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School Innovation and Educational Well-Being Across School Ecologies: Evidence from Students, Parents, and Teachers

Innovazione scolastica e benessere educativo nelle ecologie scolastiche: evidenze da studenti, genitori e docenti

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Abstract
In recent years, student well-being and school mental health have become central priorities in educational research and policy, particularly in the post-pandemic context. Within this framework, schools are increasingly conceptualized as key ecological settings for the promotion of well-being through systemic and relational processes. This study investigates the associations between perceived educational innovation, school climate, and school-related well-being adopting a whole-school approach and a multi-informant design. The study involved 484 Italian students of three primary and lower secondary schools, together with corresponding parents and teachers. Data were collected using standardized measures of school well-being (QBS 8–18) and school climate, alongside ad hoc instruments assessing perceived educational innovation across students and parents. Correlational analyses and hierarchical regression models were conducted to examine the predictive role of educational innovation beyond traditional dimensions of school climate. Additional analyses explored convergence and divergence across informants' perceptions. Results indicated consistent positive associations between perceived educational innovation and student-reported well-being, as well as parent-reported well-being, while associations were weaker or non-significant for teacher-reported outcomes. Hierarchical regressions showed that perceived innovation explained a significant incremental portion of variance in student well-being beyond school climate variables. Qualitative findings from focus groups further highlighted innovation as a systemic, iterative, and organizational process embedded in school culture. Overall, findings support the relevance of educational innovation as a relevant dimension associated with student well-being within whole-school ecological frameworks.

Keywords: educational innovation; student well-being; school climate; multi-informant approach.

Riassunto
Negli ultimi anni, il benessere degli studenti e la salute mentale in ambito scolastico sono diventati priorità centrali della ricerca e delle politiche educative, soprattutto nel contesto post-pandemico. In questo quadro, le scuole sono sempre più considerate contesti ecologici fondamentali per la promozione del benessere attraverso processi sistemici e relazionali. Il presente studio analizza le associazioni tra innovazione educativa percepita, clima scolastico e benessere scolastico, adottando un approccio globale alla scuola e un disegno di ricerca multi-informante. Lo studio ha coinvolto 484 studenti italiani della scuola primaria e secondaria di I grado di tre istituti comprensivi, insieme ai rispettivi genitori e docenti. I dati sono stati raccolti mediante strumenti standardizzati per la valutazione del benessere scolastico (QBS 8–18) e del clima scolastico, affiancati da strumenti costruiti ad hoc per rilevare l'innovazione educativa percepita da studenti e genitori. Sono state condotte analisi correlazionali e regressioni gerarchiche per esaminare il ruolo predittivo dell'innovazione educativa, al di là delle dimensioni tradizionali del clima scolastico. Ulteriori analisi hanno esplorato le convergenze e le divergenze tra le percezioni dei diversi informatori. I risultati hanno evidenziato associazioni positive e coerenti tra l'innovazione educativa percepita e il benessere riferito dagli studenti, nonché quello rilevato dai genitori, mentre le associazioni con gli esiti riferiti dai docenti sono risultate più deboli o non significative. Le regressioni gerarchiche hanno mostrato che l'innovazione percepita spiegava una quota incrementale significativa della varianza del benessere degli studenti, oltre a quella spiegata dalle variabili relative al clima scolastico. I risultati qualitativi emersi dai focus group hanno inoltre messo in luce l'innovazione come un processo sistemico, iterativo e organizzativo, radicato nella cultura scolastica. Nel complesso, i risultati confermano la rilevanza dell'innovazione educativa quale leva sistemica per il benessere degli studenti all'interno di quadri ecologici fondati su un approccio globale alla scuola.

Parole chiave: innovazione educativa; benessere scolastico; clima scolastico; approccio multi-informatore.

Credit author statement

Lattanzi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing (original draft, review & editing). Tobia: Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing (original draft, review & editing), Project administration. All other authors: Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing (original draft, review & editing).
All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript. Within each institution, authors are listed in alphabetical order.

1. Introduction

In recent years, student well-being and youth mental health have become a major international concern. The decline in the well-being of students and teachers, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, has contributed to placing mental health, prevention, resilience, and inclusion at the centre of educational policy agendas. At the European level, the EU4Health Programme was established in 2021 to strengthen the Union's capacity to prevent and respond to health-related challenges, drawing explicitly on the lessons learned from the pandemic (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2021). This concern was further developed in the Council Conclusions on supporting well-being in digital education, which emphasise that digital learning environments should support, rather than undermine, the physical, psychological, social, and cognitive well-being of learners and educators, while also promoting safe, inclusive, and balanced learning contexts (Council of the European Union, 2022). Similarly, the European Commission's comprehensive approach to mental health highlights the need for cross-sectoral policies, prevention, early intervention, inclusion, and specific attention to vulnerable groups, including children and young people (European Commission, 2023). Within this scenario, schools are increasingly recognised as key settings for mental health promotion, early identification of distress, and the strengthening of resilience, because they provide everyday environments in which emotional competences, social inclusion, empathy, and well-being can be systematically developed (European Commission, 2023; WHO & UNESCO, 2022).

