


The role of character strengths in teachers' mental health: Contributions of positive psychology

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ABSTRACT

The mental health of teachers has been the subject of important reflections and discussions, since the lack of professional recognition, low salaries, and overload of functions are among the factors that trigger illness among educators. To this end, Positive Psychology is presented as a source of studies on character strengths, which seek, through virtues, satisfaction with life and well-being. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to present a narrative review of the literature on the relationships between character strengths and teacher mental health. The researches found showed that character strengths can be resources that help in the challenges of teaching practice and in work relationships. In addition, cultivating or building character strengths can increase levels of happiness and subjective well-being, as well as decrease and prevent aspects of physical and mental burnout in teachers.

Keywords: Mental health, Teachers, Positive Psychology, Character Strengths.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to present a narrative review of the literature on the relationship between character strengths and teacher mental health. The chapter is divided into 3 parts. In the first, the teacher's process of mental illness is contextualized, presenting research data and the main factors that are characterized as predictors of this illness. In the second part of the chapter, the foundations of Positive Psychology and the contributions of the study of character strengths are presented. And, finally, the third part of the chapter presents research results that demonstrate character strengths as protective factors against teachers' mental illness.

TEACHERS' MENTAL HEALTH

The process of mental illness that educators go through during their professional activities has been a subject of interest to researchers and professional bodies for at least 40 years, since, since the 1980s, the International Labor Organization (ILO, 1984) has considered teaching as a risk profession. In Brazil, the theme has gained greater relevance since the 1990s (Delcor et al., 2004), with emphasis on the study conducted by Codo (1999) with teachers from 1440 Basic Education schools throughout the Brazilian territory. The author found that half of the participants had high levels – and, therefore, worrying – in at least one of the three characteristic symptoms of *Burnout Syndrome*, namely: a) low emotional involvement with work; b) emotional exhaustion and; c) depersonalization (insensitivity in dealing with others).

Since these first studies, the subject has remained controversial and the difficulties are permanent. This can be seen to the extent that, according to data from the Department of Medical Expertise of the State of São Paulo, in 2018 there were more than 53 thousand leaves of absence of teachers from the state public network, due to mental and behavioral disorders. This number is equivalent to more than 40% of the leaves issued that year, being the main cause of teacher absence in the exercise of their function (Giammei & Pollo, 2019).

The high incidence of Basic Education teachers becoming mentally ill – both in public and private institutions – was verified in other states, as presented in the studies by Baldaçara et al. (2015), carried out in Palmas (TO); Ceballos and Santos (2015), in Jabotão dos Guararapes (PE); Gasparini et al. (2006), in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais; Reis et al. (2005), in Vitória da Conquista (BA); Souza et al. (2011), in Salvador, Bahia; Tibúrcio and Moreno (2009), in Tubarão (SC) and; Valle (2011), in Poços de Calda (MG). The picture is similar when analyzing the situation of university professors (Costa et al., 2013; Elias, 2004; Ferreira et al., 2015; Ferreira & Pezuk, 2021; Innocent, 2005).



Some aspects related to the exercise of teaching practice can help us to understand this picture. To this end, the scholars of this problem used the teachers' own reports as the main data collection tool. In general terms, the complaints collected were as follows:

- a) social devaluation of the profession (Costa et al., 2013; Innocent, 2005; Simplício & Andrade, 2011);
- b) low wages (Inocente, 2005; Simplício & Andrade, 2011);
- c) students' indiscipline (Codo, 1999; Gasparini et al., 2006; Simplício & Andrade, 2011; Souza et al., 2011);
- d) violent actions practiced by students and parents in relation to teachers (Gasparini et al., 2006; Simplício & Andrade, 2011);
- e) overload of functions, such as the organization of materials, preparation of classes and corrections of lessons and tests (Carraro, 2015; Codo, 1999; Elias, 2014; Ferreira et al., 2015; Reis et al., 2005; Souza et al., 2011);
- f) physical environment and materials that are inappropriate for teaching (Codo, 1999; Ferreira et al., 2015; Gasparini et al., 2006; Silva, 2015; Souza et al., 2011);
- g) lack of unity among educators (Silva, 2015; Simplício & Andrade, 2011; Souza et al., 2011);
- h) lack or difficulty in dialogue with the school's management and pedagogical coordination (Carraro, 2015; Codo, 1999; Elias, 2014; Gasparini et al., 2006; Simplício & Andrade, 2011).

