Article

The Work-Related Stress and Well-Being of Teachers—An Exploratory Study within Primary Schools in Italy

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Abstract: This study analyzes the critical aspects of the professional life of primary school teachers in a southern European context. The social changes of the last two decades have profoundly impacted teachers' well-being, putting a strain on their ability to adapt to sometimes unfair working conditions. For this purpose, we interviewed twenty teachers (M = 38.85; DS = 9.17) from different areas of Italy and analyzed data using the grounded theory method. Through a data analysis, we summarized and emphasized eight core themes. The results show the effects of the gradual impoverishment of the recognition for the role of the teacher, highlighting the difficulty for teachers in renegotiating more flexible workload assessments and reinforcing psycho-emotional skills for developing a teaching methodology that is attentive to the psycho-emotional needs of their pupils. Schools emerge as a rigid working context where a competent organizational function is often absent. The practical psychological implications of this are discussed.

Keywords: work-related stress; burnout; well-being; teachers; self-efficacy; psychological intervention; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Teachers are constantly exposed to numerous stressors at work that require ever greater emotional and organizational skills. These skills are protective factors against the work-related stress of teachers. They are now becoming the professional skills necessary to satisfy the increasingly urgent and articulated requests put forward by the different stakeholders of the school system (pupils, families, internal organizations, and local communities) [1]. This study intends to offer a contribution to the research on the theme of the well-being of teachers within the school environment.

Borg and Riding, back in 1991, identified four main pillars of stress, described in terms of "pupil misbehavior", "poor working conditions", "poor staff relations", and "time pressures", concerning the school culture of that period. Today, the working conditions at schools appear more complicated as they suffer from a crisis of trust in training processes, particularly the relationship between training and entry into the world of work [2,3]. Petrillo and Donizzetti (2013) underline the expansion and complexification of the educational role of teachers, highlighting the greater responsibilities and expectations from society, which, however, undervalue their social role [4]. The Eurydice Report [5] highlights that about 50% of teachers in Europe declare that they have experienced stress at work; on the other hand, teachers who work in a collaborative school climate declare that they tolerate stress better, showing themselves to be more self-confident about their work, with positive effects on students' motivation [6].

Work-related stress occurs when an individual struggles to cope with various stresses, such as complex working relationships [7]; a thankless role; work overload and time pressure; a lack of control over the process; interference between work and one's private life; underpayment; and an absence of benefits. The effects of work-related stress can concern the organizational level (this is the case with absenteeism and reduced performance), the

individual level (with physiological disorders and behavioral and psychological consequences), and the psycho-social risk of burnout due to inadequate stress management.

Take, for example, the case of schools as a working context [8]. Teachers often need help with their internal resources and resilience skills to adequately cope with the ever-increasing and complex requests they receive, even more so during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

International surveys show that the risk of stress for teachers does not only concern worker discomfort, but impacts many other variables, such as their sense of job satisfaction on the perceived effectiveness of their teaching [9,10]. This impacts the motivation and engagement in teaching and consequently student learning [11,12]. At the national level, more recent studies have shown how burnout conditions and low perceptions of the working context impact students' experiences, showing how student well-being decreases as stress levels increase. The majority of studies confirm a strongly negative impact of burnout on school relationships [3]: the levels of burnout and the self-efficacy of teachers seem to influence their perception and assessment of student behaviors, as well as their ability to ensure functional learning environments that are responsive to students' needs [13].

Competent teachers can positively contribute to building a good school climate which, in turn, impacts teachers' well-being [14]. Feeling competent in one's teaching profession—including levels of socio-emotional competence—supports the teacher in responding to environmental demands, as they can use their resources functionally [15]. In contrast, the crystallization of distress leads the subject to develop burnout syndrome, with significant consequences for the quality of their teaching, such as developing an attitude of fatigue, disinterest in students, and emotional detachment [16,17]. In some school systems, such as Italian ones, the workload of teachers includes a series of bureaucratic requirements and unrecognized work that has a high impact on the extracurricular life of teachers, with negative consequences that impact their family and personal lives, as well as the quality of their work. In this context, it is clear that the school organization does not adequately protect the well-being of teachers. This is in contravention to the most recent indications that provide good mental and physical health for workers in public administration, as well as a reconciliation between family and work and between working time and personal time [18].

In the context of the Italian school system, assessing the risk of work stress on the mental health of teachers is the responsibility of the headmaster, whose task is to supervise the organizational aspects of school institutions and monitor for signs of malaise in their particular context. Their task is to act as a leader attentive to the contextual conditions of work, promoting the development of competent relationships, promotion of practices aimed at well-being, and cooperation in the development of everyday tasks. The management of this organizational function can significantly affect the climate and relationships within a school [7,19,20].

The research on well-being at school has focused mainly on students' experiences and needs. This research contributes to exploring the theme of the well-being of teachers in the school setting. The interest in the working conditions and stress load to which teachers are subjected is a field that is still little explored, especially in the Italian context.

