

WELL-BEING AT SCHOOL

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Abstract. The concept of personal well-being is multidimensional and encompasses both objective (economic, cultural, environmental, physical) and subjective (psychological, emotional, affective, socio-relational) conditions experienced by the individual. Numerous studies have confirmed the existence of a strong positive relationship between classroom climate and well-being, as well as between well-being and learning. This research is part of an action research framework and does not aim to draw inferential conclusions. Based on the assumption that any discomfort arising within a classroom must first be analyzed (research) and subsequently addressed through targeted interventions (action), the focus of this study was on the social and relational dimensions of well-being in the classroom.

Between February and April 2024, a non-probability sample of 553 children from third, fourth, and fifth grades in several primary schools in the northeast was surveyed using a structured questionnaire with 15 questions. The practical implications of this research are significant, as children provide clear insights into the conditions that foster their well-being. These findings offer valuable guidance for teachers and students alike on the actions that can be taken to improve classroom quality of life, and consequently, enhance learning outcomes.

1. Introduction

The school is a socialization agent that significantly influences pupils, their relationships, and serves as a learning environment for their future. It can be defined as “a main scenery for building social, emotional, and behavioural support among children because students spend a substantial amount of time there” (Tomé *et al.*, 2021, p. 3). It represents an educational context that provides students with the opportunity to engage in cognitive, emotional, relational, and behavioral experiences, which impact their quality of life and well-being (Tobia *et al.*, 2018). Within this context, the teacher plays a central role, not only in the transmission of knowledge but also in fostering interpersonal relationships with pupils (Kanizsa and Zaninelli, 2020) which contributes to the creation of a positive classroom climate, where positive relationships with classmates and teachers support pupils in their learning journey (Kanizsa, 2007). Furthermore, the school is also a physical environment that accommodates students, meaning that physical spaces, materials, and furnishings also affect their experiences and performance (Baker and Bernstein,

2012). Thus, the relationships between peers, teachers, and the environment are crucial elements for establishing a positive classroom climate. It is the outcome of the moods, desires, expectations, behaviors, and values of all individuals—students and teachers alike. Achieving a balance among these components fosters both personal and collective well-being (Polito, 2021).

1.1. Well-being and learning

Well-being is generally understood as synonymous with the quality of people's lives or happiness (Veenhoven, 2000) and can be assessed using both objective measures (such as economic conditions, cultural resources, or health status) and subjective measures (such as perceived quality of life, satisfaction, and happiness) (Statham and Chase, 2010). The World Health Organization's 1946 charter established well-being as a fundamental component of health, stating: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". This definition laid the foundation for numerous studies on well-being, all characterized by a multidimensional approach (Hossain *et al.*, 2023) that encompasses cognitive, psychological, social, physical, and material aspects.

Personal well-being is essentially the result of subjective perceptions, closely linked to emotions, which are in turn strongly connected to the ability to interact socially, learn, and internalize knowledge (Stefanini, 2013). The learning process, in fact, is not merely about "storing information"; it is also shaped by emotions, which influence how thoughts and decisions are formed (Vygotsky, 1966). There is a strong parallel between the development of emotions and intellectual functions, as both are involved in every human action (Piaget, 1991). Gardner underscores this idea by noting that emotions, such as enthusiasm for new experiences, play a key role in determining academic success, while less stimulating experiences tend to have little lasting impact (Gardner, 2010). In particular, events experienced with medium-to-high emotional involvement, and thus higher emotional activation, are more likely to be remembered (Palomba and Stegagno, 2007). As Pekrun *et al.* (2002) state, "Academic emotions are significantly related to students' motivation, learning strategies, cognitive resources, self-regulation, and academic achievement, as well as to personality and classroom antecedents" (Pekrun *et al.*, 2002, pag. 91). Positive academic emotions are also associated with higher levels of attention (Vuilleumier 2005), better memorization and learning (Phelps, 2004), improved reasoning (Jung *et al.*, 2014) and enhanced problem-solving abilities (Isen *et al.*, 1987). To summarize with Goleman, Emotional Intelligence governs people's lives, guides their choices and determines their well-being (Goleman, 2020). Students' emotional well-being is shaped by various factors, including a positive attitude towards school

and learning, a healthy self-perception in the academic context, the absence of anxiety and worries about school, and the absence of bullying or discriminatory behaviors (Polito, 2021).

