

Trust, belongingness, and teacher's self-efficacy: A quantitative investigation of an online intervention program for school teachers

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Abstract

Literature indicates that teachers and students who experience trust and belongingness in their school communities have higher levels of indicators of positive quality of life, such as performance, innovation, and creativity. Also, they are open to creating more authentic relationships and fostering an environment based on psychological safety with implications on their well-being, quality of life, self-efficacy, and their general mental health. This quantitative study aims to investigate the impact of an online training program called "Development of trust and belongingness in interpersonal relationships of school teachers" on several psychological variables related to the individual well-being. A number of 475 school teachers participated in the study, from several schools located in different regions of Romania. Data were collected pre- and post-intervention with an online form composed of three different questionnaires addressing the following variables: belongingness, connectedness and teacher's self-efficacy. The findings indicate significant effects of the online intervention program on all the target variables.

Keywords: school well-being; belongingness; teacher's self-efficacy; connectedness.

1. Introduction

Trust and belongingness are two psychological concepts that are often studied in relation to quality of life and occupational satisfaction, due to the positive impact they can have on the relational and emotional functioning of individuals, including those in the school settings, such as students and teachers. In the last decade, psychological trust has benefited from increased attention from specialists involved in economic functioning, team performance, as well as in the mental and socio-relational health (Edmonson, 2018; Dimitri, 2014; Moeller, 2020; Stebleton, 2014).

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The experience of trust at the level of interpersonal interactions in various contexts can produce many psycho-physiological and socio-professional benefits (Edmonson, 2018; Dimitri, 2014; Moeller, 2020; Stebleton, 2014; Thagard, 2018). Thus, organizations, schools, and teams in which individuals experience an increased level of trust register higher levels of performance, innovation, creativity, and openness to creating authentic relationships and an environment that promotes an increased sense of belongingness (Lee & Robins, 1995; Merchant, 2018; Edmonson, 2018; Stebleton, 2014; Moeller, 2020).

Trust is considered an essential prerequisite for the development and functioning of stable social relationships (Dimitri, 2014; *Lupas & Rusu, 2020; Lupas et al., 2021*), as well as a key factor in the functioning of organizations and societies (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Within organizations, trust has been associated with efficient functioning and with an increased need for the members of the organization to share a common goal and achieve it together (McEvily et al., 2003). The experience of interpersonal trust among the members of an organization can have positive effects on their attitude toward their workplace and their work-related behaviours, including their efficiency (Brower et al., 2009).

2. Theoretical background

Trust and belongingness in organizational contexts: Implications for schools

Several authors (Baumaister & Leary, 1995; Resnick et al., 1997, Roffey, 2012; Rowe, 2011) indicate that the efficacy of the educational process is profoundly influenced by the psycho-emotional needs, such as trust, connection, and belongingness. These needs are considered central to the relationships that are developed within the school communities. In complex and modern societies, it is important that the educational process for the next generation of students is placed in the responsibility of teachers who are motivated, have a high interest in the development of competencies necessary for adaptivity and resilience.

Educational literature emphasizes that both interpersonal trust and institutional trust can be affected by the school context and by its structural characteristics (Dimitri, 2014). For instance, Bryk & Schneider (2002) indicate that interpersonal trust between teachers is more fragile in schools with a high number of members. Other studies point out aspects connected to the understanding of the trust in school contexts and the need for integrating interindividual differences, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender etc. (Smith et al., 2001; Goddard et al., 2009).

A teacher's psychological profile should include commitment, responsibility, active involvement in the process, flexibility, and openness to change. Such characteristics are necessary considering that the good functionality of the school environment requires a constant exchange of trust and authentic connection between students and the adults involved in the process. Students should feel that they belong to the school environment, and for this, it is necessary that they perceive the adults around them caring about their

well-being. In fact, it is the experience of mistrust within relationships that predisposes to undesired attitudes and behaviours, such as bullying and absenteeism in schools. These kinds of attitudes and behaviours are counterproductive to the essential purpose, namely, to provide an environment conducive to growth, learning, and development for students (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2006).

