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## **Sense of Self-Efficacy and Helplessness Among Students of Higher Grades of Primary School During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### **Abstract**

Learning in unknown circumstances is a great challenge for young people, particularly those who lack the ability to regulate their emotions. This text presents the results of research on the image of the life of students in higher grades of primary school, measured by the sense of self-efficacy and the sense of helplessness. The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic among 303 students. It was found that (1) students rather express their belief in their own effectiveness (agency), and, at the same time, (2) half of the students indicated the feeling of helplessness; (3) helplessness is significantly higher among girls; (4) in the case of girls, there is a clear and strong negative relation between the sense of effectiveness and the helplessness.

*Keywords: sense of self-efficacy, helplessness, pandemic, students, primary school*

### **Introduction**

#### **COVID-19 Pandemic and the Organisation of Education**

In Poland, the first official cases of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus infection appeared in early March 2020. On March 11, under the Regulation of the Minister of National Education in connection with preventing, counteracting, and combating COVID-19, the classroom activities of public and non-public units of the education system were suspended (Kolber, 2022). The Ministry of National Education introduced regulations under which schools and educational institu-

tions were obliged to conduct distance education during the temporary limitation of their functioning. Then, depending on the epidemiological situation, education was suspended or returned to schools partially or entirely. Due to their frequency, these changes had a destabilising effect on the work of schools.

The lockdown intervention reduced the exponential transmission of COVID-19 and achieved its intended positive health outcomes. However, such major lockdowns have also led to other changes in life. Many studies have highlighted the negative impact on physical and mental health, more emotional distress, feeling anxiety, fear, frustrations, and loneliness (Zhu et al., 2021). The topic of SARS-CoV-2 has dominated the global media since 2020, which was not surprising as the virus was new and spreading rapidly. Many uncertainties related to its origin, nature, and course of the disease it causes have been pointed out, which is conducive to the emergence of conspiracy theories (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020). The changes in everyday life brought about by the pandemic were rapid and unprecedented.

The COVID-19 pandemic has outlined to the subjects of the education process the necessity to use digital tools, often causing mainly fears among teachers of introducing them into the didactic process. The reason for this anxiety was the lack of knowledge about them or the ability to use them effectively. On the other hand, for the generation of young learners, often with more technological knowledge than their teachers, the transfer of education to online mode through new media was not a major problem. For this group, however, other difficulties and challenges came to the fore. More than any other age group, adolescents need social interaction with their peers, time outside and face-to-face communication. During lockdown and distance learning, young people were deprived of their basic developmental needs. At the same time, in a more or less direct way, they found themselves at the centre of stressful events and emotions related to, for example, fear of the health of family members. The future was seen as a time of uncertainty and danger. Moreover, new teaching methods were introduced by teachers using the trial-and-error method. Learning in unknown circumstances was a great challenge, not only for teachers and parents but, above all, for young people, particularly those who lack the ability to regulate their emotions (Pozzoli et al., 2022; Kolber, 2022).

### **Sense of Self-Efficacy**

According to the assumptions of the social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy falls within the scope of controlling personal actions. It can be understood as the

belief in one's own abilities and possibilities of acting to achieve the chosen goal, regardless of the emerging obstacles (Bandura, 1977; 1997). According to Bandura (1997), the level of motivation, emotional state, and action are based more on what people believe than on what is "objective truth". Hence people's achievements can be better predicted based on their beliefs about self-efficacy than previous achievements, knowledge, or skills. Self-efficacy is important for behaviour change, as it enables the proper assessment of the situation and the search for an effective way of coping with the difficulties and obstacles encountered, which may weaken motivation. A high sense of self-efficacy is associated with the expectation of achieving a satisfactory result through good action, undertaking tasks with a high level of difficulty, setting high goals (high aspirations), and putting much effort into the action taken. People with a high sense of self-efficacy focus more on options for action than on obstacles. It also influences the emotional state before and during the action – greater peace of mind when approaching difficult tasks and less anxiety in difficult situations. On the other hand, low self-efficacy is related to excluding whole classes of possibilities of action and the lack of analysis of their costs and benefits. Such people overestimate the existing obstacles and the difficulty of undertaken tasks, which increases anxiety and stress and narrows the vision of how to solve the problem (Wysocka, 2011).

