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School Stress and Educational Policy as Co-Determinants of the Mental Health Crisis Among Students

Abstract: The deteriorating mental health of children and adolescents in Poland has become one of the key challenges of contemporary education. This article analyzes the impact of educational policy on students' mental well-being, with particular emphasis on school-related stress caused by exam pressure, overloaded curricula, and limited access to psychological and pedagogical support. The study employs an analysis of strategic documents and reports from national institutions (e.g., the Ministry of Health, the Supreme Audit Office) as well as international recommendations (European Commission, OECD, WHO, UNICEF). The findings reveal systemic staff and financial shortages, along with implementation gaps in preventive measures that reduce the effectiveness of support. It has been confirmed that excessive focus on exam results diminishes students' well-being, while shortages of specialists and unequal access to services remain significant barriers. At the same time, social-emotional learning (SEL), peer mentoring, and formative assessment can enhance mental health outcomes if integrated into both educational and health policies. The conclusions highlight the need to close the gap between policy declarations and practice through stable funding, workforce development, regional monitoring, and the implementation of evidence-based interventions.

Key words: mental health, stress, educational policy, well-being

Introduction

In recent years, the worsening mental health of young people has become one of the main educational challenges in Poland. Reports increasingly note depressive and anxiety disorders, psychosomatic symptoms, and declining student well-being. It is indicated that the organization of the educational process and educational policy contribute to the intensification of these phenomena. Excessive exam pressure, overloaded curricula, and limited access to psychological support foster rising school stress and mental overload.

The consequences of reduced adolescent well-being are social, economic, and health-related in nature. Hence, analyses that combine psychological and institutional perspectives are necessary to identify the sources of the problem and potential systemic solutions.

The research problem of this article concerns the relationship between Polish educational policy and the mental condition of adolescents. The aim of the article is to identify the mechanisms through which educational policy contributes to the deepening of

students' mental health problems and to formulate recommendations conducive to better integration of educational and preventive actions.

To achieve this aim, research questions and hypotheses were formulated. Research questions: (1) Which elements of educational policy negatively affect students' mental health? (2) To what extent do preventive measures and psychological-pedagogical support meet the needs of young people? (3) What systemic solutions can improve students' mental well-being?

Research hypotheses: H1: Excessive concentration of educational policy on exam results lowers students' mental well-being. H2: Shortages of specialist staff and limited funding for preventive measures constitute significant barriers to protecting the mental health of young people. H3: Integration of educational and health policy could reduce the scale of mental health problems among young people.

Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

The mental health of young people is the subject of extensive scholarly reflection spanning psychological, pedagogical, and political science perspectives. As early as Hans Selye's classic conception of stress, a distinction was made between eustress (mobilizing stress) and distress (harmful to the organism)-a reference point that still informs research on the impact of the school environment on students' psychophysical condition (Selye, 1978).

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman's transactional model conceptualizes stress as the outcome of the interaction between the individual and the environment, with intensity depending on the subjective assessment of the situation (primary appraisal) and available coping resources (secondary appraisal). Psychological stress thus arises from the cognitive appraisal of the person-environment relationship and may take the form of harm/loss (what has already occurred), threat (anticipated harm), or challenge (demanding requirements that can be tackled through resource mobilization). Coping is a process involving cognitive and behavioral efforts: problem-focused (changing the situation) or emotion-focused (modifying meaning and emotional response through reappraisal) (Lazarus, 1993).

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman's transactional model conceptualizes stress as an effect of the person-environment interaction, dependent on situation appraisal (primary appraisal) and coping resources (secondary appraisal). It may appear as harm/loss, threat, or challenge. Coping is a process that encompasses problem-focused strategies (changing the situation) and emotion-focused strategies (modifying meaning and emotional response) (Linca-Ćwikła, 2018).

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that well-being depends on the satisfaction of three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Their frustration decreases motivation and fosters mental health problems, whereas in education SDT indicates how to create environments that support students' development and well-being (Deci, Ryan, 2017). Satisfaction of these needs promotes intrinsic motivation, mental health, and personal growth, while their chronic frustration is associated with reduced well-being and an increased risk of mental health problems (Deci, Ryan, 2000). Polish-language literature emphasizes that SDT provides a coher-

ent framework for explaining motivational processes in educational, occupational, and clinical contexts, underscoring its significance for shaping well-being and quality of life (Cieciuch, Łaguna, 2012).

