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**THE MANIFESTATION OF ANXIETY SYMPTOMS IN THE SCHOOL
ENVIRONMENT – STUDENT AND TEACHER PERSPECTIVES**

Theses for doctoral (PhD) dissertation

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CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	3
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....	6
Study 1: EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL-RELATED ANXIETY AMONG TEACHERS...	7
Research Questions and Hypotheses of Study 1	7
Sample of Study 1	7
Method of Study 1	8
Results of Study 1.....	9
Study 2: EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL ANXIETY AMONG STUDENTS	10
Research Questions and Hypotheses of Study 2	10
Sample of Study 2	10
Method of Study 2	10
Results of Study 2.....	11
Study 3: PSYCHOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF NEWLY DEVELOPED QUESTIONNAIRES EXAMINING ANXIETY SOURCES AMONG TEACHERS AND STUDENTS	12
Research Questions and Hypotheses of Study 3	12
Sample of Study 3	12
Method of Study 3	13
Results of Study 3.....	13
KEY FINDINGS	14
CONCLUSIONS	15
LITERATURE CITED IN THE THESIS.....	16
LIST OF OWN PUBLICATIONS.....	17
Publications directly related to the research:	17
Scientific presentations directly related to the research:	18

INTRODUCTION

In the text of Act CXC. of 2011 on National Public Education, a central concept is the goal of creating an educational system “that promotes the harmonious mental, physical, and intellectual development of children and young people” (Act CXC. of 2011, §1 (1)).

The teacher–student relationship plays a fundamental role in the personality development of the growing generation, both in terms of quantity and quality. Therefore, attention and care toward children and adolescents are indispensable conditions for a healthy developmental path. Although this expectation is clearly articulated for those participating in public education, the question arises as to how well-prepared stakeholders are for its implementation (Mező, 2010).

Beyond the task of education, another key aim of the school environment is to ensure and maintain the safety and healthy physical, mental, and spiritual development of students (*Az Állampolgári Jogok Országgyűlési Biztosának OBH 6213/1998. számú jelentése a diákokat megillető jogok érvényesüléséről a középfokú oktatási intézményekben*, 1998). Among psychological disorders, anxiety is widely prevalent and disrupts educational tasks. Physical and psychological symptoms associated with anxiety may result in frequent school absences, which can lead to tendencies of social isolation, school refusal, underdeveloped social skills, and performance below actual cognitive abilities (e.g., Donovan & Spence, 2000).

Students’ mental health is closely related to the perception they form of the school, and in Hungary, a positive image of school is less commonly reported (Halász & Lannert, 2006). Psychological well-being and mental health encompass, among other factors, health consciousness and a sense of belonging, which are grounded in a realistic self-image, internal stability, autonomy, and the ability to take responsibility (Aszmann et al., 1999). In recent years, students have increasingly perceived school-related tasks as burdensome and have reported unrealistically high expectations from both teachers and parents (Halász & Lannert, 2006). Disruptions to emotional stability or negative experiences related to the self, community, or learning can lead to anxiety-related symptomatology. Therefore, the identification and targeted management of student anxiety can contribute to a more balanced

life both within and outside school, ultimately supporting the upbringing of a healthier generation.

Over recent decades, changes in family life have significantly affected the psychological development of children and adolescents. The altered parenting environment and the nearly unrestricted influence of digital technologies on developmental processes have highlighted the need for a unified framework and the regulation of educational processes in accordance with appropriate value systems. This regulatory role can be fulfilled by schools. More than ever, schools are needed as stable bases where prevention and correction can be implemented. Expectations toward educational institutions are formulated from various perspectives, including those of students, parents, citizens, and the labour market. School leaders and teachers take on a complex task that includes moral education, developing critical thinking, preparing students for further education and careers, and fostering social skills (Halász & Lannert, 2006). As a setting for socialization, the school plays a key role in individuals' integration into society and serves as an effective medium for addressing various educational issues. The emotional education function of schools is indispensable, and through the development of emotional intelligence, cognitive processes also advance (Gombos, Bányai, & Varga, 2009).

