

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Italian Teachers' Well-Being in the Post-Covid Era: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Teachers' psychological well-being is a crucial and multifaceted dimension of professional life, determined by the balance between job demands and available resources. This study investigates the well-being of Italian teachers in the post-COVID era using the Job Demands–Resources model to identify risk and protective factors.

Methods: Six focus groups were held with 40 primary and secondary school teachers from three Italian regions. A deductive–inductive approach was used to analyze factors influencing well-being, which were categorized within the JD-R framework. Teachers' emotional responses associated with these demands and resources were also examined.

Results: Three main categories of demands and resources emerged: individual, relational, and organizational. The most frequent demand involved relational difficulties with students' families, while positive collegial relationships represented the main resource. Demands were often linked to frustration, feeling judged, and loneliness, whereas resources were associated with serenity, satisfaction, and joy.

Implications for School Health Policy, Practice, and Equity: Findings emphasize the importance of supporting teacher–family relationships and promoting collegial collaboration as protective factors for well-being. Interventions should address relational and emotional challenges to enhance a sustainable school climate.

Conclusions: The study highlights relational and systemic factors shaping teachers' well-being and suggests actionable strategies for promoting healthier educational environments in the post-COVID era.

1 | Introduction

Teachers' psychological well-being is a critical yet complex dimension of professional life, encompassing individual, relational, and organizational aspects that influence teaching effectiveness, job satisfaction, and school climate [1, 2]. Pre-pandemic literature identified several risk factors affecting teachers' well-being, including excessive workload, role ambiguity, strained family-school and teacher-student relationships, and a lack of institutional support [2–6]. Conversely,

resources included perceived autonomy, work engagement, supportive school relationships, and professional development opportunities [7–9]. The COVID pandemic profoundly disrupted educational systems worldwide, forcing rapid adaptation to new teaching modalities. This occurred in a context of accelerated digitalization, increasingly blurred boundaries between work and personal life, and shifting expectations from both families and educational institutions [3, 4, 10, 11]. These changes exposed teachers to numerous risk factors, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, sadness, anger, and fear, which significantly

undermined their psychological well-being [12–15]. In Italy, this was compounded by pre-existing issues, like bureaucratic rigidity and tense teacher-parent relationships [15, 16]. Despite these challenges, collegial support, collaborative planning, new routines, and strong relationships with students, families, and colleagues acted as protective factors against burnout and promoted teacher well-being [13, 17].

In the post-pandemic era, although challenges such as excessive workloads, limited institutional support, and systemic inefficiencies persist, the crisis underscored that supportive strategies—including transparent communication, an emphasis on social–emotional learning, and fostering trust-based relationships—remain critical for long-term teacher well-being.

1.1 | The Job Demands-Resources Model in the School Context

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model is among the most widely adopted theoretical frameworks for understanding occupational well-being across professional contexts, including education [18–22]. Within this framework, *job demands* are physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained effort and are associated with physiological and psychological costs. In contrast, *job resources* help achieve work goals, reduce demands and related costs, or stimulate personal growth and professional development.

A central tenet of the JD-R model is that employee well-being is shaped by the dynamic interplay between job demands and resources through two interrelated processes. The health impairment process suggests that excessive demands may lead to stress and burnout, whereas the motivational process suggests that job resources foster engagement, commitment, and positive organizational outcomes [20]. In teaching, research shows that high workload, emotional labor, classroom management difficulties, and role ambiguity increase the risk of exhaustion, while collegial support, autonomy, leadership quality, and professional recognition enhance engagement and resilience [20–22]. In Italy, studies applying the JD-R framework have also highlighted the role of personal resources like self-efficacy, resilience, and trait authenticity in mitigating demands and enhancing work engagement [23, 24]. However, most evidence derives from large-scale quantitative studies using standardized instruments [1], offering limited insight into how teachers subjectively experience and emotionally interpret these dynamics in daily professional life [25].

1.2 | Aims

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopted a qualitative, context-sensitive approach informed by the JD-R framework to examine teachers’ professional experiences in the post-pandemic Italian school context. Specifically, the study explored how teachers identify and describe work-related demands (e.g., sources of distress and professional challenges) and job resources (e.g., forms of support and protective factors), as well as their subjective experience of stress and support. Particular attention was devoted to how teachers emotionally interpret and make sense of these

dynamics, highlighting the emotional processes linking demands and resources in teachers’ narratives.

