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Article

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

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Abstract: This study analyses key aspects of the professional life of primary school teachers in a southern European context. In the social changes of last two decades profoundly impacted the well-being of teachers putting a strain on their ability to adapt to sometimes unfair working conditions. For this purpose twenty teachers ($M = 38.85$; $DS = 9.17$) were interviewed from different areas of Italy, data were analyzed using the Grounded Theory Method. Through data analysis were summarize and emphasize eight core themes. The results show the effects of a gradual impoverishment of the recognition of the role of teacher, highlighting the difficulty for teachers of renegotiating more flexible workload assessments and of reinforcing psycho-emotional skills for the development of a teaching methodology attentive to the psycho-emotional needs of pupils. Schools emerge as a rigid working context, in which a competent organizational function is often absent. Practical psychological implications 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 for the work-related stress of teachers and are now becoming the professional skills necessary to satisfy the increasingly pressing and articulated requests put forward by the different stakeholders of the school system (pupils, families, internal organization, local communities) [1]. 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” in relation to the school culture of that period. Today the conditions of working at school appear more complicated as they suffer from the crisis of trust in training processes and in particular of 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 greater responsibilities and expectations on the part of society, which, however, undervalues 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 own work with positive effects on students' motivation [6].

Work-related stress occurs when the individual struggles to cope with various stresses, such as difficult working relationships [7]; an unrecognized role; work overload and time pressure; lack of control over the process; interference between work and one's private life; underpayment and 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, behavioral and psychological consequences), up to the psycho-social risk of burnout as a consequence of inadequate stress management.

Take, for example, the case of schools as a working context [8]. Teachers often fail with their own internal resources and resilience skills to adequately cope with the ever increasing and complex requests received, even more so during and following the Covid-19 Pandemic.

International surveys show that the risk-stress for teachers does not concern only the discomfort of workers but impacts on many other variables, such as the sense of job satisfaction on the perceived effectiveness of teaching [9] [10]. This has important impacts on motivation and engagement in teaching and consequently on student learning [11] [12]. At the national level, more recent studies have shown how burnout conditions and low perceptions of the working context have an impact on students' experiences, showing how student well-being decreases as stress levels increase (Author 2020; Author, 2021). The majority of studies confirm a strongly negative impact of burn-out on school relationships [3]: the levels of burnout and self-efficacy of teachers seem to influence their perception and their assessment of student behaviours, as well as their own 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, has an impact on the well-being of the teachers themselves [14]. Feeling competent in one's teaching profession - including levels of socio-emotional competence - supports the teacher in responding to environmental demands as she is able to use her own resources functionally [15]. In contrast, the crystallization of distress leads the subject to develop the burnout syndrome with important consequences for the quality of teaching, such as developing an attitude of fatigue, a disinterest in students and emotional detachment [16] ; [17]. In some school systems, such as Italian ones, the workload to which teachers are subjected 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 on the family and personal, as well as on the quality of their work. In this context, it is clear that the school organization does not adequately protect the well-being of teachers, in contravention of the most recent indications that provide good standards of mental and physical health for workers in the public administration as well as reconciliation between family and work, between working time and personal time [18].

In the context of the Italian school system, the task of assessing the risk of work for the mental health of teachers is the responsibility of the Headmaster, whose task is to supervise the organizational aspects of school institutions and to monitor for signs of malaise in their particular context. His task is to act as a leader attentive to the contextual conditions of work, promoting the development of competent relationships, the promotion of practices aimed at well-being, and cooperation in the development of common tasks and tasks. Poor or inadequate management of this organizational function can have significant effects on the climate and relationships in a school [19];[7]. This study intends to offer a contribution to research on the theme of the well-being of teachers in the school context. Research on well-being at school focuses mainly on students' experiences and their needs. The interest in the working conditions and the stress load to which teachers are subjected appears to be a field that is still little explored, especially in reference to the Italian context.