The updated WHO *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2030* highlights the need for an integrated approach that connects education and health care. It calls for the development of local mental health and social services, promotion, prevention, and universal access to care, identifying schools as key environments for supporting the well-being of children and adolescents (World Health Organization, 2021). In the European Commission's 7 June 2023 *Communication on a comprehensive approach to mental health*, the multisectoral nature of mental health policy is emphasized, with education identified as a crucial area of cooperation. It is recommended that student well-being and the school environment be included in quality assessments of education, which promotes integration of preventive and promotive actions. Schools should not only transmit knowledge but also provide spaces that support emotional and social development, within a strategy that treats mental health as a public good (European Commission, 2023).

UNESCO defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as the process of developing emotional skills, empathy, and responsible decision-making that supports student well-being. UNICEF indicates that integrating SEL fosters improved academic outcomes and attendance while also serving as a protective factor that reduces the risk of developmental problems (UNESCO, 2025; UNICEF, 2025).

The Supreme Audit Office (NIK) indicates that Poland's education system suffers from serious shortcomings in psychological and pedagogical counseling. In 2020–2023, 42% of institutions had no psychologists, many worked only part-time, and assistance was often limited to opinions and assessments rather than actual therapeutic support. Waiting times reached up to a year, and availability was territorially uneven. NIK assessed ministerial actions as ineffective, highlighting the absence of systemic solutions and the abandonment of plans to create Child and Family Centers (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2023).

PISA 2022 analyses indicate a decline in students' sense of belonging to school compared to 2018, particularly in OECD countries. Systems that kept schools closed for shorter periods during the pandemic better protected this sense of belonging, and international studies confirm a parallel decline in youth well-being. Students with low levels of belonging are more likely to experience loneliness and difficulties in peer relationships, which exacerbates stress and undermines mental condition (Li et al., 2025).

The literature indicates that SEL programs build emotional and social competencies, improve academic outcomes, reduce risky behaviors, and strengthen student well-being. A key complement is peer mentoring, which facilitates adaptation during transition periods, promotes social integration and belonging, and reduces the risk of isolation (Köttig, Gläser, 2024). The literature also emphasizes the importance of formative assessment which, through informational feedback, supports students' self-regulation, motivation, and sense of agency. SEL programs, peer mentoring, and formative assessment align with recommendations from international organizations that stress well-being-oriented education. Research shows that interactive media can develop social-emotional skills when used intentionally; however, excessive technology use-as UNICEF warns-reduces mental well-being and disrupts youth development (Digital Wellness Lab, 2025).

Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on qualitative document analysis, a case study, and a review of statistical data. The analysis covered national strategic and programmatic documents on the mental health of children and adolescents, such as the *National Mental Health Protection Program (2023–2030)*, reports of the Ministry of Health (2023), and the 2021 Supreme Audit Office report. A comparative analysis was also conducted with international documents, including recommendations from the European Commission (2023) and OECD (2023), to capture discrepancies between national policy and the recommendations of international organizations. The selection of sources was purposive and covered publications from 2021–2024. Document analysis followed the scheme of objectives, instruments, effects, and barriers in implementing school-based mental-health prevention policy.

The Deterioration of Youth Mental Health in Poland: A Diagnosis

The mental health of children and adolescents in Poland has raised growing concern among public institutions, academic communities, and NGOs for several years. The problem became particularly salient during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the lack of preparedness of the education and health systems to respond to sudden psychosocial crises (UNICEF Poland, 2024). Ministry data (e.g., the *Młode Głowy* report) indicate rising risks of mental health problems among youth-e.g., declining self-esteem, increased loneliness, sleep disorders, and self-harming behaviors.¹ At the same time, the Supreme Audit Office warns of systemic deficiencies-an increase in mental disorders among adolescents (e.g., depression, suicide attempts), combined with insufficient availability of specialist help and uneven distribution of counseling centers nationwide (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2023). According to Ministry of Health data, the number of patients under 18 receiving psychiatric care nearly doubled between 2015 and 2022 (Table 1).