2 | Method

This qualitative study is part of the Italian contribution to the international project *Global Perspectives on Teachers’ Wellbeing and Mental Health Following the COVID-19 Pandemic*. The project, coordinated by the University of Warwick (United Kingdom), Tulane University (United States), and Georgia State University (United States), stems from a collaboration among school psychologists in several countries to examine teachers’ wellbeing and mental health from a socio-cultural perspective during and after the pandemic. The Italian component of the project involved research units from three universities: the University of Bologna, the University of Florence, and Roma Tre University.

2.1 | Participants

A total of 40 teachers participated in the study, including 18 primary school teachers and 22 secondary school teachers. Participants were recruited from six public schools located in three Italian regions, representing Northern and Central Italy. The sample was approximately equally distributed across the three regions.

All participants were recruited with the cooperation of school principals. Table 1 presents descriptive demographic information for the full sample.

2.2 | Procedure and Instrumentation

The study followed a shared, ethically approved research protocol (ethical approval N. 0369220, 07/12/2022). Six focus group interviews (three primary and three secondary; 6–8 teachers each; approximately 2 h) were conducted between March and May 2023. Participants provided informed consent, completed a demographic questionnaire (Qualtrics, Provo, UT), and were assigned unique identifiers. Facilitators used a semi-structured interview protocol to guide discussions in a respectful and safe environment. The protocol included three thematic areas: (1) general questions on psychological well-being, (2) stressors and sources of support, designed to elicit teachers’ perceptions of job

TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics of the teachers.

	Primary school teachers (n = 18)	Secondary school teachers (n = 22)
Age, M (SD)	50.83 (5.98)	51.50 (8.13)
Gender, n (%)		
Male	1 (6.0)	4 (18.0)
Female	17 (94.0)	18 (82.0)
Years of teaching, M (SD)	22.17 (11.50)	19.09 (9.04)
Teachers with educational level > 13 years, n (%)	8 (45.0)	22 (100.0)

demands and resources, and (3) challenges in teaching and discipline. Rather than asking participants to label specific emotions, questions encouraged reflective narratives about distress, stress signals, coping strategies, and sources of support, consistent with interpretative qualitative research that views emotions as embedded in meaning-making processes. Questions such as “How do you recognize when you are feeling stressed?” or “What are your sources of support when experiencing distress?” prompted reflection on subjective and emotional manifestations of the health impairment process described in the JD-R model, while prompts about support and valued professional attributes enabled the exploration of affective dynamics related to the model’s motivational process. Thus, the JD-R framework functioned as a sensitizing lens for data interpretation rather than a predefined structure for data collection. The full list of interview questions is described in Supporting Information File A.

All focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed by the research team to remove personally identifiable information, ensuring confidentiality.

2.3 | Data Analysis/Coding

The analytical procedures followed the framework developed within the broader international project, drawing by Nastasi and Borja [26] and Nastasi et al. [27]. Qualitative data analysis followed a deductive-inductive coding approach, based on the project framework. The initial deductive phase applied theoretically derived codes, allowing for “double coding” to capture thematic complexity. Given the study’s aim of exploring demands and resources influencing teachers’ well-being during and after COVID, and the emotions associated with them, the analysis focused on four codes:

SUPP (*Sources of Support/Social Resources*): references to support within the participants’ sociocultural environment that help them cope with stress, manage psychological challenges, or access assistance, including informal (e.g., family, peers, colleagues) and formal sources (e.g., school counselors, psychologists).

STRESS (*Stressors/Risk Factors*): references to stressors in participants’ sociocultural contexts—such as family, school, peer group, or community—that may hinder personal or professional functioning and psychological well-being.

FEEL (*Emotions*): mentions of emotional experiences, including feeling labels or descriptions of emotional manifestations.

COVID: references to the COVID pandemic period.

Following the deductive phase, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Two independent researchers coded the transcripts to identify data-driven categories and subthemes. Their coding was compared and discussed until full agreement was reached, and the categories were refined accordingly. In line with Braun and Clarke [28], reflexive thematic analysis codes were selected not only by frequency but also by conceptual relevance, narrative salience, and contribution to research questions. Less frequent codes were therefore retained when they reflected

theoretically or emotionally significant aspects of teachers’ experiences. The resulting inductive categories are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

To interpret the emergent data, we used the JD-R model [18, 19] as a conceptual framework, mapping supportive themes onto “Resources” and stress-related themes onto “Demands.” To deepen the analysis and align with recent literature [1, 29, 30] we also applied a three-level interpretive framework situating the inductive codes within the JD-R model. These three levels reflect key domains influencing teacher wellbeing:

Individual level—referring to work-related attitudes, self-efficacy, and coping strategies.

Relational level—encompassing interpersonal dynamics with students, families, and colleagues.

