

## ABOUT RESILIENCE AND THE WELL-BEING OF STUDENTS IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT\*

Gabriela MOTOI<sup>1</sup>, Alexandrina Mihaela POPESCU<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

*In the context of the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 which has lasted for almost 2 years and which has determined the transition of universities to online education, we consider it important to address the issue of the resilience and well-being of the students. The well-being and excellence of the students are interlacing and starting from this reality it makes well-being very important. Universities are not only a place for the students to learn, they should be a place where well-being is a priority, giving students the opportunity to participate in activities that are important to them, where they can experience positive emotional states, can be valued, encouraged to gain success, to experience feelings of belonging to the academic community. Our study aims to identify the well-being of the students during the pandemic and the need to develop and implement certain academic resilience programs. Because in the specialised literature the concept of well-being is a polysemantic one, we will approach well-being considering the following components: mental state, emotional state, physical health and social interactions.*

**Key words:** *Well-being; Mental state; Emotional state; Physical health; Social interactions; Academic resilience.*

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of resilience is often used to describe the ability of people to effectively cope with pressure and stress. In the context of the pandemic, which we have been going through for almost two years, resilience has become a life skill that schools and universities need to cultivate.

In addition to the potential pressures on young people, pandemic pressures have been added: the limitation of socialization and freedom of movement, online education, which can have a negative impact on young people. Students, especially those who have not had the opportunity to go through academic activities face to

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer PhD, University of Craiova, Romania e-mail address: gabrielamotoi@yahoo.com, corresponding author.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor PhD, University of Craiova, Romania, e-mail address: alexia\_popescu@yahoo.com

face, need practical strategies to be able to manage stress, in order to increase their well-being and to manage their studies and life.

Morgan (2016) defines “well-being” as a general state of mental and physical health, strength, endurance to function well personally and professionally. "Well-being" is stable and resilient. The same author states that if a person is affected for a longer period of time by external influences, then, when something sad, worrying or difficult happens, his/ her well-being is not immediately affected. In fact, well-being provides some protection against difficult events outside that person. Well-being supports the good functioning of that particular person and helps to achieve success.

The concept of resilience is a concept that should have been more present in the concerns of the teachers, given the challenges they will have to face in the near future: pandemics, technological changes that will change the educational paradigms.

If educators have a good understanding of the processes that promote resilience in young people, they will be able to support young people in recognizing their strengths in order to meet the challenges they will have to face.

UNICEF in "Building resilient education systems beyond the COVID-19 pandemic: Considerations for educational decision-makers at national, local and school level", published in 2020 (p. 32), published some considerations for ensuring the well-being of students, parents and school staff. We are going to summarize the main risks of ensuring the well-being that includes the specific elements of socio-emotional education and the main opportunities for a better reconstruction.

**Table 1. Risks and opportunities to ensure well-being (UNICEF, 2020)**

<b>The main risks</b>	<b>The main opportunities for a better reconstruction</b>
Children, parents and teachers lack the resilience and ability to cope with certain situations; Children with anxiety and stress cannot control their behavior or handle their emotions; The risks of protection for children belonging to violent or abusive families and for migrant or refugee children; Protection of teachers against gender and domestic violence; Young people entering the labor market face recession and high unemployment rates; Parents do not have the opportunity to contact social services or other support services; food poverty; Non-functional reference systems; Exhaustion of teachers.	The clearer role of schools in the social services network at the community level: the role of information exchange, the identification of poor families, the identification of individuals at risk; increasing and professionalizing the school workforce for SMAPS (school psychologists, social workers, etc.); Better SMAPS interventions and services in schools, integrated into an approach that involves the intire school; Increasing the well-being of the school staff, recognizing the risks of exhaustion and supporting them to acquire the skills needed to cope with stress and become more resilient; Strengthen the collaboration between the education field, the health field, the social field and the social protection services.

The current emotional state induced by the pandemic involves many manifestations, from which arise the challenges that education must take into account (Schwartzman, 2020):

- distrust caused by the extent, severity and persistence of COVID-19.
- distortions of perceiving the time that accompany long-term quarantine, from staying away from the family rituals caused by distancing and asynchrony (physical changes of bodies migrating from class to class; community gatherings related to favorite places, restrictions concerning nonverbal expression and recognition due) to intrusive personal protection measures - face masks, Plexiglas shields, touch ban; false online assumptions; no deadlines, etc.).
- it implies desires for immunity (we all play like the superheroes of our dreams) and the humiliation of vulnerability.
- shattered dreams of economic security and the shock of failed plans (job losses and vacations, reductions of academic programs, etc.)
- antipathy towards the rational world: virulent anti-intellectualism accompanied by the loss of privileges, especially the denigration of expertise and the disregard of logical argumentation based on evidence (rejection of research or advice that prove uncomfortable or unpleasant, e.g. anti-mask instigations and the spreading of conspiracy theories in the midst of the pandemic, challenging climate change when remedying it requires lifestyle adjustments, etc.).
- the feeling of helplessness generated by the loss of control, as if to witness the events that take place in a dream (hence the fear of classifying social protest as a rule of the mafia).
- multiple dimensions of grief and pain (illness and the death of friends and family due to complications of COVID-19).