This international debate has progressively shifted attention from isolated well-being initiatives to the idea of the school as a caring environment. The concept of the caring school refers to an educational community in which well-being is embedded in the ordinary life of the institution and expressed through relationships, teaching practices, organisational choices, leadership, student participation, and collaboration with families and the local community. A caring school is therefore not simply a school that implements specific programmes on mental health or socio-emotional learning; rather, it is a school that builds coherent conditions for students and staff to feel recognised, supported, safe, and actively involved. More broadly, this perspective is consistent with an ecological understanding of schools as developmental contexts, in which students' experiences are shaped by the interaction of classroom practices, interpersonal relationships, institutional arrangements, and wider social environments (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). This perspective is consistent with research on school climate, which defines the quality of school life as a multidimensional construct including norms, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, safety, and organisational structures (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). It is also aligned with studies on school well-being, which describe students' well-being as a multidimensional condition involving emotional, cognitive, relational, and motivational aspects of the school experience (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Hascher, 2003; Tobia et al., 2019).

The theoretical model adopted in this study is therefore grounded in the whole-school approach to well-being. This approach assumes that students' mental health and well-being are shaped by the interaction of multiple dimensions of school life (Cefai et al., 2021). In the framework, the whole-school approach includes several interconnected areas: school culture and ethos; strategy and leadership; systems and structures; curriculum, teaching, and learning; classroom climate; pupils' voice; staff education and well-being; parents and community; extracurricular activities; safe and ethical spaces; and targeted support for students with health or special educational needs. These dimensions show that well-being is not located in a single intervention, subject, or professional role, but emerges from the coherence of the entire school ecology. Public Health England's eight principles for a whole-school approach similarly emphasise leadership and management, school ethos and environment, curriculum and learning, student voice, staff development, targeted support, identification of needs, and work with parents and carers (Public Health England, 2015). More recent international frameworks also stress the importance of universal, targeted, and individualised levels of support, indicating that schools should combine preventive actions for all students with more specific responses for pupils who show emerging or complex needs (European Commission, 2024; WHO, UNICEF & UNESCO, 2023). From this standpoint, educational innovation becomes relevant for well-being when it contributes to the transformation of the whole school environment. Innovation cannot be reduced to the introduction of new technologies, methods, or single classroom practices. It should rather be understood as a systemic process that reshapes the pedagogical core, learning environments, professional cultures, organisational routines, student participation, and school–family–community relationships (Fullan, 2015; Kools & Stoll, 2016; OECD, 2017). Research on innovative schools further highlights the interconnected

role of learning spaces, school time, student grouping, collaborative teaching, and relationships with local communities in educational change (Lomba et al., 2022). Student-centred pedagogies, collaborative learning, flexible learning spaces, autonomy-supportive teaching, and practices that make thinking and participation visible may support well-being because they foster engagement, belonging, self-efficacy, motivation, positive peer relationships, and meaningful teacher–student interactions (Goldberg et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2021; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Within this perspective, innovation and well-being are not treated as separate domains: innovation becomes educationally significant when it helps the school become more caring, inclusive, participatory, and capable of responding to students' developmental, emotional, relational, and cognitive needs. However, a distinction should be made between educational innovation as a broad process of school transformation and the specific dimensions through which innovation can be empirically investigated. Formal participation in innovation programmes, the adoption of particular teaching methodologies, or the introduction of technologies do not necessarily capture how innovation is experienced in everyday school life (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2019). In the present study, perceived educational innovation refers more specifically to students' and parents' perceptions of selected educational practices, including methodological variety, collaborative and student-centred learning, opportunities for participation, and aspects of school–family involvement. These perceptions provide an experience-based perspective on educational innovation rather than a comprehensive measure of organisational transformation. The present study adopts this systemic framework to investigate the relationship between perceived educational innovation, school climate, and students' well-being. The whole-school approach supports the choice of a multi-informant research design involving students, parents, and teachers, since well-being is experienced and interpreted from different positions within the school community (Achenbach et al., 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Molinari & Grazia, 2023). Collecting multiple perspectives allows differences in how school-related well-being is reported by students, parents, and teachers to be considered alongside students' and parents' perceptions of educational innovation. Against this background, the specific contribution of the present study lies in examining whether perceived educational innovation accounts for additional variance in school-related well-being beyond selected dimensions of school climate, while situating these associations within a whole-school ecological framework. In this sense, the theoretical framework of the study connects the international concern about youth distress with the need to examine schools as complex, relational, and organisational ecosystems in which innovation may act as a lever for well-being.

1.1 Educational Innovation in the Avanguardie Educative Network

The study was conducted within the framework of Avanguardie Educative, a national school network launched by INDIRE in 2014 together with 22 founding schools that endorsed its Manifesto for educational innovation. The network, which currently includes more than 1,900 schools across Italy, was established to support bottom-up processes of pedagogical and organizational innovation by combining schools' initiatives with research-based documentation, formalization, and dissemination. Avanguardie Educative promotes innovation through a participatory model in which schools adopt, adapt, and share a set of Innovative Ideas aimed at rethinking teaching routines, learning environments, school time, and organizational structures. For this reason, the network represents a particularly relevant context for investigating the relationship between perceived educational innovation, school climate, and student well-being. Schools involved in the network may differ in the number, type, and intensity of the innovations implemented, allowing variation in students' and parents' perceptions of innovation. Membership in the network should therefore not be interpreted as a direct measure of the extent to which innovation is implemented or experienced within individual schools, since educational change develops through context-specific processes involving different practices, actors, and organisational conditions (Nardi & Pestellini, 2025).

