

PROMEHS Teachers' Training: The effect of PROMEHS Curriculum on Teachers' Mental Health in Croatia and Romania

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Abstract: *Basic aim of newly created PROMEHS curriculum is to strengthen socio-emotional well-being, resilience and mental health of students aged from 3 to 18 years. Starting from the whole-school approach, its task was also to have positive impact on teachers' mental health what was explored in this study regarding PROMEHS implementation in Croatia and Romania. Based on the quasi-experimental design, data was collected during pre-and post-test phases of the PROMEHS curriculum implementation in experimental and control group, for both countries. The experimental group was engaged in PROMEHS education, i.e. 16 hours training, and control group was not. In-service teachers from preschool to secondary education from Croatia and Romania (N=97 in pre-test and N=97 in post-test; N=83 control and N=97 experimental group), completed the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy (short form), the Connor Davidson Resilience (CD 10), and the Social and Emotional Competence of Teachers (SECTRS). No significant differences were determined between those two groups in pre-test. However, after teachers' training, experimental group of teachers showed statistically higher levels of their self-efficacy, resilience and socio-emotional competencies than control group. Since these significant differences have been found only in experimental and not control group between pre- and post-test, the determined differences could be attributed only to the PROMEHS training effect. Even though the burnout level was lower in experimental group than in control after teachers' training, it was not determined as significant difference in the analysis. The findings are discussed within the frame of PROMEHS teachers' training contribution and the need for its sustainability.*

Keywords: *mental health training program; PROMEHS curriculum; resilience; SEL; teachers.*

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INTRODUCTION

The social and emotional competence of teachers significantly influences their professional endeavors (Collie, 2017; Hen & Goroshit, 2016), and the personal competence of teachers directly affects the quality of the educational process (Ransford et al., 2009).

Teachers' well-being and their socio-emotional competencies and resilience effect strongly the children's competencies (Lam & Wong, 2017; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2021) and their well-being (Tatalović Vorkapić & Ćepić, 2020), what is recognized in the paper title: *"Well teachers, well students"* (McCallum & Price, 2010). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to create and implement quality mental health programs for teachers at each educational level.

Common mental health programs include these three aspects that are crucial in persevering a high level of mental health and psychological well-being (Shute & Slee, 2016): A) promotion of socio-emotional learning ("the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions", CASEL, 2017); b) promotion of resilience (positive adaptation and good behavioural outcomes despite adversity and risk experiences; Luthar, 2006), with reduced vulnerability to psychosocial adversities and more successful overcoming of a stress or adversity; Rutter, 2006); c) prevention of behavioural problems and mental health difficulties: externalizing/internalizing behaviours and at risk behaviours.

It is recommendable for a comprehensive framework of mental health intervention to promote protective factors and reduce risk factors working collaboratively within development contexts: families, schools, and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006). To be able to achieve this, the whole school approach should be applied (Catalano et al., 2002). The emphasis is on the whole school approach, which is targeted on each of the participants group in kindergarten, or primary school or secondary school: students', teachers, school policy and management, collaboration with parents, connection with broader community (Cefai, Simones & Caravita, 2021).

PROMEHS project – as a solution to the mental health needs of teachers

Having in mind all of these significant aspects of providing such a professional support for teachers that will enable them to gain satisfactory level of mental health and psychological well-being, a project has been applied and run as an Erasmus+ KA3 project named PROMEHS: Promoting mental health in schools (Cavioni et al., 2020; Cefai et al., 2022a,b; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2019). Main PROMEHS goals are: a) to promote innovative policies by encouraging the cooperation among national and international public authorities and institutions across Europe; and b) to develop an evidence-based curriculum on mental health promotion in schools and assess it through large-scale field trials (Cavioni et al., 2023).

There are seven countries engaged in the project: Italy (coordinator): University of Milano-Bicocca; School Regional Office; Ministry of Education, Malta: University of Malta; Latvia: University of Latvia, Riga; School Regional Office of Sigulda; Croatia: Faculty of Teacher Education University of Rijeka; City of Rijeka; Romania: University Stefan Cel Mare Din Suceava; Inspectoratul Scolar Al Judetului Suceava; Greece: University of Patras; Portugal: Faculty of Human Kinetics, Lisbon. Having in mind the PROMEHS framework that consists of enhancing three main variables: socio-emotional learning, resilience and mental health difficulties and at-risk behaviours targeted on students, teachers, families and school leaders, the created curriculum will have an impact at several levels: regional, national European and world-wide.

