



## Well-being in pandemic times

The Erasmus+ project WINTER *”Well-being of teachers and educators - Satisfaction factors and applicable methods for maintaining and increasing the well-being of employees in social-pedagogical education and teaching for staff retention and recruitment“*, coordinated by Adolf-Reichwein Schule, Limburg, Germany, began in 2019 and is due to come to an end at the beginning of 2022. This project, initially scheduled to finish in 2021, was extended for half a year, as a result of the situation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The aim of the project is to identify suitable methods as well as the factors favouring the maintenance and improvement of the well-being of employees in general and of teachers/educators/school staff in particular. The generic concept of well-being in the workplace includes, to put it briefly, everything related to the physical and mental health of the staff.

The project presupposes the investigation of the factors which influence the well-being in the workplace, the importance granted to this state, and the solutions adopted by employers (companies, institutions, firms, etc), in order to maintain/improve the well-being of employees in the workplace.

The project brings together six educational establishments – ranging from pre-school level through secondary level II to vocational school – from four EU countries, and an institution which activates in the field of social assistance. The participating schools are from Germany (*Vitos-Teilhabe - Idstein* and *Adolf Reichwein Schule - Limburg*), Finland (*Riveria-Joensuu*), Romania (*Elena Văcărescu Elementary School and Kindergarten 50, Bucharest*), Sweden (*Baldergymnasiet - Skelleftea*) and Lithuania (*Saules Gojus - Vilnius* and *Varpelio - Klaipeda*). There have been project meetings in Germany (2019), Sweden (2020) and Finland (2021). The meeting in Romania took place online, because of the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the project meeting in Lithuania is scheduled for February 2022.

Since much of the project has been developed in the context of the changes in education triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, during the online meeting organized by *”Elena Văcărescu”* Elementary School, all the partners were invited to answer 7 questions, in accordance with the project topic. The first three focused on the experiences and challenges the partner institutions and their employees have been facing since the beginning of the pandemic, while the last four closely inspected the well-being of teachers/educators. Their answers brought to light both similarities and dissimilarities among the partner institutions.

1. How would you briefly describe your experience as a teacher / educator during the coronavirus pandemic?

*”Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.” (Albert Einstein)*

Many of the interviewees stated that the pandemic period began with uncertainty and worry – even fear, as well as with the necessity to rapidly adapt to the new working conditions.



All the countries have in common a succession of the various phases of the pandemic – both the working conditions relative to student-based activities, and the means of institutional cooperation have undergone permanent changes, according to the epidemiological conditions existing in their region/country, in a certain period.

As distance learning set in, numerous teachers and students initially struggled with technical problems, mainly caused by the lack of training and experience in using online educational platforms, as well as by the scarcity of adequate equipment and devices. The technical departments in these schools were sometimes overstrained, and the colleagues helped each other in order to cope with the new technologies in the teaching-learning-assessment process.

Educators had to adapt their teaching techniques to the new reality. Many of the respondents consider the student-teacher relationship has been more difficult to build during the online period. As stated by the interviewees from Lithuania and Finland, children's interest in studying has decreased, especially among younger students, deprived of the presence and assistance ensured by the educator. Some students have relied on the support of their parents or guardians, and those who have been the most in need of support during distance learning belong to the category of underprivileged children.

After returning to school, wearing face masks represented another challenge. In some educational institutions, it was compulsory both for the students and the whole staff to wear a mask everywhere on school premises, at all times. In some others, very young students – pre-schoolers, for example – were exempted from wearing a mask. In Germany, they had the possibility to take off their masks while sitting down, but some teachers continued wearing them throughout the whole teaching period and during the days with lots of classes they had difficulty in speaking and breathing. At the end of the lockdown period, the hybrid system was implemented in some institutions – some students attending the lessons physically, some others online, which means that classes were divided into two groups, both of them taking part at the same time. In Romania, there was a period when pre-schoolers, primary school students and the students in terminal years attended school physically, while all the other students attended exclusively online lessons. Irrespective of the lesson format, plenty of teachers have repeatedly faced a high degree of strain which sometimes reached exhaustion.

*Adolf Reichwein Schule - Limburg* in Germany pointed out that, with the introduction of the teachers' responsibility for ensuring the students' Covid-19 testing in schools, several times a week, the teachers felt overloaded by this involvement in a new field, the medical one, apart from the educational one. Moreover, despite the good behaviour in schools, an increase in the level of disapproval of those who do not want to get vaccinated against Covid-19 was noticed on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a positive attitude towards "school-teams-health", which functioned well and offered their support when needed.