Recent recommendations for the transition to life after the COVID-19 pandemic explicitly identify resilience as a necessary ability in the middle of threats and uncertainties associated with the pandemic and its consequences (Habersaat *et al.*, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic has affected millions of education participants around the world. The closure of schools and universities has been at the heart of preventive measures taken by the authorities to limit the spread of COVID-19, which has brought to the fore online education as a deliberately developed design and training for technological tools and pedagogical environment suited to distance learning.

When educational institutions issued a mandate to convert all face-to-face courses to online ones, often in a week or less to create this metamorphosis, the very nature of education changed.

Distance teaching in emergencies (or distance learning in emergencies illustrates the situation where courses are offered through distance learning in response to a crisis, rather than having been planned or organized for the purpose of

distance education. It refers to a sudden (and often accelerated) shift from classroom learning to distance education and/ or virtual classes. Many ask for a distinction to be made between online learning, based on inclusive pedagogy, and distance learning, in recognition of the fact that online learning has been planned and organized, while distance learning refers mainly to the use of technology to perform tasks designed for classroom teaching.

## **2. Conceptual delimitations**

The mental well-being of a student is a condition for them to be able to recognize their own potential, to be able to face the typical challenges of life, to be able to work creatively and productively and to be able to contribute to the development of their community. Universities can play a significant role in the mental well-being of a student in a variety of ways. For example, they can provide a safe, comfortable environment that is favourable to academic learning. In addition, through education, positive behavior and reason can be encouraged.

The emotional well-being of a student requires knowing oneself and being able to cope with the whirlwind of the problems that life sets in his/her way. Universities are a great place to support the emotional well-being of the students, providing resources and opportunities to develop resilience. For example, university education can integrate emotional development into the curriculum to help improve their overall emotional well-being.

Students who experience fewer incidents may be able to better focus on academia and develop stronger communication skills when the university environment promotes emotional well-being. This can lead to higher academic performance and lifelong health.

Socio-emotional skills "refer to the ability to manage the thoughts, emotions and behavior of a person" (OECD, 2018). These skills allow children and adults to understand and manage their emotions, set goals, empathize with others, build positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Socio-emotional skills are defined differently by different agencies. The OECD groups socio-emotional skills into five main areas: Task Performance, Emotional Regulation, Collaboration, Tolerance, Relating with Others, plus an additional area of Compound Skills, which include self-efficacy, critical thinking/independence and self-reflection and metacognition (OECD, 2018). Regarding Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Collaboration (CIASE), socio-emotional skills refer to self-awareness (e.g., identifying emotions, recognizing strengths, self-efficacy), self-management (stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal setting, organisational skills), social awareness (empathy and respect for others), relationships (communication, teamwork) and responsible decision making (problem identification, situation analysis, problem solving, evaluation, reflection).

The degree to which a student feels physically protected and healthy is related to their physical well-being in schools and other environments. The results that are beneficial for their health are guaranteed by physical well-being. How does education affect health and well-being?

The headstone of excellent health and well-being is quality education. People need information to prevent diseases and illnesses in order to live a healthier and more productive life.

Why is the well-being of students important in academia? Universities have an impact on virtually everyone, including students, teachers and staff. They can incorporate well-being into the educational experiences of the students. This can stimulate intrinsic motivation, academic performance and school satisfaction. Studies have even shown that students who are happier learn more effectively.

### 3. The research design

We live in a world where we have to change and adapt to the new reality. The pandemic has shaped this reality for almost two years and continues to be the engine in our lives.

The concept of distance education is not new, but it has become a natural style of learning. It has four main components – a corporate base, interactive telecommunications, audio and video data sharing as learning and communication experiences as well as the physical separation of teachers and students (Burns, 2011).

The teaching and learning process was directly affected and the interaction between teachers and students alike. A good explanation for this is that neither they, nor the teachers, nor the students were prepared for a total online transition. The teachers had to fully adapt their learning styles, and the students had to get used to the reality.

In this study, we aimed to identify how the health and emotional state of this pandemic period has influenced the academic performance of the students we interact with. We chose as a target group students (120 students) who started their activity during the pandemic, with whom we did not have the opportunity to interact face to face. I used the questionnaire-based survey in conjunction with the conversations we had with the students outside of class and with the observations during the teaching activities.

