




# European Journal of Psychology and Educational Research

Volume 4, Issue 1, 51 - 67.

ISSN: 2589-949X

<https://www.ejper.com>

## WeCARE Intervention Program: An Online Multilevel International Program for Promoting Well-Being and Resilience in the School Community during Unsettling Times

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Received: October 4, 2019 ▪ Revised: March 8, 2021 ▪ Accepted: June 2, 2021

**Abstract:** During the second decade of the 21st century families and schools world-wide have been affected by several critical events, with economic recession, the refugee crisis, and lately the COVID-19 pandemic being the most prominent. Pertaining to the school community (students, educators, administration, parents, school personnel etc.), evidence-based interventions for improving mental health and supporting psychosocial adjustment are necessary. In this paper the development, implementation, and evaluation of the international WeCARE (We Connect, Accept, Respect, Empower) program, an online multilevel intervention for promoting well-being and resilience in the school community during unsettling times, is presented. The Program has a multicultural perspective and provides the opportunity to students from different countries to cooperate and develop multicultural skills. The intervention is based on a conceptual model for enhancing positive development, resilience, social and emotional skills, and competence. The interventions were implemented on individual and system levels over four consecutive years, including web-based teachers' training and supervision, seminars for parents, and classroom implementation. Furthermore, collaboration amongst schools and educational settings was highlighted, in the form of networking at national and international level. Based on the evaluation results, the necessity for further development and implementation of programs for the promotion of resilience and well-being during unsettling times is discussed.

**Keywords:** *Economic recession; psychological resilience; school networking; school well-being; web-based intervention program.*

**To cite this article:** Hatzichristou, C., Lianos, P., Lampropoulou, A., Yfanti, T., & Athanasiou, D. (2021). WeCARE intervention program: an online multilevel international program for promoting well-being and resilience in the school community during unsettling times. *European Journal of Psychology and Educational Research*, 4(1), 51-67. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ejper.4.1.51>

### Introduction

During the last few decades of the 20th century there have been many changes worldwide at a social, political and economic level. Consequently, new risks and global challenges have emerged highlighting the need for international initiatives and collaboration especially within the field of school psychology (Hughes et al., 2017; Splett et al., 2013). School psychologists are committed, from a social justice perspective, to promote change in favor of the underprivileged and deprived members of the school community and to develop best practices in order to counterbalance the possible negative effects of a constantly changing world (Hatzichristou, Lampropoulou et al., 2019; Shriberg et al., 2013).

This need has been even more intense in the face of various crisis events that have occurred during the last decade affecting school communities, such as the economic recession, refugee influx, natural disasters, and pandemics. As a result, the need for supporting vulnerable groups of the population has grown, aiming at the promotion of individual and system's resilience and well-being within the school community (Hatzichristou, Lianos et al., 2019).

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Greece is greatly affected by the economic recession from 2009 onwards. Unemployment peaked at around 28% in the summer of 2013 and remains still at high levels (16.2%, November 2020) (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2021). The situation was further enhanced by the refugee influx resulting into a “double crisis” situation causing a series of difficulties to all members of school communities (Giannakopoulos & Anagnostopoulos, 2016; Hatzichristou et al., 2017). Hence the need to develop and implement intervention programs for supporting school communities became a priority.

A number of intervention programs were developed and implemented by the Laboratory of School Psychology (LSP) of the Department of Psychology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, following the consecutive phases of economic recession from its onset to its climax (Hatzichristou & Lianos, 2016). These programs were part of the Connecting for Caring project, a multi-level prevention, awareness-building, education and intervention project based on a holistic approach to foster positive development, adjustment and support of children and adolescents in schools and families. The project was supported by the generous donation of several foundations.

The first two school-based intervention programs were (a) Supporting in Crisis (Hatzichristou et al., 2014) and (b) Ε.Μ.Ε.Ι.Σ (Ενδιαφερόμαστε/Care – Μοιραζόμαστε/Share – Ενθαρρύνουμε/Encourage – Ισχυροποιούμε/Empower – Συμμετέχουμε/Participate) (Hatzichristou et al., 2017), implemented at the beginning of the recession. As the economic crisis evolved, the International WeCARE (We Connect, Accept, Respect, Empower) Program was developed and implemented online with the participation of teachers and students from different countries.

This paper presents the development, implementation and evaluation of the International WeCARE Program, an online multilevel – i.e., teacher training, consultation/supervision and classroom implementation – intervention, focusing on promoting school communities’ resilience and positive climate in times of economic recession.

### Literature Review

An alternative multi-level model combining research, training, consultation and intervention has been developed by the Laboratory of School Psychology, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in Greece for supporting school communities. The conceptual framework of the model depicts a notion of school well-being and incorporates current trends, concepts and theoretical approaches in school psychology. Social justice principles, positive psychology and ecological-systemic perspectives constitute core approaches of the conceptual framework, while key concepts of the model are resilience, positive school climate, social and emotional learning, multi-cultural competence, schools as caring communities (Table 1). In addition, a multi-level model for crisis preparedness and intervention with multi-layered, multi-dimensional, and multi-faceted approaches considering cultural construction factors and cross-cultural and transnational perspectives was included (see Hatzichristou, Lampropoulou et al., 2019 for a description of the model).

Table 1. List of concepts and theoretical approaches

Theoretical approaches	Considerations
Social Justice principles	The idea of protecting the rights and opportunities for all (Shriberg & Clinton, 2016)
Positive psychology	The scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues (Sheldon & King, 2001)
Systemic Theory/System Level Interventions	The system is perceived as the synthesis of its parts that interact with each other and is considered to be more than the sum of these parts (Sillitto et al., 2017)
<b>Concepts</b>	
Resilience	The process of, capacity for, or outcome of, successful adaptation despite challenging, adverse or threatening circumstances (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016)
Positive (school and classroom) climate	Sense of safety; mutual understanding, positive peer and student-teacher relationships; students’ engagement and satisfaction from the school context; satisfaction from the school’s physical environment related to better academic performance, sense of belonging and school connectedness (Gietz & McIntosh, 2014)

Table 1. Continued

Concepts	Considerations
Social and 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, 2012)
Schools as Caring Communities	The extent at which schools motivate and engage students in learning and provide all members of school communities with opportunities to be active members and diligently involved in school life (Carson, 2017)
Multi-cultural competence	The skills of understanding, communicating and interacting effectively with people across cultures (Fisher, 2020)
Crisis preparedness and intervention	Emphasis is on physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone, and on creating opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment (Brock & Jimerson, 2012).