The effect of school climate on learning is significantly mediated by students' well-being. A high-quality school climate is associated with increased student interest in learning and participation in educational activities. Moreover, the perceived quality of relationships between teachers and students is a strong predictor of student engagement (Fatou and Kubiszewski, 2018). As noted by Hossain *et al.* (2023, p. 448) "Students with a higher sense of well-being perform better at school and later on as adults by gaining employment, leading a socially engaged life, and contributing to the nation". Other research has found that "that well-being experience influence engagement in school activities beyond the effect of school-climate perception" (Lombardi *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, a negative and hostile classroom climate hampers learning, causing students to retreat into individualism. In such environments, classrooms become spaces of discomfort, making both teaching and learning significantly more challenging (Polito, 2021).

Children's well-being is central to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989¹ and serves as a strategic prerequisite for realizing all children's rights. This emphasis on well-being is also echoed in the recommendation of 28 November 2022 from the Council of the European Union, which states that "special attention should be paid to well-being at school, as it is a key component of academic success" (p. 22).

2. Objectives, tool and method

"Quality, welcoming atmosphere, inclusion, perceived self-efficacy, positive climate, participation, sharing, dialogue—these are just some of the terms that resonate with the concept of well-being for students and teachers" (Cristalli, 2021), regardless of the order or grade of school. This research focuses on the social and relational dimensions of well-being in the classroom, specifically exploring the "ideal" conditions that help children feel good in their relationships with classmates and teachers. To achieve this, a questionnaire was administered in which children were asked to identify both what makes them feel good and what makes them feel bad. It is important to note that the absence of elements that promote well-being does not necessarily equate to malaise, and vice versa. Following a pre-test conducted with 40 children, the final questionnaire included 15 structured multiple-choice

¹ Ratified in our legal system by Law No. 176 of 27 May 1991, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in New York on 20 November 1989.

questions. The administration of the questionnaire² took place between February and April 2024, involving 33 classes from primary schools in the provinces of Belluno, Gorizia, Pordenone, Trieste, Treviso, Udine, and Venice. The sample comprised 553 pupils, of whom 36.3% were third-graders, 36.2% were fourth-graders, and 27.5% were fifth-graders, with a distribution of 50.3% boys and 49.7% girls.

The research project is situated within an action-research framework (Lewin, 1946), where the objective is not inferential in nature. In this context, the research aims to understand the nature of a problem and gather the necessary information to address it—specifically, to determine effective strategies for promoting well-being in primary school classrooms.