Objectives

This study is aimed at understanding the conditions of the well-being and discomfort of teachers in relation to the school working context in general, and specifically to the quality of the relationships experienced within a school and the school organization. The specific objectives of the study are:

To identify the context conditions perceived as the cause of greater discomfort for the teaching profession in the explored context;

1. To investigate the perception of the support perceived inside and outside the school;
2. To deepen our understanding of the impacts that work-related stress can have on teaching practices and the teacher–learner relationship;

3. To outline effective organizational strategies for the prevention and contrast of work-related stress risk in order to protect the psychological conditions of teachers and to facilitate the learning processes of students.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants were twenty teachers (n = 20) working in primary schools in Italy, aged between 23 and 55 years (M_{age} = 38.85; DS_{age} = 9.17), 18 of which were women and 2 were men. The process of participant sampling followed a complex circular process and several phases, in accordance with the sampling methodology of the grounded theory [21,22]. The respondents were selected through snowball sampling that was started within the relational network of the research group. After half of the interviews had been collected, the research team shared the need to collect other information necessary to answer the research questions, so it was decided to include other participants in the study. After collecting and analyzing 20 interviews, the research group, through a consensus meeting, deemed the textual material collected to be sufficient in relation to the specific objectives and exploratory purpose of the study (theoretical data saturation point) [23–26]. Seven teachers were tenured, one was in her probationary year, and the others had fixed-term annual contracts (M_{years} of service = 8.45 (13 teachers between the first and ninth years of service, 4 teachers between the tenth and nineteenth years of service; and 3 teachers from the twentieth year of service). Half of the participants had a degree in Primary Education and the remaining 50% had a teacher training high school diploma.

The research group was composed of researchers who had gained direct experience as teachers. Table 1 reports the sample's sociodemographic characteristics

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Age	M_{age} = 38.85	DS_{age} = 9.17
Sex Male Female	2 18	10% 90%
Civil Status Single Married/Cohabitance	9 11	45% 55%
Context of Belonging Rural Urban	5 15	25% 75%
Distance from Work Location >2 h round trip <2 h round trip	2 18	10% 90%
Qualification Teacher training high school diploma Degree in Primary Education Science	10 10	50% 50%
Years of Teaching Between 1 and 9 Between 10 and 19 More than 20	13 4 3	65% 20% 15%
Role Tenured (Permanent) Not Tenured (Temporary)	7 13	35% 65%
Total	20	100%

2.2. Procedures

The data were collected between October and December 2021. Before the interviews, the research objectives of the study were explained and informed consent was requested, guaranteeing the confidential treatment of the data and the possibility of abandoning the research at any time. The average duration of the procedure of each interview was about one hour. It was also made clear that, at the end of the research, an event would be organized to disseminate and discuss the results, in which the interviewees would be invited to participate. The interviews were audio recorded and carried out in Italian, the mother tongue of the interviewees, as well as of the entire research group. Half of the interviews were conducted in the schools of the respondents and the remaining interviews were conducted remotely. The interviewer was a junior researcher who was an expert in the topic, trained by the senior researchers before the data collection, and supervised throughout the process. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim (in Italian language) and each interview was associated with the corresponding interview through an alphanumeric code; the analysis of the data and the definition of the results followed. The research group was composed of three senior and one junior researcher with a background in qualitative research, school psychology, pedagogy, and didactics; all the researchers also shared working experience as a school teacher. All the procedures performed with human participants were conducted following the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and Italian Association of Psychology (AIP). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Developmental and Social Psychology Department of Sapienza University of Rome under the protocol n. 0001326.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

For the investigation, a semi-structured interview [22] was built ad hoc by the research group on the basis of the knowledge of the scientific literature on the subject and through the experience gained in school contexts as teachers.

The areas investigated were: (1) work motivation; (2) the organization of workload and family life balancing; (3) work in the classroom and relationship with pupils; (4) relationship with colleagues and school management; (5) relations outside the school (family and community); (6) perceived support; and (7) suggestions for the future. Table 2 reports the investigation areas and some sample questions with related answers.

The questions were formulated in order to leave the interviewees with the opportunity to make free associations and for the administrator to stimulate possible insights. Appendix A reports a table with the questions asked. It was decided against using the terms "work-related stress" and "burnout" to avoid conditioning. Each area was investigated through initial exploratory questions and then followed by follow-up questions; in case the topic of interest was not explored by the respondent after asking the question, the interviewee intervened only to ask for some specific details or to stimulate the continuation of the conversation in the case of an interruption. The order of the questions was not respected within each area if the topic had already been covered by the previous answers; in any case, everything was performed to leave the teachers free to express themselves about their experiences.

Table 2. Extract from the interviewer guide.

