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**A Lifelong Career: Studies on the Career Sustainability of
Italian Teachers**

Relatore

prof.ssa Michela Vignoli

Dottorando

Paolo Guandalini

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Open Science and Research Transparency Statement

At the time of submission, none of the studies has yet been officially published. The first study of the dissertation, “Career sustainability in the teaching profession: Hindering and supporting factors for subjective career success”, has been accepted for publication as a chapter in the forthcoming *Palgrave International Handbook of Career Guidance in Education*, currently in preparation. The data used in this study was also employed by University of Trento master’s student Daniele Puricelli.

The data used in the fourth study, “Stepping quietly into the school: An analysis of the professional integration of second-career teachers over 50”, was also employed by University of Trento master’s student Sara Di Giamberardino.

Finally, during the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author carefully reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the final published version.

Abstract

This dissertation investigates the multifaceted dynamics of career sustainability among teachers in Italy, examining how individual, relational, and organizational factors interact across different career stages. Four empirical studies are presented to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that support or hinder long-term professional development in teaching.

The first study focuses on the broader landscape of teachers' career sustainability across multiple career stages. Drawing on 33 in-depth interviews, this study investigates the factors that either facilitate or constrain sustainable careers, with particular focus on subjective career success. Teachers' experiences reveal the central role of social support, professional development opportunities, and the challenges associated with excessive workload. Recognition from students and families emerges as a key component of perceived success, while employment status presents a nuanced picture: permanent contracts offer stability but may inadvertently foster career stagnation, whereas temporary or insecure positions can introduce variety yet increase vulnerability. This study lays the foundation for understanding how teachers navigate structural limitations and mobilize personal and social resources to sustain their professional engagement.

Building on this foundation, the second study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design to explore the critical early career phase, which is often characterized by high attrition and "reality shock". Through a combination of qualitative interviews and a longitudinal survey, this research examines how novice teachers draw on individual, relational, and organizational resources to sustain their careers. Findings highlight the importance of informal networks, such as peer mentoring and collegial collaboration, which compensate for the limited availability of formal supports like structured supervision and formal induction programs. Principals are found to provide strong emotional backing but less instrumental guidance. Teachers' self-efficacy and proactive attitudes consistently predict higher levels of job satisfaction, well-being, and engagement. The study underscores the dynamic interplay between personal agency and supportive contexts, emphasizing

the critical role of relational scaffolding and early induction measures in fostering resilience among early-career educators.

The third study shifts the focus to late-career teachers, a demographic increasingly relevant in Italy's aging educational workforce. Utilizing a large sample of 800 teachers aged 50 and above, this study employs latent profile analysis to examine patterns of perceived organizational support and their relationship to career sustainability indicators. Four organizational dimensions—organizational culture, leadership, work design, and individual development—are assessed alongside individual career resources measured through Career Adapt-abilities. Results reveal four distinct profiles, each differentially associated with work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated job performance. Organizational practices significantly influence engagement and health outcomes, though not self-rated performance, highlighting the capacity of supportive work environments to enhance career sustainability in late career stages. The findings offer practical insights for educational institutions seeking to sustain older teachers' engagement and vitality.

Finally, the fourth study addresses the emerging phenomenon of second career teachers (SCTs), individuals entering the profession later in life, often after age fifty. With a sample of 22 SCTs, semi-structured interviews explore factors influencing career sustainability and the experience of career shocks in the absence of formal induction pathways. Thematic analysis identifies both challenges—such as bureaucratic obstacles, precarious contracts, high workloads, and balancing family responsibilities—and supporting factors, including prior life experience, vocational commitment, collegial support, and targeted professional development. The study emphasizes the interplay of individual maturity and contextual supports in facilitating successful adaptation, highlighting the need for structured induction and organizational strategies to harness the potential of mature-age entrants.

Collectively, these four studies provide a comprehensive picture of the factors shaping teachers' career sustainability in Italy. They illuminate how career progression, professional support, and

personal resources interact across early, mid, and late career stages, offering both theoretical insights and practical recommendations for fostering enduring and fulfilling teaching careers.

Keywords: Teacher Career Sustainability, Professional Development, Organizational Support, Early- and Late-Career Teachers, Second-Career Teachers

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Chapter 1. Introduction

In recent years, the teaching profession has frequently been described as a profession in “crisis,” challenged by dynamics that undermine its attractiveness, stability, and long-term sustainability (UNESCO, 2024). Increasingly, education systems across countries are facing mounting difficulties in recruiting qualified teachers and, above all, in retaining motivated and effective ones throughout their careers. While schools are tasked with preparing new generations in increasingly complex social and economic contexts, they are themselves organizations permeated by tensions, conflicts, external pressures, and ongoing transformations. Consequently, ensuring a stable and professionally recognized teaching workforce has become one of the most pressing challenges for international education policies.

This introductory chapter presents some of the major issues related to the teaching profession. Specifically, the chapter is divided into three sections. The first examines key problematic aspects of teaching: on the one hand, the phenomena of teacher stress and burnout; on the other, internationally studied issues concerning the difficulties school systems face in attracting and retaining teachers (such as teacher shortage, early retirement, and teacher turnover). The second section examines different models of teaching career progression, paying particular attention to the ways in which professional trajectories are shaped by varying demands and resources across the career span. This part of the discussion highlights how teachers’ experiences of working conditions—such as workload, autonomy, and access to professional support—tend to shift over time, influencing both their professional development and long-term commitment to the profession. Building on this, the third section contextualizes these issues within the Italian school system, offering a socio-demographic profile of the teaching workforce and analyzing the structural features, policy frameworks, and organizational challenges that define the national context. By situating teachers’ career experiences within these broader dynamics, the section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the specific opportunities and constraints shaping career sustainability in Italy.

1. Why Teaching Is So Demanding: Teacher Stress And Burnout

1.1. Work-Related Stress

Work-related stress has become a central topic in international research over the past decades and is defined as an unpleasant emotional experience linked to specific environmental factors, typically accompanied by tension, frustration, anxiety, and anger (Agyapong et al., 2022; Kyriacou, 2001). Teaching is widely recognized as one of the professions most exposed to stress, as evidenced by numerous studies across different cultural contexts and in comparison with other high-pressure occupations (Chaplain, 2008; Fiorilli et al., 2015a; Greene et al., 1997; Johnson et al., 2005; Ritvanen et al., 2006; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008; Travers & Cooper, 1993). Findings consistently show that teachers report lower job satisfaction and poorer psychological well-being compared to other professional groups (Gooden et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2005).

A key factor predisposing teachers to stress is the imbalance between job demands and the individual and organizational resources available to meet them (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Desrumaux et al., 2015; Ouellette et al., 2018; Pisanti et al., 2003). Common stressors in teaching include student underachievement and low motivation, difficulties in classroom management, conflictual relationships with colleagues and families, inadequate material resources, continuous regulatory and organizational changes, and dissatisfaction with salary (Johnson & Richards, 1983; Santavirta et al., 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Supporting this, a European survey by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE, 2007) identified workload and work intensity, role overload, increasing class sizes, disruptive student behavior, and poor school management with insufficient leadership support as the main sources of stress for teachers. In Italy, these stressors are compounded by structural factors such as widespread job insecurity, limited professional development opportunities, and the low social recognition of teaching (Arbia et al., 2023; De Simone et al., 2016; Fiorilli et al., 2015b; OECD, 2014).

The impact of stress on teachers' health and professional effectiveness is well-documented. High stress levels are linked to turnover, low job satisfaction, reduced performance, and various health problems (Hakanen et al., 2006; Pomaki & Anagnostopoulou, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). Psychosomatic symptoms are associated with adverse environmental conditions, role ambiguity and conflict, and negative perceptions of change (Yang et al., 2009). In particular, heavy workload has consistently been identified as one of the most harmful stressors for teachers' health (Yang et al., 2009). Research has also shown associations between elevated stress and psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., headaches, gastrointestinal problems, sleep disorders), cardiovascular issues, mood disturbances, and depressive syndromes (Bosma et al., 1998; Lundberg, 2003; Ritvanen et al., 2006; Yang et al., 2009).

Prolonged job demands and sustained stress may reduce teachers' self-efficacy (Klassen et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016) and overall well-being, leading to higher burnout levels (Betoret, 2009), negative affect, depression, and psychosomatic complaints (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). These outcomes can also lower job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2012; Desrumaux et al., 2015), engagement, and organizational commitment (Klassen et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016), while increasing the likelihood of leaving the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011a). Although extensive research has explored the antecedents of teacher stress and burnout, only recently has attention shifted toward the connection between organizational health and teacher well-being (Hakanen et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Miglioretti et al., 2013). Teacher well-being has been shown to influence both student learning outcomes and student well-being, underscoring the importance of identifying not only risk factors but also protective dimensions of teaching (Converso et al., 2014; Denny et al., 2011; Guidetti et al., 2015).

Traditional research on the school environment has primarily focused on stress processes, assuming that schools are overly demanding and provide insufficient support for teachers (Kyriacou, 2001). More recent studies adopt a resource-based perspective, emphasizing how job characteristics

and the work environment sustain motivation and engagement even under high demands (Bakker et al., 2007; Magnano et al., 2014). Job resources can exist at multiple levels: organizational (e.g., career opportunities, job security), interpersonal and social (e.g., supervisor and colleague support, team climate), and work organization (e.g., participation in decision-making; Bakker et al., 2007).

In conclusion, teacher stress represents a multidetermined occupational risk, resulting from the interaction of individual traits, classroom dynamics, and organizational characteristics (Collie et al., 2012). It is therefore crucial not only for teachers' psycho-physical well-being but also for the quality of education and, ultimately, student learning outcomes (Converso et al., 2014; Guidetti et al., 2015).

1.2. Teacher Burnout

Burnout, according to the classical definition by Maslach et al. (2001), is a “prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job.” Psychosocially, burnout comprises three main components: emotional exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and reduced personal and professional efficacy. Among these, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are the core dimensions of teacher burnout (Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Panari & Simbula, 2016). Specifically, depersonalization in teaching manifests as negative attitudes toward students or colleagues, whereas emotional exhaustion is experienced as physical fatigue, low energy, and chronic tiredness. Burnout has been linked to physical and psychological health problems, reduced perceived well-being, and lower job satisfaction and self-efficacy (Caprara et al., 2006; Petrillo & Donizzetti, 2013).

Teachers are particularly vulnerable to burnout. Compared to other helping professions, such as healthcare, they exhibit higher emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, with more pervasive and intense stress reactions. Several factors account for this vulnerability. Teaching requires constant management of complex emotional demands: regulating one's own emotions while also understanding, interpreting, and sometimes modulating students' emotional states. Teachers devote time and energy to students' overall emotional well-being, responding to distress signals, motivating

learners, promoting inclusion, and preventing exclusion or discrimination. Additionally, managing disruptive or oppositional behaviors imposes an extra emotional burden.

A second critical factor is social, and relates to the progressive devaluation of the teaching profession. In recent decades, structural changes, policy reforms, labor market shifts, and social transformations have reshaped teachers' roles and functions. Teachers face high expectations from students, families, institutions, and the public, often without adequate resources or recognition, creating a major risk factor for psychosocial well-being (Santavirta et al., 2007).

1.2.1. Individual Factors Associated With Burnout

Demographic and personality characteristics influence vulnerability to burnout. Research on years of service has produced mixed findings: some suggest a higher risk in early career stages, when teachers are less professionally experienced and more exposed to precarity, while others find increasing risk with greater experience due to resource depletion. Early burnout is also linked to lack of experience, inadequate preparation, and limited supervisory or social support (Korunka et al., 2010). Adequate preparation and strong self-efficacy are protective factors.

Personality traits are also relevant. Maslach (1982) described vulnerable individuals as submissive and non-assertive. Later studies indicate that low psychological hardiness – poor resilience, low perceived control, and limited openness to change – predicts emotional exhaustion. Research using the Big Five model confirms neuroticism as a strong predictor, particularly when combined with low agreeableness (Kokkinos, 2007). Unrealistic expectations and idealized attitudes toward work may also lead to disappointment, depersonalization, and burnout.

1.2.2. Organizational Factors Associated With Burnout

Schools themselves are fertile grounds for burnout. Large schools with overcrowded classes, insufficient staff, rigid bureaucracy, and limited collegial support are at the highest risk (Farber, 2000; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Common organizational stressors include workload, role conflict and ambiguity, limited participation in decision-making, and inadequate recognition. Cognitive and

emotional work overload generates distress, reduces teaching performance, and harms well-being (Nigidi & Sibaya, 2002; Olivier & Venter, 2003; Pas et al., 2012). Role ambiguity – lack of clarity about rights, duties, and responsibilities – is strongly associated with emotional exhaustion.

Reciprocity in relationships plays a central role. Teachers' emotional investment in students is rewarding when recognized but depleting when met with inattention or oppositional behavior (Taris et al., 2004). Similarly, classroom misbehavior and challenging interactions with parents, often involving high expectations and criticism, constitute major stressors (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Italian studies also highlight the importance of the physical environment: negative perceptions of inadequate facilities significantly contribute to teacher stress (Caprara & Steca, 2002), as does the perception of responsibility and role ambiguity in the current context (Manetti et al., 2007).

1.2.3. Sociocultural Factors Associated With Burnout

Sociocultural conditions also shape burnout. Maslach and Leiter (1997) emphasized that economic and technological changes, organizational philosophy, and power redistribution have contributed to the spread of burnout. Farber (2000), focusing on teachers, highlighted that the low social prestige of educational and caregiving work – often associated with traditional female roles – creates a context in which teachers face high expectations but receive limited recognition. Job insecurity due to temporary contracts also contributes to teacher stress and burnout (Forcella et al., 2009).

1.3. What Happens If No One Wants To Teach Anymore: Teacher Shortages And Teacher Attrition

At the international level, the shortage of qualified teachers has long been documented (OECD, 2024; McPherson, 2025). In many countries, the phenomenon is linked, on the one hand, to a decline in the attractiveness of the profession, which for various reasons no longer succeeds in drawing new young entrants; and on the other hand, to a growing tendency among teachers to leave the profession prematurely, resulting in high staff absenteeism and difficulties in ensuring continuity of instruction

(Gooden et al., 2023; Ingersoll, 2001; Li et al., 2019; Li & Yao, 2022; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). In Europe, the decline in attractiveness and social prestige of teaching has, in the past decade, translated into widespread shortages of qualified personnel. As Lamboy (2023) observes, the issue is not new, but it represents today one of the most critical challenges for public education (Magni, 2024). The pandemic further exacerbated the situation, leading to increased retirements and resignations without a sufficient inflow of new candidates (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022).

Data confirm the severity of the problem. UNESCO (2022) estimates that by 2030, 69 million teachers will be needed worldwide to guarantee universal primary education, while the OECD (2023a) reports that teacher shortages are highlighted in almost all national reports. In Italy, the picture is further complicated by an aging teaching workforce: more than 55% of teachers are over 50 years old (EUROSTAT, 2022; OECD, 2024), with a particularly high incidence in secondary education. This is compounded by a gender imbalance, with a clear predominance of women, especially in primary education (European Commission, 2021; European Parliament, 2020).

In the Italian context, which presents some differences compared to the broader European and global picture, the problem of teacher shortage is twofold. On the one hand, there is a surplus of teachers in certain geographical areas (Southern Italy) and disciplinary fields (the humanities); on the other, there is a real shortage, particularly in primary and lower secondary education, and more generally in peripheral and rural areas of the country, as well as in STEM disciplines (Magni, 2024).

The causes of the decline in attractiveness of the profession are multiple: job dissatisfaction, lower salaries than in comparable professions, overcrowded classrooms, reduced preparation time, limited professional development opportunities, loss of autonomy and social recognition, increasing bureaucratic demands, and insufficient institutional support (Smith, 2023). All these factors undermine teachers' motivation and well-being, fueling dissatisfaction, burnout, and ultimately, attrition. In some countries, these low pay rates also clash with the rise in the cost of living and inflation, further worsening the economic situation of teachers (Gholam, 2018). The result is a

gradual reduction in experienced teachers and an increase in precarious employment and instructional discontinuity, directly affecting students and their right to stable and high-quality education.

Schools, as workplaces, are increasingly assuming the characteristics of stressful, demanding, and complex environments. Bullying, harassment, unprofessional behavior, and various forms of misconduct are increasingly observed. Interpersonal relationships are also deteriorating: among colleagues, between teachers and students, and between teachers and parents, sometimes escalating into union disputes and actual legal conflicts ending in litigation. Yet this escalation of tensions, risks, and responsibilities has not been matched by adequate institutional support, nor by recognition of the social and economic prestige of the profession.

The problem of attrition – the premature exit of teachers from the profession – is not solely linked to individual factors but is profoundly influenced by contextual and institutional variables: working conditions, career opportunities, support received, and possibilities for professional development. Recent studies highlight that excessive workloads and accountability mechanisms are among the main reasons pushing many teachers to abandon the profession within the first five years. Moreover, personal characteristics (age, gender, marital status) and school-related factors – such as students' socioeconomic background, lack of collaboration, and inadequate leadership support – further predict attrition rates (Borman & Dowling, 2017).

A common way to study teacher attrition is to distinguish between individual characteristics and contextual factors within schools (Rinke, 2008, 2013; Schaefer, 2013). Studies on individual factors have examined teacher qualifications, preparation, experience, and self-efficacy to determine their influence on retention. Generally, better-educated, well-prepared, and more experienced teachers with higher self-efficacy are more likely to remain in the profession (Den Brok et al., 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). However, findings have been mixed; some studies suggest that highly qualified teachers may leave teaching sooner (Kelly & Northrop, 2015).

Research on contextual factors examines how the school environment affects attrition. Factors such as administrative support, higher-achieving students, competitive salaries, and sufficient resources are associated with higher teacher retention (Ávalos & Valenzuela, 2016; Kaufhold et al., 2006; Podolsky et al., 2019). Nevertheless, contradictory results persist, particularly regarding salary (Kelly, 2004), and varying definitions of contextual variables, such as administrative support, complicate interpretation (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998).

Studies indicate that teacher attrition differs across career stages. During the survival period (early career), narratives often center on students and classroom challenges, including academic performance and establishing relationships (Day & Gu, 2010). In contrast, in the second stage of their careers, experienced teachers report a sense of competence and self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). Tensions shift away from students toward adults in the school, including administrators, colleagues, and curricular policies. These findings underscore that attrition among experienced teachers is often a response to systemic or organizational misalignments rather than classroom-level difficulties (Glazer, 2020).

1.3.1. Theoretical Frameworks Used To Study Teacher Attrition

Beyond the individual/contextual divide, literature on teacher attrition can also be classified by theoretical lens. Vagi and Pivovarova (2016) identify three dominant approaches:

1. Organizational theory, which examines how organizational structures, policies, and employee behavior shape teacher retention (Cowen et al., 2017).
2. Rational choice theory, which emphasizes the decisions of individual actors acting in self-interest, such as economic choices or work environment considerations (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009).
3. Self-efficacy theory, derived from Bandura (1997), which highlights the role of teachers' perceived capabilities in shaping engagement and motivation to remain or leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

Recent research has also emphasized capturing teachers' own perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of attrition, an approach aligned with Hirschman's (1970) concepts of voice and loyalty. Santoro (2017) introduced the notion of a "craft conscience", conceptualized as a professional ethic in which teachers' loyalty is tied to beliefs about teaching. Her analysis of teacher resignation letters revealed that teachers often leave when policies obstruct their ability to enact what they consider good teaching, suggesting that attrition is not solely driven by self-interest (Santoro, 2017).

This framework links individual teacher characteristics and beliefs with contextual influences and integrates elements of organizational, rational-choice, and self-efficacy theories. It has proven especially useful for understanding the attrition of experienced teachers, sometimes referred to as "invested leavers" (Glazer, 2018), whose decision to leave often reflects a clash between their professional ethics and organizational constraints (Dunn, 2018).

1.4. Early Retirement Of Experienced Teachers

Another factor that exacerbates the situation is the early retirement of mid- to late-career teachers. Several qualitative studies show that, over time, sources of dissatisfaction shift: while early career tensions are primarily related to classroom management, later on they increasingly concern relationships with colleagues, principals, and school policies, often perceived as restrictive and hostile to the exercise of "good teaching" (Glazer, 2020). This dynamic recalls the notion of "craft conscience" (Santoro, 2017), namely the sense of professional responsibility that leads some teachers to leave the profession when they feel unable to teach according to their own ethical and pedagogical standards.

The premature exit of experienced teachers further impoverishes school systems, reducing the presence of figures with consolidated expertise, advanced competencies, and mentoring capacity for younger colleagues. This dynamic intersects with the overall aging of the teaching workforce and the difficulty of ensuring generational turnover sufficient to meet educational needs.

1.5. Teacher Turnover

Alongside attrition and early retirement, another critical issue is teacher turnover, namely the frequent mobility of teachers between schools. This phenomenon does not necessarily coincide with leaving the profession, but it nonetheless produces negative effects on teaching quality and the organizational stability of schools.

Turnover is particularly high in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts, where teachers experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion and are more likely to develop intentions to transfer (Van Eycken et al., 2022). Research shows that high staff rotation negatively affects student learning, undermining instructional continuity and the development of meaningful educational relationships (Hanushek et al., 2016). The case of preschool teachers in China is emblematic: 43.65% left their position at least once, with determining factors including work stress, lack of recognition, inadequate management mechanisms, and limited opportunities for professional advancement (Ren et al., 2024). Turnover should therefore not be understood as a secondary problem compared to attrition, but rather as a structural dimension of the difficulties teachers encounter in securing sustainable and motivating working conditions.

2. What Changes Over Time: Teacher Career Phases

Researchers have developed various models of teacher career phases or stages, which may collectively be referred to as the career cycle (Booth et al., 2021; Eros, 2011). The most commonly used framework is the model that divides teachers' careers into five stages, typically deriving from Huberman's study of Swiss teachers (Huberman, 1989). In Huberman's model, career trajectories are structured according to years of teaching experience, specifically: 1–3 years correspond to the Exploration phase, in which novice teachers strive to survive the difficulties of classroom management, lesson preparation, and multiple work demands, while simultaneously exploring both the school environment and the profession itself. Between 4–6 years, teachers enter the Stabilization phase, in which, having overcome initial challenges, they decide whether to commit to teaching or to

leave the profession. This represents a critical phase that has been widely investigated in the literature in light of teacher shortages. From 7–18 years of teaching, teachers typically experience the Experimentation/Activism or Reassessment phase, where they engage in new challenges, reconsider their career choice, and experiment with new practices. Between 19–30 years, teachers generally reach the Serenity phase, a professional plateau in which they often cease striving for promotion. Although they may gradually lose energy and enthusiasm, this is compensated for by greater confidence and self-acceptance. After 30 years, teachers enter the Disengagement phase, as they approach the end of their careers. In this stage, experienced teachers may, with serenity or sometimes disappointment and bitterness, withdraw from responsibilities unrelated to pupil learning and devote more attention to outside interests.

Similar models inspired by Huberman's division include those by Dreyfus (2004) and Day et al. (2006). These models likewise define career stages by broad categories of years of practice and by teachers' perceptions of themselves, their skills, confidence, and professional contexts, highlighting sub-groups in which teachers may choose to withdraw from the profession.

Six-stage models generally assume a rather linear and progressive career path, in which phases succeed one another in a regular order and competence levels increase steadily until reaching a plateau. However, this conception has been criticized, as teachers' trajectories may be shaped by personal, professional, or organizational factors that cause deviations from linear patterns (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Bressman et al., 2018; Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Fullan, 1993; Yağan et al., 2022). These models may therefore fail to capture not only how teachers acquire new knowledge and skills through practice, but also the critical phases that may emerge over the course of a teaching career.

Linear models have also been critiqued for disregarding the possibility of unexpected events and non-linear trajectories. For instance, teachers may challenge established ideas, initiate change processes triggered by unforeseen events, or experience "career shocks" (Akkermans et al., 2018;

Freidus, 1994). Another strand of research examines second-career teachers, who enter teaching from other professional backgrounds. Due to their prior experience, they may not fit easily into these linear typologies (Castro & Bauml, 2009; Powers, 2002; Tigchelaar et al., 2014). Consequently, professional development does not necessarily follow a sequential trajectory: some teachers may specialize deeply in a single area, such as working with students with special educational needs and disabilities, thereby enhancing their expertise without broadening their repertoire. Others may expand their skills across multiple domains.

Furthermore, part of the literature highlights that the connection between years of teaching experience and teaching expertise is not necessarily straightforward. For example, Maandag et al. (2017) argue that the length of a career does not automatically lead to higher expertise or improved teaching quality. Even if teachers acquire effective skills over time, this does not guarantee sustained high-quality practice, suggesting instead that ongoing professional development opportunities are crucial for the growth of expertise and should be considered in defining career phases.

Subsequent studies have focused on identifying both risk and protective factors within different career phases, taking into account teachers' varying needs and resources. For instance, Booth et al. (2021) highlight the mid-career stage—a category often overlooked in the literature—describing it as largely composed of committed and skilled teachers who nevertheless lack sufficient opportunities for professional development. They identify several profiles relevant for policy interventions: career climbers, who aim to move into leadership positions; satisfied stalwarts, who remain committed and content within their roles; family focusers, who balance professional and family priorities; and dissatisfied stayers, who remain in the profession despite limited satisfaction or perceived alternatives.

Another strand of research investigates push and pull factors across different career stages, tracing how teachers' challenges and aspirations evolve over time and are shaped by personal, interpersonal,

and organizational dimensions (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Chaaban & Du, 2017; Davison, 1971; Glazer, 2020; Van Eycken et al., 2022).

At the personal level, novice and experienced teachers differ in their sources of satisfaction. Novices often draw motivation from idealistic aspirations, perceiving teaching as a noble profession and valuing close relationships with students (Castro et al., 2010; Ulvik et al., 2009). They also rely heavily on co-worker support, which provides learning opportunities, shared resources, and a sense of belonging to the professional community (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014; Corbell et al., 2010). By contrast, experienced teachers adopt more realistic perspectives and emphasize appreciation and recognition as central to their job satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2007; Ulvik et al., 2009). Both groups share satisfaction linked to high self-efficacy beliefs, which sustain motivation and commitment (Moe et al., 2010; Ulvik et al., 2009).

At the interpersonal level, novice teachers rely strongly on collegial support, particularly from experienced peers, and frequently employ help-seeking strategies to counteract feelings of isolation (Castro et al., 2010; Pietarinen et al., 2013). Experienced teachers also value collegial support, yet may face cultural or relational conflicts. They tend to adopt more advanced coping strategies such as problem-solving, palliative approaches, self-talk, and conflict avoidance (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014; Castro et al., 2010). While administrative support impacts novices indirectly, experienced teachers report feeling its effects more directly and personally.

At the organizational level, both novice and experienced teachers struggle with workload and limited autonomy. Novices face heavier demands, reduced opportunities for rest, and challenges in classroom management, especially in contexts lacking school-wide discipline policies (Gu & Day, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). They cope through strategies such as satisficing, seeking help, and observing or imitating experienced colleagues. Experienced teachers encounter similar challenges throughout their careers, but tend to manage constraints and classroom difficulties

through resilient and refined problem-solving strategies (Lam & Yan, 2011; Le Maistre & Pare, 2010).

3. Adapting Schools To Teachers: The Role Of Working Conditions In Teacher Retention

Teacher attrition has been widely acknowledged as a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by a combination of organizational, individual, and systemic factors. Early studies emphasized the influence of school-level organizational characteristics, including administrative support, student discipline, and teacher autonomy, as central determinants of attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001a, 2001b). Research by Harris and Adams (2007) highlighted early retirement as a key driver of teacher turnover, particularly in systems where pension structures and salary schedules incentivize leaving the profession early. Similarly, Harrington (2001) identified specific shortages in math and science teaching as a consequence of labor market distortions, inequitable resource allocation, and disincentives for productivity, which further exacerbate attrition in technical subjects. Meta-analytical evidence indicates that teacher attrition is strongly associated with school context. Not only do organizational characteristics, salaries, and instructional resources play a role, but student demographics are also critical. Schools serving low-income or high-minority populations face the highest attrition rates, creating persistent inequities in access to high-quality instruction (Borman & Kimball, 2005; Ferguson, 1998). School size also exerts a notable impact: large urban schools tend to experience higher turnover, while smaller schools are often associated with greater teacher stability (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Similarly, student discipline is among the most frequently cited working condition factors influencing teachers' decisions to leave (Borman & Dowling, 2006; Brill & McCartney, 2008). Inadequate facilities and resources further discourage teachers from remaining in a school. Unsafe or poorly designed environments and limited access to materials make teachers feel unsupported and hinder their effectiveness. Although disparities in these dimensions are widely acknowledged, few studies have explicitly examined their impact on retention. Buckley, Schneider, and Shang (2005), for instance,

identified a modest positive correlation between teachers' intent to leave and their evaluation of school facilities. These disparities reinforce structural educational inequalities and highlight the importance of targeted policies to retain qualified teachers in high-need schools.

Working conditions are consistently associated with teachers' turnover intentions. Factors such as school size, geographic location, and student behavior significantly influence attrition patterns (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Hanushek et al., 2005; Qin, 2021). Large urban schools and schools serving disadvantaged populations often present more challenging environments, including higher incidences of student misbehavior and unfavorable teacher–student ratios, which can increase stress and lead to higher turnover, particularly among early-career teachers (Kelly, 2004; Lukens et al., 2004). Salary also remains a robust predictor of attrition: higher relative salaries and financial incentives for teaching in high-need schools reduce the likelihood of leaving and may attract more qualified candidates to underserved areas (Bloland & Selby, 1980; Bobbit et al., 1991).

The following sections provide a detailed examination of the key factors related to working conditions that influence the long-term sustainability of teaching careers.

3.1. School Leadership And Organizational Culture

Leadership within schools is one of the most influential factors affecting teacher retention and job satisfaction. Supportive, participative, and transformational leadership styles foster collaboration, professional growth, and well-being, mitigating attrition (Ingusci et al., 2016; Ladd, 2011; Manuti et al., 2022; Van den Borre et al., 2021). Distributed leadership has been shown to enhance teamwork and participatory decision-making, thereby strengthening teachers' organizational commitment and performance levels (Harris, 2020; Van den Borre et al., 2021). Principals' ability to provide both emotional and instrumental support proved particularly crucial during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when leadership significantly shaped teachers' adaptation to rapid change, professional development opportunities, and morale (Bagwell, 2020; Beauchamp et al., 2021; De Carlo et al., 2019).

School culture interacts closely with leadership to influence teacher experiences. Environments characterized by mutual respect, shared educational goals, and collaborative practices enhance early-career teacher retention and foster professional commitment (Allensworth et al., 2009). Studies further show that a positive school climate positively affects teacher responsibility, engagement, and well-being (Matteucci et al., 2017). Research on school-based determinants highlights a “third band” of factors—distinct from intrinsic motivators and hygiene conditions—comprising school leadership, decision-making structures, school reputation, and infrastructure (Crisci et al., 2019; Dinham & Scott, 1997, 2000). These factors are malleable through policy and management interventions, offering strategic leverage points to improve retention. Effective leadership particularly benefits novice teachers, who often face isolation, insecurity regarding tenure or promotion, and difficulties integrating into established routines. Promoting a shared educational vision and cultivating a collective sense of purpose significantly strengthen both individual and collective teacher efficacy (Caprara et al., 2023).

3.2. Teacher Collaboration

Teacher collaboration has emerged as a central mechanism for fostering professional development, instructional quality, and retention (Methlagl, 2022; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Collaboration may take the form of informal peer exchanges or structured team-based approaches and is associated with improved teaching practices, greater participation in professional development, and enhanced student outcomes. Teachers engaged in collaborative networks are more likely to adopt cognitively stimulating strategies, deliver clear instruction, and participate in sustained learning opportunities (Methlagl, 2022; Simbula et al., 2011). Research also demonstrates that relatedness with colleagues and strong levels of collaboration are negatively associated with turnover intention (Collie, 2023).

Collaboration is most effective when supported by strong leadership and a shared school vision. Favorable conditions include supportive colleagues, dedicated time for joint planning, and

opportunities for collective problem-solving. Conversely, the absence of collaboration has been linked to reduced professional development engagement and weaker instructional practices, highlighting the interdependence between school culture, leadership, and collaborative engagement.

3.3. Professional Development

Professional development (PD) is a critical lever for promoting teacher retention, efficacy, and career advancement. High-quality PD enhances teachers' subject knowledge, instructional confidence, and motivation, all of which contribute positively to retention (Coldwell, 2017; Day & Gu, 2007; Desimone, 2009). Targeted interventions, including leadership training, subject-specific PD, and job-crafting exercises, have been shown to yield positive outcomes for both professional growth and retention (Granziera et al., 2021; van Wingerden et al., 2013).

Early-career teachers particularly benefit from structured induction programs, mentoring, and targeted PD focused on classroom management, pedagogical strategies, and working with diverse populations (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hobson & Ashby, 2012; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). The effectiveness of PD, however, depends heavily on the school's organizational context, leadership support, and wider policy frameworks (Bubb et al., 2008; Fütterer et al., 2023; McIntyre et al., 2009). Teachers' motivation, engagement, career stage, and personal circumstances further shape PD outcomes, underscoring the importance of differentiated and sustained opportunities tailored to context and career phase.

3.4. Job Satisfaction

Teacher job satisfaction results from a dynamic interplay between school-level and individual-level factors. At the school level, adequate resources, safe facilities, supportive climates, balanced workloads, and equitable student distribution enhance satisfaction, whereas poor working conditions, limited resources, and frequent student misbehavior reduce it (Collie et al., 2012; Fütterer et al., 2023; Thekedam, 2010). Such factors explain substantial variance in satisfaction, even after

controlling for teacher background variables (Bogler & Nir, 2014; Buonomo et al., 2020; Duffy & Lent, 2009; Shen et al., 2012).

At the individual level, satisfaction is influenced by teaching experience, career stage, professional commitment, and gender. Early-career teachers are particularly sensitive to supportive work environments, whereas veteran teachers tend to exhibit stronger professional identity and commitment (Kyndt et al., 2016). The combination of leadership, collaboration, PD, and working conditions shapes teachers' sense of meaningful work, professional recognition, and well-being, which in turn influence retention and student achievement (Hoque et al., 2023).

3.5. Salaries And Economic Incentives

Financial compensation is consistently identified as a decisive determinant of teacher retention and mobility. Research demonstrates that salary influences both teachers' decisions to remain in a school and their overall commitment to the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2017; Qin, 2021). Evidence from the United States indicates that both public and private school teachers report salary as a primary reason for leaving, with private school teachers expressing greater dissatisfaction with pay (Bobbitt et al., 1991). Theobald (1990) found that higher salaries positively correlate with teachers' willingness to remain in the same district, while Bloland and Selby (1980) highlighted the role of salary considerations—particularly for male educators—in career change decisions.