These factors contribute to the worsening of the mental state of educators, and Ferreira-Costa and Pedro-Silva (2018) found that teachers who experienced these characteristics more intensely in their work routine had higher levels of anxiety and/or depressive symptoms.

Another aspect pointed out by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 1984) that contributes to the high rates of illness in this population is the fact that teaching is an activity that requires constant adaptation from the professional who performs it, as he needs to deal frequently with people, especially those who are in an intense process of physical and psychological development. These events that put the teacher's body on alert – that is, take him out of his "comfort zone" – generate a psychophysiological response called by scholars in the area as stress. Although it is impossible to have a life without stressful experiences, this phenomenon, when experienced constantly, ends up depleting the individual's reserves, generating suffering, alterations in mental functions and, finally, mental illness (Apostle et al., 2006; Vignola & Tucci, 2014).

Thus, the manifestation of mental illnesses often occurs as a result, as already pointed out, of the exhaustion caused by the dynamics of work, which requires constant adaptation (Seligmann-Silva, 2011; Vicente, 2015). Thus, in addition to the uniqueness observed in the teaching-learning



process of each student, the demands of teaching force teachers to face challenges that often exceed their functions in the school or their skills built throughout their training.

Still with regard to the adversities encountered in teaching, as of 2020, with the COVID-19 virus pandemic, educators – as well as the general population – were forced to reorganize the routine of their lives and professional practices (Souza et al., 2021). In addition to these challenges, these adaptations were often made by the teacher without institutional support – such as the offer of a qualification course or integrated policies for pedagogical action. This situation often generated insecurity in the educator regarding the effectiveness of their actions (Souza et al., 2021).

More broadly, several aspects were observed in this pandemic period that had the potential to generate stress, anguish, and affect the mental health of the general population. Regarding COVID-19 itself, we can mention the uncertainties regarding its duration and its impact on the patient's health, as well as the fear of the person or someone close to them contracting the virus (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2020).tag. Regarding the quarantine period, the risk factors were fears related to unemployment, difficulty in adapting to new routines, deprivation of leisure activities, and lack of face-to-face social contact (Schmidt et al., 2020; Shojaei & Masoumi, 2020).

Thus, when we analyze the reality of teachers considering the new forms of work organization caused by the pandemic situation, which is not yet fully controlled, we observe that this context inflicted new stressors on the bodies and minds of teachers that, together with those that already existed in teaching practice, contributed to greater mental exhaustion and, consequently, mental illness (Souza et al., 2021). And in the midst of all this, educators gradually returned to their professional activities in the face-to-face modality, with the fears, insecurities, and sequelae of the pandemic period accompanying them in this process.

Thus, investigating the mental health of teachers today is important and necessary. With this in mind, in the midst of the manifestations of illness resulting from stress and, consequently, mental exhaustion, anxiety and depressive disorders stand out, among others (Vicente, 2015).

According to Dalgalarondo (2019) and the *5th Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)* (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2014), depressive disorders are a category of diseases that primarily affect mood and affects, whose main symptoms are the persistent and continuous manifestation of sadness or irritability and the loss of interest and pleasure in performing almost all activities. Anxiety disorders, in turn, result from an alteration in the psychic mechanisms responsible for identifying vulnerable states to potential situations of danger. That is, worries and fears occur in a way that is unspecific or disproportionate to the situation. Such diseases generate suffering and prevent the subject from experiencing their existence in at least one important field of their life (school, work, family, etc.).



Although the DSM-V classifies them into distinct groups, studies point to similarities between anxiety disorders and depressive disorders, since they share symptoms and, possibly, genes in their etiology (APA, 2014; Dalgalarondo, 2019; Martins et al., 2019). Sharing this understanding, studies have found a positive correlation between anxiety and depressive symptoms in a sample of teachers (Ferreira-Costa, 2017).

