



Beyond the silence: Prioritizing teachers' mental health in educational research, practice and policy

Valeria Cavioni^{a,1}, Elisabetta Conte^b and Veronica Ornaghi^c

^aDepartment of Humanities and Social Sciences, Faculty of Society and Communication Sciences, Universitas Mercatorum, Rome, Italy

^bDepartment of Human and Social Sciences, University of Bergamo, Bergamo, Italy

^cDepartment of Human Sciences for Education "Riccardo Massa", University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

Teacher mental health is a critical yet under-addressed dimension of educational quality and sustainability. While educators are widely recognised as key agents of student well-being, their own mental health remains relatively marginalised in research, institutional practices, and policy. This discussion paper highlights the urgent need to rethink how teacher mental health is conceptualised and addressed within education systems. Rather than viewing it as a private concern to be managed individually, it needs to be understood as a collective responsibility that requires institutional commitment and structural support. Adopting a narrative and integrative approach, the present paper draws on peer-reviewed studies selected from major scientific databases, alongside international evidence-based programmes and policy frameworks, to explore the key structural, relational, and organisational factors that shape educators' mental health. Particular attention is paid to the emotional costs of teaching and the clinical consequences of chronic stress. The paper calls for policy reforms that embed teachers' mental health into professional standards, quality assurance frameworks, and leadership training.

Keywords: teachers' mental health; school policy; stress; burnout; school

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Introduction

In recent years, the mental health of teachers has emerged as a critical yet underexplored dimension of educational quality and sustainability (Cavioni et al., 2023a; Poulou et al., 2024). Although international

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Corresponding author. Email address: valeria.cavioni@unimercatorum.it

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research has increasingly recognised the importance of fostering psychological well-being in students (Colomeischi et al., 2022), far less attention has been paid to the mental health of those responsible for guiding and supporting the educational process: the teachers themselves. Understanding what is meant by teacher mental health is a necessary starting point for advancing this conversation and informing effective educational policies and interventions (Cavioni, 2025). To address this need, the present paper offers a narrative and integrative synthesis that advances a theoretically grounded, policy-relevant discussion of teacher mental health as a systemic and collective concern. Rather than adopting a systematic review design, this contribution draws on selected seminal frameworks, meta-analyses, and internationally recognised evidence-based programmes that illuminate key dimensions of teachers' mental health and its organisational determinants. Through this selective and theory-informed integration, the paper aims to connect conceptual, empirical, and policy domains, providing a coherent basis for future research and action.

Mental health, in this perspective, is widely recognised as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond the mere absence of psychopathology. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2005), it is defined as a state of well-being in which individuals realise their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to their community. This definition emphasises a positive and dynamic conception of mental health, one that integrates personal fulfilment, adaptive functioning, and social contribution. In occupational contexts such as teaching, this perspective is particularly relevant, as it foregrounds the teacher not only as a professional but also as a person coping with complex interpersonal, emotional, and institutional demands.

More specifically, teacher mental health has been conceptualised in a way that integrates both individual and systemic dimensions (Cavioni, 2025). It encompasses not only teachers' emotional and social functioning, but also their ability to effectively manage professional responsibilities, build and sustain meaningful relationships with students and colleagues, and preserve their overall well-being over time. Yildirim (2014) described teacher occupational well-being as comprising job satisfaction, work engagement, and a healthy work-life balance, emphasising that teacher mental health is fundamentally situated at the intersection between personal experiences and organisational conditions.

Keyes' (2002) three-dimensional well-being model provides a particularly useful framework to the understanding of teachers' mental health. Keyes distinguishes between emotional well-being (positive affect and life satisfaction), psychological well-being (autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life), and social well-being (social integration, contribution, and coherence). In this model, mental health is defined as a continuum that spans from languishing, defined as a state of low functioning and psychological disengagement, to flourishing, which reflects optimal levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being across all domains. When applied to teachers, this model suggests that mental health is not a binary state but a dynamic condition: educators who are flourishing are not merely free from mental disorders, but are also engaged, motivated, emotionally regulated, and socially connected within their school communities.

