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Print ISSN 0034-8678; Online ISSN: 2559 - 639X

FOSTERING VALUES THROUGH EDUCATION: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES FOR A NONAGGRESSIVE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

Promovarea valorilor prin educație: Resurse psihologice și strategii pentru un
mediu universitar neagresiv

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Journal of Pedagogy, 2024 (2), 65 - 93

<https://doi.org/10.26755/RevPed/2024.2/65>

The online version of this article can be found at: <https://revped.ise.ro/category/2024-nr-1-2-lxxii-2/>



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Published by:

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UNITATEA DE CERCETARE ÎN EDUCAȚIE**

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FOSTERING VALUES THROUGH EDUCATION: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES AND STRATEGIES FOR A NONAGGRESSIVE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Approaches to strengthening educational values, such as human dignity, equality, and respect for human rights, are increasingly common in modern pedagogy and are reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all. In this regard, we aimed to examine the psychological and value-based dimensions of education and behaviours manifested in interpersonal relationships, focusing on the issue of (non)aggression. We

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administered a questionnaire to 427 students to identify intervention models in education. The questionnaire assessed emotional and attitudinal characteristics related to experiences within the educational system, including students' approaches to vulnerable situations and their suggestions for implementing best practices in education. To examine more deeply the psychological resources of students – such as hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, which are essential for understanding their responses and attitudes towards nonaggression – we used the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ). The majority of participants consider aggression in educational institutions to be a significant issue that negatively affects both the victims and the community as a whole. The analysis of the questionnaire results confirmed the significative contribution of the psychological capital to the formation of a constructive educational environment, important in the development of educational values. Proposed suggestions from the participants mentioned the need for monitoring and reporting incidents, implementing an educational program for aggression prevention and an active involvement of school counsellors, parents, teachers, and authorities in preventing and combating school aggression.

Keywords: educational values, educational environment, non-aggression, psychological resources, resilience.

Rezumat

Abordările pentru consolidarea valorilor educaționale, cum ar fi demnitatea umană, egalitatea, respectul pentru drepturile omului, sunt din ce în ce mai întâlnite în pedagogia modernă și se reflectă în Obiectivele de Dezvoltare Durabilă ale Națiunilor Unite pentru asigurarea unei educații de calitate, incluzive și echitabile pentru toți. În acest sens, am examinat dimensiunea psihologică, bazată pe valori ale educației și comportamente manifestate în relațiile interpersonale, concentrându-ne pe problema (non)agresivității. Concret, am administrat un chestionar la 427 de studenți pentru a identifica modele de intervenție în educație. Chestionarul s-a concentrat pe caracteristicile emoționale și atitudinale legate de experiențele din cadrul sistemului educațional, a inclus răspunsurile studenților referitoare la modalitățile de abordare a situațiilor vulnerabile și mesajele lor pentru implementarea celor mai bune practici în educație. Pentru a explora resursele psihologice ale studenților, cum ar fi speranța, auto-eficacitatea, reziliența și optimismul, care sunt esențiale în înțelegerea răspunsurilor și atitudinilor lor față de (non)agresiune, am utilizat Chestionarul capitalului psihologic (PCQ). Din răspunsurile studenților, s-a observat că majoritatea participanților consideră violența școlară o problemă semnificativă care afectează negativ atât victimele, cât și comunitatea, în ansamblu. Analiza rezultatelor chestionarului ne-a confirmat contribuția semnificativă a capitalului psihologic

la formarea unui mediu educațional constructiv, important în dezvoltarea valorilor educaționale. În ceea ce privește sugestiile propuse de îmbunătățire a actului educațional, participanții au menționat, printre altele, necesitatea monitorizării și raportării incidentelor; implementarea unui program educațional pentru prevenirea violenței și implicarea activă a consilierilor școlari, părinților, profesorilor și autorităților în prevenirea și combaterea violenței în școală.

Cuvinte-cheie: mediu educațional, nonagresiune, resurse psihologice, reziliență, valori educaționale.

1. Introduction

In a world of constant change, education is rapidly adapting to the new demands of modern society. At the heart of these transformations lies the strengthening of educational values, such as social responsibility, collaboration, empathy, respect for diversity, adaptability, good faith, and solidarity, an essential process for growing individuals capable of integrating harmoniously into a global community. In modern pedagogy, these approaches are increasingly common and are explicitly reflected in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2017), which advocate for ensuring high-quality, inclusive, and equitable education for all.

In this context, we initiated a research study aimed at exploring the psychological, value-based, and behavioural aspects of education, as manifested in interpersonal relationships within the primary-school, middle-school, high-school and university environment. Our research began by asking the students if and what type of aggression they experienced in primary-school, middle-school and high school. Then the research centred on asking the students if and what type of aggression they experienced in university. This approach allowed us to investigate the following topics: What are the differences between the aggression manifested in school (primary-school, middle-school, high-school) compared to those in the university? Are there any differences?; Does the aggression from school later affect the student's behaviour in the university?; And if so, by how much?.

It is well known that the aggression phenomenon in pre-university education is alarmingly widespread globally: 45% of children living in the United States

have suffered one or more forms of trauma in childhood (Watters et al., 2023), approximately 80% of Chinese individuals reported experiencing one or more types of traumatic events during childhood (Zhang et al., 2023), and worldwide, 73% of children have witnessed bullying in school settings (Salvați Copiii, 2022). In Romania, between January 1, 2023, and December 31, 2023, 17,709 cases of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation were reported by the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection (Guvernul României, 2023).