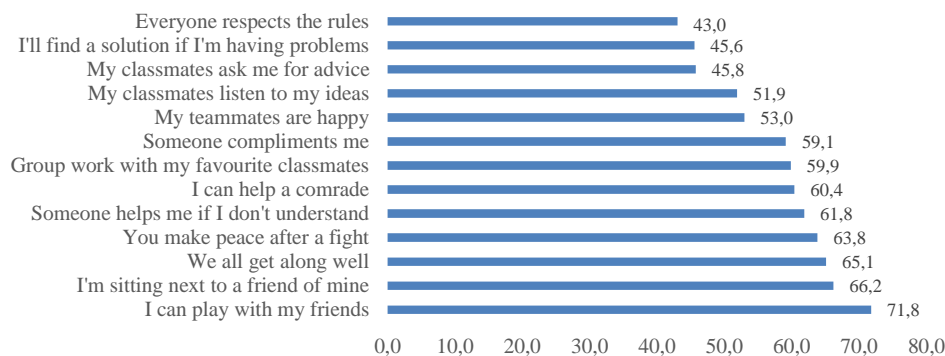
3. Data analysis

3.1. Well-being factors

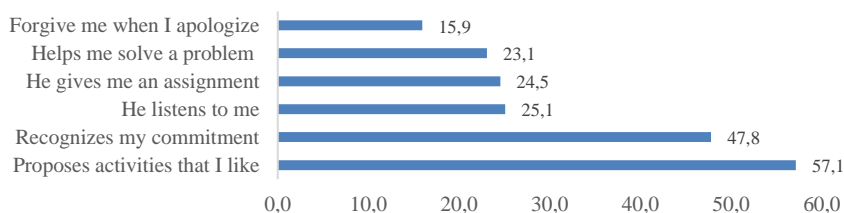
The focus of this research was on the social-relational dimension of well-being in the classroom. Key conditions that enhance this sense of well-being include the opportunity for students to share time and space with their friends, as well as fostering an environment where everyone gets along and collaborates with one another (fig. 1). There is a strong consensus among both males and females across all ages, with only three exceptions: males (64.0%) are more inclined than females (55.6%) to feel good when working in a group with preferred peers ($\chi^2 = 4.052$)³; males (50.0%) also appreciate it more than females (41.5%) when classmates ask for advice during group work ($\chi^2 = 4.068$). Additionally, fourth-graders (68.0%) are more sensitive to compliments than fifth-graders (55.3%) and third-graders (53.2%) ($\chi^2 = 10.343$).

² The questionnaires were administered by trainee students from the Educational Sciences program at the University of Udine, in the presence of the class teachers. Prior to administering the questionnaire, the research project received approval from the school principals, and an information form was signed by the families, granting consent for their children to participate. The data were collected anonymously and processed in aggregate form, fully complying with privacy regulations according to the GDPR (2016/679) and Legislative Decree 101/2018.

³ To verify the existence of statistically significant differences in opinions among children, the chi-square test was applied to all responses based on gender and class. Only significant test values with $\alpha = 0.05$ are reported in the text. Additionally, to determine whether gender or age profiles could be identified, Cramer's V test was used, which highlighted a "fair association" in only two cases, as will be detailed in the paper.

Figure 1 – Well-being factors in the classroom (percentages).

Feeling good at school also involves having a positive relationship with the teacher. To explore this, the children were asked to identify the behaviors of teachers that contribute to their well-being in class (fig. 2). Overall, opinions were consistent, except in terms of the ability to propose enjoyable activities, which was indicated more frequently by males (63.4%) than by females (50.7%) ($\chi^2 = 8.939$).

Figure 2 – Elements of well-being in the relationship with the teacher (percentages).

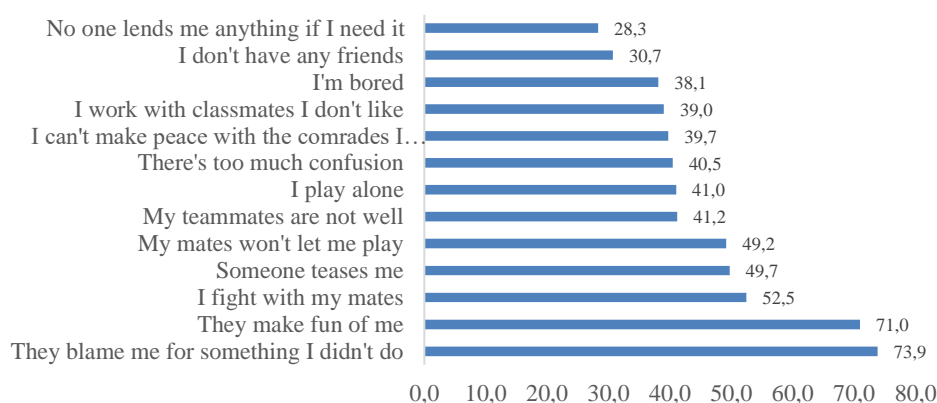
Regarding age, older children tend to feel good when the teacher assigns them work (57.0%), while this sentiment is less pronounced among fourth-graders (49.5%) and third-graders (39.1%) ($\chi^2 = 14.923$). Conversely, third-graders feel more rewarded by their teachers when their efforts are recognized, with 33.5% expressing this sentiment, followed by fifth-graders at 22.8% and fourth-graders at 17.0% ($\chi^2 = 11.332$).