The evolving lifestyles of parents and the dual-earner family model have transformed traditional educational roles both in proportion and in quality. Changes in the emotional and identification functions of parental models have disrupted children's optimal personality development, leading to unmet needs and deficiencies. However, the relatively unified framework of the school context, along with centralized regulation and the value transmission by teachers, offers hope for corrective potential. In addition to their traditional educational responsibilities, teachers now also face the added challenge of managing psychological problems and personality development deviations emerging in childhood and adolescence—factors that place increasing demands on teacher preparedness (Bagdy & Telkes, 2002). Teaching is carried out in officially organized frameworks and has a value-transmitting impact. Teachers reach students through their own personalities and identities, and this is the basis of their professional effectiveness, the ultimate goal of which is to prepare students for independent adult life. Thus, beyond universally accepted norms and values, the teacher's own personality and value system also have a significant impact. These

daily personal interactions have amplified effects on society both in the short and long term (Galicza & Schödl, 1993).

The educational function of the teaching profession is fulfilled primarily through personality development, typically via the personal example set by teachers. This requires helping students resolve their difficulties, conflicts, and developmental blocks using concrete techniques and guidance. Interaction with children takes place during their most sensitive and flexible life stage and has daily influence. With this opportunity comes great responsibility, as even a single teacher's comment may leave a lasting impact—either positive or negative (Szebedy, 2005). Unfortunately, the social recognition and respect for the teaching profession have changed significantly in recent years. The future-shaping role of teachers is less acknowledged, and the public often overlooks the demanding and highly responsible nature of teaching work.

Recognizing the central role of teachers in the upbringing and socialization of children and adolescents, numerous studies have focused on assessing the mental health status of educators working in school environments (e.g., Petróczi et al., 1999; Lelesz, 2001; Paksi & Schmidt, 2006; Szelezsánné, 2016). These studies also seek to identify risk and protective factors in maintaining teachers' mental well-being. Under the leadership of Mihály Gáspár, a comprehensive study was conducted with the goal of identifying personality dimensions that mediate the maintenance of teachers' mental health. The results strongly highlighted that the psychological balance and mental health of the teaching population (including teacher candidates) is more fragile than generally assumed (Gáspár & Holecz, 2005; Holecz, 2006; Gáspár, 2008).

The first part of this dissertation presents the theoretical background of anxiety symptomatology as it appears in the school environment, from both student and teacher perspectives. The empirical section is structured into three main parts, focusing on the anxiety experienced by both teachers and students, and introduces two new instruments designed to explore sources of anxiety.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of the research is to examine the levels of anxiety, sources of anxiety, and anxiety management techniques among teachers and students (specifically high school students). The study also focuses on assessing teachers' preparedness to recognize and address anxiety-related symptomatology within the scope of their pedagogical competencies. A third objective is the psychometric analysis of newly developed questionnaires designed to assess sources of anxiety among both teachers and students. The subtopics explored in the research are presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Overview of the Subtopics Examined in the Present Study. Source: Author

Subtopic	Objective	Sample Unit and Size	Data Collection Method
1.	Examination of teachers' anxiety levels, sources of anxiety, and anxiety management techniques. Assessment of teachers' preparedness to recognize and manage anxiety-related symptomatology within their pedagogical competencies.	Teachers (n = 102)	1. STAI-T (Trait Anxiety Inventory) questionnaire 2. Sources of Anxiety in Teachers – Questionnaire 3. Anxiety Management Techniques – Questionnaire 4. Modified MEPS (Means-End Problem Solving) performance test
2.	Examination of high school students' anxiety levels, sources of anxiety, and anxiety management techniques.	Secondary school students (n = 638)	1. STAI-T (Trait Anxiety Inventory) questionnaire 2. Sources of Anxiety in Students – Questionnaire 3. Anxiety Management Techniques – Questionnaire
3.	Psychometric analysis of the newly developed questionnaires measuring anxiety sources in teachers and students.	Questionnaires (n = 2)	Reliability and validity testing

Study 1: EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL-RELATED ANXIETY AMONG TEACHERS

Research Questions and Hypotheses of Study 1

This study investigates anxiety among teachers through the following research questions and hypotheses:

Research Question 1: Does gender and years of experience in the teaching profession influence teachers' quantitative indicators of anxiety (self-assessment of specific and overall sources of anxiety, and scores on the Trait Anxiety Inventory – STAI-T)?

