

1 Education and well-being

1.1 COVID-19: an exceptional stress test for educational systems

COVID-19 has disrupted education and training in an unprecedented way. The pandemic and the subsequent move to remote and later blended learning have been a watershed event for Member States' education systems. Some systems and some schools were able to mitigate the impact on students' exams results better than others, pointing to the importance of teachers and schools in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also moved the well-being of children and young people up the policy agenda, with increasing media attention and growing political interest. Students' life satisfaction, sense of well-being, and ability to develop decision-making skills and psychological coping mechanisms are crucial for lifelong learning and for leading a meaningful life. These factors lay the foundations for self-awareness, relationship building and building resilience, enabling all of us to adjust and to overcome personal adversity, long-term life challenges and societal shocks and disasters¹.

Students' well-being can be defined as a state of overall mental and physical health, strength, resilience and fitness that allows them to function well at school and in their personal lives. International research² shows that the school environment in general, and educational attainment in particular, are fundamental determinants of good or poor mental health in children and adolescents². The World Health Organization defines good mental health as a state of well-being, the realisation of one's own abilities and the ability to cope with the normal stresses of life³. A sense of well-being includes having a positive sense of identity and an ability to manage thoughts and emotions, to build social relationships, and to acquire an education that allows active citizenship as an adult.

The concept of well-being can be analysed in multiple ways. While the literature shares a rather general starting point⁴, i.e. that well-being is about quality of life and is multidimensional, the degree of consensus decreases as the definition attempts to become more precise and operational. Among the many existing concepts, the OECD has developed a specific framework to analyse student well-being⁵. This has also been adopted in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018⁶. It includes five dimensions: cognitive, psychological, physical, social and material.

The OECD conceptual framework will be broadly followed in the analysis, mostly focusing on the psychological, social and physical dimensions. When relevant, material indicators will be taken into account.

The actual measurement of well-being is a challenge⁷, given that indicators are usually self-reported and collected through surveys. The comparability of cross-country data requires not only

¹ Agasisti, T., et al. (2018). [Academic resilience: What schools and countries do to help disadvantaged students succeed in PISA](#), OECD Education Working Papers, No. 167.

² Cefai, C., Simões, C. and Caravita, S. (2021). [A systemic, whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools in the EU](#). A NESET report for the European Commission.

³ World Health Organization (2004). [Promoting mental health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice \(Summary Report\)](#).

⁴ Statham, J. and Chase, E. (2010). [Childhood Wellbeing: A Brief Overview](#), Childhood Wellbeing Centre Research Centre Briefing Paper N. 1.

⁵ Borgonovi, F. and Pál, J (2016). [A framework for the analysis of student well-being in the PISA 2015 study: Being 15 in 2015](#), OECD Education Working Papers, No. 140.

⁶ OECD (2019). [PISA 2018 Results \(Volume III\): What School Life Means for Students' Lives](#).

⁷ Selwyn, J. and Wood, M. (2015). [Measuring Well-Being: A Literature Review](#). University of Bristol.

international surveys asking the same question in several countries, but also selecting the most “unbiased” indicators, i.e. those that are more independent from country-specific cultural contexts⁸.

The analysis that follows distinguishes between the “pre-COVID-19” and the “during-COVID-19” periods. For the former, the key sources of well-being indicators for primary and secondary school that are used are the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)⁹ 2019 and the PISA 2018 surveys, which gather data on educational aspirations, absenteeism and learning outcomes in mathematics. More subjective data from the PISA survey are also analysed, notably on bullying and feelings of well-being. Teacher’s views are taken into account in a third subsection. For the during-COVID-19 period, the analysis looks at the impact of the pandemic on well-being indicators for primary, secondary and tertiary students, based on a few recent international surveys that cover a number of EU countries. Specific attention is paid to students in Vocational Education and Training (VET) in a final subsection of the analysis. Unfortunately, due to the lack of cross-country comparable data on learning outcomes after the spread of the pandemic¹⁰, the relationship between well-being and learning outcome indicators at international level cannot yet be investigated for the duration of the COVID-19 period.

Box 1: Well-being as part of education policies in Estonia

In Estonia’s education strategy for 2021-2035, a well-being-focused learning environment is defined as “a combination of mental, social and physical conditions for learning that support the learner’s self-efficacy and self-esteem, the development of life skills and social competences, and mental and physical health in general”. Since 2018, the well-being of students and teachers is regularly monitored through a satisfaction survey targeted at students, teachers and parents. Each school receives feedback on areas for improvement. This year’s well-being survey focused on distance learning and self-management.

1.2 What we know about well-being before COVID-19: an analysis of data from PISA 2018 and TIMSS 2019

A sense of belonging is a fundamental human need. It includes a desire for social approval and to be accepted, respected and liked by others. A sense of belonging helps people make sense of their lives and contributes to their overall well-being¹¹.

This also applies in a school context¹². Since students spend a considerable part of their lives in school, interactions with their peers and teachers affect their overall well-being as well as school

⁸ Life satisfaction can suffer from cultural biases, which makes it unsuitable for international comparisons, Cf. OECD (2019). [PISA 2018 Results \(Volume III\): What School Life Means for Students’ Lives](#), p. 36.

⁹ TIMSS is carried out every four years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). It is an international assessment of student achievement in mathematics and science at fourth and eighth grades.

¹⁰ There are country-specific studies estimating the negative impact of the spring 2020 COVID-19-induced lockdowns on student learning outcomes.

Cf. Engzell, P., Frey, A. and Verhagen, M.D. (2020). [Learning Loss Due to School Closures During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). SocArXiv (on the Netherlands);

Maldonado, J. and De Witte, K. (2020). [The Effect of School Closures on Standardised Student Test Outcomes](#). KU Leuven Faculty of Economics and Business Discussion Paper Series 20.17 (on Belgium-Flemish Community);

French Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports (2021). [Évaluations repères 2020 de début de CP et de CE1: baisse des performances par rapport à 2019, notamment en français en CE1, et hausse des écarts selon les secteurs de scolarisation](#), an information note N. 21.02 (on France).

¹¹ Greenaway, K. H., Haslam, S. A., Cruwys T, Branscombe, N. R., Ysseldyk, R. and Heldreth C. (2015). [From “we” to “me”: Group identification enhances perceived personal control with consequences for health and well-being](#). In: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 109 (1): 53.