In regards to interpersonal functioning, belongingness represents an important construct that is indicated in the literature as one of the predictors of academic and psychosocial success (Slaten et al., 2016; Wadsworth et al., 2001, cited in Lupas & Rusu, 2020). High level of belongingness is associated with high levels of aspects of well-being, such as self-esteem, resilience and functional coping strategies in crisis situations (Rowe, 2011; Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010; Lupas & Rusu, 2020).

In the context of school climate, belongingness is associated with interpersonal respect, acceptance and conflict management, this psychological concept being often related, both in teachers and in students, to high levels of attachment to school, engagement and motivation, as well as a sense of purpose in the community (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Willms, 2000; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005; Lupas & Rusu, 2020).

The concepts of attachment and security in relationships are important in defining belongingness, which is described as the pervasive human tendency to form a positive and secure attachment (Nathaniel et al., 2013). Often, to describe the sense of belongingness, the concept of connectedness is used. For example, those students who feel they belong to the school community have interpersonal relationships based on trust, they feel connected, understood and heard, have lower levels of social conflict, absenteeism, bullying, and higher levels of tolerance towards cultural diversity, as well as effective conflict coping skills (Baumaister & Leary, 1995; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Libbey, 2004; Finn, 2012).

Belongingness in schools is a construct that includes behavioral and emotional psychological components, such as respect, acceptance, connectedness and inclusion (Arslan & Duru, 2017; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Karcher & Lee, 2002). The concept contributes to several factors that promote student achievement, mental health and well-being (Haugen, Morris, & Wester, 2019). Although the implications of belongingness on teachers and students' school-related functionality and aspects of their well-being have started to be documented in the literature, there is still a need for planning and implementing of interventions and strategies that target the development of belongingness in the school communities.

The concept of *social connectedness* is often used to describe the feeling of belongingness. Connectedness refers to the meaningful relationships that an individual has within and outside the school (Libbey, 2004; Chuter, 2019), i.e. connections that include an increased level of trust, psychological safety and reciprocity. Connectedness, in the context of defining the sense of belongingness in schools, refers to a low level or

the absence of social conflict (such as bullying), tolerance to cultural diversity, and to a climate that promotes conflict prevention and foster the acquisition of new skills (Kawachi & Beckmann, 2000; Anderman, 2002; Chuter, 2019). Social connectedness is also defined as the level at which a person has and perceives a sufficient and diverse number of relationships, which allow the individual to provide and receive information, emotional and material support, and to create and develop a sense of belongingness (The Full Frame Initiative, 2013; Lupas & Rusu, 2020).

Teacher's self-efficacy in the context of school climate

The concept of self-efficacy, proposed and studied by Albert Bandura in the late 1970s and early 1980s, refers to an individual's set of beliefs about the ability to perform the necessary behaviors in order to achieve a certain performance or goal (Maddux & Kleinman, 2021). Self-efficacy reflects the confidence that an individual has in the personal ability to exercise control over one's motivations, behaviors, and social environment; the psychological concept has been applied and has had considerable influence in research, education, and clinical practice (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 202). In the field of health psychology, for example, the construct has been applied to develop treatment plans for disorders such as phobias, depression, addictions, pain control etc. (Maddux & Kleinman, 2021).

Schools in which teachers have high self-efficacy tend to be those where students are more engaged, have greater well-being and vitality, and have better academic results (Woolfolk, 2000). Skaalvik (2010) defines teacher self-efficacy as the set of beliefs that the teachers have regarding their abilities to plan, organize, and maintain activities that are necessary for students to achieve high school results. Some researchers believe that self-efficacy beliefs help determine the effort put into an activity, how much the individual will persevere when challenges arise, and how resilient they will be in the face of aversions and threatening or challenging situations (Pajares, 1996). Bandura (1989) notes that the teacher's beliefs related to self-efficacy make a difference regarding the student's ability to learn and move forward and succeed, even when faced with difficult moments, or lack of motivation (cited in Moran, 2001).

In the last decades, research has highlighted associations between teacher self-efficacy and self-confidence, motivation, resilience, as well as the quality of classroom practices (Bjorjlund, 2020; Bandura, 1997; Kleinsasser, 2014). Other researches highlighted the associations between the concept and better social relationships, a sense of belongingness, and integration, especially for teachers that are at the beginning of their careers (Bjorjlund, 2020; Barnett et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2019).