The study of Du, Zhao, You, and Zhang (2012) revealed that students with high self-efficacy are more confident in their learning ability, can effectively organise their learning, and always maintain a positive learning attitude and mentality. Students' academic self-efficacy is influenced by previous experiences and social support (Schunk, 1995). For didactics, the results of analyses are of particular importance, as they indicate the impact of a strong sense of self-efficacy on cognitive processes and intellectual achievements. For this reason, it is worth exploring this issue in relation to school-age children.

### **Learned Helplessness**

Helplessness equated with failure to cope with a specific life situation is a concept that, like many others, can be included in the specific vocabulary of a period of change and a time of uncertainty. The classic model of learned helplessness shows that being in an uncontrolled situation, the so-called helplessness training (when no individual behaviour changes the probability of occurring events), causes learning the lack of relationship between actions and desired results (Seligman, 1974; Maier & Seligman, 1976). The long-term lack of event control causes the subject to learn to expect the ineffectiveness of future actions. The learning process here

is the assimilation of the judgment (belief) that for each possible reaction, there is no correlation between carrying it out and obtaining it. The consequence of this is the formation of a belief that in the future, there will also be no correlation between one's own behaviour and its results, and the transfer of this expectation to new situations determines helplessness deficits. If we adapt the described model to the conditions of school education, we will talk about intellectual helplessness. According to its assumptions, the main cause of intellectual helplessness at school is inadequate teaching methods, irregularities in the relationship between the student and the teacher, and inadequate learning methods. This model postulates the existence of cognitive helplessness training, which consists of the inability to understand new material during classes, despite the prolonged mental activity. Such a situation may cause a state of intellectual helplessness, which is described by cognitive demobilisation and a deficit of understanding. If such states of helplessness occur repeatedly, they will stabilise, facilitating their future arousal without prior training (Ciżkowicz, 2009).

Learned helplessness can lead to (1) cognitive deficits – expecting ineffectiveness of actions in new task situations, leading to difficulties in recognising the relationship between behaviour and the correct solution of the task, even if it is generated; (2) motivational deficits – lowering or loss of motivation to undertake any reactions, slowing down all performed activities, giving up control of events; and (3) emotional deficits – a consequence of weakened activity, manifested in the sense of danger, fear, helplessness, apathy, lack of hope, leading to depression (Seligman, 1974; Wysocka, 2011). Learned helplessness is significantly related to students' behaviour in education, influencing their cognitive performance. Moreover, research shows that learned withdrawal habits established in school may foster helpless behaviour in other areas of life (Ciżkowicz, 2009).

The issue of helplessness is particularly important in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning. In stressful situations, helpless students show more emotional reactions, such as depression or anxiety. A British study found that younger age, female gender, living in the city, experiencing specific anxiety related to COVID-19 and perceived risk of infection significantly increased the likelihood of developing anxiety or depression (Shevlin et al., 2020). Kolber (2022) conducted research during the pandemic on the learned helplessness of eighth-grade primary school students in three examination subjects: Polish, mathematics and English. The study conducted among 502 eighth-grade primary school students learning remotely shows that the highest average level of helplessness was recorded in mathematics, slightly lower in Polish, and lowest in English. Girls have a higher sense of helplessness than boys in mathematics and English. The motivational

deficit makes the greatest contribution to the feeling of helplessness. The results indicate the students should receive pedagogical and psychological help.

## **Research Methodology**

### **General Background of the Research**

Part of the research project will be presented concerning the different experiences of students related to peer relationships. The project also considered issues related to interpersonal attitudes and attitudes towards adolescents' own life and the world. The research was conducted during a pandemic which created a specific interpretative context. The data that will be analysed in this article was collected in June 2021.

The text will present analyses of the student attitudes towards their own lives. The following research problems have been formulated: (1) what is the level of the sense of self-efficacy and helplessness among students in higher grades of primary school? (2) Does gender differentiate the level of the sense of self-efficacy and the sense of helplessness among students of higher grades in primary school?

### **Research Sample**

A fragment of the empirical material collected among students from the Podkarpackie Voivodeship in Poland will be presented. 303 students took part in the study, including 156 girls (51,5%) and 135 boys (44,6%) (12 students did not specify their gender). They were students from VI–VIII grades of primary schools (average age 13.88) from rural and middle-town areas.

### **Instrument and Procedure**

The Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Attitudes and Attitudes Towards the World Questionnaire (KNIIŚ; Wysocka, 2011) was used. The entire questionnaire consists of 140 questions. However, selected scales were used for the research. The statements from the scale for older students were used. A scale of 9 items measured the sense of self-efficacy, and the feeling of helplessness consisted of 8 items. The task of the respondents was to indicate the possible answers that are closest to their convictions: I agree (4), I rather agree (3), I rather disagree (2), I disagree (1).