### *School Networking*

The conceptual model was enriched by the inclusion of technology and the development of collaborative networks amongst schools within and among countries. The internationalization of school psychology and the acknowledgment of the need to create international collaborations and transnational approaches add up as important aspects of the modern school psychologist's role (Alsoqaih et al., 2017; Brown & Jimerson, 2015; Hatzichristou & Rosenfield, 2017). The function of the school as a stand-alone institution that caters primarily for the cognitive needs of students is being rapidly and steadily transformed into network-based communities that operate beyond their confined boundaries and form meaningful relations with the community. Within education, networks hold great potential to reshape both the environment and the system through increased cooperation, interconnectedness, and multi-agency (ET2020 Working Group Schools, 2018). It is supported that novel approaches to teaching should include a deeper understanding of connections, interactions and conversations via networks (Lieberman & Mace, 2010). Therefore, school networks are considered as learning communities better equipped to meet the needs of the students for success through working in partnership with one another, joint problem-solving, resource sharing, and the creation of new practices within the specific and particular school context (Mifsud, 2015).

The incorporation of social network services (SNS) into classroom teaching has been found to improve various educational aspects, such as exploration, collaboration between the students, and motivation (Doleck et al., 2019; Lau & Lam, 2012; Vollum, 2014). The uploading and sharing of educational resources can also play an important role in educators' professional development, bridging the gap between knowledge and practice (Rauch, 2016; Sotiriou et al., 2016).

The use of both synchronous and asynchronous web tools in the network's operation presents the users with many opportunities for connection, sharing and mutual learning. The goal of actively contributing and expanding a given network is essential for its establishment, development, and maintenance. However, it has been indicated that network participants, especially teachers, prefer simply to view existing content, even when they are given the option to contribute content to a social network site. This could also be the result of personal time restrictions and unfamiliarity with certain Web tools, making connecting with colleagues a low priority for the participants (Kamalodeen & Jameson-Charles, 2016). Therefore, the key to successful network building is the provision of adequate motivation for all the members that are invited to participate. Especially, since the youth of today is getting highly familiar with the use of technology, SNS provide an excellent opportunity for attracting students' interest and learning experiences (Won et al., 2015).

### *The International WeCARE Intervention Program*

The International WeCARE Program is a long-distance, web-based program for training teachers on classroom interventions that promote positive climate and resilience in the school community. The Program has a multicultural perspective and provides the opportunity to students from different countries to create bonds, cooperate, exchange experiences and develop multicultural skills that contribute to a better future life as resilient adults.

The goal of the program is to support students, teachers and schools during unsettling times through an international teachers' training program for building resilience and fostering a positive school climate. The thematic units of the program aim to: (a) promote positive climate and enhance resilience at both individual and classroom level; (b) identify and strengthen the values pertaining to the classroom and the school unit; (c) identify and express feelings especially within the context of adverse conditions; (d) cope with stress; and e) promote acceptance and respect of diversity, communication, understanding, cooperation.

Training was delivered through an interactive electronic platform and contained: (a) five teachers' training seminars with supervision and consultation sessions; (b) development and implementation of classroom activities in schools and joint

projects; (c) use of an online interactive educational game (Sailing4Caring); (d) development of an international school network; and (e) process and outcome evaluation of program effectiveness.

The International WeCARE Program was conducted via e-platform and with the use of the Sailing4Caring online educational interactive application. The structure of the program included: (a) distance training-supervision; (b) intervention in the classroom / in-class activities, (c) interactive applications/ cooperation among classrooms - the S4C interactive online educational application; (d) informing and raising awareness of parents; (e) development of an international database of best practices; and (f) initial assessment and evaluation of program effectiveness.

#### *Distance Training/Supervision*

Teachers from different regions of Greece and other countries entered the e-Learning environment and received training on the basic units of the Program (with the use of audiovisual material and printed material). The WeCARE Program curriculum included five modules (*Module A*: Promoting positive school climate and resilience in the school community, *Module B*: Recognizing and expressing emotions/ Coping with negative feelings, *Module C*: Understanding cognitive and psychological stress processes/ Suggestions for stress management, *Module D*: Accepting and respecting diversity in the school community, *Module E*: Closing of the Program/ Joint Group Project/ Evaluating implementation of Program in class).

#### *Intervention in the Classroom/ In-class activities*

During their training and via the e-platform, teachers had access to detailed and comprehensive instructions upon suggested in-class activities (with both audiovisual material and printed material) and the opportunity to communicate and cooperate with each other regarding the implementation of activities in the classroom. Furthermore, supervision and consultation (synchronous and asynchronous) were provided by members of the program's scientific team regarding in-class activities (online, via teleconferencing, e-learning platform and e-mail).

#### *Tracking Progress*

In the beginning of the Program, each class edited their own group charts, focusing on behavioral and positive characteristics goals (e.g., cooperation, friendly behavior). With the completion of each thematic unit, students and teachers reported the progress of achieving the class goals in graphs that tracked their progress.

#### *Interactive Platform/ Cooperation among Classrooms*

The Sailing4Caring online interactive educational application enabled the participating students to make a visual journey with the Sailing4Caring (S4C) Boat (Fig. 1). Classes from different countries were grouped together and were invited on an online journey to several islands-stations inspired by Homer's Odyssey (Figure 2). Each island-station was related to one thematic unit/module of the program. Via the S4C application, students were able to communicate, cooperate in joint-projects and communicate their work with their counterparts from other countries.