Another psychological perspective on mental health is offered by the model developed by Stamate and colleagues (2015). Drawing on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Keyes' (2002) two-

continua model, it conceptualises teachers' mental health as encompassing both well-being and distress. Their study demonstrated that professional competence influences these two dimensions through the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the experience of acting with a sense of volition), competence (feeling effective and capable in one's tasks), and relatedness (feeling connected and supported by others).

Within this framework, teacher mental health can be understood across three interdependent domains—self, others, and work—that jointly sustain psychological balance (Stoloff et al., 2020). The “self” dimension refers to internal capacities such as emotional regulation, resilience, and intrinsic motivation, all of which are essential for coping with the emotional demands of teaching. A strong alignment between personal values and professional roles has been shown to foster fulfilment and reduce vulnerability to burnout. The “others” dimension reflects the relational context of mental health, highlighting the role of positive interpersonal relationships with colleagues, students, families, and external support networks. High-quality social connections provide emotional resources that help mitigate stress and enhance problem-solving capacity, while relational conflict or isolation can heighten the risk of distress. Finally, the “work” dimension encompasses institutional factors such as workload, role clarity, professional autonomy, and leadership support. Evidence shows that teachers who benefit from constructive feedback, collaborative environments, and professional development opportunities report higher job satisfaction and lower occupational stress. Organisational conditions such as administrative support, collegial relationships, and adequate resources are strong predictors of job satisfaction (Polychroni et al., 2025). Conversely, excessive demands, limited recognition, and institutional neglect increase the risk of emotional exhaustion and professional disengagement.

Taken together, these frameworks underscore the relational, contextual, and systemic nature of teacher mental health. They also reinforce the need for educational systems to adopt comprehensive and integrated approaches to well-being that move beyond the identification of individual symptoms and instead address the structural and relational conditions that support or undermine mental health in the teaching profession.

Teacher mental health: A neglected priority

Teachers are frequently positioned as key facilitators of students' psychological development (Conte et al., 2023; Nalipay et al., 2021). They are expected to model students' social and emotional competence, foster positive classroom climates, and respond sensitively to the diverse needs of their students (Cavioni, 2025). They increasingly act as first responders to students experiencing mental health difficulties, often without receiving adequate training or institutional support. For instance, the qualitative study by Gunawardena and colleagues (2024) revealed that many educators feel unprepared to manage classroom mental health crises and report a lack of consistent professional training and counselling resources across schools. Yet, paradoxically, far less attention is paid to teachers' own psychological needs and well-being (Weston et al., 2018). Despite the critical emotional labour embedded in the profession, the mental health of teachers continues to be marginalised in research, policy, and institutional practice (Gunawardena et al., 2024).

One of the primary barriers to addressing this issue is the persistent stigma surrounding mental health in the teaching profession. Psychological distress is often perceived by educators not as a legitimate response to systemic challenges, but as a personal weakness or professional inadequacy (Hakanen et al., 2006). This perception fosters an environment of silence, in which teachers suppress emotional difficulties rather than seek help, thereby exacerbating psychological strain. Research on emotion regulation confirms that emotional suppression, when used habitually, is associated with increased physiological stress and reduced psychological well-being (Gross & John, 2003). Over time, such dynamics can contribute to chronic stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout. This phenomenon can be understood as the product of multiple, interrelated factors. At the cultural level, teaching remains strongly influenced by a “caregiver identity” and by gendered expectations, namely social norms that associate the teaching profession, particularly at early educational levels, with traditionally feminine traits such as emotional endurance, altruism, and self-sacrifice (Griffiths, 2006). These expectations often discourage teachers, especially women, from expressing vulnerability or seeking psychological support, as doing so may be perceived as a failure to meet the moral ideal of the “caring teacher” (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Institutionally, school systems often lack psychologically safe environments or confidential support mechanisms, fostering a climate where admitting distress is perceived as a professional risk (Kidger et al., 2016). Moreover, the performance-oriented culture emphasises accountability, achievement metrics, and constant evaluation, further contributing to emotional suppression and self-silencing among educators (Santoro, 2021).