In detail, the aim of the PROMEHS is to enhance these specific aspects in children and teachers: a) Self-awareness; self-regulation; social awareness; relationship skills; responsible decision-making; b) overcoming psycho-social challenges: bullying, transition, parental separation...); c) to reduce mental health difficulties: Internalizing behaviours (withdrawal, anxiety, fearfulness, and depression. & Externalizing behaviours: aggression, violence) and at-risk behaviours (substance abuse, addictions, sexual behaviours, crime...). Various evaluation studies have clearly demonstrated objective, reliable and valid positive effects of PROMEHS on children (Cefai et al., 2022a,b; Colomeischi et al., 2022; Conte et al., 2023; Martinsone et al., 2022a,b) and on teachers (Cefai et al., 2022a,b; Colomeischi, 2022; Martinsone et al., 2022c; Poulou et al., 2022), same as on exploring more quality way of measuring socio-emotional competencies in children (Anthony et al., 2022, 2023).

Since this paper is focused on the impact on described variable only in teachers from two countries: Croatia, and Romania, this part will be described in detail. The competence of teachers in the social-emotional domain encompasses personal and interpersonal aspects, including the relationship between students and teachers, interpersonal connections, emotional regulation, and social awareness (Tom, 2012). According to Jennings (2011), teachers' social-emotional competence serves as the foundation for establishing supportive relationships within their professional environments, enhancing their ability to effectively manage classrooms and effectively implement social-emotional curricula. Being socially and emotionally competent as a teacher entails not only possessing valuable skills but also having the capacity to recognize and understand oneself and others, thereby facilitating the development of optimal relationships with students (Elias, 2009). Teachers play a vital role in shaping the lives of students and creating an optimal learning environment (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022). Beyond their subject expertise, teachers' social and emotional competence has emerged as a significant factor in promoting positive student outcomes and overall well-being (Brackett & Katulak, 2020).

RESEARCH AIM, PROBLEMS AND HYPOTHESES

Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to explore PROMEHS effects on teachers from Croatia and Romania. Starting from the whole-school approach, its task was also to have positive impact on teachers' mental health what was explored in this study regarding PROMEHS implementation in Croatia and Romania. The focused variables that were used for operationalization of teachers' mental health were teachers': socio-emotional learning, resilience, attitude toward school, motivation, student-teacher relationship, work satisfaction, stress management and burn out.

It is expected to determine for teachers to show positive social and emotional skills, higher self-efficacy and self-confidence, improved motivation, higher resilience, fewer stress and burn-out and improved student-teacher relationships.

METHODS

Research design

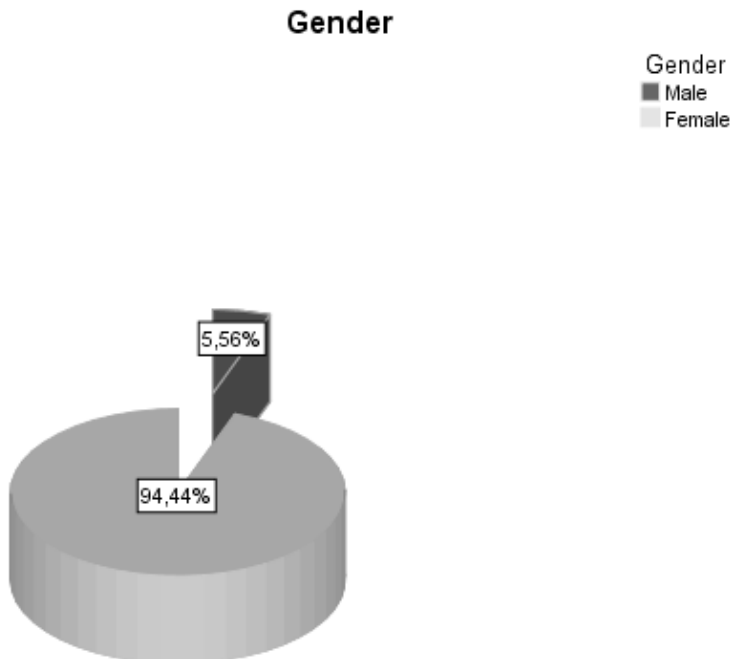
The study is based on quasi-experimental research design, what implies having two research groups: control (no variable manipulation) and experimental (variable manipulation through PROMEHS implementation) and two measuring time points (before PROMEHS implementation and