Teacher self-efficacy can have a profound effect on the educational process, and on the overall motivation, commitment, and resilience of the school members (Day, 2008; Flores, 2006; Gu & Day, 2007). Teachers who have high self-efficacy tend to consider that all students have the potential to learn and be taught, and consequently invest more time in the educational process. What was observed in studies is that teachers with higher self-

efficacy (Dunn & Rakes, 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2016) put more effort into handling difficult relationships with students, and not avoiding them.

The main objective of this paper is the examination of the variables trust, belongingness and teacher's self-efficacy, through the lens of a quantitative analysis regarding the effects of an online group intervention program called *Development of trust and belonging in interpersonal relationships of school teachers (DTBIR)*. The program aims to shape and enrich the work and learning experience of the participants (school teachers in Romania), by promoting interpersonal relationships based on prioritizing the feeling of trust, belongingness, and well-being.

3. Methodology

Objectives and hypotheses

The general objective of the study is to investigate at quantitative level an online well-being group intervention, i.e. *Development of trust and belongingness in interpersonal relationships of school teachers*. Following the analysis of the literature presented above, the specific objectives of this paper are: (1) To test the effectiveness of the group psychological intervention program in terms of increasing general belongingness and psychological trust, by analyzing the following three variables: general belongingness, teacher's self-efficacy and social connectedness; (2) To investigate the relationship between teacher's self-efficacy and the evolution of the feeling of belongingness (pre- and post-intervention).

According to the stated objectives, the following hypotheses will be tested: 1. After the implementation of the online well-being program, the participants will report higher values of the variable belongingness; 2. After the implementation of the online well-being program, the participants will report higher values of the variable teacher's self-efficacy; 3. After the implementation of the online well-being program, the participants will report higher values of the variable social connectedness; 4. An increased score on the teacher self-efficacy scale will be associated with higher values of the pre-test and post-test differences of the variable belongingness.

Participants

In the pre-intervention phase, 475 participants from Romania were included in this study. The main inclusion criteria were to be a teacher in a school that is part of the educational project "*The School of Trust*". "*The School of Trust*" is a comprehensive project that aims to improve the quality of the relationships within the schools and to increase the level of general well-being among teachers and other members of the school communities. It is important to mention that the DTBIR program was part of the section Well-being of the "*School of Trust*", which was delivered by a team of experts from Babes-Bolyai University, Mind Education Company and the Well-being Institute, Cluj-Napoca,

Romania. The structure of the program was piloted in 2019 on a number of 25 teachers from Transylvania College, Cluj-Napoca, Romania (Lupas & Rusu, 2020). This pilot phase served as an important base for the development of the DBTIR program, which was offered to a larger number of teachers from various schools in Romania. The delivery of the program was done online, due to the COVID-19 conditions. The participants came from different counties in Romania: Bucharest, Braşov, Cluj, Baia Mare, Alba Iulia, Oradea, and Iaşi. Almost all respondents (84.2%) were women, while only 15.8% were men. Regarding their level of education, 56,7% of respondents had bachelor's degree studies, 38% post-university studies, 4,3% were graduates of high schools and the rest of the teachers had other types of studies.

Instruments

Social Connectedness Scale (SCS; Lee & Robbins, 1995)

The scale is composed of items from all three categories of belongingness proposed by the Lee and Robbins (1995): connectedness (4 items), affiliation (3 items), and companionship/ fellowship (1 item). The items portray a general emotional distancing between oneself and others, that can be experienced among friends or close colleagues, as shown by the item *“Even among my friends, there is no sense of brotherhood / sisterhood”*. High scores reflect an increased sense of connectedness and social belongingness. As indicated by the authors (Lee & Robinson, 1995), the value of the Alpha Cronbach's coefficient for the Social Connectedness Scale is .91.