In this regard, Clark and Watson (1991) propose that the aforementioned psychopathologies should be seen as a unified diagnostic category, in which anxiety and depression represent different points on the same *continuum*, with the following main indications: a) reduced positive affects (characteristic of depression); b) physiological hyperactivation (common in anxiety) and; c) negative affectivity (found in both depression and anxiety). Clark and Watson (1991) called this theory the Tripartite Model.

Having made this addendum, the study of these pathologies is relevant to the extent that we found that in studies in which the diagnoses of medical absence of teachers due to mental illness were investigated, the prevalence of anxiety and depressive disorders was observed (Ferreira-Costa, 2017; Silva, 2015). Other studies have found that the rate of anxiety and depression in this group is higher than the average for the general population (Ferreira-Costa & Pedro-Silva, 2018; Innocent, 2005).

In view of this, in addition to the search for more effective psychological interventions in the prevention and treatment of those who are mentally ill (Schmidt et al., 2020), there are questions in the academic environment to understand whether certain mental or behavioral traits of the individual can contribute to the prevention of mental disorders (Caetano et al., 2022; Chan, 2013; Kim & Lim, 2016). After all, as we have already discussed, in the process of mental illness, both external factors and internal characteristics of the subject influence their mental health (Ferreira-Costa & Pedro-Silva, 2018).

In this scenario, Positive Psychology – more specifically, character strengths – becomes the focus of our research interest, since the scientific literature presents data that indicate its potential for the promotion of mental health. These findings will be discussed later. We now proceed to present the main assumptions of Positive Psychology and the different types of character strength.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND CHARACTER STRENGTHS

Positive Psychology (PP) can be defined as the area of knowledge whose objective of study is the human qualities, that is, the positive characteristics of the individual, which aim to help him to have a good and healthy life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). According to Seligman (2011), a good and healthy life is characterized by a pleasant, engaged, meaningful, fulfilling existence with the establishment of positive relationships⁵.

⁵ Later, we will discuss these characteristics.



Thus, the main scope of investigation of PP addresses the identification, measurement and development of potentialities, motivations, personal and environmental conditions, among other aspects, which can contribute to people, groups and institutions functioning in the best possible way. Thus, it aims to benefit not only the individuals themselves, but also society as a whole (Barros et al., 2010; Cintra, 2016; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Many PP scholars structure their theoretical model on three main pillars: "positive emotions", "positive qualities" and "positive institutions" (Nascimento & Hartmann Júnior, 2021; Noronha & Batista, 2017; Peterson & Park, 2006; Seligman, 2004). These represent the necessary fields to be observed for a comprehensive intervention of the aspects that guarantee a quality life (Nascimento & Hartmann Júnior, 2021; Noronha & Batista, 2017; Peterson & Park, 2006; Seligman, 2004).

For this study, we will focus on the explanation of the positive qualities of teachers, represented in the virtues and strengths of character. The conceptual development of these is due to the American psychologist Christopher Peterson (1950-2012), together with Seligman (Cintra, 2016; Noronha & Barbosa, 2016). Following the positive ideals of the counterpoint to psychological science focused on psychopathology, the authors elaborated and published *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. It is a guide, whose purpose was to serve as an alternative to the major compendiums used in the psychiatric field, such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), of the *American Psychiatric Association* (APA, 2014) and the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD) sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019).

Thus, because it is a work primarily concerned with psychological health, rather than with mental disorders, we can define it – as its creators propose – as a "Sanity Manual" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

That said, according to this theory, **virtues** can be understood as the central, universal and most valued characteristics that contribute to the individual having a good and harmonious life with the groups and spaces in which he or she is inserted (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seibel et al., 2015). As for the universality of these values, this was verified by Peterson and Seligman (2004), after an extensive analysis of documents elaborated, at different times, cultures and societies⁶, by religious and moral philosophers. After this study, the duo defined six broad categories of virtues:

⁶ Although some theorists treat society and culture as synonyms, in our text, we distinguish between the two terms, as proposed by Japiassú and Marcondes (1991). Society is understood as a set of individuals who share the same geographical space and the same culture. Culture, in turn, is defined as the behaviors, representations, and institutions that organize life in society. Examples of culture are the artistic manifestations, science, laws, customs, cuisine and religious beliefs of a particular people.