Cross-national comparisons reinforce the significance of relative teacher pay in shaping retention and career trajectories. In contexts where teacher wages lag behind comparable professions, turnover intentions rise. Conversely, wage premiums and location-based allowances effectively reduce attrition, especially among experienced teachers (Falch & Strøm, 2005; Rickman et al., 2017). Salary disparities between high-need and low-need schools further affect teacher distribution, as financial incentives for disadvantaged schools help attract and retain qualified educators, thereby addressing persistent inequities (Borman & Kimball, 2005). Compensation policies thus represent not merely

economic instruments but strategic levers for promoting retention, equity, and the long-term stability of the teaching workforce.

3.6. Teacher Status And Social Recognition

Finally, the perceived social status of teaching plays a significant role in shaping teacher motivation, satisfaction, and retention (Qin, 2021). Teachers draw professional fulfillment not only from intrinsic rewards, such as student learning, but also from societal respect and recognition. Declining prestige—manifested in diminished status, recognition, and relative pay—has been linked to reduced commitment and increased turnover intentions (Dolton et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2014; Wolman, 2010). By contrast, high-status teaching professions, such as those in Japan and South Korea, are associated with more stable workforces, higher teacher quality, and improved student outcomes (Burns & Darling-Hammond, 2014; Kim & Han, 2002).

Teachers who perceive themselves as respected and valued by their communities demonstrate greater engagement and commitment, which mitigates attrition, particularly in early-career stages (Hargreaves et al., 2007; MacBeath, 2012; Symeonidis, 2015). Teacher status interacts with financial incentives, working conditions, and professional development to shape career trajectories. Enhancing the social prestige of teaching, alongside competitive compensation and supportive environments, is therefore essential to attract and retain motivated educators in the long term.

4. Being A Teacher In Italy: Some Data On The Italian Context

4.1. Socio-Demographic Profile Of Teachers And Contextual Information

The Italian teaching profession exhibits distinctive socio-demographic characteristics that have significant implications for workforce planning, teacher retention, and educational equity. Teaching is predominantly a female profession, with over 80% of Italian teachers being women, compared to an OECD average of slightly over 68% (OECD, 2023a). This proportion rises to 95% in early childhood and primary education. Such pronounced feminization influences occupational status,

wage structures, and career progression opportunities, shaping the overall composition of the educational workforce (Argentin, 2013a; Cammelli et al., 2011).

Italian teachers are, on average, older than their counterparts in most TALIS-participating countries, with a mean age of approximately 48.6 years (ranked 6th out of 50 in 2018; OECD, 2019). Nearly half (48%) are aged 50 or above, compared to an OECD average of 34%, suggesting that Italy will need to replace roughly half of its teaching workforce within the next decade. This demographic trend underscores challenges in recruitment, succession planning, and retention of experienced educators. Between 2013 and 2018, Italy experienced one of the most marked declines in the share of teachers aged 50 and above (-2 percentage points, ranking 26th out of 32 OECD countries), reflecting both retirement trends and the potential impact of recent recruitment efforts on age distribution.

The pathway to entering the teaching profession in Italy often involves extended job search periods and prolonged employment precariousness. Teachers, particularly those in secondary education, take longer to secure their first position than other graduates, averaging over 13 months post-graduation (nearly 15 months for secondary teachers), compared to under 12 months for other fields. Early-career employment remains highly insecure: one year after graduation, 65% of teachers hold fixed-term contracts, compared to 16% of other professionals, and even five years post-graduation, only 38% have permanent positions, versus 49% of non-teachers (74% including self-employed workers). Primary and early childhood teachers benefit from more favorable conditions, with 64% in permanent positions compared to 21% of secondary teachers. Most teachers work in the public sector (over 80%), whereas private school educators enjoy greater contractual stability, with nearly two-thirds holding permanent positions versus one-third of public school teachers. These employment conditions are likely to influence professional commitment, career planning, and long-term investment in teaching goals (Cammelli et al., 2011).

Geographical origin and mobility patterns further shape the workforce. Teachers, particularly in secondary education, disproportionately originate from Southern Italy (42% overall; 49% for secondary teachers, compared to 32% of other professionals). Approximately 20% relocate to another region for work, rising to 35% among Southern teachers, and secondary teachers face longer average commutes (22 km) than other graduates (16 km), reflecting regional disparities and uneven distribution of teaching positions (Cammelli et al., 2011).

Family and socio-cultural background also play a critical role in teacher recruitment. Prospective teachers are more likely to come from less-educated families: only 21% have at least one parent with a university degree, compared to 26% among non-teachers, with primary and early childhood teachers exhibiting the lowest rates (12%). Working-class families are overrepresented among teachers (19% vs. 14% of non-teachers), particularly in primary and early childhood education (21%; Cammelli et al., 2011). These patterns suggest that social origin influences both the composition and diversity of the teaching workforce.

The initial training of Italian teachers has historically lacked a structured, profession-specific pathway, with the notable exception of early childhood and primary school educators, who benefit from specialized training programs. Consequently, novice teachers often enter the workforce without formal induction or mentoring opportunities, relying largely on the goodwill and informal support of experienced colleagues within their schools. This absence of structured guidance is particularly concerning given that initial professional socialization is crucial for the development of effective teaching practices, classroom management, and long-term retention (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ladd, 2011;).

The initial formal education and training of Italian teachers, therefore, exhibits notable gaps. Fewer teachers had substantive exposure to content, pedagogy, and classroom practice during their initial training (64%, rank 48/50; OECD, 2019), and even fewer received formal induction at their current school (74.7%, rank 8/50). Mentoring is particularly scarce: only 5.1% of novice teachers

reported having an assigned mentor, placing Italy last among TALIS-participating countries. These deficiencies are compounded by limited exposure to student behavior and classroom management strategies during formal preparation, with only 57.5% of teachers receiving training in these critical areas (rank 43/50).

Qualitative studies corroborate these quantitative findings. Many teachers, especially in southern regions, report feeling ill-prepared to address multiethnic classrooms or heterogeneous learning levels and express a need for support in subject mastery and ICT integration (De Sanctis, 2010; Menabò et al., 2020). Pastore and Mincu (2024) highlight that almost all teachers describe prior professional development experiences—particularly in assessment—as disappointing, poorly aligned with classroom realities, and unresponsive to their needs. Teachers emphasize the importance of having sufficient time to understand new policies, experiment with innovations, and receive expert guidance in adapting assessment practices. The lack of clear professional standards exacerbates these challenges, leaving teachers with vague expectations regarding the competencies required for assessment literacy.

Participation in collaborative professional learning is limited among Italian teachers. Only 18% report engaging in collaborative professional learning at least once per month, slightly below the OECD average of 21%, whereas 62% engage in team teaching with the same frequency, substantially higher than the OECD average of 28%. Despite these opportunities for collaboration, feedback mechanisms remain insufficiently implemented: 27% of teachers report never having received feedback in their schools, compared to an OECD average of 10%. When feedback is provided, it primarily derives from school- or classroom-based student outcomes and observations of classroom teaching, suggesting a limited variety of evaluative methods. In fact, only 23.8% of teachers have received feedback via more than three different methods, ranking Italy 48th out of 50 countries in this regard. Similarly, peer observation, self-observation, and coaching are minimally integrated into

formal school arrangements, with only 24.7% of teachers reporting participation in such activities over the prior year (ranked 43/50).

Teachers consistently advocate for collaborative professional learning and sustained mentoring as essential drivers for professional growth. They recognize the potential of mutually supportive learning communities, but access remains limited and inconsistent. Moreover, professional development is often perceived as time-intensive and misaligned with immediate classroom demands, leading to frustration and, in some cases, disengagement. These difficulties are compounded by emerging challenges in the Italian educational system, including a growing presence of students of foreign origin—35% of teachers work in schools where at least 10% of the students have a migrant background (OECD average 17%; Biasutti et al., 2019; Bonizzoni et al., 2014; OECD, 2019)—and the inclusion of students with learning disabilities or special educational needs, which requires specialized training (Aiello et al., 2017; Jia et al., 2022; Zambelli & Bonni, 2004). Nonetheless, teachers' persistent belief in their instructional capabilities underscores a strong sense of agency and commitment to student learning, highlighting the paradox of high self-efficacy amidst limited institutional support.

Despite these shortcomings, Italian teachers report remarkably high levels of self-efficacy. Relative to other TALIS countries, a larger proportion believe in their ability to help students value learning (96.2%, rank 5/49) and to foster critical thinking (95.1%, rank 4/49). This contrast between high self-efficacy and limited formal support suggests that teachers rely heavily on personal resilience, adaptive strategies, and informal learning networks to navigate classroom challenges (Fackler & Malmberg, 2016; Pastore & Mincu, 2024).

From a salary perspective, both initial conditions and career growth prospects for Italian teachers are far from favorable. At the outset, teachers face relatively low remuneration early in their careers. One year after graduation, they earn approximately €1,000 net per month, roughly 3% less than other university graduates (Cammelli et al., 2011). Five years post-graduation, this disparity widens:

teachers' real income increases by only about 8%, reaching just under €1,100 per month, whereas other professionals experience gains exceeding 30%, attaining an average of €1,370 net per month. When adjusted for full-time equivalents, the gap is even more pronounced, with teachers earning on average €1,150 compared to €1,450 for other graduates. This relatively flat salary scale, typical of the largely public education sector, constrains differentiation based on teaching level or discipline and offers minimal opportunities for accelerated financial advancement. Gender-based wage gaps within the teaching profession are comparatively narrow—approximately 5% in favor of men—substantially lower than the 22% observed in other occupational sectors. Nevertheless, perceptions of income inadequacy remain strong: 83% of teachers consider their remuneration insufficient relative to their level of education, and 72% perceive a mismatch between pay and professional responsibilities. Regional disparities are also notable, with teachers in Northern Italy earning 22% less than their professional counterparts, compared to a 12% gap in the South (Gerosa, 2014). These economic constraints not only compromise financial stability but also contribute to a pessimistic outlook regarding career progression, as teachers increasingly perceive a gradual erosion of social prestige and professional recognition over time (Cavalli & Argentin, 2010).

A second, closely related factor concerns career progression, which is limited by a fundamentally flat and centralized structure. Unlike education systems with multi-tiered career ladders—where teachers can ascend through formal levels accompanied by increased responsibilities and corresponding salary increments—Italian teachers have few avenues for professional advancement. In multi-level systems, career progression often entails assuming mentoring, pedagogical, methodological, or managerial roles, with school leadership actively involved in promotion decisions. In Italy, however, such differentiated responsibilities and promotion mechanisms are largely absent, resulting in a lack of formal and continuous recognition for contributions beyond classroom teaching (Eurydice, 2018). This absence of hierarchical progression and task

diversification diminishes motivation for long-term professional investment and may exacerbate attrition, particularly among early- and mid-career teachers seeking growth and acknowledgment.

Perceived social status further intersects with these economic and structural constraints, shaping teachers' professional well-being and engagement. Despite the formal professionalization of teaching, many educators report a decline in social recognition, highlighting a disconnect between objective occupational prestige and subjective perceptions of status (Argentin, 2013a). This perceived reduction in prestige is compounded by rigid organizational structures within schools, which limit flexibility in workload management and constrain the development of pedagogical strategies attentive to students' psycho-emotional needs (Arbia et al., 2023). Teachers operate in environments characterized by insufficient organizational support, where professional competence and dedication are often undervalued, and opportunities to renegotiate responsibilities or workload are minimal. The resulting psycho-emotional strain can undermine motivation, reduce commitment, and pose substantial challenges to sustaining a long-term career in the profession.

Another factor that has profoundly influenced how teachers work in schools and has also affected their perception of the direction taken by schools as public institutions is the gradual introduction of New Public Management (NPM) principles into the Italian public administration. The development of NPM within the Italian educational system has significantly reshaped both the organizational environment and teachers' professional experiences. From the outset, teachers in Italy have operated within welfare institutions, requiring them to balance professional autonomy and collegial coordination—hallmarks of traditional occupational professionalism—with the constraints imposed by bureaucratic regulation (Bronzini & Spina, 2018). This tension underscores the emergence of organizational professionalism, often in hybrid forms, as opposed to classical professional models (Evetts, 2011). As in other public service professions, such as healthcare, teaching has been subjected to substantial pressures from both top-down reforms—most notably the implementation of NPM and, subsequently, New Public Governance (NPG) (Osborne, 2006; Pollitt, 1990)—and bottom-up socio-

demographic and cultural changes that shape interactions with students and their families (Gewirtz et al., 2009; Whitty, 2002).

In Italy, the past two decades have witnessed repeated educational reforms impacting multiple levels of the system. At the macro level, governance structures have been redefined (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2014); at the meso and micro levels, teacher work practices and subjectivities have been reshaped, influencing professional identity (Pitzalis, 2016). The introduction of school autonomy through Law 59/1997 marked a “soft” decentralization process (Benadusi & Serpieri, 2000), granting schools responsibility for budget management, curriculum planning, and organizational decisions. However, while headteachers gained new prerogatives, teachers’ autonomy remained relatively constrained, and the reform’s influence largely affected institutional governance rather than everyday classroom practice. Nevertheless, NPM principles—entrepreneurial logic, managerialism, and market-oriented approaches—were embedded in the system for the first time (Grimaldi & Serpieri, 2010).

These reforms intersected with shifts in the operational definition of professionalism, whereby teachers’ careers became increasingly dependent on externally defined measures of quality, progress, and achievement (Day, 2007; Day et al., 2006). For many teachers, the imposition of competency-based agendas and the intensification of bureaucratic and performativity-related tasks increased professional uncertainty, instability, and vulnerability. Kelchtermans’ (1996) study of experienced primary school teachers illustrates this dynamic: while job stability offered satisfaction for those who had achieved career ambitions, heightened exposure to judgments from colleagues, administrators, parents, inspectors, and media created pressures leading to passivity and conservatism in practice. Despite these challenges, educational policy often neglects the interplay between reform measures, teacher identity, commitment, and instructional effectiveness, suggesting that sustainable change requires engagement with teachers’ emotional and intellectual identities. Trust, in particular, emerges

as a crucial facilitator, serving to reduce uncertainty, enable cooperation, and support cohesive organizational functioning.

Concurrently, the quantification of school performance and the expansion of evaluative mechanisms have intensified in Italy, beginning with the growing prominence of international learning assessments in public discourse (Argentin, 2021). This emphasis on measurable outputs fostered a “results-evaluation” logic, strengthened by Law 107/2015, which introduced standardized evaluation and performance-related incentives for school leadership and teachers. Complementing this evaluative push, schools’ organizational autonomy expanded, with increased discretion over curriculum implementation, internal diagnostic tools, and engagement of external professional consultants (Benadusi et al., 2020; Campione & Contu, 2020; Serpieri et al., 2015). Managerialism became a dominant logic, guiding schools in the pursuit of institutional objectives and fostering competition among schools, facilitated by the dismantling of fixed school assignment zones and the proliferation of digital platforms and public-facing initiatives. These competitive dynamics encouraged schools to market themselves strategically, aiming to attract students with desirable academic backgrounds.

Additional reforms sought to align educational content and skills with labor market demands, exemplified by the contested “alternanza scuola-lavoro” program established under Law 107/2015 (Pinna & Pitzalis, 2020). Digital technologies were also increasingly integrated into educational practice, encompassing both hardware infrastructure and teacher training in ICT and media literacy. Sociological interpretations of these changes range from optimism regarding the transformative potential of digital tools to concern over the governance of pedagogical practice through ostensibly neutral technological devices.

Interestingly, despite these extensive organizational, evaluative, and technological reforms, teacher satisfaction in Italy has not increased substantially. One explanation is that many reforms, such as aspects of Law 107/2015, were partially diluted during implementation, limiting their direct impact

on teachers' day-to-day experiences. Moreover, the large, inert educational bureaucracy and heterogeneity of school practices enabled teachers to exercise selective agency, choosing contexts and positions that mitigated exposure to neomanagerial pressures (Barbieri et al., 2019). This selective engagement, combined with variations in openness to performance-based career structures, accounts for the persistence of satisfaction among certain groups, despite widespread critiques of union representation. Media representations portraying a uniformly resistant teaching workforce are, therefore, misleading.

Finally, empirical evidence suggests that policies emphasizing the measurement of teaching quality often correlate negatively with teacher satisfaction (Smith & Holloway, 2020). This underscores the complexity of implementing NPM in education: while intended to improve accountability and outcomes, such reforms can introduce stress, reduce professional autonomy, and create tensions between managerial imperatives and the intrinsic motivations of educators. The Italian experience illustrates that successful reform requires careful attention to the relational and emotional dimensions of teacher work, trust-building, and opportunities for professional agency, as these factors are essential for sustaining motivation, commitment, and instructional quality in a rapidly changing policy landscape.

The job satisfaction of Italian teachers presents a complex and somewhat paradoxical picture. On the one hand, teachers report relatively high levels of overall satisfaction with their work, particularly when compared to other university graduates. Cammelli et al. (2010) found that only 14% of Italian teachers actively seek alternative employment, versus 26% of other graduates, suggesting a strong attachment to the profession. Teachers express satisfaction with the social utility of their work, the alignment with their intellectual and cultural interests, the coherence between their university studies and their professional tasks, and the balance with leisure time. However, these general positive evaluations coexist with notable sources of dissatisfaction, especially regarding income prospects,

career advancement opportunities, job stability, and the type of contractual arrangements available (Cammelli et al., 2010).

Despite an initially higher level of job satisfaction, evidence indicates a decline over the early career period. Between the first and fifth years after graduation, teachers' satisfaction diminishes more markedly than that of other graduates, suggesting that initial expectations of professional fulfillment are only partially met, or may even be frustrated. This erosion of satisfaction may weaken incentives for highly capable students to enter the teaching profession (Cammelli et al., 2010). Nevertheless, Italian teachers maintain a comparatively high level of satisfaction relative to most TALIS-participating countries, with 95.9% reporting overall job satisfaction in 2018 (ranked 5th of 50), even as satisfaction with salary remains low, at only 20.8% (ranked 43rd of 50) (OECD, 2019). Sociological analyses provide further insight into the underlying dynamics shaping teachers' satisfaction. Argentin (2021) emphasizes that Italian teachers' perceptions of professional satisfaction have long been analyzed in the context of a so-called "crisis of teaching." This crisis is understood at two levels: at the macro level, it reflects a loss of control over professional practice, rising population education levels, and a perceived decline in social prestige; at the micro level, it concerns the continuous evolution of student cohorts and the intrusion of external societal changes into daily classroom routine. Teachers' dissatisfaction is primarily linked to external, instrumental aspects of work, particularly inadequate remuneration and the lack of social recognition for their efforts, which often appear misaligned with the realities of their day-to-day practice. This perception of an externally hostile environment is reinforced by a long-term decline in perceived occupational prestige, even when survey data do not confirm a corresponding decrease in objective occupational status.

Taken together, these findings highlight that Italian teachers' dissatisfaction is not rooted in the intrinsic nature of teaching but in the interaction between professional work and external pressures. These pressures include societal changes, policy decisions perceived as poorly aligned with

classroom realities, and the limited recognition of teachers' contributions outside the immediate educational context (Argentin, 2021). Nevertheless, comparative analyses remain rare, and few studies have examined teachers' satisfaction in relation to labor market dynamics or contrasted it systematically with the satisfaction of other professional groups (Argentin, 2013c, 2018).

In sum, Italian teachers experience a dual reality: high intrinsic satisfaction and commitment to their work coexist with frustration stemming from limited external recognition, inadequate compensation, and constrained career advancement opportunities. Understanding these tensions is critical for policy development aimed at sustaining teacher motivation, professional commitment, and long-term career retention.

4.2. Teacher Shortage And Turnover In Italy

Like other European countries, Italy is currently facing a complex scenario regarding teacher supply, characterized by both a substantial shortage of educators and high levels of turnover within the system. According to official data, there are slightly fewer than 670,000 teachers with permanent contracts in Italy, excluding special education, non-state, and private school teachers, as well as those in non-permanent positions (Magni, 2024). However, demographic trends—particularly a very low birth rate and a general population decline—are expected to reduce the total number of teachers to around 660,000 by the 2031/2032 school year, implying a net decrease of approximately 10,000 teachers (Law No. 79/2022). In contrast, estimates from teachers' unions suggest that the actual shortage could exceed 200,000 teachers in the coming years (Adnkronos, 2023).

Regional disparities exacerbate the problem. For example, in Lombardy, the most populous Italian region, more than 5,000 new teachers are needed for initial teacher education programs in secondary schools, with particularly acute shortages in subjects such as Italian, history, geography, natural sciences, mathematics, English, technology, and computer science (Magni, 2024). These shortages result in tangible disruptions to educational continuity, with entire classes sometimes left without teachers for critical subjects during the first months of the academic year. The high turnover of

temporary staff further compounds the problem, creating instability that negatively affects student learning outcomes, particularly in STEAM disciplines, where early access to qualified teachers is essential (Calvi, 2023; Intravaia, 2023).

Conversely, certain disciplines, such as Latin, philosophy, and law, face an oversupply of teachers, highlighting systemic imbalances caused by decades of disorganized educational policy and recruitment practices that prioritized quantity over quality. This “institutionalized precariousness” has resulted in uncertain pathways for initial teacher education and high rates of temporary employment (Gremigni, 2013). In response, initiatives such as the European NextGenerationEU plan and the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) aim to reform initial teacher education and recruit over 70,000 new teachers by 2026.

Teacher turnover in Italy is strongly influenced by a centralized allocation system based primarily on seniority. Teachers are assigned to schools without consideration of performance, qualifications, or preferences, and permanent contracts are awarded only after several years of temporary appointments, typically around the age of 40 (Barbieri et al., 2017). After obtaining tenure, career advancement and mobility remain governed largely by seniority rather than individual merit or pedagogical skill. While this system promotes equality among schools and protects teachers from arbitrary decisions, it also has significant drawbacks: teachers’ conduct has little impact on career progression, and the most desirable positions are often monopolized by older staff, discouraging younger aspirants from entering the profession (Bryson et al., 2022).

Empirical research within the Italian context confirms the implications of these patterns. Teacher mobility is influenced by school characteristics, including type, size, and socio-economic context, as well as by student composition. Higher mobility applications are observed in schools with larger proportions of foreign-born or disabled students, or with more students repeating grades (Barbieri et al., 2017; Barbieri & Sestito, 2017).

Taken together, the combination of socio-demographic characteristics, limited initial teacher education, scarce opportunities for professional development and career advancement, low relative salaries, and declining perceived social status represents a multifaceted threat to the sustainability of teaching careers in Italy. Economic constraints restrict financial stability and the ability to plan long-term, while the absence of formal promotion pathways and professional differentiation diminishes motivation and reduces incentives for skill development and pedagogical innovation. Concurrently, declining social recognition and organizational rigidity exacerbate the psychological and professional pressures faced by teachers, further undermining retention and job satisfaction. Addressing these interrelated challenges requires coordinated policy interventions, including long-term alignment of salaries with European standards, the establishment of structured career pathways with clear responsibilities and incentives, and enhanced professional recognition both within schools and in society at large. Such measures are essential to ensure that the Italian teaching profession remains sustainable, attractive, and capable of retaining motivated and competent educators throughout their careers.

5. The Theoretical Framework: The Sustainable Careers Model

Across the studies presented in the following chapters, the Career Sustainability Framework (CSF) serves as the overarching theoretical foundation guiding the analysis. This framework provides a coherent and multidimensional perspective on how individuals build, maintain, and renew their careers over time within evolving personal and organizational contexts. The CSF offers a comprehensive lens through which to understand how individuals maintain viable and fulfilling work trajectories, emerging in response to contemporary challenges such as labor market flexibilization, demographic aging, and precarious employment. Building on and extending earlier models of protean and boundaryless careers, it emphasizes long-term viability and well-being (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). A sustainable career is conceptualized as a dynamic process that unfolds through time, across contexts, and in interaction with personal meaning-making,

whereby individuals act as proactive agents navigating opportunities and constraints in their work environments. Central to this model are three interdependent dimensions—happiness, health, and productivity—which jointly define the extent to which a career remains sustainable. Happiness concerns the alignment between work, values, and aspirations; health refers to the capacity to meet job demands without enduring harm; and productivity encompasses both current performance and long-term employability through continuous skill development. These dimensions fluctuate over the lifespan, reflecting the ongoing interplay between personal resources, contextual factors, and temporal dynamics. Within the education sector, this framework assumes particular relevance, as teachers' careers are characterized by high emotional demands, heavy workloads, and limited advancement opportunities, all of which heighten the risk of burnout, attrition, and early retirement (Arbia et al., 2023; Capone & Petrillo, 2020). Applying the CSF to teaching thus highlights the need for systemic support that sustains educators' health, motivation, and professional growth across different career stages. Investing in teachers' sustainable careers—through targeted professional development, structured career guidance, and inclusive HR policies—not only fosters individual well-being and retention but also enhances the long-term quality and resilience of educational systems.

6. In Sum, What Can Be Done?

Making teaching an attractive profession has become a pressing challenge not only for the European Union but also for many countries worldwide. Italy, unsurprisingly, displays specific differences compared to other contexts, which call for these tensions to be analyzed within a broader European perspective. Building on the work of Magni (2024) and Symeonidis (2020), we argue that it is necessary to rethink the educational landscape and design public policies capable of attracting motivated and competent graduates, while also fostering organizational features that sustain teachers' careers and enable them to remain in the profession across their life course (Madalinska-Michalak et al., 2021). This raises the crucial question of what schools, as workplaces, can effectively improve in

order to address teachers' needs and ensure that they remain satisfied, engaged, and motivated throughout their careers. The issue is not merely one of organizational efficiency in the functioning of the public education system; nor is it only about ensuring, as is both fair and important, that the public sector takes responsibility for the well-being, happiness, and productivity of its employees. Ultimately, it is also about recognizing that teachers who experience greater well-being are more effective in their work, provide higher-quality services to their students, and, in doing so, enable schools to fulfill their democratic mission of equipping all individuals with the tools necessary to navigate life, regardless of personal differences. Academic research, in this regard, plays a vital role in guiding policymakers and educational stakeholders on where interventions are most needed to improve these conditions. The studies presented in the following sections are designed precisely with this goal in mind.

Chapter 2. Career Sustainability In The Teaching Profession: Hindering And Supporting Factors For Subjective Career Success

Abstract

In Italy, teachers have limited opportunities for career progression and task adaptation, raising questions about their long-term career sustainability. This chapter draws on 33 in-depth interviews to examine: (1) factors that hinder or support sustainability—particularly in relation to subjective career success—across different career stages; (2) how teachers conceptualize sustainable careers within their professional context; and (3) the resources they mobilize to navigate restricted advancement opportunities. Thematic analysis underscores the role of social support, professional development, and the challenges posed by excessive workload. Subjective career success is often linked to recognition from students and families and to the perceived impact of one's work. Employment status emerges as a double-edged factor: while permanent contracts provide stability, they may foster stagnation, whereas insecure positions can offer variety but increase vulnerability. The findings provide insights for career guidance in the teaching profession, highlighting key elements that shape both sustainability and subjective success.

1. Introduction

Italian teachers face limited opportunities for career progression and for adapting their roles to individual needs. This chapter explores how they respond to these constraints and the implications for long-term career sustainability. Drawing on 33 in-depth interviews with teachers, we examine: (1) the factors that hinder or support career sustainability—particularly about subjective career success—at different stages of the profession; (2) how teachers conceptualize career sustainability within their professional context; and (3) the resources they draw upon to navigate restricted advancement opportunities.

Thematic analysis highlights the central role of collegial support, professional development, and excessive workload. Subjective career success is often associated with recognition from

students and families, as well as the perceived value and impact of one's work. Employment status emerges as a double-edged sword: permanent contracts provide stability but may lead to stagnation, while precarious employment offers variety yet heightens vulnerability. These findings have implications for career guidance in education, offering insight into the key factors that influence career sustainability and teachers' own definitions of professional success.

2. Overview of Sustainable Careers: Theory and Current Research

Labor market flexibilization, demographic aging, income polarization, and the rise in precarious work arrangements have all raised pressing concerns about individuals' capacity to maintain health, productivity, and career satisfaction throughout their working lives (Kochan et al., 2019). A growing body of research suggests that when organizations neglect to support these employee outcomes, the repercussions include elevated absenteeism, rising healthcare costs, and declining long-term productivity (OECD, 2022). In response, the concept of sustainable careers has gained prominence across scholarly and policy domains. These developments are particularly acute in certain occupations and sectors, such as education, because teachers frequently face high workloads, limited opportunities for career advancement, and emotionally demanding work environments (Capone & Petrillo, 2020). Particularly within such contexts, the sustainable careers framework offers a valuable lens to understand how individuals can maintain viable, meaningful, and resilient work trajectories over time, both for personal fulfilment and broader societal benefit (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

Drawing on Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015), a sustainable career is conceptualized as a sequence of evolving experiences across different life domains, wherein individuals actively manage their careers while simultaneously navigating contextual conditions. This framework builds upon earlier models such as the protean and boundaryless careers, which stress personal agency and mobility, but it extends them by explicitly addressing long-term viability and well-being. Sustainable careers emphasize the importance of adaptability, individual agency, and a

dynamic fit between the person and their changing work environment. The framework integrates key dimensions of time, context, and individual meaning-making to illustrate how careers unfold across the lifespan, shaped not only by organizational structures but also by transitions between roles, developmental stages, and societal systems. Crucially, it highlights the need to preserve and optimize personal resources across one's working life. (De Vos et al., 2020)

To operationalize this framework, De Vos et al. (2020) proposed three interrelated indicators: health, happiness, and productivity. Health encompasses physical and mental well-being, and the capacity to perform work without enduring harm. For example, persistent exposure to high job demands may lead to burnout or other health complications, thereby undermining career sustainability. Happiness refers to career satisfaction and the alignment of one's work with personal values, goals, and needs. Productivity entails not only short-term performance but also employability and the continuous development of skills in alignment with labor market requirements. These dimensions are dynamic and interdependent, and together, they serve as guiding principles for evaluating career sustainability.

In recent years, the sustainable careers framework has been significantly enriched through both theoretical innovation and empirical application. Theoretically, Donald and Van der Heijden (Donald et al., 2024b) proposed an integrated model that synthesizes disparate strands of research from vocational behavior, career development, and human resource management. Also, Schweitzer et al. (2023) emphasized the role of interpersonal processes, while De Vos and Sullivan (2025) expanded the discussion to include career interruptions and boomerang mobility. Finally, the model has evolved further with the introduction of the sustainable career ecosystem (Donald et al., 2024a)—a synthesis of two theoretical models: the sustainable careers framework and the career ecosystem concept. This includes a new definition of the Sustainable Career Ecosystem (SCE), new theoretical perspectives (e.g., AI as a new actor; the case for the liminality

of the relationship between the individual and the career practitioner), and new analytical dimensions for studying SCEs (actors, contexts, time, and chance events).

Empirically, a growing number of studies have applied the sustainable careers framework across diverse contexts. One line of research has focused on validating the three sustainability indicators (Curado et al., 2023), developing measurement tools (Kim et al., 2024), and examining antecedents of career sustainability in underrepresented occupations, such as project management (Jacob & Mosquera, 2024) and self-employment (van den Groenendaal et al., 2022). Other contributions have explored pivotal career moments—including transitions (Castro et al., 2020), experiences of burnout (Barthauer et al., 2020), and interventions for career guidance (Zammiti et al., 2024)—that can either support or hinder long-term sustainability.

3. Careers in the Educational Sector: Why career sustainability is crucial in the education sector

As previously highlighted, the education sector offers a particularly salient context for examining sustainable careers. Specifically, there are two aspects intrinsically linked to the teaching profession that need to be taken into consideration.

First, teachers are frequently exposed to high levels of stress, emotional labor, and workload (Capone & Petrillo, 2020). It comes as no surprise, then, that teachers face elevated risks of burnout (Arbia et al., 2023), physical health issues (De Simone et al., 2016), low job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2012), and decreased job performance. A large body of research has investigated teacher attrition, which frequently leads to high turnover across schools, or even career shifts outside the profession altogether (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). Among more experienced teachers, early retirement has become increasingly common, further compounding staffing challenges (Hsu et al., 2015). These dynamics, in turn, negatively impact students' learning outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2013), and often lead to growing difficulties for schools in attracting and retaining qualified educators (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Second, teachers' careers unfold in distinct phases, each associated with specific needs, job demands, and resources. These phases intersect with individual, contextual, organizational, and national factors, and should be examined through a longitudinal lens (Admiraal & Kittelsen Røberg, 2023). To maintain high levels of well-being, health, and professional effectiveness, it is essential that educational institutions take care of teachers' professional development, career advancement opportunities, and career guidance throughout all stages of their careers. Promoting career sustainability in education therefore requires a systemic investment in robust support mechanisms (Ingusci et al., 2016). These include tailored professional development programmes, structured career guidance, and inclusive human resource policies that respond to teachers' evolving needs. Such initiatives are crucial not only for fostering individual career sustainability among teachers, but also for safeguarding the long-term quality and equity of educational systems.

4. The Italian school context

Italian teachers have a unique socio-demographic profile. First, they are among the oldest in the world, with an average age of 51; second, the vast majority of Italian teachers are women (81.5%); third, Italian teachers generally possess lower educational qualifications compared to other professions with similar responsibilities (De Sanctis et al., 2019; OECD, 2024). All these characteristics are largely the result of hiring policies promoted by various governments over the past decades, which have either expanded or restricted access to the profession depending on political and economic needs (Argentin, 2018). These recruitment policies are also reflected in teachers' working conditions – indeed, Italy has one of the highest rates of fixed-term contracts in the education sector (OECD, 2024). Typically, teachers experience long periods of precarious employment before obtaining a permanent, tenured position (Gerosa, 2014). This prolonged insecurity often entails considerable strain (frequent relocations, rapid adjustment to new school environments) which can negatively impact teachers' mental health, increasing stress and burnout (Benevene et al., 2019).

Further complicating the situation is the inconsistency in teacher training and induction policies, which have varied significantly from one government to another over the decades. Overall, opportunities for initial training for new teachers have been limited and inadequate (De Simone, 2009; De Sanctis, 2010). Unsurprisingly, there is a strong and recurring demand for professional development among teachers (Foschi, 2021; Pastore & Mincu, 2024).

Another critical issue is the lack of clear and structured career development pathways (Bufalino, 2017). There are no real opportunities for long-term professional growth or diversified responsibilities beyond classroom teaching that are matched with significant pay increases (a factor that adds to the not insignificant issue that Italian teachers' salaries remain below the European average). For example, teachers may accept a principal's proposal to become the school's point person for a specific area (such as inclusion or student career guidance); nevertheless, this role does not come with a specific training path or a substantial pay increase, but simply with an added workload. Consequently, teachers' only real means of improving their working conditions is to transfer to schools with more advantaged student populations or to institutions that better align with their personal and professional interests (Barbieri et al., 2011). The absence of structured career paths and professional development opportunities not only affects job satisfaction and productivity but also poses significant recruitment challenges, particularly for schools in disadvantaged areas.