In the case of the sense of self-efficacy scale, the higher the score, the higher the sense of effectiveness. In the case of the helplessness scale, the higher the score, the higher the feeling of helplessness. The higher the effectiveness score and the lower the sense of helplessness, the more positive the picture of life is.

## Data Analysis

The analysis was performed by calculating the frequency, the mean and the standard deviation. The gender differences were checked with the T-Student test. The relationships between the analysed variables were checked by correlation coefficient. The reliability of the scales was checked using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ). Data were analysed by using SPSS Statistics for Windows (version 27.0).

## Research Results

### The Sense of Self-Efficacy Among Students

First, the student sense of self-efficacy was analysed. The table below presents the distribution of the answers marked by the respondents in relation to the statements concerning the sense of effectiveness.

**Table 1.** The sense of self-efficacy among students

The sense of self-efficacy	I disagree (1)	I rather disagree (2)	I rather agree (3)	I agree (4)
If I try, I can fix most of the problems I am experiencing on my own.	6,1%	12,6%	51,2%	27,4%
I can consistently pursue my goals – I am not discouraged, even when I encounter various difficulties	7,5%	25%	49,3%	18,2%
I am a resourceful and inventive person, which allows me to find a solution in situations that happen to me for the first time	7,5%	21,5%	49,8%	21,2%
Even if the task I am about to do is very difficult, I can do it with enough effort	10%	21%	51,9%	17,2%
There are many ways to solve any problem, you just need to think a little	9,2%	10,9%	47,6%	32,3%

The sense of self-efficacy	I disagree (1)	I rather disagree (2)	I rather agree (3)	I agree (4)
If I work (train) intensively, I can win the competition (sports competition) that I care about	6,9%	13,5%	39,6%	39,9%
I can be successful; it mainly depends on my effort and the work I put into achieving it	5,2%	13,7%	46%	35,1%
When I want to do a task, my focus is on ways and opportunities, not obstacles	5,8%	26,4%	52,4%	15,4%
Most of what I achieve is the result of my effort	4,1%	15,5%	54,3%	26,1%
$\alpha = 0,813$ ; Min = 9; Max = 36; M = 26,51; SD = 4,76				

The data presented above show that the answers differ depending on the statements. Most students agreed with the given statements, indicating certain confidence that they can succeed in a particular task. Students believe that putting much effort into action guarantees the achievement of the assumed goals. However, every third student (32,5%) said they were not persistent in action, which means they get discouraged when encountering obstacles. The same proportion of students (32,2%) disagreed with the statement, “When I want to do a task, my focus is on ways and opportunities, not obstacles”.

### The Feeling of Helplessness Among Students

Then the feeling of helplessness was analysed. The table below presents the distribution of the answers marked by the respondents in relation to the statements concerning the feeling of helplessness among students.

**Table 2.** The feeling of helplessness among students

The feeling of helplessness	I disagree (1)	I rather disagree (2)	I rather agree (3)	I agree (4)
I often feel like I am in a situation from which there is no way out	16,2%	32,4%	35,9%	15,5%
I usually don't take part in different competitions or contests because I won't win them anyway	22,9%	34,2%	28,1%	14,7%
In class, I am afraid to speak up so as not to embarrass myself	28,5%	27,4%	27,1%	17%
What a teacher explains in a lesson is usually incomprehensible to me	27,1%	43,3%	21%	8,6%

The feeling of helplessness	I disagree (1)	I rather disagree (2)	I rather agree (3)	I agree (4)
Even if I take any action, I cannot believe that I will achieve my goal	27,8%	36,8%	28,2%	7,2%
I am afraid of new places, tasks, or situations because I do not believe that I can handle them	21,6%	29,8%	33,6%	15,1%
I often feel that many of my actions are doomed to failure	21,4%	44,1%	25,5%	9%
I don't feel like taking on new tasks because usually, I won't be able to get them done the way I want to	30%	35,8%	25,3%	8,9%
$\alpha = 0,773$ ; Min = 8; Max = 30; M = 18,27; SD = 4,77				

Based on the results presented above, it can be said that the level of the feeling of helplessness is mostly average. However, half of the surveyed students (51,4%) agreed that they often have the impression that they are in a situation from which there is no way out. Almost half of the students (48,7%) are afraid of new situations, and 42,8% of students usually do not participate in competitions or contests because they are convinced they will not win them anyway.

