WELLBEING OF STUDENTS FROM SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS

Stefan COJOCARU, Aura ȚABĂRĂ

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Abstract

This article presents data of a quantitative study that aimed to analyze the specifics of the wellbeing of students in disadvantaged secondary schools. A total of 1579 students of gymnasium level from 27 disadvantaged schools in Iasi County, Romania, participated in a survey conducted using the Adolescent Wellbeing Scale (EPOCH). Findings illustrate that pupils from disadvantaged schools have a low level of wellbeing, with different characteristics depending on the gender, age, environment and the level of disadvantage of the school. Results indicate that students from disadvantaged schools are satisfied with their life, develop positive interpersonal relationships, show indifference to involvement in activities and easily abandon their goals. This study confirms the importance of analyzing students' wellbeing to identify educational strategies that allow schools to be more effective from the perspective of reducing the level of violence and decreasing the level of student demotivation, problems that educational systems face nowadays.

Keywords: wellbeing; vulnerable children; risk factors; academic achievement; education; social and emotional learning (SEL); wellbeing in school.

Introduction

Positive Education through Social and Emotional Learning

In recent years, educational theory and practice (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019) have paid special attention to certain aspects that concern social and emotional learning (SEL), as a natural consequence of the concerns existing in today's society regarding the understanding of emotional problems (Jagers *et al.*, 2019, Gillies, 2011, Cojocaru,

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2023). In 2015, there were over 500 evaluations of different types of SEL programs (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015), which proves the theorists' and practitioners' major interest in this field.

SEL is a complex process through which children and adults acquire the necessary skills for managing their emotions, achieving goals, establishing positive interpersonal relationships and making responsible decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015; Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019). Moreover, we are witnessing nowadays the development of a new current of thought in this field, transformative social and emotional learning (transformative SEL), which aims to use the potential of SEL in order to reduce educational, social and economic inequity (Jagers *et al.*, 2019).

Recent research has demonstrated the importance of SEL for the development and maintenance of students' mental health and wellbeing because "building social and emotional learning skills can help children respond to difficult and unexpected situations in a calm and emotionally regulated manner, enabling them to set out and develop strategies for dealing with difficult circumstances, and to interact and work with others to address problems" (Sisask *et al.*, 2014; 4). Mental health and psychological well-being can be developed through specific school interventions and actions through the implementation of SEL programs (Weissberg *et al.*, 2015; Cojocaru, 2023).

Developed countries worldwide have understood that in order to have active, productive, responsible and independent citizens capable of developing healthy interpersonal relationships and properly managing their own emotions, the school needs to pay attention to the emotional and mental life of its students (Watson *et al.*, 2012; Sisask *et al.*, 2014; Yorke, Rose, Bayley, Wole, & Ramchandani, 2021). It has thus been widely accepted that students need to develop all the specific aspects of their personality (cognitive, social, emotional), it is demonstrated that emotions, depending on their nature, can support or block learning and cognitive development, as feelings can "distract attention, confuse the mind and overload concentration" (Gillies, 2011). Despite the fact that expectations regarding the students' complex and comprehensive development exist in many education systems, including in Romania, school effectiveness and efficiency are measured by traditionally means, that is only by measuring the students' level of school achievement, more precisely the number or percentage of graduates, marks in national assessments and in different subjects, scores in international assessments and the percentage of graduates who choose to attend higher education (Govorova, Benítez, & Muñiz, 2020).

We are witnessing a significant increase in the interest in emotional health (Jagers *et al.*, 2019) materialized in the standards employed to assess the quality of education provided by educational institutions. In Romania, interest in wellbeing officially appeared in 2021 when it was listed among the quality assessment

standards, although the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP) has been operating since 2006.

Child poverty continues to be a serious problem for the countries of the world. In Iasi County many schools are included in the category of disadvantaged schools (Postoiu, Bușega, & Pele, 2015), schools which teach children who are facing poverty and all other poverty-induced difficulties. Research has shown that social and economic problems inhibit learning (Gibson, & Asthana, 1998; Kellaghan, 2001; Hatos, & Săveanu, 2009; Bădescu, 2019), so "the more socially disadvantaged the community in which a school operates, the more likely it is that the school will not achieve its educational efficiency goals" (Gibson, & Asthana, 1998: 198). In this context, we believe that the analysis of the wellbeing of students from disadvantaged schools is a priority, demonstrated by the influence that wellbeing exerts on students' school results.