The consequences of unaddressed mental health concerns among educators extend well beyond the individual level. Numerous studies have demonstrated that poor teacher mental health is associated with diminished instructional quality, classroom dysregulation, and adverse student outcomes (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Teachers experiencing high levels of stress or burnout are more likely to struggle with classroom management, show reduced emotional responsiveness, and have lower instructional effectiveness, which negatively impacts both students’ engagement and socio-emotional development. Conversely, educators with higher levels of well-being tend to foster emotionally supportive classroom environments and serve as positive models of emotion regulation and prosocial behaviour (Denham et al., 2014). Recent evidence has further demonstrated that teacher and student mental health are directly interconnected, as teachers’ psychological well-being significantly predicted students’ mental health outcomes, underscoring the reciprocal nature of this relationship within classroom ecosystems (Yan et al., 2024).

Research also showed that teachers’ well-being is closely linked to their self-efficacy and work engagement. Teachers with high levels of mental health and resilience also reported greater work engagement and professional commitment (Cavioni et al., 2023b). Similarly, high levels of social and emotional competence in teachers have been shown to act as a buffer against the negative effects of perceived stress on burnout by promoting greater work engagement and emotion regulation (Ornaghi et al., 2023). This is in line with evidence identifying that those teachers experiencing supportive collegial relationships and possessing emotion-focused coping strategies reported lower psychological distress (Conte et al., 2024).

This paper argues that promoting the mental health of teachers must become a central priority of educational systems, not only as a moral imperative grounded in the right of educators to psychological safety and fulfilment, but also as a strategic investment in the overall quality and sustainability of education. By shifting the lens from viewing teachers solely as providers of support to recognising them as individuals who also require systemic support, we can begin to develop interventions, policies, and school cultures that genuinely promote emotional well-being at every level of the educational system.

The emotional costs of teaching

Teaching is an emotionally demanding profession shaped by a constellation of interrelated stressors that extend far beyond instructional responsibilities (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). These emotional costs are embedded in the daily fabric of teachers' work and are often underestimated in educational discourse. Among the most consistently reported challenges is work-related stress, which remains particularly prevalent in the teaching profession compared to other occupational sectors (Wettstein et al., 2021). Teachers are required not only to deliver content and manage classroom behaviour, but also to respond sensitively to the increasingly complex emotional and social needs of their students (Cavioni, 2025). These expectations are frequently compounded by insufficient time, limited institutional resources, and growing accountability pressures tied to both academic achievement and students' psychological well-being. As a result, the cumulative strain experienced by teachers is profound and persistent.

For many educators, the emotional intensity of supporting students, particularly those exhibiting behavioural difficulties or signs of distress, evokes ongoing feelings of frustration, helplessness, and inadequacy, especially when adequate institutional support is lacking (Schutz & Lee, 2014). Over time, the unrelenting nature of these stressors can lead to burnout, a psychological syndrome characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion, considered the central component of burnout, often manifests as chronic fatigue and emotional detachment from students and colleagues, diminishing both personal resilience and professional effectiveness. Teachers suffering from burnout report lower levels of empathy, reduced engagement in classroom interactions, and a diminished sense of satisfaction in their work. Burnout also undermines the educational process itself by impairing the emotional climate of the classroom and contributing to decreased student engagement, academic achievement, and emotional regulation (Iancu et al., 2018; Wolf et al., 2015).

The emotional cost of teaching is further exacerbated by exposure to relational aggression, particularly from students. Although bullying has traditionally been examined in peer contexts, increasing attention has been given to teacher-targeted bullying, a phenomenon involving repeated verbal, emotional, or physical aggression directed at educators (Kim et al., 2025). These behaviours, which may include mocking, insults, threats, or vandalism, can significantly erode teachers' authority, sense of safety, and professional identity. Teachers who experience this form of aggression frequently report elevated levels of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and job dissatisfaction, which in many cases result in disengagement from the profession or premature exit (de Wet, 2010). Moreover, the effects of student-perpetrated aggression ripple outward,

affecting not only the individual teacher but also the broader classroom climate, deteriorating the quality of teacher-student relationships and fostering a general sense of insecurity (Burns et al., 2020).