Organizational level—relating to institutional policies, workload, and systemic functioning.

We also examined double-coded segments where FEEL and COVID codes overlapped with SUPP or STRESS. This allowed us to explore (a) the emotional valence associated with demands or resources, offering a more nuanced understanding of teachers’ affective responses; and (b) which demands and resources were specific to the COVID period and which persisted in the post-pandemic era.

3 | Results

The thematic analysis revealed participant-reported demands and resources across three levels: individual, relational, and organizational, each including risk and protective factors related to participant well-being. Figure 1 provides an overview of the thematic structure.

3.1 | Participants’ Reported Demands, Resources, and Emotional Responses at the Individual-Level

This level refers to personal characteristics, behaviors, perceptions, and strategies shaping participants’ experiences. Internal resources included resilience and motivation; stressors included feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, or perceived professional overload. Table 2 presents theme frequencies and illustrative quotes. Key demands involved lack of preparation, sometimes linked to COVID ($n=4$) but in most cases described as a permanent issue ($n=10$), associated with feelings of inadequacy ($n=4$), frustration ($n=5$), being judged ($n=3$), and loneliness ($n=2$). In addition, difficulties in integrating digital technologies into teaching are often coded as COVID-related ($n=25$) but also persisted in the post-COVID era ($n=5$). This demand was associated with feelings of inadequacy ($n=4$), discomfort/distress ($n=3$), frustration ($n=6$), and feeling judged ($n=2$). The participants’ perceived lack of professional and economic recognition did not elicit specific emotional responses and was largely described as unrelated to COVID ($n=13$), with only

TABLE 2 | Levels, themes, frequencies, and examples of quotes related to teachers' job demands.

Level (n)	Subthemes	n (%)	Examples of quotes	
Individual (91)	Lack of preparation	14 (15.4)	<i>"Am I up to this role? Am I doing well? Have I given everyone the tools? Have I read the needs of all the children well?"</i>	<i>"I had the feeling that I was in the moment when Gutenberg began printing, and those who continued to write books by hand perhaps did not fully understand that there would be no going back. I had that feeling."</i>
	Teaching and technology	30 (33.0)	<i>"The work tripled because you had to imagine things, explore platforms, check then feedback, that is, I remember working at night correcting photographed class assignments."</i>	<i>"As a teacher of literature, computers, and information technology, I wasn't interested in it at all. I mean, this is the real thing, paper, pen, books, and that's it. The pandemic, the day after... I'm in a provincial school, so you can imagine what happened, and we had no tools."</i>
	Lack of professional/economic recognition	14 (15.4)	<i>"A lack of professional recognition, we are at the bottom, we are that category that is somewhere between being a homemaker and being a working woman."</i>	<i>"They should give us back our professionalism, because I feel like a professional, and I feel professional. But we have a professionalism to uphold. This demotivates me. This is one of the reasons that makes me feel, I won't say bad, but still down."</i>
	Lack of privacy	12 (13.1)	<i>"There was almost an invasion of privacy. Because even the camera pointed at the house became an eye."</i>	<i>"From family to school, new technologies have erased our privacy, our rights, and even our right to disconnect. It's still going on because now they have our phone numbers, and it's a constant complaint. Whereas before there were boundaries, now it's a nightmare."</i>
	Teaching difficulties with students	21 (23.1)	<i>"Children's waiting times have become almost nil. They are constantly asking, 'What do I do?' all the time! You give them tools, but then they don't use them."</i>	<i>"As far as distance learning is concerned, not being able to be there alongside them and not being able to act in real time was frustrating."</i>
Relational (94)	Relational issues with the school principal	11 (11.7)	<i>"I made during the lockdown a request, a motion, I don't know how to put it; and he judged that it was not worth bringing it back to a meeting and so he rejected it for me."</i>	<i>"If you had any interventions to make, you had to report them in advance, days in advance, by email to the manager. For example, during lockdown, I made a request, a motion; and he decided that it wasn't worth bringing it to a meeting, so he rejected it."</i>
	Relational issues with colleagues	25 (26.6)	<i>"If one says one thing and the colleague exactly the opposite you see the disorientation in children."</i>	<i>"A sort of rivalry has developed among three teachers. Unfortunately, at first there wasn't a genuine, healthy sense of collaboration among all my colleagues. [...] As a support teacher, I felt a bit left out—supported by only a few, rather than by all my colleagues."</i>
	Relational issues with students' families	36 (38.3)	<i>"Then there's also a family behind it that maybe has demands, wants to tell you what you see, what you mustn't do, goes to syndicate even the word..."</i>	<i>"There are very few parents who don't think they can sit you down and tell you how you should work and what you should do."</i>
	Relational difficulties with students	22 (23.4)	<i>"The other day, so much so that they are individualists, during a group work on descriptive text, a group came up to me and said, 'The part he was supposed to do is missing,' and I said, 'You guys have to agree, you have to clash and you have to build a text together.' Did you understand what the smart guys had done?"</i>	<i>"It wouldn't take much to make everyone feel comfortable in class, but it's often hard to get people to listen."</i>
Organizational (78)	Rigidity of the school system	31 (39.7)	<i>"If these directives come from the top, we all have to conform and shut up."</i>	<i>"Our school got organized right away. They immediately released protocols on how to proceed: three video lessons a day, four showers, five... they organized your life for you."</i>
	Dysfunctions of the school system	22 (28.2)	<i>"We do not have moments of confrontation during programming hours"</i>	<i>"We start out as teachers, and then at some point we find ourselves doing bureaucratic work."</i>
	Work obligations	7 (8.9)	<i>"Even the exposure to the many compliances we are exposed to have become almost a necessary step."</i>	<i>"Class is certainly an important factor, but there is also a whole lot of extra work outside of class."</i>

