

**ERD 2021****9th International Conference Education, Reflection, Development****THEORETICAL BASES OF A WELLBEING INTERVENTION  
PROGRAM FOR PRE-UNIVERSITY TEACHERS**

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**Abstract**

Literature indicates that trust is a central element to many aspects of life, with implications for the manner in which people think, the ways people reach decisions, and model their behaviours, as well as their social, and professional interactions. Some research emphasises the fact that the organisations, the schools, and the teams in which people feel a high level of trust, have higher levels of other indicators, such as performance, innovation, creativity. Also, these individuals are more open to creating authentic relationships and to foster an environment based on the feeling of belongingness, with implications for their wellbeing, quality of life, and for the general mental health. This paper introduces and discusses theoretical aspects regarding the concept of trust, the implications it has for the dynamics of interpersonal relations of pre-university teachers; this paper also discusses how the conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the physical distancing and social isolation measures, have created a greater need for the development of trust and connection. Furthermore, throughout this paper, several main aspects of two well-being intervention programs targeted to teachers in schools in Romania are presented. These programs aim to support heads of school, teachers, and parents by promoting interpersonal relationships based primarily on a feeling of trust, belongingness, and well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

The present paper introduces various approaches to the concept of trust in interpersonal relationships, and the impact they have on the educational process and on the well-being of teachers in pre-university education. These approaches are supported by a series of data in the current literature, with regard to the impact and the ramifications the COVID-19 pandemic has had on general mental and emotional health. Also, the paper presents theoretical aspects supporting the need of addressing the concept of trust from the viewpoint of the protective and benefic roles it may play in relation to certain indicators connected to the general quality of life and human well-being. The last part of the paper describes two well-being programs designed to shape and enrich students' learning experience by promoting interpersonal relationships based on a prioritization of the feelings of trust, belongingness, and well-being. One of these programs is *Developing trust and belongingness amongst teachers in pre-university education*, which is part of the Școala Încrăderii (En.: *The School of Trust*) process. The authors of the present paper have developed and implemented this program of a sample of participants in Romania, and are currently analyzing statistically the impact of the program on the "trust" and "belongingness" indicators.

During this past decade, trust has been one of the topics considered essential to proper economic functioning, to team performance, as well as yielding many other collateral health-related and social benefits. Countless studies, reports of experts, and scientific journals have noted and exploited the importance of the concept and of the benefits associated with it (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014; Edmondson, 2019; Moeller et al., 2020; Stebleton et al., 2014). Some studies have suggested that trust is a central element in many aspects of life (Thagard, 2018), with implications on the manner in which people think, reach decisions, and model their behaviours, as well as their social and professional interactions. Moreover, the organisations, the schools, and other types of groups in which a high level of trust is perceived, register high levels of manifestation of variables such as performance, innovation, creativity, as well as openness towards creating authentic relationships and an environment that promotes a feeling of belongingness (Edmondson, 2019; Lee & Robins, 1995). All these variables have a positive impact on the well-being, the quality of life, and on the general mental health (Stebleton et al., 2014; Moeller et al., 2020). The benefits of trust in schools are detailed throughout this paper.

### 1.1. The current Covid-19 context: Challenges to the trust in interpersonal relationships

The spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, beginning in December 2019, has created a concerning context for the world population, with undesired effects on well-being, on individual health, and on societies. In line with this, the year 2020 has been unprecedented in what concerns its impact on health. The World Happiness Report 2021 (WHR, 2021) has presented a series of effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the mental, emotional and social functioning of people. On one hand, the authors of the reports analyze the manner in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the dynamics, the structure, and the quality of life; on the other hand, they describe the ways in which governments have managed the pandemic. The authors identified significant aspects, which must be addressed regarding

mental health, relationship dynamics, and elements of the concept of trust. Some of these aspects are discussed below.

