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*Sharing the Passion for Learning*

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# TEACHERS PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTION OF HIGHLY SENSITIVE PEOPLE: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Highly sensitive people (HSP) are characterized by different aspects that include: a great awareness of subtleties, overstimulation, depth processing of information and high emotional reactivity. HSP in their work environment will show a series of characteristics that, if properly understood, can be of great benefit for the enterprise and for the rest of the workers. It is also important to understand how employers from the areas of education perceive and manage HSP at work. The objective of the research was to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers with HSP.

**Method:** A qualitative descriptive design was performed using a thematic approach for data analysis. A total of 14 participants were recruited in 3 focus groups. The majority were female (n=8) with a mean age of 41.94 years old. Regarding their educational level four of them have reached the level of Master and the rest had a Ph.D. With regard to their profession, four of them were teachers from primary education and ten were university teachers and researchers. All focus groups were performed online through the Google Meet platform and were recorded in audio and in video to make the verbatim transcripts. For the thematic analysis the proposal by Braun and Clarke was followed using an inductive coding procedure and integrating the codes into initial themes that were triangulated between the researchers.

**Results:** A total of 5 main themes were identified after the analysis: (1) Characteristics and management of HSP, (2) Motivation of HSP, (3) Importance of relations, (4) Physical working conditions and (5) Implications for Management. HSP were perceived as employees and students with a high capacity to sacrifice themselves and with high responsibility despite they may show strong emotional reactions to some situations at work. Participants outlined the importance of reinforce them and to give them tools to regulate their sensitivity. Their emotional abilities help them to connect and establish emotional bonds with other partners.

**Conclusions:** HSP, due to their characteristics, may be really useful in work environments where teachers professionals could adapt and identify their main obstacles and problems. Educational implications and recommendations, based on the results of the research, will be presented.

**Keywords:** Highly sensitive people, teachers, education, evaluation.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) has been described as a personality trait characterised by the ability to register and process both internal and external stimuli. Therefore, SPS can be defined as a continuum representing individual differences in responding to internal and external information [1] [2]. There are significant differences in the way people react to environmental stimuli, with some individuals being more sensitive and reactive than others, thus being Highly Sensitive Persons (HSP). HSP tend to have a deeper cognitive, sensory and emotional processing of perceived information from environmental experiences.

Regarding external and internal physical stimuli, HSP are able to perceive subtle stimuli easily and tend to pay more attention to perceived interoceptive stimuli [3] [4]. In the cognitive sphere, HSP often present characteristics such as inflexibility, cognitive overload, deep cognitive processing, perfectionism and fearful and/or anxious thoughts [5]. However, HSP also exhibit other positive cognitive attributes such as greater creativity, conscientiousness, openness, rich imagination and a high reflective capacity [6]. The emotional domain is associated with a deep experience, intense expression, somatic manifestation of emotions, high levels of stress, attachment to objects, and emotional interactions with animals, art and nature [1]. HSP tend to show positive emotional aspects such as empathy and sensitivity towards others, intensity in experiencing feelings and an intelligent sense of humour [3]. Finally, in terms of social relationships, HSP tend to be more influenced by the environment around them. They sometimes lack

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