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LEARNED HELPLESSNESS OF YOUNG PEOPLE DURING THE COVID-19 DISTANCE LEARNING. A RESEARCH REPORT*

Introduction: Learned helplessness is a condition that arises as a result of a person's belief that they are unable to control events. Having no sense of control over unpleasant experiences, a person learns that there is no relationship between the actions they take and their results. This condition is accompanied by changes in behaviour. These include cognitive, motivational and emotional deficits.

Research Aim: The objectives of the study described in this article are to assess the learned helplessness of eighth grade primary school students in three examination subjects: Polish, mathematics and English, and to show the relationship between the gender of the respondents and the perceived level of helplessness.

Method: The study used the diagnostic survey method, and the research technique applied was a questionnaire. In order to measure the level of learned helplessness, the School Helplessness Scale (SBS) by Cizkowicz (2009) was used. The survey was conducted between late March and early April of the 2020/21 school year. It covered 502 eighth grade primary school students learning remotely.

Results: The study 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.

Conclusion: The results indicate the need to implement a number of activities in the areas of psychological and pedagogical support at school. It is important that this support covers not only students, but also teachers and parents. Students should receive pedagogical and psychological help in the area of emotional education and constructive thinking. Teachers and parents should understand the essence of the phenomenon, know its causes and be able to recognise the first symptoms of helplessness.

Keywords: learned helplessness, remote learning, COVID-19, tutoring, eighth grade exam.

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INTRODUCTION

In Poland, the first official cases of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus infection appeared in early March 2020. On 11 March, under the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 11 March 2020 on the temporary limitation of the functioning of education system units in connection with preventing, counteracting and combating COVID-19 (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 410, as cited in Całek, 2021), the classroom activities of public and non-public units of the education system were suspended. Remote learning was introduced by the regulation of the Ministry of National Education (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 492, as cited in Całek, 2021) for the period from 25 March to 10 April 2020. This period was extended four times by subsequent regulations and, as a result, lasted until 28 June 2020. From 1 September 2020, new rules for the functioning of schools came into force. They consisted of a total or partial limitation of the functioning of the education system units. Thus, schools could work in regular (full-time), remote (classes suspended throughout a school) or hybrid (classes suspended in some classes of a given school) modes. From 19 October 2020, all post-primary schools began teaching in a remote or mixed (hybrid) mode, depending on the location. Due to a significant increase in infections, on 26 October 2020, education in secondary schools and grades IV–VIII of primary schools switched to the remote mode. This situation lasted until early May 2021, when students, depending on the stage of education, gradually returned to schools in order to continue their education in full-time mode (as cited in Całek, 2021).

As in previous years, eighth grade students took the compulsory examination at the end of the primary school stage. According to the recommendations of the Polish education system, completion of primary school requires taking an external exam in three subjects: Polish, mathematics and a modern foreign language. Among other things, the result of this exam is decisive for admission into a dream secondary school. The period during which seventh and eighth grade students taking the exam in 2021 were taught the core curriculum and prepared for the exam included ten months of remote learning.

Observations and analysis of Internet portals (e.g. e-tutoring, *e-korepetycje*) that gather advertisements about tutoring services have shown that this form of education has become a popular supplement to distance learning. The popularity of paid classes is evidenced by the increase in prices and the number of people providing these services. A survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS) (2020) shows that the majority (55%) of parents of schoolchildren, when asked in the last days of September and the first week of October 2020 about educational expenses for the current school year, declared that one of their children attended or would attend extra-curricular classes paid for by them this year¹ (see Kolber, 2021a, 2021b).

¹ These data concern the plans of parents of all schoolchildren, not only the parents of eighth graders.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND ITS DETERMINANTS

Learned helplessness arises as a result of a person's belief in their inability to control events. In the course of an uncontrollable situation, a person learns that there is no relationship between the actions they take and their results. This condition is accompanied by behavioural changes called *deficits*. There is the cognitive deficit, manifested by the expectation of the ineffectiveness of actions in new task situations. The motivational deficit consists of a decrease in the motivation to act and manifests itself in passivity. Finally, the emotion deficit consists of feelings related to a sense of danger, helplessness, and even depression (Overmier and Seligman, 1967; Maier and Seligman, 1976, as cited in Cizkowicz, 2009). This phenomenon can be analysed through the prism of many areas. Psychiatrists identify this condition with a typical picture of clinical depression (Henkel et al., 2002, as cited in Gindrich, 2011). Psychologists associate learned helplessness with explanatory styles (attributions). According to the theory of Abramson, Seligman and Teasdale (1978), three ways of explaining negative events lead to depression. These include perceiving negative events as stable, internal and global. This means that a person is discouraged from making an effort or learning because they believe that failures always happen to them, are the result of internal circumstances and concern all spheres of their life (as cited in Aronson, Wilson, and Akert, 1997). Sędek believes that the education system contributes to learned helplessness. Overloaded programmes make it impossible to master and fully understand the material. They also deprive students of the pleasure of solving problems independently, and provoke learning by memory (1995).