Another source of psychological strain that remains underacknowledged in many school systems is emotional abuse by school leadership. Principals or administrators who engage in controlling, dismissive, or publicly humiliating behaviours contribute to a toxic organisational climate. When school leaders practice excessive surveillance, exclude teachers from decision-making, or engage in subtle forms of gaslighting, the workplace becomes a source of emotional threat rather than professional support (Blase & Blase, 2006). Such power-imbalanced relationships are deeply detrimental, often leading to heightened levels of depression, stress-related health problems, and withdrawal from professional engagement. Teachers who feel disempowered and devalued experience a diminished sense of agency and professional efficacy, which further compounds their vulnerability to burnout (Pearson et al., 2001).

These emotionally charged dynamics not only jeopardise the well-being of individual teachers but also compromise the functioning of the entire school ecosystem. Chronic stress, relational conflict, and emotional disengagement contribute to increased absenteeism, rising attrition rates, and a breakdown in collegial relationships (Coetzee & van Dyk, 2018). As these issues become more widespread, schools risk losing continuity and institutional knowledge, along with a decline in educational quality, all of which ultimately have a direct impact on students.

When stress becomes pathology

When teachers' psychological needs are systematically neglected, the cumulative effects of occupational stress may progress beyond subjective discomfort and evolve into clinically significant mental health conditions. Prolonged exposure to unmanaged stressors in the school environment, whether related to overwhelming workload, unsupportive leadership, or repeated relational conflict with students, can lead to the development of anxiety disorders, depressive symptomatology, and chronic somatic complaints. These include persistent fatigue, headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances such as irritable bowel syndrome, and sleep dysfunction, all of which compromise teachers' capacity to function both inside and outside the classroom (Giorgi et al., 2014).

Prolonged and intense occupational stress can lead to post-traumatic stress symptoms in educators, especially in environments perceived as emotionally unsafe or persistently hostile. Repeated exposure to humiliation, threats, or emotional abuse from students, families, or school leadership may result in symptoms resembling post-traumatic stress disorder, including intrusive memories, heightened arousal, avoidance of distressing stimuli, and emotional dysregulation (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Recent evidence highlights the critical role of leadership and organisational support in shaping teachers' psychological adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Matthews et al. (2022) found that district and school leaders' behaviours, particularly transparent communication, empathy, and the continuous provision of safety resources, were key predictors of teachers' well-being and turnover intentions throughout the crisis. In contexts where leadership was perceived as supportive and responsive, teachers reported better work-life balance,

lower safety concerns, and reduced intentions to leave the profession. However, in many cases, the lack of consistent institutional guidance and psychological support amplified teachers' vulnerability.

The COVID-19 pandemic thus served as a major catalyst for such experiences, exacerbating pre-existing stressors while introducing new layers of psychological burden. During extended school closures and abrupt shifts to online teaching, educators were tasked with maintaining continuity of instruction and providing emotional support to students and families, often under conditions of uncertainty, isolation, and institutional unpreparedness (Fan et al., 2021; Westphal et al., 2022). The simultaneous blurring of personal and professional boundaries, compounded by limited psychological support, significantly amplified teachers' vulnerability to trauma-related responses. Evidence from recent studies confirms the clinical relevance of this phenomenon: a meta-analysis conducted by Idoiaga Mondragon and colleagues (2023) revealed that up to 11% of teachers during the pandemic reported PTSD-like symptoms. These findings highlight the profound psychological toll of crises on educators, particularly when they are expected to function as emotionally stable caregivers in the absence of adequate systemic protection and care.

In addition to diagnosable conditions, many teachers under chronic stress adopt maladaptive coping strategies that may not meet clinical thresholds but corrode mental health over time. These include emotional suppression, professional disengagement, social withdrawal, and, in some cases, substance use as a form of self-medication (Cavioni, 2025). These coping mechanisms, while often aimed at preserving short-term functioning, contribute to long-term psychological deterioration by reinforcing patterns of isolation, emotional numbing, and detachment from professional meaning.

A series of studies conducted on teachers officially certified as unfit for teaching duties due to health reasons revealed a striking prevalence of psychiatric conditions as the leading cause of work-related disability in this population. Psychiatric conditions account for 64% of cases of certified work incapacity among teachers, with the majority of diagnoses falling within the anxiety-depressive spectrum (Lodolo D'Oria, 2012). These findings point to the high psychological burden associated with the teaching profession. The distribution of mental health disorders varies across educational levels. Primary school teachers appear to be the most affected, representing 34.65% of the cases, followed by teachers at the upper secondary level (29.7%), lower secondary level (23.76%), and pre-primary level (11.88%). Notably, the prevalence of psychiatric conditions among teachers is significantly higher than that observed in other categories of public-sector employees, including administrative staff and healthcare workers.