Unfortunately, in environments that should provide education and a safe mental and physical space, we find phenomena such as gender discrimination, harassment, violence, and aggression. According to the Romanian organization Salvați Copiii (Save the Children), Romania ranks 3rd out of 42 countries in Europe where school bullying has been studied, with 17% of 11-year-olds admitting to having bullied other students at least three times in the previous month (FILIA, 2022). In its report for the 2021-2022 school year, the Ministry of Education highlights the rising trend of violent acts in schools: in the first semester of the 2020-2021 school year, 800 cases of school violence were recorded, showing an 85.15% increase. In the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year, the number of violent incidents rose to 5,405; and in the second semester of the 2021-2022 school year, there was a 67.29% increase in violent acts compared to the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year. During the 2021-2022 school year, out of a total of 9,741 acts of violence, 69% (6,744 cases) were categorized as “personal attacks” (Ministry of Education, 2022). According to statistical data from the report, around 54,500 acts of violence were recorded in schools from 2016 to 2022, with the number continuing to grow - a concerning trend.

Regarding statistical data on aggression in the university environment, in July 2024, the Union of Students in Romania encouraged students to report abuses in the academic setting, as they do not recognize the abuse or do not report it out of fear (USR, 2024). Aggression in the university environment, manifested in various forms, raises concerns about the educational climate. Common forms of aggression include public humiliation, social exclusion, and verbal abuse - phenomena that can undermine both students' confidence and their well-being. Addressing these issues is essential to creating a safe and inclusive academic space. The research report Sexual Harassment and

Gender Discrimination in University Spaces (FILIA, 2022) highlights the presence of these phenomena in higher education: in 52 responding universities, 15 reports of sexual harassment, 22 of discrimination, and 7 unspecified reports (whether they involved discrimination or harassment) were registered between 2016 and 2021. In 23 of the cases mentioned, the perpetrator was a faculty member, while the harassed and/or discriminated person was a student. In 10 other cases, faculty members were abusive towards other faculty members. The majority of those who experienced discrimination or harassment were women (95.2%). Additionally, the report notes that “the tacit protection of certain authoritative figures is publicly known” (FILIA, 2022, p. 35).

The situation exposed above make us wonder: Does the aggression started to increase even in the university? In this context, it would be appropriate to also ask: “Why aren’t instances of aggression by professors against students, especially those of a sexual and/or verbal nature, reported by students and faculty?” To address this issue, measures can be taken based on the model of universities abroad: they have introduced prevention programs, the “Code of Conduct on Preventing Sexual and Moral Harassment”, and regulations to manage respectful interactions within the university environment. There are teams in place to inform and assist students in filing complaints within the university or with the police. University websites feature pages and guides dedicated to combating sexual violence, and clear procedures related to sanctions are promptly applied.

The United Nations advocates for quality and inclusive education that upholds equality, peace, and the respect for fundamental human rights. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global initiative adopted in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal 4 is dedicated to ensuring inclusive and quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. It aims to foster sustainable development, cultivate and respect human rights and gender equality, and promote a culture of peace, non-discrimination, non-violence, and appreciation of cultural diversity.

To uphold educational values - such as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of

individuals belonging to minorities, as outlined in the Lisbon Treaty - academic discourse has increasingly centred on the exploration of pedagogical and psychological resources within educational institutions. Psychological capital, defined as “an individual’s positive psychological state of development characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success” (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 3), is a fundamental concept for enhancing positive behavior. Consequently, the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) is particularly relevant in predicting students’ performance and well-being, as well as their academic, personal, and professional success. (Datu et al., 2016; King & Caleon, 2021; Ramírez-Pérez, 2022; Tomás et al., 2022). Based on this instrument, an inverse correlation has been identified between psychological capital and feelings of boredom (Kang et al., 2021), stress levels (Xu & Wang, 2022), procrastination tendencies (Hicks & Wu, 2015), burnout (Carmona-Halty et al., 2022), and depression (King & Caleon, 2021). Moreover, it has shown a positive correlation with motivation (Datu et al., 2016), engagement (Carmona-Halty et al., 2019), coping strategies (Ramírez-Pérez, 2022), self-regulated learning (Sava et al., 2020), well-being (King & Caleon, 2021), and academic performance (Luthans et al., 2022).

Building on the alarming statistics of trauma among young individuals, we recognized the need to explore not only the prevalence and impact of aggression in educational settings, but also the underlying psychological resources that could mitigate these effects.

2. The Purpose of the Study

Through this research, we sought to gain a better understanding of the issue of aggression in schools and also to contribute to the development of educational strategies that promote a safe and equitable learning environment for all students. To achieve this, we initiated a study focused on exploring the psychological, value-based, and behavioral dimensions of education.

Specifically, we aimed to investigate how psychological resources – such as hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism – can be transformed into educational values that enhance the overall learning environment. Regarding the cultivation and education of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism, studies show that these can be developed through favorable educational contexts. For example, in a recent study, Yildirim, M. et al. demonstrate the positive association between love of life and higher levels of optimism and hope (Yildirim et al., 2024). Additionally, studies indicate that social support and entrepreneurial education can improve self-efficacy (Hohl et al., 2019; Jiatong et al., 2021). A concrete example of cultivating resilience in students can be found in the research by Tan et al. The authors suggest that schools should place greater emphasis on the psychological resilience of students, change teaching methods, incorporate online education to enhance students' level of mentalization, and propose an eight-week mindfulness cognitive therapy program to improve psychological resilience (Tan et al., 2024).