after PROMEHS implementation). It was very important to have the same research design, research method, participants' characteristics, measures and procedure in both countries, what was assured.

Participants

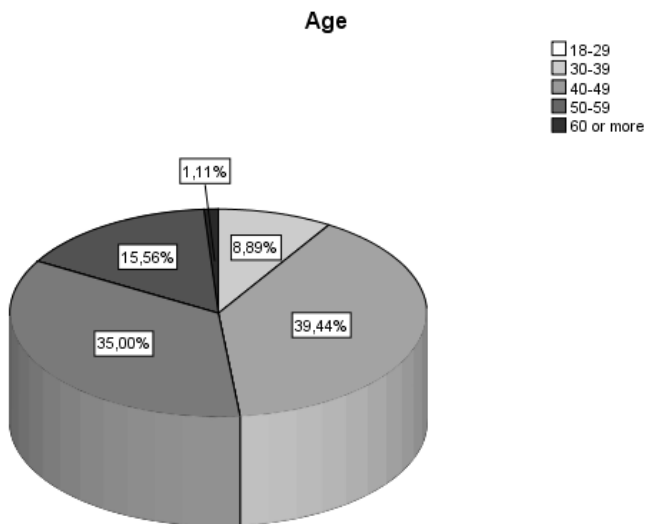
In this study, overall N=180 teachers (N=170 females (N=92 in experimental group) and N=10 males (N=5 in experimental group)) have participated (Figure 1). Regarding their age, N=16 teachers (9 in experimental group) were aged from 18 to 29 years, N=71 teachers (33 in experimental group) were aged from 30 to 39 years, N=63 teachers (37 in experimental group) were aged from 40 to 49 years, N=28 teachers (16 in experimental group) were aged from 50 to 59 years and N=2 of them (all in experimental group) were aged above 60 years (Figure 2). As it can be seen, gender and age categories were similarly distributed across control and experimental group.

Figure 1: Teachers' gender



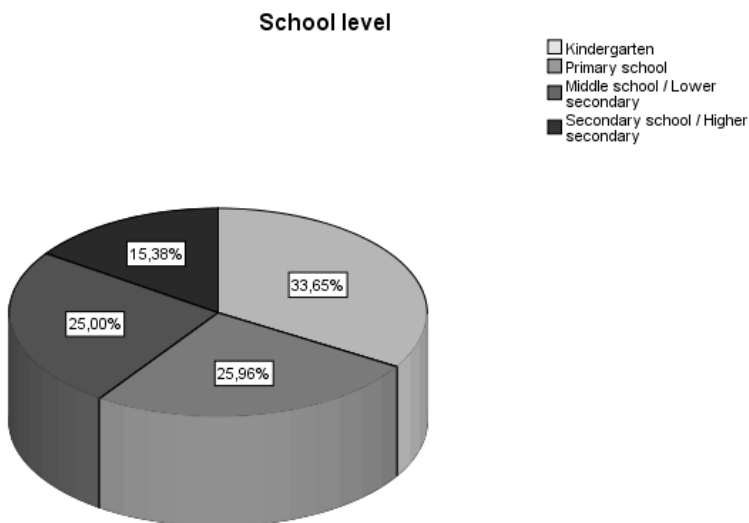
Source: Authors' own conception

Figure 2: Teachers' age



Source: Authors' own conception

Figure 3: Percentage of teachers regarding school level



Source: Authors' own conception

Teachers who participated in the study were teaching at different school levels (in kindergarten N=35 (N=19 in experimental group), in primary schools N=27 (N=16 in experimental group), in Middle schools or lower secondary N=26 (N=13 in experimental group) and in secondary schools N=16 (N=13 in experimental group)), what can be observed at Figure 3. It should be noted that 76 teachers did not provide information about school level they teach in, what should have in mind while thinking about equal distribution of their school level in both groups. In other words, similar number of teachers from each school level was participated in the control and experimental study even though participants did not inform about that.