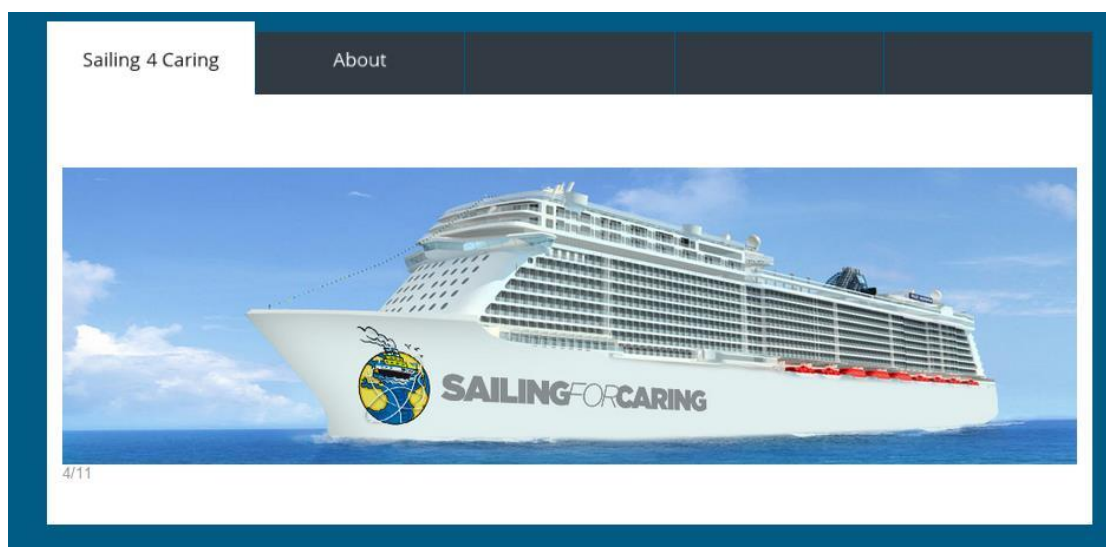


Figure 1. The Sailing4Caring (S4C) Boat as depicted in the Connecting4Caring platform.



Figure 2. The map of the online journey of the Sailing4Caring (S4C) Boat.

#### *Informing and Raising Awareness of Parents*

Students' parents were acquainted with the Program and were given the opportunity to access class projects via the Connecting4Caring online educational platform. Scientific articles and educational videos related to children's and adolescents' psychosocial adjustment, competence and development, as well as recommended activities for the whole family relevant to the thematic units of the program were available on the C4C site (Connecting4Caring, 2013).

#### *Development of an International Best Practices Database*

The outcomes of in-class activities were uploaded in the interactive platform as multicultural educational resources and best practices for promoting resilience and well-being in school communities worldwide.

#### *Innovative Characteristics*

The use of technology is primary and indispensable part of the WeCARE program (i.e., e-platform providing information, educational interactive applications). More specifically, the program: (a) is based on contemporary theoretical approaches and practices in school psychology that aim to enhance the functioning of vulnerable students; (b) uses new technologies and digital tools (distance training, online supervision and consultation, multimedia educational material, online educational interactive application) so as to achieve program's psychosocial goals; (c) includes structured in-class activities as related to students' psychosocial adjustment and learning engagement; (d) provides access for parents to useful educational activities and material relevant to the thematic units of the program via the online educational interactive platform; and (e) is permeated by the principles of multicultural and transnational school psychology and includes modules tailored to the emerging needs (emotional, social, cognitive, etc.) of all students, including migrant/refugee students. Furthermore, it brings together schools from around the world by building bridges of resilience, highlighting similar strengths and acknowledging the unique strengths of each setting.

#### *Context: An Innovative Idea and Implementation*

The WeCARE Program included distance-learning for teachers and classroom intervention. Teachers' training on the basic modules of the Program was both synchronous and asynchronous with the use of audiovisual material and printed material. Each module corresponded to islands (e.g., Calypso's Island, Island of the Lotus Eaters) as "harbors" on a sailing trip inspired by Ulysses' journey home to Ithaca from Homer's *Odyssey*. Teachers and their students had the opportunity to cooperate and virtually "travel together" with other schools from Greece and abroad, through the S4C online interactive educational platform. At the end of each module, all classes worked together on a joint Project (the "cabin") via the S4C

application (Fig. 3). Each class visited the online platform, in order to enrich and promote activities implemented in the classroom, and achieve communication, interaction and joint action with other participating classes around the world. Simultaneous supervision of the implementation of the activities was carried out by psychologists/LSP collaborators via the electronic platform.



Figure 3. Snapshot of a cabin taken from the Sailing4Caring (S4C) Boat application.

### Methodology

#### Research Goal

This article describes the benefits of the WeCARE program implementation for the school community. The goal of the study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the WeCARE program across the consecutive years of implementation in schools in Greece and in different countries during unsettling times. The evaluation procedure incorporated quantitative and qualitative measures for continuous monitoring of program satisfaction, quality, and outcomes, following a plan that has guided the implementation of the program since its inception.

#### Sample and Data Collection

The participants are presented in Table 2. The program was implemented in school classes where lessons were taught in the Greek language. Implementation spanned across four school years (four implementation phases). During the second implementation phase, the International Program WeCARE was made available to non-Greek speaking schools; a pilot group implemented the program in English, with teachers and students from schools across Greece, Belgium and the USA. Each year new school communities were invited to participate, increasing the number of countries to thirteen worldwide. This consideration broadened the number of school communities that participated.

In the fourth year of implementation, due to refugee students' integration in "typical education", a short survey concerning their participation and the effects from the Program was conducted in multicultural schools from the wider area of Athens.

Table 2. Participants in the WeCARE program

Project Phases	Participants		Primary Schools [N (%)]	Secondary Schools [N (%)]	Countries
	Teachers (N)	Students (N)			
Phase 1	62 teachers (79.6% female)	1,061 Greek students and second and third generation immigrant Greek students	34 (69.4%)	15 (30.6%)	Greece, Cyprus, United Kingdom, Ireland, USA and Belgium
Phase 2	135 teachers (73.3% female)	2,060 Greek students and second and third generation immigrant Greek students	104 (79.1%)	27(20.9%)	Greece, Cyprus, United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, Ethiopia, Canada, USA, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands

Table 2. Continued

Project Phases	Participants		Primary Schools [N (%)]	Secondary Schools [N (%)]	Countries
	Teachers (N)	Students (N)			
Phase 3	104 teachers (86.5% female)	1,782 students	52 (78.8%)	14 (21.2%)	Greece, Belgium, United Kingdom, Germany, USA, and Australia
phase 4	128 teachers (86.8% female)	1,838 students	83 (79.9%)	31 (30.1)	Greece, United Kingdom, USA, and Australia

Schools' needs for psychological support during the period of economic recession were identified by participating teachers who completed an online questionnaire regarding the impact of economic crisis on the school community on individual and systemic level (e.g., What was the impact of economic crisis on student's life? What were the deficiencies and problems schools are facing due to economic recession? What concerns you the most with regard to the economic crisis at a personal level?). All responses were quantitatively analyzed and wider categories were identified.