Table 1 – Classification and definition of virtues

Virtue	Definition
Wisdom and Knowledge	Cognitive strengths that involve the acquisition and use of knowledge.
Courage	Emotional forces that involve the exercise of the will to achieve goals in the face of opposition, external or internal.
Humanity	Interpersonal strengths that involve caring for and befriending others.
Justice	Strengths that underpin healthy community life.
Temperance	Strengths related to self-control, protecting people against excesses.
Transcendence	Character strengths that "create" connections to the larger universe and provide meaning.

Fonte: Peterson and Seligman (2004).

In turn, **character strengths** are the "psychological ingredients" (processes or mechanisms) that define virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). They can be understood as the multiple possible ways to manifest a certain virtue.

Regarding the different forms of expression of these virtues, in the following chart (Chart 2), we present in detail the 24 character strengths proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004).

Table 2 – Classification and definition of character strengths

Virtue	Character Strength	Definition
Wisdom and Knowledge	Creativity	Related to originality and ingenuity. That is, the ability to create strategies to deal with the demands and challenges of life (thinking "outside the box", as it is popularly said). It is also linked to the ability to create, as in artistic manifestations.
	Inquisitiveness	It refers to openness to new experiences as well as the active search for novelty. It allows both the deepening of subjects of interest and the exploration of new knowledge and ways of thinking.
	Critical Thinking	Thought constructed and modified in the light of evidence. It can also be seen the posture of careful and judicious analysis before drawing conclusions. It can also be understood as a fair judgment, seeking to take into account all the variables involved.



	Love of learning	Love for building knowledge and skills. Although it has some similarities with curiosity, it differs from this force in that it has a more systematic character of "incorporation" of information. It encompasses both formal and informal learning.
	Sensatez	It concerns the ability to give consistent and discerning advice. Such strength makes it possible to see the world in a way that makes sense to oneself and to others. Having it, almost always, leads the person to act supported by common sense.
Courage	Bravery	Linked to the courage to face physical and abstract challenges, making it possible to defend and maintain convictions, because they believe that it is the right thing to do, even if they do not have support.
	Perseverance	It is the tendency to finish the tasks that you initiate. Thus, this strength indicates that one does not give up easily, despite obstacles or the need to make sacrifices. It also provides pleasure in achieving goals.
	Authenticity	Honest and upright behavior, observed in behaviors guided by unpretentiousness, responsibility and sincerity. The individual, because of it, shows himself in a genuine way and takes responsibility for his actions and feelings.
	Vitality	Related to living life in a potent way, that is, with excitement, energy, enthusiasm and vigor. It pushes people to put themselves out into the world in an active way, not leaving tasks incomplete.
Humanity	Love	It refers to valuing and enjoying sharing positive moments and affections with others. Seeking reciprocal commitment to those considered significant.
	Kindness	Concerning behaviors, feelings, and ways of thinking that aim to help and benefit the other. Examples are generosity, affection, care, compassion and altruism.
	Social Intelligence	Linked to what is usually called emotional intelligence. It provides ease in social interactions, resulting from skills that allow you to identify and know how to deal with the emotions, motivations and feelings of others and of yourself.