So, we set out to examine the students' experience related to aggression both in school and university to be able to make comparisons between them and to find out what are the best ways to remedy the situation by accessing psychological capital. The goals that led us to address this topic were the following:

1. Investigating the safety of the student environment and the impact of traumatic experiences: we aimed to understand the extent to which the educational environment is safe for students and to identify the types of aggressive actions that contribute to trauma. Specifically, we examined various forms of aggression, including physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, as well as bullying and harassment. Additionally, we explored the personal consequences of these experiences, such as their impact on students' well-being.
2. Exploring psychological resources among students: this includes examining factors such as hope (“persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals in order to succeed”), self-efficacy (“having confidence to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks”), resilience (“when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond to attain success”), and optimism (“making a positive attribution about succeeding now and in the future”) to support and reinforce educational values (Luthans et al.,

2007, p. 3). These resources refer to the standards that guide behavior and decision-making within educational contexts, fostering a safe, inclusive, and equitable environment conducive to learning. By understanding these psychological resources, we can better promote positive outcomes in educational settings.

3. Developing proposals for educational system improvement: our goal is to generate actionable recommendations to enhance the educational system, ensuring that it better supports students' needs and fosters a more effective learning environment.

To achieve these objectives, we formulated the following research questions:

- Q1. What is the relationship between psychological resources such as optimism, resilience, hope, and self-efficacy and the internalized experience of aggressiveness (the process by which individuals absorb and incorporate aggressive experiences into their self-concept and worldview)?
- Q2. What are the negative experiences related to aggression within educational institutions, and how have students perceived and internalized them?
- Q3. What is the message of the students regarding the topic of aggressiveness in the educational environment?

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study involved a sample of 427 students from the National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest, selected through a convenience sampling method. As we can see in Figure no. 1, the respondents were from 19 to 25 years old, 38.4% of them being female (164 students) and 61.6% of them being male (263 students). Figure no. 2 illustrates that 89.7% of the students were following the bachelor studies (from all studying years) and 10.3% of the students were following the master studies (from all studying years). The participants were administered a questionnaire that included single-choice questions, multiple-choice questions, and an open-ended question, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of their views.

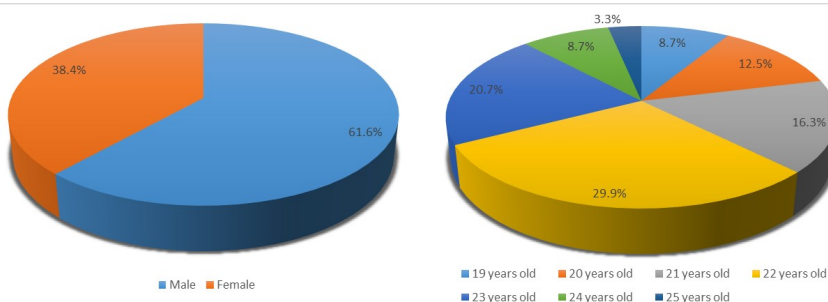


Figure no. 1. *Distribution of students by gender and age*

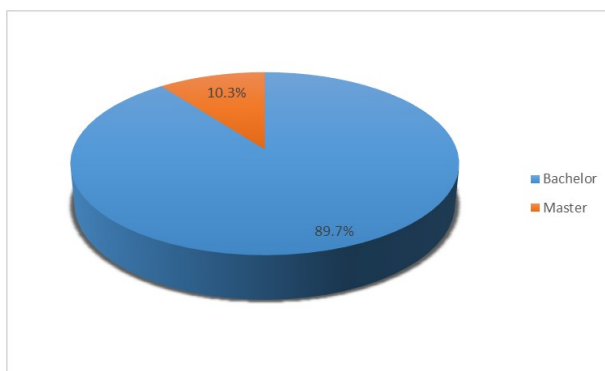


Figure no. 2. *Distribution of students by degree level*

Throughout the research process, ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose, their rights, and how their data would be used. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, with all data being stored securely and used solely for this research. The research included three stages: (1) preparatory stage (this involved developing the methodology, designing the questionnaire structure, and obtaining the necessary approvals, including ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA of Bucharest (Reg. 3038/05.10.2023), ensuring the study's quality and ethical standards), (2) data collection (conducted between March and May 2024, during which the questionnaire was administered to students), (3) data analysis and

interpretation (following the completion of data collection, the data were analysed and interpreted, leading to the conclusions presented in this article).

3.2. Measuring instrument

The questionnaire was structured into three main sections. One section contained a series of questions designed to measure students' experiences related to aggression both at pre-university and university level. The second part incorporated the Psychological Capital Questionnaire-12 (PCQ-12) to assess students' overall satisfaction and psychological well-being, focusing on dimensions such as hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy. The third section of the questionnaire included an open-ended question, having in mind to let them express their feelings and experiences related to aggression in the educational environment.