In addition, teachers were asked to fill in the "School as a Caring Community Profile-II-SCCP-II questionnaire (Lickona & Davidson, 2003), designed to assess the degree to which school stakeholders perceive school as a caring community characterized by good relationships and positive climate. The questionnaire includes 42 items which provide the following dimensions: (a) Perceptions of Student Respect (e.g., Students treat classmates with respect); (b) Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging (e.g., Students exclude people who are 'different'); (c) Perceptions of Students' Shaping of their Environment (e.g., Students try to have a positive influence on the behavior of other students); (d) Perceptions of Support and Care by and for the Staff (e.g., In this school you can count on efforts made by staff members to make sure that students are safe); and (e) Perceptions of Support and Care by and For Parents (e.g., In this school parents are treated with respect). In the present process the fourth dimension regarding the staff was not included as it was not part of the intervention goals. Cronbach's *alphas* ranged from .84 to .91 in the years of implementation.

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (Cohen et al., 1983) designed to assess the degree of stress experienced by teachers was administered. Respondents are asked about feelings and thoughts during the last month. PSS scores are obtained by reversing responses to the four positively stated items (items 4, 5, 7, & 8) and then summing across all ten scale items (e.g., In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?). Cronbach's *alphas* ranged from .79 to .83 in the years of implementation.

Process assessment surveys for teachers and students regarding the assessment of each thematic unit were conducted. Open-ended questions included such examples as "How much did your students like the activities implemented in class?" and "How much did your students enjoy participating in group activities?" In the last phase of the program several open-ended questions regarding the inclusion of immigrant/refugee students in multicultural schools were added to the progress assessment (e.g., How well did immigrant/refugee students do in relation to the Program; Which thematic units would you suggest for future implementation to your students from other countries?). Relevant questions about the factors fostering immigrant/refugee students' adjustment in Greece were also posed.

Two open-ended questions about the gains from the training sessions and the program at a professional (e.g. What have you gained from your participation in the training seminar and the Program at a professional level?) and personal level (e.g. What have you gained from your participation in the training sessions and the implementation of the Program at a personal level?) were posed to the teachers and their answers were analyzed and classified into themes according to their content (thematic analysis). Lastly, teachers were asked to fill in a demographic data questionnaire concerning their age, gender, family status, occupational experience and level of education. The same survey was conducted during all four phases of implementation, in order to evaluate the program's effectiveness across the four years of its implementation.

Following the university research ethics process, information emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time was provided on the first page of the survey. Informed consent was required for participation. Parental consent was also required for the student's participation.

### Analyzing of Data

The International online WeCARE program follows essentially the same structure as EMEIS intervention program, which has been empirically evaluated using intervention/comparison groups in schools in Greece (Hatzichristou et al., 2014, 2017). Research methodology was based on a before-after (pre-post) study protocol, a valid type of interventional study design (Robson et al., 2001).

The research design for the program evaluation included: (a) assessment of participating schools' needs in order to make any necessary modifications prior to the implementation; (b) initial evaluation, before the implementation of the program

(pre-assessment), regarding the learning and psychosocial profile of the schools taking into consideration the goals of the intervention; (c) process evaluation during the implementation of the program; and (d) final assessment for evaluation of the program's effectiveness(post-assessment).

Assumptions for normal distribution of the data were examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and indices were found significant at  $p < .001$ . Therefore, normality assumptions were considered to be violated. However, pre- and post-assessment data were compared using paired sample  $t$ -tests, which compare the means of two measurements taken from the same individual at different time periods (i.e., before and after the intervention). The null hypothesis estimated that the mean difference between the paired observations was zero. Paired sample  $t$ -tests were preferred to Wilcoxon signed-rank test, since the robustness of the  $t$ -tests to deviations from normality is greater (Fagerland, 2012). All inferential statistics analyses were conducted using SPSS v.24 at a specified critical  $p$ -value of  $< .05$ .

Data collection procedures included also a qualitative approach to investigate the way informants experience and understand specific phenomena, such as social justice principles, economic recession etc., in a given context (Smith, 2011).

## Results

### *Needs Assessment/Economic Recession*

Regarding the impact of economic crisis on student's life, teachers report that students at a higher degree: (a) couldn't afford participating in school excursions; b) couldn't afford participating in cultural school events; (c) attended less extracurricular activities; (d) expressed more intrapersonal and interpersonal behavior problems; and (e) came to school with significantly less pocket money or without lunch (Table 3).

*Table 3. Impact of economic crisis on children's life*

This year students in my class:	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
cannot afford participating in school excursions	70 (49.6)	51 (45.5)	5 (8.3)	34 (29.1)
lack new clothing and footwear	23 (16.3)	11 (11)	6 (10.3)	33 (28.2)
cannot afford attending after-school private tutorial classes	47 (33.3)	29 (26.9)	15 (20.5)	30 (28.6)
express more intra-personal behavior problems	33 (23.4)	25 (24)	8 (11.1)	25 (21.4)
attend less extracurricular activities	49 (34.8)	22 (19.8)	13 (16.5)	22 (18.8)
come to school without lunch	27 (19.1)	12 (12.6)	1 (1.8)	19 (16.2)
have too many unexcused absences	3 (2.1)	7 (7.8)	14 (17.9)	15 (12.8)
cannot afford basic school essentials	18 (12.8)	14 (14.9)	13 (16.5)	15 (12.8)
cannot afford participating in cultural school events	66 (46.8)	46 (39.3)	10 (13)	12 (10.3)
come to school with significantly less pocket money	40 (28.4)	28 (25.5)	21 (28)	20 (10)
complain about physical discomfort	21(14.9)	12 (12.6)	7 (11.1)	11 (9.4)
express more interpersonal behavior problems	44 (31.2)	28 (25.5)	20 (26)	8 (6.8)

Teachers also reported that the deficiencies and problems schools are facing due to economic recession are: (a) lack of technical-material equipment; (b) maintenance problems; (c) security issues; (d) teaching staff deficiency; (e) heating problems; and (f) cleaning problems (Table 4).