Our research underlines the necessity to study the students' wellbeing, component of the educational activity that can explain and suggest solutions for the problems faced by educational systems nowadays. Thus, the evaluation of students' wellbeing with the help of a tool that allows analysis on several dimensions highlights strengths and weaknesses, allowing the identification of vulnerable areas and the adjustment of intervention strategies. On the one hand, important links are highlighted between the psychological wellbeing of students and the level of socio-economic disadvantage of the schools. On the other hand, student demotivation, a problem faced by educational systems all over the world, can be explained by the low level of students' wellbeing (Van Gasse, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2016), respectively the low level of involvement and perseverance.

Student Wellbeing – an indicator for school effectiveness

Among the constructs underlying Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), educational research has paid special attention to the wellbeing of students, considering its major role in the harmonious development of young people and their social and occupational integration (Watson, Emery, Bayliss, Boushel, & McInnes, 2012). Hooker pointed out "the significant need for educational environments to explicitly promote and develop student wellbeing" (Hooker, 2017: 60), given the findings of empirical research, according to which students with greater wellbeing tend to have better social and emotional skills and higher academic performance.

Effective school organizations pay more attention to the relationships that are established between the members of the institution and admit the need to develop the school like a community, in which collaborative, cohesive interpersonal relationships based on trust and mutual respect prevail (Levine, & Lezotte, 1990; Cojocaru, 2023). In this approach, institutional order, rigor and discipline originate in feelings of "belonging and participation" rather than "external rules and control" (Maslowski, 2001: 16).

An effective school is a school that develops and implements long-lasting changes, both in terms of the quality of the educational process and of the organizational conditions that support learning. According to the literature, an effective school is a school that, through the rigorous use of its resources, provides learning environments that facilitate the academic success of all its students (Hopkins, 2004). Although they are extremely important for any institution, material resources are no longer considered essential in school, their place being taken by meaningful relationships (Hopkins, 2004). The network of interpersonal ties and their quality determine the degree of commitment, involvement and effectiveness in a school, support students' trust in the organization; motivate them to regulate their learning and to make progress in school (Adams, 2014).

A true "ethos of emotionality" (Gillies, 2011) has developed in the education systems of countries such as the USA and the UK, which articulates constructs such as emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, positive development and wellbeing (Watson, Emery, Bayliss, Boushel, & McInnes, 2012). Studies of school effectiveness have broadened their research horizons and no longer focus exclusively on cognitive learning outcomes. Instead, they are particularly interested in analyzing student wellbeing (Van Gasse *et al.*, 2016) in school environments (Govorova *et al.*, 2020).

In addition to a burgeoning range of interventions in school, the rise of interest in emotions has materialized in its listing as a distinct category in the standards assessing the quality of education (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Thus, in 2009, the UK established the assessment of student wellbeing as the primary indicator of education, of school effectiveness (Cojocaru, 2009; Evans, 2015). Following the awareness and acceptance of the importance of students' socio-emotional development, the 2015 edition of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) incorporated a new category devoted to the assessment of student wellbeing (Govorova *et al.*, 2020).

The definitions of the concept of wellbeing are diverse and highly general. Pollard and Lee conducted a literature review and found that wellbeing has not been consistently defined and there is no agreement on the best way to measure it either (Pollard, & Lee, 2003).

According to the 2015 PISA study, wellbeing may be defined as 'a dynamic state characteristic of students who experience the ability and opportunity to achieve their personal and social goals. This involves several aspects of students' lives: cognitive, psychological, physical, social and material. Wellbeing may be measured by subjective and objective indicators of skills, perceptions, expectations and living conditions' (Govorova *et al.*, 2020: 6).

The theoretical model approached for our research is based on the PERMA theory developed by Seligman in 2011 and later extended by Kern *et al.* (Kern, Benson, Steinberg, & Steinberg, 2016)which assesses 5 positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and

Happiness in adolescent wellbeing measuring scale (EPOCH). The EPOCH scale assesses five different interconnected characteristics that provide a complex picture of students' wellbeing (Kern *et al.*, 2016)which assesses 5 positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness. Thus, the Engagement factor refers to the state of being actively engaged in a certain activity and being an active participant in the surrounding world by investing energy, interest and focus. The Perseverance factor is seen as an individual's quality of being determined and motivated to pursue a goal, despite the challenges that may arise along the way (Kern *et al.*, 2016)which assesses 5 positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness. Once you start something, it is important to finish it, even if it takes some time. The Optimism factor is the ability to see the glass half full, to look at life and the future with confidence and hope. It involves a mostly favorable outlook on things, so that negative events are perceived as particular and temporary situations, and the general belief is that everything will be fine (Kern *et al.*, 2016)which assesses 5 positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness. The Connectedness factor represents the sense of connectedness that occurs when an individual feels loved supported and esteemed by others. It is more than just being surrounded by people – it is about having a sense of closeness and understanding in relationships with those around. Finally, the Happiness factor considers a general state of satisfaction, joy and contentment with life (Kern *et al.*, 2016)which assesses 5 positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness. Although this is not always possible, a happy individual mostly feels fulfilled and satisfied with their life.

