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Developmental vulnerabilities and educational contexts: an empirical study on teachers' emotional competencies

Fragilità evolutive e contesti educativi: uno studio empirico sulle competenze emotive degli insegnanti

Call

Growing scientific attention to developmental vulnerabilities in younger generations highlights the need to move beyond reductionist interpretations focused solely on students' individual characteristics and to consider instead the role of educational contexts in socio-emotional development. International literature suggests that teachers' socio-emotional competencies represent a theoretically relevant variable for classroom climate and relational processes within educational settings. In particular, the Prosocial Classroom Model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) emphasizes that teachers' emotional awareness, regulation, and psychological wellbeing may influence educational interactions and students' self-regulation processes.

Within this framework, the present study examined the relationship between teachers' perceived emotional competencies and indicators of professional vulnerability through a quantitative survey involving 470 teachers, using a multidimensional self-report questionnaire on emotional competencies (27 items, Likert 1–5) and the Perceived Stress Scale – PSS-10. Results show overall adequate mean levels of perceived emotional competence ($M \approx 3.74$), but also reveal a substantial proportion of teachers reporting high perceived stress (scores ≥ 20 on a 0–40 scale), suggesting potential criticalities in professional emotional regulation and partially questioning the assumption that emotional competencies alone necessarily represent a protective factor against teacher stress. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of considering teachers' emotional wellbeing within an ecological and contextual perspective and support the need to systematically integrate socio-emotional competence development into teacher education and school policies aimed at promoting educational wellbeing.

Keywords: socio-emotional regulation, teacher, developmental vulnerability

La crescente attenzione alle fragilità evolutive delle nuove generazioni evidenzia la necessità di superare letture riduzionistiche centrate esclusivamente sugli studenti, considerando invece il ruolo dei contesti educativi nello sviluppo socio-emotivo. La letteratura internazionale indica che le competenze socio-emotive degli insegnanti costituiscono una variabile teoricamente rilevante per il clima di classe e per i processi relazionali in ambito educativo. In particolare, il Prosocial Classroom Model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) evidenzia come consapevolezza emotiva, regolazione e benessere docente possano influenzare le interazioni educative e i processi di autoregolazione degli studenti. In questa prospettiva, lo studio ha analizzato la relazione tra competenze emotive percepite dei docenti e indicatori di vulnerabilità professionale attraverso un'indagine quantitativa su 470 insegnanti, utilizzando un questionario multidimensionale self-report sulle competenze emotive (27 item Likert 1–5) e la Perceived Stress Scale – PSS-10. I risultati mostrano livelli medi adeguati di competenza emotiva percepita ($M \approx 3.74$), ma anche una quota significativa di docenti con livelli elevati di stress percepito (punteggi ≥ 20 su scala 0–40), suggerendo possibili criticità nei processi di regolazione emotiva professionale e mettendo parzialmente in discussione l'assunto secondo cui le competenze emotive rappresentino di per sé un fattore protettivo rispetto allo stress docente. Nel complesso, i risultati evidenziano l'importanza di considerare il benessere emotivo degli insegnanti all'interno di una prospettiva ecologica e contestuale e sostengono la necessità di integrare sistematicamente lo sviluppo delle competenze socio-emotive nella formazione docente e nelle politiche scolastiche orientate al benessere educativo.

Parole chiave: regolazione socio-emotiva, docente, vulnerabilità evolutiva

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1. Introduction¹

Students' perceived well-being within the classroom and in peer relationships is the result of the interaction of multiple variables. In recent years, the literature has increasingly recognized the role of teachers as key actors in shaping classroom social dynamics, described by Farmer et al. (2011) as a kind of "invisible hand" capable of guiding peer relationships. This perspective goes beyond the traditional view of the teacher as a mere observer and instead defines the teacher as an active agent who contributes to shaping the social and relational climate through instructional practices and daily interactions (Farmer et al., 2011).

Within this theoretical framework, the teacher assumes a dual role: on the one hand, they structure the relational context of the classroom; on the other, they serve as a social reference point for the evaluations students make about their peers. From an organizational standpoint, teachers can facilitate or hinder positive peer relationships through choices related to spatial arrangements, group composition, and the management of interactions (Gest & Rodkin, 2011). At the same time, according to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), teachers function as behavioral models: attitudes characterized by empathy, respect, and constructive communication provide observable examples that students tend to internalize and reproduce in prosocial ways.