At the classroom level, student-centred and autonomy-supportive pedagogies may foster active participation, collaboration, meaningful teacher-student relationships, and students' sense of autonomy and competence. Recent meta-analytic evidence shows that teacher autonomy support is associated with students' need satisfaction and self-determined motivation, which in turn are linked to more adaptive academic outcomes and well-being (Howard et al., 2021; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Autonomy-supportive teaching may also benefit teachers, supporting teaching efficacy, job satisfaction, professional vitality, and more positive teacher-student relationships (Cheon et al., 2020; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Within Avanguardie Educative, the relationship between classroom practices and systemic change has been described in terms of a process of systemization operating across three interconnected levels: the micro level of individual professional practices, the *meso* level of class councils and departmental practices, and the *macro* level of the whole school, including its internal substructures and relationships with local communities and stakeholders (Nardi & Pestellini, 2025). This multilevel perspective is particularly relevant to the study of student well-being, as whole-school approaches show that social and emotional development is supported when interventions address not only curriculum and teaching practices, but also school ethos and environment, as well as family and community partnerships (Cefai et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2019). This multilevel conception provides a broader contextual framework for interpreting the perceived educational practices examined in the quantitative study, while recognising that these measures do not directly assess all the organisational and relational dimensions of school innovation.

2. Method

2.1 Research Question and Hypotheses

The present study investigates the associations between school climate, with a specific focus on perceived educational innovation, and students' school-related well-being, as well as key psychological and motivational outcomes, including academic emotions, cognitive flexibility, concentration, self-concept, perceived control, and task value. In addition, the study examines the extent to which these constructs are similarly perceived across students, parents, and teachers, adopting a multi-informant perspective on school functioning. Accordingly, two main research objectives were formulated. First, the study explores the level of convergence and divergence among students', parents', and teachers' perceptions of school climate and school-related well-being, in order to assess the degree of agreement across informants. Second, it investigates whether perceived educational innovation – reported by students and parents – is associated with students' well-being and broader psychological and motivational outcomes, above and beyond traditional dimensions of school climate. These research questions were informed by findings from a pilot study conducted in a lower secondary school in Central Italy during the previous academic year. The pilot study involved 56 students, 26 parents, and 4 teachers, and was designed to evaluate the feasibility of a multi-informant design while providing preliminary evidence on the relationships between educational innovation, school climate, and student well-being. It also contributed to the refinement of the measurement instruments used in the present study, particularly the ad hoc scales developed to assess perceived educational innovation. The pilot school had implemented the Making Learning and Thinking Visible (MLTV) approach (Mughini & Panzavolta, 2020), an instructional framework aimed at fostering metacognitive awareness, student engagement, and deeper learning through the explicit visualization of thinking processes. The approach incorporates strategies such as Thinking Routines (Ritchhart et al., 2011) and cooperative learning activities to support collaborative problem-solving and active participation.

Preliminary results indicated that higher levels of perceived educational innovation, as reported by both students and parents, were associated with more positive school-related well-being and more favourable perceptions of school climate, particularly in relation to teacher support, peer relationships, and participation in decision-making. Furthermore, a moderate level of agreement was observed between student and parent reports of educational innovation ($r = .371$, $p < .001$), supporting the value of a multi-informant assessment approach. The innovation measures also demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$ for students; $\alpha = .93$ for parents), with minor refinements implemented after pilot testing to improve scale reliability and factorial coherence.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The initial sample comprised 484 Italian primary and middle-school students (53.3% boys and 46.7% girls), aged between 9 and 15 years ($M = 12.14$, SD = 1.39). Completed student self-reports were available for 422 participants (87.2% of the initial sample), parent reports for 274 participants (56.6%), and teacher reports for 293 participants (60.5%). The availability of reports therefore varied across informants. Analyses

based on student self-reports used the available student data, whereas analyses involving multiple informants required matched reports for the relevant participants. The sample size consequently varied across analyses depending on the availability of the required data. The three participating schools belonged to the Avanguardie Educative Movement and differed in their approaches to educational innovation. The descriptions draw on institutional documentation and contextual information provided by school leaders and teachers during the study's focus groups. Istituto Comprensivo 9 in Bologna (Emilia-Romagna) is located in the peripheral Savena district and serves a socially heterogeneous student population. Its main innovation is the Flipped Classroom, supported by active and cooperative learning, digital resources, flexible classroom furniture, and multifunctional spaces. Outdoor learning opportunities and collaboration with local educational services further characterise its context. Istituto Comprensivo Gabriele Rossetti in Vasto (Abruzzo) adopts a vertically integrated, guidance-oriented curriculum (*curricolo orientante*), combining laboratory activities, differentiated pathways, inclusion practices, and links with the local community. According to school leadership, approximately one-third of lower secondary students enter from primary schools outside the institute and may therefore have had different prior exposure to this curriculum. Istituto Comprensivo Don Lorenzo Milani in Viareggio (Tuscany) serves socioculturally diverse urban neighbourhoods. Its innovation focuses on the reorganisation of learning spaces and school time, through subject-specific classrooms and flexible shared areas. Laboratory-based teaching, student participation, inclusion, and school–family relationships also characterise its educational approach.