3.2. Factors of discomfort

The children were asked to identify not only the situations that promote well-being but also those that make them feel uncomfortable at school. In fact, it can sometimes be easier to pinpoint unpleasant situations and, from those, infer the

opposite behaviors that contribute to well-being (fig. 3). There is only one notable difference between the genders: males (42.6%) report feeling more affected by boredom than females (33.6%) ($\chi^2 = 4.754$). Considering age, certain negative situations diminish in impact as students progress from third to fifth grade. For instance, feelings of discomfort arise when being excluded from games ($\chi^2 = 6.302$), being the target of teasing ($\chi^2 = 7.855$), or when no one lends them something they need ($\chi^2 = 7.205$).

Figure 3 – Situations in which children do not like to stay at school (percentages).

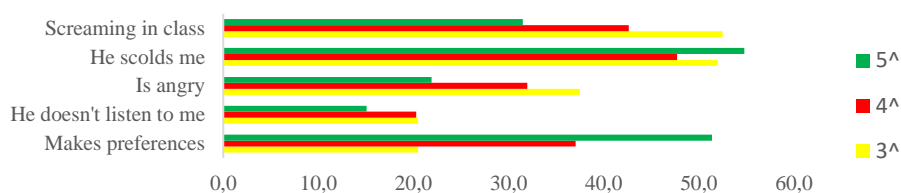


To feel good in the classroom, children also identify certain behaviors that should be avoided, as they cause annoyance and discomfort. Both boys and girls agree that they feel bad when a classmate is treated poorly (65.2%), when someone damages their classmates' materials (64.8%), or when there is disruption during the teacher's explanation (61.4%). Fewer inconveniences arise from failing to comply with certain rules, such as respecting traffic queues while moving (56.6%), raising hands before speaking (48.7%), or damaging school property (46.7%). However, differences emerge between classes: as students age, the annoyance caused by behaviors related to a lack of respect tends to decrease. This includes not raising a hand to speak ($\chi^2 = 7.245$), not remaining silent in the classroom ($\chi^2 = 7.184$), not respecting the line while moving ($\chi^2 = 8.273$), and damaging the environment ($\chi^2 = 10.750$). It can be inferred that these behaviors significantly diminish or disappear from third-graders to fifth-graders, to the extent that they no longer represent disruptive elements. Nevertheless, there is still a collective disapproval when someone hurts a classmate or damages their belongings.

In the relationship with the teacher, being reprimanded causes more distress, and few report a lack of listening as a factor contributing to their discomfort (fig. 4). This may be attributed to teachers being attentive and responsive to students' needs, which

diminishes the sensation of feeling unheard. There are no gender differences noted; however, perceptions vary by class level. Students in fifth grade report feeling less discomfort compared to earlier grades when the teacher gets angry ($\chi^2 = 9.593$), shouts in class ($\chi^2 = 15.202$), or shows favoritism ($\chi^2 = 36.131$, Cramer's $V=0,258$).

Figure 4 – Situations that cause discomfort in the relationship with the teacher (percentages).



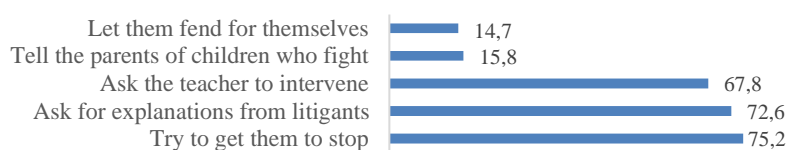
Since well-being results from both psychological and physical conditions, children were asked about experiencing headaches at school, and the data provide important insights: only 21.6% of children report never having headaches, while 15.0% say they experience them almost daily or all the time. The majority (64.4%) report having headaches occasionally. The frequency distribution indicates that females tend to experience headaches more than males ($\chi^2 = 13.935$), with no significant differences observed between classes. There may be issues related to eyesight—such as struggling to read the blackboard (19.0%) or reading for too long (15.9%)—or learning-related problems, including anxiety about a test (27.2%) or difficulties with a subject (33.0%). However, the challenges posed by a noisy classroom environment are the most significant, with many children reporting distractions from loud voices (69.3%) and noise in general (50.1%). Mathematics is the subject that creates the most tension for these children, leading to headaches (35.0%), followed by Italian (18.2%) and science (13.1%). No gender differences are observed, but third-graders are significantly more sensitive to noise ($\chi^2 = 9.459$), loud voices ($\chi^2 = 7.046$), and excessive light in the classroom ($\chi^2 = 6.239$) compared to fourth and fifth-graders.

