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Comparative Report: Survey Results on Highly Sensitive Children (HSC) in school environment in France and the Czech Republic

Fragile Power: How to support highly sensitive children

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Introduction

This comparative report analyzes the survey results on highly sensitive children (HSC) in school environment in France and the Czech Republic. The surveys, conducted in May – June 2024 at primary schools, aimed to gather insights from educators regarding their experience with HSC, focusing on cognitive, emotional and social aspects, as well as the practices implemented to support these children and the needs for the inclusion of HSC into the school environment so they could harness their potential. The report highlights similarities and differences between the two countries, draws conclusions, identifies needs and proposes solutions to enhance the support for HSC in educational settings. The findings serve as an input analyses for the creation of project results, namely methodology for educators and comic book for children and teenagers, and help define best practices and methods for working with highly sensitive children.

Demographics and Awareness

France

- **Sample Size:** 27 participants
- **Roles:**
 - 2 directors
 - 11 teachers
 - 2 special educators
 - 2 extracurricular educators
 - 10 others
- **Awareness:** 81% of participants were aware of the concept of high sensitivity.

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Czech Republic

- **Sample Size:** 55 participants
- **Roles:**
 - 25 subject teachers
 - 18 class teachers
 - 8 directors/administrators
 - 6 special educators
 - 6 school psychologists
 - 4 educational assistants
 - 4 prevention specialists
 - 4 other roles (career counselors, art therapists, etc.)
- **Awareness:** 69% of respondents were aware of the concept of high sensitivity, with varying degrees of familiarity.

This percentage does not reflect the extent of the respondents' knowledge. It can also be assumed that the questionnaire was mainly completed by those who consider the topic important, which may distort the overall situation within the teaching staff.

It is to say that each respondent brought different insights and the information is varied and limited.

Cognitive Strengths and Challenges

France

- **Strengths:**
 - **Maturity and Precocity:** HSC often exhibit a higher level of maturity and precocity compared to their peers.
 - **Curiosity and Concentration:** They show deep curiosity and can concentrate intensely on subjects of interest.
 - **Perfectionism:** A tendency towards perfectionism, leading to high-quality work when interested.
 - **Imagination:** Rich imagination and creativity.
 - **Intensity:** Experience events and information with greater intensity.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Information Management:** Can be overwhelmed by too much information or excessively detailed in their organization.
 - **Emotional Overwhelm:** The intense experience of events can sometimes lead to cognitive overload.

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Czech Republic

- **Strengths:**
 - **Intelligence and Analytical Abilities:** Often demonstrate high intelligence and strong analytical skills.
 - **Observation Skills:** Highly observant and quick to notice changes in their environment.
 - **Empathy and Creativity:** Show significant empathy and creative thinking.
 - **Memory:** Good memory and ability to connect learned concepts.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Overstimulation and Concentration:** Easily overstimulated, which affects their ability to concentrate, especially in noisy environments.
 - **Negative Reactions to Failure:** Tend to react strongly to failure and pressure, leading to anxiety or withdrawal.
 - **Emotional Distraction:** Strong emotions can distract from learning tasks.

The responses from France and the Czech Republic show notable similarities in recognizing the creativity, superior intellectual and observational skills of HSC. However, they diverge in their emphasis on specific cognitive strengths and challenges. France focuses more on maturity, curiosity, and perfectionism, while the Czech Republic underscores intelligence, analytical skills, and memory. Challenges in France are more about managing detailed information and emotional overload, whereas in the Czech Republic, the focus is on handling overstimulation, negative reactions to failure, and emotional distraction.

The representation of reflection on both strengths and weaknesses speaks to the need for HSC support in the school environment to eliminate difficulties as much as possible.

Emotional Strengths and Challenges

France

- **Strengths:**
 - **Empathy and Care:** High levels of empathy, often caring for peers.
 - **Leadership Potential:** Can take on leadership roles, especially if extroverted.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Intense Emotional Experiences:** Feelings are experienced intensely, leading to potential emotional overwhelm.
 - **Vulnerability to Harassment:** Introverted HSC may be more susceptible to bullying. They have a high sense of empathy that makes them automatically in a position to care for others to the point of overadaptation at times while making it also difficult to fully fit in in some cases.
 - **Anxiety and Self-Doubt:** Frequent questioning and doubting, sometimes leading to anxiety.