Table 1
Number of patients under 18 who received services within psychiatric care in 2015–2022

Year	Children receiving psychiatric care	Children who received medical consultation or used day-care/inpatient psychiatric services
1	2	3
2015	137,851	91,241
2016	140,339	93,778
2017	142,427	95,144
2018	144,478	96,493
2019	146,589	96,564

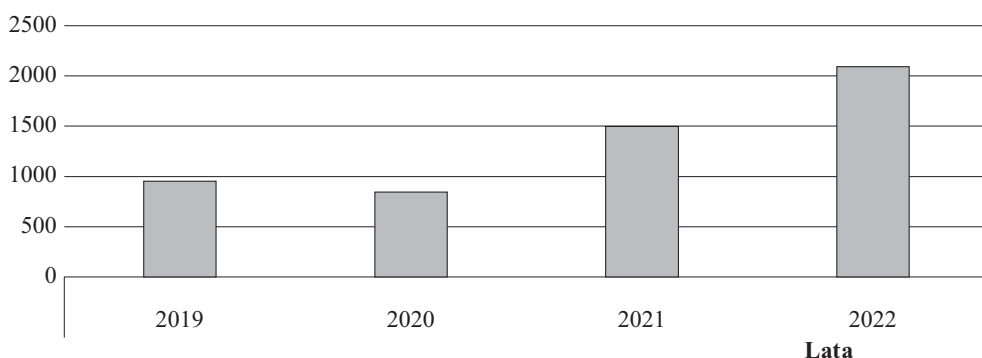
¹ Report „*Young Minds. Speaking Openly About Mental Health*” (2023) presents, among other findings, that: 52.4% of children and adolescents report a lack of motivation, 37.5% feel lonely, 16% engage in self-harm, and 43.3% struggle with unhealthy eating behaviors (overeating or food restriction) [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpglclefndmkaj/https://mlodeglowy.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/MLODE-GLOWY.-Otwarcie-o-zdrowiu-psychicznym-Raport-final.pdf, August 17, 2025.

1	2	3
2020	145,161	90,476
2021	214,134	98,959
2022	254,079	107,947

Source: Ministry of Health, Warsaw 2024.

A sharp increase in the number of children and adolescents with mental disorders has been recorded especially since the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1).

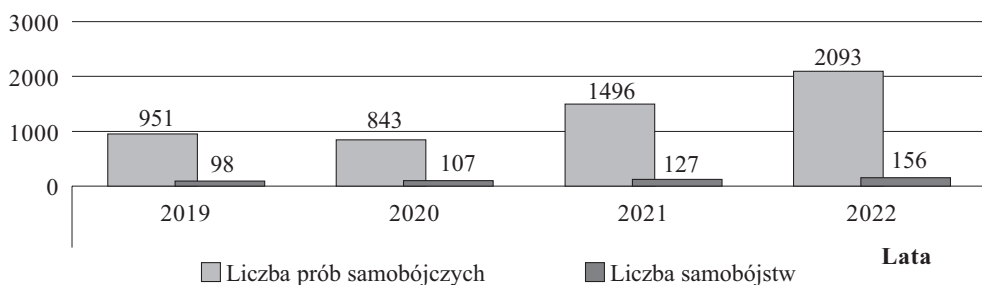
Figure 1. Number of children and adolescents with mental disorders in 2019–2022



Source: Supreme Audit Office (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli), (2024), *Psychological and Psychotherapeutic Assistance for Children and Adolescents*, Poznań.

Tragic data on suicides and suicide attempts confirm a drastic rise in health problems in this age group (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of suicide attempts and suicides among children and adolescents aged 7–18



Source: Supreme Audit Office (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli) (2022), *Suicidal Behaviors Among Children and Adolescents: Report for the Years 2012–2021* (based on Police data), Warsaw.

