

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF STUDENTS

*Ieva Brazauskaite-Zubaviciene¹ , Anna Vintere² 

¹Kauno kolegija Higher Education Institution, Lithuania

²Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies, Latvia

*Corresponding author's e-mail: ieva.brazauskaite@go.kauko.lt

Abstract

Students experienced various challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g., distance learning, which caused limited face-to-face socialization opportunities with peers, leading to loneliness and anxiety. Loneliness and anxiety are known to be associated with psychological difficulties such as depression or lack of motivation, feelings of anxiety and difficulty concentrating on work, etc. COVID-19 also had an impact on the physical health of young people, such as back pain when sitting at the computer, eye pain and other difficulties. Although COVID-19 is no longer an issue, young people studying remotely during the pandemic are now our learners. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the emotional state of school youth at the moment and the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health, as researches show that three-quarters of all mental disorders appear before the age of 24. At this age, there are rapid changes in the body as well as the formation of personal identity. Based on these considerations, the Nordplus project 'Methods for working with young people to ensure learning process resilience' was initiated, in which surveys of students and teachers were organized, and six different educational institutions from three Baltic states participated in the study. Results show that students feel tired, anxious, and angry and have too heavy workload. Teachers think that physical activity, sports and help with studies could reduce the mental health problems of students, but for students, it is most important to spend more time with friends.

Keywords: Covid-19, emotional state, mental health, pandemic, psychological well-being.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected all areas of young people's lives – education, employment and leisure, as well as mental well-being. At the beginning of 2021, the Adolescent and Youth Psychotherapy Center published the study 'The impact of the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic on Latvian adolescents and young people'. According to the research data, 54.5% of young people admitted that their mental health had deteriorated during the Covid-19 pandemic, 70.4% admitted that they had experienced depression, 79.2% encountered difficulties in learning, and more than 60% experienced intrusive thoughts or were very easily irritated. A fifth of the respondents admitted that they faced psycho-emotional challenges at school. As one of the mental health problems, 43.2% of young people indicated excessive use of the computer and social networks. The research data show that the biggest problems for young people were studies (64%), spending free time (48%) and lack of physical activities.

In the first wave, young people mostly rated their mental health as good (38.1%) or acceptable (24.3%), while in the second wave, 'acceptable' (31.6%) and 'bad' (29.8%) already prevailed. The number of young people who feel very good during the pandemic decreased sharply (from 19.5% in the 1st wave to 7.6% in the 2nd wave), but the number of those who feel critical and destructive is increasing (from 4.6% in the 1st wave to 7.8% in the 2nd wave).

Similar data have also been obtained in other studies. Students experienced various challenges during the pandemic and distance learning (e.g., Tannert & Gröschner, 2021). The students had limited face-to-face socialization opportunities with peers, which are especially important in the teenage years, and worries

about the pandemic health results in general. At the same time, students had to continue to fulfil their academic responsibilities and meet academic requirements (Singh *et al.*, 2020; Scott *et al.*, 2021; Hacatrjana, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 on the psyche of young people was characterized by several conditions, including also the direct psychological consequences of the pandemic (i.e. fear, fake news, the consequences caused by the restrictions of the pandemic (lockdown, etc.) and the consequences directly related to COVID-19 (i.e. the death of a loved one, side effects). During the pandemic, young people had limited socialization opportunities, leading to loneliness and anxiety. Loneliness and anxiety are known to be associated with psychological difficulties (Loades *et al.*, 2020).

In various studies, students have reported psychological difficulties (e.g. depression or lack of motivation, feelings of anxiety and difficulty concentrating on work) or physical health problems (e.g. back pain when sitting at the computer, eye pain and other difficulties) (e.g. Hacatrjana, 2021; Belousova, Mochalova, & Tushnova, 2022).

Young people were also asked what would be needed to reduce mental health problems. 60% indicated the need to spend more time with friends, 48% of young people would benefit from physical activities and sports, and 38% would like to receive consultations from a psychologist or psychotherapist.