Several broader systemic challenges further complicate the working conditions of Italian teachers. Frequent education reforms force teachers to continually adapt to new directives, increasing their bureaucratic workload (Bronzini & Spina, 2018); the growing presence of students with migrant backgrounds demands additional effort and support for teachers (Biasutti et al., 2019); the digitalization of both teaching and administrative tasks presents further challenges if not accompanied by adequate training and support. Lastly, teachers in Italy report a steady decline in the social recognition of their profession and often feel that their work is undervalued (Argentin, 2013a). Nevertheless, Italian teachers report increasing levels of job satisfaction over time—even when

compared to other occupational groups (Argentin, 2021); similarly, their levels of self-efficacy rank among the highest globally (OECD, 2019).

Altogether, these factors make the Italian school system a particularly complex context that requires careful study, taking into account the multiple variables affecting career sustainability at various levels (individual, organizational, and national) and through different career stages.

5. Rationale and Objectives of the Study

Although considerable quantitative evidence has documented the challenging working conditions of Italian teachers, less is known about the mechanisms that enable some teachers to maintain high levels of sustainability at various stages of their careers. This gap is especially salient given the misalignment between structural career constraints that are present within the education sector and the psychological resources needed to sustain job satisfaction over time. Furthermore, few studies have explored these dynamics through a qualitative lens, limiting our understanding of how teachers actively navigate adversity and preserve sustainability. The present study addresses this gap by drawing on in-depth interviews with Italian teachers at various career stages, examining the job demands and resources they encountered over time, how they responded to crises, and what enabled them to remain happy, healthy, and productive—or not—throughout the years.

6. Sampling, Interview script, and Data analysis

The participants were tenured primary and secondary school teachers from the province of Trento (Italy). A stratified sampling method was used to ensure representativeness in terms of age, gender, school level, and geographic area. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent, and in compliance with ethical regulations. The research protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Trento. Sampling was discontinued once saturation was reached, that is, when no new data emerged from the interviews that could provide novel insights or information relevant to the research questions. (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

The final sample included 33 teachers (8 men, 25 women) aged between 31 and 64 years. Fifty-eight

percent were under the age of 50. Forty-two percent taught in primary school, 27% in lower secondary school, and 31% in upper secondary school. Teaching experience ranged from 6 to 42 years, with an average of 21 years.

The interview guide was divided into two main parts. The first part aimed at exploring the teachers' career histories, focusing on aspects such as motivation and career choice, resources and challenges across different career stages (i.e., early teaching experiences, after obtaining tenure, and in the current phase), and how these have affected teachers' career sustainability. The second part explored how teachers conceptualized a sustainable career, asking them to reflect on several indicators of career success (e.g., job task characteristics, personal development, work/life balance, recognition) and to discuss how these aspects influence their career sustainability. Participants were also invited to reflect on how their personal definition of success and sustainability might evolve over the course of their working life, particularly in relation to changing personal and professional priorities. The interview protocol used can be found in the Appendix section (Appendix 1).

Upon transcription, the interview data were analyzed by two researchers using a mixed deductive-inductive approach. Categories drawn from existing literature and linked to the interview questions were applied, while also allowing new meanings to emerge from the data. Inter-coder reliability analysis across the full dataset showed satisfactory levels of agreement (Cohen's K: .87; Percentage agreement: 94.5%).

7. Results of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis allowed us to identify five key themes, namely: (Loss of) Work meaning, Role overload, Job (in)security, Limited organizational support, and Lack of social and economic recognition. These themes will be elaborated in greater detail in the following section, where possible, the presentation of the findings will be supported by participant quotations, highlighted in italics.

(Loss of) Work Meaning

Work meaning emerged as the most frequent theme, sustaining motivation and engagement. For the teachers interviewed, the primary source of meaning in their work comes from the opportunity to make a difference in students' lives—to help them grow and mature. For some teachers, the choice of this profession is experienced as a true vocation. The relationship with their students, along with the opportunity to convey a passion for the subject matter, represents the core of job satisfaction and the main source of their motivation.

“I think the best feeling in becoming a teacher is when you’re discussing something in class and they realize it concerns them. You’re explaining something and they realize it’s something that interests them, something worth their attention. When that happens, it’s an incredible satisfaction.” (male, 35 years old, 10 years of experience as a teacher).

Another source of work meaning is the profession's dynamic nature—its daily variety of situations and challenges, often valued by teachers with experience in other fields. Equally crucial is social support from colleagues, families, students, and school leaders; when lacking or marked by conflict, it can heighten stress, create feelings of frustration, and undermine teachers' well-being and effectiveness. More specifically, as regards the role of social support, first, tensions with colleagues often arise due to differing approaches to teaching. Some are perceived as unmotivated or even unfit for the role, making effective collaboration difficult. This leads to feelings of isolation and a lack of coordination. One key contributing factor in this regard is the absence of structured time and space for collegial dialogue and collaborative planning.

Second, more experienced teachers reported that their relationships with families have changed over the years. In the past, educational roles were perceived as more clearly defined, and families had a better understanding of what to expect from schools and where responsibilities lay. There was a sense of mutual respect. Today, poor communication with parents can consume significant emotional energy and undermine educational efforts.

Third, relationships with students also evolve over time. In the early years of teaching, the smaller age gap makes it easier to relate. But as time passes, many teachers report an increasing sense of disconnect:

“In the first years, maybe because I was closer to them in age, it was easier to understand their world. There were only about ten years between us, so empathy came naturally. Now it's increasingly difficult—not so much because of their lived experiences or their dreams and desires, which are often similar—but because of how they perceive reality. Their representation of the world is entirely different” (female, 49 years old, 21 years of experience as a teacher).

Lastly, school leadership style can also play a significant role. The emotional burden related to leadership is often tied to authoritarian styles, where teachers report a lack of trust in their initiatives, limited autonomy, and insufficient support when facing challenges with colleagues, families, or students. Conversely, a participatory leadership style—one that encourages trust and supports teachers' initiatives—contributes to a markedly more positive work experience.

In addition to interpersonal dynamics, structural changes in the school system also contribute to a diminished sense of meaning. Many teachers described the system as overly bureaucratic, weighed down by administrative burdens that divert time and energy away from teaching. A common concern was the lack of a clear and shared educational mission, with schools increasingly driven by external, market-oriented pressures.

The shift in the role of school principals—whose responsibilities have expanded significantly over recent decades—is seen by many as part of this broader trend of managerialism or corporatization of education:

“I think there's too much centrality given to the school leader, and I believe that's also a political choice. It wasn't like this ten years ago. I don't know where we're heading, but maybe schools are increasingly being shaped like businesses. That's the strong feeling I get” (female, 41 years old, 12 years of experience as a teacher).

This erosion of meaning is also evident in faculty meetings. More experienced teachers noted a progressive emptying out of these collegial spaces. What once were opportunities for open dialogue and shared responsibility in decision-making have now become formalities dominated by bureaucratic tasks, where teachers feel they are merely ratifying decisions already made by school leadership.

Role Overload

Another key theme that emerged from the interviews is the perceived increase—particularly among more experienced teachers—in the overall demands of the job. This increase is often not formal (e.g., in the form of more contractual duties or officially assigned hours), but rather informal, taking the shape of growing expectations. Teachers increasingly feel solely responsible for aspects such as students' motivation or emotional well-being, or they experience an expansion of tasks that must be carried out under the same working conditions. This is especially evident in the time and effort required to differentiate materials for students with special educational needs (SEN) or for those with a migrant background, as well as in the completion of bureaucratic requirements.

"We have to be psychologists—both for the students and, unfortunately, for their parents. And this is a slippery slope that, in my view, the entire school system is on. Let's say that in the early years, the workload of being a teacher felt much lighter" (male, 62 years old, 20 years of experience as a teacher).

"Only if your passion matches the job can you manage it. The official 18 hours are a fiction—there's all the hidden time you devote, sometimes more to other people's children than to your own." (female, 43 years old, 17 years of experience as a teacher).

Job (in)security

The early years of an Italian teacher's career are marked by great uncertainty and mobility. Teachers begin by working as substitute teachers, signing contracts that can vary greatly in duration. Some assignments are in nearby schools, in central neighborhoods of cities; others are in remote schools, in isolated valleys in the mountains. This instability is a significant source of stress for any teacher and,

since it often constitutes the first approach to the profession—particularly in the absence of structured teacher training (especially for secondary school)—entry into teaching becomes a discontinuous, accidental process, heavily dependent on the specific context. This is compounded by the impossibility of planning long-term educational projects, given the lack of guarantees around contract duration; the difficulty in forming stable relationships with students and colleagues; and the mental and physical fatigue of frequently changing contexts, responsibilities, and schedules with little notice.

It is no surprise, then, that securing a permanent position becomes the primary goal for many teachers, one they achieve only after several years of precarious employment. A tenured position represents stability—the opportunity to grow within a school over time, to put down roots, propose projects, and also to gain financial security: a fixed salary, the possibility of applying for a mortgage, or starting a family with the backing of contractual protections.

Over time, however, this stability—together with the difficulty of changing schools—can become a burden. New experiences diminish, the context becomes overly familiar, colleagues remain the same, and opportunities for training and professional development shrink. In other words, there is the risk of plateauing, exacerbated by the absence of a formal career development system or performance evaluation process. As a result, the motivation to improve one's work remains purely intrinsic.

“You tend to relax a bit once you have a permanent post. I have colleagues who have worked in the same school for twenty years, and they do the same things from first to fifth grade. I see them as somewhat settled, comfortable, stuck in their routine, not really driven to seek out new strategies or share ideas with colleagues” (male, 62 years old, 20 years of experience as a teacher).

At this point in their careers, some teachers begin to reassess their earlier years of instability in a more positive light. What once felt burdensome (frequent moves and constantly adapting) is now seen as a phase that offered benefits: the chance to meet different colleagues, learn alternative working

methods, encounter new students and contexts, and explore unfamiliar territories that enriched their experience and helped them grow as professionals.

“I must say that I really liked being a wanderer. When you're a substitute, you have that light step that lets you focus solely and completely on teaching, on the students. It also helps you keep a certain emotional distance. That changes when you get a permanent position. School is a closed space; it's not an open system—it's closed” (female, 49 years old, 21 years of experience as a teacher).

Limited organizational support

We now turn to another key issue that emerged from the interviews: the organizational support perceived by teachers. The main problems identified concern the difficulty in accessing high-quality professional development that is aligned with teachers' actual needs at different stages of their careers.

At the beginning of their careers, due to the lack of a structured induction or mentoring program, many teachers end up relying on informal mentoring to cope with the challenges of their new role. They often seek help from more experienced colleagues with whom they share some affinity—asking for tips, advice, or support in navigating the initial hurdles.

Later on, once a certain level of confidence is reached and the basic questions about teaching and how the school works have been addressed, the problem becomes that in-service training is often too theoretical and disconnected from the everyday challenges teachers face. As a result, the only meaningful learning opportunities often come through self-directed learning or through peer discussions, which are usually organized informally and rely on individual initiative rather than being part of a clear, organizationally supported framework.

“I've always valued listening to and sharing with experienced colleagues, and now I gladly talk with the younger ones—but I still listen. If I could add something to our professional development, it would be the chance to co-teach or observe colleagues in class. I would pay to

have a colleague sit in a corner of my classroom and just watch me teach—so we could then exchange feedback and ideas” (male, 59 years old, 35 years of experience as a teacher).

Lack of economic and social recognition

The final thematic issue that emerged from our empirical work concerns inadequate financial compensation and the low perceived social prestige of the teaching profession. Many of the interviewees felt that salaries no longer reflect workload or responsibilities. Those with more years of experience especially pointed out that rising living costs have eroded the adequacy of salaries over time. As a result, teachers also perceive a very low level of social prestige. Those who had worked in other professions felt this gap most keenly.

“Even now, if I introduce myself as an architect—because I do have a degree in architecture—I get a certain kind of reaction, socially speaking. But if I say I’m a teacher, it’s different” (male, 62 years old, 20 years of experience as a teacher).

Similarly, the perception of how the profession is regarded politically is discouraging. Many interviewees expressed a strong sense of disconnect between political institutions and the school world, and a feeling that their role is consistently undervalued:

“From a political standpoint, we are worth nothing. No matter who is in government, we’re always treated as the bottom of the barrel.”

Table 1

List of thematic nodes with their respective codes. On the right-hand column, the number of references.

THEMATIC NODES	CODES	N° OF SUBJECTS (33)
(LOSS OF) WORK MEANING	“The School System Doesn’t Work” Trapped In The Grading System	Meaningless/Positive Faculty Meetings Excessive Bureaucracy/Paperwork A Job That Makes A Difference
		33 (references: 1221)

	Corporatization Of Schools Passion For Teaching One's Subject Relationships With Colleagues, Students, Parents	Authoritarian/Participative Leadership The Dynamic Nature Of Teaching Work	
ROLE OVERLOAD	Increased Workload		31 (references: 182)
	Invisible Work		
JOB (IN)SECURITY	Chronic Job Instability Building Connections And Stability In A Tenured Position	The Downsides Of Job Security In Teaching The Enriching Side Of Temporary Teaching	28 (references: 196)
LIMITED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT	Lack Of Professional Development Ineffective/Useful Teacher Training Programs) Inadequate Work Organization	Inadequate School Facilities Self-Driven Learning Learning Through Peer Collaboration	33 (references: 425)
LACK OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RECOGNITION	Low Pay For High Responsibilities Teachers' Perceived Lack Of Respect In Society	Lack Of Social And Economic Recognition	22 (references: 107)

8. Future Research And Practice Directions For Career Guidance In Education

In this chapter, we have addressed only some of the issues concerning teachers' difficulties in making their careers sustainable over time, despite numerous organizational shortcomings. In this final section, we aim to both suggest other potential areas of investigation that could enrich our

understanding of the phenomenon and offer some practical implications for career guidance in education to relevant stakeholders.

First, we wish to highlight the impact that digitalization has had on teachers' working lives and how the growing pervasiveness of AI risks overwhelming schools and educators if they are not adequately trained to leverage this tool effectively while mitigating its more problematic aspects. In this sense, taking inspiration from Donald and Van der Heijden (2024), we encourage future researchers to examine more closely the role AI may play as an actor in shaping teachers' career trajectories, and what interventions can support a successful transition.

Second, the Italian context currently offers important research opportunities. During this legislative term, two new teacher training pathways have been introduced. On one hand, a new figure of "teacher tutor" has been established, tasked with student guidance responsibilities within the school. These tutors receive specific training on guidance and are granted a fixed salary increase. This represents a first step toward career differentiation that should be studied for its potential impact not only on teachers themselves but also on students. Additionally, a mandatory professional training program has been introduced for all teachers entering permanent employment. This training is designed to standardize access to the profession and serves, in effect, as a form of induction. Studying the long-term effects of this program also represents an important research opportunity. Lastly, while qualitative methods are valuable for capturing data richness, we encourage future scholars to employ mixed-methods studies that can track how career sustainability evolves in the education sector.

Regarding practical implications, we limit ourselves to raising a few considerations, based on the literature presented and the interview findings. The high satisfaction and self-efficacy levels reported by Italian teachers often stem from their reliance on informal strategies to meet their professional needs, particularly in the absence of institutionalized organizational practices (such as mentoring programs, structured induction training, or formal career pathways). Examples include: informal

mentoring practices at the beginning of one's career to compensate for missing induction; focusing on the motivational aspects of teaching (e.g., student relationships, sense of making a difference, collegial exchange) to counterbalance negative factors like bureaucracy or conflict; and engaging in self-training to fill gaps in formal training offerings or the lack of opportunities to diversify one's tasks. In light of these findings, it is evident that schools, as organizations, could do much more to address these unmet needs. One key factor would be to promote all practices that increase teachers' autonomy—understood both as freedom to act and participate in decision-making, and as the removal of barriers that hinder access to this autonomy.

At the institutional level, progress could be made by: establishing professional training pathways; introducing contractual provisions to differentiate salaries based on responsibilities; creating differentiated teacher roles, adequately trained and strategically deployed (e.g., in research or mentoring roles); supporting in-service training through better evaluation practices and allocating more funds to access quality paid training (e.g., master's programs).

However, we are especially interested in what is already within the reach of schools through the exercise of school autonomy. In particular, school leaders (principals) can play a vital role in fostering autonomy and professional development. As our interviews revealed, many teachers find collegial meetings devoid of meaning, having lost their original purpose. Given the increase in bureaucratic tasks, principals must ensure teachers are well-informed before decision-making meetings and promote mechanisms for safe expression of opinions—such as anonymous feedback or participatory committees for idea collection. This also means investing in participatory leadership styles as a criterion in the selection and evaluation of school leaders. Moreover, schools should support teacher development through collaborative practices, such as providing financial and organizational support for teachers who coordinate subject-specific training, encouraging peer observation and classroom visits, and fostering communities of practice. Another useful strategy for supporting teacher well-being and long-term career sustainability would be to create spaces where

teachers can share their professional needs, particularly important given the aging teaching workforce and its specific requirements. For instance, allowing experienced teachers to reduce their classroom hours and instead focus on mentoring newcomers, conducting research and innovation, or engaging in coordination and leadership activities could prove highly beneficial.

Finally, great attention should be given to career guidance for teachers. Facilitating spaces for peer discussion, as well as dialogue with career counseling experts, could support professional evolution. This includes opportunities to reflect on one's ambitions, interests, strengths, and areas for development, and to develop personalized plans for training and professional growth—identifying relevant opportunities, how to finance them, and ultimately preventing career plateauing.

Chapter 3. Professional Resources and the Development of Career Sustainability: Evidence from Early-Career Teachers in Italy

Abstract

This sequential mixed-methods study explores the resources supporting early-career teachers in Italy and their role in career sustainability. Framed within the Career Sustainability Framework, it addresses the critical first three years of teaching, a period marked by high attrition risk and professional “reality shock.” A sequential design combined qualitative interviews with a longitudinal survey, capturing individual, relational, and organizational resources. Results show that novice teachers rely on informal networks, including peer mentoring and collegial collaboration, while formal supports, such as structured supervision and feedback, are limited. Principals provide strong emotional support but less instrumental guidance. Teachers’ self-efficacy and proactivity consistently predict higher job satisfaction, well-being, and engagement. Resource availability varies by school size and level, indicating structural disparities. Overall, findings highlight the dynamic interplay between individual agency and supportive contexts in sustaining early-career teachers, emphasizing the importance of relational scaffolding, collegial culture, and early induction measures to foster professional growth and resilience.

1. Early-Career Teacher Vulnerabilities and the Global Shortage Crisis

The issue of teacher shortage has emerged as a pressing global concern, challenging the capacity of education systems to provide equitable and high-quality instruction (UNESCO, 2024). This shortage is not only the result of insufficient recruitment but is also fuelled by high rates of teacher attrition, particularly among those in the early stages of their careers (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019). Despite substantial investments in teacher education and induction, a significant proportion of new teachers leave the profession within a few years of entry (DeAngelis & Presley, 2010). In several contexts, including the United States, Australia, and various European countries, approximately one-third of novice teachers resign within the first three years, and nearly half exit within five (Darling-

Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Such early attrition is costly—financially and institutionally—as it weakens school communities, disrupts pedagogical continuity, and undermines student learning outcomes (Brown & Wynn, 2007).

Research consistently highlights the early career phase—often defined as the first three to five years of teaching—as a particularly critical and vulnerable period (Huberman, 1993; Kyndt et al., 2016). This stage, marked by the transition from pre-service preparation to the full responsibilities of classroom teaching, is characterized by what Veenman (1984) termed a “reality shock.” Beginning teachers must simultaneously cope with classroom management challenges, administrative demands, and the need to establish legitimacy and belonging within the school community (Lundberg, 2024; Rosa, 2016). The emotional landscape of this period oscillates between enthusiasm and discouragement, as new teachers navigate uncertainty, isolation, and fluctuating self-efficacy (Rolls & Plauborg, 2009). While many demonstrate eagerness to learn and develop professionally (Huberman, 1993), they often encounter limited structured support from colleagues or leadership (Tickle, 1994) and may hesitate to seek help for fear of appearing incompetent (Coldwell, 2017).

Recent studies have deepened our understanding of the multifaceted nature of early-career teacher attrition. Structural and organizational conditions—such as excessive workload, inadequate mentoring, poor collegial relationships, and unsupportive school climates—have been identified as key predictors of dissatisfaction and exit intentions (AITSL, 2016; Gallant & Riley, 2014). Conversely, positive workplace environments, effective leadership, and strong professional communities contribute to higher retention and greater job satisfaction (Cameron et al., 2007; Kingsford-Smith et al., 2023; Ingersoll, 2001). These findings underscore that teacher retention is not solely an individual matter of resilience or vocation but is deeply intertwined with the social and organizational ecology of schools.

Understanding the experiences of teachers in the initial stages of their careers is therefore essential, both for mitigating the global teacher shortage and for ensuring the sustainability of the

teaching profession. Investigating the personal, relational, and contextual resources that enable early-career teachers to navigate the challenges of induction can provide critical insights into how professional well-being and commitment are cultivated—or eroded—during this formative phase.

1.1. Professional Development, Workplace Learning, and the Role of Individual and Organizational Resources

Professional development (PD) has long been recognized as a key determinant of teacher quality and retention, particularly during the early stages of a teaching career. For beginning teachers, who are still consolidating their professional identities and pedagogical repertoires, opportunities for meaningful professional learning are not merely a matter of skill enhancement but a fundamental condition for sustaining engagement, motivation, and resilience in the profession (Day & Gu, 2007; Kyndt et al., 2016; Lakshmanan et al., 2011; Ross & Bruce, 2007). Empirical studies have demonstrated that teachers who perceive their professional growth as supported by the school organization are more likely to remain committed to teaching, while a lack of such opportunities correlates with job dissatisfaction and early attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2017; Kutsyruba et al., 2019).

However, the concept of PD has evolved considerably over the last two decades. Rather than being confined to structured courses, workshops, or externally delivered training, PD is now conceptualized as a dynamic, ongoing process of learning embedded in teachers' daily work (Bakkenes et al., 2010). This shift reflects a broader epistemological reorientation: from viewing professional learning as transmission of knowledge to conceiving it as a socially constructed, situated practice that unfolds through experience, reflection, and interaction within the workplace (Eraut, 2004).

In this perspective, informal and workplace learning assume a central role. Teachers learn continuously through processes that are often unplanned yet deeply meaningful—such as experimenting with new strategies, observing peers, seeking advice, or reflecting on successes and

failures (Richter et al., 2011). Informal learning is particularly critical for early-career teachers, whose professional challenges are context-specific and evolving. Unlike formal PD, which may be episodic or externally imposed, informal learning is embedded in the fabric of daily practice and allows new teachers to construct practical knowledge in response to immediate classroom realities (Bakkenes et al., 2010). Moreover, informal learning nurtures agency, as teachers actively shape their learning trajectories rather than passively receiving knowledge.

Within this ecology of workplace learning, collaboration among colleagues emerges as a vital resource. Collegial interactions—ranging from co-planning lessons to engaging in reflective dialogue—serve as both cognitive and emotional scaffolds for beginning teachers (Kelchtermans, 2009; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Collaborative cultures foster shared sense-making, collective problem solving, and professional trust. They enable novices to situate their experiences within a broader professional community and to learn through social comparison and mutual feedback. Conversely, when schools operate in fragmented or individualistic cultures, new teachers are left to navigate uncertainty alone, which can amplify feelings of inadequacy and accelerate attrition. Importantly, collaboration does not automatically happen by proximity; it requires structural and cultural conditions that encourage openness, joint responsibility, and time for dialogue (Costa, 2011; Genovese, 2009; Isidori, 2003; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

Leadership support constitutes another critical factor in the retention and professional growth of early-career teachers. Principals and school leaders shape the organizational climate and signal which forms of learning and collaboration are valued (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). When leaders cultivate trust, distribute responsibility, and provide recognition and feedback, they enhance teachers' sense of belonging and professional efficacy. Supportive leadership also has a buffering effect against work-related stress and emotional exhaustion, which are among the strongest predictors of early exit from the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). Effective leaders legitimize time and space for PD, facilitate mentoring relationships, and encourage experimentation without fear of failure. Conversely,

authoritarian or managerial styles of leadership tend to undermine teacher autonomy and intrinsic motivation, fostering disengagement rather than growth (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

Closely connected to leadership and collegiality is the practice of mentorship, a widely recognized mechanism to support beginning teachers during induction. Research indicates that mentorship can significantly reduce attrition rates, improve classroom management skills, and enhance professional confidence (Hobson & Ashby, 2012). However, the effectiveness of mentoring depends on its quality and contextual embeddedness. Mentoring relationships that are merely procedural or evaluative may have limited impact, whereas those based on trust, reciprocity, and reflective dialogue promote genuine professional learning (Birkeland & Feiman-Nemser, 2009). Moreover, mentorship should not be seen as an isolated intervention but as part of a broader organizational culture that values collaboration and shared expertise.

Beyond organizational and relational resources, teachers' individual agency and proactivity play a decisive role in shaping their professional trajectories. Proactive teachers take initiative in seeking learning opportunities, soliciting feedback, and engaging with professional communities (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). They approach challenges as occasions for learning rather than threats to competence, demonstrating adaptive coping and a growth-oriented mindset. This proactive stance interacts dynamically with contextual resources: teachers' motivation and self-efficacy are sustained when they perceive their environment as responsive to their efforts (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Conversely, when systemic or cultural constraints inhibit agency, even highly motivated teachers may experience frustration and disengagement (Kelchtermans, 2009).

Taken together, these findings underscore that early-career teacher development and retention are best understood as complex processes that involve multiple, interrelated dimensions rather than as the sum of individual attributes or discrete interventions. Sustainable professional growth emerges from the intersection of supportive organizational environments, rich opportunities for formal and informal learning, and individual proactivity. Schools that foster such conditions enhance teachers'

willingness to remain in the profession by supporting their career sustainability. Moreover, having more motivated and productive teachers also means improving the quality of their work. Investing in the professional development of early-career teachers is therefore not only a retention strategy but also a cornerstone of educational quality and institutional resilience.

Despite the growing body of research on early-career teacher retention, several gaps remain to be addressed. First, while numerous studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between professional development and teacher retention, limited attention has been given to identifying which specific features of professional development and induction programs are most effective in sustaining teachers over time. Existing evidence often lacks a fine-grained analysis of the quality, structure, and contextual conditions that make such initiatives successful in the early stages of a teaching career (Balduzzi, 2011; De Simone & Molina, 2012).

Second, much of the literature relies on cross-sectional or short-term data, offering only a snapshot of teachers' experiences rather than a dynamic understanding of how professional development, informal learning, and support resources evolve and influence retention over time. There is a need for longitudinal and mixed-method approaches that can trace how early-career teachers' engagement and identity construction unfold across the first critical years of teaching.

Third, research has increasingly acknowledged disparities in access to professional and relational resources among early-career teachers, yet few studies have systematically examined how such inequalities—linked to school context, leadership, or workload—shape teachers' opportunities for learning and integration. Understanding which teachers are most at risk of isolation or under-support remains a crucial but underexplored issue.

Finally, although individual proactivity has been recognized as a key personal resource for navigating complex school environments, little is known about how proactive behaviors interact with organizational factors such as collegiality, mentoring, and leadership support. Further investigation is

needed to understand whether proactivity can compensate for limited structural resources, or conversely, whether it may become unsustainable in unsupportive environments.

Therefore, this study aims to address the aforementioned gaps in the literature through an exploratory sequential design, investigating the resources available to early-career Italian teachers and their impact on career sustainability. Consistent with previous empirical research (e.g., Bakkenes et al., 2010; Burns, 2008; Flores, 2004; Lohman, 2000), we defined beginning teachers as those with up to three years of teaching experience. This threshold aligns with established developmental models that conceptualize the early career phase as encompassing the first three years of teaching (Huberman, 1993; Rolls & Plauborg, 2009; Tickle, 1994). Moreover, the study adopts the Career Sustainability Framework (CSF; De Vos et al., 2020) as its overarching theoretical lens, providing a comprehensive perspective on how careers evolve and endure over time. It conceptualizes career sustainability as a process unfolding through a sequence of professional experiences shaped by both continuity and change across different social and organizational contexts. Rather than viewing careers as static trajectories, the framework embraces a multidimensional and longitudinal approach, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between personal, contextual, and temporal factors (Van der Heijden, 2005; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Within this framework, a sustainable career is characterized by three interrelated outcomes—happiness, health, and productivity—each of which develops and fluctuates in response to changing life and work circumstances (Van der Heijden et al., 2020). *Happiness* refers to the degree of alignment between an individual's career and their personal values, ambitions, and needs, encompassing aspects such as work–life balance, autonomy, and opportunities for professional growth. *Health* includes both physical and psychological well-being, reflecting the extent to which career demands are compatible with an individual's physical and mental capacities. *Productivity* relates not only to job performance and self-efficacy but also to broader notions of employability and long-term career potential. Importantly, the CSF positions individuals as active agents who shape their own professional trajectories through adaptation,

learning, and proactive engagement, while continuously responding to the opportunities and constraints of their environment.

Building on this framework, the present study pursues four main research objectives:

1. To provide an exploratory overview of the informal resources available to early-career teachers in Italy. To the best of our knowledge, no recent studies have examined what types of informal resources are accessible to Italian teachers during the first three years of their professional experience. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap through a sequential mixed-methods design combining an exploratory qualitative phase with a confirmatory quantitative investigation.
2. To examine the relationship between available resources and teachers' career sustainability. Using job satisfaction (happiness), well-being (health), and work engagement (productivity) as proxy variables for career sustainability, the study investigates how the presence of individual, relational, and organizational resources relates to these dimensions. We expect that greater access to supportive resources will correspond to higher overall levels of career sustainability, as well as to greater self-efficacy and proactivity among early-career teachers.
3. To explore how teachers' sociodemographic and contextual characteristics influence resource distribution and career sustainability. Specifically, we hypothesize that school size and level (pre-school, primary, lower secondary, upper secondary) may affect the ease with which teachers can access resources within their institutions. Additionally, the presence—or absence—of informal mentoring relationships is expected to play a significant role in sustaining teachers' self-efficacy and career well-being. Finally, factors such as intention to transfer, initial motivation to enter the teaching profession, and tenure status are hypothesized to exert a significant effect on both career sustainability and perceived self-efficacy.
4. To identify which resources most strongly predict higher levels of career sustainability. The final objective is to determine which types of individual, relational, and organizational

resources are most influential in fostering sustainable careers among early-career teachers, providing evidence to inform future policies and professional development practices.

2. Procedures

The research adopted a mixed-methods design and was conducted over a 12-month period in two phases (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). An exploratory sequential design was chosen because the initial qualitative phase provided insights that informed the subsequent quantitative phase, which in turn served to confirm and enrich the preliminary findings. This exploratory design, whose structure is shown in Figure 1, proved particularly advantageous in this study for two main reasons. First, the topic is relatively underexplored in the Italian context, thus necessitating exploration within a partly uncharted research terrain. Second, given the informal and subjective nature of some of the resources under investigation, it would have been very difficult to anticipate their presence and significance solely on the basis of the existing literature. Therefore, the first phase was an exploratory qualitative study aimed at investigating the resources accessed by novice teachers during their initial years of service. A total of 11 teachers were recruited for the qualitative phase through the primary researcher's personal contacts. Semi-structured interviews explored teachers' early-career challenges and the resources they relied upon, including informal mentoring relationships and other forms of collegial collaboration, as well as their relationships with school leaders and other supports identified by the interviewees. While the literature review had already highlighted several resources, the interviews were instrumental in uncovering additional ones, thus expanding the set of resources to be considered for the survey variables. These interviews were conducted between June and July 2024, either online or in person, following approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Trento (Protocol No. 2024-48 ESA).

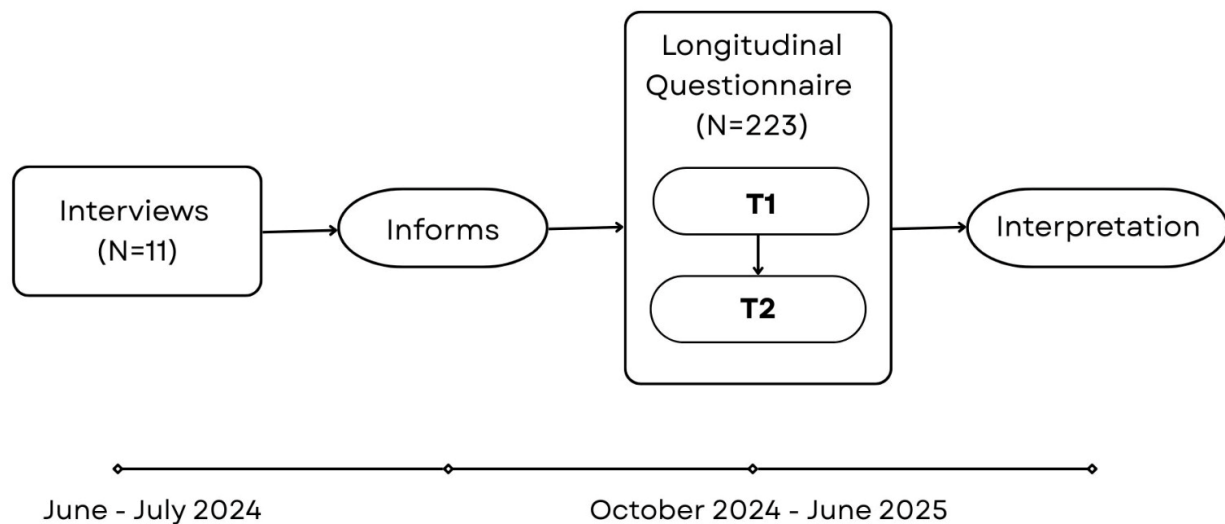
Findings from this phase informed the development of the questionnaire used in the subsequent quantitative and longitudinal phase. This second phase investigated the resources available to teachers in their first three years of service in public and private Italian schools at the preschool,

primary, and secondary levels. Alongside the availability of resources, the questionnaire measured teachers' job satisfaction, well-being, work engagement, self-efficacy, and proactivity.

The survey was administered in two waves during the 2024/2025 school year. The first wave was conducted between October 2024 and January 2025, after receiving approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Trento (Protocol No. 2024-60 ESA). Invitations to participate were sent to all public, state-funded, and private schools in Italy, as well as disseminated through teachers' associations, unions, and online communities (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp groups). At the end of the first-wave questionnaire, participants were asked for their consent to be re-contacted for the second wave, in which the same dimensions were assessed again. The second wave of data collection was conducted via email distribution using the Qualtrics platform (employed in all phases of the study) from late April to late June 2025.

Figure 1

Structure of the exploratory sequential design



3. Qualitative Study

3.1. Sample

Eleven teachers were interviewed. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of the procedures for safeguarding their privacy and handling their data. The sample included 4 men and 7 women aged 27–31 years, all employed in public or state-recognized private schools across different educational levels (primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary). At the time of the interviews, none had more than four years of teaching experience. Sampling was discontinued once saturation was reached, that is, when no new data emerged from the interviews that could provide novel insights or information relevant to the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

3.2. Methods

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol organized into five thematic areas. Ethical procedures were explained at the outset, emphasizing voluntary participation, the right to withdraw or amend responses at any time, and the measures taken to anonymize and securely store data. The interviews lasted, on average, approximately one hour each.

