

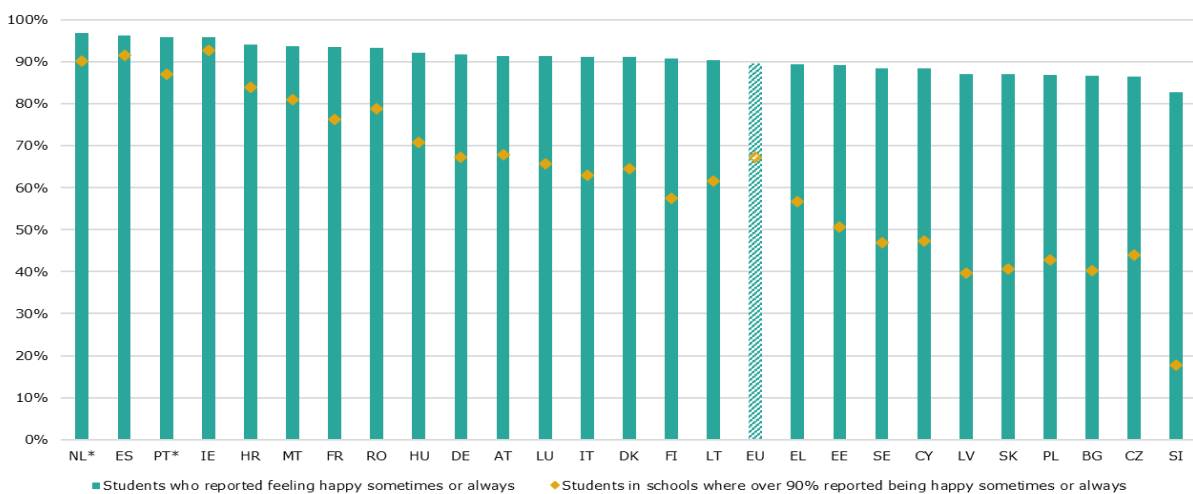
1.3 Students' perspective: PISA data on student feelings and bullying

1.3.1 Students' feelings and well-being

As previously established, well-being is a multidimensional concept that can be measured in different ways. This section will look into student feelings (both positive and negative) in PISA 2018, as a contribution to their sense of well-being, on the basis of self-reported indicators on the frequency of feelings of happiness and sadness.

A vast majority of students reported feeling happy sometimes or always (Figure 13).

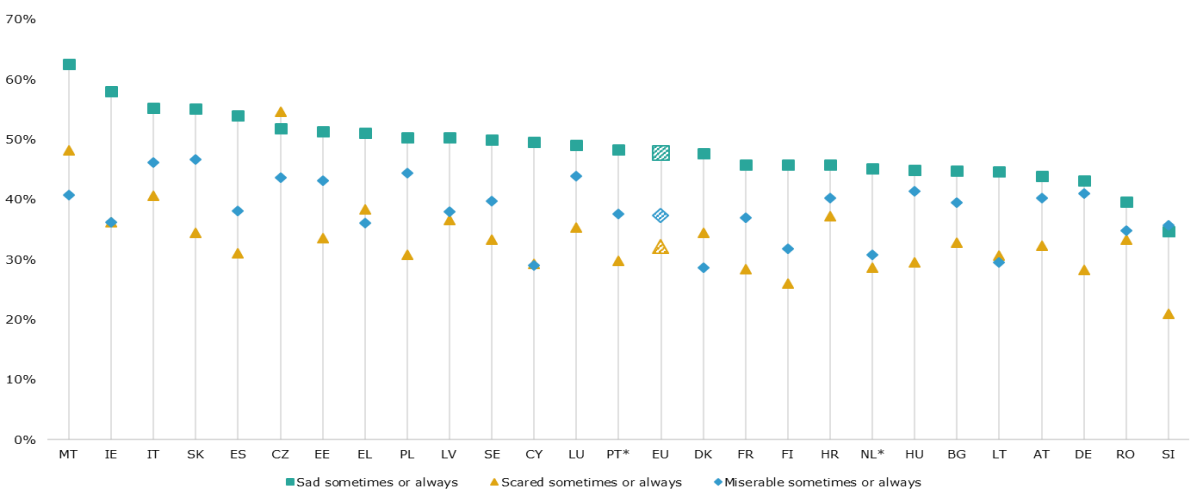
Figure 13: Prevalence of students who report feeling happy [%]



Source: PISA 2018.