These characteristics situate the study within the participating school contexts; their separate effects on students' well-being were not assessed. Participants in the study included students, teachers, and parents from diverse school contexts, with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive and multi-perspective overview of perceptions and experiences related to school climate and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The study's ethical approval was obtained by the University of Verona, Department of Human Sciences Institutional Review Board.

2.3 Instruments

Variables were assessed through self-report questionnaires completed by students and proxy-report questionnaires completed by parents and teachers, who provided information based on their perceptions of the student's experiences and well-being. The student questionnaire collected data on socio-demographic characteristics, school well-being, school climate, and perceptions of educational innovation. Socio-demographic variables (e.g., age, gender) were included to describe the sample and control for potential confounders in the analyses. Data were collected pseudonymously using unique personal codes to ensure confidentiality.

School well-being was assessed using the QBS 8–18 (Tobia & Marzocchi, 2024), a standardized instrument measuring students' emotional adjustment, academic engagement, and peer relationships. The student version (QBS-R) comprises 27 items rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = not true, 2 = very true). It assesses five dimensions: Satisfaction and Recognition (e.g., "I am satisfied with the school results I achieve"), Relationships with Teachers (e.g., "I feel comfortable with my teachers"), Relationships with Classmates (e.g., "My classmates like working with me"), Emotional Attitude in School (e.g., "I feel calm before a test or oral exam"), and Sense of Self-Efficacy (e.g., "I am able to think quickly"). Three items assessing attributional styles were excluded from scoring in the present study. The total score was used as the primary indicator of school-related well-being (QBS-R; $\alpha = .81$). The instrument demonstrated good internal consistency and a stable factorial structure.

School climate was measured using the Inventory of School Climate – Student version (ISC-S; Brand et al., 2003), a 40-item scale assessing teacher support, school rules, student commitment, peer relationships, disciplinary harshness, participation in decision-making, and perceived instructional innovation. Responses were provided on a 5-point Likert scale. Two subscales (cultural pluralism and safety problems) were excluded from the present study. Perceived educational innovation was assessed using the Innovation at School Measure – Student version (ISM-S), a 10-item scale developed for the present study and based on previous literature on educational innovation measures. The instrument captures students' perceptions of innovative teaching practices, including student-centred learning, variety of instructional strategies, and active involvement in classroom decision-making. One item referring specifically to technology use was

removed following pilot testing due to low factorial coherence. The final scale showed good internal consistency (α = .91) and was used as a unidimensional composite score in all analyses. Although school climate and perceived educational innovation are theoretically related, they were conceptualised as distinct constructs in the present study. School climate was operationalised through selected dimensions of the Inventory of School Climate – Student version (ISC-S), capturing students' perceptions of school rules, commitment, disciplinary harshness, and opportunities for participation in decision-making. These dimensions describe broader psychosocial and organisational features of school life. In contrast, the Innovation at School Measure – Student version (ISM-S) was developed to assess students' perceptions of innovative educational practices, including student-centred learning, the variety of instructional strategies, and active involvement in classroom activities. Thus, school climate refers to students' perceptions of the wider educational environment, whereas perceived educational innovation focuses on the pedagogical practices through which learning experiences are organised. The constructs may nevertheless overlap, particularly in relation to student participation and decision-making. This conceptual overlap was taken into account when examining their associations and the incremental contribution of perceived innovation to the prediction of school-related well-being. The regression analyses were intended to assess incremental predictive value, rather than to establish definitive psychometric discriminant validity.

Parents completed the QBS 8–18 Parents' Version (Tobia & Marzocchi, 2024), which assesses students' school well-being from a parent-report perspective. The questionnaire comprises 36 items rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = not true, 2 = very true), organized into five subscales. Four subscales—Evaluation of Learning, Child's Emotional Difficulties, Child's Awareness, and Relationship with Teachers—were used to compute a composite well-being score (QBS-G; α = .85), capturing academic, emotional, and relational aspects of students' functioning. The Personal Experience subscale, which assesses parents' own emotional responses to their child's difficulties, was excluded from the analyses because it reflects parental rather than student well-being. Parents' perceptions of educational innovation were assessed using the Innovation at School Measure – Parent version (ISM-P), an ad hoc instrument developed to capture perceived innovation in their child's educational environment. Its development drew on previous research on the design and validation of instruments assessing educational and organizational innovation in school settings (Ismail et al., 2002; Turrado-Sevilla & Cantón-Mayo, 2022), alongside expert consultation and comparison. The measure was designed to assess parents' perceptions of innovative educational practices, including innovative teaching methodologies, collaborative and student-centred learning, the use of new technologies, and school–family communication and involvement. Example items include: "Do you think that teachers encourage your child to try new ideas and activities?", "Do you think collaborative and group learning activities are implemented in your child's class?", and "Do you feel adequately informed and involved in decisions regarding your child's education?". Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). Following pilot testing, one item concerning the school's preparation of students for the future through innovative and practical skills was removed because of its negative impact on internal consistency. The resulting 13-item version demonstrated excellent internal consistency, supporting the use of a unidimensional composite score to represent parents' overall perceptions of educational innovation.

