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SOCITS - PREDICTOR FOR PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS' CHOICES TO PURSUE TEACHING CAREER

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Abstract

Sense of Coherence (SOC), an inner resource that exists within people, is positively associated with better quality of life and satisfaction. It is related to how well people manage to cope with the stressful situations they face making them more comprehensible, meaningful and manageable. Among college and university students SOC is positively associated with the capability to cope with the academic challenges posed upon them. Furthermore, pre-service teachers show that Sense of Coherence in Teaching Situations (SOCITS) has been found to be a coping strategy that helps them perceive stressful and challenging teaching situations as less perplexing. However, what is less clear in the teacher education literature to date, is to what extent high levels of SOCITS can influence career engagement among pre-service teachers and whether it can be a predictor of pre-service teachers' choices to pursue a career in teaching upon graduating from their teaching training program. The current paper contributes to the understanding of SOC and SOCITS among pre-service teachers. The findings in this paper may advance the knowledge in the field of pre-service education and have significant implications as to the development of teacher training programs.

Keywords: Career choice, pre-service teachers, sense of soherence, sense of coherence in teaching situations

1. Introduction

People, regardless of who they are and their position in life, face difficult and trying situations. Learning how to cope with these situations is a necessary skill that everyone must develop. Antonovsky (1979) suggested that a strong Sense of Coherence, an inner source consisting of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness, could aid in dealing with these situations. College and university students are among those who face a plethora of challenges during their studies and these include making life altering decisions regarding their career choices. Pre-service teachers pursuing a degree in education have to confront even more hardships. In addition to attending classes at the university or college, they are required to attend teaching practicum in schools and to teach. The practicum has various goals, including exposing the pre-service teachers to real-world teaching situations and allowing them to apply the pedagogical knowledge they have acquired at the college or university (Cohen et al., 2013), enabling them to develop a teacher identity (Tran & Huynh, 2017) and increasing their confidence (Mukeredzi, 2016; Wee et al., 2014). However, this experience exposes the pre-service teachers to various new challenges, teaching-related stress and uncertainties and in some cases even leads to burnout (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016). The teaching experiences in the practicum have been found to significantly affect the pre-service teachers' commitment, their intentions to quit and career decisions (Nghia & Huynh; 2019; Pfitzner-Eden, 2016). Therefore, pre-service teaches must deal not only with the regular challenges of a college student, but also the demands and responsibilities put upon them during their practicum as pre-service teachers. This paper relates to this specific group of students, pre-service teachers. It discusses the notion of Sense of Coherence in Teaching Situations (SOCITS) focusing on the potential link between SOCITS and career intentions, specifically concentrating on SOCITS being used as a predictor of pre-service teachers' decisions to pursue a career in teaching.

1.1. The Salutogenic Model

Antonovsky (1979, 1987) introduced the "Salutogenic Model" in 1979. Contrary to the pathogenic approach that mainly focuses on the causes of diseases and preventing them (Sagy, 2011), the salutogenic model focuses on the origins of health and assumes that in the modern world, stress and illnesses are part of an individual's life. The two main assumptions of this model are that humans are constantly under attack of various stimuli and unless dealt with, these stimuli will cause diseases. This model further seeks to answer the question of how individuals can cope with the difficulties around them and tries to find and examine the factors that will allow individuals to foster a healthy life, despite the difficulties and stress. Moreover, the salutogenic model tries to shed light on why certain people live healthy lives and find ways to cope with the stressful situations they are exposed to, while others don't. Antonovsky (1979) identified different types of stressors, including chronical stressors, which relate to permanent situations or traits, such as a disability; major-life events which relate to situations that occur at a specific time or place and have consequences, such as the death of a spouse; and daily aggravations which relate to minor but annoying incidents, such as an altercation with a colleague. All these stressors have been found to affect an individual's mental and physical health (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006, 2014).