Justice	Citizenship	Alluding to the ability to create and maintain lasting and meaningful bonds with people and groups. They include social responsibility, loyalty to people and groups, teamwork, among other aspects. It can be summed up in the following expression: "That which is the responsibility of the individual in the group must be done."
	Impartiality	Associated with fair and equitable treatment of all people, not allowing feelings, affinities, or other personal issues to interfere with judgments. It means acting on principle.
	Leadership	These are actions and attitudes that help the collective and harmony in the group. It is part of conducts, such as guiding the organization of activities, contributing to the achievement of demands and/or goals.
Temperance	Forgiveness	Regarding not being vengeful and also forgiving those who have harmed you in some way, allowing them to redeem themselves. It also concerns the acceptance of what you don't like or disagree with.
	Modelling	It refers to the non-realization of propaganda of one's own achievements and deeds. It requires the construction of a humble attitude; Therefore, actions that do not put people above others do not mean an attitude of subservience.
	Prudence	Referring to the ability to carefully and judiciously analyze the risks inherent to the choices and actions performed, reducing the chances of regret and causing undesirable collateral damage.
	Self	It is a disciplined attitude and control of emotions, impulses, and desires. It means acting fundamentally based on reason.
Transcendence	Appreciation of beauty	It concerns the identification and understanding of the greatness of various aspects of life. That defined as excellent, includes the natural beauty of the Earth, as well as the achievements of human beings in the various fields of endeavor: sports, science, the arts, and in the various everyday and, apparently, prosaic experiences.
	Gratitude	Acknowledging, rejoicing, and giving thanks for the good things that happen in life, as well as the people who, in one way or another, have contributed to the production of a good life.
	Hope	Optimism about the future. Active work aspiring for good things to occur, since a good future is something that can be achieved.



	Mood	Possibility to laugh and make others laugh, even in the face of adversity. Ability to maintain a humorous attitude and live more lightly.
	Spirituality	Experiencing a sense of purpose and belonging to something greater than oneself. Such an experience may or may not have a religious basis. The important thing is to nurture faith, that is, a set of beliefs that provide meaning to life, generating subjective behaviors and experiences that generate comfort and well-being.

Source: Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Noronha and Barbosa (2016), with additions made by the authors.

This systematization of character forces, proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), is not random. These forces have several shared characteristics that were taken into account to be included in the model proposed by these authors. They contribute to various accomplishments, assisting individuals in the process of building a good life, both for themselves and for those close to them (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Additionally, strengths are morally valued in and of themselves, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes, such as being kind (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Regardless of the outcome, cultivating kindness is a "gain" in itself. Further, a force manifests itself in the realm of an individual's behavior – thoughts, feelings, and/or actions, and because of this, they can be evaluated (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Finally, it should be a trait in the sense of having a degree of generality in all situations, as well as stability over time (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It must, therefore, be something that resists the taste of the variation of humor, although man is a historical subject; therefore, in permanent transformation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

It is also important to point out the following aspects: regarding its social dimension, a strength of character must be incorporated into consensual models; as a result, it should generate satisfactory resolutions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For this reason, societies provide associated institutions and rituals for such forces and virtues to sustain themselves and, as a result, enable the corresponding practice (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

As already mentioned, the levels of a given person's character strengths differ from one another, making it possible to rank them. The forces that have the highest scores are called *signature strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Even acknowledging that certain virtues and character strengths take precedence over others, Peterson and Seligman (2004) do not believe that there is a universal hierarchy, that is, there is no one more important than the other. For them, they are all present in a given society. However, the greater valuation of one or another of the forces and virtues is dependent on the culture, the historical moment and the social order in vogue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).



Having made this explanation, the studies of PP with the teaching population will be presented below, based on the literature review carried out. In addition to the findings of these studies, we will highlight the designs adopted, the instruments used, and which variables were investigated along with the strengths.

THE ROLE OF CHARACTER STRENGTHS IN TEACHER MENTAL HEALTH

As we have pointed out, character strengths are part of the set of constructs, studied in Positive Psychology, that guarantee a good life (Nascimento & Hartmann Júnior, 2021; Noronha & Batista, 2017; Peterson & Park, 2006; Seligman, 2004). In other words, they help the individual to have a satisfactory mental health (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011).

When we analyzed the studies carried out with teachers, found through the literature review, we found that they maintained the tradition of this line of thought in favoring research with a quantitative design and the use of scales. We also observed that, when analyzing the relationship between character strengths and mental health, the authors chose mainly to investigate the aspects that guarantee a healthy psyche: satisfaction with life and well-being – key elements of study of this psychological approach, as we have already informed.