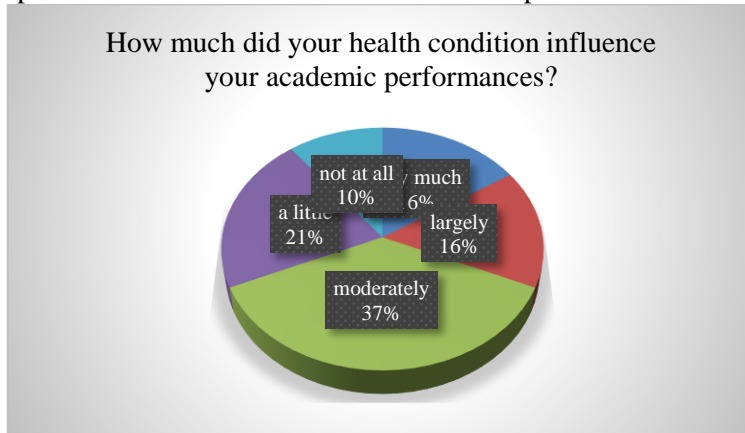
The health condition is considered to be bad by 10% of those surveyed, satisfactory by 20%, good by 50% and only 20% consider that during this period their state of health was very good.



**Figure 1. The assessment of health condition**

As for the leisure activities that they have not been able to practice, the most frequent are social activities, ("activities with friends", "interactions with others", "lack of socialization with new people", "the impossibility to visit my friends", "very little face-to-face socializing"), followed by walks/ trips and in thirdly sports activities.

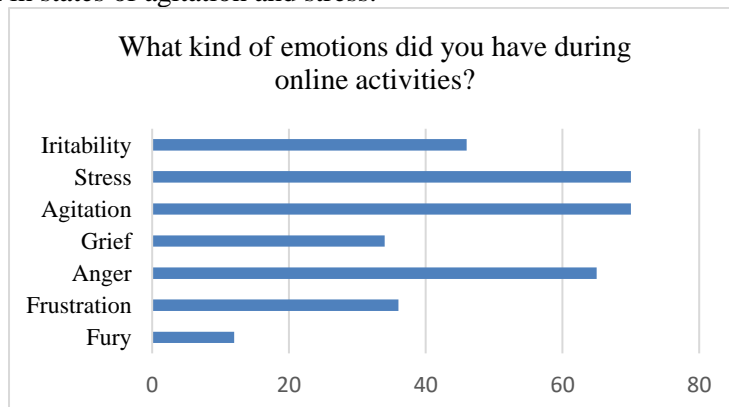
The health condition influenced the academic performance to a very large and large extent for 16%, while 10% of the students consider that the health condition during the pandemic did not influence their academic performance at all.



**Figure 2. Health - academic performance relationship**

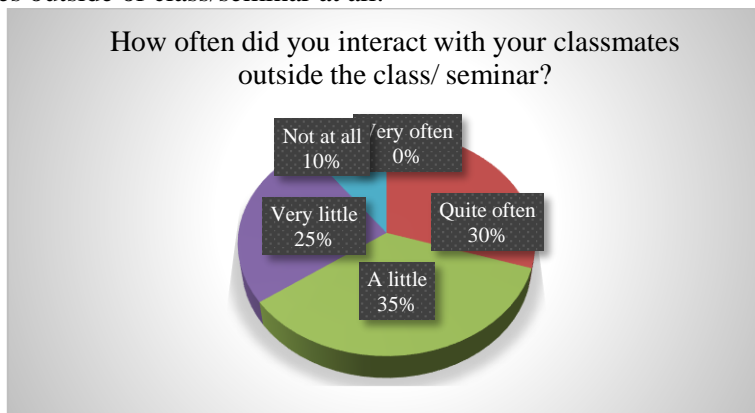
Considering emotional well-being as an important factor in academic activities, we tried to find out if and how the emotional state of the students was affected in online teaching activities. Only one person felt that her emotional state was not affected at all by the activities carried out online, while 85% of the students in the sample felt great frustration that 2 thirds of their life took place only online.

During the teaching activities, the students experienced a range of negative feelings, which we showed in the figure below: from anger, frustration, grief to their crystallization in states of agitation and stress.



**Figure 3. The frequency of emotions students experienced during online activities**

During their academic studies, young people are open to relationships, to interactions with their classmates. Unfortunately during this period the interactions of students with the others were subject to very drastic restrictions, especially during the lockdowns. Because the socialization of young people suffered the most, we tried to find out how often students socialized outside of teaching activities. So, 30% of the respondents interacted little, 25% very little, and 10% did not interact with classmates outside of class/seminar at all.



**Figure 4. The frequency of interaction with classmates outside of teaching activities**

The 30% of the students who interacted quite often with their classmates are the ones who succeeded, in a context in which the restrictions to meet their classmates face to face were relaxed.