These findings collectively underscore the distinctive psychological vulnerability associated with the teaching profession, shaped not only by the inherent demands of instruction and caregiving, but also by the complexity of relational dynamics involving students, colleagues, school leadership and all school members. The cumulative impact of these stressors compromises teachers' capacity to support student development, regulate classroom environments, and contribute to a healthy school climate. Left unaddressed, chronic stress can escalate into pathological conditions, highlighting the urgent need to shift from reactive responses to proactive, system-wide approaches. Although a substantial body of research has examined teacher well-being, stress, and burnout, much of this work has focused on individual symptoms and coping mechanisms rather

than on the organisational, cultural, and policy contexts that shape educators' psychological health. In this sense, teacher mental health remains underexplored, not because of a lack of empirical evidence, but due to its limited integration within systemic and policy-oriented frameworks. Recognising this gap is crucial to advancing a more comprehensive and preventive understanding of teachers' well-being as a structural component of educational quality and sustainability.

From evidence to action

Acknowledging the intricate interdependence between personal, relational, and institutional dimensions of teacher well-being, the need for structured, evidence-based interventions becomes evident. Teacher mental health cannot be effectively supported through isolated, reactive, or solely individual-level strategies. Rather, it calls for systemic and preventive approaches embedded within educational practice and policy. In response to these challenges, some structured, evidence-based programmes have been developed to embed mental health promotion within everyday educational practice.

In Europe, a particularly relevant initiative for advancing teacher mental health within a systemic framework is the *Promoting Mental Health at Schools (PROMEHS)* programme, co-funded by the European Commission and implemented in six European countries, namely Croatia, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Romania, and Portugal. It is grounded in a comprehensive and evidence-based theoretical model that views teacher well-being as an integral component of whole-school mental health promotion (Cavioni et al., 2020; Weare & Nind, 2011). PROMEHS positions it within the broader ecology of the school, integrating social and emotional learning (SEL), resilience building, and the prevention of emotional, social, and behavioural difficulties in both students and educators. This multi-component curriculum comprises structured teacher training, implementation guides, and both home- and classroom-based activities, all designed to be seamlessly integrated into the regular school curriculum. The programme aims not only to enhance students' competencies but also to strengthen teachers' psychological resources through SEL skills development, resilience training, and increased teachers' mental health literacy.

Empirical findings from the PROMEHS project involved more than 680 teachers and demonstrated statistically significant improvements in educators' social and emotional competencies—particularly in emotion regulation, interpersonal relationships, social awareness, and teacher–student relationships (Cavioni et al., 2023a). Furthermore, they also reported enhanced resilience and higher self-efficacy in managing classroom, student engagement, and instructional strategies, compared to those in the control group.

Complementary country-specific analyses have further supported these results. For instance, a quasi-experimental study carried out in Greece confirmed the programme's effectiveness in strengthening teachers' social and emotional competences and resilience following participation in the PROMEHS intervention (Poulou et al., 2024). PROMEHS' strength lies in its systemic design, which not only equips teachers with personal coping resources but also engages the whole school community in fostering a culture of mental health (Cefai et al., 2022; Lester et al., 2020).

Another innovative European initiative aimed at enhancing teacher mental health is the *Teaching to Be (T2Be)* project, which developed the *Online Wellbeing Course (OWC)*, a gamified, narrative-driven training programme designed to foster teachers' psychological resources and social-emotional skills (Cavioni et al., 2024). Unlike traditional training formats, the OWC leverages digital technologies and experiential learning through a serious game platform, combined with a structured digital handbook for offline reflection. This dual-format approach allows for both immersive, scenario-based learning and personal introspection, making well-being promotion more engaging and sustainable over time. The game consists of twelve levels to be completed over five months, during which teachers are encouraged to explore self-awareness, emotional regulation, stress management, empathy, leadership, and collaborative problem-solving.