In stressful situations, helpless students show more emotional reactions, such as depression or anxiety (Sędek, 1995). Seligman points out that social isolation (also experienced by the examined students) exacerbates mental ailments (1988, as cited in Carr, 1994). Research by Jalloh et al. has also shown that the spread of new infectious diseases can increase levels of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the general population. During the Ebola virus epidemic, symptoms of anxious depression occurred in 48% of people, and single symptoms of PTSD in 76%. The symptoms of PTSD and anxious depression were noticed one year after the outbreak of the epidemic (2018, as cited in Dymecka, 2021). Research by Xiao et al. reports that people in isolation are exposed to stress caused by a lack of physical activity, social interaction, and fear of the effects of infection (2020). Due to the closure of schools, workplaces and cultural centres, as well as the restrictions imposed on movement and family and social meetings, negative emotions felt by individuals were intensified (see Dymecka, 2021).

More than any other age group, teens 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 cen-

tre of stressful events and emotions (e.g. parents' fears about losing their jobs, stress about the health of family members). Additionally, 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 lacked the ability to regulate their emotions (Boekaerts and Pekrun, 2016, as cited in Pozzoli, Gini, and Scrimin, 2021).

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

The objectives of this study are to show the level of learned helplessness of eighth grade primary school students in three examination subjects: mathematics, Polish and English, and to show the influence of gender on the level of learned helplessness in the above-mentioned subjects. Based on the above goals, the following research problems have been formulated: (1) What is the level of learned helplessness in eighth grade primary school students learning remotely in mathematics, Polish and English?; and (2) Does gender differentiate the level of learned helplessness in eighth grade primary school students learning remotely in mathematics, Polish and English?

RESEARCH METHODS AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

The study involved 502 eighth grade primary school students from the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, including 222 boys and 280 girls. The method of diagnostic survey conducted in a written form was used, in which the respondents filled in an anonymous online questionnaire. The tool used was the School Helplessness Scale (SBS) by Cizkowicz (2009) which contains 20 items. These make it possible to assess the level of the phenomenon along with its dimensions: cognitive, emotional and motivational deficits. For each statement, a respondent selected one of the following responses on a 1–5 scale: *never* or *almost never*; *usually no*; *sometimes yes*; *usually yes*; *always yes* or *almost always yes*. The scale made it possible to estimate the level of helplessness in the three examination subjects: Polish, mathematics and English. At the end of the questionnaire, there was a personal data section, which provided information on the research sample; not only the gender of the respondents, but also their participation in additional, paid classes (group or individual) in a given subject.

Students who attended additional English classes were the most numerous; 185 of the surveyed students (36.85%) used this additional form of education. The next was tutoring in mathematics: 141 eighth grade students (28.09%) declared

using paid assistance in this subject. Finally, 59 surveyed students (11.75%) took on a tutor in Polish.

The study was conducted between late March and early April of the 2020/21 school year during distance learning caused by the pandemic.

STATISTICAL DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

The analysis of the quantitative variables (i.e. those expressed in numbers) was performed by calculating the mean, standard deviation, median and quartiles. The analysis of the qualitative (i.e. non-numeric) variables was performed by calculating the number of times each value occurred, expressed in percentage points. The values of the quantitative variables were compared in the two groups using the Mann–Whitney U test. The reliability of the tool was checked using Cronbach's alpha (α). The reliability of the tool was high. All values were not only above 0.7, but even above 0.85. A significance level of 0.05 was adopted in the analysis. Thus, all p values below 0.05 were interpreted as showing significant correlations.

RESULTS

The level of learned helplessness in individual examination subjects

In mathematics, the average score on the general scale (of the level of helplessness) was 2.69 (rounded to 3), so the respondents *usually* felt learned helplessness. The motivational deficit of 2.8 points made the greatest contribution to learned helplessness. The cognitive deficit of 2.7 was in second place. The emotional deficit made the smallest contribution to learned helplessness. The mean value was 2.57.

Further analysis of the individual subjects shows that the feeling of helplessness in the Polish language classes was lower than in mathematics classes. The average score on the general scale (of the level of helplessness) was 2.57 (rounded to 3), so the respondents usually felt this. In Polish, as in mathematics, the motivational deficit was the highest and amounted to 2.7. The cognitive deficit came second (2.57), and the emotional deficit came last (2.42).