Czech Republic

- **Strengths:**
 - **Empathy and Mindfulness:** Deep empathy and attentiveness to others' emotions.
 - **Authentic Emotional Expression:** Capable of genuine and authentic emotional expression.
 - **Self-Awareness:** High level of self-awareness regarding their own emotional states.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Emotional Overwhelm:** Prone to strong emotional reactions that can be difficult to manage.
 - **Emotional Lability:** Emotional states can fluctuate, causing issues with stability and focus.
 - **Absorbing Others' Emotions:** Often absorb emotions from their surroundings, leading to emotional fatigue.
 - **Difficulty Expressing Emotions:** Although they are perceptive, they may have difficulty expressing emotions because they are afraid of being seen as too emotional.

The emotional strengths of HSC in both France and the Czech Republic prominently feature empathy, but they are described with different nuances: leadership and care in France versus mindfulness, authentic expression and self-awareness in the Czech Republic. The challenges are similarly rooted in emotional intensity but differ in specific aspects: France focuses on vulnerability to harassment and anxiety, while the Czech Republic emphasizes emotional lability, absorbing emotions and difficulties in emotional expression. This highlights a broader understanding of emotional dynamics in the Czech context compared to a more socially-focused view in France.

The representation of reflection on both strengths and weaknesses speaks to the need for HSC support in the school environment to eliminate difficulties as much as possible.

Social Strengths and Challenges

France

- **Strengths:**
 - **Creativity in Social Interactions:** Use creativity to navigate social situations.
 - **Empathy and Perceptiveness:** Keen sense of empathy and understanding of social dynamics.
 - **Challenging Norms:** Potential to challenge and change social norms positively.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Difficulty with Social Boundaries:** May struggle to adhere to social boundaries and rules.
 - **Isolation or Over-Adaptation:** Introverted HSC may either isolate themselves or over-adapt to fit in. They seem to thrive more when their sensitivity is recognised and paired with someone who can welcome it or even shares it.

Czech Republic

- **Strengths:**
 - **Empathy and Social Justice:** Strong sense of justice and empathy towards others.
 - **Supportive Nature:** Tend to support and include marginalized peers.
 - **Detecting Toxic Situations:** Can quickly identify unhealthy social dynamics.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Fear of Group Settings:** Often fearful or anxious in group settings, leading to social withdrawal.
 - **Sensitivity to Criticism:** Struggle with handling criticism, which can lead to further isolation.
 - **Difficulty in Adaptation:** Challenges in adapting to new social environments or asserting themselves.
 - **Overreaction and Social Awkwardness:** Exaggerated emotional reactions inappropriate to the situation, which can make relationships more difficult to maintain. They may also appear socially awkward and unapproachable, which can lead to being singled out.

The social strengths of HSC in both France and the Czech Republic prominently feature empathy, but they are described with different nuances: creativity and challenging norms in France versus social justice, support for marginalized peers and detecting toxic situations in the Czech Republic. The challenges, while overlapping in some areas such as social isolation, are framed differently: France focuses on struggles with social boundaries and over-adaptation, while the Czech Republic emphasizes fear of group settings, sensitivity to criticism and social awkwardness. This reflects a broader focus on social justice and peer support in the Czech context compared to creativity and norm-challenging in France.

The representation of reflection on both strengths and weaknesses speaks to the need for HSC support in the school environment to eliminate difficulties as much as possible.

Implemented Practices and Identified Needs

France

- **Practices:**
 - **Self-study:** Seeking out reputable resources such as psychology journals, books and educational websites to understand the concept of high sensitivity
 - **Breathing and Grounding Exercises:** Implemented to help HSC manage stress and anxiety.
 - **Personalized Plans:** Development of individualized educational plans for HSC.
- **Needs:**
 - **Training and Information:** More training for educators on high sensitivity.
 - **Collaborative Projects:** Increased collaborative projects and participative initiatives.
 - **Parental Involvement:** Greater involvement and education for parents.
 - **Projects actively involving pupils**

Czech Republic

- **Practices:**
 - **Progress Monitoring and Referrals:** Regular monitoring and referrals to external support services (e.g., therapists, psychologists).
 - **Breathing and Grounding Techniques:** Techniques to help maintain focus and manage anxiety.
 - **Psychoeducation:** Educational sessions for students and parents about high sensitivity.
 - **Supportive Tools:** Use of tools like quiet areas, headphones, and stress-relief toys.
- **Needs:**
 - **More Information and Training:** Enhanced training programs for teachers.
 - **Support Materials:** Access to more supportive materials and resources.
 - **Parental Involvement:** Greater involvement and education for parents.
 - **Educational Activities for Students:** Programs specifically designed to help students understand and manage their sensitivity.

