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## **Evaluation of education well-being: analysis of some tools**

### **Valutazione del benessere educativo: analisi di alcuni strumenti**

*di*

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#### **Abstract:**

The promotion of learning and education well-being are two closely related factors; several studies have shown that students who experience greater emotional well-being are more likely to achieve scholastic success; conversely, those who experience greater emotional difficulties are likely to have high levels of anxiety and are more likely to experience failures during their educational process (De Francesco, Donolato, Tucci, Mammarella, 2020; Di Pietro, 2016). The aim of the essay is to analyse some tools for evaluating anxiety, well-being and emotions, which can help teachers adopt more effective teaching actions and propose targeted educational interventions in order to prevent various forms of distress also related to the evaluation moment (Briesch, Sanetti e Biesch, 2010; Di Pietro, 2016; Vio, Toso e Spagnoletti, 2015).

**Keywords:** evaluation, education well-being, anxiety, emotions, tools.

#### **Abstract:**

La promozione dell'apprendimento e del benessere educativo sono due fattori strettamente correlati; diversi studi, infatti, hanno dimostrato che gli studenti che sperimentano un maggiore benessere emotivo raggiungeranno più facilmente il successo scolastico; viceversa coloro che hanno maggiori

difficoltà a livello emotivo, saranno probabilmente caratterizzati da elevati livelli di ansia e potranno incorrere più facilmente, durante il loro processo formativo, in insuccessi (De Francesco, Donolato, Tucci, Mammarella, 2020; Di Pietro, 2016). L'obiettivo del saggio è quello di analizzare alcuni strumenti per valutare l'ansia, il benessere e le emozioni, che possono essere di aiuto ai docenti per adottare azioni didattiche più efficaci e proporre interventi educativi mirati, allo scopo di prevenire le diverse forme di disagio legate anche al momento valutativo (Briesch, Sanetti e Biesch, 2010; Di Pietro, 2016; Vio, Toso e Spagnoletti, 2015).

**Parole chiave:** valutazione, benessere educativo, ansia, emozioni, strumenti

### **Introduction**

School represents one of the environments in which students spend most of their time and in which they learn about themselves, based primarily on affective-motivational, relational and cognitive experiences, shared with the peer group and teachers. These experiences, depending on how they are experienced by students can therefore be considered the "thermometer" of their well-being in the school context (Tobia, Greco, Steca e Marzocchi, 2018).

In fact, during their schooling, students may experience emotional distress and negative moods and lack effective strategies for dealing with these difficult times. These negative emotions can make them vulnerable and negatively affect their learning, thus increasing their risk of school failure (Ahonen, Nebot & Giménez, 2007; Thompson & Tawell, 2017). The school context is the place where emotional, relational, and personal dimensions develop that can give rise to positive or negative affective states, affecting the entire educational process (Pekrun et al., 2002). In fact, research shows a correlation between affective states and learning outcomes, such that: while positive emotions can influence academic achievement by increasing learning and study motivation and improving time management, negative emotions, on the other hand, chart an entirely opposite course (Weber, Wagner & Ruch, 2016). In light of this empirical evidence, attention to the emotional aspects of students in the educational context cannot be considered a factor of secondary importance, but becomes an essential element from which to draw future perspectives. Over the years, approaches with respect to mental health have changed a great deal: from a definition of health as the absence of mental disorders, to the more current construct of well-being, understood as a general positive state of the individual (Weare, 2000, 2010). A construct that finds its greatest development in the educational context, which is that ideal place where one can exercise one's social-emotional skills and expand one's self-care abilities (WHO, 2022; UNICEF, 2021; Feng et al., 2019; Moses, Bradley & O'Callaghan, 2016; Zins et al., 2004), in order to be able to cope with stressful events, develop positive personal relationships, and know how to self-regulate one's emotions (Moses, Bradley & O'Callaghan, 2016). In order to identify students' well-being/discomfort conditions in a preventive way, it is important to have a clear picture of some of the evaluation anxiety state screening tools in the literature, which can help teachers take more effective teaching actions and propose targeted educational interventions to prevent different forms of anxiety related to the time of evaluation (Briesch, Sanetti e Biesch, 2010; Di Pietro, 2016; Vio, Toso e Spagnoletti, 2015).