Growing psychological needs among young people collide with severe staffing shortages—over 3,000 unfilled positions, 27% vacancies in schools (July 2023), and no psychologist in 450 municipalities. In Wielkopolska, for example, shortages also concern counseling centers and day wards, highlighting the need for rational allocation of Com-

munity Mental Health Centers and the long-term development of psychiatric hospitals (Sewastianowicz, 2024).

A serious problem remains the shortage of hospital beds for children and adolescents and insufficient staffing-physicians, nurses, therapists, and psychologists (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2023). It is worth noting that the above diagnosis was compiled at a time when the effects of the pandemic on children's and adolescents' mental health were not yet fully known.

School Stress as a Cause of the Worsening Mental Health of Children and Adolescents

Despite educational reforms, schools in Poland still rely mainly on obedience, discipline, and tests, which limits the development of creativity, cooperation, and independent thinking (Wiśniewski, Zahorska, 2020).

The concept of stress as a scientific phenomenon was introduced by Hans Selye, who described it as a general physiological response of the organism to diverse environmental demands (the nonspecific adaptation syndrome) (Selye, 1956). Contemporary literature distinguishes three main approaches to stress: as a stimulus (burdensome situations), as a response (emotional, physiological, cognitive reactions of the organism), and as a transaction-the dynamic approach developed by Lazarus and Folkman, in which stress is seen as the result of an interaction between environmental demands and the individual's resources to meet them (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984). Recent studies point to the importance of self-efficacy and coping patterns in modified stress models (Sun et al., 2023).

Emotional intelligence, defined as the ability to recognize and regulate one's own emotions and those of others, is a key resource in coping with stress. In the school environment it promotes better relationships and student achievement (Terelak, Walczak, 2012). Research suggests that individuals with higher emotional intelligence show greater flexibility in choosing coping strategies, react with helplessness less often, and are more likely to adopt constructive, adaptive actions (Salovey, Mayer, 1990). In the educational context this is particularly important because school stress is not limited to pressure associated with grading, but also includes interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers. It is precisely the quality of these interactions, combined with individual student characteristics such as emotional intelligence or self-efficacy, that determines whether environmental demands are perceived as a challenge or a threat (Brackett, Rivers, Salovey, 2011). Recent analyses emphasize that developing emotional intelligence in school programs can not only reduce stress levels but also foster well-being and a positive educational climate (MacCann et al., 2020).

From September to November 2022, the Children and Youth Council of the Republic of Poland at the Ministry of Education conducted nationwide consultations involving more than 2,500 students. Discussions focused on psychoeducation, online violence and the stigmatization of using the school psychologist's help, as well as-in a broader sense-on ways of coping with stress and building mental resilience (Children and Youth Council at the Ministry of Education, 2023).

For years, students' mental health issues were a taboo subject in public debate. However, a September 2023 report pointed to a series of recurring problems that concern not only young people but society as a whole: a noticeable lack of public awareness of mental disorders; lack of access to specialist psychological help for many people; disproportionately high social expectations often related to achievements at school, in sports, or culture; growing addictions to psychoactive substances, the Internet, video games, and smartphones; insufficient support from families and close circles; and increased access to harmful information that may raise stress levels among young people (Ministry of National Education, 2023).

Recommendations from the consultations emphasized the need to raise awareness among teachers, parents, and students and to strengthen specialist staffing in schools. The Ministry of Education and Science reports that in the 2022/2023 school year, psychological-pedagogical support reached a record level of the PLN 64.4 billion subsidy, more than PLN 13 billion was allocated to students with special needs. Currently, every third student benefits from such assistance (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023). A 2021 study by the Educational Research Institute, in turn, identified gaps in systematizing knowledge and individualizing teaching, recommending, among other things, greater access to specialist support, schools that account for diverse needs, and development of teacher competencies (Educational Research Institute, 2021).

School stress weakens students' communication, hindering the expression of emotions and relationship-building. In upper-secondary schools, pressure to achieve, competition, and fear of the matriculation exam contribute to tension and low self-esteem. Studies indicate that the main source of aggression is verbal violence, and more than 60% of students experience peer rejection (Przewłocka, 2015). Fear of rejection leads to social isolation, reduced self-esteem, and increased risk of emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression.