Despite the shortcomings, as a pleasant experience, the respondents from Sweden described the home working place as calmer, characterised by fewer distractions and less stress. However, the amount of time spent in front of the screens has increased dramatically, and so has the amount of time allocated for designing suitable materials for the online school.

2. What challenges have you been confronted with?

”I am not afraid of storms for I am learning how to sail my ship.” Louisa May Alcott

The challenges concerning practical issues enumerated by the partners consisted in discovering and accessing learning/teaching platforms and applying the most suitable methods in order to maintain the students' interest. At an interpersonal level, the greatest challenge has been the management of the students' and teachers' emotions and getting the trainees motivated.

Following and applying the multiple legislative amendments occurring during the pandemic, according to the evolution of the sanitary situation, has been another challenge.

Some teachers even had to work in their free time, to design materials for the online school. Also, some of them have even experienced sadness because of the impossibility of seeing their colleagues at school.

In extreme cases, the strain set on educators was augmented by the parents' accusations that their children did not receive sufficient attention.

Last but not least, coordinating this Erasmus+ project, along with the project meetings, represented in itself a big challenge.

3. What positive aspects has the corona pandemic resulted in?

“Life is a shipwreck, but we must not forget to sing in the lifeboats.” (Voltaire)

However, this period has also had some positive outcomes, among which the fact that both the teaching staff and the students have acquired digital competences. New online platforms, many of them interactive (Wordwall, Genially, Kahoot), have been explored.

The phone conversations and the online meetings have eliminated the time spent in traffic, with homeworking developing in a calm environment, with fewer distractions. Some teachers felt a lower stress level and managed to improve English as a result of using platforms and resources written in this language.

There have been interesting online presentations, and paper consumption has been reduced. In some cases, the cooperation among students has improved, thanks to the more efficient online exchange of ideas and the need for mutual help.

In one of the partner institutions, the ”school tour” was organised online, which turned out to be even more efficient than the traditional ”Day of the Open Gates” when people used to crowd the school premises.

Sanitary norms in the partner institutions have been improved and given media coverage.

One of the partners has also organised activities for the employees, where they could participate from home, to determine them to take more care of themselves. Through the programme ”*Teilhabe bewegt*”, the participants were asked to send recordings of the sporting activities they organised – for example screenshots of the distance, the number of steps or the best photo. The winners even received small prizes.

Last but not least, there have been situations in which online schooling created stronger relationships with the students' parents, but the benefits of face-to-face education have become more apparent for everybody.

4. How has the coronavirus pandemic affected your well-being as an educator / teacher?  
“We know what we are, but not what we may be.” (William Shakespeare)

The pandemic has had a series of effects upon the well-being of teachers. While some of them have been affected by sedentarism, others started paying more attention to their own health, taking exercise more frequently.

The teachers, used to being among students and colleagues, found themselves alone, isolated in front of a monitor, having to manage the groups of students from a different perspective. Some educators no longer had that sense of affective belonging to their educational institutions. Encouraged by their peers, but negatively affected by the pressure exerted by numerous parents and mass-media respectively, some educators even considered resigning during the online teaching period.

The teachers who benefited from the students' active involvement during online classes have more easily overcome this difficult period than those who reported less interest in this type of learning and even some occurrences of absenteeism. Online evaluation has its own drawbacks, since it does not reflect the trainees' real cognitive/operational level.

Returning to school, following all sanitary norms, wearing masks, sudden interaction with a high number of people after lockdown lifting, organising classes under these new conditions generated extreme fatigue among lots of teachers who had apparent difficulty readapting to the classical development of the teaching process.

The lack of cultural activities – although understandable during this period – increased stress and irritation.

5. What did you do for your well-being during this time?  
“Give light, and the darkness will disappear of itself.” ( Desiderius Erasmus)

Within the partner institutions, the well-being ensuring mechanisms during this period display both similarities and dissimilarities.

Online and face-to-face meetings brought a touch of optimism to everyone. The mood was more comfortable where stronger bonds were created among colleagues, students and their parents. The time spent within the family also contributed to a great extent to maintaining mental health.

Various more or less successful attempts to improve the well-being in the partner institutions have been made throughout the pandemic. One of the institutions regularly organised online 15-minute meetings to discuss well-being, identify possible problems and offer necessary support. Another partner attempted to implement online active breaks, but it failed to meet expectations. On the other hand, preparing and serving lunch at home contributed to everyone's health.