TABLE 3 | Levels, themes, frequencies, and examples of quotes related to teachers' job resources.

Level (n)	Subthemes	n (%)	Examples of quotes	
Individual (79)	Resilience	45 (57.0)	<i>"Never stop, even where there are difficulties and maybe you don't know ... get informed, study, never stop, to try to offer the best."</i>	<i>"There is always an opportunity to learn"</i>
	Learning new things	1 (1.3)	<i>"We learned a lot of things digitally. It was something I enjoyed, I mean it enriched me so much..."</i>	
	Reinventing one's work	33 (41.8)	<i>"Explaining a subject in a foreign language required a huge effort from me in teaching, because the frontal lecture does not work, it never works in a foreign language, so the interview, the communicative exchange, the interactive lecture is most important."</i>	<i>"No one helped you because no one knew what to do. We had never been in this situation before and had to think about what to do. Everyone talked about inventing a teaching methodology, but before teaching, we had to invent a methodology to reach the students."</i>
Relational (113)	Positive relationships with the school principal	12 (10.6)	<i>"The school leader who is present is always a person who listens to you."</i>	<i>"This is something that my school principal also promotes because if you have a working group where everyone has at least a basic level of well-being, you can build on that".</i>
	Positive relationships with colleagues	50 (44.2)	<i>"She and I have been working together for 20 years, and it is clear that we look at each other and understand each other. So many words are not necessary."</i>	<i>"There may be a day when the class weighs heavily on me, but I share it; another day it weighs heavily on my colleague, we share it, and everything becomes lighter."</i>
	Positive relationships with students' families	13 (11.5)	<i>"With students' families, I feel valued when there is trust, when you feel that families support you and you are on the same page."</i>	<i>"Let's say that my relationship with these parents has changed dramatically since Covid ended because we've had more contact [...] face-to-face meetings, we've also had face-to-face interviews now, in my opinion, it has really changed dramatically because there is more communication and, as a result, more trust."</i>
	Positive relationships with students	38 (33.6)	<i>"With the students I have a relationship I won't say on par with my colleagues, but it's close because you talk, you joke, you reason, you support, they support you, because the kids are very keen on that."</i>	<i>"In writing, we would then tell each other things beyond the lesson, even very personal things that we probably would not have said in person [...]; paradoxically, the fact of being at a distance somehow encouraged us to write more, leading us to reveal more about certain things to each other."</i>
Organizational (19)	Functioning of the school system/environment	8 (42.1)	<i>"Where one can share there is already a perhaps more peaceful environment, where one can be oneself, right? With his own merits and flaws."</i>	<i>"In my school, it is also easier to encourage interdisciplinary activities among teachers. It is not always possible due to scheduling and other circumstances, but in several cases, activities of this type have been carried out."</i>
	Teacher training	4 (21.1)	<i>"I think a fundamental thing within the school is the training"</i>	<i>"To find the right thing for the right person and to motivate and encourage them, I rely heavily on my training. By training myself, I can, or at least I would like to, give everyone this opportunity to personalize, to give everyone the chance to come out, to reveal themselves, but also starting with myself, challenging my own preconceptions."</i>
	Work recognition	7 (36.8)	<i>"I think they understood the effort we made ... even in the little things ... you could see the appreciation they had for us."</i>	<i>"Personally, I feel comfortable when I am in an environment where sincerity reigns supreme. When everyone feels recognized for who they are."</i>