Hypothesis 1: It is assumed that gender and years of professional experience affect the quantitative characteristics of anxiety. Male teachers and those with more years of experience are expected to report fewer sources of anxiety, a lower total intensity of anxiety sources, and lower trait anxiety scores (as measured by the STAI-T).

Research Question 2: Do gender and years of teaching experience correlate with more effective responses to student anxiety-related problem situations (measured by the quantity and quality of their responses to anxiety-inducing scenarios)?

Hypothesis 2: Female teachers and those with more teaching experience are expected to provide more relevant responses to anxiety-related problem scenarios.

Research Question 3: Does gender and teaching experience influence teachers' successful coping with anxiety (measured by the number of adaptive anxiety-reducing techniques they employ)?

Hypothesis 3: Gender and teaching experience are hypothesized to impact anxiety coping strategies. Female teachers and those with longer experience are expected to use more adaptive anxiety-reducing techniques.

Sample of Study 1

A total of $n = 102$ teachers participated in the study (21 men and 81 women, representing a 21% : 79% ratio). Among them, 40% had been working in education for 1 to

10 years, while 60% had over 11 years of teaching experience. The sample was composed of teachers working in public education institutions. Participants were selected from Northern and Eastern Hungary, as the findings of the study are intended for initial application and interpretation in these regions. The study employed convenience sampling and was conducted via an anonymous online questionnaire, completed voluntarily by the participants, in accordance with ethical and data protection guidelines.

Method of Study 1

The teacher-focused sub-study was conducted online. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation, the anonymity of data processing, and the research focus (school-related anxiety symptomatology).

The following tools were used for data collection:

1. *STAI-Trait (STAI-T) Subscale – Trait Anxiety Questionnaire* (Spielberger, 1970; Sipos, K. & Sipos, M., 1978)

A self-report paper-pencil (or online) questionnaire assessing trait-like anxiety characteristics.

2. *Assessment of Known and Practiced Anxiety Management Techniques*

A list-based self-report tool in which participants marked the anxiety-reducing techniques they knew and used. The list included: autogenic training, breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, mindfulness, imagination, cognitive techniques, and other techniques.

3. *Modified Means-End Problem Solving Test (mMEPS)*

A paper-pencil (or online) open-ended tool using text completion tasks to examine how teachers perceive and address students' anxiety through realistic school-related problem scenarios.

4. *Sources of Anxiety in Teachers (SZF-P) Questionnaire*

A self-developed, Likert-scale (1–5) instrument to assess teachers' perceived sources of anxiety.

Results of Study 1

H1: Not supported. The first hypothesis – that teachers' gender and years of experience significantly influence their anxiety indicators – was not confirmed. Specifically, the assumption that male teachers and those with more experience would report fewer and less intense anxiety sources, as well as lower trait anxiety (STAI-T) scores, did not hold. Exception: Female teachers were significantly more likely to report anxiety in connection with: the necessity to involve the child protection signaling system, witnessing peer bullying, intervening in physical altercations between students. In contrast, male teachers reported significantly higher anxiety related to administrative burdens associated with the educational system. No other anxiety sources, nor the four factors of the SZF-P questionnaire (instructional, educational, indirect pedagogical tasks, and systemic/administrative), showed significant differences by gender or years of teaching experience. STAI-T scores did not differ significantly based on either variable. No significant interaction effect was found between gender and years of experience on anxiety levels. Thus, no statistically significant differences were found between groups based on gender, years of professional experience, or their combination in terms of anxiety source scores or STAI-T scores. Importantly, teachers' trait anxiety scores did not significantly differ from normative values in the general population.

H2: Not supported. The second hypothesis – that female teachers and those with more experience would give more relevant responses in anxiety-related problem scenarios – was also not supported. Thus, neither gender nor length of professional experience predicted more appropriate responses in hypothetical student anxiety situations.

H3: Not supported. The third hypothesis – that female teachers and those with longer teaching experience would employ more adaptive anxiety management strategies – was not

supported either. No significant association was found between these variables and the number of adaptive anxiety-reducing techniques reported.