This model led to the introduction of the term Generalized Resistance Resources or GRRs. GRRs encompass the characteristics of a person, group or community that can help an individual cope effectively with the stimuli, including factors such as material resources, knowledge and intelligence, social support and one's self-identity, by preventing the tension from being transformed into stress (Figure 1) (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky's insights on GRRs led to the notion of Sense of Coherence (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1979). In recent studies it has been found that not only do the GRRs contribute to the development of SOC, but that SOC can also affect GRRs (Idan et al., 2017).
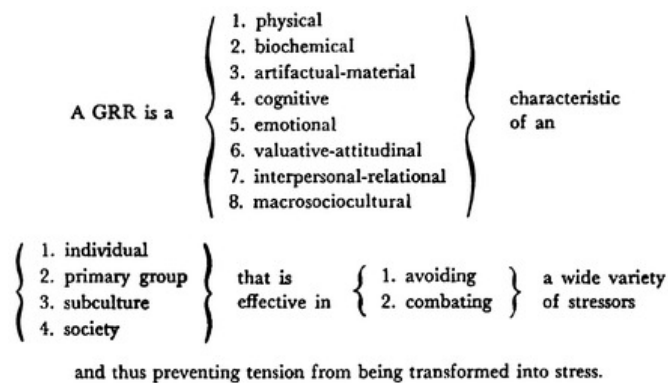

Figure 1. Definition of a GRR (Antonovsky, 1979, p. 103)

1.2. Sense of Coherence

Sense of Coherence (SOC) is an inner resource that exists in people and is an essential personality component (Figure 2). It consists of 3 elements: Comprehensibility, which relates to the extent to which one views situations as understandable and predictable; Manageability which relates to the extent to which one feels control over situations and the belief that one has the motivation, support, skills and resources to cope with these situations; and Meaningfulness which relates to the degree to which one feels that life has significance and that problems are worth dealing with (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky (1979) assumed that SOC, which exists in all cultures, is related to how well people manage to cope with the stressful situations they face by employing their GRRs and reflecting on the stressful situations, so they become comprehensible, meaningful and manageable. Individuals with higher SOC don't relate to stress as a threat but have the ability to see events as challenges that occur for a reason and have the necessary resources to manage these events. Different studies relating to SOC have been conducted among diverse populations and domains. The results indicate that people with strong SOC have a higher quality of life (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005, 2006) and tend to be less susceptible to the adversities in life (Surtees et al., 2007).
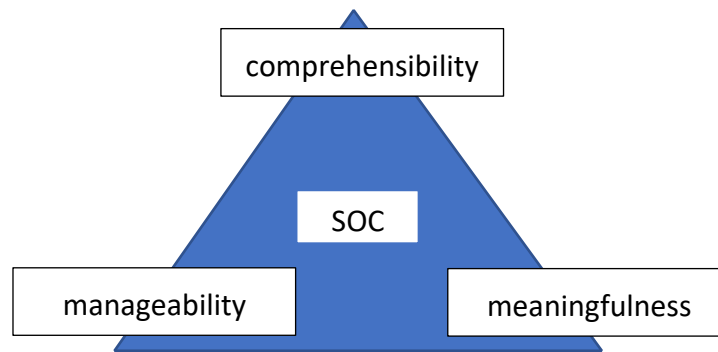
Figure 2. The Components of Sense of Coherence

Although Antonovsky (1979) found that SOC develops early on in an individual's life and is reinforced mainly in childhood and early adulthood, specifically before the age of 30, more recent studies have confirmed that SOC continues to develop throughout our entire lives (Nilsson et al., 2010). In addition, interventions such as psychosocial training and teaching work coping strategies, can affect SOC levels, thus, even in adulthood changes are possible (Skodova & Lajciakova, 2013).