Empirical studies have shown that schools differ in their effectiveness, but they also differ in their influence on student wellbeing: schools that have a strong influence on cognitive learning are not necessarily effective when it comes to student wellbeing Opdenakker, & Van Damme, 2000; Van Gasse *et al.*, 2016). However, very little is known about how schools actually manage to develop educational strategies to ensure the wellbeing of their students. The capacity of an educational institution to ensure the wellbeing of its students depends on the extent to which clear objectives have been established and undertaken in this regard, through the implementation of an integrated education strategy (Engels, Aelterman, Van Petegem, & Schepens, 2004; Kyriakides, & Creemers, 2008; Van Gasse *et al.*, 2016).

Study context and research questions

The education system in Romania is facing a sharp polarization of the efficiency of educational establishments from one region to another, between rural and urban, within the same county and, often, even within the same locality. In 2016, an analysis was carried out at the national level and it was found that there were a

large number of low-efficiency schools being classified as disadvantaged schools (Postoiu *et al.*, 2015). Thus, in Iasi County, 62 schools (about a quarter of the schools with legal personality in the county at that time) were included in the category of disadvantaged schools and this situation has not changed even today.

The literature has shown that wellbeing is significantly influenced by different factors. One of the most important factors is socio-economic status (Armstrong, 1991; Bălțătescu, 2009; Długosz, 2022). Romania has the lowest levels of wellbeing in Europe, one of the explanations being that of the socio-economic difficulties faced by the population (Bălțătescu, 2009). Gender is another important factor that impacts wellbeing (Armstrong, 1991; Gustafsson, Szczepanski, Nelson, & Gustafsson, 2012; Evans, 2015, Długosz, 2022). Researchers have shown that in education systems these differences are reproduced from one generation to another due to the fact that teachers use different strategies in their work depending on the gender of the students (Evans, 2015). In general, wellbeing is associated with childhood age and youth, researchers demonstrates that wellbeing decreases with age (Bălțătescu, 2009; Roslan, Ahmad, Nabilla, & Ghiami, 2017; Irimie, 2019). Last but not least, there are differences in wellbeing depending on the environment of residence, so in rural areas wellbeing has significantly higher levels than in urban areas (Armstrong, 1991; Gustafsson *et al.*, 2012; Tripathy & Sahu, 2021; Długosz, 2022).

Recent studies have highlighted that emotional and social education means the development of very important skills from the perspective of active citizenship, equity and social wellbeing (Jagers *et al.*, 2019). Jagers (2019) demonstrates the importance of SEL and Transformative-SEL programs that enable the development of civic competencies in five interdependent areas with a transformative role at the social level: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

We conducted a quantitative research aimed to analyzing the specificity of the wellbeing of students from disadvantaged middle schools in order to identify possible areas of educational intervention to increase school equity and effectiveness. Thus, a first specific objective aimed to identifying the specific features of the wellbeing of students from underprivileged secondary schools. A second specific objective was to establish significant differences in the wellbeing of middle school students.

In our approach, we started from the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the wellbeing of students from disadvantaged schools?
2. What are the factors that influence students' wellbeing?

The large number of schools classified as ineffective and the introduction of the wellbeing of students as a field in the standards for assessing the quality

of education in our country justifies the need for a study on the wellbeing of students in these educational institutions. Although researchers recommend early interventions to ensure mental health (Weare & Nind, 2011) studies in Romania took into account only high school students or university students (Bălțătescu, 2009; Irimie, 2019).

Methodology

Measure

The adolescent wellbeing measuring scale (EPOCH) was created by Margaret Kern. The research instrument was divided into two parts. First part consists of twenty Likert items with five response options ranging from 1 (Almost never) to 5 (Almost always), items developed by Kern regarding the wellbeing of adolescents. Part two consists of questions were provided regarding gender, the origins of the students, the year of study (students' age) and the name of the school. The quantitative data were entered by SPSS coding and analyzed by statistical methods to establish the mean of dimensions and differences between the variables.

Procedure

The data were collected in the Romanian language so it was necessary to translate the EPOCH scale. The tool was translated by an English teacher with experience in teaching, which allowed the combination of scientific expertise in the philological field with a good knowledge of the local education system, as a participant-observer. To verify the consistency of construction, the instrument was validated on each dimension and item by two university professors from the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of UAIC Iasi. All twenty items have been validated following this stage, without any changes being suggested. Subsequently, in order to verify the internal consistency, a pilot study was carried out by applying the scale in two schools for a number of 50 secondary school students. The data obtained demonstrated a good internal consistency for each dimension, obtaining alpha-Cronbach coefficient values of over 0.600.