Teachers completed the QBS 8–18 Teachers' Version (Tobia & Marzocchi, 2024), a standardized instrument designed to assess students' school well-being from a teacher-report perspective. The questionnaire comprises 36 items rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = not true, 2 = very true), organized into five subscales. One questionnaire was completed for each student to assess their academic, emotional, and relational functioning and identify potential indicators of difficulty. Four subscales—Evaluation of Learning, Student's Emotional Difficulties, Student's Awareness, and Relationship with Parents—were used to compute a composite well-being score (QBS-I; α = .89). The Personal Experience subscale, which assesses teachers' own emotional responses when students experience difficulties, was excluded from the analyses because it reflects teachers' personal experiences rather than students' well-being. Teachers did not complete a measure of perceived educational innovation. The parent and teacher questionnaires also collected contextual and sociodemographic information. Parents provided information on students' socioeconomic status, whereas teachers reported their gender, years of teaching experience, educational level, subject area, and whether they served as support teachers. All questionnaires were administered online with mandatory response fields, ensuring complete responses to the administered items.

In addition to the quantitative measures, the study included a qualitative component based on three online focus groups, one for each participating school, involving school principals and members of their lead-

ership teams. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The first focus group involved nine staff members and the school principal (n = 10), the second involved two staff members and the school principal (n = 3), and the third involved eleven staff members and the school principal (n = 12), for a total of 25 participants, including three school principals and 22 staff members. The focus groups were designed to complement the multi-informant quantitative data and to explore how educational innovation and school well-being were interpreted within each school's organisational and pedagogical context. Each session was structured into two main phases. The first consisted of presenting and discussing the quantitative findings specific to the participating school, encouraging participants to reflect on the results in relation to their everyday educational experiences. The second phase followed a semi-structured discussion protocol developed with reference to the eight dimensions of the whole-school approach to well-being. The protocol explored participants' interpretations of the relationship between educational innovation and well-being, differences among students', parents', and teachers' perceptions, school vision and ethos, teaching and assessment practices, learning environments, staff well-being, organisational arrangements, and monitoring processes. Particular attention was given to how these dimensions were reflected in school practices and strategic choices, as well as to possible areas for improvement. The sessions were facilitated by one researcher, while the other two researchers documented participants' contributions through written notes. The sessions were also recorded to support subsequent analysis. A concluding synthesis provided an opportunity to revisit the main perspectives expressed during the discussion and identify areas of agreement or divergence.

2.4 Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29.0.1.0 for Mac. The sample size was adequate to ensure sufficient statistical power for the analyses performed. Preliminary screening indicated that data distributions were approximately normal, as supported by skewness and kurtosis values (Table 1), allowing the use of parametric analyses. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine associations between school innovation, school climate, and school-related well-being across informants. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to test the incremental contribution of perceived school innovation above and beyond school climate dimensions in predicting students' school-related well-being. The qualitative material was analysed using a deductive, framework-guided approach. The eight dimensions of the whole-school approach to well-being provided the initial analytical categories, reflecting the theoretical framework used to develop the focus group protocol.

Prior to the analyses, cases with 15% or more missing data on the student self-report measures were excluded. For the remaining cases, missing data were handled using pairwise deletion in correlational analyses, so that each correlation was calculated using all available observations for the variables involved. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted on cases with complete data for the variables included in each model. Consequently, the analytical sample size varied across analyses and informants.

As for the qualitative data analysis, each of the three researchers independently examined and categorised the collected material, drawing on the recordings and notes taken during the sessions. The individual analyses were subsequently compared, discussed, and consolidated into a shared interpretation, allowing the research team to identify the dimensions that featured most prominently in participants' accounts. This process supported the identification of recurring themes and salient areas of discussion, providing a contextual perspective on the quantitative findings. The qualitative component was therefore intended to deepen the understanding of how school leaders and staff members conceptualised the relationship between educational innovation, organisational practices, and school well-being, rather than to establish causal relationships or produce generalisable findings.

3. Results

3.1 Preliminary Analyses and Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 1, all study variables showed acceptable distributions, with skewness and kurtosis values indicating no substantial deviations from normality (ranging from -0.96 to 1.24). Students reported mod-

erate-to-high levels of perceived school innovation, with parents reporting slightly higher scores. Regarding school climate, participants generally reported positive perceptions of school rules and commitment, whereas lower scores emerged for perceived harshness and decision-making opportunities. School-related well-being scores varied across informants, with teachers and parents reporting higher mean levels compared to student self-reports (Table 1).