1.3. Sense of Coherence amongst Students

The university or college environment is both a place for academic enrichment and socialization. College students are not only in a period of social development, but they also experience various stressful situations during their studies. They must cope with issues relating to academic challenges, social relationships and making career plans (Togari et al., 2008), workload (Carmel & Bernstein, 1990), daily aggravations, manageability, and meaningfulness (Shankland et al., 2019). Mato and Tsukasaki (2017) found that amongst university students in Japan, social capital (also known as the strength of social support networks) and self-efficacy, both act as GRRs that promote the development of SOC, while the latter was found to be the strongest factor influencing the university students' SOC. Successful experiences and supportive relationships lead to higher self-efficacy which in turn leads to increased SOC in university students. Kim et al. (2017) also found evidence for perceived social support functioning as a GRR and influencing SOC among university students whereas lack of such support being a risk factor in academic contexts. The positive impact of perceived social support was also confirmed in Shankland et al. (2019) amid students in higher education.

Students with higher levels of SOC were found to experience fewer difficulties in a less stressful manner during their studies (Hochwälder & Saied, 2018). University students with higher levels of SOC were also found to be more capable of dealing with daily annoyances which resulted in a decrease in academic burnout (Shankland et al., 2019). In a study by Chu et al. (2016) the results indicate that university students in Japan with higher SOC levels performed better than students with lower levels of SOC and the lower the levels of SOC, the higher the levels of perceived stress. In the same study, higher levels of SOC were associated with positive relationships, more social support and less feelings of

isolation (Chu et al., 2016). In a more recent study, Escobar-Castellanos et al. (2018) found support for the notion that SOC can be used to predict students' quality of life.

Additional research conducted with college students shows a positive connection between SOC and task-oriented coping styles, which include planning, applying problem solving strategies and positively interpretating situations (Krok, 2016). On the other hand, students who rely on emotion-oriented styles, such as venting and self-blame were found to have lower levels of SOC (Konaszewski et al., 2019) and suffer more from test anxiety (Cohen et al., 2008).

Furthermore, students with high SOC have been found to be more capable of coping with career decision making processes (Lustig & Strausser, 2008). In a study by Austin et al. (2010), it was found that people with higher levels of SOC were less constrained when dealing with career choices. They were less confused and less anxious about these choices.

1.4. Pre-service Teachers and Sense of Coherence

Pre-service teachers are students who are currently enrolled in teacher preparation programs in colleges or universities and are in the process of studying towards a degree in education as well as a teaching certificate. They are usually young people who have not reached the age of 30, thus, their SOC is still being developed. In addition to being college or university students and having to face academic, personal and social challenges in the college setting, they must also handle the responsibilities in their teaching practicum in the schools, as described above. The combination of these challenges cause tension and additional stress (Togari et al., 2008).

Teacher stress is of great concern in schools around the world, and in-field teachers have been found to have higher levels of stress than in any other profession, with about a quarter of schoolteachers regarding teaching as a 'very or extremely stressful' job (Kyriacou, 2001). Kyriacou (2001, p. 28) defined teacher stress as "the experience of unpleasant, negative emotions experienced by teachers such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher". Since then, the notion of stress has become the center of attention in the education world and in the world of teacher training programs. Pre-service teachers have reported the teaching practicum to be the most stressful part of their teaching training program for over three decades (e.g., Chaplain, 2008; MacDonald, 1993). A recent study by Haji (2019) dealing with the practicum experience of Iraqi EFL pre-service teachers confirms this claim and further shows that lack of sufficient support and feedback from supervisors and cooperating teachers during the practicum was one of the main concerns and causes of stress of the EFL pre-service teachers. Classroom management, poor coordination between the schools and the colleges and lack of cooperation between the pre-service teacher and the mentors were also found to be significant causes of stress among pre-service teachers (Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2009). Mahmoudi and Ozkan (2016) found similar results and added that the pre-service teacher's experiences during the practicum even have a significant influence on their decisions to pursue a career in teaching.