Study 2: EXAMINATION OF SCHOOL ANXIETY AMONG STUDENTS

Research Questions and Hypotheses of Study 2

The question and hypothesis related to the student population:

Research Question: Does the students' gender and grade level influence the level of trait anxiety (as measured by the STAI-T questionnaire), the number of anxiety management methods they know and use, and the nature of the anxiety sources they experience?

Hypothesis: It is expected that students' gender and grade level affect trait anxiety, the experience of anxiety sources, and the number of anxiety management methods they know and use. It is presumed that girls will have higher anxiety levels and anxiety source scores, as well as use a greater number of anxiety management methods. It is also expected that students in lower grades will have higher anxiety levels and total anxiety source scores, but use fewer anxiety management techniques compared to students in higher grades.

Sample of Study 2

A total of $n = 638$ high school students participated in the study (mean age = 16.46 years; age standard deviation = 1.340; youngest respondent was 14 years old, oldest was 20 years old). Per grade, there were on average 159.5 students, with approximately 65 boys and 94.5 girls in the sample (male : female ratio = 40.75% : 59.25%). The study used convenience sampling with group online questionnaire administration guided by teachers. The regional selection criterion was that students from the North and East Hungary regions were included in the study, because the application of the research results is expected to take place primarily in this area.

Method of Study 2

The data collection tools used were as follows:

1. *STAI-Trait Subscale – Trait Anxiety Questionnaire* (Spielberger, 1970; Sipos, K. & Sipos, M., 1978)

The goal was to measure the level of personality-related anxiety among students. Therefore, participants answered the twenty items of the Spielberger Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-T) online using Google Forms.

2. *Assessment of Known and Used Anxiety Management Methods*

This was a paper-pencil (or online) method where participants indicated from a provided list which anxiety management techniques they know and use. The list included: autogenic training, breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, mindfulness, imagination, cognitive techniques, and other methods.

3. *Students' Anxiety Sources (SZF-T) Questionnaire*

A self-developed paper-pencil (or online) questionnaire to assess the anxiety sources of students, with responses given on a 1–5 Likert scale indicating the level of anxiety experienced.

Results of Study 2

The hypothesis stating that “students’ gender and grade level influence trait anxiety, the experience of anxiety sources, and the number of anxiety management methods they know and use” was partially confirmed.

Study 3: PSYCHOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF NEWLY DEVELOPED QUESTIONNAIRES EXAMINING ANXIETY SOURCES AMONG TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Research Questions and Hypotheses of Study 3

Research Question 1: Is the face validity of the questionnaires examining anxiety sources among students and teachers adequate, and can independent raters correctly identify both the scope of the questionnaires and their target groups?

Hypothesis 1: It is assumed that independent raters will be able to identify the broader scope of the questionnaires (anxiety, sources of anxiety) and their target groups (teachers and students) based on reviewing the questionnaires.

Research Question 2: Do the questionnaires examining anxiety sources demonstrate internal consistency reliability?

Hypothesis 2: It is expected that the anxiety questionnaires and their subscales will show acceptable internal consistency, indicated by Cronbach's alpha (α) values between 0.70 and 0.95.

Research Question 3: Do the questionnaires examining anxiety sources demonstrate construct reliability?

Hypothesis 3: The questionnaires assessing sources of anxiety will show adequate construct reliability.

Research Question 4: Do the questionnaires examining anxiety sources demonstrate concurrent validity?

Hypothesis 4: It is assumed that strong correlations indicating concurrent validity will be observed between results of different anxiety assessment methods.

Sample of Study 3

Face validity was evaluated by a focus group of five experienced professionals. The internal consistency analysis included 4,080 responses for the teacher questionnaire and 30,624 responses for the student questionnaire. Responses were grouped into four factors for teachers and six factors for students. Construct reliability was examined using factor analysis. Concurrent validity was assessed by comparing results from three different

instruments in both groups: anxiety sources questionnaires, the STAI-T trait anxiety questionnaire, and the modified MEPS procedure.

Method of Study 3

Data collection was conducted using previously described methods. The instruments used included:

- **For teachers:** Anxiety sources questionnaire (teacher version), STAI-T trait anxiety questionnaire, modified MEPS, and assessment of knowledge/use of anxiety management techniques.
- **For students:** Anxiety sources questionnaire (student version), STAI-T trait anxiety questionnaire, and assessment of knowledge/use of anxiety management techniques.