So, to measure students' experiences related to cases of aggression, we applied questions using a Likert scale aimed at assessing the internalized experience of aggression (see Table no. 1) and multiple-choice questions. In the questionnaire, we focused on several dimensions of aggression, including verbal, physical, and relational aggression, as well as the factors contributing to the manifestation of these behaviors. In our research, the terms *violence* and *aggression* were used as synonyms, with the following clarifications provided in the introduction to the questionnaire to ensure a uniform understanding of the concepts among respondents:

1. Aggressive and violent behavior includes targeted verbal, physical, or gestural behavior, intended to cause minor physical harm, psychological distress, intimidation, or to induce fear (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998). Serious forms include behavior by individuals that intentionally threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts physical harm (Reiss & Roth, 1993).
2. Forms of violent and aggressive behavior can vary: insults, slights, threats, intimidation, discrimination, emotional blackmail, inducing fear, inappropriate physical contact, sexualized behaviors, etc. Aggressive behavior provokes irritation and unease, as well as difficulties in controlling one's own reactions.

3. Aggression can also be manifested through indirect forms of hostility, such as spreading nasty rumors and social ostracism (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).
4. School violence and aggression include aggressive and violent behaviors committed in schools and during school-based activities, as well as institutional violence perpetrated by iatrogenic policies and practices (Greene, 2005).
5. Systemic school violence is defined as “any institutional practice or procedure that adversely impacts individuals or groups by burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, or physically” (Epp & Watkinson, 1997, p. 4).

To ensure that students interpreted the terms consistently, we included control questions in the questionnaire that evaluated the understanding of the definitions and nuances of aggression. Additionally, we conducted a pilot study before administering the final questionnaire, which allowed us to check the clarity and relevance of the questions, thus ensuring that students did not confuse the terms.

Table no. 1. *Items for measuring the internalization of experiences related to aggression within the education system and society*

No.	Item	Cronbach's Alpha
1	How much do you worry about avoiding unpleasant situations within the education system?	0.75
2	How much do you believe it depends on you to avoid aggression situations within the education system?	
3	When I see acts of aggression, I get stressed easily	
4	When I see acts of aggression, I easily panic	
5	How much do you avoid attending social events that could be challenging, such as potential aggression or conflict?	
6	How much have you worried that others might find out about your unpleasant experiences?	
7	How much have you sought help from others to address your situations of aggression?	
8	How much pressure (aggression) do you feel from society?	

In regard to the Psychological Capital Questionnaire-12 (PCQ-12), it consists of 12 items and measures self-efficacy (items 1-3), hope (items 4-7), resilience

(items 8-10), and optimism (items 11, 12) (Table no. 2), which are combined into the super-factor of psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2007). To ensure relevance to the student population, the questionnaire was specifically adapted by tailoring items to reflect activities and challenges common to student life, such as academic performance, group projects, and coping with academic stress. This adaptation aimed to make the questions more relatable and meaningful within an educational setting. Respondents rate their level of concern or discomfort using a six-point Likert scale. The adaptation of the questionnaire was carried out as recommended by Hazan Liran and Miller (2019) for student samples.

Table no. 2. *Items for measuring the Psychological Capital*

No.	Item
1	I feel confident when presenting my work at a meeting with supervisors/professors.
2	I feel confident when contributing to discussions with managers/professors about the university/faculty/organization's strategy.
3	I feel confident when presenting information to a group of colleagues.
4	If I encounter a difficulty at university, I can find many ways to get out of it.
5	Currently, I believe that I am achieving success at university.
6	I can find many ways to achieve my current academic/professional goals.
7	Currently, I am meeting the academic/professional objectives I have set for myself.
8	I can be independent at university if necessary.
9	Usually, I take stressful things at university in stride.
10	I can overcome difficult periods at university because I have faced challenges before.
11	I always look on the bright side regarding university.
12	I am optimistic about what will happen to me in the future concerning my academic/professional career.

To assess the internal reliability of the items in the questionnaires, we applied a test-retest procedure and also examined other parameters of the variables, the values of which are included in Table no. 3. To assess the distribution shape, we used the coefficients of skewness and kurtosis. The acceptable range for skewness is between -2 and +2, while for kurtosis it is between -3 and +3. The values of these indicators, as shown in the table, allowed us to proceed with the Pearson correlation analysis, as the data followed a normal distribution. Significant correlations are presented in Table no. 4.

Table no. 3. *Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value and descriptive statistics for the analysed variables*

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Internalization of the experience related to aggression in school and university	0.75	29.7	6.55	0.27	0.29
Psychological capital of students: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism	0.87	52.0	9.71	0.34	0.05

3.3. Procedure

A quantitative analysis of the data collected from the multiple-choice and single-choice questions was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and through graphical representations. For the qualitative analysis, the responses to the open-ended question were analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

4. Results and Discussion

Following the Pearson correlation analysis, we identified and selected the statistically significant values that demonstrate meaningful relationships among the variables under investigation. These significant correlations provide critical insights into the dynamics of the study's key factors and have been summarized in the table below (see Table no. 4) for further interpretation and discussion.