Variable	N	M	SD	Min - Max	Skewness (SE)	Kurtosis (SE)
Student-reported school innovation	422	45.09	12.82	14 - 70	- .17 (0.12)	- .73 (0.24)
Parent-reported school innovation	274	46.97	11.72	15 - 65	- .48 (0.15)	- .50 (0.29)
School rules	422	20.75	2.98	10 - 25	- .65 (0.12)	.07 (0.24)
School commitment	422	19.80	3.24	7 - 25	- .49 (0.12)	.23 (0.24)
School harshness	422	13.00	3.35	5 - 23	.35 (0.12)	.12 (0.24)
School decision-making	422	12.81	3.68	5 - 24	- .06 (0.12)	- .61 (0.24)
Teacher-reported well-being	293	57.64	9.63	28 - 72	- .68 (0.14)	- .16 (0.28)
Parent-reported well-being	274	57.05	8.85	25 - 72	- .96 (0.15)	1.24 (0.29)
Student-reported well-being	422	32.82	7.34	8 - 47	- .39 (0.12)	- .21 (0.24)

Tab. 1: Descriptive statistics.
Notes: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; SE = Standard Error

3.2 Associations Between School Innovation and School-Related Well-Being

Correlational analyses examined associations between perceived school innovation and school-related well-being across informants (Table 2). Correlational analyses were conducted using pairwise deletion, allowing each correlation to be calculated using all available cases for the variables involved; consequently, sample sizes varied across correlations.

As reported in Table 2, student-reported school innovation was positively associated with student self-reported well-being (r = .445, p < .001) and parent-reported well-being (r = .272, p < .001), but not with teacher-reported well-being (r = .043, p = .491). Similarly, parent-reported school innovation showed significant positive associations with parent-reported well-being (r = .372, p < .001) and student-reported well-being (r = .241, p < .001), whereas no association emerged with teacher-reported well-being (r = -.091, p = .226). These patterns are further summarized across informants in Table 2, which confirms that associations between perceived innovation and well-being are consistently observed for students and parents, but not for teachers.

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Student-reported school innovation	—								
2. Parent-reported school innovation	.359***	—							
3. School rules	.451***	.191**	—						
4. School commitment	.408***	.183**	.478***	—					
5. School harshness	-.292***	-.028	-.058	-.084	—				
6. School decision-making	.526***	.300***	.281***	.225***	-.226***	—			
7. Teacher-reported school-related well-being	.043	-.091	.036	.012	-.140*	-.098	—		
8. Parent-reported school-related well-being	.272***	.372***	.189**	.239***	-.156*	.085	.373***	—	
9. Student-reported school-related well-being	.445***	.241***	.331***	.387***	-.266***	.184***	.302***	.421***	—

Tab. 2: Correlations Among School Innovation, School Climate, and School-Related Well-Being Variables.
Notes: p < .05*, p < .01**, p < .001***.

3.3 Associations Between School Innovation and School Climate

As shown in Table 2, school innovation was also significantly associated with several dimensions of school climate. Student-reported innovation was positively associated with perceived school rules (r = .451, p < .001), school commitment (r = .408, p < .001), and decision-making opportunities (r = .526, p < .001), and negatively associated with perceived school harshness (r = -.292, p < .001).

A similar pattern emerged for parent-reported innovation, which was positively associated with school rules (r = .191, p = .002), school commitment (r = .183, p = .003), and decision-making opportunities (r = .300, p < .001), while no significant association was found with school harshness (r = -.028, p = .656). Overall, these findings suggest that higher perceived educational innovation is embedded within broader positive and participatory perceptions of school climate.

3.4 Regression Results

Due to missing data across informants, and the use of the listwise deletion for the variables included in each specific analysis, the analytical sample varied across regression models. The hierarchical regression models predicting student-reported (QBS-R) and parent-reported (QBS-G) school-related well-being were based on 254 cases, as indicated by the residual degrees of freedom in the final models. The model predicting teacher-reported (QBS-I) school-related well-being was based on 167 cases. These differences reflect the availability of complete data for the variables included in each model.

Therefore, analyses were based on 422 participants, parent-reported analyses on approximately 254 participants, while teacher-reported analyses included 167 students for whom complete data across all informants were available. A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine whether perceived school innovation explained additional variance in student well-being beyond school climate dimensions (Tables 3 and 4). At Step 1, school climate variables significantly predicted student-reported well-being, accounting for 29.3% of the variance, R^2 = .293, F(4, 249) = 25.84, p < .001 (Table 3).

At Step 2, student- and parent-reported school innovation were added to the model and significantly improved model fit, explaining an additional 6.9% of variance, ΔR^2 = .069, ΔF(2, 247) = 13.36, p < .001 (Table 4). The final model accounted for 36.2% of the variance in student well-being, R^2 = .362, adjusted R^2 = .347, F(6, 247) = 23.39, p < .001.

As shown in Table 4, student-reported school innovation emerged as a significant positive predictor of well-being (β = .319, p < .001), whereas parent-reported innovation was not significant in the final model (β = .094, p = .090). Among school climate variables, school commitment remained a positive predictor, while school harshness and decision-making opportunities were negatively associated with student well-being.

Predictor	B	SE	β	p
School rules	0.423	0.150	.180	.005
School commitment	0.741	0.130	.350	< .001
School harshness	-0.457	0.118	-.216	< .001
School decision-making	0.021	0.115	.011	.854

Tab. 3: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Students' School-Related Well-Being. Step 1. School climate variables.
Notes: Model statistics: R^2 = .293, Adjusted R^2 = .282, F(4, 249) = 25.84, p < .001.