The study was conducted on 6th and 7th form students, aged between 13 and 15 years, from 27 disadvantaged schools in Iasi County in February and March 2022. The level of disadvantage and the ranking of schools were established on the basis of a methodology developed by education specialists and statisticians and took into account the risk of students dropping out, the number of unqualified teachers, the school results of students, socio-economic disadvantage and the level of marginalization of the localities where the schools are located. Thus, the data from the Integrated Information System of Education in Romania (IISER) of the Ministry of Education, the database of the Romanian Agency for Quality

Assurance in Pre-University Education and the two studies compiled by the World Bank "Atlas of Marginalized Rural Areas and Development" were correlated Local Humans from Romania" and "Atlas of Marginalized Urban Areas from Romania" (Postoiu *et al.*, 2015). School units were classified into five categories of disadvantage, ranked from 1 to 5, where category 1 means "the most disadvantaged" and category 5, "the least disadvantaged". Schools in categories 1, 2, 3 and 4 of disadvantage were included in our research.

The degree of disadvantage was calculated on the basis of statistical data existing at the national level on the risk of school dropout of students, the number of unqualified teachers, the school results of students, socio-economic disadvantage and the level of marginalization of the localities where the schools are located (Postoiu *et al.*, 2015) .

The questionnaire was completed with pencil on paper and it was handed to the students by the head teacher of each class. We chose this method because there are many children in rural areas who do not have access to computers and the Internet and because middle school students are not of legal age to have an e-mail address.

Participants

The questionnaire was handed to 2.212 6th and 7th form students (ages between 13 and 15 years) enrolled in 27 middle schools in Iasi County, which the Ministry of Education had classified as disadvantaged (Postoiu *et al.*, 2015). Since the participants were minor students, we used the informed consent given by parents and children for participation in the research, in accordance with the requirements of the Research Ethics Committee of our institution (no 49/17 January 2023). All disadvantaged middle schools in Iasi County were invited to enroll in the study, but only 27 agreed. In total were completed 1.579 questionnaires, with different numbers of students from the 27 schools. Thus, there was only one school in which all of its students completed the questionnaire, in 2 schools the questionnaire was completed by over 90% of their students, in 9 schools the student percentage was 80%, and in 15 schools over 50% of their students completed the questionnaire. The answers collected from the 27 schools were considered statistically representative because the questionnaire was completed by over 50% of their target children, i.e. 6th and 7th form students. Most of the respondents live in rural areas (69%) and showed a balanced distribution in terms of gender (49% female and 51% male) and form (48% students from 6th form and 52% from 7th form).

Table 1. Statistical data specific to the sampled schools and students

Independent characteristic/ variable	No. of students	%	No. of schools	%
Environment				
Urban	485	31 %	7	25%
Rural	1094	69 %	20	74%
Form				
6th	763	48 %	-	-
7th	815	52 %	-	-
Gender				
Female	779	49 %	-	-
Male	800	51 %	-	-
Category of disadvantaged school				
Class 1	92	6 %	2	7%
Class 2	356	22 %	7	26%
Class 3	869	55 %	15	56%
Class 4	262	17 %	3	11%

Another important aspect is related to the category of disadvantaged school in which the school was included (Postoiu *et al.*, 2015), given the influence of the socio-economic context on education (Bădescu, 2019). Data analysis revealed that the schools included in this research are classified into four categories, namely class 1 (the most disadvantaged) to class 4 (the least disadvantaged). Thus, 55% of the students (15 schools) are included in class 3 of disadvantage.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Validity considers the extent to which an empirical measure properly reflects the researched concept (Babbie, 2010). Reliability is determined using the alpha-Cronbach coefficient the values of which have the following meaning (Engels, Aelterman, Van Petegem, & Schepens, 2004): > 0.9 excellent; 0.9 – 0.8 good; 0.8 – 0.7 acceptable; 0.7 – 0.6 questionable; 0.6 – 0.5 weak; <0.5 unacceptable.

In our research, we consider the values of the Cronbach coefficient acceptable for the characteristics of the EPOCH Scale (Engagement - 0.654; Perseverance - 0.681; Optimism - 0.695; Connectedness - 0.734 and Happiness - 0.707). Connectedness ranked highest with 0.734, and Engagement lowest with 0.654, being lower than those obtained in another research recently carried out on a Romanian population (Maftei, Merlici, & Dănilă, 2023).

The presentation of the results aims to highlight the descriptive statistics and the statistically significant differences that characterize the student wellbeing factors,

in terms of independent variables such as gender, living environment, students' age and class of disadvantaged school.