1.1. Objectives

This study is aimed at understanding the conditions of 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 the school and the school organization. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. to identify the context conditions perceived as the cause of greater discomfort for the teaching profession in the explored context;
2. to investigate the perception of the support perceived inside and outside the school;
3. to deepen the impacts that work-related stress can have on teaching practices and the teacher-learner relationship;
4. 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 group of respondents is made up of twenty ($n = 20$) teachers working in primary schools in Italy, aged between 23 and 55 ($M = 38.85$; $DS = 9.17$). 18 are women and 2 men (description in Table 1). Participants were selected through a reasoned choice sampling method with the knowledge of the research group, which was followed by an avalanche sampling strategy. Seven teachers are tenured, one is in her probationary year, the others are precarious (M years of service = 8.45 (in particular, between the first and ninth years of service: 13 teachers; between the tenth and nineteenth years of service: 4 teachers; from the twentieth year of service onwards: 3 teachers). 50% of the participants have a degree in Primary Education, the remaining 50% have a master's degree. Theoretical saturation emerges from the data in relation to the research questions. The research group is composed of researchers who have gained direct experience as teachers.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Sex		
Male	2	10%
Female	18	90%
Civil Status		
Single	9	45%
Married / Cohabitation	11	55%
Context of Belonging		
Rural	5	25%
Urban	15	75%
Distance from Work Location		
> 2 h round trip	2	10%
< 2 h round trip	18	90%
Qualification		
Teaching Master's Degree	10	50%
Degree in Primary Education Science	10	50%
Years of Teaching		
Between 1 and 9	13	65%
Between 10 and 19	4	20%
More than 20	3	15%
Role		
Tenured (Permanent)	7	35%
Not Tenured (Temporary)	13	65%
<i>Total</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>100%</i>

The data was collected between October and December 2021. Before the interview, the objectives of the research were explained and an informed consent was requested, guaranteeing the confidential treatment of the data and the possibility of abandoning the research at any time. It was also made clear that at the end of the research an event will be organized to disseminate and discuss the results in which the interviewees will be invited to participate. The average duration of the procedure of each interview was about one hour, and the interviews were carried out at the faculty schools by the research group members. The data was then transcribed verbatim 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 is composed of a group of two Senior and two

Junior researchers; each member has had direct experience as a teacher. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the XXX Department with registration number 0001326.

2.2. Data collection tools

For the investigation, an area-focused narrative interview (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) was built ad hoc by the research group using the knowledge of the scientific literature on the subject and through the experience gained in school contexts.

The areas investigated are presented in the following (Table 2): 1) Work motivation; 2) Organization of workload and life family balancing; 3) Work in the classroom and relationship with pupils; 4) Relationship with colleagues ad school management; 5) Relations outside the school (family and community); 6) Perceived support; 7) Suggestions for the future.

The questions were formulated in order to leave the interviewees the opportunity to make free associations and for the administrator to stimulate possible insights. Has been chosen to not use the terms ‘work-related stress’ and ‘burnout’ to avoid conditioning. The discursive interactions made it possible to detect information on specific issues, while leaving the teachers free to express themselves around 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?	« (...) 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	What do you think of your working environment?	
	How much do you feel considered in working with students?	« (...) 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 (...)»
	In your opinion, are there situations in which your discomfort/work fatigue affects your teaching practices?	« (...) 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?	« (...) 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 (...)»
	Thinking about your colleagues, how important is your relationship with them?	
5. Externals	In your experience, how does the relationship with	« (...) the parent still issues a judgment on your work, sometimes they are not always positive judgments (...)»

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|----------------------------------|--|---|
| | the family influence your work? | « (...) 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 other bodies outside the school that have an influence on your work?
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 the teachers' condition, 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 method [20];[21] which allows us to build hypotheses on the data, rooted in the experience of the subjects involved in the investigation and, therefore, true. The methodological process involves 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 is aimed at reading and explaining the data through the fragmentation of meanings by attributing recognizable codes to what is read. Focused coding follows where data that was previously tagged is now conceptualized to be collected into categories; finally, through the theoretical coding, the central categories are defined, or core categories that organize the set of categories [20];[16]. The software chosen to support the analysis was ATLAS.ti 9 (Muhr, 2017). The collected data were codified and conceptualized, starting from the transcription of the interviews and from the first descriptive coding. During the entire qualitative procedure, reflections and observations were produced by the interviewer, through annotations. The analysis was conducted by the entire research group, consisting of two senior and two junior researchers. The open coding and attribution of the first codes was carried out by junior researchers, while the core categories were identified through three consensus meetings in which an agreement was reached between all members of the research group.