In a study conducted in Slovenia, Gradišek (2012) analyzed the hierarchy of character strengths of both incumbent and junior teachers. In addition, it related them to the life satisfaction of the interviewees. Thus, 173 elementary school teachers and 77 undergraduate science students – who were already teaching at the time – completed the Slovenian versions of the VIA-IS (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener et al., 1985).

The data confirmed, as presented in the literature (Park et al., 2006), the positive correlation that character strengths have with life satisfaction. Those with the highest correlations were hope, vitality, gratitude, love, and curiosity. Regarding the average score in the VIA-IS, the two samples – active and pre-service teachers – shared the greatest character strengths: impartiality, kindness, authenticity and love. These forces also had higher averages than those found in the general population (Park et al., 2006).

When analyzing the questions presented earlier by Heintz and Ruch (2020) whether the character strengths found in teachers are the result of the selection or socialization effect, the data found suggest the first option. Finally, based on the results, Gradišek (2012) understands that acting in a fair and affectionate way with students are necessary characteristics for the teaching-learning process to occur satisfactorily. He adds that it is possible that people with these traits are more likely to pursue a career in teaching.

On the other hand, in the case of active teachers, humor was the force that presented the lowest average, while in the students it was – to the surprise of the researcher – the love of learning.

Both also scored low on creativity, self-regulation, and spirituality. Such forces, when not developed, can negatively interfere in the teacher-student relationship, which justifies, for the author, the stimulation of them from the graduation of future educators (Gradišek, 2012). According to the authors, the love of learning should be strengthened as a value in teacher training, since this is apparently not a criterion for Slovenian university students to choose this career.

Kim and Lim (2016) examined the relationships between virtues and well-being among special education teachers in Korea. To this end, 115 special education educators participated in the study, who responded to two instruments.

To measure virtues, the *Short Form of the Character Strengths Test (CST-SF)* was used (Lim & Kim, 2014). Like other scales based on the VIA-IS, the CST-SF presented a grouping of forces that was different from the theoretical model proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). During the process of constructing the instrument, after it was submitted to factor analysis, the authors identified four dimensions, which were divided as follows: interpersonal virtue (social intelligence, kindness, humor, love, leadership, vitality); virtue of regulation (prudence, self-regulation, critical thinking, modesty, perseverance, impartiality, citizenship, authenticity); intellectual virtue (creativity, love of learning, appreciation of beauty, curiosity, sensibility, bravery); and theological virtue (spirituality, gratitude, forgiveness).

Finally, to investigate well-being, we opted for the Korean version of the *Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF)* (Lim et al., 2013). This divides the construct into two types: hedonic or hedonistic well-being (understood by the authors as a state of positive emotions, such as being happy, satisfied and interested in life) and eudaimonic well-being (referring to the development of skills and talents, aiming to achieve a sense of accomplishment and meaning in life).

The data showed the four virtues correlating positively with the two modes of well-being, although this correlation was stronger with eudaimonic well-being. In other words, in this study, the virtues influenced the teacher's functioning more than their emotional state. Additionally, regression analysis indicated that theological virtue significantly predicted hedonic well-being, while interpersonal virtue did the same for eudaimonic well-being (Kim & Lim, 2016).

Finally, in Brazil, subjective well-being was also the subject of research by Cintra (2016), who conducted research with elementary and high school teachers, relating the construct to other variables, including character strengths. Thus, to measure well-being, 115 teachers responded to the translated version of the *Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving* (Su et al., 2014), which evaluated seven dimensions: a) Subjective Well-Being; b) Relationship; c) Direction; d) Engagement; e) Domain; f) Optimism and; g) Control. For the strengths, we opted for the *Scale of Importance and Perception of Character Strengths for Teachers (IPFC)* (Guerra et al., 2021).



The data revealed that the representative dimensions of well-being showed a positive and significant correlation with most character strengths. Regarding the teacher's identification with the forces, the results were as follows: those who presented higher levels of engagement were those who identified more strongly with the forces of perseverance and vitality. The same was true of Dominion and the forces: love of learning and perseverance; Meaning, Optimism and Subjective Well-Being with vitality; Relationship with hope; and Control with authenticity (Cintra, 2016).