Note: Data is ordered in descending order according to students who reported feeling "happy sometimes or always". Data not available for BE. *Data did not meet the PISA technical standards but were accepted as largely comparable.

Figure 14: Prevalence of students' negative feelings [%]



Source: OECD PISA 2018.

Note: Countries are presented in descending order for the survey response "sad sometimes or always". Data not available for BE. *Data did not meet the PISA technical standards but were accepted as largely comparable.

Box 5: Skills labs, a strong tool for better well-being in Greek schools

In 2020, the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in collaboration with the Institute of Educational Policy, introduced an innovative initiative, called “21st century skills lab”, to integrate the development of soft skills, life skills and technology and science skills into the school curricula. The initiative, which covers pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education, promotes non-violent behaviour, mental and emotional health, mutual respect in diversity as well as bullying and cyberbullying prevention. It is being implemented under the umbrella “quality of school life” and “personal development at school”, it complies with the European Skills Agenda and is organised in four thematic cycles ((a) Better living – Well-being, (b) Environmental consciousness, (c) Interest and action – Social consciousness and responsibility, and (d) Creation and innovation – Creative thinking and initiative). The Skills labs received a 2021 award for quality and good practice in global education across Europe, awarded by GENES Global Education.

Source: Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, [Institute of Education Policy](#)

Nearly one in two students in the EU reported feeling sad sometimes or always (Figure 14) with a peak 62.6% of students in Malta²⁸. Some 32.2% of students in the EU reported being scared sometimes or always, with a peak as high as 54.6% in Czechia, while 37.3% reported feeling miserable. Girls are disproportionately affected by feelings of sadness. On average, girls reported feeling sad sometimes or always 28 percentage points (pps) more than boys in the EU. In individual Member States, the gap between girls and boys in feelings of sadness was as high as 40 pps (Denmark).

Various factors seem to contribute to these negative feelings, including the phenomenon of bullying²⁹. A school’s socio-economic status also plays a role in students’ negative feelings. In 15 Member States, student sadness was more than 5% more prevalent in socio-economically disadvantaged schools³⁰ than in socio-economically advantaged ones, with an EU average of 5.1%³¹. An important moment in this sense is the transition from primary to secondary school: the transition of less advantaged students into schools with a higher socio-economic status tends to have a detrimental effect on their well-being.

1.3.2 Bullying

Bullying has a direct negative effect on both the academic performance and the well-being³² of students. Conversely, the absence of bullying has a positive impact on their mental health³³. The concept of “bullying” is not easily defined. The Council of Europe defines it as an “unwanted, aggressive behaviour [that is repeated over time] among school aged children that involves a real

²⁸ This contrasts with the findings of the ISCWEB study with 8-12 year olds (Cefai, C. and Galea, N. (2020). [International Survey of Children’s Subjective Wellbeing](#), the national report for Malta. This finding is complemented with other findings in the same study, which measured various aspects of cognitive, affective and psychological well-being. Maltese children were in the top five in terms of happiness among 35 countries.

²⁹ See below; Yu, S. and Zhao, X. (2021). [The negative impact of bullying victimization on academic literacy and social integration: Evidence from 51 countries in PISA](#). *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 4 (1), 100151.

³⁰ The socio-economic status is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS). A socio-economically disadvantaged (advantaged) school is a school in the bottom (top) quarter of the index of ESCS in the relevant country/economy.