### Gender Differences in the Sense of Self-Efficacy and the Feeling of Helplessness

The next step of the analysis concerned the gender differentiation of the obtained results. The results are shown below.

**Table 3.** Means, standard deviations, t-student values, and levels of statistical significance of gender differences

	General		Girls		Boys		t	df	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Sense of self-efficacy	2,95	0,53	2,96	0,52	2,93	0,54	-0,422	269	n.i.
Helplessness	2,28	0,60	2,38	0,61	2,15	0,56	-3,240	264	<0.001

In the case of the sense of effectiveness, there is no difference between the averages obtained by girls and boys. In turn, the sense of helplessness is higher among girls, which is a statistically significant difference.



## Relation Between the Sense of Self-Efficacy and the Feeling of Helplessness

The last step of the analysis was to calculate the correlations between the sense of self-efficacy and the feeling of helplessness among students. Considering the gender differentiation, the analyses were conducted separately for girls and boys. The results of the Pearson correlation are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Correlation between the sense of self-efficacy and the feeling of helplessness among boys and girls

Boys	Helplessness	Girls	Helplessness
Sense of self-efficacy	-0,23*	Sense of self-efficacy	-0,53**

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The results in Table 4 indicate that the sense of self-efficacy is negatively related to the feeling of helplessness among boys and girls. However, for girls, this relationship is clearer and stronger.

## Discussion

This text presents the results of research on the image of the life of students in higher grades of primary school, measured by the sense of self-efficacy and the sense of helplessness. The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the established results, it was found that (1) students of higher grades of primary school rather express their belief in their own effectiveness (agency), and, at the same time, (2) half of the students indicated the feeling of helplessness; (3) the feeling of helplessness is significantly higher among girls; (4) in the case of girls, the relationship between the sense of effectiveness and the sense of helplessness is clearer and stronger.

First of all, the analysis established that students of higher grades in primary school express their belief in their own effectiveness (agency), which is a subjective belief in the ability to act in a specific situation and cope with a task. Most students agreed with the given statements. Referring to Bandura's (1977; 1997) concept of self-efficacy and Wysocka's findings (2011), it can be stated that students with

a high sense of self-efficacy are convinced of achieving satisfactory results thanks to their own actions. Hence, they are probably willing to undertake tasks with a high level of difficulty and set themselves high goals (high aspirations), the implementation of which they believe in. On the other hand, half of the students indicated that they could not control events. This result may be surprising given the previously identified results of students' self-efficacy, but considering the gender variable may provide some explanation.

Considering gender differentiation, the results are consistent with the regularities described so far in the literature. Voluminous literature documents specific gender similarities and differences in the prevalence and aetiology of depression and a growing interest in the decrease of self-esteem of girls during adolescence (Jenkins et al., 2002; Wysocka, 2011; Kolber, 2022). Cizkowicz's (2009) research reveals that, compared to boys, girls in primary schools are characterised by greater pessimism when faced with failure. In the mentioned own research, it turned out that the feeling of helplessness is significantly higher among girls and in the case of girls, the relationship between the sense of effectiveness and the sense of helplessness is clearer and stronger. Therefore, special attention should be paid to girls.

Considering the obtained results, it must not be forgotten that the context in which the research was conducted was the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, half of the surveyed students agreed with the statements concerning their uncertainty, concerns related to new situations and whether they would be able to cope with them. Perhaps a pandemic situation, which is new and entails uncertainty, strengthens these beliefs. However, this study did not control the pandemic variable, so it is difficult to discuss a causal relationship. Nevertheless, the changes in everyday life brought about by the pandemic were rapid and unprecedented. The research cited in the first part of the article proves that the fear of the unknown during the pandemic time and insecurity can lead to the development of many mental disorders and unfavourable behaviour (Zhu et al., 2021; Shevlin et al., 2020).

## **Conclusions**

This study provides the following suggestions to educational administrators of primary school students and school educators. In the context of the above results, it is worth paying attention to increasing self-confidence and coping with new situations. Learning to think constructively is also important. Cognitive methods

should be used to prevent learned helplessness by capturing and correcting automatic thoughts and appropriate organisation of the educational process. It can be agreed with Kolber's (2022) conclusion that the activities of school educators and psychologists after the pandemic should focus on changing the way of thinking in young people. Teachers can include happiness issues in their teaching content and encourage students to be optimistic about any life problem. The growing number of mood disorders and their consequences on the social functioning of individuals is a sufficient reason to reflect on the causes of their formation and take preventive measures at school.

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