The first section explored challenges and resources experienced in the first years of teaching, focusing on critical incidents, needs for support, and the most valued sources of help. The second section investigated mentoring relationships, including the presence of mentors, the nature of these relationships (e.g., frequency and format of meetings, joint activities, perceived alignment in values and teaching styles), and the usefulness of the advice received. The third section examined collaboration with colleagues, including co-planning of instructional materials, peer observation, feedback, and joint problem-solving. The fourth section focused on other professional supports, such as formal training (e.g., university courses, advanced training), online resources, peer support from other novice teachers, and support from teachers outside the school. The final section investigated the role of school leaders in supporting novice teachers, including their responsiveness to early-

career challenges and their ability to foster a collaborative school climate. The interview protocol used can be found in the Appendix section (Appendix 2).

3.3. Data Analysis

During the interviews, the researcher took notes on a personal laptop, which were subsequently stored on the university's secure server (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). These notes focused on participants' responses and highlighted novel elements compared to the resources previously identified through the literature review.

Because the purpose of the interviews was to confirm and, where appropriate, expand the range of resources available to newly appointed teachers—so that these could be considered in the subsequent quantitative phase—the use of interviewer notes was considered methodologically sufficient at this stage. In a second step, the notes were reviewed and organized to identify recurring themes across interviews and to quantify the frequency of newly emerging elements. Once the interviews and questionnaire development were completed, all notes were permanently deleted from every storage device.

3.4. Results

The qualitative data confirmed and, in several cases, expanded the range of resources reported by newly appointed teachers. All interviewees ($N = 11$) identified collaboration with colleagues and opportunities for peer learning as key resources during their initial years of service. These experiences often took the form of lesson observations or reciprocal feedback sessions during co-teaching.

Most teachers (8 of 11) reported having one or more informal mentors—colleagues who, without holding a formal position, acted as guides, advisors, or role models in navigating early career challenges. These mentors were typically colleagues teaching the same subjects within the first schools of appointment, although some were teachers from other institutions, including former

instructors. Only one participant described a mentor external to the school who nonetheless provided work-related guidance.

For nearly all participants, the school principal did not play a decisive role during their early professional experiences. Contacts were generally limited, and in medium-to-large schools—where initial substitute positions were often held—principals rarely provided direct support. One exception was reported by a teacher working in a small mountain school, where the principal was described as highly engaged and instrumental in managing early difficulties.

Despite limited direct involvement, all participants agreed that the principal was crucial in shaping the overall school climate and, consequently, in influencing the likelihood of encountering a collaborative and supportive network among colleagues.

Finally, two novel trends emerged regarding individual learning resources. Approximately half of the participants (6 of 11) reported using university course materials to prepare their lessons, while four teachers described drawing inspiration from educators active on social media—particularly Instagram—to enrich classroom practice. These insights were incorporated into the longitudinal questionnaire for further examination.

4. Quantitative Study

4.1. Sample

A total of 376 teachers agreed to participate in the second wave; after data cleaning, the final longitudinal sample consisted of 223 teachers, corresponding to an attrition rate of approximately 41%. The majority of the participants were female ($N = 163$; 73.1%), while 26.8% were male; no participants identified with other gender categories. The mean age was 36 years ($SD = 9.53$; range = 23–61 years).

Regarding education, 68.8% held a master's degree (five-year or equivalent), 5.4% had a bachelor's degree, 8.5% held a first-level master's diploma, 3.6% a second-level master's diploma, 7.2% had completed advanced specialization courses, and 6.7% held a PhD.

In terms of teaching experience, 17.9% had less than one year of service, 20.2% less than two years, and 61.9% less than three years. Most participants worked in public schools (88.3%), while 11.7% were employed in private schools. By school level, 9% taught in preschool, 18.8% in primary school, 22.4% in lower-secondary school, and 49.8% in upper-secondary school.

Subject distribution was heterogeneous: 16.6% taught Italian language and literature, 13.9% mathematics or physics, 10.3% foreign languages, and 8.5% were special-education teachers. The remainder taught various subjects (e.g., 3.6% computer science; 3.1% natural sciences/chemistry/biology/earth sciences; 5.8% technical subjects; 3.6% physical education; 26.8% other, unspecified disciplines).

Regarding tenure in their current school, 4.5% had been employed for less than one month, 39% for less than six months, 4.9% for less than one year, and 51.6% for more than one year.

Geographically, most participants were concentrated in the Trentino (19.3%), Veneto (17.9%), and Lombardy (16.6%) regions, followed by smaller proportions from Emilia-Romagna (11.2%), Piedmont (9.4%), Liguria (4.9%), Friuli Venezia Giulia and Lazio (3.6% each), and others. Only 18.8% reported that they would prefer to teach in a different region or province.

Regarding employment contracts, 53.8% were tenured teachers, 38.1% held annual contracts, 7.2% had short-term contracts, and 0.9% were part of the enhanced staffing scheme (*organico potenziato*). Most teachers worked full-time (83%), while the remainder held part-time contracts (5.4% at 70–90% of full-time, 8.5% at 50–70%, and 3.1% at less than 50%).

Participants reported an average of 34.7 working hours per week ($SD = 11.5$; range = 3–80). Slightly more than half (55.2%) indicated that becoming a teacher had been their primary career goal after graduation. One-third (33.2%) held additional roles (e.g., coordination, reference, or special functions), dedicating on average 5.34 hours per week to these tasks ($SD = 5.21$; range = 0–25). Half of the participants (50.7%) reported not having attended in-service training in the recent period,

whereas others had participated in school-provided courses (31.4%), courses by cultural institutions (10.3%), or advanced programs such as Master's degrees or specialist training (7.2%).

The size of schools varied: 13.5% taught in institutions with fewer than 30 teachers, 41.7% in schools with 100–250 teachers, and only 0.9% in schools with more than 500 teachers.

4.2. Measures

The survey consisted of three main sections: socio-demographic information (reported above in the sample description); perceived availability of school and individual resources; outcome variables (job satisfaction, well-being, work engagement), and individual characteristics (proactivity, perceived self-efficacy).

Perceived availability of school resources.

Measured using the scale developed by Lent et al. (2011), assessing perceived availability of support and feedback from colleagues and school leaders. Sample items: “I have relationships with people who provide me with useful feedback about my performance as a teacher,” and “I have colleagues or school leaders who let me know that they think I am doing a good job.”

Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree, plus an “I don't know” option). Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .814$ at T1; $\alpha = .815$ at T2). A paired-samples t-test revealed no significant change between T1 and T2 ($p = .68$).

Collaborative practices.

Frequency of collaborative practices was measured using items from the TALIS survey (OECD, 2019). A sample item is: “On average, how often do you co-teach with other colleagues?” Responses were given on a 6-point scale (1 = never to 6 = once a week or more). Internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = .787$ at T1; $\alpha = .800$ at T2). A paired-samples t-test revealed a significant decrease over time ($p = .003$), though the Shapiro–Wilk test indicated a violation of normality ($p < .001$).

Perceived support from school leaders.

Assessed with the scale by DiPaola and Forsyth (2012), which distinguishes four subdimensions: Expressive support – emotional (4 items; e.g., “Makes me feel important and that I am making a difference”); Expressive support – professional (4 items; e.g., “Gives me full attention when I speak”); Instrumental support – instrumental (4 items; e.g., “Ensures adequate time for lesson planning”); Instrumental support – appraisal (4 items; e.g., “Provides feedback after observing my classroom practice”). Responses were given on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree, plus “I don’t know”). CFA indicated acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(98) = 401$, $p < .001$; CFI = .91; TLI = .89; RMSEA = .11; SRMR = .06. No significant changes were found between T1 and T2 ($p = .56$).

Informal mentoring.

Participants were first asked whether they had an informal mentor (Yes/No), how many (1–4), whether the mentor was also a teacher in the same school and/or subject area, and how frequently they met and discussed specific topics (e.g., pedagogy, lesson planning, classroom management, relationships with parents).

Mentoring functions were assessed using the scale by Castro et al. (1993), covering: Career support (3 items; e.g., “My mentor takes a personal interest in my career”); Psychological support (3 items; e.g., “I share personal problems with my mentor”); Role modeling (3 items; e.g., “I try to model my behavior after my mentor”). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alphas were satisfactory for all subscales (.81–.89), except for role modeling, which was lower (.73 at T1; .66 at T2). No significant differences emerged over time.

Perceived similarity to the mentor was assessed with the scale by Harrison et al. (2002), comprising 11 items addressing perceived similarity in values, personality, and work styles. Responses were given on a 7-point scale (1 = very dissimilar to 7 = very similar).

Internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = .91$), and no significant differences emerged over time ($p = .78$).

Individual self-training and other resources.

Participants reported how frequently they used various resources (e.g., textbooks, online materials, university resources) and could add others. This section was developed drawing on TALIS items (OECD, 2019) as well as resources identified during the qualitative phase.

Job satisfaction.

Assessed using the 9-item scale from the HBSC Teachers' Survey (Delbosq et al., 2022; e.g., "How satisfied are you with your working hours?"), with responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = extremely dissatisfied to 5 = extremely satisfied). Internal consistency was good ($\alpha = .817$ at T1; $\alpha = .810$ at T2). No significant changes were detected over time ($p = .075$), although the Shapiro–Wilk test indicated non-normality ($p < .001$).

Well-being.

Measured with the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Topp et al., 2015), translated using back-translation procedures (e.g., "Over the past two weeks I have felt cheerful and in good spirits"). Responses were given on a 7-point scale (1 = never to 7 = always).

Internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .879$ at T1; $\alpha = .868$ at T2). A paired-samples t-test indicated a slight but non-significant decrease ($p = .079$), with non-normal distribution (Shapiro–Wilk $p < .001$).

Work engagement.

Assessed with the Italian version (Balducci et al., 2010) of the three-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2019; e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job"), using a 7-point scale (1 = never to 7 = always). Internal consistency was moderate ($\alpha = .726$ at T1; $\alpha = .721$ at T2), but improved when the item "I feel immersed in my work" was excluded ($\alpha = .822$ at T1; $\alpha = .827$ at T2). No significant differences were found between T1 and T2 ($p = .072$), with non-normal distribution (Shapiro–Wilk $p < .001$).

Proactivity.

Measured with the Italian back-translated version of the 7-item scale by Trifiletti et al. (2009; e.g., “In any setting, I have been a powerful force for constructive change”), rated on a 7-point scale (1 = absolutely true to 7 = absolutely false). Internal consistency was good and slightly improved over time ($\alpha = .809$ at T1; $\alpha = .850$ at T2). No significant changes were observed ($p = .103$).

Perceived self-efficacy.

Assessed using a short version of the Norwegian Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (Avanzi et al., 2013), operationalized as in the HBSC Teachers’ Survey. A sample item: “How confident do you feel in your ability to motivate all students, even in classes with mixed abilities?” Responses were given on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 7 = completely). Internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = .909$ at T1; $\alpha = .920$ at T2). No significant changes were detected over time ($p = .096$).

4.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis began with data cleaning. Only questionnaires that were fully completed by participants at both Time 1 (T₁) and Time 2 (T₂) were retained for analysis.. Descriptive statistics were then calculated using Jamovi (Version 2.6; The Jamovi Project, 2025). This preliminary analysis provided an overview of participants’ demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, years of service) as well as descriptive information on the resources reported at T₁ and T₂ and on the outcome variables.

Following the descriptive phase, Pearson’s correlation coefficients were computed to explore associations between resources and outcome variables. A series of paired-sample t tests was conducted to examine potential differences between T₁ and T₂ measures. When the assumption of normality was violated, results were cross-validated using the nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test.

To detect significant differences in the distribution of resources and outcome variables, a series of repeated-measures ANOVAs was subsequently performed, using selected between-subject factors

such as school size, school level, and the presence of an informal mentoring relationship. Given that some variables did not meet normality assumptions, nonparametric and robust analyses were conducted using the Friedman test.

To examine the longitudinal associations between resources and outcome variables together with self-efficacy, we estimated a series of cross-lagged panel models. In each model, the resources measured at Time 1 (e.g., Perceived Resources, Collaborative Practices) and the corresponding outcome at Time 1 (e.g., Job satisfaction, Well-being, Work engagement) were simultaneously entered as predictors of the outcome at Time 2. These models aimed to estimate both the autoregressive effect of the outcome (temporal stability) and the cross-lagged effects of the resources, identifying which Time 1 resources predicted changes in the outcome between T1 and T2. All models were estimated using maximum likelihood (ML) with robust standard errors. Continuous predictors were mean-centered before analysis to facilitate the interpretation of regression coefficients.

4.4. Results

4.4.1. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive analyses provided a comprehensive overview of the distribution of resources and outcome variables across the two data collection points. A series of paired-sample t tests revealed no significant differences between T₁ and T₂ for nearly all variables. Consequently, the following results primarily refer to T₁, while a complete table with T₁ and T₂ values is presented in Table 1.

Perceived School Resources

The analysis of perceived school resources revealed a heterogeneous distribution. The highest mean scores were reported for opportunities to participate in professional development activities ($M = 5.62$) and for learning through classroom observation of colleagues ($M = 5.57$), followed by having colleagues who serve as sources of professional inspiration ($M = 5.07$). The perception of receiving

useful feedback from colleagues ($M = 4.68$) and being recognized for one's work ($M = 4.55$) also showed moderately high levels.

Lower scores were observed for having a designated supervisor ($M = 3.17$) and, particularly, for the existence of a structured system of teacher performance feedback ($M = 2.87$). Participation in educational research activities was also relatively low ($M = 3.85$). Standard deviations were generally modest, though higher variability ($SD > 1.8$) was noted for supervision and structured feedback items, suggesting considerable differences in individual experiences.

Collaborative Practices

Teachers reported an overall mean frequency of collaborative practices of 3.76 on a six-point scale. The most frequent activities included participation in staff meetings ($M = 4.50$) and discussions about individual students' progress ($M = 4.84$). The exchange of teaching materials ($M = 4.13$) and co-teaching experiences ($M = 4.37$) were also relatively common.

By contrast, more structured or professionally oriented forms of collaboration were less frequent. Mutual classroom observation and feedback provision ($M = 3.00$), joint definition of assessment standards ($M = 3.47$), and participation in collaborative professional learning activities ($M = 2.59$) all recorded lower means. High standard deviations for certain items ($SD > 2.0$) indicate substantial variation across schools in the implementation of such practices.

Principal Support

Perceived support from school principals was overall positive. Expressive professional support ($M = 4.98$) and emotional support ($M = 4.80$) received the highest ratings, while instrumental support related to practical matters ($M = 4.25$) was slightly lower. The lowest mean was recorded for evaluative/appraisal support ($M = 3.61$). Overall, the composite mean score for principal support was 4.42, with moderate variability ($SD \approx 1.5$), suggesting a generally favourable yet differentiated perception among respondents.

Frequency of Use of Lesson Preparation Resources

The most frequently used lesson preparation resources were textbooks and their accompanying digital materials ($M = 4.15$) and online resources such as publishers' websites or educational channels ($M = 4.06$). University or specialization course materials ($M = 3.13$) and school-related websites ($M = 3.04$) followed.

Other resources—scientific articles ($M = 2.73$), ministerial documents ($M = 2.92$), social media content from other teachers ($M = 2.96$), and national or international reports ($M = 2.09$)—were used less frequently. The overall mean ($M = 3.14$) indicates a selective approach to resource use, with limited reliance on scientific or institutional materials.

Purposes for Resource Use

Teachers' reported purposes for using resources highlighted a clear focus on pedagogical aspects. Using resources for lesson ideas and inspiration ($M = 6.14$) and for discovering new teaching methodologies ($M = 5.63$) were the most frequent motivations, followed by improving classroom management and relationships with students ($M = 5.15$).

Lower scores were observed for purposes related to managing relationships with parents ($M = 3.56$) and staying informed about bureaucratic or contractual issues ($M = 4.47$). Variability was low for core pedagogical items but higher for secondary purposes ($SD > 1.8$), suggesting more heterogeneous practices in non-instructional areas.

Mentoring

Presence and Number of Informal Mentors

The vast majority of newly appointed teachers reported having at least one informal mentor. Only 15.7% indicated having no such figure, while nearly half reported having two (28.3%) or three mentors (27.4%). A smaller proportion (15.7%) mentioned having a single mentor, and 13% reported four mentors. Overall, these data suggest the existence of a widespread support network, often distributed across multiple reference figures rather than concentrated in a single mentoring relationship.

Characteristics of Mentors

Almost all participants (95.7%) shared the same professional role as their mentors, meaning that both were teachers. In more than 86% of cases, mentors and mentees worked in the same school, while sharing the same subject area occurred in less than half of the cases (46.8%). About 56% reported teaching at least one class in common.

Taken together, these results indicate that informal mentoring relationships primarily develop within contexts of organizational, though not necessarily disciplinary, proximity.

Frequency of Meetings

The frequency of interaction between mentors and mentees was generally high. More than one-third of participants (36.7%) reported meeting at least once per week, an additional 23.9% reported almost daily exchanges, and 5.3% described daily contact. Only 7.4% met less than once per month. These findings suggest that informal mentoring relationships are typically characterized by sustained and ongoing interaction over time.

Discussion Topics

The most frequently discussed topics in mentoring conversations concerned classroom management and the handling of difficult situations ($M = 3.99$), followed by bureaucratic issues ($M = 3.60$) and lesson planning ($M = 3.52$). Discussions about relationships with parents ($M = 3.36$) and colleagues ($M = 3.35$) were slightly less frequent.

Standard deviations (≈ 1) indicated moderate individual variability but no major divergence in interaction patterns. Overall, mentoring content appeared to focus on the practical and operational aspects of teaching and daily work management.

Types of Perceived Support

Mean levels of perceived support were relatively modest for both career-related support ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.48$) and psychological support ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.52$). These findings suggest that informal mentors are not primarily sought for guidance in coordinating professional goals or for

sharing personal concerns—functions that are more typically associated with formal mentoring programs.

However, the relatively high standard deviations (above 1) on both scales indicate meaningful individual differences in perceived support experiences within the sample.

Mentor as Role Model

Perception of the mentor as a role model averaged $M = 2.95$ ($SD = 1.45$) on a 0–5 scale, suggesting that mentors are viewed as moderately exemplary figures, though not universally idealized. The wide score range ($\min = 1$, $\max = 5$) reflects diverse individual experiences and interpretations of the mentoring relationship.

Perceived Similarity with Mentor

Perceived similarity between mentee and mentor was generally positive. The highest mean scores referred to personal values ($M = 5.07$), work-related judgments ($M = 4.91$), thinking patterns ($M = 4.89$), and general outlook ($M = 4.86$), followed by problem-solving approaches ($M = 4.70$) and attitudes toward work and life ($M = 4.63$). Lower values emerged for perceived similarity in personality ($M = 3.89$) and career goals ($M = 4.22$). Standard deviations around 1.5 indicated moderate variability. Overall, teachers tended to perceive affinity with their mentors in cognitive and value domains rather than in personality traits or career aspirations.

Outcome variables

Job Satisfaction

Average job satisfaction levels among newly appointed teachers were moderate ($M = 3.39$ on a 1–5 scale). The highest satisfaction was reported for relationships with students ($M = 4.13$) and for the variety of the work ($M = 3.70$). Satisfaction with work schedule ($M = 3.61$), relationships with colleagues ($M = 3.43$), and time devoted to teaching ($M = 3.42$) followed closely. Lower means were observed for job security ($M = 3.43$), physical working conditions ($M = 3.34$), salary ($M = 2.81$), and social recognition of teaching ($M = 2.65$). These latter two domains

represented the main sources of dissatisfaction. Standard deviations were moderate, indicating broadly shared perceptions across participants. Overall, satisfaction was centred on relational and pedagogical aspects, while structural and social dimensions remained critical.

Well-being and Work Engagement

General well-being levels were moderately high ($M = 3.77$ on a 6-point scale), indicating a broadly positive yet not fully consolidated perception of personal well-being. Work engagement levels were higher ($M = 4.37$), suggesting that despite certain sources of dissatisfaction, teachers maintained strong energy and dedication toward their professional activity. Standard deviations below 1 indicated widely shared perceptions of these dimensions.

Individual Variables

Proactivity

Proactivity levels were moderately high ($M = 4.75$ on a 7-point scale), indicating that teachers tended to show initiative and autonomous problem-solving in professional contexts. Low variability ($SD = 0.89$) suggests that this tendency was widespread across the sample.

Perceived Self-efficacy

Perceived self-efficacy was also moderately high ($M = 4.75$ on a 7-point scale), with notable differences across specific domains. Teachers reported the highest confidence in responding effectively to students' questions ($M = 5.50$) and explaining complex concepts ($M = 5.22$), reflecting strong faith in core instructional competencies. Medium-high means were found for adapting teaching to student needs ($M = 4.91$) and for collaborating with families of students displaying behavioral difficulties ($M = 4.81$). Slightly lower averages emerged for managing challenging students or complex situations ($M = 4.50$ – 4.69), and the lowest for applying any method proposed by the school ($M = 4.29$). Standard deviations occasionally exceeding 1.3 indicated individual variability, particularly concerning classroom management and conflict resolution. Overall, novice

teachers displayed solid professional self-efficacy, with stronger confidence in instructional and relational abilities than in organizational or disciplinary management.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Resources, Individual Factors, and Outcome Variables at Time 1 and Time

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	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min.	Max.
Perceived Resources_T1	223	4.43	4.50	1.176	1.50	7.00
Collaborative Practices_T1	223	3.76	3.75	1.073	1.38	6.00
Support from Principal_T1	223	4.42	4.50	1.463	1.00	7.00
Mentor Career Support_T1	223	2.74	3.00	1.480	0.00	5.00
Mentor Psychological Support_T1	223	2.72	3.00	1.519	0.00	5.00
Role Modeling	223	2.95	3.33	1.450	0.00	5.00
Perceived Similarity_T1	223	3.89	4.36	1.958	0.00	7.00
Individual Resources	223	3.14	3.13	0.607	1.63	5.00
Frequency_T1						
Job Satisfaction_T1	223	3.39	3.33	0.711	1.67	5.00
Well-being_T1	223	3.77	3.80	1.059	1.00	6.00
Work Engagement_T1	223	4.37	4.67	0.934	2.00	6.00
Proactivity_T1	223	4.75	4.86	0.885	2.29	7.00
Self-Efficacy_T1	223	4.75	4.83	0.924	2.58	6.92
Perceived Resources_T2	223	4.41	4.38	1.154	1.75	7.00
Collaborative Practices_T2	223	3.59	3.63	1.059	1.50	6.00
Support from Principal_T2	221	4.47	4.56	1.368	1.00	7.00
Mentor Career Support_T2	223	2.79	3.33	1.47	0.00	5.00
Mentor Psychological Support_T2	223	2.82	3.33	1.59	0.00	5.00

Role Modeling_T2	223	2.93	3.33	1.48	0.00	5.00
Perceived Similarity_T2	223	3.82	4.45	2.01	0.00	6.64
Individual Resources	223	3.06	3.00	0.588	1.57	5.00
Frequency_T2						
Job Satisfaction_T2	223	3.33	3.33	0.700	1.56	5.00
Well-being_T2	223	3.67	3.80	1.004	1.00	6.00
Work Engagement_T2	223	4.27	4.33	0.982	1.00	6.00
Proactivity_T2	223	4.67	4.71	0.927	1.00	6.86
Self-Efficacy_T2	223	4.67	4.75	0.981	1.92	7.00

4.4.2. Relations Between Resources, Outcomes, and Individual Variables

The second research objective concerned the analysis of relationships among professional resources, outcome variables, and individual factors across the two data collection points (T₁ and T₂). Specifically, correlations were examined both synchronously (T₁) and longitudinally (T₂) between professional resources (perceived resources, collaborative practices, principal support, mentoring-related resources, and use of individual resources) and outcome variables (job satisfaction, well-being, and work engagement), as well as individual variables (proactivity and self-efficacy). Full correlation tables are reported in Tables 2,3,4.

Resources and Outcomes at T₁

At T₁, all professional resources were positively and significantly correlated with outcome variables, outlining a highly interconnected system of relationships. Perceived resources and principal support emerged as the most salient dimensions, both showing significant associations with job satisfaction ($r = .48$ and $.41$), well-being ($r = .33$ and $.31$), and work engagement ($r = .35$ and $.28$). Informal mentoring resources were also positively correlated with outcomes—particularly with job satisfaction and, to a lesser extent, with well-being and engagement. Within these, career support and perceived similarity with the mentor showed the strongest associations with job satisfaction

(approximately $r = .40$). Collaboration among colleagues showed weaker but positive correlations with well-being indicators, whereas the frequency of using individual teaching resources was only marginally associated, suggesting that instrumental resource use may exert a more limited influence on satisfaction and engagement levels.

Table2

Correlations Among Professional Resources, Individual Factors, and Outcome Measures at T1

	Perceived Resources_T1	Collaborative Practices_T1	Support from Principal_T1	Number of Mentors	Mentor Career Support_T1	Mentor Psychological Support_T1	Role Modeling	Perceived Similarity_T1	Individual Resources Frequency_T1	Job Satisfaction_T1	Well-being_T1	Work Engagement_T1	Proactivity_T1	Self-Efficacy_T1
Perceived Resources_T1	—													
Collaborative Practices_T1	0.574***	—												
Support from Principal_T1	0.695***	0.400***	—											
Number of Mentors	0.353***	0.358***	0.329***	—										
Mentor Career Support_T1	0.431***	0.323***	0.324***	0.608***	—									
Mentor Psychological Support_T1	0.275***	0.254***	0.192**	0.515***	0.814***	—								
Role Modeling	0.380***	0.281***	0.265***	0.608***	0.857***	0.824***	—							
Perceived Similarity_T1	0.325***	0.277***	0.255***	0.651***	0.803***	0.806***	0.856***	—						
Individual Resources Frequency_T1	0.261***	0.262***	0.127	0.040	0.056	0.032	0.038	0.056	—					
Job Satisfaction_T1	0.475***	0.244***	0.409***	0.348***	0.404***	0.282***	0.347***	0.337***	0.166*	—				
Well-being_T1	0.331***	0.136*	0.308***	0.222***	0.223***	0.104	0.194**	0.186**	0.132*	0.643***	—			
Work Engagement_T1	0.350***	0.167*	0.281***	0.285***	0.218**	0.100	0.194**	0.203**	0.191**	0.598***	0.686***	—		
Proactivity_T1	0.170*	0.146*	0.144*	0.156*	0.095	0.086	0.064	0.098	0.195**	0.188**	0.332***	0.424***	—	
Self-Efficacy_T1	0.322***	0.213**	0.289***	0.254***	0.126	0.114	0.119	0.166*	0.189**	0.379***	0.365***	0.417***	0.456***	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Resources and Outcomes at T₂

At T₂, correlations between initial resources and outcomes remained positive and significant but showed an overall weakening in strength. Perceived resources and principal support remained the most consistent predictors, maintaining associations with job satisfaction, well-being, and engagement ($r \approx .24$ – $.36$). This pattern suggests that a supportive work environment constitutes a relatively stable protective factor that sustains adaptation and satisfaction over time. Mentoring-related resources continued to show significant but attenuated correlations with outcomes. Career support and perceived similarity with the mentor remained positive predictors of engagement and satisfaction ($r \approx .22$ – $.29$), underscoring the ongoing importance of high-quality, even if informal, mentoring relationships. However, the reduced strength of correlations over time suggests that the influence of such resources may diminish as teachers gain professional autonomy and rely less on

informal support. Collaboration with colleagues maintained moderate associations with well-being, while the use of instructional resources continued to show weak or nonsignificant correlations, reflecting the more instrumental and transient nature of these resources.

Table 3

Correlations Among Professional Resources at T1 and Outcome Measures and Individual Factors at T2

	Perceived Resources_T1	Collaborative Practices_T1	Support from Principal_T1	Number of Mentors	Mentor Career Support_T1	Mentor Psychological Support_T1	Role Modeling_T1	Perceived Similarity_T1	Individual Resources Frequency_T1	Job Satisfaction_T2	Well-being_T2	Work Engagement_T2	Proactivity_T2	Self-Efficacy_T2
Perceived Resources_T1	—													
Collaborative Practices_T1	0.574***	—												
Support from Principal_T1	0.695***	0.400***	—											
Number of Mentors	0.353***	0.358***	0.329***	—										
Mentor Career Support_T1	0.431***	0.323***	0.324***	0.608***	—									
Mentor Psychological Support_T1	0.275***	0.254***	0.192**	0.515***	0.814***	—								
Role Modeling	0.380***	0.281***	0.265***	0.608***	0.857***	0.824***	—							
Perceived Similarity_T1	0.325***	0.277***	0.255***	0.651***	0.803***	0.806***	0.856***	—						
Individual Resources Frequency_T1	0.261***	0.262***	0.127	0.040	0.056	0.032	0.038	0.056	—					
Job Satisfaction_T2	0.360***	0.220***	0.360***	0.290***	0.291***	0.170*	0.247***	0.250***	0.103	—				
Well-being_T2	0.244***	0.152*	0.256***	0.158*	0.184**	0.123	0.149*	0.170*	0.073	0.602***	—			
Work Engagement_T2	0.242***	0.116	0.161*	0.234***	0.219***	0.127	0.228***	0.245***	0.076	0.494***	0.661***	—		
Proactivity_T2	0.102	0.128	0.043	0.101	0.109	0.137*	0.081	0.137*	0.190**	0.169*	0.335***	0.356***	—	
Self-Efficacy_T2	0.309***	0.269***	0.220***	0.272***	0.154*	0.151*	0.167*	0.201**	0.168*	0.346***	0.386***	0.422***	0.448***	—

Not2. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Individual Variables

Proactivity and self-efficacy exhibited distinct yet complementary association patterns. Both were strongly correlated with job satisfaction, well-being, and work engagement at T₁ and T₂, indicating reciprocal reinforcement between personal and organizational resources. At T₁, both proactivity and self-efficacy were significantly correlated with all resources except those linked to informal mentoring, suggesting that the formation of such mentoring relationships is not primarily driven by proactive traits or perceived self-efficacy. By T₂, correlations between proactivity and initial resources weakened, highlighting a more autonomous role of proactivity as an outcome of adaptation processes. Self-efficacy, however, remained a central and stable factor, significantly correlating with nearly all resources ($r = .30\text{--}.45$), confirming its pivotal role in sustaining professional adjustment over time.

Table 4

Correlations Among Professional Resources, Individual Factors, and Outcome Measures at T2

	Perceived Resources_T2	Collaborative Practices_T2	Support from Principal_T2	Number of Mentors	Mentor Career Support_T2	Mentor Psychological Support_T2	Role Modeling_T2	Perceived Similarity_T2	Individual Resources Frequency_T2	Job Satisfaction_T2	Well-being_T2	Work Engagement_T2	Proactivity_T2	Self-Efficacy_T2
Perceived Resources_T2	—													
Collaborative Practices_T2	0.507***	—												
Support from Principal_T2	0.642***	0.418***	—											
Number of Mentors	0.353***	0.229***	0.325***	—										
Mentor Career Support_T2	0.477***	0.198**	0.438***	0.335***	—									
Mentor Psychological Support_T2	0.392***	0.136*	0.343***	0.248***	0.847***	—								
Role Modeling_T2	0.409***	0.138*	0.372***	0.293***	0.891***	0.840***	—							
Perceived Similarity_T2	0.398***	0.115	0.338***	0.279***	0.847***	0.817***	0.895***	—						
Individual Resources Frequency_T2	0.224***	0.298***	0.199**	0.176**	0.106	0.044	0.050	0.082	—					
Job Satisfaction_T2	0.463***	0.256***	0.475***	0.290***	0.290***	0.183**	0.267***	0.270***	0.159*	—				
Well-being_T2	0.344***	0.176**	0.377***	0.158*	0.251***	0.129	0.234***	0.233***	0.229***	0.602***	—			
Work Engagement_T2	0.300***	0.065	0.286***	0.234***	0.253***	0.156*	0.233***	0.273***	0.229***	0.494***	0.661***	—		
Proactivity_T2	0.184**	0.171*	0.198**	0.101	0.192**	0.180**	0.171*	0.190**	0.329***	0.169*	0.335***	0.356***	—	
Self-Efficacy_T2	0.307***	0.336***	0.343***	0.272***	0.103	0.080	0.070	0.111	0.286***	0.346***	0.386***	0.422***	0.448***	—

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

4.4.3 Repeated-Measures ANOVA

The third research objective was to examine, through a series of repeated-measures ANOVA, whether:

1. Significant differences existed in the distribution of resources as a function of school size and educational level;
2. The presence or absence of an informal mentoring relationship affected the levels of the outcome variables and perceived self-efficacy;
3. The desire to move to another region, the intention to continue teaching after graduation, and tenure had effects on the outcome variables and self-efficacy.

Given the non-contextual nature of this variable, the frequency of resource use for lesson preparation was excluded from this part of the analysis. The results of the ANOVA analyses are reported in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5

Analysis of Variance Showing the Effects of School Size and Educational Level on Teachers'

Perceived Resources, Collaborative Practices, and Principal Support

Dependent Variable	Between-Subjects Factor	SS	df	MS	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2p	Post-hoc Comparison (1–3)
Perceived Resources	School Dimension	36.10	2	18.06	8.32	< .001	.070	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	School Level	34.40	3	11.48	5.24	.002	.067	Decrease ($p < .01$)
Collaborative Practices	School Dimension	29.10	2	14.56	8.13	< .001	.003	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	School Level	47.90	3	15.98	9.33	< .001	.113	Decrease ($p < .01$)
Principal Support	School Dimension	62.80	2	31.39	10.80	< .001	.007	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	School Level	23.60	3	7.88	2.54	.057	.041	ns

Note. Type III sum of squares (SS) used. MS = Mean Square. η^2p = partial eta squared.

ns = non-significant ($p > .05$). Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using Tukey's correction for multiple comparisons.

Effects of School Size and Educational Level

Between-subjects effects indicated significant differences associated with both school size and educational level across the three resources, with the partial exception of perceived principal support. For Perceived Resources, significant effects emerged for school size, $F = 8.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .070$, and for educational level, $F = 5.24$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .067$. Post hoc comparisons revealed a significant decrease in scores from level 1 to level 3, suggesting that perceptions of available resources tend to decline as school size and level increase.

A similar pattern was observed for Collaborative Practices, with significant effects of school size, $F = 8.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .003$, and educational level, $F = 9.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .113$. Post hoc tests again indicated a decrease in mean scores from smaller to larger schools and from lower to higher educational levels.

For Principal Support, the effect of school size was significant, $F = 10.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .007$, while the effect of educational level did not reach statistical significance, $F = 2.54$, $p = .057$, $\eta^2_p = .041$. Here too, a downward trend was observed in larger schools, although the effect of level was only marginal.