Table no. 4. *Statistically significant Pearson correlations among variables*

Item	Pearson Correlation/ Sig (2-tailed)	PCQ Hope	PCQ Self-efficacy	PCQ Resilience	PCQ Optimism
How much do you worry about avoiding unpleasant situations within the education system?	Pearson Correlation	0.39**	-0.37**	-0.73**	-0.44**
	Sig (2-tailed)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
How much do you avoid attending social events that could be challenging, such as potential aggression or conflict?	Pearson Correlation	0.04	-0.09*	-0.99*	-0.07
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.46	0.04	0.04	0.14
How much have you sought help from others to address your situations of aggression?	Pearson Correlation	0.41**	0.44**	0.79**	0.41**
	Sig (2-tailed)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
How much have you worried that others might find out about your unpleasant experiences?	Pearson Correlation	-0.05	-0.02	-0.05	0.09*
	Sig (2-tailed)	0.32	0.71	0.32	0.04

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

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

The analysis revealed the importance of the development of psychological capital for remediating situations of aggression within the education system. As can be seen from Table no. 3, the Hope, Self-efficacy, Resilience, Optimism dimensions support relational competence and facilitate the students' approach for help in cases of aggression.

This fact can be seen from the following correlations:

1. Hope and avoiding unpleasant situations (e.g., avoiding confrontations with peers, evading participation in group activities, or steering clear of discussions that could lead to conflict; the survey seeks to understand how much students worry about avoiding such situations in schools and universities, highlighting the broader implications of these experiences on their overall well-being and academic success) (How much do you worry about avoiding unpleasant situations within the education system?): A significant negative correlation was observed between students' concern about avoiding unpleasant situations within the education system and their levels of hope ($r = -0.39$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that higher

levels of hope are associated with a reduced tendency to worry about such situations. Additionally, students who reported seeking help for abuse situations showed a significant positive correlation with hope ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher hope is linked to a greater likelihood of seeking support.

2. Self-efficacy and challenging situations (How much do you avoid attending social events that could be challenging, such as potential aggression or conflict?): There was a significant negative correlation between the concern about avoiding unpleasant situations and self-efficacy ($r = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that greater self-efficacy is associated with less worry about such situations. A weak but significant negative correlation was found between avoiding challenging social events and self-efficacy ($r = -0.09$, $p = 0.04$). Individuals with higher self-efficacy tend to place greater value on facing these events rather than avoiding them. Conversely, seeking help for abuse situations was positively correlated with self-efficacy ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting that those with higher self-efficacy are more likely to seek help.
3. Resilience and social challenges (How much have you sought help from others to address your situations of aggression?): A strong negative correlation was identified between worry about avoiding unpleasant situations within the education system and resilience ($r = -0.73$, $p < 0.001$), showing that higher resilience is associated with less worry about these situations. Similarly, a strong negative correlation was observed between avoiding challenging social events and resilience ($r = -0.99$, $p = 0.04$), indicating that greater resilience is linked to a reduced tendency to avoid social challenges. Furthermore, seeking help for abuse situations was positively correlated with resilience ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that individuals with higher resilience are more likely to seek assistance in abusive situations.
4. Optimism and difficult situations (How much have you worried that others might find out about your unpleasant experiences?): There was a significant negative correlation between worry about avoiding unpleasant situations and optimism ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher optimism is associated with less worry about such situations. A significant positive correlation was found between seeking help for abuse and optimism ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that higher optimism is related to a greater likelihood of seeking help. Additionally, a weak but

significant negative correlation was observed between the concern about others discovering unpleasant experiences and optimism ($r = -0.09, p = 0.04$), suggesting a slight association between higher optimism and reduced worry about others learning of these experiences.

Overall, the findings highlight the important role of psychological capital – hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism – in shaping students’ responses to challenging situations, including their tendencies to seek help and manage their concerns about social and academic environments.

For multiple-choice questions, we present the answers in the form of graphs below. Figure no. 3 illustrate the answers for the question “How strong did you feel the aggression in school (pre-university level)?” and Figure no. 4 illustrates the answers for the question “How strong did you feel the aggression in university?”. The measuring scale is from “1” that stands for “not at all” to “10” that stands for “very strong”.

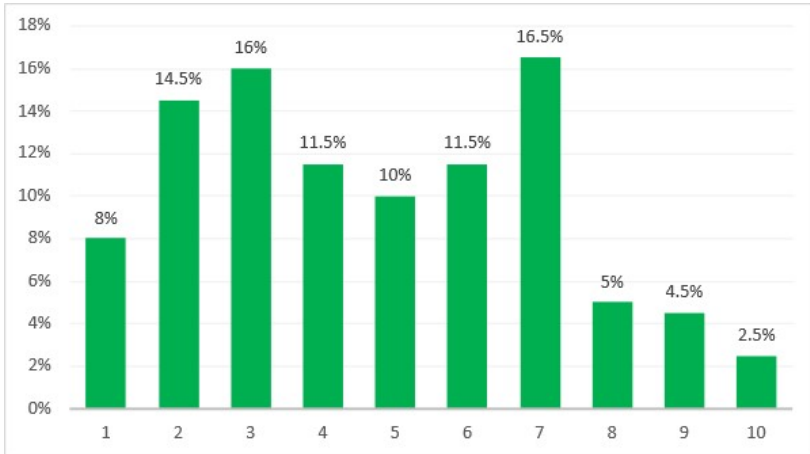


Figure no. 3. *Students’ responses regarding aggression at school*

The students’ responses indicate that the aggression experienced at university level is lower compared to that in pre-university level. Specifically, while 51% of respondents reported not experiencing any violence in the university

environment, nearly 41% of respondents provided ratings between 6 and 10 for the aggression perceived in the pre-university environment. This should be a wake-up call, highlighting the urgent need for educational institutions to address and mitigate aggressive behaviors, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for all students.