The General Belongingness Scale (GBS; Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2011)

To develop the General Belonging Scale (Malone et al., 2011), three studies were conducted, which resulted in an instrument with 12 items. The construction of the items was carried out by examining the specialized literature, following keywords, themes, and tools related to belongingness. Initially, 30 items were generated, 14 with positive valence and 16 with negative valence. The 12 items selected for the final version of the scale (6 with positive valence; 6 with negative valence) were allocated to the two categories of factors (Acceptance/Inclusion and Rejection/Exclusion). Negatively formulated items were reverse scored and the final scale is used as a single instrument. The scale has good psychometric properties. Alpha Cronbach's coefficient for the scale is .95 with an average inter-item correlation (AIC) = .62 (M = 69.4, SD = 13.5; Satici & Tekin, 2016).

Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale, the short form (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001)

The Teachers' Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale is an evaluation tool designed to gain a better understanding of the aspects that create difficulties for teachers in their teaching process and activities at school. The two forms, the long one containing 24 items and the short

one containing 12 items (the one used in the present paper), include three subscales of teacher self-efficacy: *Self-efficacy in student engagement* (items 2, 4, 7, 11), *Self-efficacy in training practices* (items 5, 9, 10, 12), *Self-efficacy in classroom management* (items 1, 3, 6, 8). In the study carried out by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001), the scale showed a value of the Alpha Cronbach coefficient of .94.

Procedure

In the first phase of program's implementation, participants received an email from the Well-being Institute's Administrative Department informing them about the online program and its objectives. Also, the participants received another email with the invitation to complete an online Google survey, which contained the three scales used in the present study. The responses were collected from October 2020 to February 2021. The full completion of the questionnaire took about 30 minutes. The participants had the option to quit the process of data collection at any moment. In the document created online, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the conditions for completing it, and the granting of consent to participate in the online testing. They were also informed about the fact that participation was voluntary and that all the data were confidential. The questionnaires included in the survey were translated into Romanian language and checked by two experts in psychology and sciences of education.

Participation in the DTBIR program involved 5 online group sessions of one hour and 30 minutes each, held online through the ZOOM platform. The frequency of the meetings was weekly. Before attending these meetings, participants were advised to complete the online course: *Trust. The foundation of authentic relationships*, for which they were given free access on the platform www.sinergie.ro. The purpose of completing this course was to familiarise the participants with important concepts used in the DTBIR program. This helped them prepare for the live online group sessions. The online course had a duration of 120 minutes and was composed of 8 modules. In the first online session, important topics were discussed.

The 5 online sessions aimed at developing the following psycho-social skills that can function as protective factors in terms of mental health and social functioning of the participants, i.e. school teachers: psychological resilience, emotional agility, emotional self-regulation, active and empathetic listening, communication in conflictual situations, understanding the human personality, from the perspective of temperament, values, and cognitive schemes; using techniques and practices from positive psychology, such as mindfulness, appreciation, positive feedback, gratitude.

All of these competencies mentioned above can have an important beneficial impact on the quality of the relationships within schools. Also, after completing the program, some of the participants had the opportunity to participate in a qualitative focus group study, from which future data will be extracted, regarding the perception of the DTBIR program and the impact at a subjective level.

Design

An cvasi-experimental design with repeated measurements (pre- and post-test evaluations) was used in this study. The three dependent variables that were evaluated are general belongingness, social connectedness, and teacher's self-efficacy. The independent variable was the DTBIR program, with two phases of data collection (pre- and post-intervention). Conducting an experimental study is motivated mainly by the possibility of establishing causal relationships. Unlike a correlational design, which involves simply observing a phenomenon in the absence of any intervention, in the experimental design the independent variable is manipulated (Field & Hole, 2002). More specifically, the proposed experimental design is one with repeated measures, in which all participants go through all the experimental conditions (Field & Hole, 2002).

4.Results

In order to test the proposed hypotheses, we used SPSS version 26. The first three hypotheses were tested with paired samples t-tests, while the last hypothesis was tested with linear regression. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, correlations).