*Table 4. Schools' deficiencies and problems due to economic crisis*

Deficiencies and problems	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
lack of technical-material equipment	78 (55.3)	69 (54.3)	40 (38.5)	91 (46.4)
maintenance problems	69 (48.9)	65 (51.6)	40 (38.5)	76 (38.8)
security issues	56 (39.7)	47 (37)	28 (27.5)	-
teaching staff deficiency	53 (37.6)	32 (25.4)	28 (27.5)	56 (28.6)
heating problems	47 (33.3)	42 (32.8)	19 (18.4)	31 (15.8)
cleaning problems	43 (30.5)	19 (15.2)	13 (12.6)	29 (14.8)

Regarding the recession, teachers were mainly concerned at a personal level with: (a) financial issues; (b) worries about the well-being of their own family; (c) living conditions and quality of life; (d) unpleasant feelings they experience due to the economic crisis (e.g. insecurity, confusion, pessimism, depressed mood, anxiety, stress, uncertainty for the future, lack of resilience to cope with problems); (e) worries about their personal well-being; and (f) social problems, such as social changes, starvation-deprivation-impoverishment of people, lack of solidarity.

At a professional level, teachers were seriously concerned with their personal job-related state (e.g., dismissal, working conditions/ lack of quality, lack of educational/ training opportunities and continuing education, non-objective evaluation, pressure, stress, insecurity, anxiety, concern for coming changes). In addition, teachers worried about how to support their students and the impact on education. They were also concerned about the negative/unpleasant feelings they experience



in relation to their job, such as pressure, insecurity, anxiety and concern for coming changes. Lastly, several teachers worried about social issues regarding the relationships among colleagues.

Conclusively, the results indicated that although all members of school communities were affected in negative ways, they were not affected in similar ways. School teachers stressed the changes in the life of students due to income reduction (e.g., inability to participate in school activities), as well as the increase of problems regarding interpersonal and intrapersonal behavior of children and adolescents. However, certain stability was evident; the greatest changes were caused in the beginning of the economic crisis, while at the end of the program (phase 4) the situation remained steady, although difficult. Teachers also expressed their personal concerns regarding their own difficulties in their everyday life, but mainly their intense anxiety and distress on how to support their students. Their concerns pointed out the need for support and the necessity of the intervention.

### *Implementation in the Classroom*

Teachers reported that students seemed to better cooperate with their classmates, they showed greater respect and supported each other more. In addition, teachers reported that their students were very interested and actively participated in the activities and the program was very beneficial to the students and enhanced the cooperation spirit. Results also revealed that teachers and students had a very positive attitude towards the program and recognized its effectiveness and its benefits towards them.

Regarding the topics discussed in the classroom during the last phase, most students pinpointed emotions and stress/coping (66%), diversity (31%), the building of cooperation and team spirit (35%), and the improvement of classroom climate (14%). They felt that the program helped them to improve themselves on a personal level by achieving goals, such as becoming an active team member (23%), handling difficult emotions (23%), achieving self-awareness (20%), expressing emotions (17%) and building efficient relationships (13%). As a classroom, students were assisted by the program to achieve cooperation (32%), to improve relationships (25%), to show respect and help each other (17%), to improve classroom climate (12%) and talk more openly about their emotional experiences (12%).

In the last phase of the Program the presence of immigrant/refugee students in schools was investigated. Two multicultural schools in the wider area of Athens participated in the implementation. Teachers stressed that the Program and especially the thematic units of emotions and diversity were very helpful for these students. Furthermore, teachers ( $N=14$ ) answered that immigrant/refugee students showed interest and they were benefited from the activities. Most teachers chose all thematic units of the program for future implementation to the students from other countries, while six teachers stated a preference to the units of emotions (Module B), coping (Module C) and diversity (Module D). Specific activities for promoting students' adjustment were undertaken, such as role-playing, group games and watching movies regarding different cultures.

Good, friendly behavior was indicated as the main prerequisite for adjustment by all of the students, together with acceptance (55%), and the opportunity for emotional expression (12%). Respect of equality rights was also highlighted by several students (15%). Peers were asked to send messages to the immigrant/refugee students' teacher. They produced such responses as being supportive (85%) and more friendly (15%). Ultimately, peers were also asked to send messages to their immigrant/refugee classmates. These messages included demanding equal rights (49%), trusting themselves (24%), and accepting diversity (24%).

### *Post Assessment*

After the implementation of the Program, teachers were invited to answer questions related to the effectiveness of the Program for both their students and themselves at a professional and personal level. Upon the completion of the Program, overall evaluation included various dimensions with regard to utility, benefit and effectiveness of the Program, as well as teachers' experience from their participation in the Program. As the Program evolved throughout its years of implementation, means increased, especially from the pilot phase (phase 1) to the main three phases of the intervention for all the dimensions examined (Table 5).

More specifically, there were high mean values in all teachers' answers related to students' active involvement and interest, as well as to the utility of the Program. The highest mean values found were those concerning the questions "How much did your students like the activities implemented in class?" and "How much did your students enjoy participating in group activities?" The lowest mean value was that concerning the question "To what extent do you believe the voting process/graphs at the end of each Unit helped your students?" which –even though the lowest mean value – was still above midscale. The mean values to questions concerning teachers' personal satisfaction from the implementation of the Program – and particularly from their cooperation with other schools and with the Program Coordinators – were equally high.