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, 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; 8) Covid-19 impacts.

Table 3. Categories.

Core Categories	Intermediate Categories
1. <i>Organizational Competence and Training</i>	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; need for more human resources in relation to students.
2. <i>Esteem and Recognition</i>	Need to communicate/relate/collaborate to share intentions; support between colleagues.
3. <i>Psychological Support and Supervision</i>	Need to feel listened to (new spaces and figures for sharing); need for psychological support/counselling; need for non-judgmental supervision.
4. <i>Work-related Stress Symptoms</i>	Impacts of work-related stress and unease conditions on teaching practices and on the work quality; physiological and psychological reactions.
5. <i>Relationship with Pupils</i>	Communication and relationship; recognition (knowing how to be).
6. <i>Topicality of the educational mission</i>	Convergence of several tasks in the teaching role.
7. <i>Sense of effectiveness</i>	Fulfilments; pursuit of objectives and control of learning; classroom control and problematic behaviour management; didactic strategies; children enthusiasm.
8. <i>Covid-19 Impact</i>	Disorientation (remote meetings, new technologies).

4.1. *Organizational competence and training*

The first level that emerged highlights the need for a quality school organization that supports the teacher in his work both from an organizational and training point of view: the perceived organizational competence and the capacity of the contexts, as well as of the teachers themselves to promote it.

Teachers feel the need to manage problematic situations, but they do not always feel ready to do so, which can generate anxiety and worry, but also the desire to be supported from a formative point of view. The complicated and difficult situation would be a new situation that leads to uncertainty about one's actions. The S3C interviewee claims that teachers who cannot manage the classroom do not have mastery of strategies, as they are not trained for practice.

Managing the class takes on tones of control, of preserving and obtaining order and tranquility, bringing with it the risk of reducing the authentic component of relationships; yet, the relationship with the child, as claimed by the S5N participant, must be based on trust, but not only this: «it influences a lot, also because then the children tend to report interventions that the teachers make».

On the one hand, therefore, the element of trust, on the other, attention to what the children could tell. Fear of judgment is a risk factor that emerged clearly and lies in the gap between the energy invested in the profession and the fear of being subject to a devaluing judgment. Hence, the need to organize their work, because teachers seem to feel safer through planning. The workload, however, was identified as a category during the analysis and the design in this sense determines a considerable weight; the same sense permeates the private and family life of teachers who do not feel an adequate quality in the school organization, both in terms of spaces adequate for carrying out their

activities of planning and the preparation of materials, and with respect to the human resources available to face the actual needs of the classes, which are often too numerous. The work is defined as heavy and the need for organizational and training support emerges. On the other hand, those who are very organized could plan in an unbalanced way in an attempt to prevent risky situations by placing additional burdens on their activities. The importance of developing organizational competence is undoubtedly evident, but so is the fact that the teacher should not feel alone; the S2A interviewee expresses it with strong words: «I also talked about it with those involved in the design, that is, I said in clear words "you are killing us", referring to the fact that the hours of design are not enough and often they are used to fulfill bureaucratic tasks considered heavy and expensive and therefore requiring more time to be devoted to the work. The manager, as responsible for the unitary management of the school, should be perceived as a safe guide on all levels of schooling, yet he would seem to play primarily the role of guarantor of safety. The desire emerges to recognize in the manager a present guide that can support in everyday life through non-judgmental but human supervision because, as the S15F participant argues, it is on him that the quality of the institute depends. Finally, a certain distance emerges from the territory of belonging; it could be useful instead to educate the school reality in contact with the social context, to the school context and the organization of activities for adults and children.

