly contributes to accomplishment improvement but also has an additional positive effect through stress reduction. Overall, the results indicate that strengths use supports effective work performance through both of these mechanisms.

The results related to this thesis are presented in the following publication: Molnár, A., & Fodor, S. (2024). Erősséghasználat, mint erőforrás? A munkahelyi erősséghasználat és a munkahelyi jóllét kapcsolatának feltáró elemzése. *Alkalmazott Pszichológia*, 26(1), 37-60.

Thesis 7: Perceived organizational support for strengths use has a positive effect on positive workplace relationships, both directly and indirectly through reduced perceived work-related stress.

The results of the mediation analyses indicate that perceived organizational support for strengths use has a significant direct effect on positive workplace relationships. In addition, a significant indirect effect is observed through reduced perceived work-related stress. Although the majority of the total effect stems from the direct pathway, the mediating role of stress is also significant. These findings emphasise that organizational support for strengths use not only enhances

individual well-being but also contributes to the quality of interpersonal relationships among colleagues.

The results related to this thesis can be found in the following publication: Molnár, A., & Fodor, S. (2024). Erősséghasználat, mint erőforrás? A munkahelyi erősséghasználat és a munkahelyi jóllét kapcsolatának feltáró elemzése. *Alkalmazott Pszichológia*, 26(1), 37-60.

Thesis 8: The intervention designed to enhance teachers' use of signature character strengths had a protective effect on perceived work-related stress. In the experimental group, no increase in stress levels was observed, whereas the control group showed a significant increase.

The effects of the intervention were examined using mixed-design analysis of variance. The results indicated significant main effects of time and group membership, and a significant interaction between time and group. The intervention contributed to stabilising perceived work-related stress levels among teachers in the experimental group, whereas the control group showed a substantial increase over time. The intervention was implemented toward the end of the academic year, a period characterised by heightened workload and increased demands (von der Embse & Mankin, 2020), thus the findings suggest that supporting character strengths use could be an effective way to prevent teachers from increasing work-related stress.

The results related to this thesis are presented in Chapter 7.7 of the dissertation.

4. Conclusions

This dissertation enriches empirical knowledge of character strengths in Hungary at multiple levels, with particular attention to their

measurement, their relationship with well-being, and studies with a teacher sample. One of the most significant methodological contributions of the dissertation was the Hungarian validation of the VIA-IS-M questionnaire. This validation provides a reliable means of measuring character strengths in a Hungarian context and enables international comparability of results.

The thesis covers both school and organisational psychological aspects. It takes a novel approach by examining teacher burnout in relation to character strengths, particularly focusing on the role of Hope and Vitality. By interpreting burnout through a positive psychological lens, this research provides a fresh perspective on prevention. It emphasises the significance of positive emotions experienced at work in reducing the risk of emotional exhaustion.

Another innovative aspect of the dissertation is the examination of strength use and organisational support for strength use. The findings indicate that strength use behaviour has a positive effect on workplace well-being and a negative effect on burnout. Therefore, burnout can be prevented if employees can apply their personal strengths at work and feel supported by their managers in this endeavour. It would be particularly important for teachers to build on their strengths in teaching and to have an environment that supports their strengths use. Consequently, a vital area for future research in school organisational psychology could be the integrated analysis of teachers' strength use and the school climate.

The dissertation also emphasised the practical applicability of its empirical results. The intervention designed for teachers highlights that the effectiveness of such interventions largely depends on personalisation and on understanding of participants' individual needs, as well as their relevance to everyday work.

Overall, the dissertation points out that research on character strengths offers several untapped opportunities, particularly regarding their potential role in preventing burnout and in implementing positive psychological interventions to foster them.

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Registry number:
Subject:

DEENK/87/2026.PL
PhD Publication List

Candidate: Adrienn Molnár
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Human Sciences
MTMT ID: 10073433

List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (4)

1. **Molnár, A.**, Fodor, S.: Erősséghasználat mint erőforrás?: A munkahelyi erősséghasználat és a munkahelyi jóllét kapcsolatának feltáró elemzése.
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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17627/ALKPSZICH.2024.1.37>
2. **Molnár, A.**, Fodor, S.: Pedagógusok karaktererősségeinek és munkahelyi jóllétének feltáró elemzése.
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3. **Molnár, A.**, Fodor, S.: Pozitív pszichológia a munkahelyen: Az erősségek használata és fejlesztési lehetőségei a szervezetekben.
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4. Fodor, S., **Molnár, A.**: Karaktererősségek az iskolában. Fogalmak, jellemzők és a fejlesztésre irányuló intervenciók.
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Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

5. **Molnár, A.**, Kurucz, G., Fodor, S.: Assessing character strengths in Hungary: exploring factor structure and reliability of VIA-IS-M.
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Total IF of journals (all publications): 3

Total IF of journals (publications related to the dissertation): 3

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

27 February, 2026