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
School rules	0.255	0.147	.109	1.730	.085
School commitment	0.581	0.128	.274	4.534	< .001
School harshness	-0.375	0.115	-.177	-3.246	.001

School decision-making	-0.268	0.123	-.144	-2.183	.030
Parent-reported innovation	0.057	0.033	.094	1.700	.090
Student-reported innovation	0.171	0.039	.319	4.367	< .001

Tab. 4: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Students' School-Related Well-Being. Step 2. School innovation variables.
Notes: Model 2: R^2 = .362, Adj. R^2 = .347, ΔR^2 = .069, Fchange(2, 247) = 13.36, p < .001
Final model: F(6, 247) = 23.39, p < .001.

Additional hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine whether the incremental contribution of perceived school innovation to school-related well-being generalized across different QBS informant versions. Specifically, the same two-step hierarchical models previously tested for student-reported well-being were also replicated using the QBS-G and QBS-I total scores as dependent variables. Overall, the findings showed a partially consistent pattern across informants. For the QBS-G model, school innovation contributed a substantial and significant increase in explained variance, ΔR^2 = .136, $\Delta F(2, 247)$ = 21.43, p < .001, raising the total explained variance from 8.3% to 21.8% (R^2 = .218, adjusted R^2 = .199). In contrast, for the QBS-I model, the addition of innovation variables did not result in a significant improvement in model fit, ΔR^2 = .013, $\Delta F(2, 160)$ = 1.08, p = .343, with the final model explaining only 4.9% of the variance in well-being (R^2 = .049, adjusted R^2 = .013). Taken together, these results indicate that the predictive contribution of perceived educational innovation is robust for the QBS-R and QBS-G outcomes, although with differing effect magnitudes across informants, whereas it is not supported within the QBS-I model, suggesting weaker or non-significant associations for this specific dimension of school well-being.

In the final hierarchical regression model, student-reported educational innovation remained a significant positive predictor of school-related well-being, whereas the coefficient for decision-making opportunities became negative after controlling for the other school climate dimensions and perceived innovation. Although decision-making was positively correlated with student-reported well-being at the bivariate level (r = .184 , p < .001), its association was not significant in Step 1 and became negative in Step 2. This pattern indicates that the unique association between decision-making opportunities and well-being differed from their zero-order association. Shared variance among the predictors, particularly between decision-making and perceived educational innovation, may contribute to this pattern; however, this interpretation requires further examination of the regression diagnostics. The negative coefficient should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that student participation in decision-making is inherently detrimental to well-being.

The focus groups provided an interpretative frame for understanding how the participating schools made sense of the quantitative findings. Across the three dimensions explored in the protocol, participants described well-being not as an isolated initiative, but as part of the school's organisational identity and everyday functioning. This was expressed through a reflective and non-self-referential stance: the school did not want to develop «a certain self-referential culture», but rather to understand «where we stand, not because everything has to be perfect, but in order to work on and adjust problematic situations».

A first theme concerned innovation as a recursive process of experimentation, reflection, and adjustment. As one participant stated, «this approach is really spiral-shaped: we apply, we go back, we reflect, we question ourselves, and then we experiment again». In this sense, innovation was not represented as the adoption of isolated techniques, but as a continuous organizational process aimed at creating the conditions for students to feel engaged, recognized, and willing to participate in school life.

A second theme concerned the need for systematic monitoring. School leaders valued the quantitative data because they offered evidence beyond informal impressions and helped them understand whether their efforts to innovate were connected with students' experience of well-being. Participants noted the lack of «scientifically validated monitoring tools» available to schools, despite their strong commitment to innovation and to involving students «in many different ways». A third theme concerned the relationship between student and staff well-being. Participants stressed that students' well-being is inseparable from the well-being of teachers and the wider school community. One school leader explicitly framed well-being as a condition for the whole organization, stating: «I am a strong supporter of feeling good at school, not only for students but also for teachers, staff, everyone». Innovation was therefore interpreted not only as a matter of teaching methods, but also as a question of professional conditions, shared responsibility,

collaborative work, and organizational care. Finally, regarding curriculum and classroom climate, the focus groups confirmed the centrality of teacher–student relationships and of the teacher's role as mediator and facilitator. As one participant put it, the findings «all come back» to «the figure and role of the teacher» and to how the teacher positions themselves «as mediator, as facilitator». Innovation was linked to active, laboratory-based and competence-oriented learning practices, as well as to the role of learning spaces, assessment, and teacher mediation in making school a meaningful environment for students.