	Investigation Area	Sample Question	Excerpt of Answers
1.	Motivation	What are the reasons that led you to take up this profession?	«(...) since I was a child when they asked me "what you want to do when you grow up" I said: teacher(...)»
2.	Load and work organization—life family balancing	How do you describe the workload within your profession? What do you think of your working environment?	« (...) then in the end, teaching is certainly neglected from what I can see because all these meetings take up a lot of time (...)» « (...) potentially it is a school that could give a lot but maybe we should work on the sense of community (...)»
3.	Work in the classroom—relationship with pupils	How much do you feel considered in working with students? In your opinion, are there situations in which your discomfort/work fatigue affects your teaching practices?	« (...) they consider me enough of a point of reference, also because I am quite strict, but I also know how to make myself loved in short (...)» « (...) it may happen that the attention one puts on what is planned to do in class is affected (...)»
4.	Relationship with colleagues and management	In relation to your work, how do you think the role of the head teacher is involved? Thinking about your colleagues, how important is your relationship with them?	« (...) the head teacher's role is a cross and a delight for the school system (...)» « (...) The teaching team is a team that must function beyond personal misunderstandings or sympathies because in any case we are professionals (...)»
5.	Externals	In your experience, how does the relationship with the family influence your work? Are there other bodies outside the school that have an influence on your work?	« (...) the parent still issues a judgment on your work, sometimes they are not always positive judgments (...)» « (...) let's say the parish in the school where I work is fundamental because for some years it has been implementing remedial courses for children, all free of charge (...)»
6.	Council and perceived support	Are there any situations in which you have felt particularly in difficulty? What do you think are the main needs of teachers in today's school? Are they listened to?	« (...) with colleagues when you have different opinions, when you can't find a common point eh, when the discussions then go on and are not always constructive (...)» «(...) I think that the work of teachers should be re-evaluated... a lot is expected but nothing is recognized (...)»
7.	Suggestions	Thinking about your experience, if you had to give me suggestions to improve teachers' conditions, what would you think? In your opinion, which professional figure should be responsible for improving the quality of teachers' work?	« (...) tools that can facilitate the work and then obviously the figure of the school psychologist because in my opinion it is fundamental as a figure... should always be present always available so that even teachers if they feel the need can still ask for help at any time (...)» « (...) The head teacher should ensure that there are experts within the school (...)»

3. Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out using the grounded theory methodology [21], a bottom-up qualitative method aimed at building interpretative categories, starting from the narrations of the rooted experiences of the people involved in the study. The methodological process involved a series of data collection and analysis procedures characterized by recursive, analytical, and interpretative steps carried out on three different levels. The initial or

open coding was aimed at reading and explaining the data through a fragmentation of the meanings by attributing recognizable codes to what was read. Focused coding followed where the data that were previously tagged were then conceptualized to be collected into categories; finally, through the theoretical coding, the central categories were defined, or core categories that organized the set of categories [21]. The software chosen to support the analysis was ATLAS.ti [27].

The transcripts of the interviews were coded by two researchers, a junior and a senior, who, together, read the interviews in their entirety and produced codes. Emerging doubts, reflections, and observations were produced through textual annotations. At the end of each coding level, discussion meetings were held between all the members of the research group, in which the choice of codes was critically discussed and any disagreements were resolved. In addition, at the end of the focused coding phase, three consensus meetings were held, in which an agreement was reached between all the members of the research group about the final core categories produced.

4. Results

The analysis produced (Table 3) 263 open codes, which were narrated into 22 macro-categories and then further grouped through a semantic similarity criterion in the following eight core categories, which are analytically described below: (1) organizational competence and training; (2) esteem and recognition; (3) psychological support and supervision; (4) relationship with pupils; (5) work-related stress symptoms; (6) topicality of the educational mission; (7) sense of effectiveness; and 8) COVID-19 impacts.

Table 3. Core and intermediate categories.

	Core Categories	Intermediate Categories
1.	Failure of management strategies	Anxiety/need for management; fear of judgment (families and head teacher); workload; links with the territory; head teacher who guarantees safety; need for active/practical training; and need for more human resources in relation to students.
2.	Lack of recognition	Need to communicate/relate/collaborate to share intentions; and support between colleagues.
3.	Psychological support and supervision	Need to feel listened to (new spaces and figures for sharing); need for psychological support/counselling; and need for non-judgmental supervision.
4.	Work-related stress symptoms	Impacts of work-related stress and unease conditions on teaching practices and work quality; and physiological and psychological reactions.
5.	Relationship with Pupils	Communication and relationship; and recognition (knowing how to be).
6.	Changes in the educational mission	Convergence of several tasks in the teaching role.
7.	Sense of effectiveness	Fulfilments; pursuit of objectives and control of learning; classroom control and problematic behavior management; didactic strategies; and children's enthusiasm.
8.	COVID-19 Impact	Disorientation (remote meetings and new technologies).

4.1. Failure of Management Strategies

The first category collected the difficulties in managing behaviors and critical events, in the relationship with the school leadership and the family, and in managing the huge workload assigned. Teachers feel the need to manage and control problematic situations, precisely because it is not possible to do so, which generates anxiety and worries, but

also the desire to be supported and trained in coping with such situations. In this regard, interviewee S2A said: «*Last year I had a tough experience, I also dreamed about the student at night, I took him home every day, because this child had explosions of anger that he didn't control and therefore I was scared for the other pupils and as a team we could not manage these moments of anger for which we were even forced to send him home sometimes, so the interviewee S8A adds: «in particular* one *with whom I have difficulty right in management, so much so that last year I had to ask my colleague for help, because I really didn't know how to do it*».