The eighth grade students achieved the lowest level of helplessness in English classes. The average score on the general scale (of the level of helplessness) was 2.3 points (rounded to 2), so the respondents sometimes felt this. The mean score on the emotional deficit scale was 2.14 points (rounded to 2). This means that students sometimes experienced emotional symptoms of helplessness. The average score on the cognitive deficit scale was 2.28 points (rounded to 2), so the respondents

sometimes felt it. The emotional deficit had the lowest contribution to the sense of learned helplessness. Its average score was 2.14. Table 1 shows the characteristics of learned helplessness (taking its deficits into account) for the individual subjects.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics for the School Helplessness Scale (SBS) for the three examination subjects: mathematics, Polish, English (N = 502)

SBS in mathematics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Mdn	Min	Max	Q1	Q3
General school helplessness	2.69	0.75	2.70	1	4.70	2.20	3.25
Emotional deficit	2.57	0.97	2.43	1	5.00	1.71	3.29
Cognitive deficit	2.70	0.89	2.70	1	5.00	2.00	3.20
Motivational deficit	2.80	0.79	2.75	1	4.88	2.25	3.38
SBS in Polish lesson							
General school helplessness	2.57	0.76	2.55	1	4.85	2.05	3.10
Emotional deficit	2.42	0.99	2.29	1	5.00	1.71	3.00
Cognitive deficit	2.57	0.85	2.60	1	5.00	2.00	3.20
Motivational deficit	2.70	0.85	2.62	1	5.00	2.12	3.25
SBS in English lesson							
General school helplessness	2.30	0.72	2.30	1	4.7	1.75	2.80
Emotional deficit	2.14	0.95	2.00	1	5.0	1.29	2.71
Cognitive deficit	2.28	0.91	2.20	1	5.0	1.60	2.80
Motivational deficit	2.44	0.81	2.38	1	5.0	1.88	3.00

Source: Author's own study.

The relationship between the level of helplessness and gender

The values of the quantitative variables were compared in the two groups using the Mann–Whitney U test. P values <0.05 indicated statistically significant correlations. The research sample consisted of 222 boys and 280 girls. The general level of helplessness was significantly higher in girls in both mathematics and English classes. A detailed analysis of the level of the individual deficits shows that girls were also characterised by a higher level of emotional deficit compared to boys in all the examination subjects: mathematics, Polish and English. Moreover, the data quoted in Table 2 shows that girls felt more helpless in mathematics classes in terms of the cognitive deficit.

Although the differences did not turn out to be statistically significant, it is worth adding that the general level of helplessness in Polish was also higher in girls. English, on the other hand, was characterised by higher levels of cognitive and motivational deficits. Moreover, the girls' motivational deficit was higher in mathematics classes. Table 2 shows the distribution of the perceived helplessness and its deficits by gender in the three examination subjects: mathematics, Polish and English.

Table 2.

The distribution of learned helplessness and its deficits by gender in mathematics, Polish and English

		in mathematics		in Polish lesson		in English lesson	
		boys (N = 222)	girls (N = 280)	boys (N = 222)	girls (N = 280)	boys (N = 222)	girls (N = 280)
Learned helplessness	M±SD	2.55±0.71	2.81±0.76	2.53±0.76	2.6±0.75	2.21±0.7	2.36±0.72
	Mdn	2.6	2.85	2.5	2.58	2.1	2.4
	Q	2–3.04	2.3–3.35	1.91–3.1	2.05–3.1	1.75–2.7	1.8–2.85
		$p < 0.001^*$		$p = 0.27$		$p = 0.014^*$	
Emotional deficit	M±SD	2.29±0.87	2.79±0.99	2.25±0.94	2.55±1	1.93±0.85	2.32±0.98
	Mdn	2.14	2.86	2.14	2.43	1.71	2.14
	Q	1.57–2.86	2–3.43	1.57–2.86	1.86–3.14	1.29–2.43	1.57–3
		$p < 0.001^*$		$p = 0.001^*$		$p < 0.001^*$	
Cognitive deficit	M±SD	2.57±0.82	2.81±0.92	2.59±0.81	2.56±0.88	2.27±0.89	2.29±0.93
	Mdn	2.6	2.8	2.6	2.4	2.2	2.2
	Q	2–3.2	2.2–3.4	2–3.2	2–3.05	1.6–2.8	1.6–2.8
		$p = 0.006^*$		$p = 0.472$		$p = 0.973$	
Motivational deficit	M±SD	2.77±0.81	2.82±0.78	2.74±0.87	2.67±0.83	2.43±0.81	2.45±0.81
	Mdn	2.75	2.75	2.62	2.62	2.38	2.38
	Q	2.16–3.38	2.38–3.38	2.25–3.38	2.12–3.25	1.88–3	1.88–3
		$p = 0.552$		$p = 0.402$		$p = 0.775$	

p – Mann-Whitney U test

* statistical significance ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Author's own study.