Empirical evidence supports these assumptions. Experimental studies indicate that even seemingly simple structural variables can influence peer relationships. For example, Van den Berg et al. (2012) showed that seating students who were initially less liked by their peers closer to others promoted improvements in mutual liking and reduced victimization behaviors. Additional research highlights that teachers act as powerful social referents: students tend to interpret adults' reactions as cues for evaluating peers' social competence and popularity. Hendrickx et al. (2016) found that high levels of teacher support at the classroom level are associated with greater peer acceptance and increased prosocial behavior, whereas high levels of teacher–student conflict predict social rejection and aggressive conduct. In a subsequent longitudinal study, Hendrickx et al. (2017) demonstrated that teachers' negative attitudes toward a student can undermine that student's peer relationships through a process of social referencing. This dynamic appears to be particularly relevant in primary school, a developmental phase in which the quality of the teacher–student relationship significantly influences children's social and behavioral adjustment (Magro et al., 2025), and in which teachers contribute to shaping students' representations of peer relationships (Chen et al., 2020).

Further confirmation comes from a meta-analysis by Endedijk et al. (2022), conducted on 297 studies, which showed that the quality of the teacher–student relationship mediates the association between individual behavior and peer relationships. In particular, negative aspects of the educational relationship were found to be more strongly predictive of social outcomes than positive ones, suggesting that teachers' influence on relational dynamics operates primarily through the prevention of dysfunctional interactions rather than solely through the promotion of positive ones. This finding highlights the complexity of the teacher's social role and underscores the need to jointly consider both facilitating and hindering processes in the study of classroom relationships.

Although previous studies have frequently linked teachers' socio-emotional competencies to classroom climate and student-related outcomes, the present study specifically focuses on teachers' perceived emotional competencies and stress levels. In this perspective, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of the emotional dimensions of the teaching profession through a descriptive and correlational approach centered on teacher wellbeing.

¹ This work is the result of a joint effort by the authors. Specifically, Luna Lembo is the author of Sections 2, 3, and 4; Stefania Morsanuto is the author of Sections 1 and 5; Francesco Peluso Cassese supervised the research.



2. Prosocial classroom model

The Prosocial Classroom Model proposed by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) posits that teachers' socio-emotional competence does not influence student outcomes in a direct or linear manner, but rather through a network of interconnected processes. The model identifies three main pathways of influence. First, emotional competence fosters high-quality teacher–student relationships, as it enables teachers to recognize, understand, and respond appropriately to students' emotional needs, thereby building warm and supportive bonds that provide a secure base for social development. Second, emotional competence enhances classroom management through more effective emotion regulation, contributing to the creation of a positive classroom climate that reduces stress and facilitates social learning. Third, emotionally competent teachers promote social-emotional learning (SEL) through behavioral modeling and sensitive instructional practices. A core assumption of the model is that these pathways do not operate independently but in an integrated manner: for example, positive teacher–student relationships are supported by effective classroom management and, in turn, reinforce it; similarly, emotion regulation skills support both relational quality and the effectiveness of SEL instruction. Within this transactional perspective, the interaction among these mechanisms contributes to the development of a healthy classroom climate, which may in turn enhance teachers' professional satisfaction, sense of efficacy, and motivation, thereby generating a virtuous cycle that helps prevent burnout.

A substantial body of empirical research supports these theoretical assumptions. Teachers with higher levels of positive emotions and emotional competence tend to be more effective in building stable relationships with students (Poulou & Garner, 2025). A second line of evidence concerns classroom management and conflict resolution: studies indicate that emotionally competent teachers achieve better outcomes in these domains (Valente et al., 2019; Valente & Lourenço, 2020), whereas lower levels of emotional competence are associated with difficulties in recognizing students' needs and managing problematic behaviors (Nizielski et al., 2012). However, the relationship between emotion regulation and instructional effectiveness does not always appear linear. A recent systematic review (Aldrup et al., 2024) reported heterogeneous findings, suggesting that these associations are more complex and less robust than often assumed.