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics*

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Belongingness Pretest	4.39 (0.46)	1						
Belongingness Posttest	4.46 (0.46)	.74**	1					
Self-Efficacy Pretest	4.44 (0.51)	.38**	.37**	1				
Self-Efficacy Posttest	4.53 (0.46)	.33**	.39**	.74**	1			
Connectedness Pretest	4.35 (0.54)	.82**	.65**	.38**	.28**	1		
Connectedness Posttest	4.41 (0.54)	.68**	.83**	.32**	.34**	.66**	1	
Belongingness Difference Pretest – Posttest	-.07 (0.33)	.36**	-.36*	.03	-.08	.23**	-.21**	1

** $p \leq 0.01$

We further tested whether the intervention led to differences in belongingness (h1), self-efficacy (h2), and connectedness (h3). Results show that there is a significant difference ($t(299) = -3.815, p < .001$) between the pretest level of belongingness ($M = 4.389, SD = 0.463$) and the posttest level of belongingness ($M = 4.463, SD = 0.463$). Thus, our results support the first hypothesis, showing an increase in the level of belongingness after the intervention. The visual representation of the relationship can be observed in Figure 1.

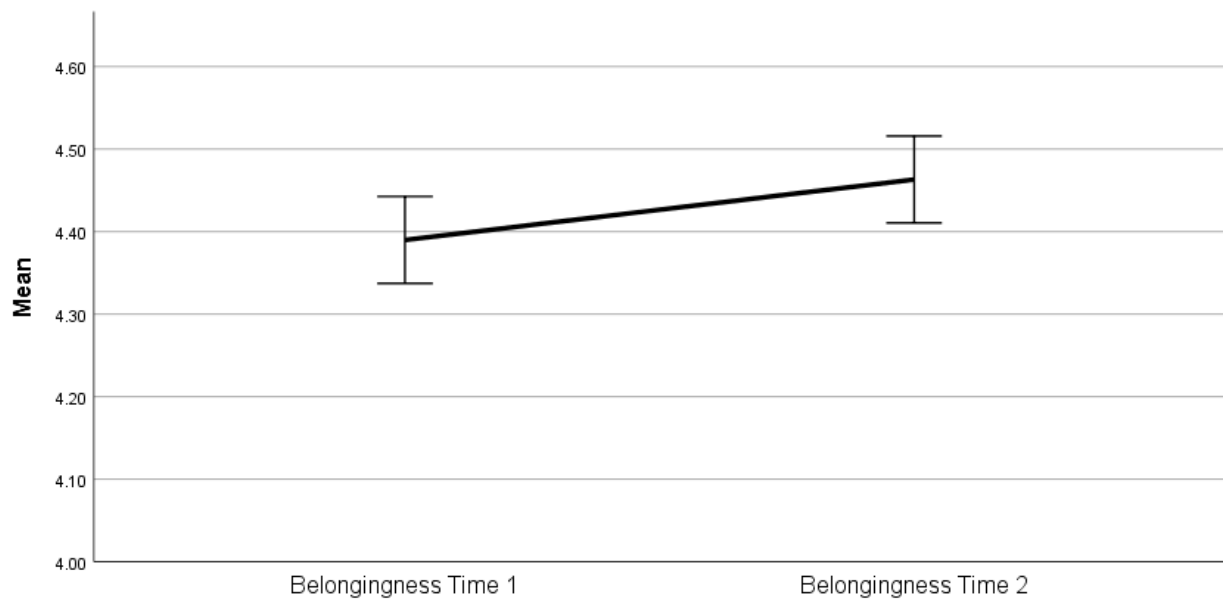


Figure 1. Differences in Belongingness from Time 1 to Time 2

Results also show significant differences ($t(299) = -4.42, p < .001$) between the pretest level of self-efficacy ($M = 4.44, SD = 0.51$) and the posttest level of self-efficacy ($M = 4.53, SD = 0.46$). Thus, data shows an increase in the level of self-efficacy after the intervention, offering empirical support for the second hypothesis. The visual representation of the relationship can be observed in Figure 2.

Regarding the differences in connectedness, results show a significant difference ($t(299) = -2.26, p = .025$) between the pretest level of connectedness ($M = 4.35, SD = 0.54$) and the posttest level of self-efficacy ($M = 4.41, SD = 0.54$). Thus, hypothesis 3 is empirically supported, with an increase in the level of connectedness after the intervention. The visual representation of the relationship can be observed in Figure 3.