DISCUSSION

The highest average level of helplessness was recorded in mathematics, slightly lower in Polish, and the lowest in English. Girls have a higher sense of helplessness than boys in mathematics and English. Cizkowicz's research reveals that, compared to boys, girls in primary schools are characterised by greater pessimism

when faced with failure (2009). According to Seligman, a pessimistic explanatory style increases the risk of depression and learned helplessness (1994, 2010). The activities of school educators and psychologists after the pandemic should focus on changing the way of thinking in young people. Girls in particular should be helped by this change. Techniques derived from cognitive therapy can come to the rescue as they enable control of one's own thoughts and the development of constructive thinking (Beck, 1983; Seligman, 1990). These activities include: 1) learning to recognise destructive thoughts; 2) learning to resist destructive thoughts; 3) learning to avoid destructive explanations; 4) learning to break away from depressing thoughts; 5) learning to avoid claims that are the condition for happiness; 6) focusing one's internal dialogue on the process, not on the target (as cited in Franken, 2005).

Another recommended technique for changing the way of thinking is ABC-DE, a set of exercises that enable following and going through significant elements of the thought process. This technique consists of the following stages: making an objective description of the situation (A – Adversity); interpreting difficulties (B – Beliefs); writing down feelings and what was done in relation to the situation (C – Consequences); questioning unjustified accusations (D – Disputation); and describing the situation as a result of a change in thinking (E – Energisation). The ABC stages will help students find and understand the relationships between beliefs and their effects. In this way, they will find that pessimistic explanations lead to passivity and discouragement, while optimistic interpretations release energy and action. The next stages, DE, focus on learning to argue with oneself and experiencing the activation process (Seligman, 2010).

In the eighth grade, the average level of learned helplessness in English was 2.3. A study conducted on a sample of high school students indicates a higher level of this phenomenon.² The mean value of perceived helplessness was 2.41 (Kolber, 2020). Cizkowicz's study shows that helplessness increases with the stage of education. The level of helplessness of an average university student is higher than the level of helplessness of an average high school student. High school students feel more helplessness than their peers in elementary schools (2009). It can therefore be assumed that the feeling of helplessness in the students covered by the study will grow. Educators, psychologists and teachers are responsible for taking appropriate steps to prevent the helplessness and depressive situations of students.

The results of a study on teaching foreign languages show that there is a negative correlation between the use of a learning strategy and learned helplessness (Kolber, 2019). This indicates the need for teachers of a foreign language to undertake educational activities aimed at changing the passive use of education into an active one. Changing the methodology of work should consist of developing meta-

² The study concerned classroom learning and was conducted using the same tool – the School Helplessness Scale.

cognition, that is, knowledge and skills concerning not only memory, but also cognitive processes such as: learning, reasoning, problem solving, as well as receptive skills: listening and reading (Ledzińska and Czerniawska, 2011). Students should be introduced to developing planning, monitoring, and regulating of their learning. Planning strategies include formulating and refining learning goals, reviewing teacher-assigned material, asking oneself questions about the material learned, and assessing the time needed to complete tasks. Examples of monitoring activities for learning include: focusing attention while learning; connecting the newly learned material with prior knowledge; checking the pace of learning; comparing learning outcomes with a previously set goal; matching the pace of reading to difficulty; and discussing with others how they understood the content. The essence of regulatory strategies is to make changes when monitoring indicates that learning is not going according to plan. These include: changing the pace of reading when the text turns out to be more difficult or easier; reaching for other sources; talking to the teacher; and changing or modifying an ineffective strategy (Ledzińska and Czerniawska, 2011).

The analysis of the individual subscales of the School Helplessness Scale shows that the motivational deficit has the greatest contribution to the feeling of helplessness. It is at the highest level for any tested item. Therefore, a teacher's actions aimed at stimulating the motivation to learn are justified. According to Brophy, this motivation tends to make sense of an activity and it should be distinguished from internal motivation, which is only an emotional reaction to an activity (2012). Students must develop and use learning strategies. This means that they must actively process information and relate it to prior knowledge, capture the educational content in their own words, and not recreate it thoughtlessly (Brophy, 2012). Marshall (1994) adds that learning-oriented classes emphasise the school's didactic tasks, effort and strategies for carrying out these tasks. The ability to think, understand and solve problems is more valued than formulating correct answers (as cited in Brophy, 2012).