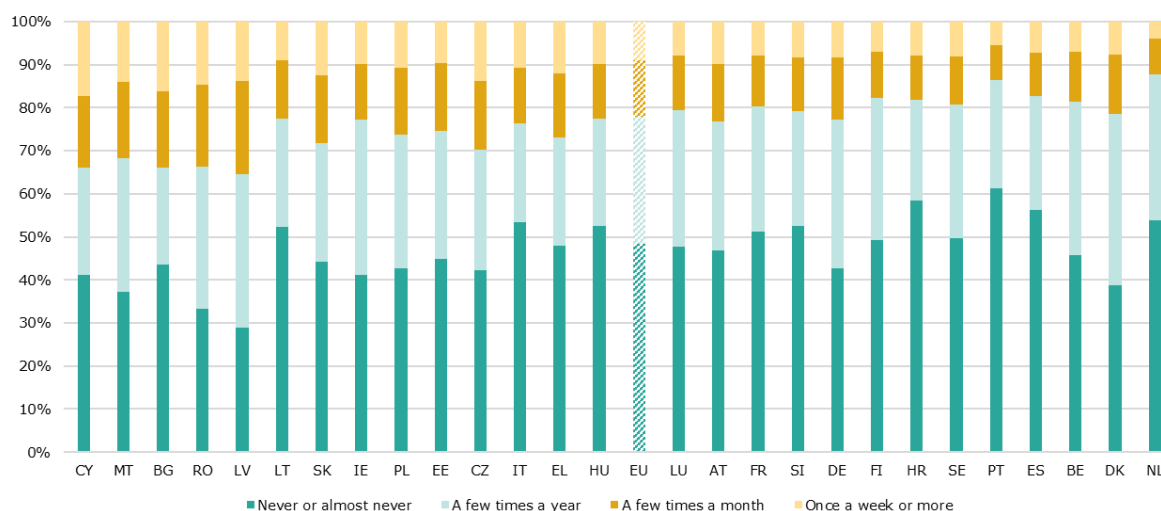
³¹ OECD PISA 2018.

³² Oliveira, F. R., de Menezes, T. A., Irffi, G. and Oliveira, G. R. (2018). [Bullying effect on student’s performance](#). *Economia*, 19(1), 57-73.

³³ European Union (2020). [Anti-bullying Practices from the Repository of the European Platform for Investing in Children](#).

or perceived power imbalance³⁴. A power imbalance and repetitive nature as well as an “intention to harm” are key characteristics³⁵. Bullying can take different forms, including: (1) direct bullying, which takes place in person and can either involve physical violence and/or verbal insults; (2) indirect bullying, spreading rumours or ignoring the victim, and characterised by psychological or social aggression; (3) discriminatory bullying aimed at, but not limited to, the race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation or religion of the individual; or (4) cyber bullying, harmful behaviour that occurs between peers online, and includes the dissemination of pictures, videos and messages designed to humiliate the victim. The PISA dataset that provided the data for the analysis focused mostly on the first three forms.

Figure 15: Frequency of being bullied [%]



Source: OECD PISA 2018.

Note: The index of exposure to bullying includes the following statements: “Other students left me out of things on purpose”; “Other students made fun of me”; and “I was threatened by other students”. Higher values in the index indicate more exposure to bullying.

Bullying appears to be widespread in the EU, with more than 50% of students having experienced bullying. In 19 EU Member States, more than half of all students experience bullying at least a few times a year. The rate of being “frequently bullied” stands at 6.9% in the EU, with values as high as 14.6% (Cyprus). Among the different types of bullying, being called names is by far the most prevalent, followed by having nasty rumours spread about you³⁶.

Box 6: Anti-bullying NGO “Friends” in Sweden

Friends is a non-profit organisation working since 1997 to prevent bullying and violence within schools and sports associations throughout Sweden. On their [website](#), Friends provides information, advice, videos and online courses for teachers, students and parents about various forms of bullying and possible actions to take. The NGO can also develop programmes tailored to an individual school’s problem areas and resources, including staff training. The programme will run for 3 years. It includes an annual school survey for students and staff on security and well-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ 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.