Table 5. Mean values and standard deviations of teachers' overall evaluation of the Program

Students' participation in the Program	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
	M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)
How satisfactory was your students' participation in the Program?	3.00 (.79)	3.41 (.61)	3.53 (.58)	3.26 (.71)
How much interest did your students show in the Program?	2.96 (.84)	3.51 (.60)	3.55 (.55)	3.24 (.83)
How much did your students like the topics discussed in class?	2.92 (.73)	3.50 (.59)	3.41 (.57)	3.53 (.58)
How much did your students like the activities implemented in class?	3.02 (.83)	3.49 (.56)	3.44 (.61)	3.56 (.56)
How much did your students like the discussions held in class?	2.96 (.76)	3.46 (.61)	3.31 (.62)	3.44 (.63)
How much did your students enjoy participating in group activities?	3.04 (.79)	3.36 (.59)	3.59 (.59)	3.56 (.60)
To what extent do you believe the voting process/graphs at the end of each Unit helped your students?	-	2.70 (.72)	2.79 (.87)	2.77 (.76)
To what extent do you believe the goals of the Program have been achieved?	2.42 (.70)	2.97 (.76)	3.18 (.61)	2.97 (.54)
How much did your students like the online interactive game Sailing4Caring?	3.16 (.93)	3.52 (.57)	3.42 (.66)	3.48 (.65)
To what extent do you believe the online interactive game Sailing4Caring contributed to the achievement of the Program goals?	2.48 (.87)	3.39 (.62)	3.11 (.74)	3.25 (.69)
<b>Teachers' evaluation of cooperation</b>				
How satisfactory was your cooperation with other schools through the online interactive game Sailing4Caring?	-	2.67 (.83)	2.53 (.80)	2.60 (.77)
How satisfactory was your cooperation with the Program Coordinators?	-	3.64 (.50)	3.58 (.59)	3.62 (.52)
How satisfactory was your communication with the other teachers in your group (forum)?	-	2.60 (.82)	2.68 (.87)	2.76 (.93)
How important do you believe it is to have the Program implemented next year?	-	3.67 (.49)	3.19 (.81)	3.47 (.63)

(1= Not at all, 2=Moderately, 3=A lot, 4=Very Much)

Lastly, the teachers were asked to make suggestions and comments on the Program. They highlighted the innovative elements in the WeCARE Program, addressing mostly certain characteristics, such as the interactive platform (33%), thematic units (26%), the distance learning platform (22%) and the inter-connection of schools (19%). Most answers concerned: a) continuation of the Program and online communication, b) technological upgrading of the game and c) having more in-person meetings. Similarly, almost all of the students that participated in the program's evaluation (89%) were positive towards to the continuation of the Program, proposing several topics for future discussion, such as friendship (38%), family/parents (34%), racism (10%), and bullying (9%).

#### Individual and Systemic Factors Assessment

When evaluating the degree to which teachers perceive school as a caring community, mean values with regard to all school-related dimensions after the intervention were found to be quite far above the midscale. The increase in mean values of all factors after the implementation of the intervention was found to be statistically significant in all cases. The same findings apply for the stress perceived by teachers, as the mean values after the intervention during all the years dropped significantly (Table 6).

In addition, it was examined whether there were differences in how teachers perceived their classroom profile before and after the intervention (learning, socio-emotional and behavioral skills). Statistically significant differences were identified in all mean values. More specifically, mean values of students' skills related to the Program demonstrated significant increase after the intervention, while mean values of students' learning and behavioral difficulties decreased (Table 7).

Table 6. Assessment of the degree to which teachers perceive school as a caring community and perceived stress

Subscales SCCP-II	Phase 1		t (df)	d	Phase 2		t (df)	d	Phase 3		t (df)	d	Phase 4		t (df)	d
	Pre-M (S.D.)	Post-M (S.D.)			Pre-M (S.D.)	Post-M (S.D.)			Pre-M (S.D.)	Post-M (S.D.)			Pre-M (S.D.)	Post-M (S.D.)		
-Perceptions of Student Respect	3.33 (.62)	3.60 (.60)	-5.52 (89)**	.44	3.49 (.68)	4.15 (.52)	-6.13 (74)**	1.14	3.68(.64)	4.34 (.41)	- 6.33(33)**	1.23	3.55 (.57)	4.16 (.26)	-8.37 (48)**	1.3 8
-Perceptions of Student Friendship and Belonging	3.21 (.59)	3.52 (.55)	-6.38 (90)**	.54	3.07 (.65)	3.81 (.54)	-7.16 (75)**	1.24	3.23 (.66)	4.05 (.56)	-7.23 (38)**	1.34	3.02 (.72)	4.07 (.59)	-11.36 (50)**	1.6 0
-Perceptions of Students' Shaping of Their Environment	2.74 (.61)	3.15 (.70)	-7.35 (89)**	.63	2.65 (.68)	3.47 (.59)	-7.06 (66)**	1.32	2.70 (.77)	3.75 (.72)	-8.48 (38)**	1.41	2.59 (.77)	3.73 (.73)	-11.72 (62)**	1.5 2
-Perceptions of Support and Care By and For Parents	4.27 (.49)	4.37 (.50)	-2.24 (89)*	.20	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3.92 (.60)	4.22 (.53)	-4.02 (54)**	2.1 2
-Perceived Stress	-	-	-	-	25.17 (4.88)	23.36 (5.06)	2,36 (81)*	.36	25.24 (5.02)	23.83 (4.42)	2.43 (52)*	.30	24.50 (4.06)	16.80 (2.87)	11.39 (63)**	2.1 9

Note: \* p<.05, \*\*p<.001.

Table 7. Assessment of the degree to which teachers perceive their classroom profile