The experimental group was engaged in PROMEHS education, i.e. 16 hours training, and control group was not. The participation of the teachers was voluntary basis since in the PROMEHS project and also in this study, those schools which express their motivation to be engaged in the project were involved. In total the participants were teachers from all level of school system from Croatia and Romania (N=97 in pre-test and N=97 in post-test; N=83 control and N=97 experimental group).

Measures

Teachers completed online scales of the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy (short form), the Connor Davidson Resilience (CD 10), the Social and Emotional Competence of Teachers (SECTRS), and the short Burn-out scale with the aim of measuring: teachers' self-efficacy (efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, efficacy in classroom management); teachers' resilience; teachers' social-emotional competence (teacher and student relationship, emotional regulation, social awareness, interpersonal relationships) and teachers' burnout. All used scales showed very quality psychometric properties (for details see: Cefai et al., 2022a,b).

Procedure

Based on the quasi-experimental design, data was collected during pre-and post-test phases of the PROMEHS curriculum implementation in experimental and control group, for both countries. For both countries pre-test lasted from December 2020 until February 2021. and post-test lasted from May 2021 until June 2021. Months before, in the planning phase of this study, Ethical approvals were collected from faculties and Ministries of Education in each country.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since the results' distributions of focused variables showed significant differences from normal distribution, Mann-Whitney test has been applied to test the significance of differences in two research situations: between experimental and control group and between pre-test and post-test phase, and the results could be observed in the Table 1.

As could be observed in the Table 1 and Figure 4, no significant differences were determined between experimental and control groups in pre-test phase, what was expected. In other words, in the pre-test phase (before the PROMEHS implementation only in the experimental group later on), both groups were equalized regarding focused variables: teachers' sense of efficacy, resilience, their socio-emotional competencies and burn-out level. This means that later on if differences between groups were determined, that they could be ascribed to the PROMEHS effect.

After teachers' training and PROMEHS implementation what was happened only in experimental group, experimental group of teachers showed statistically higher levels of their self-efficacy, resilience and socio-emotional competencies than control group (Table 1, Figure 5) in the post-test phase. Since these significant differences have been found only in experimental (Table 1, Figure 6) and not control group (Table 1, Figure 7) between pre- and post-test, the determined differences could be attributed only to the PROMEHS training effect. The determined and confirmed main effect of this study was expected, since the teachers' training included lectures and workshops regarding their overall socio-emotional competencies, their resilience and mental health, strategies on coping with stress on work and the quality of their teaching strategies. In addition, this result is aligned with results determined in other countries involved in the project PROMEHS (Colomeischi, 2022; Martinsone et al., 2022c; Poulou et al., 2022), as well with overall effect of PROMEHS implementation in all countries (Cavioni et al., 2023; Cefai et al., 2022a,b).

Even though the burnout had a lower level in the experimental group than that in the control after teachers' training, it was not determined as significant difference in the analysis. This finding should be discussed in the frame of the measure used for burn-out, since it was one-item scale. For the economic and practical reasons with the aim of having high participants' motivation to be engaged in the project and research, only one item was used for measuring burn-out. However, since it has no satisfactory psychometric values, it is recommendable to use more valid and reliable measure in the future for this variable.