Results

Wellbeing Characteristics of Students from Disadvantaged Middle Schools

Analysis of Mean Student Wellbeing Factors

The five factors specific of EPOCH scale obtained mean between 3.22 - 3.70 which indicates a relatively good level of wellbeing of the students. The analysis of the data for each factor of wellbeing (Table 2) reveals that the Connectedness dimension has the highest mean (M = 3.70), which demonstrates that students self-evaluate themselves as having feelings of closeness and understanding with those around them, colleagues and teachers. A high mean also recorded the Happiness factor (M = 3.62), so we can consider that students from disadvantaged backgrounds feel relatively satisfied and fulfilled with their lives.

Table 2. Statistical data specific to the sampled schools and students.

Factor	Minimum	Maximum	SD	Mean	N
Engagement	1.00	5.00	0.95	3.22	1579
Perseverance	1.00	5.00	0.87	3.49	1579
Optimism	1.00	5.00	0.90	3.53	1579
Connectedness	1.00	5.00	0.95	3.70	1579
Happiness	1.00	5.00	1.01	3.62	1579

Notes: Likert 1-5 scales.

On the other hand, the lowest mean value (Table 2) was obtained by the Engagement factor (M = 3.22). This dimension of wellbeing refers to the state of engagement in an activity, the interest that students show in active participation in the world around them. This factor also records a large standard deviation, thus the variations being attributed to a large number of schools. At the same time, one of the lower mean also records the Perseverance factor (M = 3.49), indicating that students self-evaluate themselves as having a relatively low ability to remain determined to achieve a goal, despite the difficulties that may arise.

Mean analysis in terms of living environment shows that in the rural areas the means are higher than in the urban areas for all the wellbeing factors. The Engagement factor shows the largest gap between urban and rural (M_{Urban} = 2.97; M_{Rural} = 3.32), while the Perseverance factor shows the smallest gap between the two living environment means (M_{Urban} = 3.36; M_{Rural} = 3.55). On the other hand,

all the wellbeing factors considered showed high standard deviations (SD > 0.86), which were specific to the majority of schools participating in our research.

Data analysis in terms of form reveals lower means for all wellbeing factors as students grow older. Wellbeing factors showed higher values for 6th form students and lower values for 7th form students. The biggest gap was noted for the Perseverance factor means (M_{VI} = 3.56; M_{VII} = 3.43).

The data collected in this research show different values of the wellbeing factor means in terms of gender. Thus, we note that for most means of the wellbeing factors are higher in the female gender category than in the male gender counterpart.

Table 3. Student wellbeing factor means in terms of gender

Gender		Engagement	Optimism	Connectedness	Happiness	Perseverance
Male	Mean	3.18	3.51	3.60	3.65	3.46
	Std. Deviation	0.87	0.88	0.93	0.93	0.87
	N	800	800	800	800	800
Female	Mean	3.26	3.56	3.80	3.59	3.60
	Std. Deviation	1.03	0.92	0.96	1.08	0.87
	N	779	779	779	779	779

Notes: Likert 1-5 scales.

The only exception is the Happiness factor, which ranked higher in the male gender (M_M = 3.65, M_F = 3.59).

Significant Differences in Student Wellbeing

Differences Induced by Students' Living Environment, Gender and Form

We used the Independent Samples Test statistical method to process the data according to living environment, form and gender, as they are all two-value variables. Data analysis in terms of living environment revealed significant differences as concerns most student wellbeing factor environments (Table 4).

Table 4. Student wellbeing factor means in terms of living environment

Wellbeing factor	T	Sig	Urban	Rural
Engagement	6.835	0.056	2.97	3.32
Perseverance	4.112	0.003	3.36	3.55
Optimism	5.741	0.001	3.34	3.62
Connectedness	5.532	0.001	3.50	3.78
Happiness	5.888	0.000	3.39	3.72

Thus, we found significant differences between the results of students schooled in rural schools and the results of those schooled in urban schools in terms of the level of optimism, connection, happiness and perseverance. Rural students have a higher level of optimism, connection, happiness and perseverance compared to urban students. The difference with the highest level of significance is recorded in the case of the Happiness factor (F = 12.96, p = 0.000). In other words, the level of happiness felt by students in rural schools is significantly higher, compared to that felt by students in urban schools. In the case of the Involvement factor we find (Table 4) that the differences recorded according to the average variable are statistically insignificant (F = 1.70, p = 0.19).