The S3C teacher argued that teachers who are unable to manage a class are not «*trained as teachers, therefore they don't really have the material in their hands, the strategies, they don't even understand them... they don't go further, they don't ask themselves" but why ", they take note of the situation and try to remedy it, in a disastrous way then because it is not resolved*». Fear of judgment appears as a factor that emerges immediately after a failure to manage. Interviewee S16D argued, for example, that parents "*judge the work of teachers within the classroom a lot, not knowing that the dynamics within a class group are very different from those that can happen outside the school*»; thus, the S10L teacher felt «*conditioned because the parent in any case issues a judgment on your work and sometimes they are not always positive judgments*».

The interviewee S17S defined the work as «*heavy, really varied and you need to have a good organization to be able to do everything, which I don't have*»; thus, the interviewee S4A said: «*I had an initial period in which I realized that I had put too much load on my expectations, after a while I found myself realizing that I was too tired, and that I was not able to reach the maximum, so I revised the design a bit*».

Interviewee S2A expressed difficulty in carrying out the excessive tasks assigned, «*I also spoke about it with those in charge of the design, that is, I clearly said "you are killing us"*», in reference to the fact that their working hours are too many and that, very often, teachers are required to fulfill bureaucratic tasks that are considered to be heavy and time consuming. In this regard, interviewee S5N defined herself as «*satisfied but extremely tired, because as in everything I would like to be able to put an end every now and then I I'd like to have that feeling that salesgirls have when they finish their shift: they've folded all the sweaters, so they go home and are satisfied*».

From the point of view of sharing their tasks, the teachers complained about their distance from the school manager, from whom one would expect, differently from what actually happens, to be involved in the work. Interviewee S6E highlighted how one feels «*abandoned alone in the classroom*». Instead, this would be desirable for some, as interviewee S13J said that «*the manager was always present and could go around the classes not to supervise or check that the teachers are doing what he would like, but simply to make his opinion heard presence*». This distance is not only within the school, but is also perceived with respect to the territory and local community. Interviewee S8A underlined the opportunity of the activation of «*extra-school projects, for example theatre, music, that is more proposals and perhaps aimed at both to teachers and children"*.

4.2. Lack of Recognition

The second category identified included the relational needs and need for teachers to be appreciated in their work, recognized in their professionalism, and esteemed in the scholastic and extracurricular contexts.

Interviewee S16D, in this regard, reported that: «*if you go to work with little desire to deal with colleagues as well, you are certainly demotivated, well, you need to be very open-minded, positivity with colleagues is essential, but it also suffers the class, the children then accept it*», and interviewee S9S also stated that: «*I have had classes in which perhaps the teachers may have had disagreements or disagreements and the children experienced this, this reality badly on their own skin... this the unease situation has passed even children who need, who are the first to need serenity and harmony and therefore perceive it*».

Serenity also passes through their relationships with parents, as interviewee S2A underlined: it is important that parents have «*trust in the work of teachers and in the moment in which it is created, that is, there is dialogue with families and above all sincere dialogue without*

going around too much about anything, then a community is truly created there because that is the fundamental thing about school, because school and family must be a community. So sharing of choices, careful and punctual communication».

A failure to share intentions between teachers and families is a particularly problematic factor, and with respect to families, teachers complain of little recognition and respect for their role of teacher and their professional skills. Interviewee S15F maintained that *«we need to find the right balance with families, because sometimes we cross a border».* Finally, interviewee S20S similarly argued how much the complexity of the teacher's work is devalued: *«people, outside the walls of the school, have an idyllic vision of the teacher and minimize the enormous problems of managing a class group where personalities coexist often variegated and contrasting with each other».*

4.3. Psychological Support and Supervision

In the third category, the teachers expressed the need to be supported in their work by professional figures both inside and outside the school reality. In this regard, interviewee S19S claimed that it would be useful to be followed by *«a multifunctional support center where many figures revolve around».*

In regard to the presence of ad hoc psychological spaces for teachers, some referred to a request for individual consultancy, and interviewee S3C maintained that *"the teacher's main need now, today, is for someone to listen to him».* Interviewee S2A added that *«we would need some psychological sessions for us teachers because we should be checked once in a while because we suffer considerable stress, in my opinion this is a need that I feel as a teacher».* Interviewee S13J, on the other hand, argued for the constant presence of a psychologist in schools *«a psychologist should always be present, always available so that even the teachers, if they feel the need, can still ask for help at any time».*

In particular, for teachers, the need to be listened to starts from the need to not feel alone when making choices. Interviewee S3C argued that *«it would be the psychologist who would have to be at school and have to create moments in which to be able to talk to the teacher, trivially yes, for example, one can enter recess and talk to the teacher for five minutes a day and ask him "how are you, what's wrong, what's wrong" and if the psychologist, the psychologist and the teacher think they need more time, they make an appointment, but that is, leaving the choice to the teacher, in my opinion, is not convenient».* The teachers underlined that receiving indications for the management of group dynamics or problem behaviors could be useful, in order to not feel the total acceptance of these difficult situations and to better understand the emotional experiences in the class, and to not feel alone. According to interviewee S11L, *«there are situations in which one has great emotional, personal and approach difficulties, and certainly a systematic psychological support would be of benefit to everyone».*

Another aspect expressed by the teachers was the need to establish new settings dedicated to comparison and sharing within the school. Interviewee S4A, for example, supported the need to foresee *«moments and places where one can feel at school in a mediated way,* i.e., *have places where one can meet with other teachers»*; thus, interviewee S1S argued that, at school, there is a need for *"psychological listening support, also for the manager and above all to provide communication strategies and discussions between adults».*

4.4. Relationship with Pupils

The fourth category included the relational experiences of teachers with students. In this regard, interviewee S18R said: *«I have generally always had a good relationship with my students and it is the most gratifying aspect of my job»*; this gratification can be expressed in terms of protection from the risk of work-related stress.