Overall, these findings indicate that increases in organizational scale and educational level are associated with lower perceptions of available resources, collaborative practices, and—to a lesser extent—principal support. This trend may reflect the greater organizational and relational complexity of larger schools, where maintaining a collaborative climate and a shared sense of support can be more challenging.

Effects of Informal Mentoring

Between-subjects analyses further revealed that the presence of mentoring relationships, even informal ones, was associated with significantly higher levels of job satisfaction, well-being, work engagement, and self-efficacy compared to participants without any mentoring relationships ($p < .05$ across variables). Post-hoc comparisons confirmed a decrease in all scores among those without mentoring, indicating that the absence of a professional reference or exchange relationship is linked to lower perceived well-being and psychological resources at work.

The number of informal mentors also proved to be a relevant factor. For nearly all variables (except where effects were non-significant), a progressive increase in scores was observed as the number of mentors increased, with significant differences between the extreme groups (0 vs. 4 mentors; $p < .01$). This suggests that broader professional support networks positively contribute to satisfaction, wellbeing, and engagement, likely by facilitating experience-sharing, recognition, and a sense of belonging.

Effects of Professional Intentions and Tenure

The desire to relocate to another region showed significant effects for job satisfaction and well-being, but not for engagement or self-efficacy. Participants expressing an intention to move reported lower satisfaction and well-being scores ($p < .05$), suggesting a potential link between territorial rootedness, perceived stability, and professional well-being.

The intention to teach after graduation was also significantly associated with all variables except self-efficacy: individuals who did not intend to remain in the teaching profession reported lower

satisfaction, wellbeing, and engagement ($p < .01$). This highlights a connection between professional motivation and the subjective experience of work.

Lastly, tenure (years of teaching experience) had significant effects on job satisfaction and wellbeing, but not on engagement or self-efficacy. Lower scores were found among teachers with less than one year of experience, suggesting that the early phase of professional insertion is particularly delicate and that mentoring and support relationships may play a protective role during this stage.

Table 6

Between-Subjects Effects of Mentoring, Professional Intentions, and Tenure on Job Satisfaction, Well-Being, Work Engagement, and Self-Efficacy

Dependent Variable	Between-Subjects Factor	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2p	Post-hoc Comparison
Job Satisfaction	Mentor Yes/No	17.80	1	17.84	23.10	< .001	.095	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	Number of Mentors	24.40	4	6.10	8.09	< .001	.129	Increase ($p < .01$)
	Would Change Region	11.00	1	10.98	13.60	< .001	.058	ns
	Teaching Intention	6.22	1	6.22	7.53	.007	.033	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	Tenure	6.37	2	3.18	3.84	.023	.034	Decrease ($p < .05$)
Well-being	Mentor Yes/No	13.60	1	13.65	7.87	.005	.034	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	Number of Mentors	20.70	4	5.18	3.01	.019	.052	Increase ($p < .01$)
	Would Change Region	14.30	1	14.33	8.28	.004	.036	Decrease ($p < .05$)
	Teaching Intention	11.60	1	11.58	6.65	.011	.029	Decrease ($p < .05$)
	Tenure	13.20	2	6.61	3.79	.024	.033	Decrease ($p < .05$)
Work Engagement	Mentor Yes/No	17.20	1	17.25	12.10	< .001	.052	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	Number of Mentors	35.70	4	8.93	6.58	< .001	.108	Increase ($p < .01$)
	Would Change Region	5.12	1	5.12	3.47	.064	.015	ns

Dependent Variable	Between-Subjects Factor	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2p	Post-hoc Comparison
Self-efficacy	Teaching Intention	26.30	1	26.30	19.00	< .001	.079	Decrease ($p < .01$)
	Tenure	4.41	2	2.20	1.48	.229	.013	ns
	Mentor Yes/No	9.10	1	9.10	5.87	.016	.026	Decrease ($p < .05$)
	Number of Mentors	33.60	4	8.40	5.75	< .001	.095	Increase ($p < .01$)
	Would Change Region	0.33	1	0.33	0.21	.651	.001	ns
	Teaching Intention	2.55	1	2.55	1.61	.206	.007	ns
	Tenure	2.86	2	1.43	0.90	.408	.008	ns

Note. Type III sum of squares (SS) used. MS = Mean Square. η^2p = partial eta squared.

ns = non-significant ($p > .05$). Post-hoc comparisons were conducted using Tukey's correction for multiple comparisons.

4.4.4 Cross-lagged Panel Models

Finally, the last research objective was to identify which of the available resources were the most effective predictors of changes in the outcome variables (job satisfaction, well-being, work engagement) and self-efficacy between Time 1 and Time 2. However, as shown in Table 7, none of the resources measured at T1 emerged as significant predictors of the corresponding outcomes at T2. In all models, the only statistically significant predictor was the outcome at T1, which had been included to control for autoregressive effects. This pattern suggests that the temporal stability of the outcome variables absorbs most of the explained variance, thereby reducing the apparent predictive power of the other resource variables. In other words, the strong association between T1 and T2 outcomes tends to overshadow the independent effects of the resources measured at T1.

Table 7.

Fixed Effects Parameter Estimates for Cross-Lagged Panel Models Predicting Job Satisfaction, Well-being, Work Engagement, and Self-efficacy

Dependent Variable	Adj. R ²	Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	β	df	t	p
Job Satisfaction	.495	(Intercept)	1.92e–16	0.0333	[–0.0657, 0.0657]	0.0000	216	5.76e–15	1.000
		PerRes	–0.0373	0.0464	[–0.1288, 0.0543]	–0.0626	216	–0.803	.423
		ColPra	0.0295	0.0395	[–0.0483, 0.1074]	0.0453	216	0.748	.455
		SupDir	0.0488	0.0323	[–0.0148, 0.1124]	0.1019	216	1.512	.132
		NumMent	0.0153	0.0301	[–0.0440, 0.0747]	0.0276	216	0.510	.611
		ResFreq	–0.0219	0.0582	[–0.1366, 0.0928]	–0.0189	216	–0.376	.708
		JobSat	0.6666	0.0553	[0.5575, 0.7757]	0.6773	216	12.045	<.001
Well-being	.455	(Intercept)	5.31e–17	0.0496	[–0.0978, 0.0978]	0.0000	216	1.07e–15	1.000
		PerRes	–0.0471	0.0678	[–0.1808, 0.0866]	–0.0551	216	–0.694	.489
		ColPra	0.0769	0.0589	[–0.0391, 0.1930]	0.0822	216	1.306	.193
		SupPrinc	0.0437	0.0481	[–0.0510, 0.1385]	0.0637	216	0.910	.364
		NumMent	–0.0177	0.0440	[–0.1045, 0.0691]	–0.0222	216	–0.402	.688
		ResFreq	–0.0508	0.0867	[–0.2216, 0.1200]	–0.0307	216	–0.586	.558
		JobSat	0.6413	0.0508	[0.5412, 0.7414]	0.6764	216	12.623	<.001
Work Engagement	.386	(Intercept)	–4.05e–16	0.0515	[–0.1015, 0.1015]	0.0000	216	–7.86e–15	1.000
		PerRes	0.0623	0.0707	[–0.0771, 0.2017]	0.0747	216	0.881	.379
		ColPra	–0.0084	0.0611	[–0.1289, 0.1120]	–0.0092	216	–0.138	.891
		SupPrinc	–0.0499	0.0497	[–0.1478, 0.0480]	–0.0743	216	–1.004	.316

Dependent Variable	Adj. R ²	Predictor	Estimate	SE	95% CI (Lower–Upper)	β	df	t	p
		NumMent	0.0489	0.0463	[−0.0423, 0.1402]	0.0627	216	1.057	.292
		ResFreq	−0.0836	0.0906	[−0.2622, 0.0949]	−0.0517	216	−0.923	.357
		JobSat	0.6474	0.0609	[0.5274, 0.7674]	0.6159	216	10.632	<.001
Self-efficacy	.565	(Intercept)	2.75e−16	0.0434	[−0.0855, 0.0855]	0.0000	216	6.34e−15	1.000
		PerRes	0.0547	0.0588	[−0.0613, 0.1707]	0.0656	216	0.930	.353
		ColPra	0.0839	0.0512	[−0.0169, 0.1848]	0.0918	216	1.640	.102
		SupPrinc	−0.0603	0.0419	[−0.1430, 0.0223]	−0.0899	216	−1.439	.152
		NumMent	0.0497	0.0386	[−0.0264, 0.1258]	0.0637	216	1.287	.199
		ResFreq	0.0005	0.0761	[−0.1496, 0.1505]	0.0003	216	0.006	.995
		JobSat	0.7593	0.0509	[0.6590, 0.8597]	0.7153	216	14.916	<.001

Note. *PerRes* = Perceived resources; *ColPra* = Collaborative practices; *SupPrinc* = School Principal support; *NumMent* = Number of mentors; *ResFreq* = Frequency of resource use. Models estimated using robust maximum likelihood (MLR). Continuous predictors were mean-centered.

5. Discussion

The exploratory analysis provided a nuanced picture of the informal resources available to early-career teachers in Italy, revealing both strengths and gaps within school environments. Overall, the findings highlight that newly appointed teachers can rely on a fairly rich network of informal supports, yet these are unevenly distributed across domains and schools. Teachers reported ample opportunities for professional development and collegial learning through classroom observation, suggesting a culture of shared pedagogical exploration in many schools. However, lower scores for

structured supervision and systematic feedback point to the absence of formalized mechanisms for sustained professional growth. This imbalance echoes international evidence showing that informal collegial exchanges often compensate for the lack of institutionalized induction frameworks but may not guarantee equity or consistency across contexts (Bullough, 2012; Janssen et al., 2016).

Similarly, the reported frequency of collaborative practices indicates that while everyday cooperation—such as staff meetings and discussions about students—is widespread, more structured forms of professional collaboration (e.g., co-design of assessments, peer observation) remain sporadic. This pattern suggests that collegiality tends to be operational rather than developmental in focus, reflecting a pragmatic orientation toward managing immediate classroom and organizational demands rather than promoting collective professional learning.

Perceived principal support emerged as moderately high, particularly for emotional and expressive dimensions, confirming that relational leadership can play a key role in creating a supportive school climate for beginners (Ingersoll, 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Yet the relatively lower ratings for evaluative and instrumental support suggest that principals may offer encouragement more readily than practical guidance or feedback on teaching performance.

In terms of individual practices, early-career teachers showed a selective approach to lesson preparation resources, relying mainly on textbooks and online materials rather than on scientific or institutional sources. This tendency may reflect limited access to academic materials, time constraints, or insufficient research literacy, which have been documented as common challenges in the early stages of teaching careers (Van Driel & Berry, 2012). The purposes of resource use were clearly oriented toward improving classroom practices and pedagogy, reinforcing the view that beginning teachers prioritize concrete instructional needs over bureaucratic or relational dimensions of work (Korthagen, 2010).

Mentoring relationships appeared to constitute one of the most consistent informal resources. Most teachers reported having at least one informal mentor, typically a colleague within the same

school but not necessarily from the same disciplinary area. These relationships were frequent and ongoing, emphasizing practical support related to classroom management, lesson planning, and bureaucratic procedures rather than career development or psychological assistance. The limited perception of career-related or emotional support, along with the moderate identification of mentors as role models, suggests that informal mentoring among Italian teachers tends to be horizontal and situational rather than hierarchical or developmental in nature.

Finally, outcome measures portray a professional condition marked by moderate job satisfaction and well-being, with particularly positive feelings toward student relationships and engagement in teaching tasks, but persistent dissatisfaction regarding salary, recognition, and job security—results that are consistent with other international findings (OECD, 2019). These results, combined with relatively high self-efficacy and proactivity, suggest that early-career teachers demonstrate resilience and motivation despite structural limitations. The overall picture is thus one of committed professionals operating in resource-constrained yet relationally rich environments, where informal peer networks seem to partially offset the absence of structured induction policies.

The analysis of associations among resources, individual factors, and outcome variables provides further insight into the mechanisms sustaining early-career teachers' professional adjustment. As hypothesized, greater access to supportive resources was consistently associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, well-being, and work engagement, confirming the role of both organizational and interpersonal factors in fostering career sustainability. At the initial measurement point, perceived school resources and principal support emerged as the most influential correlates of positive outcomes, suggesting that a collegial and well-resourced school environment acts as a crucial protective factor during the early stages of professional socialization. Informal mentoring relationships also showed meaningful positive associations—particularly when characterized by perceived similarity and career-oriented support—indicating that relational proximity and targeted guidance may strengthen teachers' sense of belonging and satisfaction.

Over time, the strength of these correlations tended to decline, pointing to a process of progressive professional autonomy. While supportive environments remained beneficial, the reduced impact of mentoring and other relational resources at T₂ suggests that as teachers consolidate their professional identity, they may rely less on interpersonal guidance and more on self-regulated strategies. This dynamic aligns with longitudinal findings in the literature indicating that the salience of external supports often decreases as teachers' confidence and competence develop, although their presence continues to contribute indirectly to sustained motivation and engagement (Day & Gu, 2007; Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Among individual variables, proactivity and self-efficacy showed robust and enduring links with all dimensions of career sustainability. These findings reinforce the idea that individual agency interacts synergistically with contextual resources: teachers who perceive themselves as competent and proactive tend to derive greater benefit from available supports, while supportive contexts, in turn, nurture these self-perceptions. Interestingly, the lack of strong correlations between mentoring variables and proactivity suggests that informal mentoring relationships may emerge more from situational opportunities than from teachers' personal initiative. Self-efficacy, conversely, remained a stable and central predictor of all outcomes, confirming its role as a key psychological resource that sustains professional engagement and resilience over time (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Overall, these results portray career sustainability in early teaching as the product of a dynamic interplay between contextual supports and individual capacities. Organizational resources such as leadership and collegial collaboration appear to provide the structural and emotional scaffolding necessary for adaptation, while self-efficacy and proactivity enable teachers to capitalize on these opportunities and maintain engagement despite evolving challenges.

The third research objective examined how contextual and sociodemographic characteristics shape the distribution of professional resources and the sustainability of early-career teachers'

professional trajectories. The results revealed clear structural disparities across school contexts, highlighting the influence of organizational scale and educational level on teachers' perceptions of available resources. Teachers working in smaller schools and at lower educational levels reported significantly higher access to collegial and organizational resources, greater collaboration, and stronger principal support. Conversely, in larger or upper-secondary institutions, resource availability and perceived support tended to decline. This pattern likely reflects the increased complexity and bureaucratic organization typical of larger schools, where interpersonal exchanges are less frequent and relational cohesion more difficult to sustain (Louis et al., 1996), but it might also be because in primary schools teachers are required to meet once a week to plan lessons, thereby facilitating discussion and the exchange of materials and advice.

The presence of informal mentoring relationships emerged as another critical factor in sustaining early-career well-being and professional functioning. Teachers who reported having one or more informal mentors demonstrated significantly higher job satisfaction, well-being, engagement, and self-efficacy than those without any mentoring relationships. Moreover, the positive effects appeared cumulative, as outcomes progressively improved with the number of mentors available. These results underscore the protective function of relational networks in the teaching profession, suggesting that broader access to informal exchanges and reference figures can enhance teachers' confidence, motivation, and affective commitment to their work.

Beyond organizational and relational factors, teachers' professional intentions and tenure status also played a significant role in shaping career sustainability. Those expressing an intention to relocate or to leave the profession reported lower satisfaction and well-being, suggesting that both territorial stability and vocational commitment contribute to a more positive professional experience.

Conversely, teachers with stronger intentions to remain in the profession exhibited higher engagement and satisfaction, highlighting the motivational dimension of career sustainability. Finally, tenure effects indicated that the initial year of teaching represents a particularly vulnerable

phase characterized by lower satisfaction and well-being, thereby confirming the need for targeted support measures during induction. Together, these results emphasize that career sustainability is not only a matter of individual adaptation but also deeply conditioned by the relational and institutional ecology in which teachers begin their careers.

The fourth research objective aimed to identify which individual, relational, and organizational resources most strongly predict the sustainability of early-career teachers' professional trajectories over time. However, the cross-lagged panel analyses did not reveal significant longitudinal effects of any resource variable on subsequent outcomes. In all models, the autoregressive paths—linking each outcome variable at T_1 with its corresponding measure at T_2 —proved to be dominant, absorbing most of the explained variance and effectively overshadowing the potential contribution of other predictors. As a result, no independent cross-lagged effects emerged for perceived resources, principal support, mentoring, or individual practices, suggesting that the strong temporal continuity in job satisfaction, well-being, engagement, and self-efficacy left limited room for additional explanatory power.

This pattern primarily reflects the methodological dynamics of the cross-lagged panel model, in which high stability coefficients can suppress smaller cross-lagged associations, especially when outcomes are relatively stable over short intervals. Nonetheless, the finding is theoretically informative: it indicates that early-career teachers' initial levels of satisfaction, engagement, and self-efficacy tend to consolidate rapidly and remain relatively stable over time. Once established, these perceptions appear resistant to short-term contextual fluctuations, implying that the early professional phase may represent a critical window during which foundational attitudes toward the profession take shape. From a developmental standpoint, this result highlights the strategic importance of early support and induction initiatives, as initial experiences may set trajectories that later interventions can modify only marginally.

At the same time, the absence of significant cross-lagged effects should not be interpreted as evidence against the importance of professional resources. Rather, it may suggest that their influence is more diffuse or indirect—operating through motivational, relational, or identity-building processes that unfold gradually and are less detectable within short longitudinal frames.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study presents several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size limited the statistical power of some analyses, preventing more robust and fine-grained modeling of the observed relationships. In addition, the sample composition was somewhat unbalanced, with more than half of the participants being tenured teachers, which may have reduced the representativeness of early-career experiences. Future research should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, as well as by extending the temporal scope of observation. Longitudinal studies covering longer time spans and using more sophisticated analytical approaches—such as latent growth or multilevel models—could offer a deeper understanding of how early resource availability contributes to sustained career well-being and engagement. Moreover, expanding the investigation to include teachers from different national contexts would allow for cross-country comparisons and the identification of structural and cultural factors influencing career sustainability in education.

Chapter 4. Aging as a teacher: Effects of organizational practices on career sustainability in the later career stages.

Abstract

Italy's aging population has raised concerns about sustaining careers, particularly in education, where teachers are among the oldest professional groups globally. Risks such as burnout, limited career progression, and increasing digitalization highlight the need to understand which organizational practices support teachers' late-career sustainability. Using a sample of 800 Italian teachers aged 50 and above, we applied latent profile analysis to examine patterns of perceived organizational support. Four organizational practices —organizational culture, leadership, work design, and individual development—were considered, alongside individual career resources measured through Career Adapt-abilities. Four distinct profiles emerged, relating differently to three career sustainability indicators: work engagement (happiness), perceived health (health), and self-rated job performance (productivity). Organizational practices strongly influenced engagement and health, but not self-rated performance. Age and gender did not predict profile membership or outcomes. Findings offer insights for supporting older teachers' career sustainability and suggest practical strategies for schools and higher education institutions.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the working population in many countries has undergone a steady aging process (OECD, 2023). This demographic shift presents an urgent challenge for organizations and national systems tasked with structuring paid work, healthcare, and retirement provisions (Gahan et al., 2016; OECD, 2025). One common policy response has been to raise the retirement age (OECD, 2023). However, the education sector has displayed a contrasting trend: many teachers choose early retirement (Keogh, 2016; OECD, 2024) or transfer to schools that better align with their age- and career-related needs. These patterns—along with the declining attractiveness of the teaching profession, driven by low salaries, high stress levels, increased administrative workloads, and limited

career advancement opportunities (OECD, 2024)—have contributed to widespread teacher shortages in many countries. Such shortages significantly impact school management’s ability to recruit and retain staff (McPherson, 2025), with further implications for teacher quality and student outcomes (Ingersoll, 2001; Li et al., 2019; Li & Yao, 2022; OECD, 2024; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). A related issue is teacher absenteeism, which exacerbates the challenges some schools face in maintaining adequate staffing levels and delivering high-quality instruction (Bowers, 2001; Carrizosa & De Witte, 2024; Lee et al., 2015).

Aging within the teaching profession presents multiple challenges that must be considered when organizing teachers’ work effectively. Teaching is widely recognized as a demanding occupation (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Zurlo et al., 2007), often more so than many other professions (Seibt et al., 2009). It demands continuous adaptation—to policy reforms, digital technologies, administrative procedures, and increasingly diverse student populations—and sustained professional development. As teachers age, they may experience decreased job satisfaction, heightened emotional exhaustion (Anastasiou & Belios, 2020), and declines in both health and work ability (McMahan & Sturz, 2006; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Vangelova et al., 2018). Effectively integrating an aging workforce thus represents a key challenge for educational organizations (Appanah & Biggs, 2015; Burke et al., 2013; Moen et al., 2017; Rinsky-Halivni, 2022). Several organizational factors contribute to early retirement and turnover, including insufficient administrative support, rigid leadership styles, limited professional growth opportunities, and poor working conditions (Cochran et al., 2012; OECD, 2024). These factors can lead to dissatisfaction, prompting teachers to change schools or exit the profession as a whole, which obviously is even more distressing than organizational turnover. We contend that understanding the drivers of teacher attrition and identifying organizational practices that can support older workers’ career sustainability is critical to ensuring a stable and motivated teaching workforce (De Vos, 2020; Hertel & Zacher, 2018; Sousa et al., 2019).

Previous research has already shown that supporting successful aging at work requires recognizing that individuals' resources vary significantly based on age, gender, education, ethnic background, and socio-economic status (Mejía et al., 2017). Therefore, we posit that to be effective, organizational interventions must be both age- and need-sensitive (cf. Converso et al., 2018; Hennekam & Herrbach, 2015; Philipp & Kunter, 2013; Sottimano et al., 2017). However, despite a substantial body of research on the causes of early retirement (e.g., Cau-Bareille, 2011; Gümüş et al., 2012; Keogh & Roan, 2016; Kreuzfeld & Seibt, 2022; Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2014;) and teacher turnover (e.g., Ingersoll, 2001; Li & Yao, 2022; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), relatively few studies have examined what schools—as workplaces—can proactively do to support older teachers. Further research is therefore needed to explore how school-level organizational practices may contribute to sustaining aging teachers' careers.

Building upon these considerations, this study draws on the process model of sustainable careers, a framework that captures the dynamic interplay over time between individual and contextual factors, such as organizational practices (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). Specifically, our empirical work has two main aims. The first is to identify emerging teacher profiles based on perceived organizational practices targeting teachers over 50, and their levels of career adaptability. Career adaptability is a key construct for aging workers, as it supports well-being (Takao & Ishiyama, 2021), job satisfaction (Zacher & Griffin, 2015), and career success (Kim & Kim, 2022), and is positively associated with engagement in professional development (Coetzee & Stoltz, 2015). Access to training is especially relevant for older workers, who – according to socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) and the selection, optimization and compensation model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) – tend to prioritize meaningful work experiences and relationships at work over focusing on career adaptability and growth and therefore benefit greatly from targeted upskilling initiatives (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009; Day & Gu, 2007; Lowe et al., 2019; Mazzetti et al., 2020) to maintain their career sustainability. Moreover, some studies suggest

that career adaptability promotes organizational retention (Coetzee & Stoltz, 2015) and reduces turnover intentions (Guan et al., 2015; Orie & Semijn, 2021).

Using the notion of sustainable careers, the second aim of this study is to examine how career sustainability indicators (i.e., happiness, health, and productivity; Van der Heijden, 2005) vary across these teacher profiles.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Sustainable Career Framework.

This study addresses the issue of older teachers' successful aging at work through the theoretical lens of the Career Sustainability Framework (CSF; De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). Career sustainability refers to the sequential nature of professional experiences, evident in various patterns of continuity over time and within diverse social spaces. This model offers a multi-dimensional and longitudinal approach to studying careers and their development over time, highlighting the interplay between individual, contextual, and temporal elements (Van der Heijden, 2005; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Sustainable careers are defined through three key outcomes: happiness, health, and productivity, which are understood as evolving over time in response to both personal and contextual factors (Van der Heijden, 2005). *Happiness* refers to the dynamic fit between one's career and personal values, career goals, and individual needs (e.g., work-life balance, professional growth). *Health* encompasses both physical and mental well-being, reflecting the alignment between career demands and one's physical and mental capacities. Finally, *productivity* relates to job performance, self-efficacy, and also includes aspects such as employability or career potential. The model views individuals as active agents, capable of adapting and engaging in proactive behaviors to achieve meaningful and lasting career goals.

Building upon the CSF, organizational practices can be viewed as contextual resources that support the maintenance of sustainable careers—but only when a dynamic fit with individual resources and needs is sustained over time. This argument is not only consistent with person-

environment (P-E) fit theory, which emphasizes that positive outcomes occur when there is a dynamic alignment between individual resources, needs and the opportunities and demands of the working environment (Edwards et al., 1998; Kristof, 1996); but also with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), which posits that individuals are primarily motivated to preserve and accumulate resources. Following Kira and colleagues (2010), we also draw on COR theory to propose that crafting sustainable work environments involves developing and mobilizing a range of personal resources that underpin an individual's capacity to sustain work over the course of the career. Within this perspective, individual resources such as career adaptability play a key role in shaping perceptions of organizational practices and, ultimately, in influencing indicators of career sustainability. Accordingly, our study applies the sustainable careers framework by examining the interplay between organizational practices and career adaptability, and assesses its impact on career sustainability through three core indicators—being happy, healthy, and productive—operationalized as work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance.

2.2 Senior Teachers

Scholarly literature has proposed various frameworks for understanding teachers' professional development and, consequently, the different career stages that characterize the teaching profession. Although these interpretative models have evolved over time, they can largely be categorized into two main strands. The first includes linear models of career development, in which the acquisition of teaching skills and expertise—as well as teachers' concerns—progresses according to predefined career stages (e.g., Dreyfus, 2004; Day & Gu, 2007; Huberman, 1989; Meeus et al., 2018). The second comprises non-linear models, which are generally multi-dimensional, as they incorporate both skill acquisition and career progression while also accounting for the dynamic integration of different components of teaching expertise (e.g., Kelchtermans, 2018; Kinchin & Cabot, 2010).

Since the cut-off values used to distinguish between young, middle-aged, and senior teachers vary across the literature, we adopted the categorization proposed by Van der Heijden (2010).

Accordingly, we refer to three age groups: young teachers (< 35 years old), middle-aged teachers (35–49 years old), and senior teachers ($\geq$ 50 years old). However, as noted by Wong and Tetrick (2017), there is no clear consensus in the literature on how to define older workers, since aging is a continuous process rather than a fixed point in time. In addition, contextual factors—such as job type and cultural setting—can influence how aging manifests and is perceived in the workplace. Against this background, the present study focuses specifically on senior teachers, defined here as those aged 50 years and older.

2.3 Organizational practices as contextual factors associated with sustainable careers

Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of organizational practices in ensuring the successful aging of the workforce (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009; Brouhier et al., 2021; Cochran et al., 2012; Day et al., 2006; Taneva & Arnold, 2018). This topic is gaining increasing urgency over time, particularly in the public sector, which employs a significant proportion of older workers (OECD, 2025). Kooij and colleagues (2014) identified four categories of human resource management (HRM) practices targeted at older workers: accommodative practices (aimed at reducing job demands), utilization practices (which replace overly demanding tasks with more suitable ones), maintenance practices (which help sustain levels of functioning), and development practices (which focus on growth and skill development). In line with this framework, HRM strategies aimed at supporting the aging workforce in the school context may include both accommodations to working conditions—such as reduced working hours, avoidance of physically or mentally strenuous tasks, management of smaller class sizes, or more frequent breaks—and approaches that seek to leverage the expertise accumulated over the course of a career. The latter may involve enabling teachers to reshape their roles in ways that support sustainable career development, for example, by taking on managerial responsibilities, mentoring younger colleagues, leading specific school projects (Fasbender et al., 2016; Lowe et al., 2019), or engaging in specialized training programs (Findsen, 2015; Froehlich et al., 2023; Mazzetti et al., 2020). Kooij

and colleagues (2013) also observed that the association between development practices and employee well-being tends to weaken with age, whereas the link with maintenance practices becomes stronger. Nonetheless, it is precisely development practices that appear to be most strongly associated with higher job performance among older workers. In summary, as age increases, maintenance practices seem to foster well-being, while development practices contribute to performance.

In our study, we consider four organizational practices as central to supporting an aging workforce: organizational climate, leadership, work design, and professional development. Organizational climate for successful aging refers to employees' perceptions of the extent to which their organization understands age-related changes and supports all age groups by ensuring equal opportunities for all workers and promoting a positive image of aging (Armstrong-Stassen & Lee, 2009; Wilckens et al., 2021; Zacher & Yang, 2016). Organizational climate has been shown to influence work outcomes among aging workers and teachers (Armstrong-Stassen & Lee, 2009; Jafaari et al., 2012; Kunze & Toader, 2019; Truxillo et al., 2014), job satisfaction and morale (Converso et al., 2019; Qureshi, 2014), and even perceived health (Vanajan et al., 2020).

Closely related to organizational climate, leadership plays a critical role in supporting an aging workforce. Leaders and supervisors within can foster successful aging by showing appreciation for employees' work outcomes, granting them freedom and autonomy, while also demonstrating responsiveness to individual employee requests, addressing personal needs, and supporting their professional and personal development (Silver et al., 2019; Taneva & Arnold, 2018). Cheung and colleagues (Cheung et al., 2018) showed that transformational leadership plays an important role in promoting successful aging. Other studies have demonstrated that, even in the school context, leadership that is attentive to teachers' needs has significant effects on school climate and on the ability to retain teachers and reduce turnover (Brown & Wynn, 2009; McCarley et al., 2016). Wang and colleagues (2022), for instance, found that transformational leadership can influence older

teachers' attitudes toward knowledge-sharing practices. Additional studies have further highlighted the relationship between leadership and the reduction of teacher attrition in schools, showing that positive leadership behaviors—such as communicating a clear vision for the school to staff and actively working to realize it, providing support to teachers in instructional and other matters, recognizing outstanding teaching performance, and enforcing rules regarding student behavior and discipline—play a crucial role (Player et al., 2017; Sahu et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2022).

Work design represents another important aspect of organizational practices, as it allows employees to adjust their working conditions to better meet individual needs. This includes adapting working hours (e.g., adjusting schedules based on personal needs, reducing workload, modifying the number and duration of breaks), modifying workspaces (e.g., working from home, choosing work environments according to personal preferences), working according to their capabilities (e.g., tailoring tasks to individual needs and preferences, implementing job rotation), and having access to ergonomic working conditions (e.g., adapting workstations to improve functionality). The possibility of moving to less demanding positions has, for instance, been associated with greater work enjoyment (Choi et al., 2018). Other studies have shown that the ability to adjust working conditions has a positive effect on work engagement (Allen et al., 2021; Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa, 2008), including among teachers (Addimando, 2019). Perceived autonomy in adjusting schedules and tasks has also been found to positively impact teachers' personal resources, such as self-efficacy (Choi & Mao, 2021), as well as their work engagement and job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014).

Finally, individual development encompasses the opportunity for continuous career planning within the organization, ensuring that training methods and development opportunities are appropriate and tailored to the needs of older employees. It also involves guaranteeing equal access to professional growth and career progression opportunities for all employees, regardless of age. Individual development is a key process for maintaining an aging workforce within organizations (Tikkanen & Billett, 2014) and for enhancing its active participation (Chen & Gardiner, 2019).

Research has shown that younger and older workers differ in their approaches to training. Therefore, organizations must carefully adjust motivational strategies and consider employees' personal circumstances and private lives in order to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities (Kyndt et al., 2011). Among older teachers, some studies have found that they are less likely than their younger colleagues to learn through experimentation or collaborative activities. Instead, they tend to prefer learning through reading professional literature or engaging in intergenerational dialogue, particularly when mentoring younger colleagues (Kyndt et al., 2016; Richard et al., 2011). Nevertheless, ongoing professional development in the later stages of a teaching career is crucial for sustaining high levels of job satisfaction, reducing ageism, decreasing the risk of turnover and early retirement, and supporting the management of job-related demands (Brouhier et al., 2023; Day & Gu, 2007; Findsen, 2015; Mazzetti et al., 2020).

2.4. Career adaptability as an individual factor associated with sustainable careers

Career adaptability is a construct that reflects workers' perceptions of their personal resources and self-regulatory competencies to effectively deal with current and anticipated career-related changes and challenges (Goodman, 1994; Savickas, 1997). According to Savickas and Porfeli (2012), career adaptability consists of four dimensions—referred to as adapt-abilities: *concern*, which refers to being oriented toward and preparing for one's vocational future; *control*, the extent to which individuals feel capable of taking responsibility for shaping their careers; *curiosity*, the perceived ability to explore possible career opportunities; and *confidence*, the belief in one's ability to pursue aspirations and overcome obstacles. Research has shown that career adaptability is positively associated with indicators of subjective career success (Kim & Kim, 2022; Zacher, 2014), well-being, and job satisfaction (Konstam et al., 2015; Maggiori et al., 2013; Takao & Ishiyama, 2021; Yang et al., 2019; Zacher & Griffin, 2015), as well as with work engagement (Chen et al., 2025; Collie et al., 2018; Collie et al., 2020b). Adaptability has also been shown to be an important dimension for teachers, particularly in the early stages of their careers, where it appears to contribute

to increased self-efficacy, a positive classroom climate, and professional learning (Collie et al., 2020a; McLean et al., 2023; McLeveen et al., 2018). Collie and colleagues (2018) further demonstrated that adaptability seems to prevent work disengagement among teachers. Building on this body of evidence, we consider career adaptability in our study as a key personal resource for sustaining an aging workforce.

2.5. Research Questions

1. How do school organizational practices affect the ability of teachers aging to remain happy, healthy, and productive?
2. How is career adaptability related to organizational practices in shaping the identified profiles?
3. How do combinations of perceived organizational practices and career adaptability shape career sustainability profiles among aging teachers?
4. To what extent do age and gender differences determine profile membership and levels of work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance among older teachers?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Procedures

Data collection began after receiving approval from the Ethics Committee for Research at the University of Trento (reference number: 2023-12ESA). Anonymous, web-based questionnaires were distributed via email to all Italian schools, using official contact information made publicly available by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit. School principals were asked to circulate the research invitation among teachers within their institutions. Schools of all types and levels were contacted, including preschools, primary schools, lower and upper secondary schools, and both public and private institutions.

To be eligible for participation, individuals had to meet the following criteria: (1) be at least 50 years old, (2) be native Italian speakers, (3) have worked at the same school for at least one year, (4)

be employed in a school with a minimum of 30 staff members, and (5) work at least 20 hours per week. Data were collected in Italy between October and December 2023. All participants were informed about the aims of the study, the consent process, and the data protection procedures. Data quality was assessed through multiple procedures. First, we embedded instructed response items within the questionnaire to detect and remove inattentive respondents. Second, we applied the LongString Index to identify participants who showed low response variability, which may indicate careless responding. Finally, we used Mahalanobis distance to screen for multivariate outliers (Curran, 2016; Meade & Craig, 2012).