Depending on the variable year of studies we have identified only one significant difference for the Perseverance factor (M_{VI} = 3.56, M_{VII} = 3.43) which is evidenced by the data in Table 5:

Table 5. Student wellbeing factor mean in terms of Form

Wellbeing Factor	T	Sig	6th Form	7th Form
Engagement	3.349	0.001	3.30	3.14
Perseverance	2.995	0.003	3.56	3.43
Optimism	1.378	0.168	3.57	3.51
Connectedness	2.275	0.023	3.75	3.64
Happiness	2.454	0.014	3.68	3.56

Therefore, for the Perseverance factor there is a statistically significant difference depending on the variable year of study (F = 7.807, p = 0.005). In other words, younger students perceive themselves as more perseverant in activity compared to older students. For all other wellbeing factors measured using the EPOCH scale, no significant differences have been identified according to the age of the students (Table 5).

The analysis of the data obtained by gender variable did not reveal any significant differences.

Differences Induced by the Disadvantaged School Class Variable

We used the One Way Anova statistical method (analysis of differences between means) to analyze the differences induced by the disadvantaged school class variable and noted significant differences in the assessment of the Happiness factor ($F = 3.381$ and $p = 0.035$). Using the Bonferroni test, we identified a significant difference between disadvantaged schools in class 2 and disadvantaged schools in class 4.
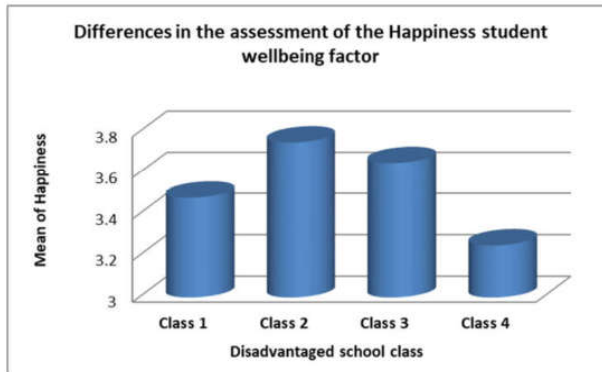

Figure 1. Differences in the assessment of the Happiness student wellbeing factor

We noted significant differences in the Happiness factor between the answers of students from class 2 disadvantaged schools and those of students enrolled in class 4 disadvantaged schools. Thus, class 2 disadvantaged school students consider themselves happy to a greater extent than students enrolled in class 4 disadvantaged schools. This is a paradox, considering that class 2 schools are more disadvantaged than class 4 schools, which are located only in urban areas and are classified as less disadvantaged.

Discussion

Our research was aimed at determining the specificity of the wellbeing of students from disadvantaged middle schools in order to identify areas of intervention to assure educational equity and increase academic achievement. We present the analysis of the results according to the established research questions.

The characteristics of the wellbeing of students in underprivileged secondary schools

Statistical analyses have indicated that the students involved in this study have relatively low levels of general psychological wellbeing. The data obtained confirm the conclusions of the researches that claim that students from socio-economically

disadvantaged backgrounds have a low level of wellbeing (Armstrong, 1991; Bălțătescu, 2009) and, consequently, tend to have poor academic results (Hatos, & Săveanu, 2009; Van Gasse *et al.*, 2016; Hooker, 2017; Bădescu, 2019; Długosz, 2022). Thus, the 27 schools included in the research obtained poor and very poor results in the National Evaluation exam, an exam that is held at the end of the gymnasium cycle for all students in the pre-university system in Romania (Postoiu *et al.*, 2015).

In this research, the wellness factors that have achieved the highest averages are the Connection and Happiness factors, while the lowest averages have been achieved by the Engagement and Perseverance factors. Thus, students from disadvantaged schools feel happy, satisfied and reconciled with what life offers them despite the material and financial difficulties, health problems and family conflicts (Li & Fischer, 2017) they face. We note the existence of a contradiction between the level of happiness rejected by students and the material and financial difficulties they face on a daily basis, the poor and very poor school results they register at evaluations. A possible explanation is that, in line with the theory developed by Jagers and his collaborators (Jagers *et al.*, 2019), these children have poorly developed skills in the field of "self-awareness", a field that presupposes the existence of a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism.

The data of this study proves that students coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are strongly connected with those around them; they show a great ability to develop positive social relationships with their peers. In our opinion, further research is needed on the specifics and impact of the relationships that are established between students who learn in schools classified as socio-economically disadvantaged. On the one hand, the connection of these young people manifests itself in a context that is at odds with the expectations of the educational system (Kern *et al.*, 2016)which assesses 5 positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness and of society in general, being an educational environment characterized by high absenteeism, increased risk of dropout, poor results at exams, modest expectations in terms of academic achievement and professional integration. In marginalized, economically underdeveloped areas, there are fewer opportunities to interact with each other in informal contexts and, as a result, residents are developing small-scale social networks (Li & Fischer, 2017). On the other hand, there are studies (Irimie, 2019) that argue that the self-assessment of adolescents' wellbeing at a high level may be due both to the protection they receive from their parents and to a process of self-regulation of one's own perception of subjective wellbeing. We believe that in order to clarify these results a qualitative research approach is needed to allow in-depth analysis of the connectedness between students from disadvantaged schools.