Some teachers found innovative solutions from an ergonomic point of view during the online period, such as replacing the traditional desk with the ironing board.

Appropriate hydration, even more beneficial during the mask wearing intervals, taking walks or doing any kind of exercise have been of great assistance. Cycling to school has become a habit for some teachers – the project coordinator himself pedals 20 kilometres a day.

The daily routine has undergone changes for many of us. Well-organised breaks, appropriate ventilation of the classrooms and preserving unchanged the class structure contributed to maintaining the mental comfort of the school community.

The idea that immunization and wearing a mask help prevent illness has come as a relief to some teachers.

In the institutions in which the school has offered services such as counselling, meditation classes or sports activities, the teachers enthusiastically resorted to them, given that personal initiatives to ensure their own well-being were virtually nonexistent.

As an example, to improve well-being, the partners took an online aerobic class given by one of the Physical Education teachers in one of the partner schools. All working sessions enjoyed the partners' positive reactions and even when the activities took place online, our European team remained united, to the joy and satisfaction of all those involved, starting with the project coordinator.

The Instagram account (Wintererasmus) has been regularly updated with photos of the activities which improved well-being.

6. What do you need so that you have a good sense of well-being even in stressful times?

“There are always flowers for those who want to see them.” (Henri Matisse)

Educators' needs in stressful periods extensively overlap those of any other person – quality interactions with the dear ones, healthy food, sport, communion with nature, cultural activities, hobbies, relaxation activities, informal meetings with colleagues.

Some teachers even required the setting up of a room, on school premises, where they could relax/ rest/ meditate.

Teleworking, along with better time management and a greater freedom to design didactic activities and evaluation instruments can lead to well-being improvement among the teaching staff.

Adequate time management, thereby avoiding excessive work and training courses, represents another instrument, consistent with the educators' needs.

In stressful situations, maybe more than ever, the emotional support received from the educational institution managers matters to teachers to a great extent. Educators need to feel that they are being seen, heard, understood, valorized.

Moreover, to ensure your well-being, it is necessary to keep in touch with the colleagues, exchanging ideas and experience. Thus, part of the stress brought about by this extraordinary state of affairs is removed, being replaced by the feeling that nobody is alone and each of us can rely on the support of the team. On the other hand, the students' active involvement in online educational activities prompts teachers not to lose their motivation and enjoy the didactic process even under unfavourable conditions.

7. What do you take with you from the Coronavirus time to deal with stressful situations in your professional field?

“A certain darkness is needed to see the stars.” (Osho)

We have realised that we can handle more than we used to imagine, that we cannot control everything and have an amazing capacity to adapt. We also remembered that the sense of humour is a good ally.

We have discovered the usefulness of online resources, assessments and meetings, as well as the benefits of teleworking. Many of us have discovered the joy for small things and sought support in activities suitable to their needs: meditation, prayer, positive thinking, yoga, etc.

Some teachers have become more self-confident, others more organised and paid special attention to the prioritisation of tasks. Mastering digital platforms and applications represents an advantage when working with children.

Remaining optimistic, transmitting some of this optimism to our students, wishing to get in touch with each other, both at a local and European level, represent important factors.

And, despite all unfavourable events and unpredictable challenges, we should always remember our calling, along with Nelson Mandela's famous words: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

The partners' answers to the afore-mentioned questions contain valuable information, in accordance with the project topic. Investigating the concept of well-being in the workplace has proved to be a topical issue, therefore even more useful in the pandemic context, which nobody could have foreseen at the beginning of the project.

As previously mentioned, the partners have successfully cooperated towards reaching the aim of the project. The assessment sessions and online meetings contributed to the identification of the most appropriate methods and the factors determining the well-being of the teaching staff and employees in general. Accordingly, various activities have taken place within each partner institution. Also, during the project meetings, there were sessions provided by the organizers' guests – representatives of the private local companies and public authorities. Each partner has made a report at the end of each project meeting. This technical article itself synthesises the methods and factors contributing to the well-being of teachers/educators/other staff working in educational institutions.

The project *Winter - "Well being of teachers and educators - Satisfaction factors and applicable methods for maintaining and increasing the well-being of employees in social-pedagogical education and teaching for staff retention and recruitment"* has highlighted, once again, the usefulness of Erasmus+ projects, the advantages of the cooperation among European partners, along with the multiple positive effects on the professional and personal development of the participants.

