

# WELL-BEING IN ITALIAN SCHOOL CONTEXTS: SOME EVIDENCE FROM AN ONGOING EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36004/nier.cecg.II.2024.18.02>

**Abstract.** *Current Events.* In recent years, students' psychological well-being has become a topic of growing relevance in Italy due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated levels of anxiety and stress among young people. This context makes it urgent to understand and address the factors influencing students' school well-being. *Research methods.* The research uses a quantitative approach by administering structured questionnaires integrating specific components of the AMOS (Anxiety and Resilience) tests. The sample comprises secondary school students from an Italian region, selected through stratified sampling to ensure representative data. *Results.* Preliminary results indicate a significant correlation between high levels of anxiety and low levels of academic performance, while resilience seems to play a protective role, attenuating the negative impact of anxiety on the overall well-being of students. *Further analyses* are exploring gender and age differences and the influence of socioeconomic and environmental factors. *Implications.* The survey results provide helpful evidence for developing interventions to improve students' psychological well-being in Italian schools. Schools can use these data to implement psychological support programs and resilience strategies, creating a healthier school environment conducive to learning. *Instruments.* The main research instrument used is a questionnaire developed specifically for this type of investigation, part of the more complex AMOS tests relating to anxiety and resilience. We validated this instrument to ensure its reliability. The ongoing investigation represents a significant step towards understanding the dynamics of psychological well-being in Italian schools, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators and school psychologists.

**Keywords:** inclusion, education, standardized testing

**JEL:** I21, I29, I31

**UDC:** 37.015.324(450)

**Introduction. Psychological and Social Well-being in School Environments.** Well-being in school contexts is of growing interest due to its significant impact on students' socio-emotional and academic development. School is not only a place of learning but an environment in which interpersonal relationships and emotions play a significant role, influencing individual well-being and academic success and contributing to the formation of complete individuals ready to face life's challenges. Cyrulnik (2005, p. 21) states that

resilience does not follow linear patterns but operates systemically and dynamically. The constant interactions between the individual and his or her environment must be considered, with particular attention paid to the people around him or her. The collaboration between educational psychology and neuroscience has highlighted how brain development occurs through the opportunities offered by the environment and life contexts through rich social-emotional experiences and meaningful interactions (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019a). This evidence confirms, at both biological and phylogenetic levels, the principles supported by socio-constructivist theories, as proposed by scholars like Vygotsky (1978; 1986) and Bruner (1960; 1966). Specifically, it highlights social contexts and interpersonal relationships' fundamental role in learning construction (Bianco & Castelli, 2022). In recent years, the psychological well-being of students has also assumed increasing relevance in Italy due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased levels of anxiety and stress among young people (Fegert et al., 2020). This context makes it even more urgent to understand and address the factors influencing student well-being in schools.

***Effects of the Pandemic and Distance Learning.*** The pandemic has exacerbated many existing challenges and introduced new ones, creating an environment of uncertainty and isolation that has negatively impacted students' mental health. Social distancing measures and school closures have deprived many young people of support networks, making it even more difficult to maintain meaningful social relationships. Recent studies have shown a significant increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress among students during the pandemic (Fegert et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020). The lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers has reduced opportunities for social-emotional learning, which is critical for developing interpersonal skills and managing emotions.

Furthermore, distance learning has imposed a series of technical and logistical problems, exacerbating existing disparities among students (Bonal & González, 2020). Those with inadequate access to technological resources or a home environment conducive to learning have been particularly affected, increasing the risk of dropping out of school and poor academic results (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Since each individual in his or her dynamic plasticity is a world system (Mannese, 2023), this period has highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to school well-being, which considers not only academic aspects but also emotional and social ones to create an inclusive and supportive school environment, promoting students' resilience and psychological well-being through targeted programs and the involvement of the entire school community, including teachers, families and health workers (Schonert-Reichl, 2019a, b).

***Anxiety, Resilience and Academic Success.*** The importance of exploring and analyzing students' psychological well-being in Italian school contexts is increasingly recognized, especially regarding anxiety and resilience, two determining factors that profoundly influence students' school experience and academic performance.