## 1. Framework

Well-being is an extremely complex, multidisciplinary and multidimensional construct (Tobia & Marzocchi, 2015a); particularly in the scientific literature in the psycho pedagogical field, there are several constructs of well-being (Ryff & Synger, 1998; Konu & Rimpela, 2002). However, in order to be able to best describe this topic, it may be helpful to analyze three areas of research in particular that refer to three different declinations of the term (Petrillo e Donizzetti, 2010; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) which are: subjective well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being. Subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995; Kahneman, Diener & Schwarz, 1999) is primarily described as the degree of satisfaction and fulfillment an individual has with his or her life and on which variables such as: demographic characteristics, personality traits, cognitive styles, and interpersonal relationships do not affect (Kim-Prieto, Diener, Tamir, Scollon, & Diener, 2005; Myers & Diener, 1995). Psychological well-being, on the other hand, refers to the optimal psychological functioning or positive mental health of an individual; in other words, the state that characterizes an individual who is able to overcome the existential challenges of life and integrate easily with the world around him or her (Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002). According to this perspective, being well thus lies in the individual's ability to feel in harmony with the world around him or her (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993): a fusion of individual and collective well-being that mutually influence each other (Delle Fave, 2004; Massimini & Delle Fave, 2000). The third element is social well-being, later called psychosocial well-being, which is characterized by a view that is no longer based on individualism, but on the interactions that individuals enact with their surroundings (Petrillo & Donizzetti, 2010) and the relationships that arise with their sociocultural environment (Bassi, Fianco, Preziosa, Steca & Delle Fave, 2008).

In recent years, research has provided empirical evidence with respect to the fact that being well is no longer an absolute and unconditional concept, but represents adaptive functioning, that is, how each subject interacts with internal or external demands. Against this, when social well-being refers to the school context, it is more correct to speak of educational well-being, which is helpful in promoting the development of: sense of efficacy and self-efficacy, metacognitive strategies, motivation, positive self-image, and social recognition (Kern et al., 2016; Larson, 2000; Seligman, 2009). Scientific research tells us that an integrated school approach promotes healthy conditions, prosociality, engagement, and learning (Roffey, 2015), in the sense that students show greater ability to succeed when they perceive a sense of belonging with the school and when teachers see them not just as students, but as people embedded in a larger context (Clift & Jensen, 2005; Noble et al., 2008; Roffey, 2011; Weare & Gray, 2003). There are numerous researches furthermore (OECD, 2015) confirming that factors related to well-being are multiple and are all connected with students' learning processes, both from an individual and group perspective (Calenda, 2019).

## 2. Analysis of some elements affecting educational well-being

The concept of "well-being" in the educational sense has been defined over time in various ways, almost always referring to models that put the term educational well-being in relation to a number of factors that influence or do not influence its development (Allison, Locker & Feine, 1997; Crocetti, 2014; Diener & Larsen, 1993; Konu e Rimpelä, 2002; Mariani, 2001; Maslow, 1970; Petrillo, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Varni, Seid & Rode, 1999). Among the many elements considered determinants in this sense (physical and psychological health, quality of family and extra-familial relationships,

self-esteem, sense of self-efficacy, emotional experience), there are some elements that more than others need to be considered in order to assess and promote educational well-being, especially in the face of the copious scientific research in the field that returns us not entirely positive data on this issue (OECD, 2017; Inchley et al, 2020; Mignolli et al., 2022; Lucisano et al., 2018; Lucangeli, 2019; Lucangeli, 2021), particularly with respect to the declination of this construct from a psychological perspective (WHO, 2013) . Factors that generally have the potential to influence well-being include self-esteem, students' academic performance, and anxiety.

### *Self-esteem*

Self-esteem corresponds to a positive or negative evaluation the subject makes of himself or herself based on the gap between the perceived and ideal self-concept (Pope, McHale and Craighead, 1988). It is a factor that influences academic success or failure and satisfaction with respect to relationships. Indeed, it will be the nature of the cognitive and affective-emotional experiences and relationships woven throughout one's educational journey that will determine in the student the perception of educational well-being (Cvencek, Fryberg, Covarrubias e Meltzoff, 2018; Tobia & Marzocchi, 2015; Pazzaglia, Moè, Cipolletta, Chia, Galozzi, Masiero e Punzi, 2020).