Out of the initial 3,215 respondents, a final sample of 800 eligible participants was retained for analysis. Of these, 83.6% were women, a figure statistically comparable to the broader population of Italian teachers in the 2022–2023 academic year (81.5%). The average age was 56.9 years ($SD = 3.91$, range: 50–67). Regarding educational qualifications, 24.1% held a high school diploma, 5.3% a bachelor's degree, and 70.6% a master's degree or higher. At the time of data collection, 72.8% of participants had been working in the same school for more than 15 years, 17% between 7 and 15 years, and the remaining participants for less than 7 years.

3.2.Measures

Measures were administered in Italian, using the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970) for scales that did not already have an Italian version. Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale (with the additional option to select “I don't know”), unless otherwise noted.

3.2.1. *Profile Indicators*

To measure organizational practices, we used the Later Life Workplace Index (LLWI; Wilckens et al., 2021). The LLWI comprises nine distinct domains of organizational practices related to an aging workforce. For this study, we included only four dimensions: age-friendly organizational climate, leadership style, work design characteristics, and individual development opportunities. The remaining LLWI dimensions (health management, knowledge management, transition to retirement,

continued employment opportunities, health and retirement coverage) were not considered in this study, as they pertain to aspects not applicable to the context of Italian schools. To enhance the face validity of the questionnaire, we included an introductory text inviting teachers to adapt certain terms in the items to their work context (for example, interpreting “organization” as “school” and “manager” as “school principal”).

The organizational climate scale assesses equality of opportunity (3 items, e.g., “In my organization, regardless of age, all employees have the same opportunities”), positive image of age (3 items, e.g., “In our organization, there is a positive attitude towards older employees”), open and target-group specific communication (4 items, e.g., “In our organization, the possibilities of working for older employees are openly communicated”). CFA results indicated acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(32) = 229$, $p < .001$, CFI = .93, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .05.

The leadership scale includes appreciation (2 items, e.g., “Managers of our organization show appreciation both for current work results as well as for the overall performance of their employees”), and responsiveness to individuality (4 items, e.g., “Managers of our organization invest time in their employees”). CFA results indicated acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(8) = 27.5$, $p < .001$, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .01.

The work design dimension assesses flexible work time arrangements (4 items, e.g., “Employees of our organization can adjust the beginning and the end of their daily working hours to their individual needs”), flexible workplaces (3 items, e.g., “Employees of our organization have the opportunity to work from home”), work according to capabilities (3 items, e.g., “In our organization, managers change the tasks of their employees in the foreseeable future (e.g., within half a year) if the tasks no longer correspond to the employee's ability to perform and to withstand stress”), ergonomic working conditions (4 items, e.g., “In our organization, workplaces are designed according to ergonomic recommendations”). CFA results indicated acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(71) = 210$, $p < .001$, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .03.

The Individual Development dimension includes Continuous development planning (3 items, e.g., “In our organization, development prospects and qualification requirements are identified for employees, regardless of age”), Appropriate solutions for training and development (2 items, e.g., “In our organization, older employees are offered training to learn new competencies and develop their expertise”), Enabling development steps and job changes (3 items, e.g., “In our organization, employees, regardless of age, are involved in projects according to their competencies and developmental interests”). CFA results indicated acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(13) = 55.1$, $p < .001$, CFI = .97, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .02.

To assess career adaptability, we used the Italian version of the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale–Short Form (CAAS-SF; Maggiori et al., 2015). The CAAS-SF consists of four 3-item subscales measuring: concern (e.g., “Thinking about what my future will be like”), control (e.g., “Making decisions by myself”), curiosity (e.g., “Looking for opportunities to grow as a person”), confidence (e.g., “Taking care to do things well”). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “not strong” to “strongest”. CFA results indicated acceptable model fit after adding two intra-factor correlations: $\chi^2(46) = 273$, $p < .001$, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .03.

3.2.2. Outcome Variables

Work Engagement was assessed using the Italian version (Balducci et al., 2010) of the three-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2019; sample item: “I am enthusiastic about my job”).

Self-rated Perceived Health Status was assessed using four items from Adams and Beehr (1998; sample item: “My health is better than most people my age”).

Self-Rated Job Performance was measured using four items from Eisenberger et al. (2001; sample item: “I meet the formal performance requirements of my job”).

3.2.3. Control Variables

Two individual characteristics were examined as predictors of both profile membership and outcome variables across profiles: age and gender (1 = female, 2 = male).

3.3. Analytical Procedure And Data Analysis

3.3.1. Descriptive Statistics And Measurement Models

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. A preliminary confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the psychometric properties of the measures. Analyses were performed in Jamovi (version 2.6; The Jamovi Project, 2025). We used maximum likelihood (ML) estimation, and model fit was evaluated using chi-square (χ^2), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Cut-off values greater than .90 for CFI and TLI and less than .08 for SRMR and RMSEA were considered indicative of acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

3.3.2. Latent Profile Analysis

Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) was conducted to identify subgroups based on organizational practices and career adaptability. LPA uses continuous variables to determine the optimal number of profiles, assign individuals to profiles based on estimated probabilities, and examine the psychological mechanisms associated with profile membership (Collins & Lanza, 2013; Ferguson et al., 2019; Spurk et al., 2020).

The analysis was performed using Mplus version 8.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017), which provides advanced estimation techniques specifically suited for this approach. We tested several models, ranging from one to seven profiles. Parameters were estimated using Maximum Likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) and Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) to handle missing data. To avoid local maxima, we used 10,000 random sets of start values with 1,000 iterations for each set, retaining the 250 best solutions for final stage optimization.

Model fit was evaluated using several indicators: log-likelihood value, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), sample-adjusted BIC (SABIC), Lo-Mendell-Rubin Likelihood Ratio Test (LMR), Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test (BLRT), and entropy values. Additional criteria for determining the final solution included profile size (models with profiles smaller than 5% of the sample were excluded) and the interpretability of the profiles (Spurk et al., 2020).

Lower values of log-likelihood, AIC, and BIC indicate better model fit, while significant LMR and BLRT p-values support the selection of a model with k profiles over one with $k+1$ profiles. Entropy values between 0.60 and 0.80 indicate good classification accuracy (Howard & Hoffman, 2018; Muthén, 2004; Nylund et al., 2007; Spurk et al., 2020).

After identifying the best-fitting model, we examined profile characteristics and assigned descriptive labels to each profile. To assist in this process, we conducted ANOVA and post-hoc Tukey tests to verify whether significant differences existed among the items that defined each profile.

Subsequently, we used the BCH procedure in Mplus (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014, 2021; Nylund-Gibson, 2019) for two main purposes: first, to explore the distribution of the outcome variables (work engagement, perceived health, self-rated performance) and predictors (age, gender) across profiles; second, to assess whether age and gender significantly predicted profile membership and the distribution of outcome variables across profiles.

Following the three-step BCH procedure (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2021), we first saved the BCH weights to account for uncertainty in class assignments. We then estimated an auxiliary model to test the class-specific regression of work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance on age and gender, and to evaluate whether significant differences in profile membership were associated with these predictors.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics, reliability index, and correlations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliability coefficients of the variables.

	Organizational Climate	Leadership	Work Design	Individual Development	CAAS	Work Engagement	Perceived Health	Job Performance	Age	Gender
Organizational Climate	—									
Leadership	0.642 ***	—								
Work Design	0.426 ***	0.488 ***	—							
Individual Development	0.599 ***	0.644 ***	0.580 ***	—						
CAAS	0.022	0.014	-0.017	-0.018	—					
Work Engagement	0.351 ***	0.379 ***	0.277 ***	0.356 ***	0.167 ***	—				
Perceived Health	0.216 ***	0.171 ***	0.143 ***	0.172 ***	0.140 ***	0.226 ***	—			
Job Performance	0.075 *	0.006	-0.031	0.046	0.240 ***	0.236 ***	0.130 ***	—		
Age	0.003	0.0010	0.014	0.004	-0.065	-0.056	-0.144***	-0.057	—	
Gender	-0.045	-0.014	0.039	0.019	-0.011	0.041	-0.032	-0.048	0.088*	—
α	0.86	0.92	0.86	0.84	0.92	0.70	0.87	0.84		
M	4.56	4.24	2.40	3.55	3.87	6.10	4.85	6.43	56.9	1.16
SD	1.21	1.56	0.96	1.28	0.64	0.95	1.44	0.64	3.91	0.370

Note: CAAS = Career Adapt-abilities; α = Cronbach's Alpha; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

The dimensions related to organizational practices show positive and significant correlations with one another, as well as with work engagement and perceived health; only organizational climate shows a weak but significant correlation ($r = .075$, $p < .05$) with self-rated performance.

None of the organizational practices, on the other hand, does significantly correlate with career adaptability, but the latter does show significant and positive correlations with all three outcome variables (work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance).

All three outcome variables are positively and significantly correlated with one another.

Age is significantly correlated only with perceived health ($r = -.144, p < .001$), while gender is significantly correlated only with age ($r = .088, p < .05$),

4.2.Latent Profile Analysis

Table 2 presents the fit indices for the models ranging from one to seven profiles. The best-fitting model was the one with four profiles for several reasons: the log-likelihood, AIC, and BIC values showed only minimal improvement beyond four profiles, as seen in the elbow plots; entropy values reached their highest level with the addition of the fourth profile; the p-values for both the LMR and BLRT tests were significant. Furthermore, in the models with more than four profiles, the smallest class fell below the 5% sample threshold, making profile interpretability more difficult.

Table 2

Fit indices for profile solutions 1 to 7.

Model	Log-likelihood	AIC	BIC	SABIC	Entropy	Smallest class %	LMR p-value	LMR meaning	BLRT p-value	BLRT meaning
1	-5593.792	11207.584	11254.430	11222.675			—	—	—	—
2	-5092.439	10216.878	10291.831	10241.023	0.808	0.49	0.000	2>1	0.0000	2>1
3	-4951.015	9946.029	10049.091	9979.228	0.789	0.18	0.0138	3>2	0.0000	3>2
4	-4896.171	9848.342	9979.511	9890.596	0.744	0.12	0.0304	4>3	0.0000	4>3
5	-4861.309	9790.619	9949.896	9841.927	0.775	0.01	0.7348	5<4	0.0000	5>4
6	-4839.249	9758.498	9945.882	9818.860	0.800	0.005	0.0088	6>5	0.0000	6>5
7	-4820.693	9733.387	9948.879	9802.803	0.780	0.008	0.3306	7<6	0.0000	7>6

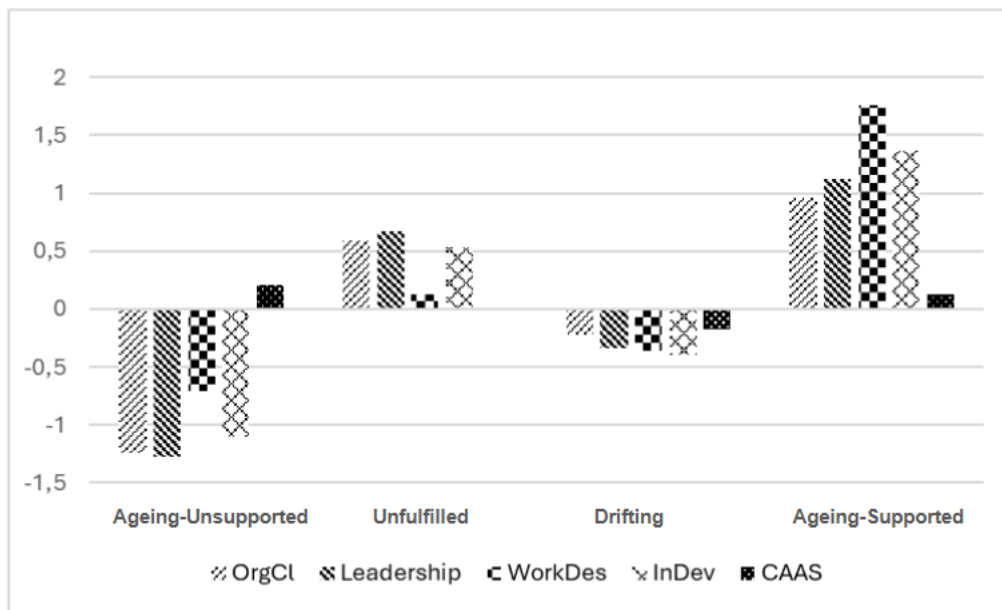
Note. $n = 800$; The LMR test and the BLRT compare the current model to a model with $k-1$ profiles.

AIC = Akaike's Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; SABIC = Sample-Adjusted BIC; LMR = Lo-Mendell Ruben; BLRT = bootstrap likelihood ratio test.

Figure 1 displays the graphical representation of the four profiles and the indicator values relative to the sample mean level ($M = 0$).

Figure 1

Results from the 4-profile solution



Note. OrgCl = Organizational Climate; WorkDes = Work design; InDev = Individual development; CAAS = Career Adapt-abilities

Table 3 presents the standardized scores within each profile.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics in the 4-profile solution

Variables	Aging-Unsupported (n = 157; 19%)	Unfulfilled (n = 266; 33%)	Drifting (n = 273; 34%)	Aging-Supported (n = 102; 12%)
Organizational Climate	-1.241	0.587	-0.224	0.963
Leadership	-1.274	0.675	-0.340	1.122
Work Design	-0.713	0.130	-0.364	1.760
Individual Development	-1.107	0.532	-0.397	1.369
CAAS	0.202	0.009	-0.174	0.129

Note: CAAS = Career Adapt-abilities.

The first profile includes teachers who report the lowest levels of organizational practices, and across all categories/types, but, at the same time, these teachers show relatively higher levels of career adaptability. For this reason, the profile was labeled *Aging-Unsupported*, to highlight the limited organizational attention experienced by these teachers in their schools. The second profile shows the level of organizational practices to be moderately below the average, and career adaptability levels that are very close to the mean. Due to this moderately positive but unremarkable

position, we chose to label this profile *Unfulfilled*. The third profile was labeled *Drifting*, as it shows below-average levels of organizational practices and, simultaneously, the lowest levels of career adaptability. Finally, the fourth group was labeled *Aging-Supported*: these are teachers who work in schools with high levels of organizational practices and who report high levels of career adaptability.

4.2.1. Predictors And Outcomes Of Profile Membership

Table 4 presents the standardized values of the predictors (age and gender) and outcome variables (work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance) across profiles. Table 5 shows the results from pair-wise comparisons of standardized score differences across profiles using the BCH method. The results indicate that levels of work engagement and perceived health vary across the different profiles, portraying the level of organizational practices. Profiles with below-average values of organizational practices, such as *Aging-Unsupported* and *Drifting*, show lower levels of engagement and perceived health. In contrast, profiles with above-average values, such as *Unfulfilled* and *Aging-Supported*, show higher levels of engagement and perceived health. These differences across profiles were consistently significant, as shown in Table 5. By contrast, there were no significant differences between profiles in terms of self-rated performance: the variations across profiles were minimal and not significant in any case. Similarly, there were no substantial differences between profiles with respect to age and gender either.

Table 4

Descriptive statistics of predictors and outcome variables across profiles.

Variables	Aging-Unsupported (n = 157; 19%)	Unfulfilled (n = 266; 33%)	Drifting (n = 273; 34%)	Aging-Supported (n = 102; 12%)
Age	57.1544	56.7528	56.6749	57.3299
Gender	1.2215	1.1513	1.1413	1.1753
Work Engagement	-0.6123	0.3469	-0.2017	0.5572
Perceived Health	-0.2989	0.1364	-0.0879	0.3298
Job Performance	0.0106	0.0186	-0.0488	0.0762

Note. Gender: 1 = Female, 2 = Male.

Table 5*Predictors and outcome variables pair-wise comparisons*

Variable	Aging- Unsupported vs. Unfulfilled		Aging- Unsupported vs. Drifting		Aging- Unsupported vs. Aging- Supported		Unfulfilled vs. Drifting		Unfulfilled vs. Aging- Supported		Drifting vs. Aging- Supported	
	χ^2	p-value	χ^2	p-value	χ^2	p-value	χ^2	p-value	χ^2	p-value	χ^2	p-value
Age	1.189	0.276	1.395	0.238	0.086	0.770	0.067	0.796	1.364	0.243	2.214	0.137
Gender	3.106	0.078	3.880	0.049	0.902	0.342	0.279	0.598	0.231	0.631	0.910	0.340
Work												
Engagement	67.583	0.000	7.931	0.005	87.086	0.000	36.801	0.000	5.546	0.019	71.782	0.000
Perceived Health	16.917	0.000	3.123	0.077	21.879	0.000	4.155	0.042	2.166	0.141	10.929	0.001
Job Performance	0.000	0.985	0.375	0.540	0.139	0.709	0.611	0.434	0.140	0.708	0.949	0.330

Note. Gender: 1 = Female, 2 = Male.

Finally, using the BCH procedure, we tested age and gender as class-specific predictors for the outcome variables (work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance), and we examined whether there were significant differences in profile membership based on age and gender. The results are shown in Tables 6 and 7. Age and gender did not emerge as significant predictors for the outcome variables within profiles. Similarly, they did not appear to be significant predictors for profile membership. In other words, age and gender do not account for the differences in outcome variables across the identified profiles.

To verify that the relationship between age and the outcome variables was not curvilinear, we also categorized age into two- and three-level groupings, each with an approximately equal number of participants, and conducted an ANOVA. The cut-off values for the two-group categorization were 50–57 and 58–67; for the three-group categorization, they were 50–54, 55–59, and 60–65. The

ANOVA test was not significant for all outcome variables (work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance).

Table 6

Predictors of work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance across profiles

Covariate	Aging- Unsupported			Unfulfilled			Drifting			Aging-Supported		
	WE	PH	JP	WE	PH	JP	WE	PH	JP	WE	PH	JP
Age	-.041	-	-	-.001	.012	-	-.048	.032	-	.003	-	.026
		.035	.028			.002			.047		.020	
Gender	-.072	-	-	-.299	.016	-	-.047	-	.052	-.051	.239	.020
		.067	.067			.045		.149				

Note: Scores indicate the slope coefficients. WE = Work Engagement, PH = Perceived health, JP =

Job Performance. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 7

Predictors of profile membership

Predictor	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3
Age	-0.013	-0.044	-0.051
Gender	0.350	-0.169	-0.346

Note: Profile 4 served as the reference group. Scores indicate the slope coefficients. *** $p < .001$; **

$p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

5. Discussion

The first aim of the study was to identify the profiles that emerge among aging Italian teachers based on combinations of perceived organizational practices for the aging workforce and career adaptability. The results revealed four distinct profiles among Italian teachers over 50: Aging-Unsupported (19%), Unfulfilled (33%), Drifting (34%), and Aging-Supported (12%). A closer examination of these profiles shows that the two profiles characterized by below-average levels of perceived organizational practices (Aging-Unsupported and Drifting) comprise 53% of the sample. In other words, just over half of the teachers studied perceive that their schools do not support them in terms of an age-friendly organizational climate, that school leaders do not demonstrate a supportive or individualized leadership style, that opportunities to adapt workspaces, schedules, and

tasks are limited, and that professional development opportunities are scarce, inappropriate, and not designed to promote continuous, strategic growth. The levels of career adaptability in these two groups vary considerably: the Aging-Unsupported group demonstrates the highest levels of adaptability, while the Drifting group shows the lowest.

The other two profiles (Unfulfilled and Aging-Supported) exhibit very different characteristics. Their perceived levels of organizational practices are above average, indicating that these teachers work in schools where they feel supported by the organization, where leaders are attentive to their needs, where work can be adapted to individual necessities, and where professional development is prioritized. Notably, the Unfulfilled profile is characterized by only slightly above-average levels of work design and career adaptability.

The four-class model identified holds practical significance as it enables the identification of different patterns that may guide more targeted and effective interventions. Indeed, the literature has extensively explored the effects that organizational practices—specifically, organizational climate, leadership, work design, and individual development—can have on well-being (Desrumaux et al., 2015; Veliz & Mainsbridge, 2024), stress levels (Mannix-McNamara et al., 2021), job satisfaction (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009; Bogler, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012; Xiaofu & Qiwen, 2007), and turnover intention (Carr et al., 2016; Messe, 2012; Van Solinge & Henkens, 2014; Walker, 2005). The finding that 53% of the sample works in schools where organizational practices are perceived as poor underscores the need for action by educational institutions.

Here, we suggest several interventions that schools could adopt to support teachers over 50. First, implementing tools such as the Later Life Workplace Index could be beneficial in helping schools diagnose areas for improvement in HR practices. Second, schools could take steps to improve attention toward older teachers by creating spaces to discuss aging openly and recognizing the unique needs of an aging workforce (Guglielmi et al., 2016; Veliz & Mainsbridge, 2024). Similarly,

fostering transformational leadership may enhance organizational commitment and the intention to delay retirement among teachers, as can distributed leadership that promotes autonomy (Choi, 2023; McCarley et al., 2014; Velarde et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2022).

Other studies have shown the positive impact of the ability to adapt one's tasks to their career stage, provided there is sufficient administrative support. Specifically in the school context, this means that late-career teachers could benefit from being allowed to focus more on instructional duties (reducing bureaucratic tasks), managerial responsibilities, or mentoring early-career teachers (Addimando, 2019; Brouhier et al., 2021; Ertürk, 2022; Geeraerts et al., 2018; Guglielmi et al., 2016; Meisser & Ahrens, 2011).

It is also crucial that principals and educational advisors facilitate continuous professional development for teachers over 50. This may include organizing individual or group discussions to identify specific interests and training needs, and supporting teachers in developing self-diagnostic skills to analyze their learning gaps. Continued professional development in the later stages of one's career plays a vital role in maintaining high job satisfaction, facilitating retention, preventing turnover and early retirement, and mitigating job demands (Brouhier et al., 2023; Day & Gu, 2007; Firestone & Pellen, 1993; Findsen, 2015; Mazzetti et al., 2020).

The second research question aimed to explore how career adaptability is related to organizational practices in shaping the identified profiles. Previous research has linked career adaptability to career satisfaction and job satisfaction (Maggiori et al., 2013; McLennan et al., 2017; Zacher, 2014; Zacher & Griffin, 2015), self-efficacy and self-rated performance (Hirschi & Valero, 2015; McLennan et al., 2017; Meng & Briscioli, 2024; Öncel, 2014), and work engagement (Chen et al., 2025; Collie et al., 2018; Collie et al., 2020b). An interesting finding from our study is that, although the overall mean of career adaptability in the sample is quite high ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.64$ on a 5-point Likert scale), significant differences exist between profiles with above-average (Aging-Unsupported, Unfulfilled, Aging-Supported) and below-average values (Drifting). Again, the four-class model proves

practically useful: principals and educational advisors could foster discussions around career adaptability skills and their relevance throughout the teaching profession. Targeted training activities could particularly benefit teachers in the Drifting profile, who show the lowest adaptability and may be at high risk of turnover. Enhancing career adaptability skills could help reduce such risk (Coetzee & Stoltz, 2015; Omar & Noordin, 2013).

The third research question aimed to understand how the perception of school organizational practices affects the ability of teachers over 50 to remain happy, healthy, and productive—specifically, how levels of work engagement (happiness), perceived health (health), and self-rated performance (productivity) vary across the identified profiles. The results indicated that profiles with low levels of perceived organizational practices (Aging-Unsupported, Drifting) exhibit significantly lower levels of work engagement and perceived health compared to those with higher levels (Unfulfilled, Aging-Supported). These findings are consistent with previous literature linking organizational climate, leadership, work design, and professional development with work engagement (Addimando, 2019; Bakker et al., 2007; Guglielmi et al., 2016; Hakanen et al., 2006; Ren et al., 2025; Rudolph & Baltes, 2017; Sahu et al., 2018; Sousa et al., 2019). Similarly, organizational practices and work characteristics have been shown to impact teacher health and work ability (Ford et al., 2019; Kinnunen et al., 2019; Lipponen et al., 2022; Ünlü & Filiz, 2019; Vangelova et al., 2018; Virtanen et al., 2020).

Thus, schools must strive to maintain high levels of engagement and health among their teachers, both to promote well-being and to reduce turnover intention (Damman et al., 2011; Räsänen et al., 2020). The four-class model again proves valuable in identifying teacher groups for targeted action. Some studies have found that older teachers benefit most from recovery time and breaks (Kinnunen et al., 2019; Virtanen et al., 2020). Teachers may also benefit from training in stress management, promotion of healthy lifestyles, or managing aging at work (Hlad'ó et al., 2020).

In contrast, self-rated performance does not appear to be affected by profile membership. That is, different perceptions of organizational practices do not seem to significantly influence how Italian teachers evaluate their own performance. This contrasts with prior research showing strong links between organizational practices and self-rated performance and self-efficacy. Numerous studies have demonstrated this connection with organizational climate (Collie et al., 2012; Domitrovich et al., 2019; Malloy et al., 2015; Reaves & Cozzens, 2018; Ren et al., 2025), school leadership (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Bogler, 2001; Choi, 2023; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Li & Liu, 2020;), work design and autonomy (Addimando, 2019; Betoret, 2009; Choi & Mao, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), and professional development (Guskey, 2002; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Mazzetti et al., 2020; Ross & Bruce, 2007; Yoo, 2016).

However, this result is not entirely surprising. Findings from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) have reported similar levels among Italian teachers (Argentin, 2018; De Sanctis, 2010; Fackler & Malemberg, 2016; OECD, 2014, 2019). For example, in the 2018 TALIS survey, the percentage of Italian teachers who believed they could help their students value learning was among the highest across countries (96.2%, rank 5/49), and 95.1% (rank 4/49) believed they could help students think critically. As Foschi notes, a misalignment exists between the training received by Italian teachers (and their expressed training needs) and their perceived preparedness for teaching (Foschi, 2021). This misalignment also emerges in representations of what knowledge, skills, and dispositions are necessary for assessment literacy. Pastore and Mincu (2024) attribute this gap to the lack of professional standards in the Italian school system and a low propensity for feedback: 27% of teachers report never having received feedback in their schools (OECD average 10%; OECD, 2019). Furthermore, the study sample consisted of teachers over 50, 72.8% of whom had worked in the same school for more than 15 years—mostly veteran teachers with high levels of expertise. This likely explains the generally high self-rated performance (Argentin, 2018; Carrillo &

Flores, 2017; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). This observation may also apply to the Italian teaching population in general, given that one in two teachers (48%) in Italy is aged 50 or older.

Another noteworthy finding relates to the relationship between career adaptability and the outcome variables in this study. The Aging-Unsupported profile, despite showing the lowest levels of perceived organizational practices, exhibits the highest career adaptability. However, it also demonstrates the lowest levels of engagement and perceived health. Thus, career adaptability as a personal resource does not appear sufficient to offset the negative effects of poor organizational practices on these outcomes. This finding contributes a new perspective to existing research linking career adaptability to work engagement (Chen et al., 2024; Collie et al., 2018; Collie et al., 2020b) and well-being (Konstam et al., 2015; Maggiori et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2019). However, this relationship warrants further investigation using different analytical approaches.

The final research question of the study aimed to determine the extent to which age and gender influence profile membership and levels of work engagement, perceived health, and self-rated performance among older teachers. The findings show that neither age nor gender significantly predicts the distribution of outcome variables across profiles. In other words, the perception of organizational practices and their impact on engagement, health, and self-rated performance does not appear to be influenced by teachers' age or gender. These findings diverge somewhat from the literature that has identified links between age and gender and work engagement (Antonoiu et al., 2006; Douglas & Roberts, 2020; Goštautaitė & Bučiūnienė, 2015; Perera et al., 2018; Rudolph & Baltes, 2017), perceived health (Anson et al., 1993; Peris-Ramos et al., 2024; Serrano et al., 2008), and self-rated performance and self-efficacy (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Mullola et al., 2011; Šabić et al., 2022).

One possible explanation is that the perception of organizational practices within a school is relatively uniform and affects all teachers working in the same environment, resulting in a homogeneous experience largely immune to differences in age or gender. In other words, in schools

where the organizational climate is poor, where job characteristics cannot be adapted, and where professional development is inadequate, these conditions affect all teachers similarly—regardless of whether they are 50, 55, or 65 years old, male or female. However, a limitation of this study—and a recommendation for future research—is to investigate whether perceptions of organizational practices are influenced by the gender of the school principal and whether gender congruence between principal and teacher leads to significant differences.

6. Implications, Limitations, And Future Directions

This study provides valuable new insights for various stakeholders in the education sector. Specifically, the findings reveal that approximately half of the participants fall into at-risk profiles—namely, the *Aging-Unsupported* and *Drifting* groups. These profiles are characterized by low levels of perceived organizational practices, low engagement, and poor perceived health, indicating an urgent need for targeted interventions. In the absence of adequate support measures, these teachers may face progressive disengagement, burnout, or turnover.

To address these challenges, schools should consider implementing initiatives aimed at enhancing career adaptability and reducing stress among teaching staff. Potential interventions include peer coaching programs, workshops focused on reflective career planning, stress management courses, and the promotion of collaborative work environments. The introduction of training programs tailored to teachers' age and career stage can also make a significant contribution to maintaining high levels of engagement and performance (Lee et al., 2021; Van der Heijden, 2015). Promoting the development of mentoring pathways and knowledge-sharing between younger and older teachers is also a way to acknowledge the generativity of older teachers and enhance their motivation and engagement (Santoro et al., 2012; Wiktorowicz et al., 2022). At the policy level, the adoption of internal monitoring tools to assess organizational well-being among teachers over the age of 50 would be beneficial. Such tools could serve as a basis for multi-level interventions targeting organizational climate, leadership style, work flexibility, and continuous training. It is essential that

these responsibilities do not fall solely on school leaders, but rather are supported by systemic policies that promote regular well-being assessments and shared accountability mechanisms.

Additionally, the study identified a group of teachers—referred to as the *Unfulfilled*—who, despite displaying moderately positive levels of organizational practices, engagement, and perceived health, also show areas where institutional support could be strengthened (e.g., work design and career adaptability). Although this group does not exhibit overt signs of distress, they may be at risk of stagnation or dissatisfaction if not adequately supported. These teachers could benefit from structured opportunities for reflection and the development of career adaptability. More broadly, they would benefit from spaces where they can express their needs regarding the work flexibility they wish to implement in their roles.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, although the scales employed were carefully selected and adapted from validated instruments in related fields, their face validity in the context of teacher education may still be limited. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents causal interpretation of the observed relationships. Future longitudinal research is needed to explore how these dynamics evolve over time and to assess the long-term effects of potential interventions.

Third, the sample was limited to Italian teachers, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other educational systems or cultural contexts. Future studies should aim to replicate the research in other countries and school systems to enhance external validity. Moreover, the study did not collect data on the regional origin of the participants. Given the diversity of educational contexts across Italy, ensuring broader geographic representation would be advisable in future research.

Additional contextual variables—such as school location (urban or rural), student population characteristics, or socio-economic conditions—could further help explain the observed relationships and should be included in future studies.

Finally, a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative components such as interviews or focus groups, could enrich the quantitative findings and offer a deeper understanding of teachers' subjective experiences related to their professional well-being and career development.

Chapter 5. Stepping Quietly into the School: An Analysis of the Professional Integration of Second-Career Teachers over 50

Abstract

Teacher shortages have prompted the recruitment of second-career teachers (SCTs), yet little is known about the professional integration of individuals entering teaching after age fifty, particularly in contexts lacking formal induction pathways. This study investigates factors influencing career sustainability and the experience of career shocks among SCTs in Italy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 teachers who entered the profession later in life, including those with prior careers and those whose first work experience was teaching. Thematic analysis revealed that major challenges included bureaucratic obstacles, precarious contracts, classroom management responsibilities, high workloads, administrative demands, and balancing family caregiving. Positive factors supporting sustainable careers comprised prior life experience, maturity, vocational commitment, collegial support, constructive parental relationships, and targeted professional development. Findings highlight the interplay of individual and contextual factors in shaping SCTs' successful adaptation and underscore the need for structured induction, tailored training, and organizational support to enhance retention and capitalize on the contributions of mature-age entrants.

1. Introduction

Teacher shortages represent a phenomenon that affects educational systems in many countries worldwide, making it necessary to adopt alternative strategies to ensure a complete teaching workforce (Magni, 2024; OECD, 2018). In fact, 26 out of 38 European countries reported teacher shortages in several subjects (Eurydice, 2018), with STEM disciplines being particularly affected (Hoffkamp & Koch, 2025; Shwartz & Dori, 2020). One of the strategies adopted to address the issue is the recruitment of second career teachers (SCTs), that is, workers who leave a previous career to dedicate themselves to teaching, usually at a relatively mature age (Castro & Bauml, 2009; Powers,

2002; Tigchelaar et al., 2014). Some governments have implemented recruitment policies to attract SCTs and established alternative training pathways to facilitate their entry into the profession (Kee, 2011; Paniagua & Sánchez-Martí, 2018). SCTs represent approximately 25% of new teachers in the US, 27% in the UK (Paniagua & Sánchez-Martí, 2018), and around 40% of new entrant teachers in secondary schools in French-speaking Belgium (Coppe, 2022).

Entering the teaching profession entails for SCTs the development of a new identity as educators and brings about numerous tensions (Hogg et al., 2024). According to Van Heijst and colleagues (2025), the professional identity of second career teachers develops through three interconnected dimensions. The first concerns personal characteristics: with maturity and life experience, they tend to reflect on who they are as individuals and attempt to integrate this self-perception with the image of the teacher they are and aspire to become. This process may generate challenges, for example, when their personal disposition contrasts with the demands of classroom authority (Hollowell, 2025). The second dimension involves skills and knowledge: prior professional experience often provides valuable resources that can enrich their teaching, such as linking lessons to real-world situations. However, not all previous competencies are directly applicable, and in some cases, they may even hinder professional growth (Den Hertog et al., 2023, 2025). At the same time, through training and classroom practice, they gradually acquire new expertise that supports the construction of their professional identity. The third dimension relates to motives and ideals: these influence both their decision to enter teaching and the way they shape their professional trajectory. Such drivers range from pragmatic concerns like job stability to altruistic goals such as contributing to society, as well as personal aspirations like self-development or engaging with students. While these ideals can be strong sources of motivation, they may also lead to disillusionment if they prove unrealistic.