Although in Positive Psychology life satisfaction and well-being are the constructs commonly used for the conceptualization and measurement of mental health, researchers in this line of thought have paid attention to the importance of investigating the relationship of character strengths with various variables that directly or indirectly influence people's quality of life (Chan, 2013; Freitas & Barbosa, 2022; Lian et al., 2021; Noronha & Batista, 2020). Thus, understanding that the panorama presented at the beginning of the chapter should be similar to the reality of teachers in other countries, the incidence of psychopathologies in teachers was also a field of research interest.

Regarding stress and work exhaustion, Chan (2013) observed that the aspects that make up *the Burnout Syndrome* – exhaustion, depersonalization and reduction in the sense of professional accomplishment – are diametrically opposed to a good life. In other words, for the author they are the opposite of a pleasurable, engaged, and meaningful life. Such a description of a good life is based on the paths that the individual can choose to guide his or her life, aiming at the cultivation of happiness (Peterson et al., 2005).

With this in mind, Chan (2013) examined the relationships between subjective well-being, happiness, and the character strengths "gratitude" and "forgiveness." The choice of gratitude and forgiveness, according to the researcher, was because these qualities were among the most important for Confucianism – an important philosophical view in Chinese culture. To do so, he questioned 143 Chinese teachers from Hong Kong, who taught classes in Basic Education. It should also be noted that this universe was formed by part-time students of a graduate university program, who were submitted to a set of scales for data collection.

Regarding the instruments, they were applied in person, namely: *Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6)* (McCullough et al., 2002), which assessed the character strength "gratitude"; *Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS)* (Thompson et al., 2005), and *Orientations to Happiness Scale (OHS)* (Peterson et al., 2005), whose purpose was to measure happiness, based on three possible paths to achieve it – a life oriented towards pleasure, engagement and meaning. In order to analyze subjective well-being, it was operationalized as follows: *Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)* (Diener et al., 1985), to measure general satisfaction with life, and the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)* (Watson et al., 1988) for positive and negative affects.



The results found that the forces of gratitude and forgiveness were positively correlated with each other, and these with happiness oriented by a meaningful life and with subjective well-being. The pattern of correlations suggested that the more grateful, the more likely the educator was to forgive, endorse their happiness through a meaningful life, and thus experience greater satisfaction with life, in addition to having a higher incidence of positive emotions and, as a result, fewer negative emotions (Chan, 2013).

Still in relation to the two character strengths studied, there was a strong negative correlation between forgiveness and negative affect, while gratitude had a weak negative correlation with negative affect. In addition, gratitude was shown to be a strong predictor of satisfaction with life and positive affect, regardless of "forgiveness", whereas forgiveness was only shown to strongly predict these variables when gratitude was included in the prediction. In other words, "forgiveness" alone failed to guarantee a high level of life satisfaction and positive affect. It had to be tied to "gratitude." The authors point out that previous findings also indicated that subjective well-being was associated with gratitude and forgiveness. This implies that cultivating or building these character strengths can lead to increased happiness and subjective well-being (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; McCullough, 2000).

Regarding work burnout, Lian et al. (2021) investigated how character strengths and vocation affect the manifestation of *Burnout Syndrome* and career identification in young Chinese university professors (up to 39 years of age).

For this purpose, data collection was done online. The researchers used the *Brief Strengths Scale (BSS-12)* (Ho et al., 2016) to assess character strengths. This scale groups the forces into three dimensions: a) temperance; b) interpersonal and; c) intellectual. The *Calling Scale* (Zhang et al., 2015) and the *Career Identity Scale* (Wei et al., 2017) were used for vocation and career identification, respectively. Finally, *Burnout Syndrome* was measured using the *Chinese Maslach Burnout Inventory* (Meng et al., 2009).

The results showed a positive correlation between character strengths, vocation and identification with the career. These three aspects, in turn, were negatively correlated with *Burnout Syndrome*. The data also showed that vocation played a partial mediating role between character strengths and career identification. The latter, on the other hand, played a partial mediating role between vocation and *Burnout Syndrome*. Vocation and career identity therefore played a mediating role between character strengths and job burnout. In short, the researchers pointed out that the low level of character strengths indirectly predicts *Burnout Syndrome*, confirming the finding of studies with other audiences (Jackson et al., 2016; Steffanina, 2014).