The small mean obtained by the Engagement factor of wellbeing highlights the fact that these children show indifference to involvement in activities, to the world around them. Studies show that students' involvement in activities is influenced

by both the school and extracurricular contexts, by the expectations that others (teachers, colleagues, family members) have of them (Lombardi *et al.*, 2019). The involvement of students in activities is an aspect of maximum interest for the educational system in Romania and all over the world, given that studies have shown that the level of demotivation of students increases from one generation to another (Popenici & Fartusnic, 2009; Maftei *et al.*, 2023). Involvement has recently been described as a multidimensional concept, composed of three interrelated dimensions: emotion, behavior and cognition (Ainley & Ainley, 2011; Cojocaru, Cojocaru, & Ciuchi, 2011; Estell & Perdue, 2014; Jagers *et al.*, 2019; Lombardi *et al.*, 2019). Children engage in activities when they have positive emotions. Positive emotions allow appropriate behavior to expectations in the school context and this is how learning is achieved. Negative emotions lead to inappropriate behavior in a school context, withdrawal and non-involvement, which prevents learning (Ainley & Ainley, 2011; Estell & Perdue, 2014; Lombardi *et al.*, 2019). The school involvement of the students has been a factor of interest in the literature due to the effects it has in the short and long term. Thus, empirical studies have shown that reduced school involvement has undesirable effects in the short term, such as juvenile delinquency and increased aggressiveness among children (Greenberg *et al.*, 2003; Fredericks, & Blumenfeld, 2004; Estell & Perdue, 2014). At the same time, the low school involvement of students is closely related to the increased risk of dropout (Finn, 2006; Lombardi *et al.*, 2019).

There are also long-term effects of non-engagement, which are extremely important. School involvement influences self-esteem (Lombardi *et al.*, 2019) and has been associated with academic and occupational outcomes in adulthood. Thus, a high level of involvement in childhood is associated with good academic and occupational outcomes in adulthood. Children with a low level of school involvement demonstrate poorly developed competencies in terms of "social awareness" (Jagers *et al.*, 2019) and reduced ability to understand social norms and to recognize and use different resources for personal and collective wellbeing.

Students from disadvantaged schools also show a low level in terms of perseverance, having major difficulties in setting and pursuing a goal. According to the Transformative-SEL theory, a possible explanation would be that these children demonstrate poorly developed skills in the field of "self-management" (Jagers *et al.*, 2019: 67), which implies difficulties in managing stress, controlling impulses, easily discourage themselves in the face of challenges, which leads to abandoning personal and group goals.

The factors that influence the students' wellbeing

In the education system of Iasi County in particular, there is a marked polarization of localities in terms of their socio-economic development, with considerable gaps between rural and urban areas, a fact that obviously affects the activity and quality of education provided by schools to their students. Thus, we considered

relevant the analysis of the characteristics of the students' wellbeing in terms of environment, form and class of disadvantaged school. In our study, all student wellbeing factors had a higher mean in rural areas than in urban ones, in accordance with the conclusions of previous studies (Armstrong, 1991; Gustafsson *et al.*, 2012; Tripathy & Sahu, 2021; Długosz, 2022). There are significant differences in the wellbeing of students educated in rural schools and the wellbeing of those educated in urban schools. Students from rural areas have a higher level of optimism, connectedness, happiness and perseverance than students from urban areas. The level of happiness experienced by students from rural schools is significantly higher than that felt by students from urban schools. A possible explanation is that the expectation level of children from disadvantaged rural areas is low. So, despite the financial and material difficulties they face, these children declare themselves satisfied with the life they have. Another explanation would be that of a process of self-regulation of one's own perception of subjective wellbeing (Irimie, 2019). Regarding the level of involvement of students from disadvantaged secondary schools, there are no significant differences, with the students' involvement in activities being reduced both in urban and rural areas. The data obtained confirms the existing data at the national level regarding the high absenteeism and the increased risk of dropping out in these schools (Hatos, & Săveanu, 2009; Govorova *et al.*, 2020).

At the same time, the analysis of the data revealed significant differences depending on the variable year of study, so we identified only one significant difference in terms of perseverance. In other words, younger students are more persistent in activity compared to older students. Sixth-graders reported a significantly higher level of perseverance compared to seventh-graders. This finding partially confirms the data obtained by other researches (Bălțătescu, 2009; Roslan *et al.*, 2017; Irimie, 2019) which suggests that wellbeing decreases with age.