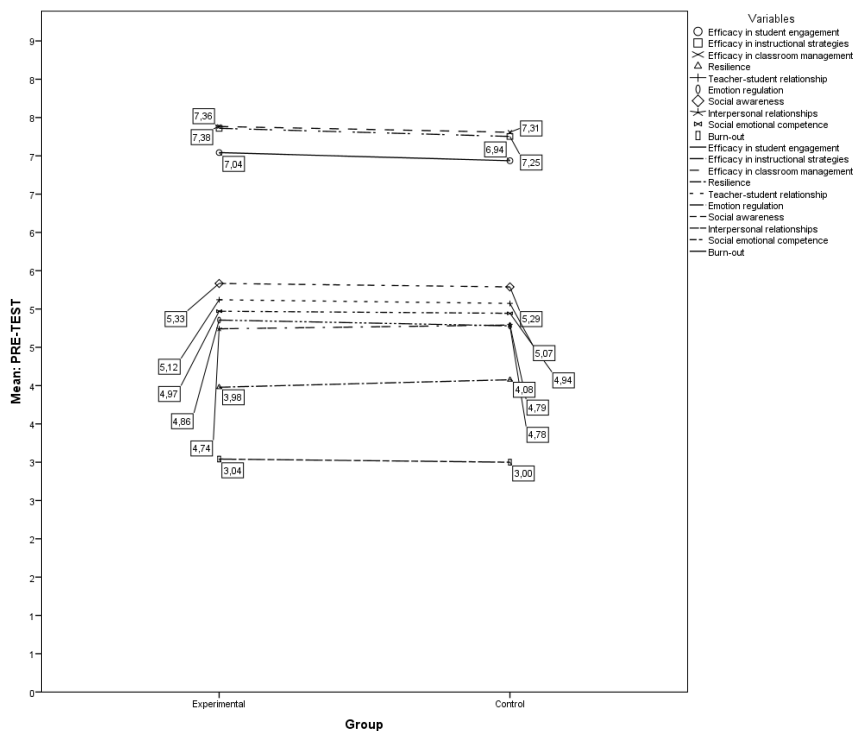
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Table 1: The results (M-W U and p) of testing the differences significance between groups (experimental and control) and between research phases (pre-test and post-test) on four variables: Teachers' Sense of Efficacy, Teachers' resilience Teachers' Social and Emotional Competence and Teachers' burnout

GROUPS & PHASES		Mann-Whitney U test (M-W U) and significance (p)	Teachers' Sense of Efficacy			Resilience	Teachers' Social and Emotional Competence					Burn-out
			Efficacy in student engagement	Efficacy in instructional strategies	Efficacy in classroom management		Teacher-student relationship	Emotion regulation	Social awareness	Interpersonal relationships	Social emotional competence	
GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL	M-W U p	3091 ,001	2975 ,001	3071 ,001	3122 ,001	3770,5 ,02	4346 ,36	4087,5 ,11	3702 ,01	3614,5 ,01	4568,5 ,92
	CONTROL	M-W U p	3271 ,57	3135 ,32	3110 ,28	3296 ,63	3414 ,92	3385,5 ,85	3107,5 ,27	3292,5 ,62	3443,5 1	3148 ,46
PHASE	PRE-TEST	M-W U p	3854 ,62	3859 ,63	3782,5 ,48	3609,5 ,23	3895,5 ,71	3704,5 ,36	3850,5 ,61	3835,5 ,58	3911 ,74	3877 ,76
	POST-TEST	M-W U p	2648,5 ,001	2658 ,001	2904 ,001	3299 ,04	3049 ,01	3332 ,05	2971 ,01	3517 ,14	2930 ,01	3705,5 ,56