4.2. Esteem and recognition

The second category identified includes a series of protection factors that sometimes need to be implemented. In particular, reference is made to the relational aspects and the need to be appreciated at work, recognized in terms of professionalism and esteemed in the school and extracurricular context. The S20S interviewee claims that *«people, outside the school walls, have an idyllic vision of the teacher and minimize the enormous problems of managing a class group where often varied and conflicting personalities coexist»*. This highlights the risk created by the lack of a sense of social recognition and the great work effort of teachers in primary school. There must, therefore, be respect for the roles that in the case of teachers comes through the acceptance of family stories, opinions and through timely communication with parents, while on the part of families through trust, recognition and respect for the role of teacher, and of his professionalism and skills, thus establishing adequate relationships. Not only respect for roles, but also the sharing of intentions is seen as a protective factor and it is necessary that teachers and parents are allies in the educational processes of children. In this sense, work on emotions takes on an unrepeatable value because it encourages activities that improve the relational and communicative aspects of the subjects involved in the school system. One category concerns precisely the need to communicate, starting from the relationships between teachers and between teachers and parents, because the quality of relationships between peers-adults also has repercussions on children. Finally, the support between colleagues, in addition to being a component of perceived protection, has an impact in the classrooms because children perceive the climate between adults.

4.3. Psychological support and supervision

Teachers feel the need for adequate spaces for discussion and sharing; not only that, there is also the need to be supported by competent figures, both internal and external to the school situation. The psychological help desk, mentioned by most of the interviewees, but not used by them because it is perceived as distant, is considered an important space, if directed to the individual but also to groups. Teacher S13J argues that the school psychologist *«should always be present, always available so that even teachers, if they feel the need, can still ask for help at any time»*. Individual support is needed to respond to the need to be heard. The S2A interviewee highlights an important factor related to stress, arguing that *«we would need psychological sessions for us teachers because we should be checked once in a while because we suffer considerable stress»*. In particular, the need emerged to open the classes to non-judgmental supervision, but moved by a spirit of support without leaving the choice to the teacher. The teachers stressed that receiving indications for the management of group dynamics or problem behaviours could be useful in order not to feel alone when taking charge of these difficult situations and to better understand the emotional experiences in the class, especially in situations of great difficulty, emotional, personal and in terms of approach. The need for new physical spaces dedicated to discussion and sharing has emerged, to learn those strategies that are useful for

communication and comparison between adults and that facilitate the development of relational skills. According to the S4A interviewee, it would be appropriate to define physical places in the school where groups can meet in a mediated way to exercise communication and relational skills and where they can also be supported for aspects relating to emotional regulation, through systematic support.

4.4. Relationships with pupils

In addition to relationships with adults, it is the quality of relationships with pupils that contributes to the achievement of well-being or conditions of hardship in the profession. S18R interviewee says: *«I have generally always had a good relationship with the students and it is the most rewarding 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 have some common characteristics. In the first place, the affective dimension emerges, which makes teachers feel that they are well-liked by children who are looking for a direct and affective relationship with them.

Thus, the S5N interviewee: *«they want another safe place after home, [...] so yes, the part related to teaching, the part related to skills, but there must also be the human part»*. Teachers can feel responsible for the growth processes of children, confusing and permeating the emotional dimension with the element of control, so the interviewees feel considered by the pupils; S16D: *«the children are affectionate, no, no, they consider me ... counting to 3, let's say I already put them in line at 2»* and S17S: *«In any case, there is no student who opposes my interventions so yes I feel absolutely listened to by them»*. In this sense, the element of reciprocity that takes on value if the spontaneity of relationships is considered, risks being compromised by the need for control. On the contrary, the communicative-relational area should involve the emotional dimensions and not just the organizational aspects related to

teaching; the S4A interviewee argues, for example, that it is important to communicate to children how you feel because a relationship based on respect and educating towards it should pass for authenticity. The S20S interviewee says: *«we have people in front of us who will respect the adult when they too are respected and listened to»* and this dimension supports global growth, including didactics, because in the child who feels respected, the desire to learn emerges, so the interviewee S19S: *«the children want to work with me, they look for me for new jobs... there is a smile, there is a hug»*; so the S9S interviewee *«I understand it from the attention, the participation, the smiles, the availability»*. It is knowing how to be the teacher that makes the difference in relationships with students. Listening and creating an empathic relationship with them are winning dimensions of the training path, increasing the sense of adequacy of teachers, and protecting them from the risk factors of work-related stress.