A third body of research focuses on social-emotional learning (SEL). The increasing expectations placed on teachers to promote students' socio-emotional skills require corresponding competencies in teachers themselves (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Empirical studies show that emotionally competent teachers are more likely to understand and value SEL objectives and to support students' emotional socialization in a positive manner (Valiente et al., 2020; Zinsser et al., 2015). Moreover, teachers' emotional skills are relevant for the creation of a supportive classroom climate and the adoption of emotionally responsive instructional practices (Zinsser et al., 2015), conditions that foster prosocial behavior already in early childhood.

Despite this body of evidence, some findings point to weaker-than-expected associations. A recent meta-analysis by Gebre et al. (2025), based on 21 studies, reported a modest correlation ($r = 0.120$) between teachers' socio-emotional competence and student engagement. Similarly, Aldrup et al. (2022), examining the role of teacher empathy, did not find significant effects on student outcomes. These results suggest that the link between teachers' emotional competence and student outcomes is likely mediated by intermediate variables and strongly context-dependent. This interpretation is consistent with the core assumption of the Prosocial Classroom Model, which posits that the influence of teachers' emotional competence on student outcomes is primarily exerted through mediating mechanisms, particularly the quality of the teacher–student relationship, rather than through direct effects. Although some studies have demonstrated mediation pathways linking teacher–student relationships to peer acceptance via school engagement (Hughes & Kwok, 2006), research examining teachers' emotional competence as an initial predictive variable has largely focused on academic outcomes (Chamizo-Nieto et al., 2021) or learning engagement (Wang et al., 2024), while largely neglecting students' social outcomes. Taken together, these findings suggest that the relationship between teachers' socio-emotional competencies and edu-



cational processes is likely to be complex, multidimensional, and context-dependent. For this reason, the Prosocial Classroom Model is adopted in the present study primarily as a theoretical interpretative framework rather than as a directly tested empirical model.

3. Research project

In line with the international literature emphasizing the relevance of socio-emotional dimensions within educational contexts, the present study explored teachers' perceived emotional competencies and perceived stress within the teaching profession. The Prosocial Classroom Model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) was adopted as a theoretical framework for interpreting the potential relevance of teachers' emotional functioning in educational settings. However, the study specifically focused on teachers' self-reported emotional competencies and stress levels, without directly assessing classroom climate, teacher–student relationships, or student outcomes.

From this perspective, a quantitative study was conducted in order to provide descriptive and correlational data regarding teachers' perceived emotional competencies and stress levels, with the aim of contributing to pedagogical reflection on the emotional dimensions of teaching and teacher wellbeing.

3.1 Study objectives

The present study aims to describe and analyze teachers' perceived emotional competencies and perceived stress levels in a large sample of educators, in order to explore possible associations between these variables. Consistent with the literature highlighting the relevance of socio-emotional dimensions in educational settings, the study seeks to provide descriptive and correlational evidence that may contribute to pedagogical reflection on teacher wellbeing and emotionally relevant aspects of educational contexts.

The study does not directly assess student outcomes, peer relationships, classroom climate, or teacher–student relational quality. Therefore, the Prosocial Classroom Model is used as a theoretical interpretative framework rather than as a directly tested empirical model.

3.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 470 teachers working across different educational levels, including kindergarten, primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools. The mean age of participants was 45.59 years ($SD = 7.08$; range = 23–67). The gender distribution was 82.3% female, 17.2% male, and 0.4% participants who identified with another gender identity.

The inclusion of teachers from different school levels allowed the study to involve professionals operating in heterogeneous educational contexts characterized by different organizational, relational, and instructional demands. However, detailed information regarding years of teaching experience and professional seniority was not collected and therefore could not be included in the analyses. This aspect should be considered in future research, as teaching experience may represent a relevant variable in the interpretation of teachers' emotional functioning and perceived professional stress.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous and involved completing a structured online questionnaire distributed via a digital platform. Participants received information regarding the aims of the study, confidentiality procedures, and data processing methods, in accordance with ethical principles governing research in educational contexts.