School anxiety is a widespread phenomenon and can manifest itself through physical, emotional and behavioural symptoms, ranging from difficulty concentrating to actual panic attacks (Huberty, 2012). The consequences of anxiety on academic performance are well documented: anxious students tend to avoid situations perceived as threatening, compromising active engagement in learning and reducing growth opportunities (Putwain & Daly, 2014a, b, c). Furthermore, anxiety negatively affects working memory, hindering the processing and retrieval of information (Owens et al., 2012). Resilience, on the contrary, represents the ability of students to face and overcome adversity, maintaining a positive level of psychological and social functioning despite the difficulties (Masten & Reed, 2002). Although the nature of resilience is a matter of debate, its protective role in mitigating the adverse effects of anxiety and promoting well-being is widely recognized. Resilience is not static but develops through environmental interaction and social support. In the school context, teachers and peers play a fundamental role in promoting resilience, offering emotional support, recognition and opportunities to develop socio-emotional skills (Masten & Reed, 2002).

### ***Critical Issues of Psychological Well-being in the Italian School Context.***

Teachers' psychological well-being is crucial for educational success, as their emotional state directly impacts the learning environment and the ability to support students (Schonert-Reichl, 2019a, b, c). However, many Italian schools face structural and organizational challenges that limit the effectiveness of emotional support for teachers and students. Although studies have shown that social-emotional education (SEL) programs reduce anxiety and increase student resilience (Elias & Zins, 2007; Payton et al., 2000; Durlak et al., 2011), schools implement them unevenly. This inhomogeneity is due to limited resources, lack of specific staff training, and intrinsic pressures of the school system.

The Italian school context presents several critical issues that affect students' psychological well-being, such as academic pressure, group dynamics and family expectations. In addition to these difficulties, there are problems in managing peer relationships sometimes. Despite the numerous initiatives to improve emotional well-being, their variable application causes heterogeneous school results (Pellitteri et al., 2015a). The lack of adequate structural support and a systemic approach to managing emotions keeps many of the daily problems that affect students and teachers unsolved, thus preventing a genuinely supportive and inclusive school environment.

In light of these critical issues, fundamental questions emerge to understand better the internal dynamics of Italian schools: how do anxiety and resilience influence students' school experience and academic performance? What structural barriers prevent the effective implementation of programs to improve psychological well-being? How can the Italian school system evolve to promote a more positive and supportive environment that fosters students' emotional well-being and academic success? These questions represent the cornerstones of this contribution, highlighting the need for critical reflection and targeted interventions on a larger scale.

**Research methodology.** To explore these research questions, we surveyed the “Regina Margherita” State High School in Salerno<sup>2</sup>, involving ten classes: five from the Human Sciences track (Section A) and five from the Linguistics track (Section L), spanning from the first to the fifth year. The total sample consisted of 224 students, 12 of whom had special educational needs (SEN). The study focuses on a specific case, highlighting the transferability of the results rather than their statistical generalization. Case studies have, in fact, targeted objectives and integrate qualitative and quantitative data, although they are subject to limitations such as subjectivity and the difficulty of generalizing, requiring significant resources and time for a detailed analysis (Biancone & Cisi, 2017; Trincherò, w.d).

The instrument used was the Anxiety and Resilience Questionnaire (QAR) by C. Cornoldi et al. (2023), part of the more extensive set of Amos (Ability, Motivation, Study Orientation) tests. This collection of tests, complete and usable independently, offers a global and in-depth view of the student’s profile, with particular attention to study skills, strategies used, learning styles and motivational beliefs. These tests have been validated and standardized (Cornoldi et al., 2023) to assess behaviours and activities associated with academic success, fostering self-awareness and personal insight. The authors explicitly developed the QAR to examine critical dimensions of the subjective experience of anxiety within learning environments. Beyond anxiety, the authors also explored resilience, conceptualized as adapting and responding effectively to challenges and adversity. The questionnaire, which includes both dimensions, is composed of 14 items: 7 related to anxiety (items 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14) and 7 to resilience (items 1, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11,13). Below are the questions in the questionnaire (*Table 1*).