Both France and the Czech Republic utilize breathing and grounding techniques to help HSC manage stress and anxiety, highlighting a shared approach in this area. However, the practices diverge significantly beyond this similarity. France utilizes self-study for educators and developing personalized plans for HSC, indicating a more individualized and self-directed approach. In contrast, the Czech Republic emphasizes psychoeducation for the broader school community, regular progress monitoring and the use of supportive tools. This illustrates different methodologies in addressing the needs of HSC, with France leaning towards individualized plans and educator-driven learning, while the Czech Republic adopts a holistic, community-involved approach. In both countries, however, the implementation of these practices is rather insufficient and limited.

Especially in the Czech educational system, the direct support for HSC is not widespread and in most cases is limited to referral to external support services. There is still a high percentage of those who do not use any methods. Tests used for identifying HSCs are mentioned as the least implemented practice in both countries.

Both France and the Czech Republic recognize the importance of training educators and involving parents in supporting highly sensitive children. However, their additional needs diverge: France focuses on collaborative projects and participative initiatives, aiming to create a more inclusive and interactive learning environment. The request for participative projects and collaboration is higher than for pedagogical material, which is also an indication that material alone may not be as powerful as a package material WITH training and collaboration. In contrast, the Czech Republic emphasizes the need for support materials and specific educational activities for students, reflecting a more resource-oriented and student-centered approach. This illustrates different priorities in addressing the needs of HSC, with France leaning towards community and collaborative efforts, while the Czech Republic prioritizes practical resources and direct student engagement.

Additional comments

Czech educators point to the need for support not only for students but also for teachers who may themselves be highly sensitive. Others stress the need for improved communication between teachers, smaller class sizes and better conditions for individual work with HSCs.

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French respondents mention that differences can be stigmatized and education is important for children who can identify as highly sensitive but also for other children to be informed about sensitivity and its various levels. There is also a family element that will have consequences in the classroom: how is sensitivity experienced at home and what is the message sent to the children? There is also an important distinction to be made whether the school personnel identifies as highly sensitive. Finally, media awareness, growing literature and campaigns can facilitate the conversations about sensitivity with the children, the parents, but also among the educators.

Conclusions and Proposed Solutions

Conclusions

Both surveys reveal a significant awareness of high sensitivity among educators but also highlight a need for deeper understanding and more comprehensive training.

Psychologists have more detailed and specific knowledge about highly sensitive children, including the use of diagnostic tools and individual support plans. Other education staff have a more general awareness and a less systematic approach to identifying and supporting highly sensitive children. Both groups agree on the need for more awareness, training and support materials, but psychologists place more emphasis on detailed and specific methods and interventions.

Responses indicate that more information, training, support materials, projects that actively involve pupils, parental support and educational events for pupils are needed to support the inclusion of these children. These needs were mentioned repeatedly and with high frequency.

Proposed Solutions

1. Enhanced Training and Education:

- Develop and implement comprehensive training programs for educators on high sensitivity, including practical strategies for classroom management and student support. The training should also raise awareness of how to work with high sensitivity among teachers themselves.
- Incorporate high sensitivity topics into teacher education curricula at universities and colleges to equip future educators with necessary knowledge and skills from the start of their careers.

2. Supportive Resources:

- Create and distribute detailed guides and resources on managing HSC in educational settings. These should include case studies, best practices and practical tools.
- Methodology shall deal with child psychology, teaching methods and social-emotional learning and strategies for dealing with HSCs. It shall include innovative forms and methods of education and connecting formal and non-formal education.
- Establish online platforms for educators to access professional articles, share experiences and seek advice on dealing with high sensitivity in schools.

3. Collaboration with Experts:

- Increase the involvement of school psychologists and special educators in regular classroom activities and consultations. Address the issue of the shortage and high workload of these professionals.
- Provide opportunities for educators to consult with experts on high sensitivity through regular meetings, workshops and conferences.