Data analyses involved calculating Cronbach's alpha, Pearson and Spearman correlations, and confirmatory factor analysis, using SPSS 22 and JASP 0.19.3 statistical software.

Results of Study 3

H1: The first hypothesis concerning face validity was confirmed. Independent raters reached full consensus because the questionnaire's textual information clearly communicated its topic and target audience, consistent with the developers' intentions.

H2: The second hypothesis on internal consistency was supported. The questionnaires and their subscales showed acceptable Cronbach's alpha values within the expected range (0.70–0.95).

H3: The third hypothesis on construct reliability was partially confirmed. Although the questionnaires showed some construct reliability, further development and calibration are necessary.

H4: The fourth hypothesis on concurrent validity was not confirmed. Among teachers, only moderate correlations ($r = 0.4\text{--}0.5$) were observed between sources of anxiety and trait anxiety. No significant correlation was found regarding anxiety recognition and management in relation to the anxiety sources questionnaire.

KEY FINDINGS

a) For teachers:

- No differences were found based on gender or years in the profession regarding the number and intensity of anxiety sources or trait anxiety. Average trait anxiety in the sample did not differ from population averages.
- No gender or experience-related differences appeared in anxiety-related problem situations among teachers.
- Teachers with longer careers or female teachers did not report using more anxiety-reduction techniques.

b) For students:

- High school girls showed higher anxiety levels than boys; the average trait anxiety of girls in the sample was higher than in previous studies.
- No significant differences were found between grades regarding sources of anxiety.
- Girls in the sample reported more known anxiety-reduction techniques than boys.

c) Regarding the anxiety source questionnaires:

- Both new instruments (teacher and student versions) demonstrated adequate face validity and internal consistency reliability. However, confirmatory factor analyses suggested that further calibration is needed to improve construct reliability.
- Moderate correlations between anxiety source questionnaires and the STAI-T trait anxiety scale indicate some relationship, but future research should compare these tools with other diagnostic instruments focusing on anxiety sources.

Novel Contributions of the Research:

- Development of a questionnaire procedure for assessing teachers' sources of anxiety
- Development of a questionnaire procedure for assessing students' sources of anxiety
- Modified MEPS questionnaire

CONCLUSIONS

The practical benefits of the research and the comprehensive recommendations based on the results:

a) From the students' perspective:

The introduction of a new measurement tool in educational diagnostics for assessing students' sources of anxiety becomes possible. This enables personalized and source-specific prevention and intervention programs tailored to students.

b) From the teachers' perspective:

Teachers can receive information within their competency area about students' anxiety sources and relevant problem-solving options. Based on this information, individualized preventive and interventive treatments can be provided to maintain psychological balance and reduce anxiety, along with teaching person- and anxiety-specific anxiety management techniques.

c) From the perspective of educational institutions:

Increasing teacher competence within the institution in educational and indirect pedagogical tasks can be achieved if teachers have sufficient knowledge about students' anxiety and its sources. The atmosphere within the teaching staff and students' satisfaction with the school can be improved if the prevalence of anxiety symptoms at the local level is kept low, and if both teachers and students possess effective coping skills.

d) From the perspective of teacher education and professional development:

The preparedness and sense of competence of teachers in personality development and educational tasks can be enhanced by integrating knowledge about students' anxiety symptoms into teacher training and continuing education curricula.

e) From the perspective of educational institution maintainers:

Supporting and preserving the psychological well-being of teachers and students can contribute to the successful fulfillment of maintainers' requirements (e.g., filling teaching positions, maintaining student numbers). Absences due to anxiety symptoms, related financial costs (e.g., substitute teacher fees, lessons and exams for individually scheduled students), and additional administrative burdens reduce the maintainers' efficiency indicators. Timely identification of anxiety can reduce these burdens, prevent teacher burnout, and decrease related turnover.

f) *From the perspective of education policy:*

Diagnostic, preventive/intervention, and teacher training and professional development improvements addressing both teachers' and students' perspectives can help prevent teacher attrition and make the teaching profession more attractive, partly by reducing anxiety related to school learning, teaching, and education, which often manifests as adverse side effects.

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