**Table 1. Anxiety and Resilience Questionnaire**

	Item
1.	I overcome agitation and tension and recover from moments of difficulty in studying.
2.	The mere thought of taking an exam or a test makes me panic.
3.	Exam anxiety/test anxiety keeps me from concentrating.
4.	I can get over my irritation with a professor.
5.	I feel strong in the face of difficulties.
6.	If a study topic seems too complicated, I get nervous and cannot tackle it.
7.	My everyday life at school/university is a whole of things that interest me.
8.	I get anxious when faced with complex topics to understand.
9.	The closer the date of the exam/class test gets, the more anxiety I get.
10.	I can get over my irritation with a friend.
11.	My interactions at university/school are mostly pleasant.
12.	Just thinking about exam situations/a class assignment makes me anxious.
13.	I can overcome my disappointment over a school/university failure.
14.	There are some study subjects that just the thought of makes me anxious.

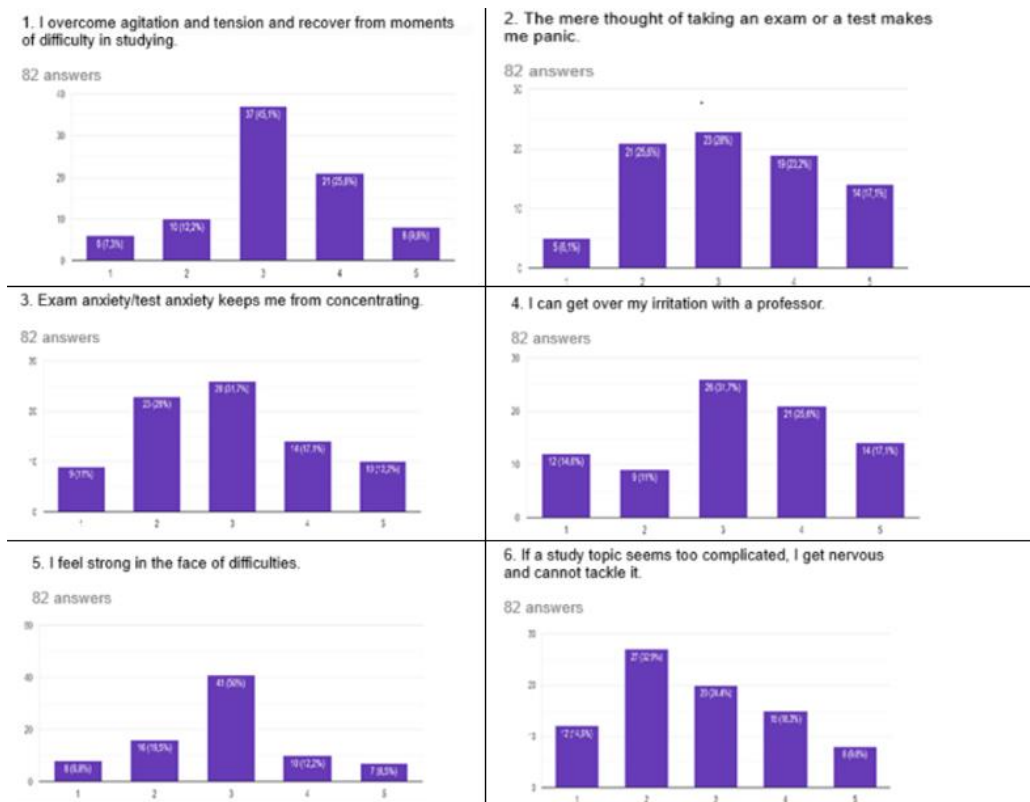
*Source: Cornoldi et al., 2023*

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<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank the Headmistress of the Liceo Statale ‘Regina Margherita’, Prof. Angela Nappi, for having encouraged this research and, more generally, educational and didactic innovation in a constructive and serene environment that enhances the potential of students and teachers.

In June 2024, researchers administered the questionnaire online via Google Forms during extracurricular hours, asking participants to respond using a 5-point Likert scale, where one represented “not at all” and five represented “completely.” No time limit was imposed. Each subscale’s theoretical minimum and maximum are 7 and 35, respectively. Of the 224 students invited to participate, 82 responded voluntarily, variously distributed by school address, age and gender.