Lian et al. (2021) justified this relationship because character strengths can be seen as positive personality traits. The research showed that character strengths helped teachers to maintain good



relationships with other people, in addition to contributing to the cultivation of more pleasant feelings, reducing, as a result, the importance given to problems. Another finding was that, with positive behaviors, they ended up influencing students to seek to establish a positive and optimistic relationship with life, without neglecting the need to transform the *status quo* (Lian et al., 2021).

Even if such strategies are not able to eliminate all possibilities of stress at work, it is still possible to affirm, according to the authors, that curiosity, vitality, creativity – just to name a few strengths – are resources that help in the daily challenges encountered in teaching practice. This aspect consequently allows for less physical and mental exhaustion.

In the studies presented, although the researchers investigated different aspects of what we can define as mental health, and that all character strengths, in some way, benefited it, we found that some forces stood out more as promoters of psychic quality, such as, for example, vitality. In this regard, Noronha and Batista (2020) consider that, possibly, vitality, together with self-regulation, are the forces with the greatest potential to act as protective factors against depression and anxiety. They justified this thought to the extent that, while the former enables the subject to live life potentially, in the form of enthusiasm, vigor, energy, and animation, the latter is related to discipline and control of emotions, impulses, and desires (Noronha & Batista, 2020; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Regarding self-regulation, this observation is worrisome, since this force was among the least developed in Gradišek's (2012) sample.

Regarding the aforementioned pathologies, even though they are the most common mental disorders found in this population (Ferreira-Costa & Pedro-Silva, 2018; Silva, 2015), we did not find in our literature review any studies that investigated the relationship between character strengths, anxiety, and depression. The analysis of these variables is important, since we did not find a consensus within the scientific literature on which set of forces is more important in the prevention and reduction of anxiety, depressive and other disorders when observing samples with different populations.

For example, Littman-Ovadia (2015) found a significant and negative relationship between depressive symptoms and the forces of love, curiosity, hope, gratitude, and vitality in the general population. However, when investigating young high school students, Niemiec (2017) observed that the association was with love, self-regulation, hope, and gratitude, in addition to citizenship predicting depression. Finally, in the study by Freitas and Barbosa (2022), with an elderly population, depressive symptoms were negatively related to the strengths of citizenship, curiosity, forgiveness, hope, humor, and vitality.

Regarding gratitude, it was positively related to the life satisfaction of the teachers surveyed by Gradišek (2012), negatively to *the Burnout Syndrome* in Chan's work (2013) and negatively to depressive symptoms in other populations (Littman-Ovadia, 2015; Niemiec, 2017). As gratitude



enables the individual to recognize, rejoice and be grateful both for the good things that happen in life, as well as for the people who help to make it happen, we believe that this trait provides support for the teacher to be able to maintain interpersonal relationships and deal with challenges at work in a "lighter" and healthier way – contributing to not getting sick. The same can be said of hope, since the optimism generated by it makes the subject experience more positive affects and less negative ones. These findings converge with the data found by Noronha and Batista (2020), who found a positive association between the two forces and emotional regulation in Brazilian university students.

In short, the scientific literature indicates that it is pertinent to carry out further studies that deepen the theme of character strengths and their association with the incidence of psychopathologies. They reinforce that, in addition to identifying the environmental aspects with strong stressful potential existing in the practice of teaching, it is necessary to understand the individual characteristics of teachers that influence their relationship with work. Thus, the stress of certain events can be mitigated or avoided, depending on how the educator interprets the situation. In other words, the stimulation and maintenance of character strengths through public or institutional policies can be understood as the expansion of one more protective factor for the psychic health of this population (Chan, 2013; Cintra, 2016; Gradišek, 2012; Heintz & Ruch, 2020; Holik & Sanda, 2020; Kim & Lim, 2016; Lian et al., 2021).



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