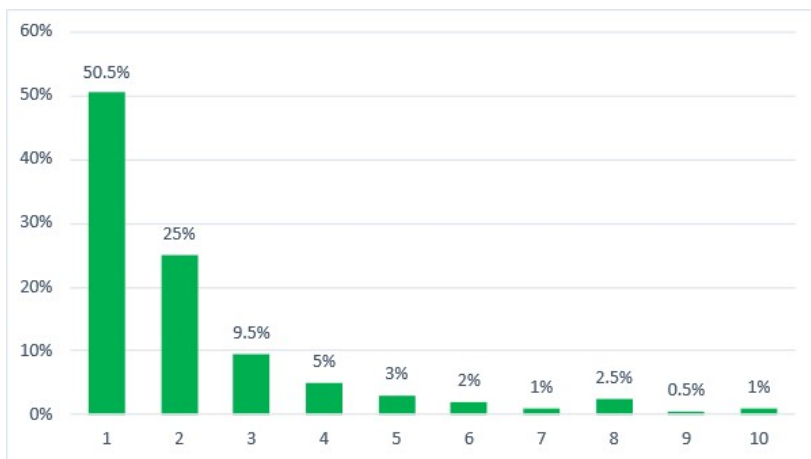


Figure no. 4. *Students' responses regarding aggression at university*

For the question “Did you participate in an act of aggression as:” 47.8% of participants stated that they were witnesses, 8.9% of respondents admitted to being in the role of aggressors, 31.7% were victims of aggression, while 11.6% of respondents reported that they had not experienced any form of aggression at school/university (see Figure no. 5, the answer options are represented by the legend of the pie chart).

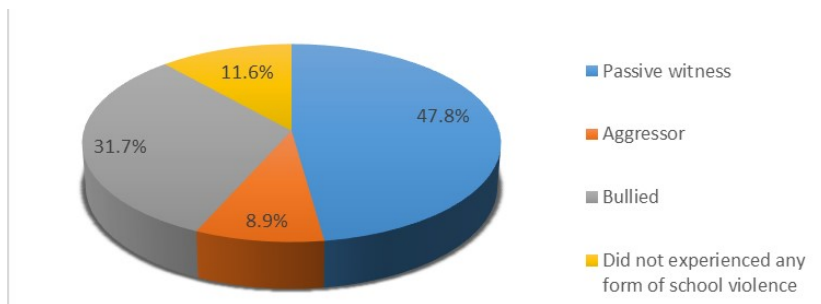


Figure no. 5. *Students' roles in instances of aggression (Witness, Aggressor, Victim)*

For the question “The act of aggression was...”, the majority (39.4%) indicated that the aggression was verbal, 23.9% reported physical aggression, 21.6% mentioned psycho-emotional aggression, 11.5% referred to cyber aggression, 1.6% reported sexual aggression, and 2% stated that no form of aggression was experienced (see Figure no. 6).

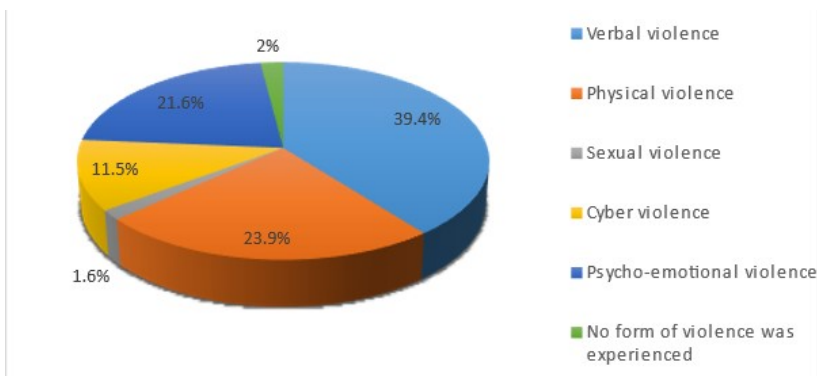


Figure no. 6. *The type of aggression experienced by the students*

The next question was “I felt from my colleagues...”. Because all types of aggression (verbal, physical, psycho-emotional, cyber aggression, sexual aggression) can be done in many ways, we need to specifically find out

what acts of aggression were carried out. The results are presented in Figure no. 7 where the legend of the pie chart represent the answer options.

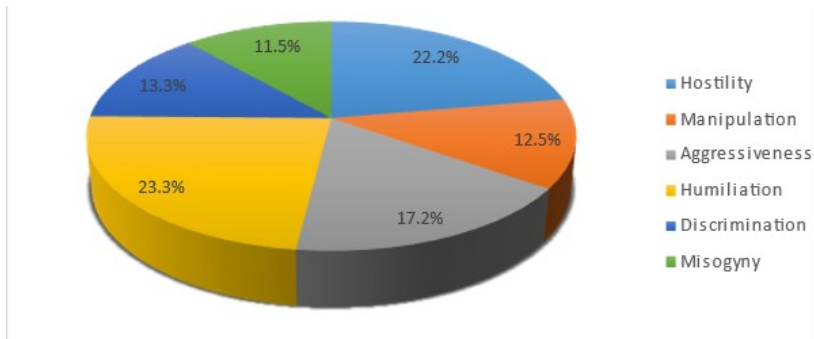


Figure no. 7. *Forms of aggressive manifestation*

While 22.2% of the students were victims of a hostile behaviour towards them, 17.2% experienced directly aggressiveness (any form of direct manifestation). On one hand, 12.5% were manipulated by their colleagues, while on the other hand, 23.3% were directly humiliated. Discrimination and misogyny were present, unfortunately, for 13.3% and respectively 11.5% of the students.