Questions in relation to the goals of the Program (To what extent do you believe...) <sup>a</sup>	Phase 2		t(df=100)	d	Phase 3		t(df=72)	d	Phase 4		t(df=63)	d
	Pre-	Post-			Pre-	Post-			Pre-	Post-		
	M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)			M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)			M (S.D.)	M (S.D.)		
-...that your students express their feelings?	3.09 (.84)	3.59 (.69)	-4.36**	.65	2.98 (.77)	3.78 (.44)	-7.70**	1.28	3.15 (.82)	3.95 (.77)	-7.77**	1.01
-...that your students handle their negative emotions?	2.28 (.64)	3.07 (.59)	-8.84**	1.28	2.36 (.71)	3.30 (.49)	-10.11**	1.54	2.20 (.51)	3.33 (.78)	-9.81**	1.72
-...that your students manage their stress?	2.36 (.71)	3.16 (.61)	-9.42**	1.21	2.29 (.68)	3.37 (.54)	-11.74**	1.76	2.35 (.63)	3.42 (.75)	-9.76**	1.55
-...that your students accept diversity in the school community?	3.12 (.86)	3.86 (.81)	-6.97**	.89	3.22 (.79)	3.84 (.36)	-6.68**	1.01	3.10 (.89)	4.22 (.76)	-9.93**	1.35
-...that your students understand the importance of setting personal goals?	2.57 (.73)	3.28 (.85)	-6.98**	.90	2.43 (.62)	3.43 (.64)	-10.54**	1.59	2.45 (.69)	3.45 (.89)	-8.33**	1.26
-...that your students understand the importance of setting goals as a class?	2.55 (.79)	3.31 (.82)	-6.19**	.94	2.53 (.72)	3.52 (.62)	-9.47**	1.47	2.48 (.73)	3.58 (.90)	-9.01**	1.34
<b>Questions about students' learning and behavior</b>												
-Do you believe that your students face learning difficulties? <sup>b</sup>	3.07 (1.02)	2.64 (1.02)	3.74**	.42	2.93 (1.04)	2.52 (.92)	4.14**	.42	3.12 (.84)	2.66 (.78)	5.44**	.57
-Do you believe that your students present behavior problems? <sup>b</sup>	3.27 (1.14)	2.46 (.83)	5.79**	.81	3.05 (1.11)	2.42 (.78)	5.24**	.66	3.34 (.87)	2.61 (.84)	6.84**	.85
-Do you believe that your students actively participate in the learning process? <sup>b</sup>	-	-	-	-	4.31 (1.06)	2.86 (1.34)	6.42**	1.20	4.17 (.82)	4.47 (.75)	-2.41*	.38
-How would you generally characterize your class this year? <sup>v</sup>	3.29 (1.20)	2.95 (1.08)	3.08**	.29	3.28 (1.03)	2.84 (1.19)	4.10**	.40	3.56 (1.21)	3.17 (1.21)	3.77**	.32
-How would you characterize the learning level of your class this year? <sup>d</sup>	2.95 (1.03)	2.67 (1.05)	2.60*	.27	3.05 (1.12)	2.38 (1.16)	5.31**	.59	3.16 (1.04)	2.73 (1.09)	3.73**	.40

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.001

\*Scale: <sup>a</sup>1= Not at all, 2= little, 3=Quite a lot, 4=Much, 5=Very much; <sup>b</sup>1=not at all to 6=very much; <sup>c</sup>1=very easy to 6=very difficult; <sup>d</sup>1=not low at all to 6=too high

*Online Training*

The main categories deriving from questions related to the utility and benefit of teachers at a professional level are common for both elementary and secondary education teachers and are the following: (a) acquiring knowledge and skills (43 teachers, 65%, e.g., “The Program helped me to be trained in new subjects in the field of student’s development that I can also apply in class”); (b) improvement of relationships at school (12 teachers, 18%, e.g. “We strengthened our relationship with the students and our ability to communicate with them”); and (c) coping with difficult conditions in the classroom (10 teachers, 15%, e.g. “I learned to manage difficult situations involving emotional behaviors in the classroom quietly and calmly and put through things with my students within a given time frame”).

The main categories deriving from questions related to the utility and benefit of teachers at a personal level were common for both elementary and secondary education teachers and are the following: (a) acquiring knowledge (17 teachers, 27%, e.g., “I gained knowledge in subjects concerning the psychology of students and crisis management in school and classroom”); (b) coping with personal difficulties (17 teachers, 27%, e.g., “I learned to manage stressful situations”); (c) self-empowerment/ self-awareness/ self-improvement (19 teachers, 30%, “I got to know myself and my reactions better”); (d) experiencing positive feelings (6 teachers, 9%, e.g., “I felt very well, I traveled with the children in the world of fantasy and beautiful emotions”); and (e) improvement of relationships (5 teachers, 8%, e.g., “It helped me develop a closer relationship with my students, to open up more and gain confidence among us”).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this article is to present the usefulness of the International WeCARE Program and its implementation in a wider context for promoting well-being and resilience in the school community during unsettling times. The installation of the evidence-based intervention adhered to several characteristics of implementation science, such as development of administrative and teacher support, provision of high-quality training and consultation methodology, alignment with school goals, and visibility of outcomes, which can improve the prospect of the successful outcome of an intervention (Forman et al., 2009; Smith & Polaha, 2017). Findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the program in all levels of implementation, especially during the critical phases of the recession.

The findings indicated that the economic recession was still affecting school community members in Greece during the period of the program’s implementation. Elementary and secondary school teachers stressed the changes in the student’s lives due to income reduction (e.g., inability to participate in school activities), as well as the increase of problems regarding interpersonal and intrapersonal behavior of children and adolescents. However, certain stability is evident since the greatest changes were caused in the beginning of the crisis; while at the time of implementation still remained adverse. The acknowledgment of the increased difficulties in various aspects of children and adolescent’s life due to the economic recession was evident in several research studies conducted in Greece and other affected countries as well (Hatzichristou et al., 2014, 2018; United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2014). It should be noted that the difficulties experienced by school communities related to the economic recession -which is still an issue in Greece- were further escalated with the occurrence of additional adversities such as the refugee influx, the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters (Hatzichristou, Lianos et al. 2019).

Teachers also expressed their personal concerns regarding their own difficulties in their everyday life, but mainly their intense anxiety and distress on how to support their students. They identified their students’ social and emotional need for improvement and pointed out the learning and behavioral difficulties that appeared in the classroom. Especially, concerning the immigrant/refugee students, teachers pinpointed the need for support and appropriate preparation of the native students to integrate with the newcomers through the implementation of an intervention based on diversity acceptance. This finding further highlights the need for supporting vulnerable group of students especially during adversities and the importance of developing cultural appropriate interventions which is highly considered as a core prevention competency (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2021). According to the teachers, the program was beneficial for students coming from other countries since it provided them with the opportunity to express themselves, while at the same time had an effect on native students enhancing their acceptance and team spirit.