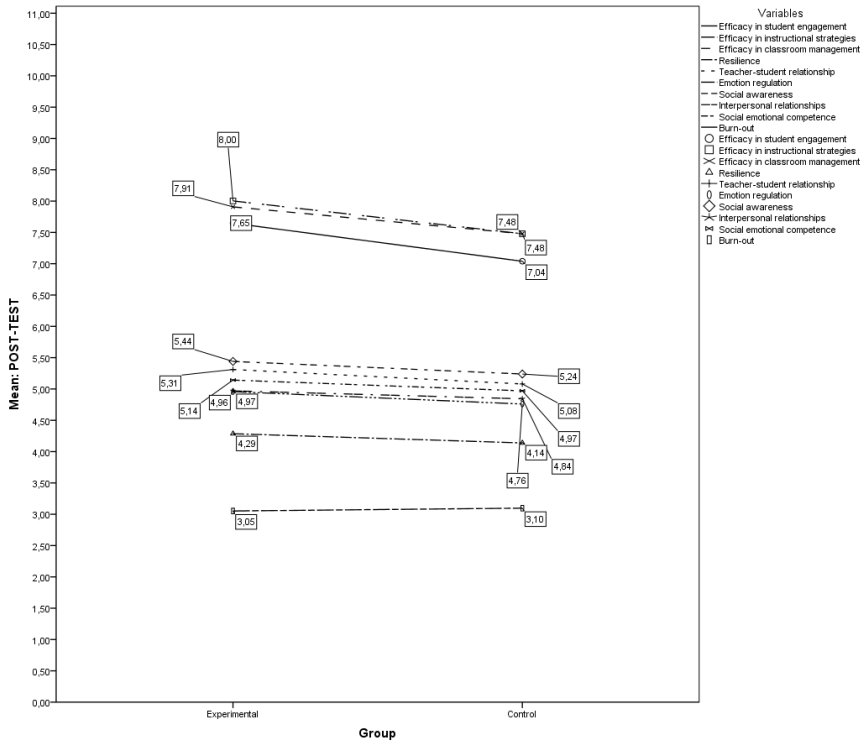
Source: Authors' own conception

Figure 4: Averages on teachers' self-efficacy (efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, efficacy in classroom management); teachers' resilience; teachers' social-emotional competence (teacher and student relationship, emotional regulation, social awareness, interpersonal relationships) and teachers' burnout separately for experimental and control group in the Pre-test phase



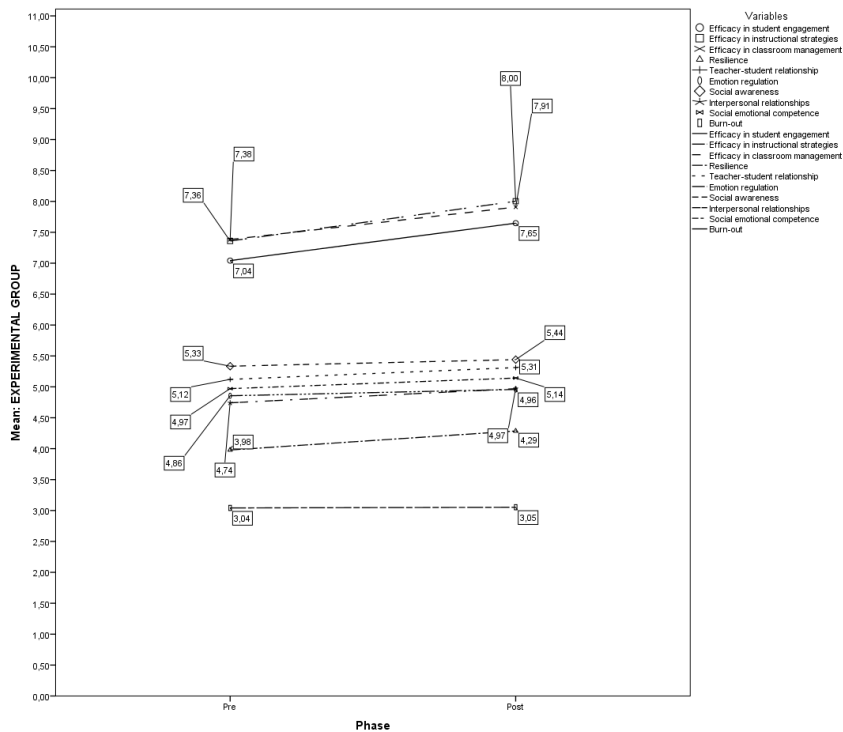
Source: Authors' own conception

Figure 5: Averages on teachers' self-efficacy (efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, efficacy in classroom management); teachers' resilience; teachers' social-emotional competence (teacher and student relationship, emotional regulation, social awareness, interpersonal relationships) and teachers' burnout separately for experimental and control group in the Post-test phase