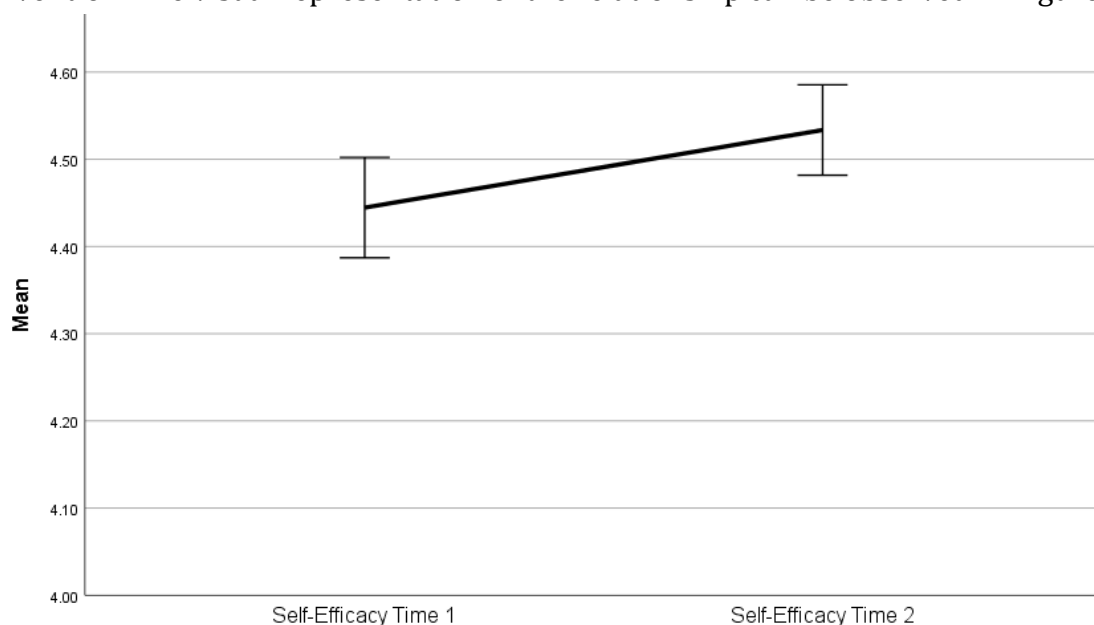


Figure 2. Differences in Self-Efficacy from Time 1 to Time 2

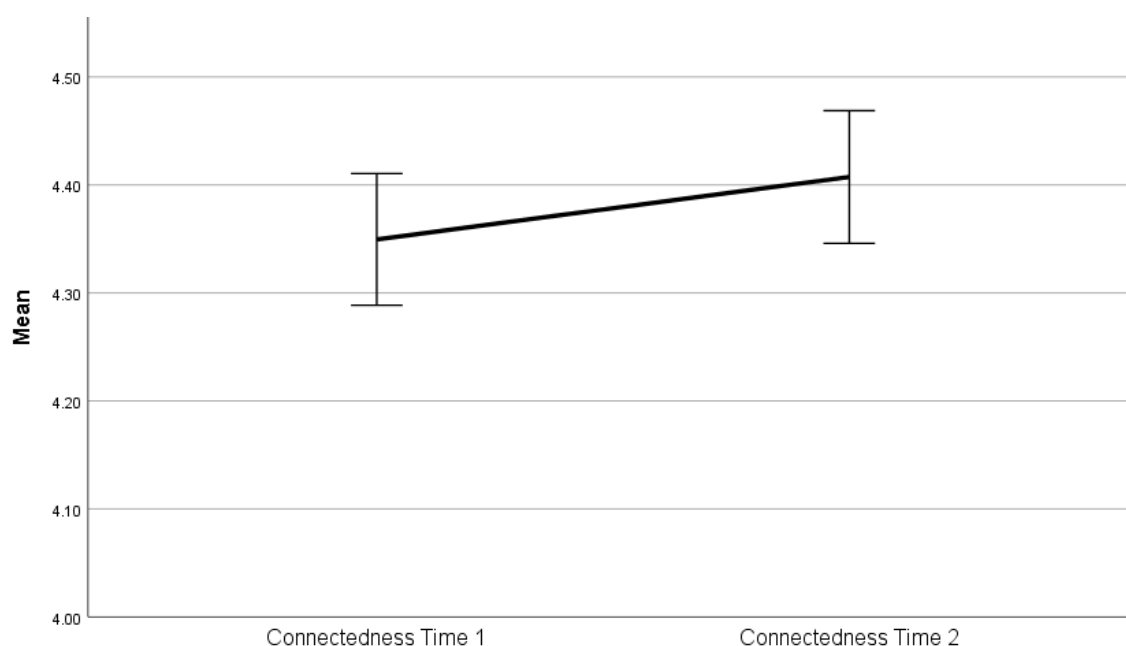


Figure 3. *Differences in Connectedness from Time 1 to Time 2*

The fourth hypothesis proposes that pretest levels of self-efficacy influence the difference in belongingness from the pretest to the post-test. We tested this hypothesis with linear regression analysis, with experience as a controlled variable. The model is not significant ($F(2,297) = 0.11, p = .895$) and explains 0.1% of the variance of belongingness differences.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze at a quantitative level the impact of an online intervention program with a strong psycho-educational component, designed to address psychological concepts associated to the well-being of schoolteachers. A series of hypotheses were constructed to test the impact of the program on the following variables: *belongingness*, *self-efficacy* and *social connectedness*, which are all documented in the literature as having protective values in terms of mental health. A specific objective of the study was to include a psycho-educational component in the program, i.e. materials and information from the literature regarding the key concepts, in order to promote among the participating pre-university teachers attitudes, behaviours and beliefs associated with well-being. The longitudinal aim of the intervention program is to facilitate the development of a school environment defined by safety and trust, where school members can experience more inclusion, acceptance and can identify the necessary tools so that students can have good academic results and social-emotional functioning.

The first hypothesis of this study was that, after completing the program, higher values of the belongingness variable would be recorded. The data indicated that the difference between the pre-test and post-test measurements for the belongingness

variable was statistically significant. The second hypothesis assumed that higher values of the self-efficacy variable will be recorded after completing the program. The data presented in this paper indicates that the difference between pre-test and post-test measurements for the self-efficacy variable was statistically significant. Thus, the second hypothesis was also confirmed. The third hypothesis assumed that after completing the program, higher values of the social connectedness variable will be recorded. The findings show that the third hypothesis was confirmed. Thus, the results support the fact that the program was effective in increasing the values of all the target variables.