Nearly 50% of students indicate the grading system and test anxiety as factors that worsen mental health. The concept of a "school without grades" may reduce stress and pressure, supporting individualized learning and the development of soft skills such as creativity or critical thinking, creating an environment free from fear of mistakes. Its effectiveness, however, depends on student characteristics – for some it means greater freedom, for others decreased motivation (OECD, 2017). It is important to account for students' diverse needs, which requires teachers to develop competencies and adopt flexible approaches (Educational Research Institute, 2021).

Educational Policy and Recommendations for Reducing Stress

Mental-health policy for children and adolescents is multi-level. At the national level, the *National Mental Health Protection Program 2023–2030* is key; it assumes, among other things, increased availability of psychological services in schools, implementation of preventive programs, and development of Community Mental Health Centers based on community psychiatry. Implementation faces significant barriers, primarily limited funding, which hampers adequate service availability despite growing needs (Sagan, Sowa, McDaid, 2022). Secondly, a shortage of specialist staff, including psychiatrists

and psychologists, significantly impedes access to care, resulting in long waiting times (Ministry of Health, 2019). Despite the assumptions of educational and health policy, schools' readiness for systematic preventive and therapeutic measures remains low. Management teams lack preparation for strategic planning and appropriate tools and institutional support. Data from the Łódź region, for example, also show limited knowledge among teachers-only 26.3% of principals rated their schools' preparedness in this area as "very good" or "rather good" (Lewandowska et al., 2025).

At the international level, the European Commission's recommendations contained in *A Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health*, adopted in June 2023, are of crucial importance. They indicate the need to integrate educational and health policy and to recognize mental well-being as one of the fundamental indicators of education system quality (European Commission, 2023a). Within this approach, the concept of "mental health in all policies" is promoted, assuming the inclusion of mental-health aspects across sectors such as education, youth, culture, digitization, and environment, to create a coherent system supporting citizens' mental well-being (European Commission, 2023b). The OECD's *Education Policy Outlook 2023*, published in November 2023, recommends implementing evidence-based solutions, including programs that build students' social-emotional skills (SEL) and training teachers to recognize early symptoms of mental-health crises (OECD, 2024). The report emphasizes that such interventions are not merely add-ons but integral to increasing the resilience of education systems and improving teaching quality, especially amid growing psychosocial challenges (OECD, 2024).

Although youth mental health is increasingly present in public debate, a gap still exists between declarations and real actions. As shown by the *Stop the Culture of Marginalization* project, young people point to the lack of serious dialogue and real support as a key deficit (TVN24, 2023).

NGOs and civic initiatives play an increasingly important role in education and the prevention of youth mental-health problems. An example is the *Republic of the Unheard* campaign at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, which combined artistic and educational activities, with proceeds allocated to support mental-health classes in schools (UAM, 2024).

Studies indicate that in high-income countries, the implementation of school-based mental-health prevention is constrained by short time frames, weak coordination, and a lack of stable funding (Schäfer et al., 2025). A similar discrepancy is observed in the Polish context-despite long-standing pledges to support mental health in the school environment, implementation challenges remain significant-from inadequate funding and staffing shortages to limited school capacity for systematic interdisciplinary action (Sagan, Sowa, McDaid, 2022).

A Supreme Audit Office review revealed significant disparities in psychiatric care for children and adolescents: 42% of level-II clinics operate in voivodeship capitals inhabited by only 14% of the population in this age group. Moreover, as of March 2023, three voivodeships had no day wards at all (Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, 2023). Such inequalities underscore the need to improve resource allocation and local-level coordination.

On 7 June 2023, the European Commission adopted the communication *Comprehensive approach to mental health*, placing mental health on par with physical health and emphasizing its role in employment, education, digitization, and climate policies. The

document rests on four pillars: exchange of good practices, the “Healthier Together” initiative, capacity-building, and a support package against stigma. Funding (including EU4Health) exceeded €30 million in 2020–2023, including €18.5 million in 2023, with implementation at the national level supported by the EC, WHO, OECD, and UNICEF (European Commission, 2023).