1.5. Sense of Coherence in Teaching Situations

In order to understand SOC in specific teaching situations, Bracha and Hoffenbartal (2011) introduced the concept of Sense of Coherence in Teaching Situations (SOCITS). This concept, based on Antonovsky's notion of SOC, focuses directly on teaching situations and its introduction enabled the identification of an inner coping resource for pre-service teachers. SOCITS focuses on teachers' feelings and it relates to "the extent to which the teacher has a sense of confidence in the predictable, familiar teaching situations, and the belief that one can cope so that teaching situations will be managed in the best way" (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2011). SOCITS also has 3 components: Comprehensibility - the cognitive component, which relates to the extent to which the pre-service teacher perceives teaching situations as meaningful and predictable; Manageability - the behavioral component, which relates to the extent to which the pre-service teacher believes the available resources are satisfactory in the attempt to meet the demands placed by both external and internal stimuli in teaching problems; Meaningfulness - the motivational-emotional component, which relates to the extent to which the pre-service teacher feels teaching situations are emotionally meaningful and that at least some of the daily requirements can be considered a challenge and not a burden (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2011).

Bracha and Hoffenbartal (2015) confirmed the existence of SOCITS and found that higher levels of SOCITS had a positive effect on pre-service teachers' motivation to deal with crises and stressful situations. This supports the findings in Grayson (2008) who showed that pre-service teachers with higher levels of SOC who perceived their problems as comprehensible and manageable were found to be more likely to succeed.

Bracha and Bocos (2015), found that SOCITS was also an effective coping resource for interns in their first year of teaching. Those who demonstrated higher levels of SOCITS, had lower levels of burnout, confirming the results in Sagy (2000) who found that SOC can be a predictor of burnout rates. They also felt less mental and physical exhaustion and experienced less feelings of incompetence. In addition, they had fewer negative thoughts regarding their work and deliberated less about choosing teaching as their career and therefore were better able to cope with the challenges of being both a student and a teacher.

2. Problem Statement

Although much research has been conducted on SOC and its effects on college students, very little research exists on SOCITS. Furthermore, to date, no research has been carried out to investigate SOCITS among pre-service EFL teachers and whether it can be used as a predictor of pre-service teachers' decisions to pursue a career in teaching upon graduation.

3. Research Questions

This paper refers to the question of whether SOCITS can be an indicator and predictor of EFL pre-service teachers' choices to pursue a career in teaching upon graduation.

4.   Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to elaborate on and discuss the notion of SOCITS. It further tries to investigate whether SOCITS can be used as an indicator and predictor of EFL pre-service teachers' choice to pursue a career in teaching upon graduation.

5.   Research Methods

The current paper is a theoretical paper, based on a comprehensive and updated literature review that discusses the notion of SOCITS as a predictor for pre-service EFL teachers' choices to pursue a career in teaching. It focuses on the various perspectives presented in previous studies.

6.   Findings

Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) salutogenic model has identified Sense of Coherence (SOC) as an essential personality trait and an inner resource that exists in people of all cultures and allows them to cope with difficult and stressful situations. In this review, it has been noted that GRRs, generalized resistance resources, which may include emotional, physical and cognitive factors in an individual are responsible for developing SOC. Contrary to Antonovsky's claim, more recent studies have shown that SOC may continue to develop throughout our entire lives, and not only until the age of 30, as a result of interventions (Skodova & Lajciakova, 2013).

This paper has highlighted several studies suggesting that SOC among college and university students is used as a coping resource and allows them to relate to stressful and challenging situations in a positive way instead of perceiving such situations as stressful and impeding. In a time when students face endless difficulties, higher levels of SOC have been identified as a way to cope with workload (Carmel & Bernstein, 1990), experience fewer agitations (Hochwälder & Saied, 2018), accomplish higher achievements (Chu et al., 2016) and better handle their academic challenges (Togari et al., 2008). Moreover, studies (e.g., Austin et al., 2010, Togari et al., 2008) also provide evidence for SOC being a coping strategy that improves career decision processes, helping the students become less confused, less anxious and less constrained when making such decisions. In addition, when students have successful experiences and supportive human relationships, their views on life become more positive which results in higher SOC. As a result, they are better able to use these human resources, GRRs, to cope with the stressful situations (Mato & Tsukasaki, 2017).