The interpersonal relationships described by the interviewees had some common characteristics. In the first instance, the affective dimension emerges, which makes teachers feel they are well liked by the children who seek a direct and emotional relationship with them. Thus, interviewee S5N said: *«they want another safe place after home, [...] therefore in any case the reference, beyond the fact that no one can replace mum and dad, is in any case a person*

who in that case in their absence it replaces in some way, so yes, the part referring to teaching, the part referring to skills, but there must also be the human part»; and S1S said: *«they understand the importance of my work and appreciate the teachings that are given to them, beyond the teaching at a human level»*. Teachers can feel responsible for the growth processes of the children, arriving to confuse and permeate the affective dimension with the element of control. On feeling considered by the pupils; interviewee S16D said: *«the children are affectionate, no, no, they consider me... by counting up to 3, let's say at 2 I already put them in line enough»* and S17S said: *«Anyway, there is no pupil who opposes my interventions, let's say so yes I feel absolutely listened to by them»*.

In this regard, interviewee S19S added: *«the children want to work with me, they look for me for new jobs... there's a smile, there's a hug»*; thus, interviewee S9S said: *«I understand it, I understand it from the attention, from the participation, from the smiles, from the availability obviously then they are children in short with their liveliness, but it is part of their age»*.

Some teachers also report that, on some occasions, they have shown and communicated symptoms of fatigue to their pupils. Interviewee S4A claimed, for example, that it is important to communicate how one feels, *«in my opinion said explicitly «guys sorry I'm sorry for today, I feel tired" or "too much confusion has given me a bit of a headache", said in a human way, I mean as an adult to children, but still to people»*.

4.5. Work-Related Stress Symptoms

This category included some symptomatic aspects due to the highly correlated work stress in both physiological and psychological reactions; in the first case, the fatigue caused by workload can lead, in particular, to tiredness and insomnia, which, as interviewee L16D maintained, depends *«on the worries that fail to let you rest adequately»*; thus, interviewee S20S said: *«he never lets go, not even at night and I confess that sometimes I open my eyes and don't close them again until the alarm goes off»*; in the second case, brooding over experiences can destabilize the teacher to the point of thinking *«I'm not cut out for this job, I just want to go away, I want to get under the bed to sleep because I don't want to go back"»* (S3C).

The element of tiredness, physical or psychological, is a factor that can lead to difficulties in the classroom; interviewee S18R commented that it happens that *«everyone has days in which stress and tiredness make themselves more felt and seem to slow down times and alter the usual ways of working»*. The aspects that would be most affected by this concern are the quality of the didactic and educational interventions (S7L); the lack of lucidity in the planning of activities, with consequences at the level of working memory (S2A) or of the attention to what one plans to do in class (S12G); and the holding of the lesson (S3C). In this regard, interviewee S19S stated that *«in moments when fatigue makes itself felt, one reacts a bit... not very calmly compared to other situations, however the importance is to be true also with children»*. The problem of not keeping calm, however, can create difficult situations, such as a feeling of failure. In this regard, interviewee S8A said: *«obviously there are days in which maybe I don't know, there was some discussion between pupils or maybe I had difficulty managing a situation, so I dwell on it»*; so if *«things didn't go as we thought, an activity didn't go as we wanted, the results aren't the right ones, then maybe we can even enter a crisis»* (S10L).

4.6. Changes in the Educational Mission

This category contained the major changes that schools and the role of teacher are experiencing. Interviewee S18R noted a change in the educational objectives of primary schools, and in this regard, he reported: *«In elementary school one must no longer just literate and educate a child as happened in the past, but one must help him to grow up, to make him independent; we need to give him confidence in his abilities and potential, help him overcome his difficulties. Therefore, several roles converge in the work of the teacher»*.

Another change noted concerns the process of debasing the didactic function to the detriment of administrative components: *«the bureaucratic part, the commitments we have go a bit to affect the didactic part and this is something that weighs heavily on me when it happens, weighs me down so much because I think I am giving importance to the bureaucratic part [...]*

struggling to carry on the didactic part which is in my opinion more important» (S10L); *« We are often bureaucrats and we are invaded by documents that are certainly important but take away a lot of time and lucidity from the main role which is the education of children. Instead you do too many things together and you risk doing them wrong»* (S20S); *« All this bureaucratic aspect takes time away, then in my opinion it crushes it because time is, let's say, taken away from something else»* (S14C); *«leave teachers more time to do the work between teacher and child, without loading it and with many other activities, therefore leaving us the serenity of working with the class»* (S13J).