The meetings were short, in very small groups and generally to solve administrative tasks (picking up student cards and IDs). The socialization activities within the events organized by the student league disappeared during this period. We can say that there was no pre-socialization period for 1st year students.

#### **4. Conclusions**

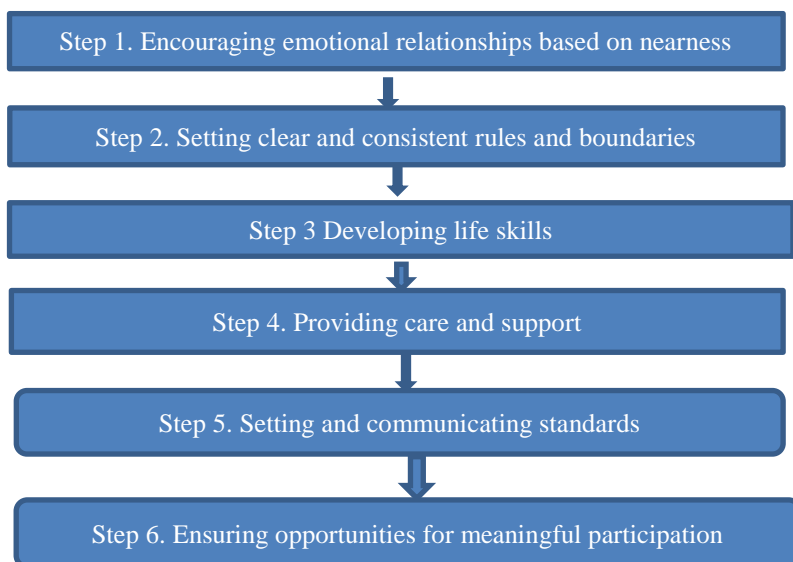
Students with well-being generally feel healthy, positive enough, able to focus on the task at hand, and ready to try to solve any situation they face.

They have reserves of physical and mental health and endurance to help them cope with more problems, events or negative challenges. Crucially, people with well-being can proactively manage stress rather than suffer from it (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012).

Teachers have the mission to continuously develop communication channels between students and teachers according to their needs. Whether it is hybrid or e-learning, the reality is that this is a necessary learning option and can bring many benefits to students. The teacher must be flexible, he/she can adapt the courses to the needs of each student, he/she gives students the option to learn at their own pace, motivates students to interact with colleagues and more than ever, saves time. As the world revolves around us, having extra time without commuting to and from school

is a blast. Of course, it also has disadvantages, such as a lower level of concentration or involvement from the perspective of the student. But we need to start thinking about "school" in different ways and understand that sometimes the face-to-face school cannot happen.

In 2003, N. Henderson and M.M. Milstein developed a model focused on the development of educational resilience in schools, which he entitled “The Wheel of Resilience in Six Steps” (Anghel, 2016). The model presents the attitudes that teachers must show, as well as aspects related to the school space, as a supportive and safe environment for the development of educational resilience. We considered it appropriate to adapt this model for the development of the educational resilience of students in the context of the pandemic.



**Step 1.** *Encouraging emotional relationships based on nearness.* This is mainly due to the need to be in touch with people they can trust and whom they can ask for help in certain situations, thus avoiding isolation and alienation. Unfortunately, in the pandemic context, physical proximity is no longer possible, but this approach can be created through tutoring in the online environment.

**Step 2.** *Setting clear and consistent rules and boundaries* includes references to prohibited behaviors and their consequences in the context of online education. It is very important in the context we are going through that the system of rules should not focus on negative sanctions, but on those supportive interventions for students that aim to avoid undesirable behaviors.

**Step 3.** *Developing life skills* They are constituted as objectives adjacent to the academic act. However, they can be developed in a concrete way by using academic activities that focus on cooperation and teamwork, self-expression, and assuming decisions.



**Step 4.** *Providing care and support* involves focusing on the student. All students need academic success in order to be motivated to learn and to increase their self-esteem, and these goals can be achieved in a real and realistic way by individualizing the work tasks according to the level and potential of each one. It is very important that teachers show a special interest in a good knowledge of the students, especially in the context in which students who started their academic career in 2020 and who have never interacted face to face with the teachers.

**Step 5.** Setting and communicating standards. Setting standards has proven to be an important factor in promoting resilience, bringing extra motivation to overcome the difficulties encountered.

**Step 6.** *Ensuring opportunities for meaningful participation.* It is important to provide students with as diverse experiences as possible that allow them to participate online in the context of the pandemic.

For the pandemic period that we are going through for almost two years and for which we do not have a time horizon regarding the return to "normality" face to face, it is necessary to design interventions for the development of the academic resilience of the students.

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