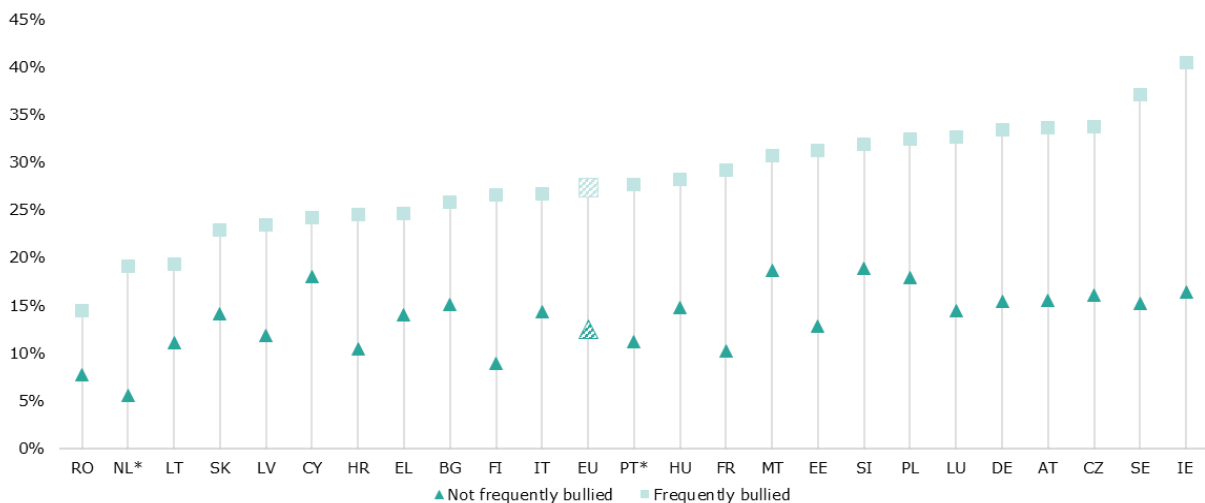
Gaffney, H., Ttöfi, M. M. and Farrington, D. P. (2019). [Evaluating the effectiveness of school-bullying prevention programs: An updated meta-analytical review](#). In: *Aggression and violent behaviour*, 45, 2019, 111-133.

³⁶ OECD (2019). [PISA 2018 Results \(Volume III\): What School Life Means for Students’ Lives](#).

being issues, with the survey's results used as a basis for further targeted action. The organisation is financed through donations and fees from participating schools. It has also initiated an international and multidisciplinary forum to broaden the understanding of bullying, harassment, discrimination, racism, and other forms of violence among and against children and youth, cf. [The World Anti-Bullying Forum](#).

Frequent bullying has a considerable detrimental effect on students' life satisfaction, an element of well-being³⁷. Figure 16 shows that, in 2018, the EU average share of students with low life satisfaction was nearly 15 pps higher if they also reported being bullied frequently. This "life satisfaction gap" stood at more than 20 pps in two Member States (Sweden and Ireland), indicating the severity of the effect bullying has on students.

Figure 16: Students' low life satisfaction, by frequency of being bullied [%] (2018)



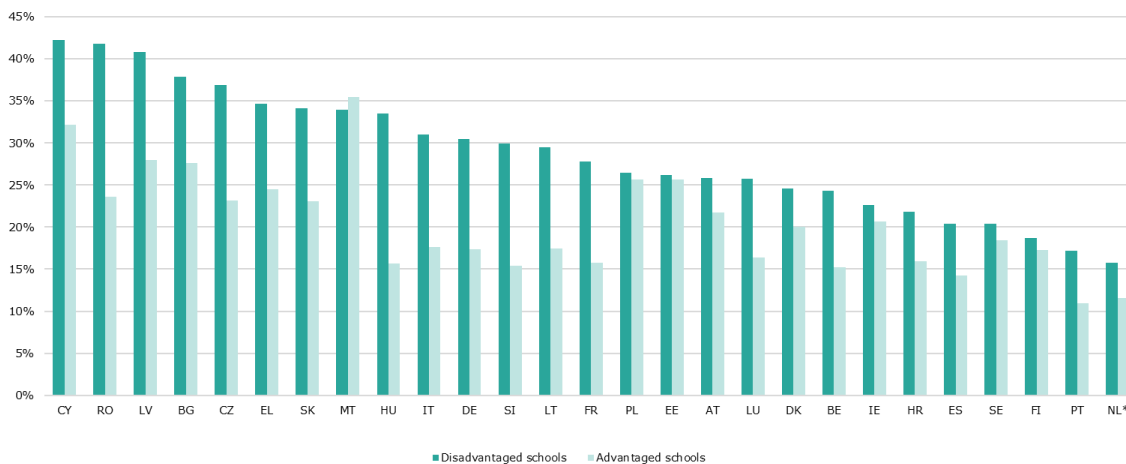
Source: OECD PISA 2018.