The effectiveness of the OWC was tested across partner countries involved in the European project, namely Lithuania, Latvia, Norway, Austria, Slovenia, and Italy, through a quasi-experimental design comparing an experimental group of in-service teachers who participated in the intervention with a control group who did not. Data were collected through a combination of quantitative methods using questionnaires and qualitative methods involving focus groups to capture changes in teachers' psychological and social-emotional competencies, well-being, and perceived school climate. In Italy, the national implementation involved a sample of 189 in-service teachers from early childhood to upper secondary schools. Findings revealed significant improvements in key areas related to teachers' emotional competence, self-care strategies, social awareness, relationship skills, decision-making, and perceptions of school climate. Teachers reported greater self-efficacy in managing stress, enhanced empathy, and a strengthened sense of belonging and cohesion within the school environment. Comparable positive results were observed in the other participating countries, further supporting the programme's cross-cultural relevance and its potential to serve as an innovative, scalable model for promoting teacher well-being at the European level (Martinson et al., 2024).

In the American context, *CARE for Teachers (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education)* is a well-validated, mindfulness-based professional development programme designed to strengthen teachers' emotional competence, stress regulation, and resilience. Grounded in SEL theory, the programme includes 30 hours of experiential training and individual coaching. In a cluster-randomised trial with 224 teachers, CARE participants showed significant improvements in emotion regulation, mindfulness, self-efficacy, and well-being, along with reductions in psychological distress and time-related stress (Jennings et al., 2017). Their classrooms also demonstrated higher levels of emotional support. A 9.5-month follow-up confirmed sustained benefits, particularly for teachers with higher initial distress levels, reinforcing CARE's value as a targeted intervention (Jennings et al., 2019).

Despite the promising outcomes associated with these programmes, their large-scale adoption across educational systems remains limited. Key barriers include fragmented and inconsistent policy frameworks, insufficient and unstable funding streams, and a lack of infrastructure to support sustained implementation and evaluation (Cavioni et al., 2023). Moreover, efforts to support teacher well-being are often confined to isolated training sessions or short-term initiatives that are disconnected from the broader school context. Such decontextualized interventions are often not embedded within the everyday practices, relational processes, and

organisational structures of school settings, which limits their effectiveness and reduces their potential for long-term sustainability (Cavioni, 2025).

Conclusions

Teacher mental health is still too often regarded as a matter of personal responsibility, isolated from the organisational and relational contexts in which it develops. This individualised framing overlooks the systemic causes of psychological distress and limits the potential for meaningful, long-term solutions. By placing the burden solely on the individual, it also perpetuates stigma and obscures the significant role that working conditions and institutional dynamics play in contributing to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion. This discussion does not aim to present teaching as entirely separate from other emotionally demanding professions, but to highlight how its educational, interpersonal, and ethically charged nature intensifies specific pressures and calls for preventive, system-level responses integrated into school policy and practice. What is needed is a fundamental shift in perspective, one that recognises teacher mental health as a matter of professional entitlement, institutional obligation, and structural reform.

This position is strongly supported by international policy guidance. At the global level, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021a) advocates for the development of health-promoting schools where staff well-being is considered foundational to school effectiveness. According to WHO recommendations, mental health promotion for educators must include early identification of psychological distress, targeted prevention programmes, and access to psychosocial support. Importantly, WHO (2021b) highlights the critical role of school leadership in protecting staff mental health, recommending strategies such as redistributing high-stress tasks, facilitating peer support, and ensuring timely access to mental health services.

Recent OECD reflections have also expanded the policy discourse on teacher well-being by addressing the complex challenges educators face in times of crisis. According to Kell (2024), teacher well-being is a fundamental condition for ensuring continuity and quality in education. This is especially true during crises, such as armed conflicts, natural disasters, or public health emergencies, when teachers' ability to work effectively is particularly vulnerable. This report emphasises that teachers' emotional, psychological, and physical health are deeply shaped by the institutional environment, organisational culture, and the degree of professional agency and collaboration supported by education systems. To strengthen resilience and sustain teachers' moral purpose under pressure, the OECD calls for the systematic integration of self-care and emotional regulation competencies into teacher education and professional development. Moreover, it urges policymakers to cultivate cultures of well-being at all system levels through leadership modelling, recognition, effective communication, and balanced workload policies, stating that resilient teachers are essential for resilient education systems.