4.5. Work-related stress symptoms

In this category there converge some areas of discomfort relating to individual levels, group sizes and impacts on teaching practices. The symptoms that have emerged are divided into physiological and psychological reactions; in the first case, the fatigue caused by the workload can lead in particular to extreme tiredness and insomnia which, as interviewee L16D claims, depends *«on worries that are unable to make you rest properly»*; so, interviewee (S20S): *«it never comes off, 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 sleep under the bed because I don't want to go back»* (S3C). The element of fatigue, physical or psychological, is a factor that can lead to difficulties in the classroom; S18R interviewee commented that it happens *«to everyone, to have days in which stress and fatigue are felt more and seem to slow down times and alter the usual ways of working»*. The aspects that would be most affected concern the quality of the didactic and educational intervention (S7L); the lack of clarity in planning activities with consequences in terms of operational memory or attention paid to what is planned in the classroom; the holding of the lesson, also in terms of enthusiasm and accuracy in the work, and the tendency to improvise; the type of response that the trainer is able to give to the pupil: the S19S interviewee says: *«you react a little ... not very calm compared*

to other situations, but the importance is to be true even with children». However, the problem of not keeping calm can create difficult situations, such as the fear of judgment on the part of families or colleagues. The S8A interviewee says that if *«things did not go as we thought, an activity did not go as we wanted, the results are not the right ones, then maybe we can also go into crisis»* (S10L).

4.6. Current relevance of the educational mission

From the didactic point of view, the teacher is called to educate; says the subject S18R: *«we must no longer just make a child literate and educate him as happened in the past, but we must help him to grow up, to make him autonomous; you have to give him confidence in his abilities and potential, help him overcome his difficulties. In the work of the teacher, therefore, more*

roles converge ». The teacher is a mediator, facilitator, observer, educator... but not only that, as the interviewees argue, the teacher now has a considerable bureaucratic burden that risks undermining the care of the pedagogical component because it overloads the teacher with other tasks; the interviewees underlined how the bureaucratic aspects take away time from teaching and this is perceived as a burden because you feel you are doing too many things together, crushing the relationship with the children. Interviewee S13J argues that *«teachers should be given more time to do the work between teacher and child, without loading it and with many other activities, then leave us the serenity of working with the class»*. Teachers recognize the educational component in their role, but in difficult situations they ask themselves how much space and time to devote to the care of the educational dimensions; the S4A subject says *«to have a bit of the tension of "I don't know whether to wait and see how it goes, but the situation could also explode", so knowing how much confidence to give, when to block first and then 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 have to be patient and know what you are doing while feeling like saying "maybe I'm wasting time" »*. There is a need to work on the sense of community, implementing effective communication to support relationships. The S20S interviewee says: *«We are not listened to perhaps because we are not united and this is our biggest flaw»*. The school as a community that promotes well-being should work on emotions and so should the teachers in the classroom: *«I work a lot on empathy, in short, on the human relationship with them, because they have to understand that there is a person in front of them who does not judge them. and that it is not against them»*. Children must be supported in their growth, they must become autonomous and *«we must give them confidence in their abilities and potential, help them to overcome difficulties»* (S18R).