The impact of COVID-19 on the emotional and psychological well-being of young people is very important, as research shows that half of all mental health problems appear before the age of 14, and three-quarters of all mental disorders appear before the age of 24 (Mittendorfer Rutz & Wasserman, 2004). This is related to rapid changes in the body (e.g. growth, hormones). During this period, the limbic system is

very active, the frontal lobe is still maturing, and identity formation is essential for development (social contacts, separation from parents, etc.)

Although COVID-19 is no longer an issue, young people studying remotely during the pandemic are now our learners. Therefore, this study aims to identify the emotional state of youth at school (general, professional, interest) at the moment and the impact of COVID-19 on their emotional and psychological well-being.

Materials and Methods

The theoretical basis of the research methodology is based on the considerations above and the World Health Organization's definition of health (WHO, 2001). The understanding of mental health emphasizes the focus on well-being and considers positive mental health as 'a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community'.

The emotional and psychological well-being of learners is therefore important for the sustainability of the learning process. Thus, 16-23-year-old school youth (general, vocational and special interest education) were part of the empirical part of this study aimed at identifying their emotional state as well as teachers survey to identify the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health 'Figure 1'.

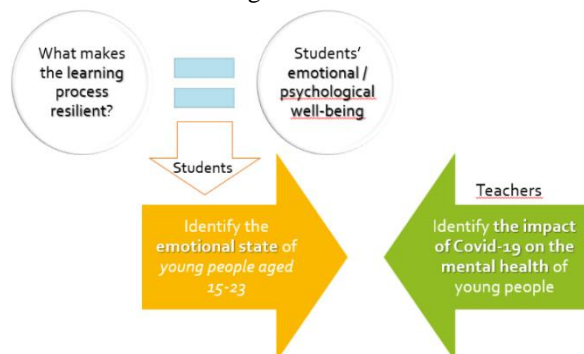


Figure 1. The design of the study.

The survey was carried out within the Nordic Council of Ministers' Grant Programme Nordplus project 'Methods for working with young people to ensure learning process resilience' in six different educational institutions (general, vocational and interest education) from three Baltic states. In total, 859 learners and 176 teachers took part in the survey.

Based on the above theoretical considerations and using the methodology of the study on the mental health of the post-pandemic generation of engineering students (Vintere & Balode, 2024), the two questionnaires (for students and teachers) were designed, characterized by the following keywords:

- Conversation with classmates, communication difficulties (peers, parents, teachers), social environment;
- Routine (day/night), leisure, free time activities,

hobbies, physical activities;

- Routine (day/night), leisure, free time activities, hobbies, physical activities, feelings, bullying, workload, competition;

- Problem-solving strategies, solutions (what do they need), motivation aspects, support, and help they need.

The student questionnaire (in English) is still available here <https://forms.gle/SBT8BjGk9PS9cvdE> seven and the teacher questionnaire - <https://forms.gle/Wr99ZhQzsA7KZbPm6>. The questionnaire was distributed among students aged 16 – 23 and teachers through the school e-learning systems.

The quantitative results of the study were analysed using descriptive statistics, while content analysis was used for qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions.

Results and Discussion

In the first question of the survey, students assessed their emotional well-being on a scale from 1 to 10: 1 - very bad, 10 – excellent. The results are similar in all Baltic States, and '7' is the most frequently repeated answer. It is alarming that, although a small minority, some learners rate their emotional well-being only between 1 and 3.

The second question asked learners to tick their feelings recently: angry, tired, happy, self-confident, safe, calm, anxious, worried, guilty and free answer – other. The results are similar – students feel tired, restless, anxious and angry. Comparing results by country, it should be noted that Estonians feel more self-confident and much calmer. Also, Estonian students seem to have more sense of safety when rating their sense of safety on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 - very bad, 10 - excellent).

Comparing the answers of students and teachers to similar questions, teachers are very optimistic and, for example, do not see anxiety or eating disorders as a big problem 'Figure 2', 'Figure 3'.