Empirical findings from TALIS 2024 (OECD, 2025) reinforce this global perspective, revealing that teacher stress has increased across OECD countries since 2018, mainly due to excessive workload and administrative demands. At the same time, professional autonomy, recognition, and supportive collegial relationships remain the strongest predictors of job satisfaction and retention. Earlier TALIS reports (OECD,

2019; 2020) also underlined that reducing stress and burnout requires systemic and structural measures, including emotionally supportive work environments, high-quality professional development, and shared decision-making processes that empower teachers within their institutions.

At the European policy level, the European Education Area, as articulated in the European Commission Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (European Commission, 2020), builds upon these global priorities by emphasising teacher competence, career development, and well-being throughout the professional lifecycle. Within this framework, teachers and trainers are recognised as central actors in achieving high-quality and inclusive education, with their mental health and motivation regarded as essential for both innovation and student development. The Communication calls for enhancing the professional status of educators, providing coherent career frameworks, and ensuring supportive working conditions that prevent stress and burnout. Among the flagship initiatives, the Erasmus+ Teacher Academies aim to strengthen both initial and in-service teacher education through international collaboration and communities of practice. By integrating modules on sustainable development, mental health promotion, and social engagement, these Academies promote teacher well-being as a cornerstone of effective and equitable education.

Australia offers a concrete example of how such an approach can be implemented at scale. The *Be You* initiative, developed by *Beyond Blue* and nationally funded since 2017, provides a whole-system model for promoting mental health across early childhood and school settings. Rather than focusing narrowly on individual self-care, *Be You* adopts an ecological framework that addresses educator well-being through six interrelated domains: individual educator characteristics, collegial relationships, workplace culture, leadership, community, and policy governance. This model reflects a recognition that mental health is shaped by both personal and environmental factors, and that school systems must engage across multiple levels to generate meaningful change. *The Be You: Beyond Self-Care Guide* (Be You, 2023) articulates this framework in detail, advocating for leadership practices that normalise well-being conversations, integrate staff mental health into school improvement planning, and use structured feedback processes to assess and adjust interventions over time. By embedding educator well-being into strategic priorities and organisational culture, *Be You* offers a replicable, evidence-informed model for transforming school environments into spaces that promote psychological safety and professional fulfilment.

Practical implications, limitations, and future research agenda

Bridging the persistent gap between research and educational practice requires systemic coordination among policymakers, researchers, and school leaders, supported by a coherent and long-term policy framework. Promoting teacher mental health cannot rely on isolated initiatives but must be embedded as a structural pillar of educational quality and workforce sustainability.

To translate these insights into practice, educational authorities should: (a) integrate validated indicators of psychological well-being, including stress, burnout, self-efficacy, and relational climate, into national systems of school evaluation and accountability; (b) embed evidence-based modules on social and

emotional competence, and mental health literacy within both pre-service and in-service teacher education, as well as in leadership development programmes for school leaders; (c) ensure sustained funding mechanisms and implementation infrastructures to guarantee the continuity and scalability of effective interventions avoiding their fragmentation after project completion; and (d) establish national observatories or longitudinal monitoring systems to systematically track teachers' well-being across the professional lifespan, informing preventive and supportive policies grounded in empirical evidence.

The present paper, conceived as a discussion-based and integrative synthesis, does not present new empirical data but draws together theoretical, empirical, and policy contributions to understand teacher mental health as a collective and institutional responsibility. While this narrative approach provides analytical depth, it does not claim exhaustiveness. Future research might, therefore, employ longitudinal and cross-national designs to examine how system-level variables, such as leadership practices, school climate, and policy environments, interact with psychological factors to influence teachers' well-being and mental health over time. Integrating large-scale international datasets (e.g., TALIS 2024) with psychological and organisational indicators would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the multilevel determinants of teacher mental health and professional sustainability.

Ultimately, the evidence reviewed in this paper converges on a clear message: no educational reform can succeed without emotionally healthy educators. The sustainability, equity, and quality of education systems depend on the well-being, motivation, and professional fulfilment of those who bring learning to life every day. Embedding teacher mental health within educational policy and institutional design is therefore not optional; it is a foundational prerequisite for the future of teaching and learning.

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