4.7. Sense of effectiveness

Two main dimensions emerged from the data with which it is possible to describe the results of this area and they are: class control and children's enthusiasm. In the first case, the teacher feels effective when he receives gratification from a situation of equilibrium in which no problematic situations arise that need to be managed both from a behavioral point of view and with respect to learning; the S3C interviewee shares: *«in classes where normally it was not possible to take lessons I arrived and I was even told ... we thought that there was no one in this class»*; in this case the social reinforcement received meant that the teacher felt effective in conducting the class. The need to keep the learning under control to monitor its effectiveness is quite evident in the answer given by the S16D interview: *«I do numerous tests, let's call them tests which they then know are not tests, they are more useful to me than to them" »*. Other teachers, instead, use different strategies that involve children in evaluating their effectiveness, asking them for feedback on what is done (S3C). We point out that many of the interviewees consider their work effective when they can say that they have achieved the goals they set themselves; teachers seem to be anchored in personal programming. Furthermore, effectiveness is perceived when through their own indications *«children understand what they must do and how they must proceed»* (S18R); teachers who do not feel effective try to change their strategies and organize teaching action differently by investing new energy. The main difficulty that emerged in terms of effectiveness concerns the relationships with children who demonstrate problem behaviours; so the subject S10L: *«it happened for example last year with a child with behavioral problems and there I felt a little ineffective [...] the mother decided to enroll him in another school»*. The abandonment of the school context in this sense is experienced as a defeat

in terms of effectiveness. With respect to the second dimension, it emerges that basing relationships on empathy is a first element of perceived effectiveness.

Teachers feel effective when they see children motivated to learn and enthusiastic, as so much energy is invested to *«make the lesson interesting, not boring and above all open to all levels of learning»* (S20S); the enthusiasm that children put into tackling the activities is a sign of success for the teachers.

4.8. Covid-19 impact

The present category assumes value in this particular historical phase that has seen teachers and pupils adapt to different requests both in an emergency situation, with everything that has meant the modulation of distance teaching, and 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), *«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 the relational dimension; the school is a place of 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 the workload is considerable, the S5N interviewee claims 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. Discussion

The research has shown 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 do not have a direct relationship with their headmaster, who is indeed perceived as distant and to whom one turns mainly in problematic situations. In this sense he is represented exclusively as a guarantor of the fulfillments. What is lacking is effective support from the manager, a competence to build clear training and didactic objectives and foresee their realization through effective application methods. The lack of organizational competence on the part of the management does not facilitate the teaching practice, the dialogue with families, the emotional-relational aspects, the organization of work, in other words, it lacks the ability to support teachers in addition to demanding quality in their work. The excessive workload and the lack of organizational factors in the context are experienced as highly problematic dimensions by the interviewees, who describe a high impact on the personal and family life stress of teachers. Finally, the commitment required of teachers does not correspond to adequate social recognition. The bureaucratic formalities use too much energy, taking away time from the care of relationships with pupils; one feels confused about one's role in the face of these tasks. The S20S interviewee on the role of teacher argues that it *«includes a series of burdens that deviate from the role of trainer»*. What emerged that the dimension that is most affected by work-related stress symptoms is the attitude of teachers in the planning of teaching activities, which would be less accurate, but also the way of interacting with children in the classroom, which would become more impulsive and less patient. Furthermore, the need to receive confirmation with respect to 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 objectives, also moving away from the methods suggested by the National Indications (2012) 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 of teachers are attributable to poor personal resilience skills, but also to having to manage 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, 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 the analysis of needs, 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 makes give the opportunity to build coping strategy in terms of 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 always supported at all times, within the working context, with structured and functional paths to increase those internal resources necessary to face risk situations. The need has emerged to be accompanied by competent figures in paths of comparison, recreational groups or spaces dedicated to reflexivity, to analyze emotions starting from their own scholastic experiences. In this sense, the promotion of collective effectiveness can be hoped for, in which a central role would have the head teacher on 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 supervision of one's work or for 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 the 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 pay attention to the emotional aspects, but they ask themselves how much time to devote to them; a sort of split emerges between the emotional and didactic structures, as if training and emotions were different spheres; here is once again the need for psycho-pedagogical integration. The need to deepen socio-emotional learning in schools clearly emerges and to understand that it is convenient to promote it if it is inserted and made to dialogue with 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 encounter the greatest difficulties with children engaging in problematic behaviours. In this sense, the value of socio-emotional learning takes on an even more significant role. A network work is then proposed in which the school, as an educational agency, recognizing its belonging to a territory, can activate itself in the creation of an educational network, placing itself as a center in the construction of meaning. Ensuring that the school community plays the role of an educating community, pursuing the shared construction of meaning, is possible if the working groups, considered an opportunity by the interviewees, dedicate themselves to promoting the construction of a shared space. The desirable design must not be lowered from above, but must arise from different contexts; however, it should not exclude the participation of particular professionals. In this sense, hypothesizing a mandatory presence of a school psychologist in each school could help in identifying the variables that allow us to pass from the perception of a problematic situation to the construction of the problem, starting from the situations through the different problem solving processes, thus responding to the need to adequately define problems before trying to solve them. The contribution of the two figures would be configured as a support in terms of caring, which from the pedagogical point of view assumes the logic of taking charge to accompany prevention, promotion of well-being and on the realization of the subjects; and curing, which, from a psychological point of view, is aimed at treating possible conditions of risk or discomfort.