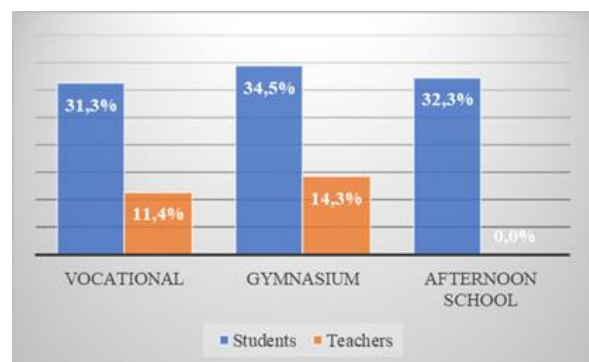


Figure 2. Anxiety.

In addition, students in vocational schools are more likely to have eating disorders than those in gymnasiums or afternoon schools (in the so-called interest educational institutions).

Students were also asked if they experienced bullying

in their environment. There are differences between types of schools, with vocational school students being the most likely (14%) to experience this. However, bullying is also experienced by gymnasium students (11%) but is least common in afternoon schools - only 3.2% of cases were affirmative. Student answers to the question, ‘How do you feel about your workload?’ (Table 1) shows that almost half of the respondents' workload is heavy, one of the most important causes of anxiety in schools today.

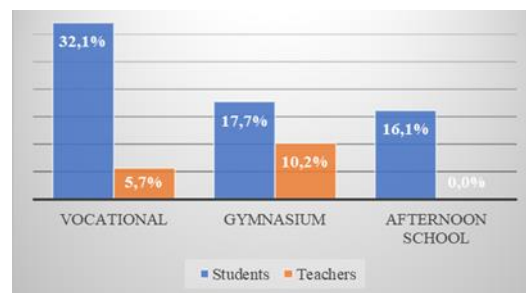


Figure 3. Eating disorders.

Table 1

Student answers, ‘How do you feel about your workload?’

| Type of school | It is too heavy | It is adequate | It could be heavier |
|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Gymnasium | 45.3% | 51.2% | 3.5% |
| Vocational schools | 40.2% | 50.5% | 9.3% |
| Afternoon school | 48.4% | 48.4% | 3.2% |

The teacher survey included similar questions. To the question, ‘Which of the following mental health problems have occurred/ exacerbated in your students since the pandemic?’, teachers as the first most identified excessive use of the computer or social networks, second - difficulties, third – irritability. For vocational schools, it is also very problematic despair depression. Teachers were asked to mark the three most important

areas where their students have significant difficulties. Results show that studies/work, physical health, and physical activities / sports are the three most important difficulties students face after the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2). Students were asked what kind of help would be most beneficial to them and were asked to tick one or more of the answers given (Table 3).

Table 2

The teacher answers, ‘In which areas do your students have significant difficulties?’

| | Vocational schools | Gymnasium | Afternoon school |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Studies/work | 83% | 78% | 69% |
| Free time/hobbies | 23% | 28% | 31% |
| Physical activities/ sports | 40% | 43% | 38% |
| Friends | 9% | 18% | 8% |
| Romantic relationships/ sexuality | 6% | 7% | 0% |
| Physical health | 49% | 38% | 23% |
| Finance | 9% | 4% | 0% |
| Relationship with parents | 20% | 25% | 31% |
| In none of these | 6% | 5% | 0% |
| Other | 3% | 3% | 0% |

Table 3

Students’ answers about the help that would be most useful

| | Vocational schools | Gymnasium | Afternoon school |
|---|--------------------|-----------|------------------|
| More time with friends | 20% | 30% | 38% |
| Physical activity or sports | 71% | 72% | 85% |
| Psychological counselling | 46% | 40% | 31% |
| Help with studies | 63% | 48% | 62% |
| Joint activities with the family | 14% | 41% | 8% |
| A conversation with an important adult outside the family | 34% | 38% | 62% |
| I need support, but I don’t know what type of it | 17% | 2% | 0% |
| No support is necessary at this time | 6% | 14% | 0% |

Results show that physical activities or sports and help with studies would be most helpful to students. Psychological counselling or psychotherapy would also be beneficial for gymnasium and vocational school students, but afternoon school is a conversation

with an important adult outside the family. A similar question was also asked of teachers: ‘What do young people need most to reduce mental health problems?’. Table 4 summarizes students’ and teachers' answers by type of school.