Note: Countries are presented in ascending order for the survey response "frequently bullied". Data not available for BE, DK and ES. *Data did not meet the PISA technical standards but were accepted as largely comparable. A student is classified as "not satisfied" with life if they reported between 0 and 4 on the life-satisfaction scale. The life-satisfaction scale ranges from 0 to 10.

Looking at who is most vulnerable to and most affected by the phenomenon of bullying, PISA 2018 data unequivocally show that socio-economically disadvantaged groups and students from disadvantaged schools are disproportionately affected.

³⁷ Life satisfaction differs from other elements contributing to well-being in that it is based on personal criteria rather than generalisable standards of evaluation; Borgonovi, F. and Pál, J. (2016). 18. [A framework for the analysis of student well-being in the PISA 2015 study](#): Being 15 in 2015, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 140.

Figure 17: Students who reported being bullied at least a few times a month, by school's socio-economic status [%]



Source: OECD PISA 2018.

Note: The socio-economic status is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS). A socio-economically disadvantaged (advantaged) school is a school in the bottom (top) quarter of the index of ESCS in the country or entity in question.

Figure 17 shows the gap in the percentage of students who reported being bullied at least a few times per month, by the socio-economic status of their schools. In all but one Member State (Malta), the share of bullied students was higher in disadvantaged schools than in advantaged ones. In the EU, the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools stood at 7.9% in 2018. A lower socio-economic school environment is therefore clearly linked with the prevalence and propensity for school bullying, a finding that has been corroborated by recent studies using PISA data in- and outside of the EU³⁸.

Box 7: The index of economic, social, and cultural status in PISA 2018

In PISA 2018, the index of economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) is built from indicators of parental education, parental occupation, and home resources. The indicator of home resources is built of responses to a set of questions asking students about availability of various items, such as a room of their own, a quiet place to study, a desk, a computer and other electronic devices, cars, but also cultural items, such as books or works of art or musical instruments. The specific list of items used in the question varies across countries. The three indicators are combined to form a single composite index. Instead of using values of the index, it is often convenient to divide students — separately in each country — into four equally sized groups, such that the highest group comprises 25% of students with the highest ESCS score, the lowest group comprises 25% of students with the lowest ESCS scores, etc.

³⁸ Yu, S., and Zhao, X. (2021). [The negative impact of bullying victimization on academic literacy and social integration: Evidence from 51 countries in PISA](#). In: *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 4(1), 100151.

A 2018 analysis by the OECD suggests that differences in socio-economic status of peers and their schools has a direct effect on students' chances of success³⁹. Other factors such as fewer resources, lower-skilled teachers and local services may also explain the higher prevalence of bullying in socio-economically disadvantaged schools. The need to balance out pre-existing socio-economic disparities and promote inclusion and equity in schools is therefore crucial⁴⁰.

Box 8: Monitoring and tackling violence in schools in Poland: the RESQL system

RESQL is an innovative, research-based system that supports schools in resolving problems of peer violence. It was created in collaboration with the school community itself (students, teachers, principals and parents) and its measures were piloted in primary and secondary schools before being rolled out further. For example, in 2019-2020, a team of psychologists and educators from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw piloted lessons on peer violence, leading to the development of a set of lessons on: relationship violence, cyberbullying, response to violence and the role of witnesses, resolving conflicts, and socio-moral thinking. The system allows heads of schools to monitor, report on and analyse the problems, and give appropriate pedagogical advice. The system consists of:

1. A mobile application enabling students to anonymously report incidents to teachers.
2. Materials on how to respond in crisis situations and in various peer violence scenarios, to help school staff take appropriate decisions and actions.
3. Tested scenarios for lessons on violence-related issues.

Source: The resql.pl website (in Polish).

In addition to the socio-economic gap, PISA data points to a clear gender gap in bullying. The EU average for bullied boys (at least a few times a month) was nearly 5 pps higher than that of girls (24.4% vs 19.7%). The recent report analysing the PISA data confirms the increased likelihood of boys to being bullied, and points to further characteristics such as class repeaters and students prone to truancy in middle school⁴¹. Finally, low-achievers in reading are twice as likely to be bullied as high-achievers⁴².