Teachers recognize the educational component of their role, but in difficult situations, they ask themselves how much time to devote to taking care of these educational dimensions; subject S4A said he *«has a bit of the tension of "I don't know whether to wait and see how it goes, but the situation could also explode", therefore knowing how much trust to give, when to block first and therefore here's how to mediate»* and again *« maybe I'm wasting time, maybe if I called them back I could go back more quickly to simply the activity we had to do or the topic we had to deal with [...] you need to be patient and know what you're doing even in the feeling of saying "maybe I'm wasting time [. . .]".*

Furthermore, the need to not feel alone and to strengthen one's professional identity emerges, implementing effective communication to support relationships. Interviewee S20S said: *«perhaps we are not listened to because we are not united and this is our greatest flaw»*, and it is therefore important to work on the sense of community, because a school should *be* an educating community. A school as a community that promotes well-being should work on emotions and so should teachers in the classroom: *"I work a lot on empathy, in short on the human relationship with them, because they don't have to understand that there is a person in front of them who judges them and that stands against them".* Children must be supported in their growth, they must become independent, and *" we must give them confidence in their abilities and potential, help them overcome their difficulties"* (S18R).

4.7. Sense of Effectiveness

The seventh category concerned teachers' perceptions of their own sense of effectiveness. The latter is sometimes anchored in managing the behavior of students in the classroom; S3C proposed a positive experience: *«I arrived in classes where lessons were normally not possible and I was even told . . . "we thought there was no nobody in this class"»*; instead, interviewee S10L proposed an unpleasant situation *«it happened, for example, last year with a child with behavioral problems and there I felt a bit ineffective, because I wasn't able... not so much to empathize with him, because I also managed to empathize, but on a behavioral level there were no positive results [...] then the child decided to change schools, the mother decided to enroll him in another school and therefore we then did not continue the I repeat, our work and the results weren't positive, it was a bit of a defeat well, in this case it was a defeat, we lived it a bit like this . . . even if we really tried to do everything possible. Obviously that wasn't enough.»*

Another area that participates in satisfaction concerns the ability to verify and plan learning, S16D said, in this regard: *«I do numerous tests, let's call them, which then they know that they are not tests, they serve me more than they do»*, and teacher S2A added that *«I'll realize that I've achieved a goal that I set for myself, so then I'll be able to measure the effectiveness of my intervention otherwise at this moment I can't say a priori».* In difficult cases, teachers are also able to modify their strategies and organize their didactic actions differently (S17S), investing in new energies. Interviewee S17S said: *"I don't see that they are going very far so I'm trying to understand which strategy to adopt?»*

Interviewee S15F said: *«I see improvements, I see changes in relationships. This is a job in which you understand day by day whether it is effective or not».* Teachers feel effective when they see children motivated to learn, and one feels effective when one witnesses the *«progress that children make and that... not because the child is moving forward and is therefore better at it, but the commitment and constancy that puts us in doing a certain thing»* (S5N). A lot of energy is then invested to *«make the lesson interesting, not boring and above all open to all learning levels»* (S20S), and the interviewee continued: *«I think my way of teaching is very effective, I see it every morning when I say that "today we will not do anything" and they really believe it thinking*

"now we play". *At the end of the day we did nothing but pique their curiosity. Let's say that I use a lot of material to experiment with, in my opinion learning passes through the senses, touch to experiment... sight to analyze... I usually rely on their perception to make it clear that the learning process takes place by trial and error that mistakes are precious, I try to make them understand that alibis are useless and are, on the contrary, harmful to educational success»*. The S10L teacher concluded by stating *«The enthusiasm that the children put into tackling the activities is a sign of success for the teachers»*.

4.8. COVID-19 Impact

The present category assumed value in this particular historical phase that has seen teachers and pupils adapt to different requests in an emergency situation, which has meant the modulation of distance teaching and then the resumption of face-to-face teaching. The teachers pointed out that the children returning to school *«were really so confused... they were no longer able to choose even the sheet to write on»* (S19S), and that *«the children were certainly destabilized, because it took you some time to organize working remotely and then again in the presence of starting the relationship with them all over again»* (S16D). Not only, therefore, were there difficulties in organizing teaching activities, but also in the relational dimension; a school is a place for the sharing of *«relationships and this long period in which this has been lacking has caused damage [. . .] to both students and teachers»* (S14C). The school situation now appears *«less active, more static»* (S15F), to the detriment of sharing among children, but also among colleagues: *«I must say that there are no physical meetings with colleagues in which we say the best and the ugly»* (S20S); *«Yes, he has changed a lot, in the relationship, in the approach, in the exchange»* (S15F). It is evident that the *«frequency of intercourse with the computer and of social and work relationships through the computer which is in some ways an added value, in the sense that there is also a more direct and facilitated communication by the computer, but there are limits»* (S7L). A positively perceived consequence is the knowledge and use of tools *«of which we were almost all unaware»* (S16D); on the other hand, the impact of the use of technologies on workload is considerable, and interviewee S5N claimed that *«you feel there is a greater load and now that we are perhaps at the end of October it almost seems to be living in the period of May, the tiredness is almost the same»*.