An important objective of this study was to establish the influences that disadvantages exert on the wellbeing of students, being known that poverty conditions education in a decisive way (Armstrong, 1991; Cleveland, Chambers, Mainus, Powell, & Skepple, 2012Powell, Saddler, &Tyler, 2008; Neagu, 2012; Altavilla, Manna, & Perrotta, 2013; Abbott-Chapman *et al.*, 2014). The analysis of the data according to the variable disadvantage class led to the identification of a significant difference for the Happiness factor. Students studying in schools with a low level of disadvantage (grade 4) self-assess themselves as significantly more unhappy than students coming from schools with a high level of disadvantage (grade 2). The disadvantaged grade 4 schools included in this study are urban schools, which achieve results above the national average in the end-cycle exams. The data of this study confirm the conclusions of previous empirical research that schools that have a strong influence on cognitive learning are not necessarily effective when it comes to student wellbeing (Van Gasse *et al.*, 2016).

Despite the reforms implemented in recent years, PISA studies highlight that schools in Romania have become increasingly socio-economically segregated

(Holtmann, 2017). The schools where we conducted this research are schools differentiated by the level of disadvantage, but all of them are socio-economically segregated. Schools that are in the 4th grade of disadvantage are efficient schools that educate students who face fewer socio-economic difficulties. Here the expectations are high regarding the school results and the standard of living. Disadvantaged grade 4 schools are located in cities so children learning here frequently interact with students who learn at socio-economically favored schools, thus being influenced by their expectations. Schools that are located in disadvantaged grade 2 educate students who are experiencing severe socio-economic difficulties, whose parents have a low level of education. We can assume that the level of expectation of these students, who most often live in poor conditions and who usually did not leave their place of residence until the age of 13-15, is a low one.

Student wellbeing is an indicator of school effectiveness and its assessment must be undertaken by practitioners and school principals through the implementation of SEL programs. SEL programs refer to processes of developing socio-emotional skills, namely the individual's ability to recognize, understand and manage emotions. Consequently, it is necessary to implement intervention programs to increase the level of involvement and perseverance of students and not crowd schools with programs that aim to reduce violence. In this way, action will be taken on the cause and not on the effect, and the results of the intervention would be visible.

However, we believe that further research is needed in this regard, research that allows for in-depth knowledge of aspects of students' wellbeing.

We find that the assessment of students' wellbeing with the help of a tool that allows analysis on several dimensions highlights strengths and weaknesses, allowing the identification of vulnerable areas and the adjustment of possible intervention strategies (Kern *et al.*, 2016) which assesses 5 positive psychological characteristics (Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness. The data obtained highlight the fact that students from disadvantaged schools have a low level of involvement and perseverance, which may suggest the need for interventions on the two levels.

Conclusion

Our paper provides new empirical data on the wellbeing characteristics of under-privileged students, given that there is growing evidence that school needs to develop all the specific components of human personality in children. The research conclusions illustrate the fact that underprivileged students have a low wellbeing level, with different emphases depending on age, living environment and category of disadvantaged school. The data obtained indicate that students from disadvantaged schools are satisfied with their life, develop interpersonal

relationships with colleagues, show indifference in engaging in activities and easily give up on achieving goals.

Our research highlights important aspects regarding the study and analysis of students' wellbeing. Thus, we can conclude that secondary school students from underprivileged schools have a low level of involvement and perseverance, a fact that can explain the low level of motivation of the current generations, the problem facing educational systems all over the world. On the other hand, another important conclusion is that the low level of student involvement, as a dimension of students' wellbeing, can justify the increased aggression in schools. Consequently, to reduce the level of aggression and violence in schools, intervention strategies are required to increase student involvement.

This study may be consider a starting point in the analysis of the wellbeing of secondary school students. This research does not shed light on aspects of connectedness and the level of happiness felt by students in disadvantaged schools. Further research is needed to clarify these results, studies that through a complex approach allow the in-depth understanding of the specifics of the students' wellbeing. We believe that there is a need for additional empirical studies, based on a mixed research approach (quantitative and qualitative), which allows the analysis of involvement and perseverance by taking into account individually and in more detail the specific items (Estell & Perdue, 2014). At the same time, further research is needed to study connectedness and state of happiness, so that the impact of the relationships that are established between students from disadvantaged schools and the factors that influence their state of contentment and satisfaction can be explained. At the same time, it is necessary to carry out studies on the wellbeing of students in schools considered socio-economically favored so that comparative analysis can be carried out.

The results of this research concern a sample of students from disadvantaged secondary schools. Favored middle school students and high school students may have other wellbeing characteristics. At the same time, the results of our research cannot be generalized because the authors did not perform an exploratory factor analysis for the EPOCH scale. The data obtained from this sample are not representative of the entire Romanian school population. Such research should be conducted more often on representative samples of children and adolescents, to identify areas of vulnerability.

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