1.3.3 Possible approaches to increase student well-being

One specific protective factor against bullying is the awareness and response of schools, school principals and teachers. However, when asked whether bullying hinders student learning, principals in different EU countries give significantly different responses.

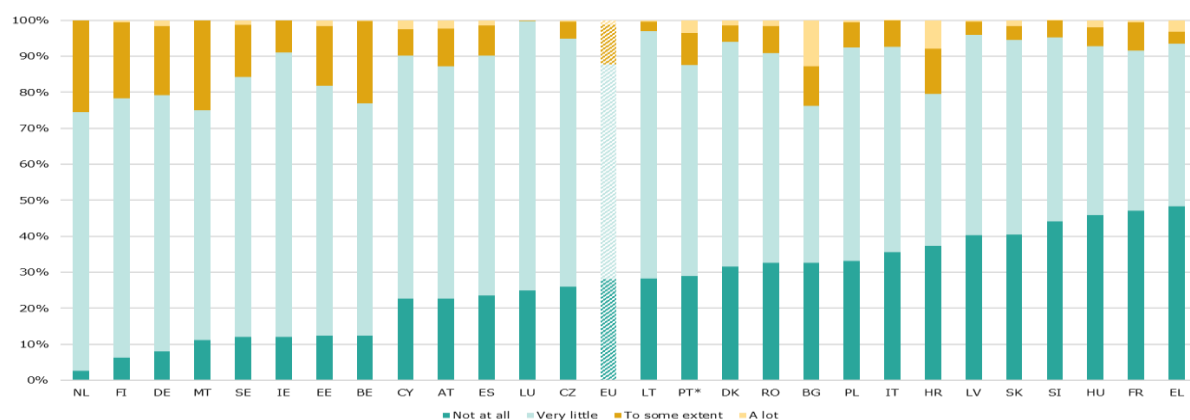
³⁹ Agasisti, T., Avvisati, F., Borgonovi, F., and Longobardi, S. (2018). [Academic resilience: What schools and countries do to help disadvantaged students succeed in PISA.](#)

⁴⁰ Also acknowledged as the first strategic priority of the [Council Resolution of 18 February 2021 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond \(2021-2030\) 2021/C 66/01.](#)

⁴¹ Yu, S. and Zhao, X. (2021). [The negative impact of bullying victimization on academic literacy and social integration: Evidence from 51 countries in PISA.](#) In: *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 4(1): 11.

⁴² OECD (2019). [PISA 2018 Results \(Volume III\): What School Life Means for Students' Lives.](#)

Figure 18: Percentage of students in schools whose principal reported that learning is hindered to the following extent by students intimidating or bullying other students



Source: OECD PISA 2018.

Note. *Data did not meet the PISA technical standards but were accepted as largely comparable.

As can be seen in Figure 18, the vast majority of students attend schools where the principal considers that learning is hindered “very little” by students intimidating or bullying their peers. This share ranges from to 42.3% (Croatia) to 79% (Ireland). In 22 Member States, more than half of all students are in schools where principals indicated “very little” hindrance to learning by bullying.

The PISA data on the high prevalence of bullying in general, and in particular its effects on socio-economically disadvantaged groups, compared with data on the perception of bullying, may indicate that bullying is not taken as seriously as it should be at leadership level⁴³. Viewed together with the notion that school staff are rarely equipped to treat bullying as a serious mental health issue⁴⁴, these results warrant further attention. For anti-bullying campaigns and interventions to succeed, the involvement of school staff and educators from all levels is key⁴⁵. The Repository of the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) has compiled a list of national and transnational campaigns to combat bullying. They include a Greek curriculum-based initiative and a British-German computer-based anti-bullying programme, both aimed at fostering peer intervention and training teachers in intervention methods⁴⁶. EPIC is evaluating national and transnational interventions based on three factors: how effective they are, how transferable their approaches are, and how enduring their impact is. The evaluation provides interesting insights into the efficacy and proposed designs of interventions. Firstly, they need to encompass all aspects of students’ school and social lives to provide balanced, sensible solutions such as classroom interventions and information sessions for parents. Secondly, measures must be tailored to the changing nature of bullying given the rise of cyber bullying and the current digital transformation.