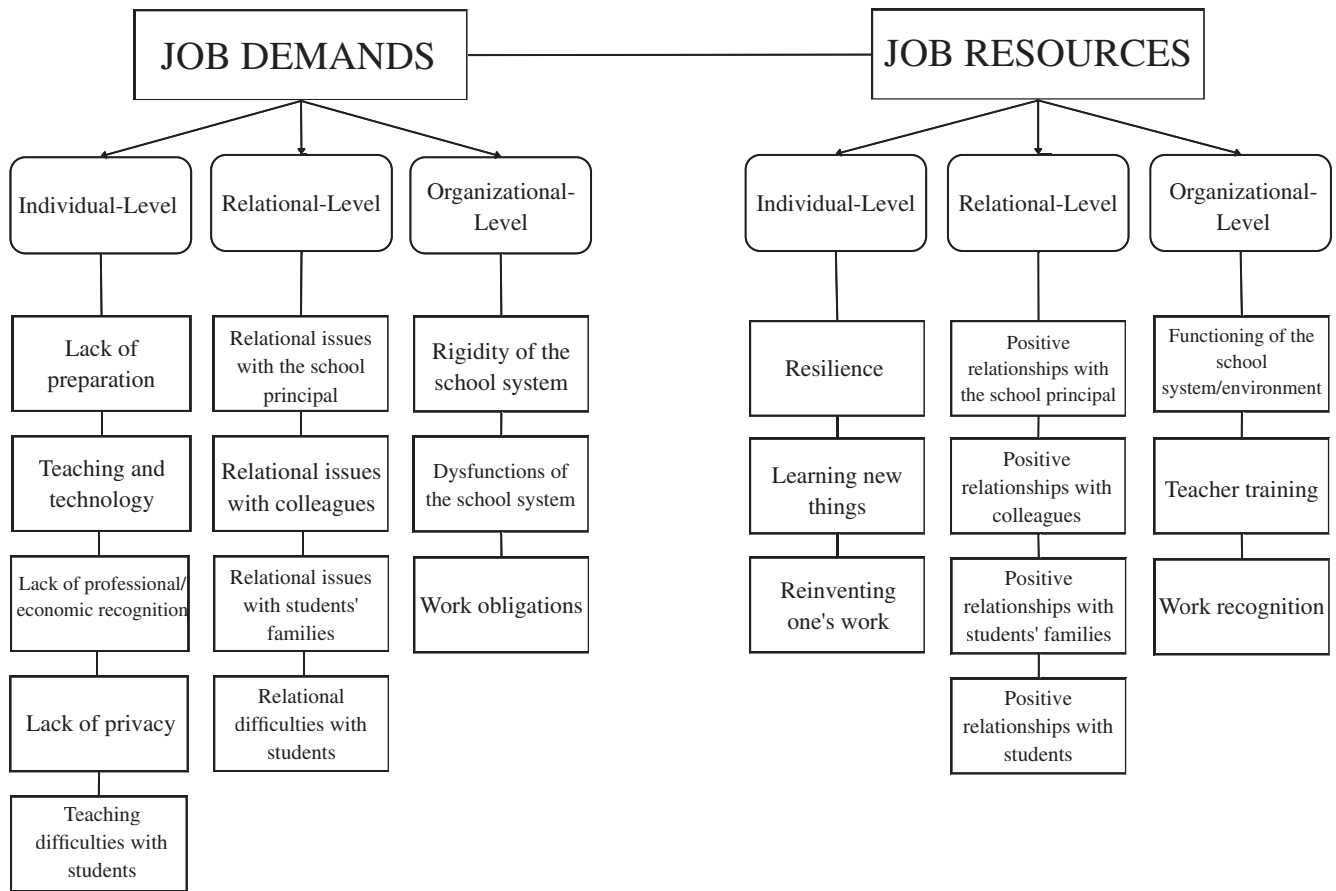


FIGURE 1 | Overview of categories and subcategories identified through thematic analysis, organized according to the job demands-resources (JD-R) model.

one explicit reference to the pandemic period ($n=1$). A further individual-level demand was a lack of privacy, reported exclusively during the COVID period ($n=12$). This demand was associated with emotional responses of inadequacy ($n=2$) and feeling judged ($n=3$). Finally, participants frequently reported experiencing didactic challenges in managing students' learning processes, partly tied to the COVID period ($n=7$) but above all persisting beyond it ($n=14$). These challenges led to emotional responses such as inadequacy ($n=2$), fatigue ($n=2$), frustration ($n=9$), guilt ($n=3$), loneliness ($n=3$), and fear ($n=2$).