Findings from all these studies may provide important implications for teacher training programs. Pre-service teachers are students who are currently enrolled in teacher training programs and are first and foremost students in colleges or universities. However, pre-service teachers are also required to do their teaching practicum in schools, which actually gives them a real-life test of their abilities and competences as teachers. It also exposes them to additional challenges, stress and uncertainties (Kokkinos & Stavropoulos, 2016). As shown in previous studies (e.g., Haji, 2019; Mahmoudi & Ozkan, 2016), pre-service teachers' practicum stress can be a result of lack of support and feedback, classroom management issues and lack of cooperation between the pre-service teacher and the mentor (Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2009).

This leads to a need to identify GRRs, develop different strategies for controlling stress, instruct pre-service teachers on how to use these coping mechanisms during their practicum to reduce stress to some extent and help the pre-service teachers develop in their future professions (Mahmoudi & Ozkan, 2016).

As shown in previous studies (Chaplain, 2008; Kyriacou, 2001), the teaching profession has been found to be more stressful than any other profession and the levels of stress among pre-service teachers can be said to be higher than that of regular college or university students, which is a worrying situation that must be dealt with. The studies discussed in the introduction suggest that high levels of SOC allow students to perceive the stressful situations they face as less threatening and as such it enables them to use their inner resources and cope with the stressful situations.

The notion of Sense of Coherence in Teaching Situations (SOCITS), introduced in 2011 by Bracha and Hoffenbartal, focuses specifically on pre-service teachers' feelings and relates to SOC in teaching situations. Not only was SOCITS identified as a coping resource among pre-service teachers (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2015), but it was also found to be a predictor of interns' levels of burnout (Bracha & Bocos, 2015). Hoffenbartal and Bocos (2015) claim that pedagogical instructors in teacher training programs can build more effective programs if the characteristics of SOCITS and the factors that enhance or hinder them are understood. In other words, teacher training programs could integrate SOCITS into the syllabi, including its meaning and components, so that pre-service teachers can learn to use it as a resource and a strategy for coping with stressful teaching situations. This may help pre-service teachers become more confident and competent teachers.

7.   Conclusion

The literature highlights the importance of high levels of SOC and SOCITS among college and university students and pre-service teachers around the world and the significance of developing their levels of SOCITS. Stress can have negative impacts on both performance and teacher satisfaction. Therefore, it is essential for pre-service teachers to develop coping strategies to deal with the challenges and stressful situations they encounter, both in the college and in their teaching practicum. This may help pre-service teachers gain the ability to cope with tense, demanding and challenging situations, which is essential for their commitment to the teaching profession.

The notion of SOC and SOCITS can therefore be of added value to teachers and to teaching training programs around the world.

However, despite the abundance of research on SOC and its effects on university and college students, there is a scarcity of information on SOCITS with very few studies conducted in the field, to date, that this researcher is aware of. In addition, no research to date has checked how SOCITS affects EFL pre-service teachers' choices to pursue a career in teaching upon graduating from their teacher training program.

This paper sheds light on the notion of SOCITS among pre-service teachers and consequently a more comprehensive research will be conducted. The research will involve three studies that aim to determine which variables can acts as predictors of EFL pre-service teachers' intentions to pursue a teaching career upon graduation: motivation, self-efficacy and SOCITS. The focus of these studies is designed around the TREP Program: a teacher training program focusing on Teaching, student-instructor

Relationships, Exposure to successful EFL teachers or experts and Pedagogy. The program's contribution to the motivation, self-efficacy and levels of sense of coherence in teaching situations among EFL pre-service teachers in a teacher training college in Israel will be examined.

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