In response to the growing demand for teachers, research has initially focused on how to attract these new professionals into schools and on the motivations that drive them to teach (Coppe et al., 2021; Gehrman & Germer, 2025; Lucksnat et al., 2022; Richardson & Watt, 2005), leaving partly

aside the issue of their retention (Haim & Amdur, 2016; Lucksnat et al., 2022). Research evidence has shown that attrition rates are particularly high among SCTs (Chambers Mack et al., 2019; Laming & Horne, 2013; Redding & Smith, 2016; Shen & Palmer, 2005). Although they are generally highly motivated (Lucksnat et al., 2022), SCTs face numerous challenges related to their career transition: the effort of rebuilding a professional identity, adapting to a complex environment with heavy workloads (Redding & Smith, 2016; Tigchelaar et al., 2010), a gap between ideal and reality (Ruitenburt & Tigchelaar, 2021), training that is not always adequate or tailored (Tigchelaar et al., 2010), and inconsistent support from administration, leadership, and colleagues, which can lead to social isolation and reduced familiarization with the new profession (Brindley & Parker, 2010; Coppe et al., 2023; Haim & Amdur, 2016). All these factors may cause SCTs to leave the profession, hence the metaphor of a “revolving door” (Ingersoll, 2001; Tigchelaar et al., 2008). Identifying the reasons why SCTs can be successfully retained in schools is therefore not only important for addressing the shortage of qualified and motivated teachers, but also because there is evidence of many advantages linked to the innovations SCTs bring into schools thanks to their previous experiences (Aslan & Eröz, 2025; Hogg et al., 2023; Mayotte, 2003).

Italy is facing a similar issue of teacher shortages, largely due to the progressive decline in the attractiveness of the profession, caused by factors such as job dissatisfaction, low pay, and difficult working conditions (Magni, 2024). However, the shortage of teachers in Italy must also be considered alongside several contextual factors. First, the Italian teaching workforce is among the oldest in the world, with high retirement rates. Second, the proportion of women in the profession is very high (81.5%) in a country with one of the highest female unemployment rates in Europe (Carta et al., 2023). Third, the percentage of graduates compared with other comparable employment sectors is relatively low: this means a workforce with limited qualifications that may struggle to find other jobs. Fourth, Italy is one of the OECD countries with the highest number of fixed-term teaching contracts (De Sanctis, 2010; OECD, 2024). In recent years, to compensate for shortages in

primary schools, individuals with a diploma from teacher training institutes—previously the requirement to enter primary teaching before the establishment of university degrees in Primary Education—have been recruited. As a result, some SCTs choose to use this diploma to make a career shift into teaching. In some cases, these are individuals who had never worked before, except as housewives or in exclusive caregiving roles.

A substantial body of research on SCTs already exists, focusing on entry-level challenges (Frison, 2024; Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021), differences with first career teachers (FCTs; Baeten & Meeus, 2016), and how alternative training programs can be adapted to leverage prior work experiences (Van Heijst et al., 2024b; Van Renselaar et al., 2025). However, little is known about the induction processes of SCTs (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021), particularly informal ones, in contexts (such as Italy) lacking alternative entry routes. Similarly, few studies have simultaneously considered both individual and contextual factors that may affect the sustainability of a career change, which for many can represent a true career shock (Akkermans et al., 2018; Freidus, 1994), while also accounting for the generally older age of SCTs and possible issues related to ageism (Nalis et al., 2021). Older workers, with their broader life experience, often face increased expectations and responsibilities. When they transition into teaching from other professions, they may struggle to adapt to the role of novice teachers, especially if they previously held positions of expertise and recognition. For this reason, their existing skills and knowledge must be acknowledged and valued (Živković, 2021). Very little is also known about which organizational practices or family-related factors can most effectively support SCTs in their career transitions into teaching (Marcaletti, 2020; Rocco et al., 2003). Moreover, to our knowledge, no studies have investigated the entry into teaching of individuals who start working in schools later in life as their very first work experience. For these reasons, further research is needed to fill the existing gaps in the literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study addresses the issue of late entry of SCTs into the school context by drawing on two theoretical frameworks: the sustainable career framework (SCF; De Vos et al., 2020) and the career shock framework (CS; Akkermans et al., 2018).

2.1. The Sustainable Career Framework

Career sustainability concerns the unfolding of professional experiences over time, which can take shape through different patterns of continuity across multiple social contexts. This perspective adopts a multidimensional and longitudinal lens, emphasizing how careers develop through the constant interaction of individual, contextual, and temporal factors (Van der Heijden, 2005; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). A sustainable career is characterized by three core outcomes—happiness, health, and productivity—understood as evolving throughout the lifespan in response to both personal circumstances and external conditions (Van der Heijden et al., 2020). Happiness reflects the degree of alignment between one's career and personal values, aspirations, and needs, such as work-life balance or opportunities for professional growth. Health refers to overall physical and psychological well-being, mirroring the compatibility between career demands and an individual's resources and capacities. Productivity encompasses work performance, self-efficacy, and broader elements like employability and future career opportunities. Within this framework, individuals are seen as proactive agents, capable of adjusting and taking initiative to pursue meaningful and sustainable career goals.

2.2. Career Shock

Career shocks have been defined by Akkermans and colleagues (2018) as “a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career.” Events such as career changes can constitute genuine career shocks, since they may involve significant psychological and financial costs (Holtom et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2023), a substantial need for adaptation to new

situations and contexts (Brown et al., 2012), and the challenge of reconstructing a professional identity, often at an advanced age (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Newman, 1995). Akkermans and colleagues (2018) identify five attributes of career shocks: frequency, predictability/controllability, valence, duration, and source. Frequency refers to how often shocks occur, raising questions about whether repeated exposure fosters resilience or, conversely, leads to habituation and reduced reflection. Predictability and controllability concern the extent to which shocks can be anticipated or managed, with growth-oriented mindsets helping individuals focus on what is within their influence. Valence relates to whether shocks are perceived as positive or negative; while positive shocks often enhance career success, negative ones may hinder it, though they can also prompt reflection and value reassessment. Duration captures both the length of the shock and its lasting effects, with prolonged experiences often linked to more severe consequences or career change intentions.

Finally, sources of shocks can be interpersonal, organizational, environmental, or structural, with some groups more vulnerable due to systemic barriers. Importantly, sources may also serve as buffers when shocks are attributed to external rather than personal causes. Overall, career shocks shape development through complex interactions between individual agency, values, and contextual conditions.

2.3. Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to filling the research gaps outlined above regarding the professional integration of mature-age entrants into the school context. Specifically, the investigation will focus on the professional integration of teachers entering the profession after the age of fifty—individuals who have already accumulated significant life experience and are confronting the specific dynamics of the school environment for the first time.

The research questions guiding this study are therefore:

1. Which factors significantly influence career sustainability among teachers who enter the profession after the age of fifty?

2. Has late entry into the profession resulted in career shocks, either during the transition into teaching or after integration into the school context?
3. In cases where career shocks have occurred, which factors facilitated the successful overcoming of these shocks, and which acted as obstacles?

3. Methods And Results

3.1. Sampling And Participants

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach. This approach—specifically, semi-structured, in-depth interviews—was chosen because qualitative methods allow researchers to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the perspectives of a small group of individuals (Lefstein et al., 2020), as in the case of our study. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Trento (protocol number: 2024-045), the institution to which the research team is affiliated. The interviews were conducted by one researcher, either in person or via video call, between August and November 2024. Participants were informed in advance about the aims of the study, the procedures for data handling, and the measures taken to safeguard their privacy.

Interview duration ranged from thirty minutes to two hours, depending on participants' availability. Participants were recruited by one of the researchers through posts in Facebook groups for teachers and through WhatsApp groups; subsequently, a snowball sampling technique was employed. The eligibility criteria for participation were having turned fifty and having started work in a school after reaching that age. Sampling was discontinued once saturation was reached—that is, when no new data emerged from the interviews that could offer novel insights or information relevant to the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Johnson et al., 2020; Shenton, 2004; Sirwan Khalid, 2025).

The final sample consisted of twenty-two women who had entered the teaching profession in preschool or primary school after the age of fifty. Only one participant had begun teaching in an

upper-secondary school at the age of forty-eight; she was retained in the otherwise homogeneous sample to enrich the study and provide a point of comparison with the other participants.

The mean age of participants at the time of the interview was 57 years. Fifteen had previous work experience before entering the school system, while the remaining participants had been homemakers. Only one participant held a permanent contract; all others were employed on fixed-term contracts.

Table 1 presents selected characteristics of the twenty-two participants. For each, the table reports chronological age, the profession carried out before (or, in some cases, concurrently with) teaching, and the number of years of teaching experience (not necessarily continuous).

Table 1

Socio-demographic information on participants.

Participant	Age	Previous Career	Years Teaching
1	59	Banking sector	3
2	59	Employee	9
3	62	Homemaker	9
4	60	Clerk	10
5	54	Self-employed	4
6	52	Clerk	3
7	55	Homemaker	5
8	56	Clerk	4
9	60	Clerk	5
10	51	Homemaker	1
11	53	Researcher	3
12	54	Employee	4
13	61	Shopkeeper	4
14	63	Clerk	5
15	59	Clerk	6
16	62	Employee	5
17	58	Homemaker	2
18	56	Shopkeeper	4

Participant	Age	Previous Career	Years Teaching
19	55	Homemaker	4
20	60	Shopkeeper	6
21	53	Employee	4
22	53	Homemaker	3

3.2. Instrument And Procedure

The interviews followed a protocol (available in the Appendix) structured into four sections. The protocol served as a guide to collect as much information as possible regarding the participants' entry into the teaching profession, as well as their reflections and observations concerning their initial experiences in schools.

In the first section, socio-demographic information was gathered, along with details of any prior professional career in which career shocks might have occurred.

The second section explored participants' entry into the school system, including bureaucratic procedures and administrative steps required to access the profession—processes which, for many, represented a significant hurdle. This section also addressed participants' contractual situations and their future employment prospects. Furthermore, it sought to obtain information on their preparedness for teaching, including any self-initiated training activities they might have undertaken, and other forms of support they may have received—whether from the school administration, colleagues, or through formal or informal induction and mentoring activities within the schools.

The third section focused on aspects of the teachers' career sustainability. Specifically, a series of questions was posed to assess factors related to job satisfaction, perceived self-efficacy, physical and psychological well-being, as well as the resources and obstacles they encountered throughout their careers. Particular attention was given to topics such as work–life balance, family support, effective use of technology, career shocks, difficulties associated with age, career change, and adaptation to a new professional context.

The final section examined any feelings of inadequacy associated with entering the school environment at a mature age. The interview grid was applied consistently across all twenty-two cases, with only minor adjustments when participants expressed, either explicitly or implicitly, discomfort or resistance to certain questions.

3.3. Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were made after obtaining informed consent from participants. Transcriptions were produced by one of the researchers, who ensured anonymity by using an alphanumeric code generated by each participant before the interview began. Recordings and transcripts were stored on a secure server at the authors' home institution. Upon completion of the transcription process, the audio files were deleted.

Data analysis initially employed a combined inductive–deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The interplay between description and interpretation served as a central point of reflection and discussion for the three members of the analysis team.

In the first stage of analysis, two researchers conducted thematic analysis using NVivo 10 software. At this stage, both researchers independently coded the transcripts, identifying codes that addressed the research questions. This approach allowed for an initial coding process free from predefined themes, enabling new codes to emerge organically from the data.

In the second stage, the two sets of codes were compared, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion to reach the most appropriate interpretation; in cases of greater difficulty, the opinion of a third researcher was sought. Inter-rater agreement was assessed using Cohen's Kappa coefficient and the percentage agreement. The final Kappa value was 0.92 across the full set of transcripts, indicating excellent agreement, while the percentage agreement was 98.07%.

In the subsequent stage of analysis, the approach became more deductive, drawing on the categories from the study's theoretical frameworks. Specifically, the three career sustainability indicators proposed by De Vos (2020)—being happy, healthy, and productive—and their respective

sub-indicators were used as the underlying framework to organize the themes identified in the earlier stages. In addition, particular attention was paid to the emergence of references to career shocks in the interviews; these references are therefore presented either as themes themselves or as sections within broader themes. Relevant literature was also carefully considered in organizing these references (Akkermans et al., 2018). The development of the thematic tree and the naming of the themes involved the joint contribution of all three researchers participating in the study. The results of the analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

List of thematic nodes with their respective codes. On the right-hand column, the number of references.

SUSTAINABLE CAREER INDICATORS	SUB- INDICATORS	THEMATIC NODES	N° OF SUBJECTS (22)
HAPPY	Alignment Of Career And Personal Life Needs	Managing Caring Responsibilities	20 (references: 153)
	Alignment Of Career With Personal Values And Goals	Teaching As Responsibility And A Calling	20 (references: 145)
	Career Satisfaction And Subjective Career Success	Shocks experienced upon entering the profession	20 (references: 206)
		Managing (And Overcoming) Transition Shocks	14 (references: 32)
		Receiving Recognition	17 (references: 60)

HEALTHY		Salary	15 (references: 49)
	Well-Being	Reflections On Adulthood	13 (references: 50)
		Family Support	20 (references: 105)
	Physical Health	Age-Related Physical Limitations	6 (references: 9)
	Stress	Relationships With Students' Parents	12 (references: 98)
		Fear Of Being Inadequate	16 (references: 89)
		The Shock of Prejudice	15 (references: 68)
		Teaching Requires Constant Involvement	14 (references: 51)
	Organizational Citizenship Behaviors	Go The Extra Mile	19 (references: 164)
		Proactive Collaboration	18 (references: 59)
PRODUCTIVE	Employability	Skills From Previous Jobs	11 (references: 30)
		Advantages And Challenges Of Training	22 (references: 259)
	Performance	Use Of Technology	20 (references: 106)
			18 (references: 114)

	Class Management	10 (references: 41)
	The Burden of Bureaucratic and Administrative Tasks: An Unexpected Toll	22 (references: 468)
	Relationships With Colleagues	

4. Results

Happy

The first career sustainability indicator used to organize the themes is *Happy*, which, according to De Vos et al. (2020), refers to the dynamic alignment of one's career with work–life balance needs, personal values, and goals. This dimension can be captured through measures of subjective career success. The following section presents the themes identified in relation to the three sub-indicators.

A major thematic cluster concerning the *Alignment of career and personal life needs* is *Managing care responsibilities*. For many interviewees, a significant barrier to entering the profession and developing their career was the burden of family care duties (looking after children, parents, etc.). Several participants reported feeling caught between work demands and family pressures. Prioritizing family care often meant an additional workload, compounded by the absence of support networks or services, which in many cases delayed their entry into the profession:

«I've always liked teaching, yes. But unfortunately, I didn't do it before. I don't regret it though, because I raised my children». (60 years old; 10 years of experience as a teacher)

«I wish I could just do that [...]: but I have to look after my daughter, help my husband, check in on my in-laws, and bring food to my father who is ill». (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

For some, teaching only became possible once their children had grown and required less time and attention:

«When I saw that at 18 or 20, they were quite independent, I thought: now I can start. You're fine at home alone, you have the car, you don't need to be driven to swimming anymore... Now I think about myself». (60 years old; 10 years of experience as a teacher)

Conversely, some participants valued the flexibility of teaching hours, which allowed them to combine domestic work with school duties:

«Teaching gives me the peace of mind of being home with her [my daughter] in the afternoon, helping with homework, all of us being home at Christmas... from this point of view, teaching is priceless». (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

A second theme, related to *Aligning career with personal values and goals*, is *Teaching as a responsibility and a calling*. This refers to two sets of considerations regarding how interviewees perceive their profession—sometimes as a mission, a calling, or a service to pupils. The first aspect concerns motivation: for some, teaching was a genuine vocation delayed for years due to numerous factors (care responsibilities, lack of time to prepare for entry exams), but eventually pursued in their late forties:

«If it hadn't really been the job I'd wanted since I was a child, if it hadn't truly been a passion—something I put aside for years while doing other jobs because I didn't have the time to prepare for exams—then I wouldn't have fought so hard. But I decided this was my job, what I'd always wanted to do, and that I would keep going until I made it». (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

Some had initially pursued different, stable, and well-paid jobs, but never abandoned the desire to teach. Only years later—through necessity or conscious choice—did they have the chance to reinvent themselves:

«I really liked my old job, but I never let go of the idea of working with children, because I like them so much». (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

This sense of vocation is accompanied by a high regard for the teacher's role and the responsibility towards pupils. For many, working with children—the most rewarding aspect of the job—becomes a focus that helps them overlook other, less satisfying aspects (difficult relations with colleagues, bureaucratic obstacles, short-term contracts):

«My job is to help and support those pupils. I let everything else slide off me». (60 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

An additional point concerns the need to separate personal difficulties from professional life, so that one's mood does not affect students. Some participants emphasized how challenging—yet essential—it is to maintain this balance. From this perspective, the high regard in which the teaching profession is held seems, in some respects, to function as a driving force that enables teachers to overcome the difficulties they encounter. It is as if the very high standards to which the interviewees refer help them set aside obstacles in the name of a higher purpose.

«It's such an important job, and I think teachers should be tested periodically, because you can't assume you'll always be fine. Personal issues can affect you so much that you're no longer clear-headed». (63 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

For others, however, this strong sense of responsibility can heighten feelings of insecurity and fear of inadequacy—especially when entering the profession as special needs teachers without prior specific training. This can lead to doubts about their ability to provide adequate support:

«I feel inadequate. As a parent myself, if I had such a situation, I'd want my children to be supported by competent people, which isn't the same as being a good teacher. I promised myself I wouldn't accept any more special needs cases». (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

Regarding *Career satisfaction and Subjective career success*, thematic analysis revealed several significant clusters. The first concerns *Shocks experienced upon entering the profession*, encompassing major obstacles that have delayed or hindered aspiring teachers in starting and maintaining their position.

One set of challenges relates to the bureaucracy of the school system. For many, starting work felt like stepping into the unknown—an intricate world of acronyms, procedures, and regulations that can be discouraging. Support from experienced colleagues was often crucial, but not always available or easy to seek.

Another challenge was access to information on recruitment procedures. Limited technological skills or a lack of equipment were significant barriers for some, making it hard to find the necessary information online. While digital platforms could facilitate access to rankings and job postings, some participants found it difficult to visit offices in person or respond quickly to calls for temporary posts due to other work commitments.

Initial contracts were often short-term replacements in remote or unpopular schools, sometimes starting on the very day of the call, with little notice. Beyond the challenges of commuting and frequent school changes, these first assignments often involved special needs support in complex cases, with a significant emotional toll:

«I felt a bit abandoned, because on my first day, in my first year, I was put in a class with a difficult child—throwing chairs—without any preparation or anyone saying “let’s do this together”». (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

In the absence of institutionalized induction practices, each school was different. Sometimes colleagues or administrative staff provided basic guidance; more often, new teachers had to gather information piecemeal, occasionally encountering resistance. This initial shock meant facing complex demands with little help, while under pressure to perform well.

From a financial perspective, short and unstable contracts often required a second job to ensure a steady income. Many criticized the unclear management of rankings and temporary appointments, reporting long waits and poor organization in overworked school offices.

A second theme concerns the satisfaction of *Managing (and overcoming) transition shocks*. Precisely because the challenges are heavy and expectations high, successfully solving problems, supporting students, and seeing results provides great satisfaction. For some, this also meant unexpectedly managing to balance work and family and overcoming personal limitations:

«It was hard, especially organizing the family and private life. But most of all, it was about changing how you see yourself—getting past limits you didn't think you could, facing things you didn't even know existed». (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

For others, working in schools also meant overcoming the social dynamics of small towns, where community life is tightly intertwined and public opinion can be difficult to avoid. While local scrutiny could be an obstacle, many adapted by ignoring criticism or taking insensitive comments in stride, keeping their focus on personal and professional goals:

«I had to put myself out there. I know people here who went to school with me but never taught, and who gave up because they didn't feel ready or adequate». (63 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

Another source of satisfaction was *Receiving recognition* from colleagues, family members, and parents. A recurring form of recognition concerned their perseverance in achieving the goal of becoming teachers—especially when family members had doubted such a change was possible:

«Now they're proud of me. At first, they thought it was just a passing idea». (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

Similarly, praise from parents for the work done—given the high value teachers place on the profession—was a major source of pride and personal success.

Finally, satisfaction was also linked to *Salary*. For some, their first paychecks brought a pleasant sense of financial independence, allowing them to live with more ease within the family and make small personal purchases without relying on shared resources. This sense of autonomy was particularly strong among those for whom teaching was the first paid job, highlighting a greater perceived improvement compared to previous unemployment:

«It's satisfying. Before, if I wanted something, I had to ask my husband. Now I have my own money». (59 years old; 6 years of experience as a teacher)

By contrast, those with prior work experience often considered the pay inadequate for the workload, which extended beyond classroom hours and was not always recognized:

«I don't think the pay is fair. It's not just the morning hours at school—there are staff meetings, training, lesson planning, and the work you take home to prepare». (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

Healthy

The second indicator concerns health and refers to the dynamic adaptation of one's career to physical and mental abilities. In the analysis, the themes were divided into *Well-being*, *Physical Health*, and *Stress*.

Regarding the first sub-indicator, *Well-being*—understood as the balance between physical/mental resources and work demands—the first thematic cluster identified concerns certain *Reflections on Adulthood*. This cluster gathers reflections on the advantages of practicing the teaching profession at a later stage in life. One of the main advantages relates to having reached a certain level of maturity, which manifests, on the one hand, in greater self-confidence and a deeper awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses; and, on the other, in greater freedom and peace of mind, stemming from being at a stage of life when it is possible to dedicate oneself to personal goals and vocations:

«In my mature years, I was finally able to do what I truly wanted, because when you are older and have settled everything—you have done what you needed to in life, in the material sense,

bought a house, settled down—then, in my experience, you have more time to dedicate to what you enjoy». (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

Maturity also brings a different kind of authority, which interviewees see as a strength in classroom management and as fostering respectful relationships with students:

«A 50-year-old teacher has so much life experience, and that is important, because when you have a child in front of you, you can tell, just from their movements, how to frame them». (63 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

The second cluster linked to *Well-being* concerns *Family Support*, which includes accounts of closeness, empathy, and assistance from family members that significantly contributed to maintaining well-being. Such support can manifest in practical and material ways—facilitating the fulfillment of work demands and easing the management of care responsibilities—as well as in moral support, through emotional and psychological encouragement.

Assistance with technological tools emerged as crucial, especially in the context of the digital transition, which has been particularly challenging for older teachers. In many cases, children or more experienced colleagues offered help in tackling more complex technological tasks.

It is noteworthy that entering the teaching profession not only represents a new professional dimension but also prompts a reorganization of family dynamics. Joining the school system can lead to new arrangements that, with proper adaptation, foster a positive work–life balance:

«Yes, in light of what happened, maybe it's not... well, absolutely yes, it was a revolution for my whole family—a complete change—even in my relationship with my husband. He has always been very supportive, of course, but he took on a different role with the children as well». (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

The second sub-indicator relates to *Physical Health*, with the main cluster concerning certain *Age-Related Physical Limitations*. While acknowledging the positive aspects of maturity, many teachers interviewed regretted starting their teaching careers after the age of fifty. This is partly because

teaching requires considerable physical and mental energy, and partly because it demands continuous professional development:

«... it's a field I love, but I would have studied more, taken more courses. Now it's harder for me to organize myself, maybe because I've lost the habit of studying. Of course, I must still do something... But it's one thing to do it at 52, and another at 35, you know? You need to throw yourself into the job right away and not waste any experience». (63 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

Compared to younger colleagues, some teachers highlighted differences related to greater fatigue, general tiredness, and the difficulty of resuming independent study after many years.

The final sub-indicator under the *Healthy* category concerns *Stress*, which includes factors related to the perception or management of increased demands, both physical and mental, that can lead to stressful situations.

The first thematic cluster linked to stress concerns *Relationships with Students' Parents*. Interviews revealed instances of difficulties, misunderstandings, and in some cases, outright hostility, which can challenge the stability of the school environment. Such situations can generate dissatisfaction and lead either to direct confrontations with families or to the involvement of the school principal as a mediator. These conflicts risk negatively affecting the quality of work with students, creating a fragile situation that requires careful communication management. In some cases, stress stems from the difficulty in defining clear boundaries of responsibility and respect with parents:

«Yes, because there are some very meticulous parents, so they want to be involved in anything that happens in the classroom. But if we are in the classroom, we are the ones responsible for what happens at school, so we know what needs to be explained». (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

Sometimes, parents attempt to establish overly close contact with teachers, infringing on their privacy and rest time:

«At first, I was happy, but then the parents... maybe because they already knew me, they already had my phone number... Teachers are told not to give their number to parents because some can be invasive, as happened in my case». (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

A second cluster concerns *Fear of being inadequate*, including considerations about the fear of not being up to the role. This fear can arise from self-assessment or from others' opinions, potentially generating insecurity and stress. Inadequacy may be linked to a perceived lack of disciplinary or pedagogical preparation, making classroom management more difficult and the daily work more stressful:

«I thought I wouldn't be able to manage something I believed was bigger than me. I thought, maybe I can't be there for this child... They made a mistake choosing me—that's what I thought». (63 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

«The fear was just that—fear itself—because you're working with people, with children, so the fear of making mistakes, the fear of not doing well... That's what made me most anxious, wanting to ensure everything was done precisely, on time, and with attention to every detail». (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

Insecurity is also exacerbated by the lack of organizational support for certain tasks, especially those related to communication and the preparation of technical documents, such as individualized plans for students with specific needs, evaluation reports, or the presentation of results to parents, particularly when teachers do not feel sufficiently trained to complete them correctly.

In one case, an interviewee faced profound feelings of inadequacy, compounded by difficult relationships at school and minimal family support. During a meeting, some colleagues highlighted her failure to complete certain documents, making her uncomfortable and intensifying pre-existing

insecurities. This ultimately led her to decide to leave teaching altogether—a clear career shock that destabilized her professional path:

«I went to school without joy, without the pleasure of going; I went with a heavy heart and couldn't wait to go home. I couldn't have finished the school year like that. So, I decided to stop in February and not continue anymore». (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

A third cluster, partly linked to feelings of inadequacy, concerns *The Shock of Prejudice* faced by teachers due to starting to teach later in life or because of their approach to the job.

The teachers interviewed had generally entered the school system with only a secondary school diploma and felt legitimate in their role, even if they sometimes perceived looks and judgments that fueled a sense of inadequacy. They acknowledged that younger colleagues had followed more demanding educational paths (such as a master's degree), but did not consider it wrong to have seized the opportunity to enter the profession. Prejudices encountered often related to the absence of a degree, presumed insufficient preparation, and competition with younger, more qualified teachers:

*«It also depends on the person's envy. When I started here at ***, the first few days I didn't take it very well, because I felt all eyes were on me. I thought: How can I be working here as a teacher? But if I have the right to be here, why shouldn't I be?».* (63 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

Previous careers can also influence how others perceive them, generating surprise or skepticism, especially since the career change occurred at a later age; in some cases, this prompted teachers to choose schools far from their hometown to avoid such dynamics. Integration was complicated both by the need to adapt to established internal dynamics and by the need to overcome implicit or explicit prejudice. Interviewees reported episodes of envy or negative judgment from colleagues of different ages and seniority, with a gap between declared willingness to help and actual support, sometimes creating a less welcoming environment than expected:

«The bad thing about starting late is that everyone is surprised that I've become a teacher, everyone wonders how it could happen, because they know I used to work in a carpentry shop». (59 years old; 6 years of experience as a teacher)

Many of the interviewees responded to such prejudice by emphasizing the value of life experience—in terms of maturity and responsibility—over formal education. They stressed that being a good teacher depends more on enthusiasm and care for children than on qualifications:

«But I think it's not the title that makes you a teacher or makes you love the school—it's the experience and enthusiasm for doing things. It's useless to have the title if you don't want to do things with the children, because after all, they are children». (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

Similarly, when comparing themselves to recently graduated younger colleagues, teachers often noticed they had a greater familiarity and more natural rapport with children, and they also observed that the training they had received in the past was more solid and practice-oriented:

«Last year I worked with two girls who had just graduated—and even though they finished their degree in May, right at the end of the school year—they didn't know... There's no match between what you study and what you have to do. Whereas in our four years of high school, we already had a more practical, work-oriented education». (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

The final cluster linked to stress concerns the fact that *Teaching Requires Constant Involvement*. This includes observations that, for many interviewees, the job—especially preparation work—eats into time for hobbies and personal interests. Many stressed that the preparation required, driven by their desire to be well-prepared and to provide the best possible service to students, led them to work well beyond contracted hours:

«It's not true that a teacher's work ends at school. The time you spend at home is almost entirely absorbed by school-related tasks». (63 years old; 5 years of experience as a teacher)

This workload inevitably affects physical and mental well-being, although the motivation and satisfaction of doing the job they had long desired often offset the weight of these demands.

Productive

The last career sustainability indicator, *Productive*, concerns the dynamic adaptation of a career to the needs of the organization's human capital. It encompasses all aspects related to teachers' performance levels, their employability, and their potential for professional growth. In the analysis, the sub-indicators identified were *Organizational Citizenship Behaviors* (OCB), *Employability*, and *Performance*.

The first sub-indicator, OCB, refers to behaviors that, although not formally required by the role, remain at the discretion of the individual and contribute to the effective functioning of the organization, such as altruism, sportsmanship, and courtesy. The thematic analysis identified two thematic clusters for this type of behavior. The first, *Go the extra mile*, refers to behaviors that demonstrate civic virtue and dedication, indicating engaged and responsible participation in one's work. Specifically, it reflects the effort interviewees make to overcome difficulties, address perceived gaps, and achieve satisfactory results, dedicating significant time to preparing lessons and materials, learning to use new technologies, and constantly engaging with colleagues to improve and grow professionally:

«Yes, I also look for new materials to present, to make lessons more rewarding. And also, I try to connect with other teachers to see what they are working on, so that we can keep in step. It's all connected, I think—you can't separate the two things.» (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

Commitment also takes the form of trying to maintain professionalism at all times, avoiding the negative impact of personal problems on work performance:

«I try to keep other things out—my private life, my relationship with my children—I try to keep those out, and I think I manage fairly well.» (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

«When you walk through that gate, you have to leave your problems outside and work with the children. You have to smile even when you don't feel like it, even when you have a headache or you've had a problem; your problems have to stay outside the gate. Then, when you leave school, you pick them up again and take them home—but in there, they mustn't affect you.» (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

The second cluster of virtuous behaviors relates to *Proactive collaboration*. This includes references showing that interviewees attach great importance to collaboration among colleagues, aiming for the best possible work outcomes, and that they cultivate communication and relationships with this purpose in mind. Two main traits emerge: on one hand, flexibility and willingness to compromise and provide mutual support; on the other, communication aimed at fostering a positive climate, initiating and maintaining constructive dialogues, setting clear boundaries in relationships, and offering listening and support when needed.

The second sub-indicator, *Employability*, refers to the extent to which teachers possess characteristics that may enable them to remain engaged in the future or transition into other jobs. It includes two thematic clusters. The first, *Skills from previous jobs*, refers to technological skills—particularly dexterity and familiarity with digital tools—and relational skills, understood as the ability to interact positively with people (both adults and children):

«I think of Canva, for example—it creates diagrams, concept maps, videos, and so on. I was a bit more familiar with it, so even though I had little experience in schools, teachers with twenty years' experience would come to me for help.» (59 years old; 6 years of experience as a teacher)

«The fact that I had worked before helped me—even if it wasn't in a school, it was still an environment involving interaction with others, including children, though they were people living special lives, if we want to use that term. That really helped me a lot.» (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

For many interviewees, motherhood also acted as a facilitator in school work, as it helped them refine classroom management skills by transferring competencies acquired in the family context to the school environment. Advantages included a more empathic listening style and the ability to make children feel welcomed:

«So it's really an affectionate relationship, as if I were their mother. I maternally approach them, trying to treat them in the best way possible.» (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

The second cluster, *Advantages and challenges of training*, refers on one hand to the benefits training brings to teachers, and on the other to the difficulties they face in accessing it. While interviewees express a strong need for additional training to update and refresh their knowledge and skills, the training they can access is often limited, fee-based, or deemed useless. Many teachers complain about an unequal distribution of training opportunities, as well as high costs that discourage participation, especially for those without access to the state-provided teacher bonus:

«I spend a mountain of money on books, on courses, to keep myself updated. The Ministry should provide the training—if they want me to be prepared and updated, they have to give me the necessary materials. Instead, I have to pay for courses and buy the books myself.» (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

Often, perceived gaps are compensated for by informal training occurring among colleagues, stemming from collaboration. For many teachers, the opportunity to exchange views, observe different ways of teaching, create materials, and manage situations constitutes an (informal, imperfect) pathway of professional learning:

«During the school year, you meet new colleagues, have new experiences—you look at those who have more experience. Sometimes you learn—everyone has their own method. Every year, things change, and you realize everyone works in their own way, whether right or wrong.» (59 years old; 6 years of experience as a teacher)

The final sub-indicator, *Performance*, focuses on the challenges workers may face when trying to keep up with new work demands. The thematic analysis identified four clusters. The first, *Use of technology*, concerns the increasing presence of technology in education, which for many late entrants to the profession represents a steep wall of novelty they must quickly learn to climb. On one hand, for many teachers, digital tools are a useful and practical opportunity, not only to improve teaching but also to manage their employment status within the school—an innovation that has brought greater clarity to application processes previously perceived as cumbersome and opaque:

«And the systems—because with the increase in IT, many things are checked and managed more accurately. Before, that was the main problem—many times you would apply for something but didn't know your score or where to check it.» (59 years old; 9 years of experience as a teacher)

On the other hand, the digitalization of formerly paper-based procedures (filling out forms, class registers) presents a difficult challenge that can generate frustration and resistance if not adequately supported:

«When it comes to computers, I feel inadequate, yes. Sometimes, I don't know—I refuse. I know all the steps, I know how to do it all, but sometimes I just reject it.» (55 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

The second cluster, *Class management*, focuses on difficulties teachers experience in handling certain relational dynamics with students. Managing pupils with special educational needs or disabilities is particularly challenging, partly due to inadequate training in this area or insufficient school support. Some teachers feel unprepared to manage such cases, leading to frustration:

«I thought I wasn't able to handle something I believed was bigger than me. I thought they had made a mistake in assigning me to that child—that's what I thought.» (52 years old; 2 years of experience as a teacher)

The third cluster, *The Burden of Bureaucratic and Administrative Tasks: An Unexpected Toll*, concerns the paperwork teachers must deal with outside lesson hours, which ends up consuming considerable time that could be devoted to other activities. Many teachers would like to reduce or simplify the most repetitive procedures, streamlining the processes of filling out, consulting, and updating documents. They emphasize that reducing the administrative workload would allow them to dedicate more time and energy to the more active, direct aspects of teaching:

«Of course it's an obstacle—because all the time we spend filling in reports is time we don't spend with the children, time we don't spend really thinking about them.»

Some teachers also express little confidence that the documents they are required to produce have any real use or relevance in school administration. This fuels frustration at devoting time and energy to an activity considered essentially pointless:

«...but I do it anyway because I have to, and since I can't do things badly—even though I know perfectly well that 90% of what we write will never be read—I still do it well, because I can't do it any other way. But sometimes I wish I could just let go a bit more.» (54 years old; 4 years of experience as a teacher)

The final cluster, *Relationships with colleagues*, is particularly relevant in primary school, where class teaching often requires teamwork. Relational difficulties can significantly hinder the ability to work calmly and effectively. Conversely, when the team works well and there is good rapport, collaboration becomes fruitful. For interviewees, this also represents an opportunity for professional growth, drawing on the experience and goodwill of more senior colleagues who act as informal mentors.