3.3. Behaviors to improve well-being in the classroom

The classroom climate can also be influenced by relationships among classmates, with children generally preferring to resolve conflicts either by intervening directly or by asking the teacher for help (fig. 5). Gender differences are evident in how children choose to handle their issues: boys are more likely to stay away from conflicts (20.9%) compared to girls (8.4%) ($\chi^2 = 17.429$), while girls are more

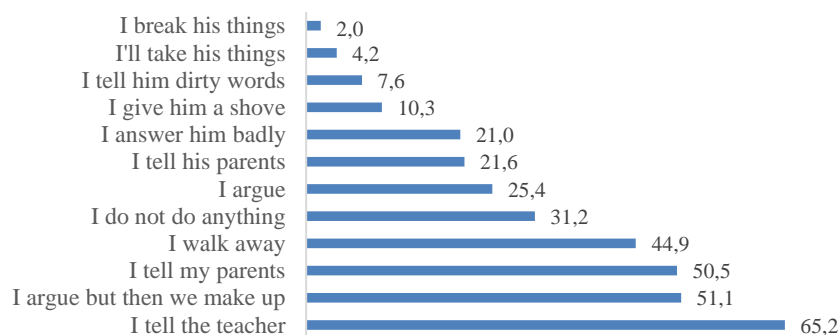
inclined to ask the disputing parties to resolve their conflicts (79.3%) than boys (66.1%) ($\chi^2 = 12.114$). Regarding age, there is a significant variation in opinions about the appropriateness of seeking teacher intervention ($\chi^2 = 16.626$) or informing the parents of children who argue ($\chi^2 = 9.961$). This tendency is more common among third-graders and decreases by fifth grade.

Figure 5 – What should be done when classmates argue (percentages).



Let us now consider children's reactions when someone makes them angry (fig. 6). It is interesting to note that a quarter of the children react by arguing (25.4%), while 51.1% argue but eventually make up. Although few children are aggressive or vindictive, the majority respond not only by reacting directly but also by seeking the teacher's help (65.2%).

Figure 6 – How children react when a classmate makes them angry (percentages).



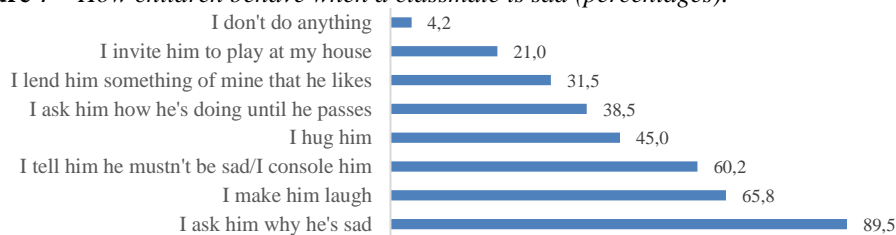
Males (15.9%) are more likely than females (4.7%) to react by pushing ($\chi^2 = 18.552$) or swearing (10.8% vs. 4.4%, $\chi^2 = 8.209$). In contrast, females (59.3%) more frequently tell their parents about conflicts than males (41.9%) ($\chi^2 = 16.705$). Additionally, females tend to reconcile after a quarrel more often than males (55.6% vs. 46.6%, $\chi^2 = 4.539$). Age also influences reactions to provocation, with older children displaying more moderate behaviors compared to younger ones. This is particularly evident in their responses, such as pushing ($\chi^2 = 6.907$), informing the parents of the child who angered them ($\chi^2 = 28.286$), or talking to their own parents

($\chi^2 = 10.006$) or the teacher ($\chi^2 = 17.700$), and even choosing to do nothing ($\chi^2 = 10.985$).