Resources included personal traits and coping mechanisms. Table 3 provides the frequency, definition, and illustrative examples for each resource-related subtheme. Many participants highlighted their resilience as a core resource, often related to the COVID era ($n=10$) but more frequently to the post-pandemic period ($n=35$). Resilience was connected to both positive (e.g., serenity/emotional stability, $n=4$) and negative emotional experiences (distress, $n=2$; fatigue, $n=2$). Learning new things was also mentioned once, specifically in relation to the post-COVID period, although without emotional attribution. Additionally, the capacity to reinvent their work was reported as a source of strength, especially during the COVID period ($n=19$), but also persisting afterward ($n=14$). This resource was linked to mixed emotions: serenity ($n=2$), distress ($n=3$), and fatigue ($n=7$).

3.2 | Participants' Reported Demands, Resources, and Emotional Responses at the Relational-Level

This level concerns social and interpersonal aspects, including relationships with students, families, colleagues, and school leaders. These relationships may serve as sources of emotional strain or support. These relational challenges are detailed in Table 2, including frequencies, definitions, and illustrative quotes. Relationships with school principals were perceived as unsupportive, appearing only once in the COVID era ($n=1$) and mainly persisting afterward ($n=10$). These were described as sources of frustration ($n=3$), feeling judged ($n=2$), and loneliness ($n=4$). Problems with colleagues were also reported, partly tied to COVID ($n=4$) but more commonly described as ongoing issues ($n=21$), and elicited inadequacy ($n=6$), distress ($n=3$), frustration ($n=4$), feeling judged ($n=4$), and loneliness ($n=5$). Conflicts with students' families emerged as the most frequently reported stressors, often linked to COVID-related circumstances ($n=10$) but even more strongly persisting beyond the pandemic ($n=26$). These tensions generated feelings of inadequacy ($n=4$), distress ($n=4$), fatigue ($n=3$), frustration ($n=6$), feeling judged ($n=5$), and loneliness ($n=5$). Relational tensions with students were also commonly reported, emerging both during COVID ($n=10$) and afterward ($n=12$), and were linked to inadequacy ($n=4$), fatigue ($n=5$), frustration ($n=4$), and loneliness ($n=3$). Relational resources are presented in Table 3, along with their

associated emotional responses and illustrative quotes. Participants identified several key sources of emotional support at the relational level: constructive interactions with school principals were occasionally mentioned, especially in the post-pandemic phase ($n = 9$; COVID, $n = 3$), though without explicit references to emotion. By contrast, collegial relationships emerged as a significant protective factor, often referenced in the COVID era ($n = 14$) but more strongly in the post-pandemic phase ($n = 36$), and commonly associated with serenity/emotional stability ($n = 7$). When experienced positively, relationships with families were described as supportive, particularly outside the COVID period ($n = 11$; COVID $n = 2$), tied to serenity ($n = 5$) and satisfaction ($n = 4$). Positive interactions with students also stood out, both during COVID ($n = 12$) and beyond ($n = 26$), and were connected to serenity ($n = 12$) and gratification/satisfaction ($n = 5$).

3.3 | Participants' Reported Demands, Resources, and Emotional Responses at the Organizational-Level

This level refers to the structural and systemic aspects of the educational environment, including institutional policies, administrative dynamics, school culture, and broader systemic conditions. These factors may influence participant well-being either by generating professional strain or by offering institutional support. Several demand-related subthemes emerged at this level, as presented in Table 2, which details the frequencies, descriptions, and sample quotes. The rigidity of the school system was a frequently cited concern, partly linked to COVID ($n = 6$) but mostly described as a persistent issue ($n = 25$). This rigidity was often associated with inadequacy ($n = 3$), fatigue ($n = 2$), frustration ($n = 8$), feeling judged ($n = 4$), and loneliness ($n = 3$). Similarly, systemic dysfunctions were noted during the COVID period ($n = 4$) but predominantly afterward ($n = 18$), and elicited inadequacy ($n = 3$), fatigue ($n = 2$), frustration ($n = 11$), feeling judged ($n = 3$), and loneliness ($n = 5$). Bureaucratic work obligations, though less frequently mentioned, emerged both in the COVID period ($n = 2$) and beyond ($n = 5$), and were associated with distress ($n = 3$). Participants also described several organizational-level resources, which are detailed in Table 3. Participants mentioned effective school functioning, almost exclusively in relation to the COVID era ($n = 8$) and associated with serenity ($n = 6$), gratification/satisfaction ($n = 5$), and joy ($n = 2$). Opportunities for participant training ($n = 4$) and professional recognition ($n = 7$) were only reported in the post-pandemic period. Although these resources were cited as valuable, they were not explicitly connected to emotional responses. Nonetheless, their presence was interpreted as indicative of institutional support for professional growth and well-being.