Table 4

Teachers answer, ‘What do young people need most to reduce mental health problems?’

| | Vocational schools | | Gymnasium | | Afternoon school | |
|---|--------------------|----------|-----------|----------|------------------|----------|
| | Teachers | Students | Teachers | Students | Teachers | Students |
| More time with friends | 20% | 36% | 30% | 56% | 38% | 48% |
| Physical activity or sports | 71% | 38% | 72% | 34% | 85% | 39% |
| Psychological counselling | 46% | 21% | 40% | 28% | 31% | 35% |
| Help with studies | 63% | 27% | 48% | 29% | 62% | 32% |
| Joint activities with the family | 14% | 20% | 41% | 21% | 8% | 23% |
| A conversation with an important adult outside the family | 34% | 9% | 38% | 12% | 62% | 3% |
| I need support, but I don’t know what type of it | 17% | 29% | 2% | 19% | 0% | 6% |
| No support is necessary at this time | 6% | 18% | 14% | 21% | 0% | 23% |

Teachers in all types of schools claim that physical activity, sports and help with studies could reduce mental health problems. There are differences in the answers of pupils of different kinds of schools. For example, young people from vocational schools say that the help they need now is physical activity and sport, as well as more time with friends, but 29% - say that no support is needed

at this moment. At the same time, it is essential for gymnasium and afternoon school students to spend more time with friends, follow physical activity and sport, and help with studies; for afternoon school students in the third place - psychological counselling and psychotherapy - a comparative teachers and students answers’ summary given in Table 5.

Table 5

Comparative teacher and student answers’ summary

| | Teachers | Students |
|---|----------|----------|
| More time with friends | 29% | 49% |
| Physical activity or sports | 73% | 36% |
| Psychological counselling | 40% | 26% |
| Help with studies | 52% | 29% |
| Joint activities with the family | 33% | 21% |
| A conversation with an important adult outside the family | 39% | 10% |
| I need support, but I don’t know what | 5% | 22% |
| No support is necessary at this time | 11% | 20% |

The most helpful help for students at the moment would be more time with friends (49%), physical activity or sports (36%) and help with studies (29%). Teachers believe that for promoting students’

emotional and psychological well-being, young people need most physical activity or sports (73%), help with studies (52%) and psychological counselling or psychotherapy (40%).

Conclusions

1. When evaluating students’ emotional well-being on a scale from 1 to 10: 1 - very bad, 10 - excellent, ‘7’ is the most frequently repeated answer.
2. There is a correlation between emotional well-being and a sense of security. Young people in all types of schools rated feeling safe higher than emotional well-being, as demonstrated by students answers to the questions ‘Evaluate your emotional well-being on the scale’ and ‘Tick the feelings you have been having recently’.
3. The main problem for students in all types of educational institutions in the Baltic States is tiredness.
4. The exact number of students rate their workload as ‘It is adequate and ‘It is too heavy’. The results show that the emotional well-being score is lower than the sense of security score for students who

- answered ‘It is adequate’ and ‘It is too heavy’ about the workload.
5. There are differences between the types of schools on the question of whether their students have experienced bullying in their environment: vocational school students experience it most often (14%), gymnasium students - 11%, but it is the least in the afternoon schools - only 3.2% of cases were affirmative.
6. Comparing the answers of students and teachers to similar questions, teachers are very optimistic. For example, teachers, unlike students, do not see anxiety or eating disorders as a big problem.
7. Teachers’ and pupils’ answers to reducing mental health problems differ slightly. For students, it is most important to spend more time with friends, engage in physical activity or sports, and help with their studies. At the same time, teachers think that young people need most physical activity or sports,

help with studies, and psychological counselling or psychotherapy.

8. Reduced workload, learning support, physical activity and sporting opportunities are measures to improve pupils' emotional and psychological well-being.

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