5. Core Category

Demotivation is the core category that best summarizes the emotional condition of the Italian teachers interviewed, as it emerged in the categories defined. This emotion appears to be the reactive response to a series of factors that reduce the effectiveness of teachers and, specifically, the basis of teachers' distress is the organizational incompetence of the workload within schools (macro-category 1) and the increasing requests and demands of families towards teachers and the school (macro-category 6). This condition of distress, as the interviewees tell, is transformed (1) into psychosomatic symptoms, such as insomnia, social anxiety, and performance anxiety (macro-category 5), which also increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (macro-category 8) and (2) on the level of relational dynamics, within a request for continuous approval, legitimation recognition within and outside the school (macro-category 2), and with the continuous questioning of one's own sense of efficacy (macro-category 7). The only exception to this is the relationship with pupils, with whom teachers feel they have and build a good relationship with on an emotional/empathic level and on the level of learning knowledge and skills. As far as possible support in relation to their discomfort is concerned, the teachers consider the possibility of entrusting themselves to a psychologist in the work context, in order to alleviate their school-related anxieties. The distrust towards a positive transformation of the school organizational system appears to be the basis of a rampant experience of impotence and frustration that the participants told in the interviews, and from which they feel it is difficult to escape from.

6. Discussion

This study had the task of highlighting the risk factors for the well-being and health that teachers experience in relation to their working context. The important social transformations [28–31] of the last few years and a complexification of the requests towards scholastic institutions, as well as a gradual impoverishment of this class of employees in Mediterranean countries, as in the country under consideration, are the factors that have moved the interest to investigate this area, with the expectation that the considerations proposed below may contribute to improving the conditions and quality of work within Italian schools.

Most of the research [32,33] concerning correlated stress–work has studied the aspects concerning the "real" dimensions of the working condition, complaining of a devaluation of the teacher in terms of a loss of social prestige and purchasing power. Our proposal, on the other hand, aims to analyze the suffering experienced by teachers, keeping in mind the psychodynamic dimensions that identify the factors of ineffectiveness of the teacher's function in a limited school organizational culture [19].

This research has shown what the most critical conditions in the teaching profession concern: an excessive workload, a poor organization of the school context, the loss of social prestige of the role of teacher, and finally, insufficient support from headmasters, whose actions seem to be detached from the needs of the school. Starting from this last point, the teachers interviewed, in fact, declared that they did not have a direct relationship with their headmaster, who was indeed perceived as distant and to whom one turned to mainly in problematic situations. In this sense, they were represented exclusively as a guarantor of the fulfillments. What is lacking is effective support from the manager and a competence for building clear training and didactic objectives and foreseeing their realization through effective application methods. The lack of organizational competence on the part of the management does not facilitate the teaching practice, dialogue with families, emotional–relational aspects, and organization of work; in other words, the management lacks the ability to support teachers, in addition to demanding quality in their work.

The excessive workload and lack of organizational factors in this context were experienced as highly problematic dimensions by the interviewees, who described them as having a high impact on the personal and family life stresses of teachers. Finally, the commitment required of teachers does not correspond to adequate social recognition.

Bureaucratic formalities use too much energy, taking away time from the care of teachers' relationships with pupils; teachers feel confused about their role in the face of these tasks. The dimension that is most affected by work-related stress symptoms is the attitude of teachers in the planning of their teaching activities, which would be less accurate, but are also the way of interacting with children in the classroom and would become more impulsive and less patient. Furthermore, the need to receive confirmation regarding the great effort needed to carry out one's work would lead some teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of their work by relying solely on the achievement of predetermined didactic objectives, also moving away from the methods suggested, according to which, teachers are asked to identify the most effective learning experiences through strategies and activities that aim at the quality of learning and not at the sequence of disciplinary content.

This picture makes it clear that some of the rigidities for teachers are attributable to poor personal resilience skills, but also to the management of excessive workloads or situations of impasse. Not only that, given and considering that the teacher is exposed to numerous psychosocial risk factors in the relational field (with students, parents, and colleagues), in the organizational field (such as workload and lack of recognition), and with respect to socio-cultural variables [22], one should intervene on several levels, starting from an analysis of their needs and oriented towards a design goal [23].

The fatigue associated with this perception and the sense of inadequacy perceived in difficult situations would have an impact on the teachers' sense of self-efficacy.

The teachers' awareness of the impacts that may exist at the work level gives the opportunity for building coping strategies in terms of the prevention of stress, starting from

the teachers' reflections on the organizational needs of their own school reality, but also on an individual level, in order to be supported at all times within the working context, with structured and functional paths for increasing the internal resources necessary for facing risk situations.

The need has emerged to be accompanied by competent figures in paths of comparison, recreational groups, or spaces dedicated to reflexivity, in order to analyze emotions, starting from their own scholastic experiences. In this sense, the promotion of a collective effectiveness can be hoped for, in which the central role would belong to the head teacher, upon whom the quality of the school context and the inclusion of professional figures in the school, such as the school psychologist, for which a need is felt, and to whom the teachers could contact in addition to the psychological help desk, would largely depend, but through a request for the supervision of one's work or for an intervention in the most problematic classes.