4 | Discussion

This study aimed to explore the multidimensional factors influencing Italian teachers' well-being during and after the COVID pandemic using the JD-R model as a guiding framework. Through the voices of teachers, three main levels of analysis emerged—individual, relational, and organizational—each encompassing both demands and resources and associated with specific emotional responses. By applying a qualitative,

inductive-deductive approach, the study added granularity to existing literature and unveiled the complex emotional and contextual fabric underpinning teacher well-being in the COVID and post-COVID era, particularly within the Italian educational setting. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to capturing the lasting repercussions of the pandemic on teachers' professional lives and psychological adjustment over time.

4.1 | Individual Level

At the individual level, the study confirmed known stressors such as perceived lack of preparation and digital overload, but enriched them through participants' emotional reflections (e.g., self-doubt, guilt, professional isolation, and frustration). These findings resonate with COVID and post-COVID studies highlighting digital fatigue and pedagogical uncertainty, both linked to self-preparation and to managing students' learning process, as pervasive stressors [11, 13, 15, 31]. Lack of privacy also emerged as an individual source of stress, particularly in relation to difficulties maintaining clear boundaries between personal and professional life. This finding is in line with previous studies [4, 32], which have highlighted how blurred work-life boundaries, especially in teaching professions, can significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion and decreased well-being. Importantly, the lack of professional and economic recognition emerged as a finding consistent with previous research conducted in the Italian context [4] confirming a long-standing issue within the national education system, where teachers often report low levels of social prestige and inadequate financial compensation [16]. As widely documented in both international and national literature, the study highlights teachers' resilience and the ability to reinvent one's practice as essential resources in coping with the challenges brought by the COVID pandemic, but also relevant in the post-pandemic era. Studies have shown that such resilience is linked to a combination of contextual factors, such as access to resources, school organization, and systemic support, and personal capacities, including adaptability, professional learning, and intrinsic motivation [33, 34]. For example, in the Italian context, Parmigiani et al. [35] reported that, during the COVID pandemic, special education teachers not only adopted digital tools but also reimagined inclusive pedagogies to ensure learning continuity. These examples align with our findings, particularly in identifying flexibility and creative problem-solving as key professional assets. However, our research adds a critical emotional dimension to this discourse. While resilience and reinvention are often celebrated as markers of professional strength, our data reveal that they frequently come at a psychological cost. Specifically, in under-resourced or high-pressure contexts, the ability to adapt is accompanied by emotional strain, pointing to what we term the "emotional cost of resilience." In such cases, personal commitment may enable teachers to cope effectively [36], but not without experiencing significant affective fatigue and internal conflict. This underscores the need to view teacher resilience not only as a capacity but also as a burden, especially when systemic support is lacking [37].

4.2 | Relational Level

Concerning the relational dimension, one of the most salient findings of our study concerns the emotional strain associated

with interactions with students' families and colleagues. These social relationships—often underexplored in quantitative JD-R research—emerged as central to teachers' emotional well-being, frequently linked to feelings of frustration, loneliness, and a sense of being judged. This is consistent with previous studies suggesting that relational job demands, such as unrealistic parental expectations and insufficient collegial support, can intensify emotional exhaustion [17, 38]. Similarly, Conte et al. [4] reported that limited support from families and school principals constituted a major source of teacher stress. The present findings corroborate and expand upon this evidence, indicating that these stressors continue to play a critical role well beyond the pandemic period.

Conversely, positive and supportive relationships with colleagues and students consistently emerged as key resources, acting as mediators between job demands and teacher well-being [7]. These relationships were associated with feelings of calmness, fulfillment, and belonging, emotional dimensions often underrepresented in survey-based research. Supporting this, higher levels of social and co-worker support have been linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression among teachers [10]. Our findings align with those of Yin et al. [22] and Soncini et al. [17], reinforcing the protective role of social support in promoting emotional well-being in educational settings. Importantly, we expanded on this evidence by demonstrating that, beyond collegial relationships, meaningful connections with students, their families, and school supervisors also play a critical role in sustaining teachers' psychological health. These relationships functioned as essential resources for teachers during the pandemic and remained particularly pivotal in the post-COVID era, underscoring the lasting significance of social and institutional support in sustaining teacher well-being and resilience [39].