3.3 Tools and Methods

Perceived emotional competencies were assessed through a 27-item self-report questionnaire rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire explored teachers' perceived emotional awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and perceived ability to manage emotionally demanding professional situations. Several items specifically addressed emotional clarity, tolerance of negative emotions, and self-regulatory responses in stressful contexts. A total score was calculated as the mean of all items, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of perceived emotion-related self-regulatory competence. In the present sample, the instrument showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$). Since the questionnaire relied exclusively on self-report responses, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting perceived rather than objectively assessed emotional competencies. Perceived stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale – PSS-10 (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The scale consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale and yields a total score ranging from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating greater perceived stress. In line with the literature, scores ≥ 20 were considered indicative of high levels of perceived stress. The PSS-10 also demonstrated good internal consistency in the analyzed sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

3.4 Data analysis and results

Descriptive and correlational statistical analyses were conducted using Jamovi software. First, descriptive statistics were calculated for the main variables. The mean score for teachers' perceived emotional competencies was overall high ($M = 3.97$; $SD = 0.49$ on a 1–5 scale), with the distribution mainly concentrated in the medium-to-high range, as illustrated in the histogram (Fig. 1). This suggests that the sample generally perceives itself as possessing good levels of emotional awareness, regulation, and management skills in the professional context.

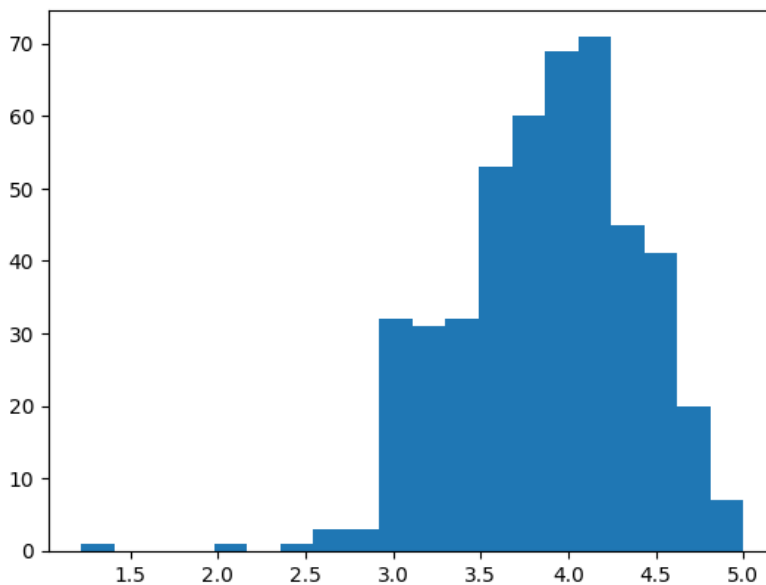


Figure 1 – Distribution of Emotional Competencies

Regarding perceived stress, measured using the PSS-10, the mean score was $M = 19.36$ ($SD = 3.85$; range = 0–31). The distribution shows a substantial concentration in the middle range of the scale, with a considerable proportion of participants close to or above the risk threshold (≥ 20), which, according to the literature, indicates high levels of perceived stress (Fig. 2).

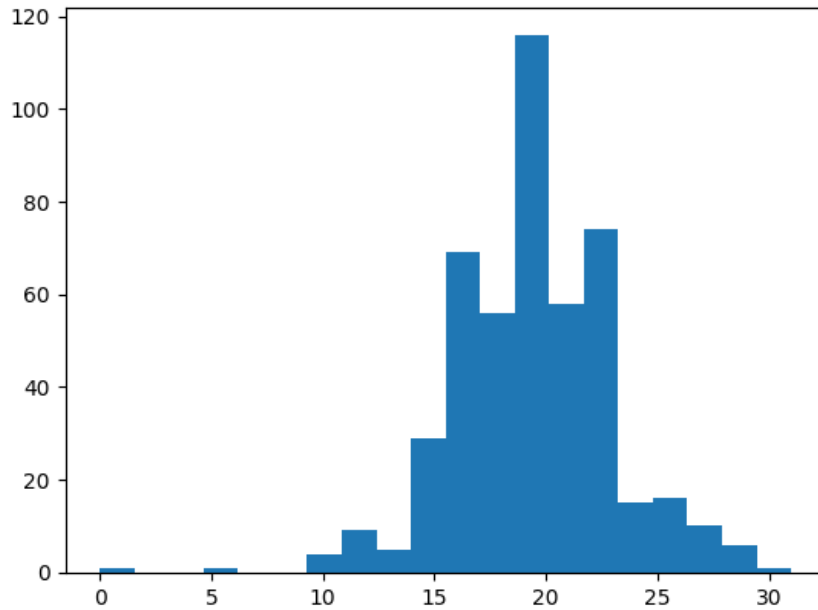


Figure 2 – Distribution of Perceived Stress

This finding suggests the presence of a non-negligible psychological burden among the participating teachers.