For the 2023/2024 school year, the Ministry of Education and Science identified ten directions of educational policy, three of which directly relate to student mental-health support. These include improving the quality of support within the education system and enhancing teacher competencies in working with children with migration experience and in the area of physical activity. Findings from the analysis confirm that mental-health issues remain marginal among ministerial priorities (Ministry of Education and Science, 2023). These assumptions merely signal topics concerning students’ developmental needs and school prevention programs. Regrettably, school psychologists and pedagogues are available to students only during specified hours or even on specified days of the week. Group classes in psychological-pedagogical assistance for students in need depend on school financing.

Counteracting stress-inducing conditions in the school environment is currently one of the most important tasks of educational policy in Poland. Despite the introduction, as of 1 September 2022, of the obligation to employ specialists (pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists, therapists), their numbers still do not meet the rising mental-health needs of students. The European Commission recommends: (1) adjusting class sizes and curricula to students’ abilities, (2) fully implementing staffing standards for specialists, (3) preparing clear procedures for accessing psychological support, (4) creating a school environment free from stigmatization and discrimination, and (5) developing students’ social-emotional competencies through activities that support relationships and cooperation (European Commission, 2024). However, European recommendations may themselves become a source of stress by increasing pressure and anxiety among teachers who-facing national policy constraints, low pay, and student problems-often sacrifice their own development for the needs of their pupils (European Commission, 2002).

Conclusion

The analysis confirmed that the conditions of educational policy co-create a high-stress school environment. Exam pressure and overloaded core curricula remain key risk factors for student well-being (Hypothesis 1 confirmed), consistent with the decline in a sense of belonging observed in PISA 2022 and with students’ declarations regarding the negative impact of grades and tests. At the same time, staffing shortages and unequal access to psychological-pedagogical support (including the concentration of counseling centers at the voivodeship level and gaps in day care) indicate systemic barriers that limit the effectiveness of preventive actions (Hypothesis 2 confirmed). The findings support the thesis that an integrated approach combining education and health-including incorporating well-being criteria into school quality assessments and implementing evidence-based interventions (SEL, peer mentoring, formative assessment)-can reduce the scale of problems (Hypothesis 3 partially confirmed).

Policy implications: First, the “implementation gap” (coordination, stable funding, staffing) between declarations and practice must be closed. Second, continuous monitoring of outcomes (at the regional level) and evaluations of scaling SEL and related programs are needed-so that policy is evidence-based and schools genuinely strengthen the mental well-being of young people.

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Stres szkolny i polityka edukacyjna jako współdeterminanty kryzysu zdrowia psychicznego wśród uczniów

Streszczenie

Pogarszający się stan zdrowia psychicznego dzieci i młodzieży w Polsce stanowi jedno z kluczowych wyzwań współczesnej edukacji. W artykule analizowane jest oddziaływanie polityki oświatowej na kondycję psychiczną uczniów, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem stresu szkolnego wynikającego z presji egzaminacyjnej, przeładowanych programów oraz ograniczonego dostępu do pomocy

psychologiczno-pedagogicznej. Zastosowano metodę analizy dokumentów strategicznych i raportów instytucji krajowych (m.in. Ministerstwa Zdrowia, NIK) oraz rekomendacji międzynarodowych (KE, OECD, WHO, UNICEF). Wyniki wskazują na systemowe niedobory kadrowe i finansowe oraz luki w implementacji działań profilaktycznych, które ograniczają skuteczność wsparcia. Potwierdzono, że nadmierna koncentracja na wynikach egzaminacyjnych obniża dobrostan uczniów, a deficyt specjalistów i nierównomierny dostęp do usług stanowią poważną barierę. Jednocześnie programy społeczno-emocjonalne (SEL), mentoring rówieśniczy i ocenianie kształtujące mogą sprzyjać poprawie zdrowia psychicznego, jeśli zostaną zintegrowane z polityką edukacyjną i zdrowotną. Wnioski podkreślają konieczność domknięcia luki między deklaracjami a praktyką poprzez stabilne finansowanie, rozwój kadr, regionalny monitoring oraz wdrażanie interwencji opartych na dowodach naukowych.

Słowa kluczowe: zdrowie psychiczne, stres, polityka oświatowa, dobrostan

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