It is also important to consider the parents, by clearly defining the roles and relational dynamics, and the children who, as active subjects of the school system, should be involved in the project, taking into account the emotional sphere in particular. It is about cooperating with children also in the teaching/ learning processes; the outcome of the same, in fact, would seem to have effects on the conditions of well-being or the discomfort of the teachers. It is certainly a commitment in terms of giving up control but if supported by the system, in an organization that takes into

account the needs of all components of the school community, then teachers could feel supported in courageous educational choices that fully respect the uniqueness of the individual school. The study made it possible to explore the research objectives, defining and starting from the experience of the teachers, the risk conditions and possible situations of discomfort. In this sense, the research, highlighting the need to ask teachers to question their emotional experiences, to intervene in a preventive way, contributes to the knowledge of the factors associated with the work-related stress of teachers.

5.1. 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 to promote teachers' wellbeing in relation to their work. The interventions concern tertiary, secondary and primary prevention. A first point concerns the provision of a free clinical psychological consultation (minimum 10 meetings) for teachers, within the school, or by making available free vouchers. This path should have as its purpose the exploration of the teacher's work motivation and analyze the critical events that occur in the school context considering the emotional dimensions that inform relationships within the school system and that organize development goals. [19]; [24]. A second point concerns a reorganization of work and work breaks, allowing small breaks (weekly) during the working year instead of concentrating them in the summer would allow greater sustainability of the workload. A third suggestion, on the other hand, concerns the inclusion of salary reward systems for teachers who show interest in further promoting their training, specifically in the field of teaching [2]. A fourth suggestion is to involve school managers in organizational psychology training courses in order to promote their psychological competence to think about the functioning of the organization in relation to the objectives of the school and the demands of families, students and the community. Fifth, to introduce a mandatory system for monitoring the well-being of teachers in each school based on indicators, downstream of which to promote reward or penalty systems for the school manager.

6. Limitations and future directions

The 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 must be limited to the Italian reality, and in particular to a context such as that of the capital. The second limitation concerns the fact that the interviews were conducted in the first academic year after the pandemic, which saw classes return to school; this meant that the interviewees found themselves in a difficult period of readjustment to school life. The statements of the interviewees should be anchored to this particular and unique moment of the school. 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 experience and on a particular aptitude of the teaching of some teachers ("expert teacher"). Future research could combine qualitative studies such as this one presented with mixed methods studies on a larger group 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 the school and implementing measures to prevent and combat the stress and mental distress of teachers. Additional investigation might be carried out in the psychological-clinical field; psychologists who offer psychological counseling to teachers within the school could be interviewed, asking them to describe the most common and emerging discomforts from the teaching staff within the work environment.

Code availability: Not applicable.

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

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Department of Developmental and Social Psychology, Faculty of Medicine and Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome - IT (protocol code XXX - 2021)."

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