3.5 Qualitative findings

Overall, the qualitative findings suggest that all dimensions of the Whole-School Approach to Well-Being were reflected in the participating schools' accounts, although with different levels of prominence. Five dimensions emerged as particularly salient: school climate and ethos, classroom climate, curriculum, pupils' voices, and local community. Participants' reflections highlighted the importance of supportive school environments, positive educational relationships, curriculum design, opportunities for student participation, and connections between schools and their local communities. These dimensions were described not as isolated elements, but as interconnected aspects of school life through which educational innovation and well-being are understood and pursued. The findings therefore suggest that, from the perspective of school leaders and staff, educational innovation extends beyond individual teaching practices and is embedded in a broader organisational and relational ecology. While these perceptions do not establish a causal relationship between innovation and well-being, they provide contextual support for interpreting educational innovation within a whole-school perspective.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationships between perceived educational innovation, school climate, and school-related well-being within a multi-informant framework including students, parents, and teachers. Grounded in a whole-school approach perspective, the findings provide evidence that educational innovation is meaningfully associated with students' well-being, although its outcomes vary depending on the informant and the dimension of well-being considered. Overall, the results indicate that perceived educational innovation is most strongly and consistently related to students' own evaluations of their school experience. From the student perspective, innovative practices – such as student-centred teaching, participatory learning environments, and diversified instructional strategies – appear to be closely linked to more positive emotional, relational, and motivational experiences at school. This is consistent with previous literature suggesting that educational innovation can enhance engagement, belonging, and well-being by fostering more supportive and meaningful learning environments (Fullan, 2015; Howard et al., 2021; OECD, 2017; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). A similar pattern, although less pronounced, emerged for parent-reported outcomes, suggesting that families may also perceive the benefits of educational innovation, albeit in a more indirect way. Parents' perceptions are likely shaped by students' attitudes toward school and by school–family communication processes, which mediate how innovation is experienced and interpreted within the home context. In contrast, no meaningful association emerged between perceived educational innovation and teacher-reported evaluations of student well-being. This divergence may reflect differences in how well-being is conceptualized and operationalized across informants. Teachers may rely more on stable, observable indicators of academic and behavioural functioning, which may be less sensitive to variations in perceived pedagogical innovation. Alternatively, this pattern may indicate a partial disconnect between how innovation is experienced by students and how it is interpreted within professional judgments of student adjustment. Importantly, the discrepancies observed across informants highlight the value of a multi-informant design in school-based research. Rather than being interpreted as inconsistencies, these differences can be understood as reflecting the distinct positionality of students, parents, and teachers within the educational system. This aligns with evidence emphasizing that multi-informant approaches capture complementary perspectives on complex constructs such as school climate and well-being (Achenbach et al., 1987; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). The qualitative findings help to further contextualize this divergence. The focus groups suggest that the weaker association between innovation and teacher-reported evaluations of student well-being should

not be read as a simple contradiction between informants, but rather as a possible effect of teachers' specific observational position within the school. Compared with students and parents, teachers may adopt a more critical and reflective stance toward the impact of their own practices, especially in schools where innovation is experienced as a demanding and continuous process of professional reflection. The focus groups also support a broader interpretation of educational innovation. Participants did not describe innovation as a set of isolated teaching techniques, but as a recursive and organisational process involving shared reflection, professional collaboration, learning spaces, curriculum design, and continuous adjustment. This interpretation is consistent with whole-school perspectives that connect student well-being with school ethos, leadership, staff development, curriculum, and organisational conditions (Cefai et al., 2021; European Commission, 2024). They also emphasised the need for monitoring tools and organisational conditions capable of supporting both student and staff well-being. In this sense, the qualitative data suggest that innovation becomes relevant for well-being when it is embedded in the wider school ecology, rather than limited to single classroom practices, and when it operates across multiple levels of school change (Nardi & Pestellini, 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, the findings support the idea that educational innovation should not be understood as an isolated instructional feature, but rather as part of a broader systemic transformation of school environments. In line with the whole-school approach, innovation appears to be most relevant when it contributes to a supportive, participatory, and relationally positive school climate. This is consistent with research framing school climate as a multidimensional construct encompassing relational, organizational, and instructional dimensions (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016), as well as with definitions of school well-being as a multidimensional experience involving emotional, cognitive, and relational functioning (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Hascher, 2003; Tobia et al., 2019). Taken together, these results underline both the potential and the complexity of educational innovation as a lever for school well-being. While innovation appears to be associated with more positive school experiences, its effects are not uniform across informants or dimensions of functioning. This suggests that future research should continue to adopt multi-informant and system-level approaches in order to better capture how innovation is experienced, interpreted, and translated into well-being within school contexts.

5. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal interpretations of the relationship between perceived educational innovation and students' well-being; longitudinal studies are needed to examine changes over time. Second, innovation was mainly assessed through students' and parents' perceptions, rather than through direct observations or independent measures of implementation. Future research should therefore combine self-report data with classroom observations, document analysis, and school-level indicators. Third, although the multi-informant design is a strength of the study, differences in the instruments administered to students, parents, and teachers may have affected the level of convergence across informants. In addition, missing data, especially among parents, may limit the representativeness of some findings. Finally, the voluntary participation of only three Italian schools limits generalisability; the qualitative component also warrants more systematic analysis in larger samples. Given that students were recruited from only three schools, their observations may not be fully independent, as students attending the same school are likely to share common contextual experiences. This potential clustering effect should be acknowledged as a limitation, particularly if the nested structure of the data was not explicitly accounted for in the analyses. Future studies involving a larger number of schools could adopt multilevel approaches to better account for the hierarchical structure of the data and distinguish between individual- and school-level contributions to students' well-being.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the relevance of perceived educational innovation for students' school-related well-being, particularly from the perspectives of students and parents. At the same time, the differences across informants show that well-being is a complex construct that should be examined through multiple perspectives. The qualitative findings further suggest that innovation becomes meaningful when it is embed-

ded in the wider school ecology, including organisational culture, professional collaboration, curriculum design, learning spaces, and processes of reflection and monitoring. Overall, the study supports the value of whole-school and system-level approaches for understanding how educational innovation can contribute to more positive and supportive school experiences.

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