The relationship between emotional competencies and perceived stress was subsequently examined using Pearson's correlation. The analysis revealed a negative but very weak and non-statistically significant correlation ($r = -.035$; $p = .45$). This result indicates that, in the analyzed sample, higher levels of perceived emotional competence were not significantly associated with lower levels of perceived stress.

The scatterplot analysis visually confirms the absence of a clear linear relationship between the two variables, showing a wide distribution of scores without systematic patterns (Fig. 3).

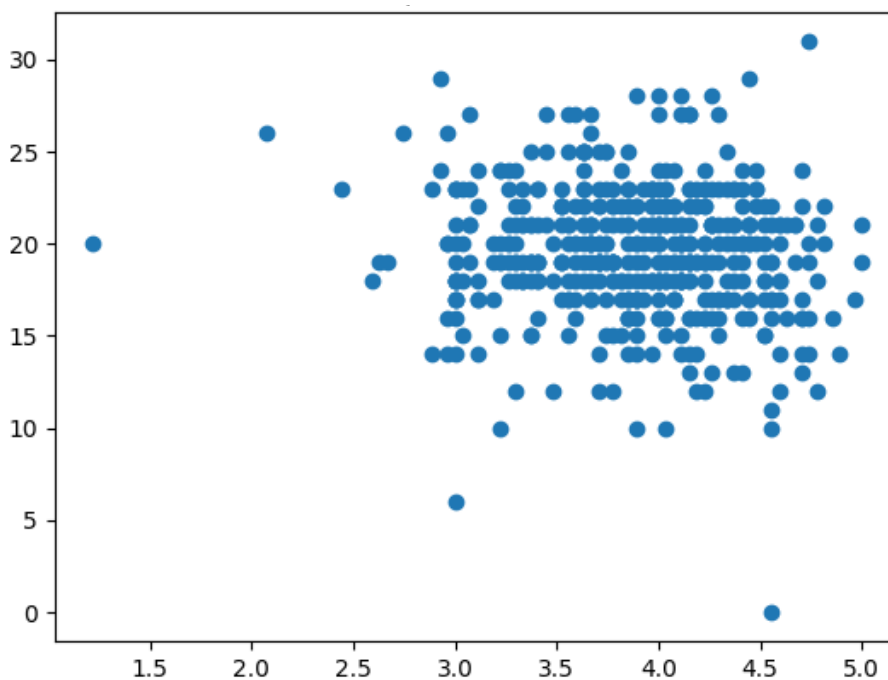


Figure 3 – Relationship between emotional competencies and stress



This finding suggests that the relationship between teachers' emotional competencies and perceived stress may be mediated by contextual or organizational variables not examined in the present study, in line with the literature describing these associations as multidimensional and dependent on the professional context.

Overall, the results depict a pattern characterized by good perceived levels of emotional competence accompanied, however, by moderate levels of stress, highlighting the need to further investigate the role of environmental, organizational, and relational factors in shaping teacher wellbeing.

4. Discussion

The results of the study offer relevant insights into the emotional dimensions of the teaching profession within contemporary educational contexts, which are increasingly characterized by relational complexity and growing emotional and organizational demands placed on teachers. First, the descriptive findings revealed moderately high levels of perceived emotional competencies among participating teachers, suggesting a generally positive perception of their ability to manage emotions, interpersonal relationships, and emotionally demanding professional situations. At the same time, moderate levels of perceived stress emerged, with a substantial proportion of teachers reporting scores within the range indicative of high stress (≥ 20). The coexistence of relatively high perceived emotional competencies and non-negligible stress levels suggests that individual emotional resources alone may not be sufficient to protect teachers from the psychological burden associated with contemporary educational work.