In what concerns the general mental health indicators, most countries registered a rapid decline, at the onset of the pandemic, but also throughout this period (WHO, 2021). It has been noted that, in countries such as Great Britain, subjective happiness scores dropped by 12.3%, anxiety scores went up by 28.6%, and the score for life satisfaction decreased from 7.67 to 6.91 (being measured on a Likert scale of 0 to 10). Moreover, an increase of the prevalence of symptoms associated with depression has been registered, from 9.7% for March 2019, to 19.2% for June 2020. Vulnerable categories of people (women, the youth, people with low income) registered the most pronounced decline in scores. The risk factors include: intolerance to uncertainty, isolation, solitariness, deficient social support, abuse, demographic factors. However, it appears that what did make a difference regarding the level of deterioration of circumstances and the impact of the pandemic, were those aspects linked to care for one's well-being, adequate coping skills, resilience, the quality of the individual's relationships, the degree of social connectedness, prosocial behaviors, as well as the presence of relationships based on trust.

In the aforementioned report (WHO, 2021), the authors added a variable called *institutional trust*, which refers to one's trust in public institutions and the perception of corruption, respectively. Alongside other studies, the report emphasized the importance of public trust, as a support in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies which measured the connection between social trust and the individual perception of happiness (WHO, 2020), revealed that individuals with higher levels of social and institutional trust tend to be happier than the ones who live in a society characterized by mistrust. Moreover, people who seemed to benefit the most from social and institutional trust were part of vulnerable populations, i.e. people suffering from illnesses, unemployed people, people with low income, people subjected to discrimination, people who lived in dangerous areas, and people with mental health challenges.

The results of the reports are coherent with the results of many other studies, which have emphasized that a high level of trust has protective and benefic effects on individual and societal functioning in situations of high-risk crisis. In other words, the communities where social trust was high, resilience during crisis situations (earthquakes, accidents, floods) was also high. Hence, trust not only facilitates good interpersonal cooperation, but it also facilitates a greater disposition towards acts of kindness directed to peers, and towards behaviors and attitudes that have the potential to increase the feeling of belongingness.

In what concerns schools, the COVID-19 pandemic did challenge the patience and resilience of the teachers, parents, and students, but especially the patience and resilience of heads of school and of other people in leadership roles. As operating conditions changed and became more challenging, some recent studies (Muijs & Sampson, 2021) discuss the increased capacity for adapting of members of communities. The study of Muijs and Sampson (2021) emphasized the importance of trust with regard to leaders' capacity to adapt and to meet the needs of their employees, as well as needs generated by systems. Trust was useful to leaders in situations where safety protocols were applied, where COVID-related guidelines were interpreted, where they needed to personalize and adapt learning curricula, and where they needed to implement remote working and learning.

## 1.2. Trust in an organisational context: implications for schools

Trust is considered to be an essential prerequisite for the good functioning of stable social relationships (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014), as well as a key factor in the good operation of organizations (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002) and societies. 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 to achieve it together (McEvily et al., 2003). The experience of interpersonal trust between the members in an organization has a positive effect on their attitude towards their workplace, on their behaviors, and on their performance (Brower et al., 2009).

When the concept of trust is discussed and analyzed in the literature, different approaches and manners of conceptualizing it are taken into account. While social psychological studies perceive trust as an interpersonal phenomenon and define it as a psychological state on an individual level (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014; Shamir & Lapidot, 2003), studies in the sociological and organizational literature see trust rather as a quality of a social system (Fukuyama, 1995). This approach focuses on the experience that people have regarding the organization, in this case, regarding the school (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014). Some sources characterize trust as being a collective phenomenon, when it is linked with an organizational environment, at a group or team level (Forsyth et al., 2011), or at the level of the institution (WHO, 2021).