### *Scholastic achievement*

Several studies also highlight how self-esteem is closely related to academic performance, to the point that students with low self-esteem have more difficulty achieving the goals set by the teacher, compared with those with high self-esteem (Cvencek et al., 2018). Also involved in determining school performance are relational and emotional variables, namely those factors that are important in order to be able to structure effective teaching and improve students' educational experience and well-being. Regarding relational variables, two types of relationships are important: with the peer group and with teachers. Peer relationships can have a strong impact on a student's social, emotional, and behavioral development and influence his or her cognitive performance and scholastic achievement (Tobia, Riva e Caprin, 2017). The relationship between student and teacher, on the other hand, appears to influence motivation, psychosocial well-being, and school success (Fredriksen and Rhodes, 2004) and also to be critical to the quality of relationships built among peers (Ulmanen, Soini, Pietarinen e Pyhältö, 2016). On the other hand, with regard to emotional variables, an important factor in educational well-being is perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 2000); by it we refer to a person's ability to cognitively, emotionally and relationally self-evaluate himself or herself in the continuous process of identity construction (Xodo, 2003). If students perceive themselves as effective they will go on to success in school, as they will feel able to cope with different situations by applying various learning strategies (Di Benedetto and Zimmerman, 2010), produce the desired effects through their own actions, be more motivated to recreate the conditions to be able to relive the positive school experience, and have an increase in their self-esteem (Gore, 2006; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, Langley, & Carlstrom, 2004). The dynamics underlying self-efficacy and self-esteem are social in nature, and in the school context they develop within a complex relational fabric in which teachers and students are involved. It is precisely the nature of the cognitive and affective-emotional experiences, as well as the relationships woven throughout one's educational journey, that will determine in the student the perception of educational well-being (Tobia & Marzocchi, 2015). Conversely, the experience of failure will lead students to be unmotivated and experience failure with

a sense of deep malaise, which can, in some cases, even lead to dropping out of school (Caprara et al., 2008; Batini, 2014). Studies have also confirmed a positive correlation between academic performance and student well-being (Kornhonen et al., 2014; Wang e Peck, 2013). Specifically, secondary school students with low levels of well-being are more likely to drop out of school. One factor that plays an important role in this regard is anxiety because when it manifests itself in an excessive or inappropriate form for the situation, it has negative consequences at the level of student learning (Morelli, Palamà e Meneghetti, 2015). The degree of anxiety also affects the attention subjects place on the test task assigned by the teacher: if the level of anxiety is high, attention is focused on the difficulty of the task, possible failure, and feeling unskilled, as a result there is a decrease in school performance (Raccanello, Brondino, Moè, Stupnisky, & Lichtenfeld, 2019), a decrease in memory, concentration, and attention (Carbonero & Lucas, 1999; Franco, Mañas, Cangas, & Gallego, 2010).

### *Anxiety*

When we talk about schooling in addition to referring to cognitive ability as a factor that enables the achievement of curricular goals, it is necessary to consider the fact that the cognitive dimension is closely linked to the affective-emotional and emotional sphere (Eccles e Wigfield, 2002; Pekrun, Lichtenfeld, Marsh, Murayama e Goetz, 2017; St Clair-Thompson e Gathercole, 2006). Emotional aspects thus guide the development of school learning in a positive or negative sense (Musetti, Pasini e Cattivelli, 2016). In fact, students experience a variety of emotions in the course of their education process, and one of the negative emotions they experience the most is anxiety, which can emerge in various forms, including assessment anxiety (von der Embse, Jester, Roy e Post, 2018). Assessment anxiety appears in the presence of concerns, physiological (e.g., sweating, trembling, increased heart rate), behavioral (e.g., avoidance), and social responses related to the fear of failure and experiencing failure related to teacher evaluations, such as the performance of classroom tests (Zeidner, 1998). This is a form of anxiety that usually develops at school, but at the same time is related to the construct of general anxiety (Carey, Devine, Hill and Szu'cs, 2017; Mammarella, Donolato, Caviola and Giofrè, 2018), which is the tendency to worry at different times in daily life. The development of evaluation anxiety is related to several individual characteristics, including gender differences. In fact, research tells us that female students often show higher levels of evaluation anxiety than male students, and that it is developmental in nature, as it increases as they get older (von der Embse et al., 2018). Although these results have been confirmed in college students and adults, there are not many studies regarding elementary school children instead (Hill et al., 2016).