The last hypothesis of the study, which assumed that higher levels of self-efficacy pre-intervention will influence the difference in belongingness from the pre-test to the post-test was not statistically significant. Therefore, as a future direction of research, we intend to investigate in depth the associations between self-efficacy and belongingness within school communities, by combining the quantitative analysis with a qualitative approach.

Some limitations were identified for this study. In terms of preconditions for the online intervention program, the participants were supposed to complete an online course entitled *Trust. The basis for authentic relationships*, on the www.sinergie.ro platform. Although the participants were asked in the first meeting if they completed the course or not, no in-depth verification was carried out. For future interventions like this, a short questionnaire can be constructed to check whether all the participants did meet the preconditions for being included in the intervention program.

Another limitation of the study is related to the inter-personal differences of the participants. Some of them were teachers in schools from rural areas, and some from the urban area. Some were part of more prestigious schools, and some came from schools that were disadvantaged from a social and economic point of view. Although these aspects were in our attention from the beginning and we adapted as much as possible the intervention according to these factors, future interventions might benefit from a more systematic attention on the differences between the groups and their impact on the outcomes.

6. Conclusions

The program presented in this study had the objective of creating psycho-educational contexts in which teachers from different schools connect and interact with each other, while developing skills related to communication, professional self-efficacy, better stress management, dealing with uncomfortable situations, making more optimal decisions that include personal well-being, but also caring for others. The results of the analysed variables are promising and they are encouraging us for future interventions of this kind.

Considering the importance of belongingness and trust in educational settings, it is essential for teachers, who serve as relational and emotional role models to their students, to understand the need to incorporate key aspects of these psychological dimension in designing interventions addressing their well-being. By understanding and

effectively applying the key aspects of belongingness and trust, teachers and other members of school communities, can exert a positive impact on their own individual functioning, as well as on students' individual growth and educational evolution, thereby strengthening their social and emotional functioning in a meaningful and sustainable manner.

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