The children in the sample not only avoid quarrels but also demonstrate a high level of generosity by helping their classmates in times of need. For instance, if someone lacks school supplies, 79.0% offer to lend something, with an additional 13.8% doing so only if it is for a friend. There are no statistically significant distinctions based on gender or age.

Generosity and the desire to support others are also evident when a classmate is experiencing sadness or difficulty. Only 4.2% (23 children in total) would ignore their peer's discomfort. In contrast, the majority would seek to help in various ways, starting with simply asking why their peer is sad (89.5%). Other responses include making them laugh (65.8%), attempting to console them (60.2%), or offering a hug (45.0%) (fig. 7).

Figure 7 – How children behave when a classmate is sad (percentages).



Females show a greater interest than males in the emotional state of their classmates, as evidenced by their willingness to ask why someone is sad (94.9% vs. 84.2%, $\chi^2 = 16.975$), try to comfort them (65.1% vs. 55.4%, $\chi^2 = 5.424$), and offer hugs (58.2% vs. 32.0%, $\chi^2 = 38.243$, Cramer's $V = 0.263$). Conversely, males are more likely than females to invite their classmates to play at home (24.5% vs. 17.5%, $\chi^2 = 4.093$). There is a notable consistency in behavior across different ages; however, differences do exist in the level of concern for a classmate's sadness ($\chi^2 = 10.514$) and the willingness to lend something to make them happy ($\chi^2 = 11.778$).

Even when a classmate is angry, children's first response is to show interest in him/her by asking what is going on (83.8%), trying to calm him/her down (69.6%), and encouraging him/her not to act violently or damage others' belongings. Both males and females generally agree on these approaches; however, the recommendation to refrain from violence is more common among third and fourth graders ($\chi^2 = 8.518$), as is the suggestion not to break things ($\chi^2 = 17.371$).

To conclude, we asked what teachers should do when children do not respect rules of appropriate behavior in order to restore a positive classroom climate. When a classmate is mocked, the teacher should apologize (48.6%) and/or reprimand the

student (42.4%). If children argue, the teacher should encourage them to apologize (42.7%) and also talk to them to understand the reason behind the conflict (35.8%). If students are noisy during the lesson, the teacher should scold them (52.0%) and remind them of the importance of rules (29.8%). In cases where students use swear words, parents should be informed (53.8%) alongside the scolding (31.9%). If children harm their classmates, it is essential to notify their parents (33.1%) and reprimand the children (28.2%). When speaking turns are not respected, students should be reprimanded (47.2%), and the significance of rules should be reiterated (28.6%).

4. Conclusion: from research to action

This research has identified factors that contribute to children's well-being at school, as well as those that cause discomfort, and has illustrated how children react to enhance the well-being of their entire class. It is now essential for teachers to integrate this information into their classrooms and use it as a foundation for designing actions that promote well-being and improve learning outcomes.

The findings indicate that children's expressions of discomfort vary with age; however, the importance of friendships remains significant for all. Teachers are therefore tasked with fostering social relationships and guiding students in recognizing and managing their emotions. Implementing a self-awareness program can start as early as primary school.

Another critical area to address is the education around respecting rules. While respecting rules was initially perceived as the least important factor for creating well-being (43.0%), teachers play a pivotal role in managing inappropriate behaviors (such as fighting or using foul language). Thus, a comprehensive "Respect Project" should be integrated into the entire primary school curriculum, focusing on social interactions (both with peers and adults), community relationships, and connections with the natural environment.

Teachers can promote well-being by introducing activities that spark students' curiosity and interest without compromising essential teaching and planning requirements. They can easily create an environment that minimizes physical discomfort, keeping in mind that, from an action-research perspective, any reported discomfort by even a single child necessitates intervention, as the goal is to ensure that every child feels included and comfortable.

Lastly, educators must reflect on their teaching styles and their relationships with students. This includes avoiding shouting, recognizing student efforts, treating all students equitably without showing favoritism, and, most importantly, actively listening to their needs and concerns.

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