In general, analysing student feelings when assessing well-being is relatively new, as is the understanding of how student well-being can best be safeguarded, and negative feelings mitigated. It is clear, however, that a sense of belonging can be achieved when students have meaningful social connections and relationships with their peers and their teachers⁴⁷.

⁴³ Foody, Mairéad, Murphy, Helena, Downes, Paul and James O’Higgins Norman (2018). [Anti-bullying procedures for schools in Ireland](#): principals’ responses and perceptions, Pastoral Care in Education.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ybarra, Michele L., et al. (2019). [Perceptions of middle school youth about school bullying](#). In: Journal of adolescence 75, 2019, 175-187.

⁴⁶ European Union (2020). [Anti-bullying Practices from the Repository of the European Platform for Investing in Children](#).

⁴⁷ OECD (2019). [PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework](#).

Among the various options, school-level interventions are the best for improving student well-being, as they can counteract socio-economic inequalities⁴⁸. One remarkable school-level initiative involves health literacy classes to help overcome inequalities in the long term⁴⁹. By contrast, ill-advised school interventions may increase inequalities rather than reduce them. An analysis of Finnish upper secondary schools concluded that improving students' well-being and self-esteem requires long-term interventions tailored to individual students⁵⁰. Systemic interventions that cover the whole school and that concentrate on building individual competences, developing school policies, and improving social relationships, are most likely to have an impact⁵¹.

A key consideration is the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in European schools. According to PISA 2015 data, more than one in ten 15-year-olds in European schools are first or second-generation migrants – with first-generation migrants accounting for 4.8% of the PISA student cohort, and second-generation migrants (i.e. students with foreign-born parents who were born in the country of assessment) accounting for 6.5%⁵².

The same PISA 2015 data reveal that an average of around one in ten (9%) 15-year-old learners across the EU speak a different language at home to the one they are taught in⁵³.

Poor command of the language of instruction can contribute considerably to students' feelings of alienation and lack of well-being. Language deficiencies can also be a source of bullying. Data show⁵⁴ that primary school students who do not speak the language of schooling at home have a lower sense of belonging at their school, and they report being more frequently bullied by their peers.

The traditional approach to dealing with linguistic differences has been to try to make students focus completely on the language of schooling, ignoring and often actively suppressing their home languages. There is however ample evidence that such practices can be detrimental to students' self-esteem and well-being. Recognising students' individual linguistic capital and using it as stepping stones towards acquisition of better competences in the language of schooling yields better academic results⁵⁵.

Linguistic support measures should ideally endeavour to maintain students' existing languages while developing their proficiency in the language of schooling, since this is known to have a positive impact on functional literacy, including educational success as a whole⁵⁶. At the same time, these diverse linguistic backgrounds add value to the host country's classroom, as a means of engaging with migrant learners. Promoting language awareness among the whole school

⁴⁸ Moore G. F. (2020). [Socioeconomic status, mental wellbeing and transition to secondary school: Analysis of the School Health Research Network/Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey in Wales](#).

⁴⁹ Flecha, A., García, R. and Rudd, R. (2011). [Using Health Literacy in School to Overcome Inequalities](#). In: European Journal of Education, 46: 209-218.

⁵⁰ 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.

Holopainen, L., Waltzer, K., Hoang, N. and Lappalainen, K. (2020). [The Relationship between Students' Self-esteem, Schoolwork Difficulties and Subjective School Well-being in Finnish Upper-secondary Education](#). In: International Journal of Educational Research, 104, 101688.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² European Commission (2016). [Pisa 2015: EU performance and initial conclusions regarding education policies in Europe](#).

⁵³ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2017). [Key data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe: 2017 Edition](#). A Eurydice Report, p. 22.

⁵⁴ EC/EACEA/Eurydice (2019). [Integrating Students from Migrant Backgrounds into Schools in Europe: National Policies and Measures](#).

⁵⁵ Van Der Wildt, A., Van Avermaet, P. and Van Houce, M. (2017). [Multilingual school population: ensuring school belonging by tolerating multilingualism](#). International journal of bilingual education and bilingualism, 20(7), 868-882.