4. Student and Parent Education:

- Implement educational programs or tools that help students understand and manage their sensitivity. These could include material enabling understanding, workshops, interactive sessions and peer support groups.
- Awareness of high sensitivity through stories, projects, providing tools and techniques for self-regulation of emotions, and education on the importance of self-care as a key element to creating a supportive and inclusive school environment. The topics covered shall include the characteristics of high sensitivity, challenges faced (not only) in school environment and tools and strategies of self-care and how to cope.
- Offer material, workshops and informational sessions for parents to equip them with knowledge and strategies to support their children effectively at home.

5. Creating Supportive Environments:

- Designate quiet areas in schools where HSC can retreat and recharge when needed.

- Promote a flexible approach to teaching that allows for individual adjustments based on student needs, such as varied seating arrangements, reduced stimuli environments and tailored instruction methods.
- Implementation of methods of working with HCSs into regular lessons and every-day practice to prevent the over-loading of educators and the lack of time and space.

6. Regular Research and Monitoring:

- Conduct regular research and surveys to monitor the effectiveness of implemented strategies and the ongoing needs of HSC. Use findings to continually refine and improve support mechanisms.
- Track the progress of HSC to ensure that interventions are effective and adjust approaches as necessary.

By addressing these areas, educational institutions in both France and the Czech Republic can better support HSC, leveraging their strengths and mitigating their challenges to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

Topics/narratives for the project results – original plan from the proposal

Guide: Development of a 40-page guide for pedagogical staff: summarising the topics, best practices and recommendations for teaching HSPs and supporting HSCs. Suggested topics: Introduction to high sensitivity, Identification of HSCs, Importance of environment, Overstimulation, Emotional reactivity and empathy and Sensitivity to subtle stimuli. It will be based on four pillars of working with the highly sensitive child:

- 1) working on the child's adequate self-esteem,
- 2) reducing the shame experienced by the child,
- 3) disciplining in a wise way,
- 4) teaching how to talk about one's own sensitivity.

Comic book: Development of the comic book content (100 pages): The main narratives of the comic book will be defined. The outcomes from the initial research will be used, existing resources and the current research on the topic of high sensitivity in children and teenagers consulted and the most relevant themes for the comic book selected. The messages to convey through the comic book will be specified and a storyline that engages and educates the target audience created. The comic book will provide ways how to cope with the negative aspects of high sensitivity (overstimulation, overworking, feeling uncomfortable socially, anxiety and depression, worry about problems in the world or at home, low self-esteem, distress about school being a competition (often with cheaters) or choosing to play dumb rather than be called a nerd) and cultivate the positive ones (creativity, intuition, curiosity, attention to details, eagerness to please others (such as teachers), conscientiousness, empathy, ability to sense what is going on in a situation, unusual appreciation of the arts and music and concern about social justice and the world's problems). Through engaging narratives and relatable characters, the comic book will help children and teenagers understand and empathise with HSCs, which in turn will contribute to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for HSCs.



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Other ideas from the meeting discussion

- Discussion concerning suggestions and recommendations of how to present the topic of high sensitivity to target groups, crucial aspects and topics. Brainstorming ideas:
 - The main goal of both Guide and Comic book will be the UNDERSTANDING of high sensitivity among HSPs themselves as well as non-HSPs.
 - The materials will promote diversity and diverse society as a whole where HSPs play a significant role. Therefore, it is necessary to understand ourselves and each other to take part in specific aspects of community collaboration so HSPs can contribute with their strengths.
 - Guide will include tips for teachers on how to work with emotions/teach students how to process emotions and disciplining in a sensitive way, e.g. guiding questions that could facilitate the teacher-student communication, suggesting options for perfectionist students, importance of leisure time, reflection etc.
 - Guide could be in the form of a binder and ready-to-use with separate worksheets.
 - Guide could include a detachable flap in the form of infographic for a quick reference with a summary of needs and consequent behavioral patterns.
 - The G. should include tips for prevention as well as the strategies how to cope when the situation escalates (coping mechanisms).
 - Guide/Comic book could include some examples of famous HSPs as role models – ideally also attractive for the young generation.
 - In both G. and C. the demonstration behaviour could be presented and interpreted from the point of view of a teacher and a child.
 - The main characters in the C. could be a circle of friends (different types, both non-HSP and HSP with a varied level of sensitivity) who will share their experience and gradually learn about their personalities.