The following graphs show the students’ responses and relative percentages



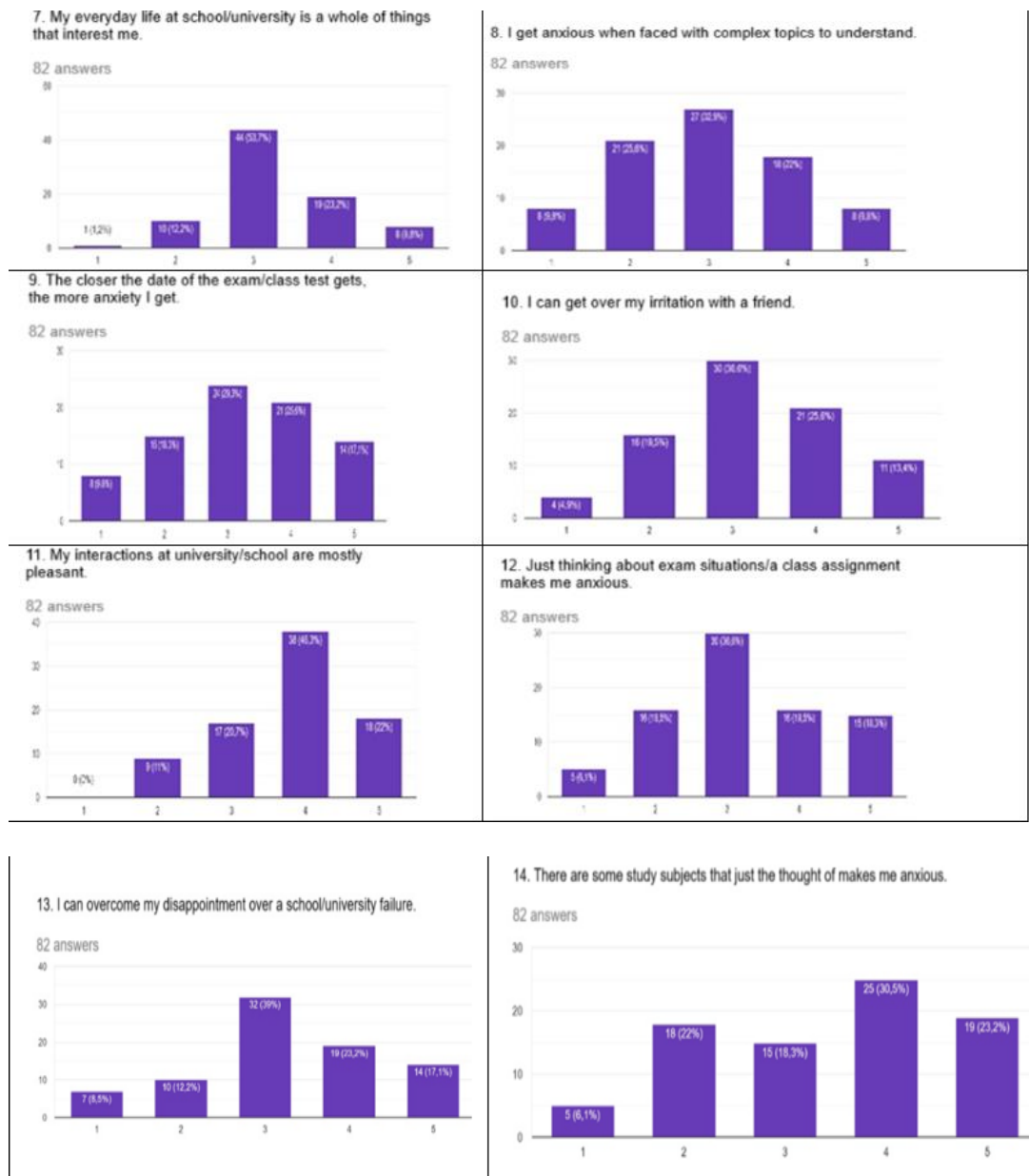


Figure 1. Questions and Answers

Source: Our elaboration.

**Main results.** The analysis of the scores reported by students on the different statements offers a clear picture of their emotional experiences in the school environment, with particular reference to the management of anxiety and difficulties. The data reveal a complex interaction between the ability to deal with stress and vulnerability in the face of situations that generate anxiety, especially about exams and more challenging study topics.

The analysis indicated an average reference value of 246 for the “Total” column (*Table 2*), with scores ranging from a minimum of 85 to a maximum of 410.