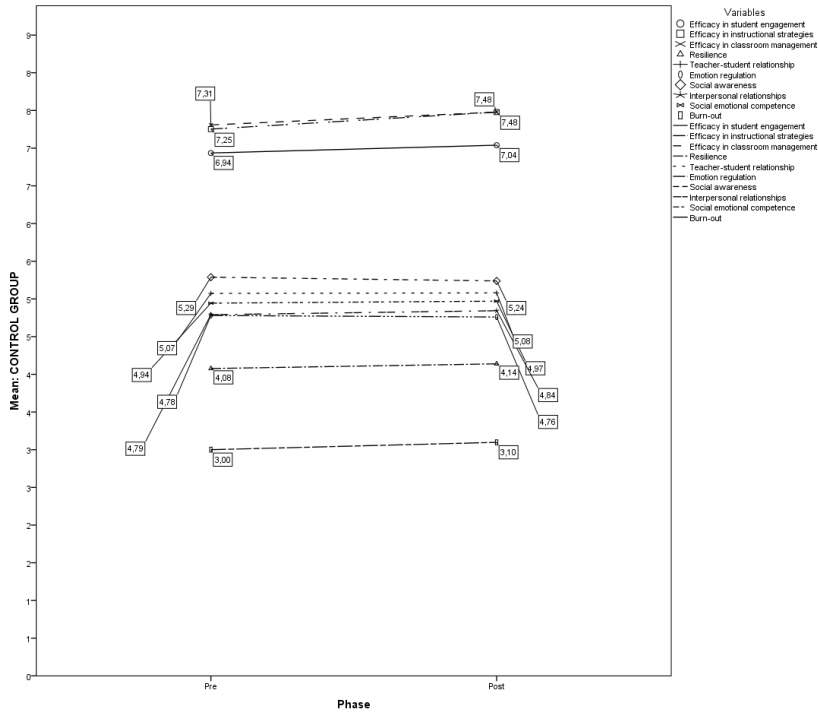
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Figure 6: Averages on teachers' self-efficacy (efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, efficacy in classroom management); teachers' resilience; teachers' social-emotional competence (teacher and student relationship, emotional regulation, social awareness, interpersonal relationships) and teachers' burnout separately for pre-test and post-test phases only for experimental group



Source: Authors' own conception

Figure 7: Averages on teachers' self-efficacy (efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional strategies, efficacy in classroom management); teachers' resilience; teachers' social-emotional competence (teacher and student relationship, emotional regulation, social awareness, interpersonal relationships) and teachers' burnout separately for pre-test and post-test phases only for control group



Source: Authors' own conception

Similar results were obtained through analysing the Romanian sample only (Colomeischi, 2022) showing that what teachers do conduct to their personal transformation and development, because not only the training, but also the entire process of curriculum implementation resulted in better psychological functioning. Comparing with other studies which measured the impact of programs for teachers, our results indicated optimization for all the teachers' personal competences versus other studies showing the social-emotional competence and the resilience were enhanced but not the teachers' self-efficacy (Fitzgerald et al., 2022). Other programs had similar effects on teachers' wellbeing showing self-efficacy enhancing and significant decreases in emotional exhaustion (Kim et al., 2021). Blewitt et al. (2020) in a systematic review pointed out that SEL programs may contribute to the optimization of teacher quality, especially related to

teacher-student interaction and effective classroom management which is consistent with the results of present study which underline the strengthening of the teachers' self-efficacy and social-emotional competences and their specific dimensions. The present study indicates that the trained teachers have better levels of self-efficacy regarding the class management and this result is consistent with the findings of studies showing that the experienced teachers have greater impact on the students' learning and psychological response (Wu et al., 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, it can be concluded that no significant differences were determined between those two groups in pre-test phase what implied at successful equalization of two comparison groups of teachers. Also, what was expected, after teachers' training and PROMEHS implementation only in experimental group, this group of teachers showed statistically higher levels of their self-efficacy, resilience and socio-emotional competencies than control group did.

Since these significant differences have been found only in experimental and not control group between pre- and post-test, the determined differences could be attributed only to the PROMEHS training effect. Even though the burnout level was lower in experimental group than in control after teachers' training, it was not determined as significant difference in the analysis, what was ascribed single-item measure used for this variable. Besides this research imitation regarding burn-out measure, in future one should have in mind bigger and more representative sample of teachers, especially regarding possible longitudinal effect of PROMEHS training and implementation on teachers' mental health. Nevertheless, determined findings are very valuable within the frame of PROMEHS teachers' training contribution and there is a strong need for its sustainability in kindergartens and schools in both countries.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

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