For the question regarding the handling of abuse incidents, “How were these situations solved?”, 12.1% of respondents stated that they received help from friends, and 13.3% received support from adults. Unfortunately, 17% continued to endure the situation, suggesting that the aggression might have persisted without any intervention. Additionally, 22.2% chose to ignore what was happening, while 18.7% decided to focus on other activities. Worryingly, 6.8% turned to vices, which is even more concerning than the previously mentioned cases. Escaping into gambling/video games, smoking, alcohol, unhealthy food, drugs, etc., not only fails to resolve the problem but also harms the health and destructively influences the personality and psyche of those who resort to these methods of emotional regulation. The consequences in these cases are the most severe, as it becomes extremely difficult to

reintegrate the victims into society as if the instances within the education system and their harmful effects had never occurred (see Figure no. 8).

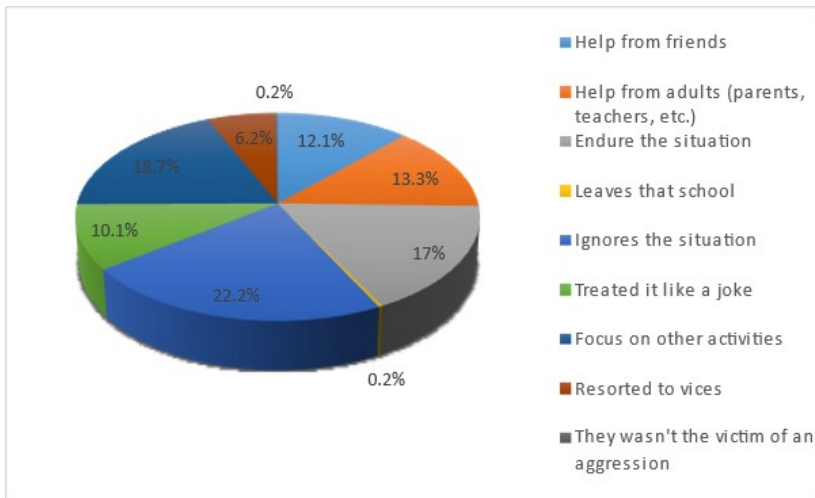


Figure no. 8. *How violent situations were solved*

Because it is very important to understand the message conveyed by the respondents and to make it heard, at the end of the questionnaire, we included an open-ended question: “Would you like to share a message on the topic of aggression in the educational environment?”

Below, we will present some of the responses to this question and the valuable conclusions drawn from them, which are significant for the theme of this research:

- “Mental health should also be prioritized in schools. Aggression doesn’t just happen by itself and is encouraged by many factors.”
- “It is sad that at some point in life, both my friends and I suffered abuse at school or in the family, and none of us had the courage to talk to an adult or a teacher. We learned to ignore it and hope it would stop. It would be helpful if there were more psychologists encouraging students from a young age that it is okay to speak up and seek advice. I believe that mandatory psychological counselling for every student would lead to

a better learning/social environment in schools and help with their personal development.”

- “In primary and middle school, I was mocked, and during my undergraduate studies, from the first to the third year, I was disregarded. Now, with many things that have happened in my life, I feel strengthened, and I believe this is due to my visits to a personal psychologist. There, I learned about psychological mechanisms that helped me develop a positive attitude.”
- “I believe that verbal aggression is becoming increasingly frequent. In a civilized society, psychological aggression should be a marginalized concept. It is important to know how to be decent, have good manners, and strive to be a better version of ourselves without feeling the need to be aggressive in language and gestures just because we are ‘authentic and real’. Personally, I prefer a person who has incredible self-control compared to someone who is ‘authentic’ and cannot refrain from being both physically and verbally violent.”
- “Aggression in schools is becoming more acute, and the primary cause is the family and the power of example within the family.”
- “Aggression in school is a real problem, especially in primary and middle school classes when children have not yet developed the emotional intelligence to show empathy. I believe that lowering behaviour grades, expelling students, and mocking them by teachers is not a solution for children who are aggressors.”
- “People are shaped by the environment and situations they live in. School should be an environment that fills the gaps in family education and offers support to children. Education stops aggression!”
- “University professors (a large part of them) should try to empathize with students, even a little, because university is not an easy period in a person’s life.”
- “I hope this problem diminishes more and more, at least among the next generations, that effective solutions are found, and that there is no longer any shame in seeking specialized help (psychologist).”
- “[...] There is too much indifference regarding the quality of being a parent. A child’s education must start with the parents. It’s painful to live in an environment where you don’t feel appreciated, safe, or even prefer to stay longer at school than to return home. It’s sad....”

We note that more than half of the respondents chose not to leave a message on this topic. This is an important aspect to highlight because let us not forget... silence is also a response.

As we can see, the responses to the open-ended question reflect insights regarding aggression, mental health, and the role of education and family in shaping students' well-being. There is a strong call for prioritizing mental health in educational settings. Respondents emphasize that aggression is not an isolated phenomenon; it is often influenced by various factors. The presence of psychologists in schools is seen as crucial for encouraging students to speak up and seek help.