**Table 2. Sum of scores. Summary view**

	Item	Total
1.	I overcome agitation and tension and recover from moments of difficulty in studying.	261
2.	The mere thought of taking an exam or a test makes me panic.	262
3.	Exam anxiety/test anxiety keeps me from concentrating	239
4.	I can get over my irritation with a professor	262
5.	I feel strong in the face of difficulties	238
6.	If a study topic seems too complicated, I get nervous and cannot tackle it.	226
7.	My everyday life at school/university is a whole of things that interest me	269
8.	I get anxious when faced with complex topics to understand.	243
9.	The closer the date of the exam/class test gets, the more anxiety I get.	264
10.	I can get over my irritation with a friend	265
11.	My interactions at university/school are mostly pleasant.	311
12.	Just thinking about exam situations/or a class assignment makes me anxious	266
13.	I can overcome my disappointment over a school/university failure	269
14.	There are some study subjects that just the thought of makes me anxious	281

*Source: Cornoldi et al., 2023*

The analysis of the Anxiety and Resilience questionnaire administered to students at the “Regina Margherita” State High School in Salerno highlights a complex relationship between anxiety, resilience, and the school experience. Key findings indicate that while anxiety, particularly exam-related, is a recurring concern, students generally demonstrate good emotional resilience, especially in interpersonal relationships and overcoming academic disappointments.

Anxiety levels fluctuate, with exam-related panic scoring above average, suggesting that the anticipation of tests is a significant stressor. However, anxiety about concentration during exams and complex subjects, while present, is not debilitating for most students. Notably, anxiety about studying complicated topics is more pronounced, with students feeling overwhelmed.

Resilience, on the other hand, is a protective factor. Students can recover from difficulties, with high scores in managing tensions with peers and teachers. Positive social interactions within the school environment act as a buffer against academic stress, highlighting the critical role of relationships as a support system.

The research aligns with existing literature, which suggests that anxiety impairs concentration and academic performance, while resilience fosters recovery and emotional management (Putwain & Daly, 2014; Masten & Reed, 2002). The positive perception of school life, supported by enriching social interactions, suggests that a supportive environment helps mitigate the adverse effects of anxiety.

The results underline the importance of implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) programs to enhance emotional self-regulation and stress management, not just for students but also involving teachers, families, and health professionals. These programs aim to create a cohesive school community that addresses anxiety and promotes psychological well-being, supporting academic success and personal development (Durlak et al., 2011; Schonert-Reichl, 2019a, b).

**Conclusions and perspectives.** The article highlighted the importance of social-emotional skills, particularly concerning anxiety and resilience factors in students and their impact on academic performance and psychological well-being. The analysis of pre-existing studies demonstrated that interventions to develop these skills can significantly improve students' ability to manage anxiety and increase resilience, contributing to a more inclusive school environment and enhancing academic performance. It was clear that an educational approach that integrates the development of social-emotional skills with cognitive ones can promote the integral growth of students.

Despite the results obtained, the research used a limited sample size, which constitutes a significant methodological limitation. The small size and homogeneity of the sample may compromise the generalizability of the results to broader and more diversified contexts, thus requiring further confirmatory studies. The QAR, the instrument used, represents a further limitation. We used the questionnaire as a preliminary approach and interpreted the results flexibly based on the average scores for each item, ranging from a minimum of 82 to a maximum of 410, with an average reference value of 246.

Prospects suggest the need to expand research regarding sample size and sociocultural diversification. It is essential to conduct studies on a more representative and diverse sample, including students from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds, to confirm the validity and effectiveness of the proposed strategies. We should promote interdisciplinary collaboration between educators, psychologists, and sociologists to develop more personalized intervention programs adaptable to different school settings. This would allow us to address not only issues related to anxiety and resilience but also other emotional components that can negatively affect learning, such as depression, burnout and performance stress.

Future research should explore creating and implementing long-term evaluation tools that can measure the effectiveness of socio-emotional interventions more precisely and sustainably. These tools should be able to evaluate not only the immediate effects of socio-emotional skills on academic performance but also the impact that these can have in adult life on a personal and professional level. The skills acquired during school could be fundamental to face the challenges of work, social and family life, promoting a more stable general well-being and a greater capacity for adaptation.

Therefore, although the study has highlighted essential correlations between socio-emotional skills and school well-being, it requires further investigation to confirm its conclusions and validate interventions on a broader and more varied

scale. Therefore, the future of this area of research seems oriented towards a more inclusive and multidisciplinary approach to create an educational system capable of training individuals who are not only cognitively competent but also equipped with the emotional skills necessary to face the challenges of the contemporary world successfully.

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