The absence of a statistically significant correlation between perceived emotional competencies and perceived stress is consistent with literature suggesting that the relationship between socio-emotional competencies and professional wellbeing is neither linear nor direct, but rather influenced by broader contextual, organizational, and relational variables. Within this interpretative perspective, the Prosocial Classroom Model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the potential relevance of teachers' socio-emotional functioning within educational settings. According to this model, teachers' socio-emotional competencies are theoretically associated with dimensions such as classroom relational quality, classroom management, and emotionally supportive educational contexts. However, the present study did not directly assess classroom climate, teacher–student relationships, or student outcomes. Therefore, the model is used here primarily as an interpretative framework rather than as a directly tested empirical structure.

From this perspective, the findings may suggest that perceived emotional competencies represent a potentially relevant personal resource for teachers, although their relationship with wellbeing and professional stress appears likely to depend on broader contextual and organizational conditions. Teachers who perceive themselves as emotionally competent may nevertheless experience elevated stress when working in environments characterized by high workload, bureaucratic demands, limited institutional support, or relational complexity. In this sense, emotional competencies alone may not automatically translate into lower stress levels, particularly when environmental and organizational stressors remain highly demanding.

Although the present study did not directly investigate indicators of student wellbeing, classroom relational dynamics, or educational climate, previous literature has highlighted that teachers' socio-emotional competencies may contribute to more supportive and inclusive educational environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Valiente et al., 2020). Studies have also emphasized the importance of teacher–student relational quality in promoting school adjustment, prosocial behavior, and emotional regulation among students (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Hughes & Kwok, 2006). However, such implications should be interpreted cautiously in relation to the present findings, since these dimensions were not directly measured within the current study. Consequently, the results should primarily be interpreted as contributing to reflection on teachers' emotional functioning and professional wellbeing rather than as evidence of indirect effects on student developmental outcomes.



Overall, these findings may contribute to the contemporary pedagogical debate emphasizing the need to move beyond exclusively individualistic interpretations of teacher professional wellbeing toward more ecological and systemic perspectives, in which personal, organizational, and contextual variables interact dynamically (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). In line with this perspective, the promotion of teachers' emotional competencies should not be limited to individual training interventions alone, but should also involve organizational policies and school practices aimed at supporting professional wellbeing and fostering sustainable and emotionally supportive educational environments (OECD, 2020; Jennings, 2015).

5. Conclusions

The results of the study show that adequate average levels of perceived emotional competence can co-exist with moderate or high levels of perceived stress in a significant proportion of teachers, partially questioning the assumption that emotional competence alone necessarily functions as a protective factor against professional stress. This evidence suggests that teacher wellbeing is likely to be shaped by complex and multidimensional dynamics that cannot be fully explained through linear relationships between individual emotional resources and stress conditions. Rather, the findings support the importance of considering the interaction between personal, organizational, and contextual variables when reflecting on teachers' professional wellbeing.

From an applied perspective, these findings may encourage critical reflection on currently widespread teacher training models. Although the development of socio-emotional competencies represents an important educational objective, the present data suggest that interventions focused exclusively on individual emotional competencies may prove insufficient if not accompanied by specific strategies aimed at managing professional stress and addressing the broader conditions in which teaching activities take place. In this regard, both initial teacher education and in-service training could benefit from integrating the enhancement of emotional competencies with reflective practices, stress management strategies, and greater attention to the emotional demands characterizing contemporary educational contexts.

The operational implications also concern the development of more contextualized and ecologically oriented interventions capable of recognizing teachers' existing emotional resources and supporting their translation into effective coping and self-regulation practices. Such interventions may include reflective training approaches, pedagogical supervision, peer discussion opportunities, and organizational support actions aimed at fostering more sustainable and emotionally supportive school environments. In this perspective, teachers' emotional wellbeing appears to derive from a dynamic balance between individual resources and characteristics of the professional context, rather than from isolated individual competencies alone.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of adopting more integrated interpretative perspectives in the analysis of teacher wellbeing, considering the interaction between emotional, organizational, and contextual dimensions. The implications for educational settings concern not only teacher training but also broader school policies and organizational practices aimed at supporting professional wellbeing and promoting emotionally sustainable educational environments.

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