The literature suggests, in fact, how teachers who promote socio-emotional learning and, therefore, the social and emotional skills of students, are more satisfied, and how this depends on their sense of satisfaction and work motivation [11].

This study highlights that stress and effectiveness have an impact on the gratification and satisfaction of the work performed; the teachers interviewed paid attention to the emotional aspects [34], but asked themselves about how much time to devote to them. A sort of split emerges between these emotional and didactic structures, as if training and emotions were different spheres; there is, once again, the need for psycho-pedagogical integration. The need to deepen the socio-emotional learning in schools clearly emerges, as does an understanding that it is convenient to promote this if it is inserted and introduced into the dialogue in every area of the learning path, because social and emotional skills belong to daily school life and cannot be separated from it. An important fact to highlight is that most of the teachers involved in this survey stated that they encountered their greatest difficulties with children engaging in problematic behaviors. In this sense, the value of socio-emotional learning takes on an even greater need to support teachers, in addition to demanding quality in their work.

Practical Implications

The results that emerged on the difficult working conditions of teachers open up to a profound reflection on the implementation of transformative policies and empowerment interventions for promoting teachers' wellbeing in relation to their work. The potential interventions concern prevention strategies and contrasting actions. On the primary level, we suggest the provision of a free clinical psychological consultation (a minimum of 10 meetings) for teachers within a school, or by providing available free vouchers. This path should have as its purpose the exploration of teachers' working motivations and an analysis of the critical events that occur in the school context, considering the emotional dimensions that inform the relationships within the school system and organize development goals [19,24,35,36]. On the secondary level, a reorganization of work and work breaks, allowing small breaks (weekly) during the working year instead of concentrating them in the summer would allow for a greater sustainability of the workload. In terms of socio-economic status, it would also be necessary to equate teachers' salaries (among the lowest in EU) to the large workload required of them, which is often carried out invisibly, and on the other hand, to establish a salary reward systems for teachers who show interest in further promoting their training, specifically in the field of teaching [2]. On the organizational level, we suggest involving school managers in organizational psychology training courses, in order to promote their psychological competence and induce them to think about the functioning of their institution in relation to the objectives of the school and the demands of families, students, and the community. Finally, we recommend introducing a mandatory independent system for monitoring the well-being of teachers in each school based on quantifiable indicators, the downstream of which would promote reward or penalty systems for the school manager.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some relevant limitations that the reader should be informed about. The first limit concerns the generalizability of the results. The research took into consideration the experiences of a specific group of teachers, so the answers will be limited to the Italian reality, and in particular, to the capital. The second limitation concerns the fact that the interviews were conducted in the first academic year after the pandemic, which was characterized by a full reopening of schools and a return to full-time teaching; this meant that the interviewees found themselves in a difficult period of readjustment to school life [37] and emerging social challenges [38,39]. The statements of the interviewees should be anchored to this particular and unique moment for schools. The third limitation concerns the fact that, while this paper is in preparation, the lack of salary for teachers is the subject of public and political debate and it is possible that, in the near future, political considerations may be taken to increase wages or bonuses based on distinctive experiences and a particular aptitude for the teaching of some teachers ("expert teacher"). Future research could combine qualitative studies such as the one presented with mixed methods studies on larger groups of participants from different areas of the country, where purchasing power, access to the labor market, and family support differ (for example between northern and southern Italy, as well as between rural and urban realities). Another line of research would concern interviewing school managers about the organizational models implemented within their schools and implementing measures to prevent and combat the stress and mental distress of teachers. Additional investigations might be carried out in the psychological–clinical field; psychologists who offer psychological counseling to teachers within the school could be interviewed and asked to describe the most common and emerging discomforts from the teaching staff within the work environment.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Motivation

(1)   What are the reasons that led you to undertake this profession?

Workload and organization—life family balancing

(2)   How do you describe the workload within your profession?
(3)   What do you think of the environment in which you work?
(4)   How do you feel this work relates to your private life? How does work impact your life at home?

Work in class—relationship with pupils

(1)   In working with students, how much do you feel considered?
(2)   How effective do you feel working with them? Do you think students appreciate your work?
(3)   When you come home do you feel satisfied?
(4)   There are particular students with whom he feels his work particularly complicated?
(5)   In your opinion, are there situations in which your discomfort/work fatigue impacts on your teaching practices?

Relationship with colleagues and management

(1)   In reference to your job, how do you think the role of manager is involved?
(2)   If he thinks instead of his colleagues how important is his relationship with them?

External partners

(1)   In your experience, how does your relationship with your family influence your work?
(2)   Are there other entities outside the school that have an influence on your work?

Listening and perceived support

(1)   Are there situations in which you have felt particularly difficult? How did she overcome it? Did he address anyone?
(2)   Did you experience any physical symptoms during these difficult moments?
(3)   Do you think your job has changed since the pandemic? Has it gotten harder? In what? Have you perceived any changes in your effectiveness?
(4)   If we wanted to make a summary, in your opinion what are the main needs of teachers in today's schools? Are they listened to?

Suggestions for the future

(1)   Thinking about your experience, if you were to give me suggestions to improve the condition of teachers, what would you think?
(2)   In your opinion, which professional figure should be responsible for improving the quality of teachers' work?

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