### **3. Analysis of some tools**

Anxiety is one of the most common discomforts especially in the educational process and can impair school and social functioning (Keeley & Storch, 2009). For this reason, it is important to be able to employ valid psychometric measurement tools to identify the onset of this distress in a preventive manner. Since we cannot analyze all the instruments offered in the scientific literature, for the economy of discussion we will focus only on three questionnaires: *State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-Y)* di Spielberger et al. 1983, *Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWB)* di Ryff et al. 2003 e *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)* di Gratz & Roemer (2004).

*State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-Y)* di Spielberger et al. 1983

The STAI-Y aims to investigate two characteristic aspects of anxiety: "state" (S-anxiety) and "trait" (T-anxiety). The first indicates how anxious the subject feels "right at that moment" and expresses a subjective feeling of worry and tension with respect to a transient situation-stimulus of varying intensity. The second refers instead to how the subject habitually feels, that is, to a more enduring personality condition, regardless of the particular situation he or she is experiencing. It is an instrument consisting of forty questions: the first twenty investigate the perception of the transient stimulus (Y1), the second the stable personality condition (Y2). The questionnaire is based on a 4-step Likert scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (4).

*Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWB)* di Ryff et al. 2003

The PWB, on the other hand, is a psychological well-being questionnaire consisting of 84 items and is based on a 6-step Likert scale, ranging from "not my case" (1), to "that's just the way it is" (6). The dimensions that make up the instrument are:

- *Autonomy*: allows one to be independent, uninfluenced by others' expectations or social pressures, self-confident. Behavior and thinking are determined by internal personal standards and not by social pressures;
- *Environmental mastery*: enables one to manage everyday life, one's surroundings, to seize opportunities, and to modify, as much as possible, the context according to one's needs;
- *Personal Growth*: Have a positive and constructive attitude toward new experiences;
- *Positive Relations*: this dimension implies the presence of a satisfactory number of interpersonal relationships characterized by warmth, trust, empathy, affection; qualities that make it possible to maintain important ties with others, relationships in which it is possible to give and receive reciprocally;
- *Purpose in life*: involves the ability to ascribe meaning to one's life, both present and past, to set goals or objectives, moving toward a certain direction, based on definite personal beliefs about the meaning of life;
- *Self-acceptance*: sense of satisfaction with oneself and one's life and awareness of one's qualities, both positive and negative.

*Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS)* di Gratz & Roemer (2004)

The last instrument is the DERS a scale that assesses difficulties in emotion regulation. It consists of 36 items and is based on a 5-step Likert scale ranging from "never" (1) to "almost always" (5). The dimensions that make up the scale are: nonacceptance of negative emotions (*Nonacceptance*); inability to have purposeful behaviors when experiencing negative emotions (*Goals*); difficulty keeping impulsivity under control when experiencing negative emotions (*Impulse*); difficulty implementing effective emotion regulation strategies (*Strategies*); lack of awareness of one's emotions (*Awareness*); and lack of understanding of the nature of one's emotional responses (*Clarity*).

### **Concluding reflections**

The correct evaluation of all factors of school discomfort, through the use of valid psychometric measuring instruments that allow their preventive detection, is an important condition to be able to improve the well-being of students and thus reduce the difficulties of adaptation to school life and consequently to the construction of personal and social identity of the same students. Through the

proper identification of students' malaise and discomfort, it is therefore possible, to also cope with all those states of anxiety that can affect the individual's proper learning process. However, in order to work in the promotion of educational well-being, a new perspective is needed, drawing attention to a training of teachers and school administrators, curved not only on the cognitive aspects of students, but also on the affective-motivational and social ones, in order to be able to prevent malaise and discomfort. This aspect is exceedingly important because as the WHO (WHO, 2003; 1999; 1993) suggests, a person capable of taking care of his or her own well-being possesses a good level of self-esteem, confidence in personal control, consideration for others, and possession of Life Skills, all of which contribute to one's educational success.

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