4.3 | Organizational Level

At the organizational level, teachers reported bureaucratic rigidity, systemic dysfunctions, and excessive work obligations as major stressors. These findings align with international evidence showing that work overload, time pressure, and organizational constraints contribute to heightened anxiety and depression, as well as increased risk of job burnout [10]. In the Italian context, studies have documented how excessive workload, inadequate organizational factors, and institutional fragmentation undermine teachers' well-being [4, 16]. The emotional fallout, notably feelings of frustration and inadequacy, suggests that systemic inefficiencies are not merely structural burdens but also have emotional implications. Nonetheless, teachers did report instances of institutional support (e.g., effective school functioning, recognition of work, professional training), although compared to resources at other levels, these forms of support are less consistently available or perceived. This may point to broader systemic shortcomings in educational policy and school management in Italy [40].

4.4 | Implications for School Health Policy, Practice, and Equity

This study underscores the need for a multidimensional, equity-informed approach to supporting teacher well-being in

the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the individual level, the findings highlight the psychological toll of digital overload, blurred work-life boundaries, and a lack of recognition, issues that disproportionately affect teachers in the Italian context. Health policies targeting schools should therefore prioritize support for digital competence and public recognition of teachers' roles, ensuring equitable access across diverse contexts.

At the relational level, the centrality of interpersonal dynamics, especially interactions with students' families, colleagues, and supervisors, points to the need for relational competence training, peer-mentoring programs, and family-school communication protocols. School policies that promote collaborative relationships between school and families can act as buffers against emotional exhaustion, particularly in high-pressure environments.

From an organizational perspective, the findings call for urgent investment in structural reforms, including the reduction of bureaucratic overload, clearer workload regulation, and more consistent access to professional development. While moments of institutional support were noted, their inconsistent presence reveals a need for system-wide policy efforts to standardize resources such as ongoing training, leadership support, and meaningful teacher participation in decision-making processes in the Italian context.

In terms of equity, systemic shortcomings (e.g., uneven distribution of support, disparities in digital infrastructure, and low levels of career recognition) may exacerbate existing inequalities within the education system. Addressing teacher well-being through a health equity lens requires attention not only to individual resilience but also to the redistribution of organizational resources, especially in marginalized or geographically disadvantaged school communities.

Finally, given the strong emotional dimension of the findings, schools must integrate ongoing emotional support into their well-being strategies. Research has shown that emotionally supportive environments, characterized by empathy, peer connection, and recognition, can reduce stress and promote psychological well-being [41]. Along these lines, peer support groups, supervision models with emotional scaffolding, and access to mental health services may be effective strategies for supporting teachers emotionally and should be seen not as a reactive measure but as a core component of sustainable school health policy.

4.5 | Limitations

The qualitative design, while enabling an in-depth exploration of teachers' emotional and contextual experiences, may also have introduced social desirability bias or limited the expression of dissenting perspectives, particularly given the focus group methodology. Future studies should consider mixed-method approaches to triangulate qualitative insights with large-scale quantitative data, thereby enhancing the breadth and robustness of conclusions.

Second, the study focused exclusively on Italian teachers, limiting cross-cultural comparisons. Expanding research to include transnational perspectives would provide valuable insight into

how systemic, cultural, and policy-related factors shape teacher well-being across different educational contexts.

Third, our findings underscored that the relational dimension emerged as central to teachers' well-being. However, the current study primarily focused on school-based relationships and did not fully explore the broader network of informal and extra-school social support. Alternative methodologies, such as social network analysis or the use of ecomaps [42], could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how personal relationships outside the school context contribute to teachers' emotional resilience and well-being. Future research should consider these approaches to capture the full scope and dynamics of teachers' support systems.

Fourth, the sample mainly consisted of experienced teachers. Professional seniority may have shaped how job demands and resources were perceived and managed, as more experienced teachers often develop stronger coping strategies and professional stability. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of early-career teachers. Future research should include teachers at different career stages to examine how professional experience influences the relationship between job demands, resources, and emotional well-being.

5 | Conclusions

This study provides a nuanced, emotionally grounded account of teacher well-being in Italy during the post-COVID era. By applying the JD-R model through a qualitative lens, it captures how job demands and resources operate across individual, relational, and organizational levels, revealing both shared challenges and uniquely Italian dynamics. Above all, the study demonstrates that teachers' well-being is not simply a matter of workload or resilience, but a complex interplay of structural conditions, social relationships, and emotional experiences.

In sum, these findings underscore the need to reconceptualize schools as organizational contexts of well-being, recognizing that teacher flourishing is instrumental to teaching effectiveness and students' outcomes.

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The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Supporting Material A.** Full List of Interview Questions Used in the Focus Groups.