The final evaluation of the program demonstrated statistically significant differences in all factors concerning the context of the school as a caring community. Both elementary and secondary education teachers reported that after the implementation of the Program their students started showing higher respect, more willingness to cooperate and more active participation in school procedures, while parents were more respected and involved in the school. In addition, teachers recognized that their students started to express their feelings more openly, manage more effectively their negative feelings, accept diversity and understand the importance of setting targets both as individuals and as a whole class. At the same time, teachers reported that students’ behavioral and learning problems reduced after the intervention, and that their class became much “easier” to handle. It seems that the implementation of the program contributed to having students’ individual goals achieved and to reducing their learning and behavioral problems. The findings stress the effectiveness and the necessity of the development and implementation of prevention and

intervention programs in schools, especially during difficult times, in order to enhance resilience at an individual and school level (Hatzichristou, Lianos et al., 2019; Mahoney et al., 2018)

Teachers' answers also showed high acceptance of the program and recognition of its utility at multiple levels for both students and teachers at personal and professional level. However, it should be mentioned that time pressure was the main difficulty in the program implementation as reported repeatedly by teachers, while there were also some technical difficulties that caused problems mainly in the beginning. Teachers' answers concerning the utility of thematic modules and the overall program demonstrated high acceptance rate, as well as recognition of its great effectiveness and utility. More specifically, teachers believe that: a) their students showed high interest and active participation in the activities of the Program; b) the program benefited their students by significantly enhancing their team spirit and cooperation; and c) the continuation of the program's implementation is of critical importance. The importance of implementation continuation, the enhancement of team connectedness, bonding and cooperation and the acknowledgment of the beneficial outcomes of such intervention programs both for learning and psychosocial development are highly stressed in the relevant literature (National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2017; Taylor et al., 2017)

Furthermore, teachers recognized that the Program was innovative and that interconnection with other schools was particularly helpful; it was actually what themselves and their students mostly enjoyed. The graphics, structure and form of activities implemented were particularly attractive to the students and contributed highly to have goals fulfilled. School interconnection and the interactive game were greatly accepted by both students and teachers, who underlined how much they liked the highly innovative features of the Program. Teachers emphasized that they particularly liked the fact that the program focused on connecting theory and practice, providing updated scientific items of knowledge, and not only simple activities to be implemented which is also in accordance with social justice principles (Hatzichristou, Lampropoulou et al., 2019).

Finally, teachers pointed out that the Program was especially beneficial for students coming from other countries since they were provided with the opportunity to express themselves, while at the same time posed a positive effect on the native students enhancing the acceptance of their immigrant/refugee classmates and team spirit. Findings, especially from students coming from other countries, show that the Program had a positive effect on them directly (by allowing them to express their feelings) and indirectly (by influencing the classroom climate and creating a more understanding and accepting environment for them). The importance of primary intervention programs in promoting multicultural understanding and inclusion of all members of the school community irrespectively of ethnic/racial and economic backgrounds is highly stressed in the literature (Barnes & McCallops, 2019). It should also be mentioned that students' comments regarding what helped them adjust were in accordance with the goals of the Program, stressing once again its necessity for the school community (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Students recognized the importance of the Program both at a personal and system level. Their remarks regarding their attitude towards the program concur with those of the teachers demonstrating high acceptance rate, as well as recognition of its great effectiveness and utility. Students especially enjoyed the activities and their participation in team working, while they recognized that the Program helped them to improve their peer relationships and emotional expression. The use of computer and the cooperation with other schools via the online game were reported to be also very attractive. The beneficial use of technology and networking and the positive reports of teachers and students adds to the literature regarding the power of networking in enhancing learning and engagement at an individual and system level (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). Moreover, they believed that the Program enhanced team spirit in the class in order to achieve learning and psychosocial goals, such as becoming a team, building cooperation and team membership, handling difficult emotions and to know themselves and experiencing greater respect among students, better school climate and eventually a greater sense of the school as a caring community (Carson, 2017; Hatzichristou et al., 2018).

The program was highly accepted by parents also, as they pointed out the interesting and innovative nature of the intervention and supported the need for further and in-depth information in such issues. According to teachers' perceptions, parents seemed to have benefited from the program since after the program parents were found to be feeling more supported and cared for by the teachers and vice versa. This finding further highlights the beneficial outcomes when implementing such programs in schools for all members of the school community (Meyers et al., 2018)

### Conclusion

The International WeCARE Program was effective and widely accepted by teachers, students and parents. Changes in class climate, learning and psychosocial adjustment at both individual and class level were identified. Students, teachers and parents recognized the utility of the Program, emphasized its innovative features and reported their satisfaction from participation. All members of the school community expressed the necessity for the continuation of similar evidence-based interventions. Results from previous studies emphasize the need for developing multidimensional mental well-being interventions in schools (Cilar et al., 2020). Especially for students from disadvantaged families, the benefits from implementing mental health interventions in the school setting are most

profound. The effectiveness of evidence-based interventions, such as the International WeCARE Program, that combines innovative characteristics and the use of SNS highlights this important dimension in delivering network-based school mental health services. Finally, the outcome of the WeCARE program implementation accentuate the important role universities can play for supporting school communities, especially in unsettling times, regardless of contextual or cultural factors (Hatzichristou, Lianos et al., 2019),

### Recommendations

The development and implementation of primary prevention programs in schools for promoting well-being and resilience, especially in times of adversity, is highly suggested. However, it is essential to incorporate innovative practices, such as the use of technology and networking, that can act as a means for motivating and enhancing learning and psychosocial adjustment for students and professional development for teachers. A key step is the provision of resources to schools and the appropriate support to teachers in order to be able to perform such innovative tasks. Enabling schools to establish contacts and partnerships and develop an international network can contribute to the development of bridges of communication for exchange ideas, best practices and cultivate connectedness within and among schools. Universities in particular can serve as change agents in order to develop and provide such services in schools thus linking theory, practice, new developments and innovations with practice in the best interest of school communities.

### Limitations

Limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Although a pre-post assessment of the intervention was implemented, the self-report nature of the data may contain several potential sources of bias, such as selective memory, exaggeration and social desirability. Additionally, due to the specific nature of the program, web-based data collection tools were used. This approach may have given greater rise to the possibility that participants with limited access or ability to use the internet were under-represented. Finally, the fact that the participants in the program (and consequently the study) changed over the years – as the need for supporting the largest number of schools possible was pertinent – provided inadequate data for a total comparison of the assessment variables across the years of implementation. However, a future program design could focus on long-term partnerships in the context of school networks and incorporate longitudinal research data and analyses.

### Authorship Contribution Statement

Each author has contributed equally to the preparation of the present manuscript in view of the following criteria: concept and design, data acquisition, data analysis / interpretation, drafting manuscript, critical revision of manuscript, statistical analysis, securing funding, admin, technical or material support, supervision, final approval.

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