Having understood the category of trust, in order to develop it within schools, we deem important that school members, both teachers, heads of school, and other members understand what the necessary prerequisites, abilities, competences, and policies are that need to be implemented. Literature in sciences of education emphasizes the fact that both interpersonal trust and institutional trust can be affected by the school context and by the structural characteristics within it (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014). For instance, some studies (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 and the need for integrating interindividual differences, such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender etc. (Smits & Hulstijn, 2020; Goddard et al., 2009). Social-emotional development or well-being programs, such as the ones described within the present paper, integrate the transfer of information to the school members regarding the normality of interindividual differences, the benefits derived from them, both on an individual, and on a collective level; the aforementioned types of programs also implement techniques and procedures that enable people to internalize the knowledge in order to manifest the behaviors that include understanding and acceptance.

Concerning the importance of studying and understanding the concept of trust within schools, we believe that it is important to analyze the benefits thereof and potential results derived from this endeavor. Firstly, the schools where both interpersonal and institutional trust is experienced, are the same schools which benefit from increased social capital (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014). The teachers, the students, and the parents are more prone to choose the school and to integrate prosocial behaviors and behaviors aiming to develop the school; this phenomenon is reflected in the degree to which people establish connections and in more frequent interactions of higher quality between school members (Adler & Know, 2002). When relationships between school members are characterized by trust, information tends to be shared more freely and with positive intentions (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014). People are more capable of engaging in

situations involving other members of the organization, where they feel vulnerability and risk, when there is trust (Rousseau et al., 1998). Such aspects facilitate the development of an educational context with increased collaboration, cooperation, and reduced fear and uncertainty (Dimitri & Forsyth, 2014).

Another important factor of trust in schools is linked to the way in which employees experience trust towards the school leaders. Studies such as the one carried out by Shamir and Lapidot (2003) point out the importance of this aspect in connection to the good functioning of the organization. The collaborative relationships between employee and leader, which are characterized by trust, are shown in meta-analysis studies to be associated with performance, job satisfaction, commitment, and prosocial behaviors (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Furthermore, employees' trust in school leaders proved to be a key element for performance, interpersonal functioning, and well-being (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Forsyth et al., 2011). This is possible when the leader, which is most often the head of school in the case of school environment, behaves in an authentic way, is responsible, supportive, avoids manipulating others, and prioritizes humanitarian values, such as kindness, fairness, and transparency. Another attribute of such leaders is the real interest to the good functioning, both on a personal, and on a professional level, of teachers (Tarter & Hoy, 1988). The leaders who protect their teachers in critical situations, such as conflicts with parents of students, predispose their relationships with teachers to be characterized by trust (Smits & Hulstijn, 2020).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The relevance of trust within interpersonal relations in school environments is given by the multitude of benefits it has on the educational context, and also the wellbeing of teachers and other members.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research question that is aimed to be answered in this theoretical paper is how can trust be developed in school environments through well-being programs addressing the interpersonal relations.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The relevance of this paper consists of the examination of the concept of trust, and its ability to positively influence interpersonal dynamics between teachers, with an impact on their general well-being and emotional health. Moreover, two programmes are presented throughout this work: an umbrella one, and another one which is part of the umbrella-type programme; these two programmes aim to develop the trust, belongingness, and well-being of teachers in pre-university education. The paper aims to:

- To introduces and discusses theoretical aspects regarding the concept of trust that can offer the bases for group intervention well-being programs in school teachers.
- To discuss conditions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, especially the physical distancing and social isolation, and how this has created a greater need for the development of trust and connection.

- To present the main aspects of a well-being intervention program targeted to teachers in schools in Romania.

## 5. Research Methods

This is a theoretical paper discussing the topic of trust and well-being in school teachers, the ways COVID19 pandemic has affected these aspects and what can be done to recalibrate them through structured interventions in the direction to better prepare the teachers to face future challenges.