⁵⁶ Cummins, J. (2001). [Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why is it important for education?](#) In: Sprogforum 19 (2), p. 15-20.

population increases tolerance and inclusion while encouraging all learners to develop their linguistic skills⁵⁷.

Analyses on classroom and school variables have also found a direct link between teacher and student well-being⁵⁸. Involving teachers in strategies to improve student well-being is sensible as they have close day-to-day interactions with their students⁵⁹.

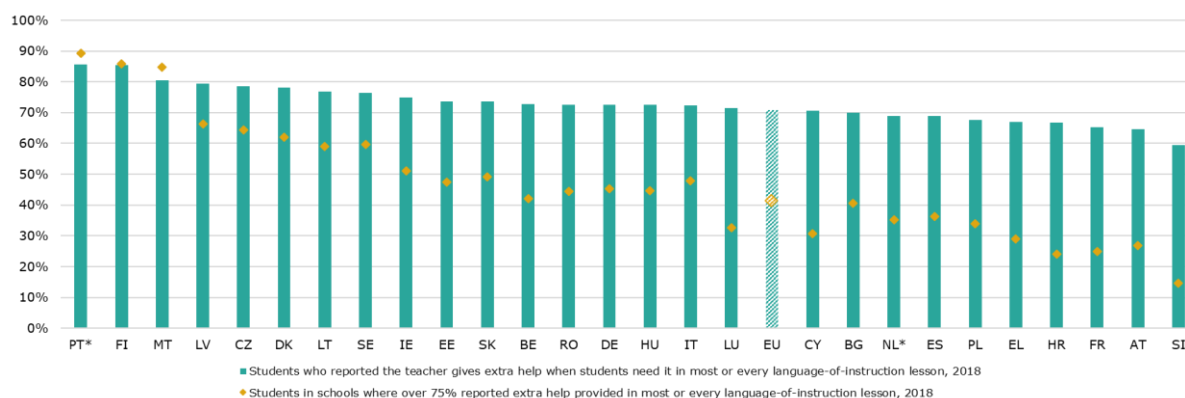
1.4 Teachers' perspective and the role of school governance in shaping well-being

1.4.1 The role teachers play in students' well-being

A teacher's role is to support students in their learning process, and their social and emotional development. They can make students feel confident in their skills, and feel supported and understood. Teaching behaviour and school practices can foster a pleasant climate and increase students' well-being. There is a clear link between the mental health of teachers and that of students⁶⁰. There is also evidence⁶¹ that students' perceptions of teachers' support are significantly correlated with greater life satisfaction.

According to PISA 2018, an average of 71% of students in the EU reported that their teacher gives extra help when needed in most or in every lesson taught in the language-of-instruction. The proportions varies across the EU, ranging from 85.6% in Portugal to 59.4% in Slovenia.

Figure 19: Students who reported that the teacher gives extra help when they need it in most or every language-of-instruction lesson, 2018 [%]



Source: PISA 2018.

Note: *Data did not meet the PISA technical standards but were accepted as largely comparable. Original OECD Table III.B.1.6.4

⁵⁷ See Herzog-Punzenberger, B., Le Pichon Vorstman, E. and Siarova, H. (2017). [Multilingual Education in the Light of Diversity: Lessons Learned](#). A NESET network report for the European Commission.

⁵⁸ Van Petegem, K., Aelterman, A., Van Keer, H. and Rosseel, Y. (2008). [The influence of student characteristics and interpersonal teacher behaviour in the classroom on student's wellbeing](#). *Social indicators research*, 85(2), 279-291.

⁵⁹ Another approach is closely involving educators and empowering them through, *inter alia*, achievement motivation, environmental resilience (i.e. teaching educators how to focus on developing their students' strengths), and developing social competences; Morrison, G. M. and Allen, M. R. (2007). [Promoting student resilience in school contexts](#). *Theory into Practice*, 46(2), 162-169.

⁶⁰ 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.

⁶¹ Guess, P.E., and McCane-Bowling S.J. (2016). [Teacher support and life satisfaction: an investigation with urban, middle school students](#). In: *Education and Urban Society* 48.1, 2016: 30-47.