The answers of the respondents attracted our attention to experiences of abuse, highlighting the long-lasting impact it can have. Some students express regret over not having the courage or support to report these incidents at the time. This underscores the need for accessible and mandatory psychological counselling to create a safer and more supportive school environment.

Psychological counselling, including both group and individual sessions, is viewed as a powerful tool in helping individuals cope with and overcome the effects of aggression. The responses indicate that such support can lead to personal growth and cultivation of resilience skills.

From the students' perspective, the phenomenon of verbal and psychological aggression in pre-university environment is increasing continuously, thus their answers manifesting a deep concern in regard with this topic. They advocate for a culture of decency, self-control, and non-violence, emphasizing that being "authentic" should not justify aggressive behaviour. There is a call for societal norms that marginalize psychological violence and promote respectful interactions.

Respondents argue that schools should compensate for deficiencies in family education and provide necessary support to children. The lack of attention to parenting quality is noted with concern. Students point out the pain of growing up in environments where children do not feel valued or safe, sometimes preferring school over home. This highlights the need for parent education and the creation of supportive educational environments. Promoting

parenting not only enhances children's immediate social-affective behaviour but also contributes to long-term societal benefits, further aligning with Sustainable Development Goals, and SDG 3 focuses on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages (Tripon, 2024).

It is noted by students that the period of university life is difficult. In this context, they suggest that better development and support from faculties could alleviate some of these challenges. Despite the concerns expressed by the respondents, they expressed the feeling of hope that the situation will improve for future generations. Respondents express a desire for effective solutions to be found and for seeking specialized help, like psychological counselling, to become normalized and free of stigma.

Overall, the responses suggest a deep concern about the prevalence of violence in pre-university educational settings and a strong belief in the need for better mental health support, empathetic approaches, and improved family dynamics to address and prevent such issues.

5. Conclusion

As we can see, the administered questionnaire and data analysis provided specific insights into the level of violence students are exposed to. Overall, the results describe a reality where aggression is still prevalent in the educational settings, affecting a significant portion of the student population. Students emphasized the importance of having a school psychologist or pedagogist to intervene and address cases of aggression.

By helping students develop specific psychological competencies, such as emotional self-regulation, empathy, resilience, and constructive conflict resolution, we can transform their attitudes and behaviours, enabling them to respond to challenges with empathy and understanding rather than aggression.

A key component in this transformation is the cultivation of optimism, resilience, hope, and self-efficacy. These qualities not only empower students to overcome obstacles but also foster a positive, supportive learning

environment where everyone can thrive. By prioritizing these psychological competencies, we can create a more peaceful and equitable educational landscape, where all students are equipped to reach their full potential.

To truly promote the values of equal opportunity and inclusive, high-quality education (United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals), it is imperative that we work to eliminate violence and misunderstanding in educational settings. To counteract this phenomenon, measures are needed for the continuous assessment of the academic climate and the implementation of educational policies that reinforce core values within the learning environment.

5.1. Practical implication

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize the urgent need for immediate and effective measures to prevent and mitigate instances of aggression within educational environments. Authorities, educators, and parents must collaborate closely to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment for students at all levels. Special attention must be given to the development of socio-emotional and communication skills among students, which would better equip them to manage their emotions and interpersonal relationships, thereby reducing the incidence of violence in schools and universities.

A critical starting point is the need for permanently accessible support within educational institutions, where students can seek assistance not only for resolving incidents of school violence but also for ongoing therapy. Establishing accessible support services, such as scheduled sessions with external counsellors or online support resources, could significantly aid students in navigating these challenges, even in contexts where full-time school counsellors are not available.

Moreover, it is essential to focus on developing students' transformative and perspective-taking competencies by involving educators, school counsellors, and support staff in structured programs and activities that reinforce, optimism, resilience, hope, and trust. These efforts can include workshops, classroom discussions, and counselling sessions aimed at fostering these psychological resources. Hereby, we not only equip students to navigate personal and

social challenges but also contribute to the fulfilment of the EU's goals for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable education, perpetuating the broader values of society and education.

While some educational institutions already provide these resources, responses from our study indicate a need for reform to enhance student confidence in using these services. It is obvious that the demand for support is real and must be addressed.

Furthermore, awareness campaigns are essential to educate students, teachers, and parents about the various forms and consequences of school violence. Understanding the scope of this issue and its long-term impacts is crucial for all stakeholders. Only through unified efforts can this phenomenon be effectively combated.

We hope that this study will serve as a valuable resource for those in a position to make a difference because any steps taken toward resolving these issues will be well-received by students, parents, educators, authorities, and society at large.

5.2. Study limits

Since the sample used in the study consists of students from the National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest, the results reflect only a partial view of the situation regarding violence in universities. However, considering that students do not come only from Bucharest, but from several other counties in Romania, being familiar with the pre-university system, the findings may offer some insights into the complexities of aggression in pre-university educational institutions.

Another limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature, capturing students' self-perceived experiences of aggression at a single point in time. As with any self-reported data, there is an inherent risk that participants may not be entirely honest or may struggle to accurately articulate their experiences.

5.3. Future research direction

Following this study, we propose to explore several research directions, including (1) assessing the professional development needs of pre-university and university teachers regarding the management and promotion of a positive climate in educational institutions and (2) analysis of how emotional experiences influence students' motivation and academic performance. These research directions could contribute to improving academic performance, fostering a constructive and supportive educational climate, perpetuating educational values, and implementing good practices in the field of education.

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