The high level of emotional deficit in girls is also disturbing. The high value of this subscale applies to the three examination subjects: mathematics, Polish and English. The Self-Regulation method (Self-Reg) developed by Shanker and Barker appears to help in coping with the stress related to the functioning of students in the new pandemic conditions. According to the authors, self-regulation covers five dimensions that interact and create a coherent system. These include the biological, emotional, cognitive, social and prosocial areas. Each one can be a source of stressors. The method supports adults in learning to identify excessive stress in a child, reduce stressors, and support the child in building awareness and knowledge in order to develop their own self-regulation strategies (2016, see Kolber, 2021b).

CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that for eighth grade students learning remotely, the highest average level of helplessness was recorded in mathematics, slightly lower in Polish, and the 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. These results indicate the need to implement a number of post-pandemic activities in the areas of psychological and pedagogical help. The support should cover not only students, but also teachers and parents. Students should receive direct pedagogical and psychological help in the area of emotional education, so that they learn to recognise, name, understand and deal with emotional states. Another recommended group of activities is related to increasing self-regulation in learning. Therefore, teachers should be educated how to develop their students' learning skills. Learning to think constructively is also important. For this, it will be useful to change the explanatory style from pessimistic to optimistic. Pessimism can cause depression or learned helplessness, and optimism can increase immunity to difficult situations. It is also important that activities in the area of learned helplessness cover teachers as well as parents. They should not only understand and know what causes helplessness, but also know its first symptoms in order to diagnose them at the initial stage.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study has its limitations. It is worth noting that although it was addressed to the entire student community of the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship, the profile of the respondents may differ from the whole student population. Firstly, the research sample did not include those students who did not respond to e-mails. Secondly, those respondents who had a relatively low level of helplessness, and, thus, a higher motivation to take part in the study, may have been more willing to respond, which could consequently lower the level of learned helplessness in the surveyed population.

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WYUCZONA BEZRADNOŚĆ MŁODZIEŻY W CZASIE NAUCZANIA ZDALNEGO W PANDEMII COVID-19. RAPORT Z BADAŃ

Wprowadzenie: Wyuczona bezradność to stan powstający w wyniku przeświadczenia osoby o niezdolności do kontrolowania wydarzeń. Brak poczucia kontroli nad przykrymi doświadczeniami prowadzi do tego, że człowiek uczy się, że nie ma zależności pomiędzy działaniami podmiotu a rezultatami tych działań. Stanowi temu towarzyszą zmiany w zachowaniu. Należą do nich: deficyt poznawczy, motywacyjny oraz emocjonalny.

Cel badań: Celem badań zaprezentowanych w artykule jest diagnoza wyuczonej bezradności uczniów klas ósmych szkoły podstawowej na trzech egzaminacyjnych przedmiotach: języku polskim, matematyce i języku angielskim oraz ukazanie związku pomiędzy płcią badanych a odczuwalnym poziomem bezradności.

Metoda badań: W badaniu zastosowano metodę sondażu diagnostycznego, a użytą techniką badawczą była ankieta. W celu pomiaru poziomu wyuczonej bezradności zastosowano Skalę Bezradności Szkolnej (*School Helplessness Scale*) autorstwa Cizkowicz (2009). Badanie zostało przeprowadzone na przełomie marca i kwietnia roku szkolnego 2020/2021. Objęto nim 502 uczniów klas ósmych szkoły podstawowej uczących się w trybie zdalnym.

Wyniki: Badanie pokazuje, że najwyższa średnia wartość poziomu bezradności wystąpiła na lekcji matematyki, nieco niższa na lekcji języka polskiego, natomiast najniższa na lekcji języka angielskiego. Dziewczeta cechuje wyższe poczucie bezradności niż chłopcy w zakresie matematyki oraz języka angielskiego. Największy wkład w poczucie bezradności ma deficyt motywacyjny.

Wnioski: Wyniki wskazują na potrzebę wdrożenia w szkole szeregu działań z zakresu pomocy psychologicznej i pedagogicznej. Ważne jest, aby wsparciem byli objęci nie tylko uczniowie, ale też nauczyciele i rodzice. Uczniowie powinni otrzymać pomoc pedagogiczną i psychologiczną z zakresu edukacji emocji, czy nauki konstruktywnego myślenia. Nauczyciele i rodzice powinni rozumieć istotę zjawiska, znać jej przyczyny oraz umieć rozpoznawać pierwsze objawy bezradności.

Słowa kluczowe: wyuczona bezradność, nauczanie zdalne, COVID-19, korepetycje, egzamin ósmoklasisty.