## 6. Findings

This paper presents a series of aspects found in the scientific literature, which provide a theoretical foundation for the key concepts of trust, and belongingness, which represent the target variables of two well-being programs; the programs' structure will be presented here. The programs aim to shape and to enrich the participants' (teachers) learning experience by promoting interpersonal relationships based on a prioritisation of the feeling of trust, belongingness, and well-being. One of these programs is *Developing trust and belongingness amongst teachers in pre-university education*, which is part of the Școala Încrăderii (En.: *The School of Trust*) process.

The first well-being program, The School of Trust, is a longitudinal one, having its empirical foundation in the continuous research carried out by a team of experts in the Babes Bolyai University, in collaboration with the team in Mind Education, Bucharest, Romania, and the Wellbeing Institute team, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. This continuous, umbrella-type programme is considered to be a process of functional modelling done by teachers, both on an individual level, and at the level of the society. The programme has involved so far 53 heads of school, 870 teachers, 686 students, and 2538 parents. The intention of the process is for the space of the school to become a place which promotes the values of a community based on trust, where its members become meaningfully involved, and where vitality is actively promoted. According to the study *The research and cultivation of trust in schools in Romania* (Curșeu et al., *in preparation*), the preliminary results indicate that the lack of trust between heads of school, teachers, parents, and students is present in all schools in Romania, which have been included in the study. In what regards the students, the preliminary data suggest that well-being seems to be influenced by the number of friends (the span of the social network), and the students who feel accepted and supported by the adults around them are more confident in the success they may experience in school. Preliminary data regarding teachers suggest that mistrust between them is associated with a tendency to be critical of one's self, to feel dependent on others around them; preliminary data also suggests that mistrust between teachers is associated with increased levels of stress and anxiety. The School of Trust intervention model is divided into four sections: (1) The Academic Section, which addresses the learning experiences of the students, within lessons; (2) The Leadership Section, which addresses the development of the competencies and skills connected with assuming personal responsibility for the choices they make, and for adapting to the professional requirements of the 21st century; (3) The Global Education Section, which offers students opportunities to really understand the world with its real challenges, emphasising the importance of being open to experiences and equity; and Section (4), called

Well-being, which addresses the need for safety and trust within the relationships between teachers, the school leadership, students, and parents.

The second program to be presented here, as mentioned above, is the *Development of trust and belongingness in school teachers* (DTBT), is part of the intervention connected to the Well-being Section of the umbrella-program School of Trust. The aim of this program to test the effectiveness of the online group psychological intervention programme in terms of increasing teachers trust, belongingness, and teachers' self-efficacy, analysing three variables - social connectedness, general belongingness and teaching self-efficacy in teaching. The structure and efficiency of the well-being group intervention program was initially tested in a pilot experiment conducted in a face-to-face format in 2019, on a number of 25 high-school teachers in Romania (Lupaş & Rusu, 2020).

The research questions that shaped the pilot study were: What is the effect of the DBT programme in terms of evolution of the feeling of belongingness among the participating teachers? What are the implications of early maladaptive schemas in terms of the evolution of belongingness? Starting from these research questions and based on a generous theoretical support, the implementation of the group intervention program, as well as the data processing, brought some findings that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the analysed constructs. Specifically, the results indicated that the difference between pre- and post-test measurements for the social connectedness variable was statistically significant (Lupas & Rusu, 2020). Thus, the first hypothesis, which stated that there would be a significant difference between the pre- and post-intervention levels of social connectedness, was confirmed. Hence, the DBT pilot program was effective in increasing the social connectedness variable among the participants. An element of uniqueness of the study was represented by the investigation of the association between the number of early maladaptive schemas (Young et al., 2003) and the development of the sense of belongingness following the intervention program. The third hypothesis, according to which the number of early maladaptive schemas present in a person will moderate the effect of the intervention on increasing belongingness, was confirmed (Lupas & Rusu, 2020). The results of the pilot study were in line with other investigations presented in the literature, in which belongingness is associated with higher levels of well-being, self-esteem, a more positive and optimistic state, a better memory, transition to a better life, lower stress levels and better physiological functionality (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Jetten et al., 2009; Slaten et al., 2016).

The intention the well-being program *Development of trust and belongingness in school teachers* (DTBT) was to introduce different concepts from psychology, neuroscience and coaching, in order to increase the awareness and the openness towards change in the direction of promoting the feelings of trust, security, and belongingness (Lupas & Rusu, 2020). Compared to the pilot program in which the group meetings with the participants were face-to-face, in the online version of the program, five group meetings took place on an online platform. The meetings were organized to answer the objective of the well-being program, that it to develop the following specific skills: maintaining and improving relationships at work, empathic listening, managing conflicts and difficult conversations, containing and validating the discomfort of others (colleagues, parents, students), the relationship between mind, emotions and behaviour etc. In the first part of the meetings, the participants were recommended a series of books and videos, as educational bibliography, such as *Reinventing your life* (Young et al., 2003),

*Difficult conversations* (Stonen et al., 1999), *Emotional agility* (David, 2016). The topics covered within the online meetings of the DTBT programme were: trust, wellbeing, feedback, resilience, emotions, mindfulness, inter-individual differences, early maladaptive patterns, gratitude, and compassion. The trainers were all psychologists who had undergone an ample process of preparation in a well-being coaching programme, facilitated by Mind Education, Bucharest, Romania, Wellbeing Institute, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and various other experts.

Besides the applied value of this program, a research design was used to investigate the changes in the belongingness, social connectedness and teaching self-efficacy. Three questionnaires were used to measure the target variables, as it follows: the General Belongingness Scale (Malone, 2011), the Social Connectedness Scale (SCS; Lee & Robins, 1995), and the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy short scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). These three questionnaires were applied in the first and in the last online group meeting. The questionnaires were translated into Romanian language and verified for the comprehension of the terms by two experts in psychology. The data collection pre- and post-intervention program was conducted on a number of 373 school teachers in Romania, aged between 19 and 63 years, including both females and males. While the data are currently in the phase of being processed, the hypotheses of the research are the following ones: Increased values for the belongingness variable will be recorded in **the post-intervention phase**; increased values for the self-efficacy variable in teachers will be recorded in **the post-intervention phase**; an increased score of the self-efficacy variable, pre-intervention, will be associated with increased values of the difference post-test and pre-test of the belongingness variable (regression analysis). The interpretation of these data will be done taking into account the fact that they were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic period, that is, in a fragile period for the mental health of teachers, who were deprived not only of their social contacts such as friends, but also of the contacts that define their actual work, meaning contact with their students and colleagues.

## 7. Conclusion

Taking into account the information existent the scientific literature, both what was published before the pandemic, and the more recent reports regarding trust and its implications on peoples' wellbeing and mental health, we consider that it is important that teachers develop a better understanding of psychological phenomena involved in trust. In line with this consideration, teachers should be empowered with the necessary instruments and abilities, referring here to the support necessary to improve trust in interpersonal relationships alongside their colleagues, their students, and other categories of people which bear significance to their professional and every-day life context. Such group intervention well-being programs presented in this paper offer the possibility of sharing examples of good practices within the academic community and with mental health practitioners, i.e. programs with evidence-based beneficial effects on the participants' mental health, social behaviour, decision making, performance and other aspects of quality of life.

Literature indicates that self-confidence and trust in relationships influence our thinking, our relationships, and our performance at the workplace. On a personal note, this is one of the main reasons why we step out of our homes to go see a friend, or why we turn to the services of an expert. If we



experience trust in the environment where we live and work, we increase the chances of being more productive, of having more energy, of being more creative and more open to collaborating with others. In other words, we become more open to creating an authentic environment, which, in turn, supports the feeling of belongingness, where we can experience an increased well-being and quality of life. In a world that is passing major changes, trust might be one of the most necessary things to discuss in the context of individual and societal functioning.

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