5. Discussion

Teacher shortages are a growing concern affecting many countries, with the potential to disrupt school organization in multiple ways (OECD, 2018). To address this issue, many governments have increasingly relied on second-career teachers (SCTs). Nevertheless, the retention of SCT represents a

serious challenge, since these teachers face numerous difficulties during their career transition, which may become so burdensome as to drive them out of the profession (Chambers Mack et al., 2019; Laming & Horne, 2013; Redding & Smith, 2016; Shen & Palmer, 2005). While it is already clear that SCTs require specific forms of support compared to first career teachers (FCTs)—for instance, through tailored induction programs and substantial collegial assistance (Coppe et al., 2023; Van Renselaar et al., 2025)—it remains unclear which additional factors may facilitate or hinder a sustainable entry into the school context. This is especially relevant in contexts where no formal induction processes exist, where career change occurs at an advanced age with age-related considerations, or where entry into teaching, despite occurring later in life, represents the first stable professional appointment.

To investigate these issues, our study draws on 22 interviews with SCTs aged 50 or older who entered the teaching profession later in life, either after previous employment in other sectors or after having primarily worked as homemakers. Specifically, our study aims to clarify which factors significantly influence career sustainability among teachers who enter the profession after the age of fifty (RQ1); whether late entry into the profession resulted in career shocks, either during the transition into teaching or after integration into the school context (RQ2); and, in cases where career shocks occurred, which factors facilitated their successful resolution and which operated as obstacles (RQ3).

Thematic analysis yielded a set of answers to these research questions. The first major cluster of obstacles was associated with the shocks experienced during the initial entry into the profession.

Interviewed teachers, regardless of previous work experience, reported major difficulties in navigating the bureaucratic procedures required to become eligible for substitute teaching. Similarly, the first contracts—often short-term, with little notice, and frequently in schools located far from home—posed significant challenges, demanding high levels of adaptability and motivation. Another major difficulty was being suddenly confronted with the responsibility of managing a classroom or,

as frequently reported, caring for students with disabilities and special educational needs without any real training. These challenges were particularly pronounced for those with less familiarity with digital platforms or limited technological skills, making the recruitment process difficult to navigate. In Akkermans' terms (2018), these shocks are often unpredictable and low in controllability, given the procedural opacity and time-sensitive nature of temporary postings. Their valence was predominantly negative, provoking stress and feelings of inadequacy. For one teacher, in the absence of adequate support from colleagues and family, this shock ultimately resulted in leaving the profession.

Among the unexpected factors not initially anticipated by the teachers, a heavy and constant workload emerged as particularly burdensome. This was exacerbated by the fact that SCTs, often unsupported by colleagues or school staff, needed to independently acquire the necessary tools to perform their job (e.g., sourcing materials, lesson planning, organizing didactic activities). The volume of administrative work accompanying classroom teaching was also described as a negative surprise: not only because they had not expected such an extensive amount of required paperwork, but also because much of this work appeared pointless, taking time away from classroom activities, which constituted the main source of professional satisfaction for the interviewees. Both workload and administrative burden have been identified as sources of dissatisfaction in previous research on SCT (Chambers et al., 2010; Coppe et al., 2021; Laming & Horne, 2013; Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003; Tigchelaar, 2008).

Another key area of difficulty—or of support—was the relationship with parents. When negative and unsupported by school leadership, this relationship was perceived as stressful and mentally draining. Conversely, when teachers were able to establish constructive relationships with families, particularly in the case of students with special needs, parents represented an important source of professional satisfaction.

Findings regarding salary revealed apparently contradictory dynamics. For some interviewees, teaching represented their first experience of financial independence and self-earned wages, which were perceived as fair recognition of their effort and a welcome novelty compared to prior experiences. For others, however, the salary was perceived as inadequate relative to the workload, while precarious contracts and irregular income made a career change especially difficult. The issue of low pay is a recurrent finding in SCTs' literature, particularly in cases where previous employment provided higher and more stable compensation for a comparable or lighter workload (Chambers et al., 2010; Hunter-Johnson, 2015).

A second major theme concerned caregiving responsibilities and the extent of family support (or lack thereof). Roughly half of the interviewees had not previously engaged in regular professional employment, having instead dedicated themselves to caregiving tasks (raising children, caring for elderly parents). For these women, entering the teaching profession was an unexpected opportunity that only became possible once family conditions allowed it—for instance, when children had grown up and no longer required constant care. For others as well, family responsibilities strongly influenced both access to the profession and the ongoing burden of balancing domestic care with work demands. When families reorganized and redistributed roles to accommodate the teacher's new responsibilities, the transition was manageable; otherwise, the burden could become overwhelming, as also documented by Williams (2013). This result is not surprising in the Italian context, which is characterized by one of the lowest female employment rates in Europe (Carta et al., 2023).

According to Akkermans' framework (2018), these shocks were structurally sourced, external to the individual, and could act both as barriers and, when managed successfully with family support, as resilience-enhancing factors. Several teachers highlighted how the flexibility inherent in teaching schedules mitigated these shocks, allowing a gradual alignment between career and personal life, thereby transforming negative shocks into opportunities for work-life integration.

Importantly, for many women, entering teaching represented a transformative shock that reshaped their professional identity: they were no longer just mothers, but also teachers. When families resisted these transformations—whether through rigid role expectations or lack of confidence in their ability to reinvent themselves after age 50—the additional weight was significant, as revealed by thematic analysis.

A third major theme concerns the strong fear of inadequacy, which generated high stress levels and led many teachers to engage in extra work to compensate for their insecurities. This anxiety derived not only from their high standards of professionalism but also from the objective complexity of the school environment, which they had to navigate without any formal induction process. This finding appears to diverge from other studies suggesting that SCTs tend to have very high expectations of themselves early on and experience frustration when confronted with classroom challenges (Gordon & Newby Parham, 2019; Wilson & Deaney, 2010). For our participants, feelings of inadequacy were compounded by prejudices from acquaintances and colleagues regarding their ability to reinvent themselves at 50 and the quality of their teaching performance. Such prejudice was often rooted in conflicts with colleagues holding more experience or a university degree in teaching, while many of our participants had entered the profession based on secondary school diplomas.

These differences sometimes produced skepticism, reinforcing isolation and limiting opportunities for professional integration. Similar difficulties in building collegial relationships among SCT are noted by Hunter-Jackson (2015) and Watters & Diezmann (2015). Thus, the issue is not only insufficient collegial support but also active obstacles, which in a fragile transition phase can reinforce intentions to leave the profession. This aligns with other studies identifying negative attitudes towards SCT as factors reducing retention (Hunter-Johnson, 2015; Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003).

Another dimension of perceived inadequacy is related to physical limitations associated with age. Some participants reported concerns about their physical stamina and cognitive flexibility at a time when they were expected to quickly adapt to numerous novelties.

At the same time, multiple sustaining factors were identified. Some were individual characteristics, others contextual. Among the former, teachers emphasized life experience and maturity as sources of strength. Changing career at 50, though unexpected for some, was generally described as a deliberate and meaningful evolution—made at the right time of life, with greater self-awareness of one's abilities and desires, and often fulfilling a long-postponed aspiration. Motherhood itself was seen by some as a facilitating factor, providing both familiarity with the school environment and heightened empathy, consistent with findings from other SCT studies (Bar-tal et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2014). Teachers with prior professional experience sometimes reported advantages, such as proficiency with technology (Rowston et al., 2021).

Another important individual factor was their conception of teaching itself. For most participants, regardless of how they experienced entry into the profession (a long-postponed dream, a gradually formed objective, or an unexpected opportunity), teaching was viewed as a vocation requiring utmost seriousness and dedication, with children always at the center. In this perspective, personal difficulties, family tensions, or professional conflicts had to be left outside the classroom. For some, teaching was seen as a true calling, so achieving teacher status was such a high aspiration that any obstacles became secondary. This aligns with studies showing that SCT motivation is often higher than that of FCT, since their career choice tends to be more deliberate (Chambers, 2002; Williams & Forgasz, 2009).

As a result, many participants demonstrated a strong willingness to invest effort in overcoming difficulties that might otherwise derail career change. Whether commuting long distances, balancing family and work, filling perceived gaps in competence, or dedicating extra time to students and parents, they were willing to go to great lengths to meet their own standards. A similar effort was

invested in cultivating positive collegial relations, a strategic coping resource in contexts where mentoring or induction depended largely on the goodwill of available colleagues. Such strategies were also highlighted by Van Heijst et al. (2024a), who emphasized the importance of consciously reflecting on these approaches in SCTs training to foster cooperation and prevent tension. Likewise, Bar-tal et al. (2020) identified the use of communication and interpersonal skills for seeking support as a common SCT strategy. Coppe et al. (2022) also demonstrated that professional interactions with colleagues were significant for work socialization.

For the teachers interviewed, collegial support and feedback represented crucial moments for professional growth and development (Baeten & Meeus, 2016; Howe, 2006; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004), as well as for affirming their competence when recognition was offered. Other studies have shown similar results, suggesting that part of SCT engagement in teaching practices may be explained by a strong desire to prove themselves to others—school authorities, colleagues, students—by demonstrating competence in fulfilling their tasks (Hogg et al., 2024; Shwartz & Dori, 2020; Trent, 2018; Wilson & Deaney, 2010). However, because these opportunities largely depend on chance encounters in specific school contexts, this form of induction remains insecure. Schools should instead provide organizationally structured opportunities for collegial exchange and recognition, given SCT's clear need for them. Coppe et al. (2022) similarly confirmed that opportunities for collegial discussion—even in contexts with more structured induction processes—remain a substantial issue for SCTs' professional development.

Training opportunities were also highly requested, though participants frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the training offered—either because it was too theoretical, unrelated to their actual needs (particularly regarding technology), or because access to high-quality training required personal financial investment, since many courses were reserved for permanent staff. This is especially problematic, given that those most in need of training support face the greatest barriers. The lack of targeted, needs-based training for SCTs is a recurrent finding in other studies, confirming

that careful attention to their specific requirements during the design of professional development programs is a fundamental step for ensuring effective training (Kee, 2011; Van Renselaar et al., 2025).

6. Limitations And Implications For Future Research And Practice

This study has several limitations. First, although the sample was sufficient for data collection, it remains limited (22 participants) and could benefit from broader participation. Second, it is a cross-sectional study conducted in a single country. To enhance the generalizability of results, future research could extend to other samples and adopt a longitudinal design to track participants' working conditions over time.

Despite these limitations, the study addressed some gaps concerning late-life career transitions into teaching, contributed to a better understanding of the factors that promote or hinder career sustainability in such cases, and explored how career change can result in career shocks and how these shocks may affect retention.

Given the progressive aging of the population (OECD, 2023b) and the likely reliance on older workers to address teacher shortages, further research is needed to investigate the effects of late-life career changes. Specifically, following Donald and colleagues (2024), we argue that greater attention should be devoted to new drivers such as the introduction of artificial intelligence and the role of chance events, also within the school sector, and how they may influence SCT transitions. In particular, future studies could examine the impact of artificial intelligence on SCT training and assess whether it might serve as an alternative resource to compensate for limited opportunities to connect with colleagues and engage in meaningful professional exchanges. Similarly, it would be valuable to investigate how interventions aimed at raising awareness of SCTs' difficulties within schools could affect collegial reception and the willingness of peers to offer support.

On the practical side, the implications are significant for contexts such as Italy, where structured induction and support processes for entering the teaching profession are lacking. First, schools must

establish structured induction pathways for SCT, creating mentoring roles for novice teachers, diagnosing their skill gaps, and indicating targeted pathways to address them through innovative pedagogical and didactic practices (Trent, 2017). The importance of induction pathways and their positive influence on beginning teacher retention is well documented in the literature, and their implementation is of vital importance (Helms-Lorenz et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). At the same time, support should take into account SCTs' age-related needs, prior life experiences, and existing competences.

Second, peer support networks should be fostered to facilitate integration, increasing opportunities for informal professional dialogue in which teachers can engage in critical discussions, reflection and feedback about practices and pedagogical views, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and professional recognition (Aslan & Eröz, 2025; Coppe et al., 2023; Van Renselaar et al., 2025; Schwartz & Dori, 2020). Wherever possible, recognition and valorization of SCTs' prior competences should also be promoted, creating opportunities for these skills to be expressed and facilitating the construction of a new professional identity, particularly when teaching constitutes their first professional experience (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021).

Finally, access to professional development opportunities should also be facilitated for temporary teachers, promoting the dissemination of training initiatives and creating occasions to identify training needs and provide the most suitable programs, especially concerning the use of digital technologies.

Chapter 6. Discussion

1. Main Findings And Conclusions

This doctoral dissertation examined the sustainability of teachers' careers in the Italian education system through four complementary studies. Taken together, these studies explored how individual, relational, and organizational factors interact in shaping teachers' capacity to maintain adequate levels of sustainability across different stages of their careers, particularly within a context—the Italian school system—characterized by an aging workforce, institutional rigidity, limited career differentiation, and an almost complete absence of formal induction practices.

The findings converge on the idea that career sustainability is a multidimensional and dynamic construct, grounded in both structural conditions and individual agency. The research also highlights how the Italian educational context—marked by long-term systemic shortcomings, weak career guidance mechanisms, and a strong reliance on informal practices—offers a revealing case for understanding the broader challenges faced by the teaching profession in ensuring long-term vitality and professional fulfillment.

The first study, conducted through a series of interviews with 33 teachers, explored the experiences of mid- and late-career educators facing the challenge of sustaining their professional engagement over time despite limited institutional opportunities for advancement and development. The analysis revealed that teachers often compensate for systemic deficiencies through informal strategies, self-initiated learning, and relational resources to sustain a sense of meaning in their work and to cope with a perceived increase in workload. The study confirmed that the Italian school system continues to rely heavily on teachers' individual resilience and sense of vocation rather than on structured mechanisms for career development or differentiation—a condition reflected in teachers' widespread feeling of lacking recognition and respect from both institutions and society.

Furthermore, the study identified autonomy as a crucial lever for sustaining teachers' motivation and commitment. Autonomy was conceptualized not only as freedom in instructional decision-

making but also as genuine participation in school governance and the reduction of bureaucratic constraints. At the same time, the analysis emphasized the importance of leadership practices that enable rather than constrain autonomy. Transformational and participatory leadership styles were described as key to fostering teachers' engagement and collegial collaboration (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

The study also pointed to emerging opportunities within recent policy reforms, such as the introduction of the teacher tutor role for student guidance (Decree No. 328, 2022) and the establishment of a standardized qualification pathway for new teachers (DPCM, 2023). These measures represent tentative steps toward career differentiation and structured professional development. However, the extent to which they will enhance teachers' long-term career sustainability remains an open question, warranting systematic evaluation in future research.

The second study provided an exploratory analysis of the informal resources available to early-career teachers in Italy. It revealed a nuanced pattern in which new teachers operate within relationally supportive but structurally weak environments. Informal collegial exchanges, peer mentoring, and principal support emerged as significant protective factors that partially compensate for the absence of institutionalized induction frameworks. However, these informal supports were unevenly distributed across schools and often limited to emotional or practical assistance rather than developmental feedback or career-oriented guidance.

The findings highlighted a recurring imbalance between the relational and structural dimensions of professional support. While collegiality was widespread, it tended to be operational rather than developmental—focused on day-to-day problem-solving rather than shared reflection or innovation. This mirrors previous research showing that informal collegiality, though beneficial, cannot fully substitute for structured mechanisms of professional learning (Bullough, 2012; Janssen et al., 2016).

Principal support was perceived as moderately high, particularly in its emotional dimension, confirming the pivotal role of leadership in shaping the quality of early professional experiences

(Ingersoll, 2001). However, lower ratings for evaluative and instrumental support indicated a limited capacity to provide systematic feedback and pedagogical guidance, underscoring the need for school leaders to strengthen their instructional leadership competencies.

At the individual level, early-career teachers demonstrated notable self-efficacy, proactivity, and motivation despite structural constraints. They tended to rely on practical resources such as textbooks and online materials rather than on research-based sources, reflecting time pressures and limited access to academic knowledge (Van Driel & Berry, 2012). This pragmatic orientation reinforced the image of teachers as adaptive professionals focused on immediate classroom challenges, consistent with earlier findings (Korthagen, 2010).

Informal mentoring emerged as one of the most consistent resources, though typically horizontal and situational rather than hierarchical or formally structured. Mentors were usually colleagues within the same school, assisting mainly with classroom management and bureaucratic tasks. While this relational proximity fostered belonging and confidence, the absence of systematic mentoring schemes limited opportunities for deeper professional development.

Analyses of associations among variables confirmed that access to supportive resources—collegiality, leadership, and mentoring—was positively correlated with job satisfaction, well-being, and engagement, particularly during the initial phase of professional socialization. These results underscored the interdependence between organizational climate and individual agency in sustaining teachers' early careers. Over time, the strength of these associations declined, reflecting a developmental shift toward professional autonomy and self-regulation (Day & Gu, 2007; Klassen & Chiu, 2010). The study also found that proactivity and self-efficacy were significantly associated with career sustainability, suggesting that personal agency and contextual supports interact synergistically. Teachers who perceive themselves as capable and proactive tend to benefit more from available resources, while supportive environments further reinforce these self-perceptions.

Self-efficacy, in particular, emerged as a stable psychological resource associated with well-being and engagement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Contextual differences across school types further highlighted structural inequities: smaller and lower-level schools offered more collegiality and support, whereas larger or upper-secondary institutions displayed greater bureaucratic distance and weaker relational cohesion (Louis et al., 1996).

Finally, the cross-lagged analyses—though only partially conclusive—revealed high stability in teachers' satisfaction, engagement, and self-efficacy over time, suggesting that early experiences play a formative role in establishing enduring attitudes toward the profession. The initial phase of teaching thus emerges as a critical window for intervention: once professional orientations consolidate, subsequent changes become more difficult to achieve.

The third study examined the impact of aging-related organizational practices on the career sustainability of Italian teachers over fifty, identifying distinct teacher profiles based on perceived organizational support and career adaptability. The analysis revealed four profiles—*Aging-Unsupported*, *Drifting*, *Unfulfilled*, and *Aging-Supported*. The first two, characterized by below-average levels of perceived organizational practices, accounted for 53% of the sample, indicating that over half of the teachers perceive limited organizational support, inadequate individualized leadership, restricted opportunities to adapt workspaces, schedules, and tasks, and insufficient or poorly targeted professional development. These teachers also reported lower levels of work engagement and perceived health compared to the *Unfulfilled* and *Aging-Supported* profiles, whose members experienced above-average organizational support, attentive leadership, flexible work arrangements, and opportunities for professional development (Desrumaux et al., 2015; Veliz & Mainsbridge, 2024).

Career adaptability, a key personal resource, was also examined. Although mean levels were high overall, significant differences emerged across profiles: the *Drifting* profile displayed below-average

adaptability, while the other three profiles (*Aging-Unsupported*, *Unfulfilled*, and *Aging-Supported*) showed above-average levels. These findings align with previous research linking career adaptability to career satisfaction, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, self-rated performance, and work engagement (Chen et al., 2025; Collie et al., 2018, 2020b; Maggiori et al., 2013; McLennan et al., 2017). This suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing career adaptability could be particularly beneficial for teachers at risk of turnover.

Teachers in profiles characterized by low organizational support reported lower engagement and perceived health, consistent with evidence linking organizational climate, leadership, work design, and professional development to engagement and well-being (Addimando, 2019; Ren et al., 2025).

Interestingly, self-rated performance did not vary across profiles, likely due to the high expertise of the participants and the misalignment between perceived preparedness and available professional development opportunities in the Italian context (Foschi, 2021; OECD, 2019; Pastore & Mincu, 2024). Notably, the *Aging-Unsupported* profile exhibited the highest career adaptability but the lowest engagement and perceived health, suggesting that personal resources alone do not appear to offset the negative effects of inadequate organizational practices (Collie et al., 2018; Maggiori et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2019). Neither age nor gender significantly influenced profile membership or levels of engagement, health, and self-rated performance, suggesting that organizational conditions may override demographic differences (Antonoiu et al., 2006; Douglas & Roberts, 2020).

The fourth study investigated career sustainability among second-career teachers (SCTs) entering the profession after age fifty, drawing on 22 interviews with individuals transitioning from previous employment or homemaking. Three research questions guided the study: identifying factors influencing career sustainability, examining career shocks during transition or integration, and exploring factors facilitating or obstructing the successful resolution of these shocks.

Key obstacles emerged during entry into the profession. Participants reported bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining eligibility for substitution, short-term contracts often requiring relocation, and sudden

responsibilities for classroom management and students with special educational needs without formal training. For some, inadequate support from colleagues or family led to career exit (Chambers Mack et al., 2019). Unexpectedly high workloads, administrative burdens, and strained relationships with parents—particularly when unsupported by school leadership—were also cited as sources of stress and dissatisfaction, consistent with prior SCT research (Chambers et al., 2010; Coppe et al., 2021; Laming & Horne, 2013; Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003; Tigchelaar, 2008).

Family responsibilities emerged as a crucial factor. Many participants, often women who had previously been engaged in caregiving, entered teaching only once family conditions allowed—for instance, when children reached adulthood. Supportive family reorganization facilitated the transition, whereas rigid role expectations or resistance exacerbated stress (Carta et al., 2023; Williams, 2013). Transformations in professional identity were also significant: participants became teachers as well as parents, and this role negotiation had direct implications for career sustainability.

Feelings of inadequacy, high stress, and anxiety were common, stemming from classroom complexity, lack of formal induction, age-related physical limitations, and skepticism from colleagues regarding their late entry or non-traditional qualifications (Gordon & Newby Parham, 2019; Hunter-Johnson, 2015; Watters & Diezmann, 2015; Wilson & Deane, 2010). Collegial support and recognition were crucial for professional development and retention (Baeten & Meeus, 2016; Howe, 2006; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Training was often inadequate, overly theoretical, or financially inaccessible, highlighting the need for needs-based professional development (Kee, 2011; Van Renselaar et al., 2025).

Facilitating factors included individual characteristics such as maturity, life experience, deliberate career choice, and empathy derived from parenthood (Bar-tal et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2014). Many SCTs viewed teaching as a vocation, motivating substantial effort to overcome obstacles and to build collegial relationships strategically (Bar-tal et al., 2020; Chambers, 2002; Van Heijst et al., 2024a). Recognition of prior competencies and structured induction pathways were identified as essential

organizational supports (Helms-Lorenz et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Trent, 2017).

In sum, when drawing a common thread across the four studies presented in this dissertation, a coherent picture emerges concerning the professional lives of Italian teachers and the sustainability of their careers.

First, across all cases examined, informal practices play a pivotal role at every stage of the teaching career. Whether in the form of informal mentoring, peer collaboration, or self-directed learning, Italian teachers appear to compensate for the absence of structured organizational support by adopting lateral strategies that address their needs for professional growth, reflection, and meaningful relationships.

Second, the school leader emerges as a key actor in shaping teachers' perceptions of the school climate and of their opportunities—or lack thereof—for collaboration, support, and innovation. Where leadership styles are participatory and decision-making is distributed, higher levels of job satisfaction and professional engagement are observed. A related consideration concerns the role of collegial bodies and the extent to which these forums for discussion, participation, and collective decision-making are still perceived as useful, functional, and meaningful within schools.

Another critical dimension concerns teacher satisfaction, which appears to be closely linked to relationships with students and to the opportunity to cultivate positive connections—with colleagues, students, and parents—rather than to specific organizational conditions, which are often perceived as inadequate. Although autonomy and professional freedom in managing one's own teaching space remain central to teachers' sense of meaning—valued even during precarious employment phases—the absence of structured guidance throughout different career stages, limited opportunities for professional growth, insufficient financial recognition, and restricted access to high-quality professional development collectively undermine the long-term sustainability of teaching careers.

These challenges become even more pressing when considered in light of the demographic profile of the Italian teaching workforce, prompting reflection on the measures needed to ensure both the highest possible quality of teachers' professional lives and, ultimately, the best learning outcomes for students.

2. Practical Implications and Future Directions

The combined findings of the four studies suggest several practical implications for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher training institutions, highlighting both immediate and long-term strategies for enhancing career sustainability in the Italian education system. These implications address structural, relational, and individual dimensions of professional life, recognizing that sustainable careers are not solely a matter of personal resilience but depend on supportive organizational ecosystems.

Strengthening organizational practices

A recurring theme across all studies is the critical role of organizational practices in promoting engagement, well-being, and retention. Schools must move beyond reliance on informal mechanisms and implement structured pathways for professional development, mentoring, and differentiated career roles. The introduction of teacher tutor positions (Decree No. 328, 2022) and standardized qualification pathways (DPCM, 2023) represents promising steps, but their potential can only be realized if integrated into a coherent strategy that aligns leadership, work design, and developmental opportunities.

Schools should prioritize autonomy and meaningful participation in decision-making, as these factors consistently emerged as drivers of teacher engagement (Study 1). Principals must actively create environments where teachers feel empowered to influence instructional practices, contribute to school governance, and access resources without bureaucratic barriers. Transformational and participatory leadership styles are particularly effective in fostering commitment, collective efficacy, and resilience (Choi, 2023; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006).

Targeted interventions should also address the needs of specific teacher groups. Early-career teachers benefit from structured induction, mentoring programs, and feedback mechanisms that go beyond emotional support to provide career guidance and pedagogical development (Studies 2 and 4). Mid-career and aging teachers, in contrast, require differentiated roles that leverage their experience, such as mentoring, research coordination, or leadership within professional communities (Study 3). Age-friendly work adaptations—including flexible schedules, reduced administrative load, and access to professional development tailored to late-career stages—can prevent burnout and disengagement among senior teachers.

Enhancing mentoring and collegial support

Informal mentoring emerged as a critical resource for sustaining teachers' careers, yet its effectiveness depends on structure, relational quality, and alignment with career needs. Informal mentoring can provide immediate practical support but may fail to address long-term professional growth or career planning (Studies 2 and 4). Schools should therefore formalize mentoring systems, ensuring that mentors are trained, recognized, and able to provide both instructional guidance and career-oriented support. Multi-tiered mentoring approaches could also link early-career, mid-career, and late-career teachers, fostering intergenerational knowledge transfer and reinforcing professional communities.

Collegial collaboration should be expanded beyond operational problem-solving to encompass co-design of curriculum, shared research, and reflective practice. Structured opportunities for professional dialogue not only enhance instructional quality but also contribute to teachers' sense of belonging and professional identity (Study 4). For second career teachers (SCT) and teachers entering the profession later in life, access to collegial networks is especially crucial, as it helps mitigate isolation, accelerates integration, and facilitates the consolidation of a new professional identity (Study 4).

Promoting career adaptability and personal resources

Individual agency, proactivity, and self-efficacy are central to sustaining teaching careers, but they operate most effectively when supported by conducive organizational contexts (Studies 1 and 2).

Career adaptability—encompassing skills such as reflection, goal-setting, and planning—can buffer the negative effects of poor organizational practices and promote resilience (Study 3).

Interventions that develop these capabilities, including workshops on career planning, stress management, and self-directed professional learning, can empower teachers to navigate evolving policy, technological, and demographic challenges.

For aging teachers, career adaptability can be integrated into later-life professional development, enabling teachers to adjust roles, balance workload, and maintain engagement despite physical or cognitive changes. Similarly, early-career teachers can benefit from programs that enhance self-efficacy, foster proactivity, and encourage autonomous problem-solving, providing a foundation for long-term professional sustainability.

Leveraging technology and AI

Digitalization and the growing prevalence of artificial intelligence (AI) in educational contexts present both challenges and opportunities for career sustainability. Teachers may perceive AI as a source of disruption, yet it also offers potential to supplement formal training, provide adaptive learning resources, and facilitate collaboration. Future interventions should explore the use of AI-powered tools to support lesson planning, instructional assessment, and professional networking, particularly for SCT and teachers in resource-constrained environments. Similarly, AI could be deployed to monitor professional growth, identify skill gaps, and tailor individualized professional development plans, thereby complementing existing mentorship and coaching structures.

Addressing structural inequities

The research highlighted significant disparities in resource availability across school types, size, and educational level (Study 2). Smaller and lower-level schools tended to provide stronger collegial support and principal engagement, whereas larger or upper-secondary institutions faced challenges in

relational cohesion and accessibility of resources. Policymakers should address these structural inequities by allocating resources, support programs, and targeted interventions to schools with limited informal support networks, ensuring equitable access to professional development, mentoring, and leadership opportunities.

Implications for policy and teacher retention

The studies collectively underscore the urgency of designing policies that recognize teachers' life-course trajectories, diverse career entry points, and age-related needs. Structured induction programs, differentiated career pathways, and formalized mentoring systems are essential not only for early-career teachers but also for SCT and older teachers. Retention strategies should include flexible workload arrangements, recognition of prior competencies, and support for work-life integration, particularly for teachers with caregiving responsibilities (Study 4).

At a systemic level, the findings advocate for regular monitoring of teacher well-being, engagement, and professional satisfaction. Tools such as the Later Life Workplace Index (Wilckens et al., 2021) could help schools assess organizational practices, identify gaps, and design multi-level interventions. Importantly, policy and leadership support must extend beyond compliance, fostering cultures of continuous development, recognition, and shared responsibility for career sustainability.

Future research directions

Several avenues for future research emerge from these studies. Longitudinal designs could track the evolution of career sustainability across different professional phases, capturing the long-term effects of policy reforms, mentoring interventions, and technological integration. Comparative studies across countries with varying institutional contexts would also enhance the generalizability of findings. In particular, investigations into AI as a facilitator of professional development, as well as the role of chance events in shaping second career trajectories, represent promising areas of inquiry.

Further research should explore the intersection of gender, age, and school leadership, examining whether gender congruence between principals and teachers influences access to resources,

mentoring, and career development opportunities (Study 3). Similarly, studies could investigate how organizational climates moderate the effects of individual career adaptability, resilience, and self-efficacy, particularly in aging or late-entry teaching populations.

3. Final Remarks

In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrates that sustaining a teaching career is a complex, multidimensional process that hinges on the interplay between personal agency, relational support, and organizational structures. Across different career stages—from early-entry teachers to second career entrants and aging educators—success depends not solely on individual resilience but also on the availability of structured guidance, mentoring, and leadership that recognizes and leverages teachers' experience and skills.

The Italian context, with its mix of institutional rigidity, reliance on informal strategies, and demographic challenges, exemplifies both the vulnerabilities and potential strengths of educational systems worldwide. Teachers' intrinsic motivation, career adaptability, and relational engagement remain central to professional sustainability, yet their full potential can only be realized within supportive organizational ecosystems. By integrating structured induction, differentiated roles, mentorship, and adaptive policies, schools can foster long-term engagement, well-being, and retention.

Ultimately, sustaining teacher careers is not only an individual or institutional responsibility but a systemic imperative. It requires ongoing attention to evolving professional demands, demographic shifts, technological innovations, and the lived experiences of teachers. This dissertation provides both empirical evidence and actionable insights to inform policies and practices that enable teachers to thrive throughout their professional lives, ensuring educational quality, organizational resilience, and the well-being of both teachers and students.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Career Sustainability in the Teaching Profession: Hindering and Supporting Factors for Subjective Career Success – Interview Guide for the Study

1. Introduction:

The purpose of this interview is to explore the factors that contribute to the satisfaction and well-being of teachers in the province of Trento. Specifically, we would like to explore some work-related aspects that constitute a concept referred to as "subjective career success" in the scientific literature. To do so, we would like to gather your opinion and delve into your work history and your experiences in school, but most importantly, we would like to understand your perspective on what has helped or hindered your satisfaction in your career path. The interview lasts approximately one hour and with your consent we would like to record it.

2. Documentation:

Before we begin the interview, we would like to spend some time discussing data management and your personal information:

- Your participation is completely voluntary. At any time, you may interrupt the interview, refuse to answer a question, or modify a previously given response.
 - Your personal data (*explain what personal data is, if needed*) will be anonymized (*explain the procedure, if needed*), and the recording will be deleted from all sources once we have finished transcribing it. Additionally, no personal information will be disclosed in any scientific publications resulting from this research. The data will be aggregated and none of your responses will be attributable to you.
 - Any notes taken during the interview will be stored using the same security procedures.
- *Make sure everything is clear; ask for doubts or requests.*

Research dimensions	Research subdimensions	Questions
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	C) Becoming tenured: how it occurs and symbolic meaning. D) Post-tenure period.	- Looking back at those early years of teaching, who or what would you say helped you the most with your professional growth? Do you remember any particularly significant moment? - In relation to that period, what would you say were the aspects you enjoyed most about your work? What gave you satisfaction and made you happy to go to work? Can you recall any significant episodes? - On the other hand, what would you say were the negative aspects that caused worry, anger, or dissatisfaction? Can you recall any particularly significant moment? - Do you believe that the motivations you had for teaching before you started have changed since you began? C) Becoming tenured: - When did you obtain a permanent position? - How many years had you been teaching at that point? - What did acquiring a permanent position represent for you? What significance did it hold? D) Post-appointment service: - What kind of impact did acquiring a permanent position have on your life? - Would you say that your approach to teaching, your interactions with students, colleagues, and the school principal, have changed? - Reflecting now on the reasons that led you to teaching, how do you feel? Do you believe that your approach to teaching has changed? <i>[Explore with prompts to understand if there have been any trade-offs (e.g., not great</i>
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		<i>satisfaction but economic stability to start a family))]</i> - What would you say are the aspects of your work that bring you the most satisfaction now? - And what are the aspects that you like the least?
Commenting on SCS scale factors	Exploring in detail the levels of importance that participants attribute to dimensions commonly used to identify Subjective Career Success (SCS).	In the next part, we will list some dimensions that are typically considered in measuring subjective career success based on workers' interpretations. We would like you to reflect on how each of these dimensions applies to your work in school: - Achievement - Job task characteristics - Satisfaction - Learning/Personal development - Making a difference - Work-life balance - Security - Recognition - Job performance - Social working environment - Self-actualization <i>The dimensions of subjective career success are presented in written form. Participants are given moment to reflect and ask questions. Then, they are asked to indicate which of these aspects they consider most important for career success and to rank them in descending order (most important to least important).</i>
Defining "career success"	Personal definition of career success for teachers; aspects that contribute positively or negatively to career success.	In the next part, we would like to engage in a discussion with you about the concept of "career success." As mentioned earlier, it is a construct used in the field of Work Psychology to measure aspects that influence workers' overall satisfaction with their career path, not necessarily in objective terms (such as one's salary), but in subjective terms (e.g., being satisfied with the meaning of one's work, the quality of one's work, recognition in their work, work-life balance, etc.). Therefore, we would like to share a definition of "career success" to better understand what it entails and hear your thoughts on it:

		→ "the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences over time." - Thinking about your work experiences so far in education, how would you describe career success for a teacher? - What aspects of your work as a teacher make you feel successful? - On the other hand, what aspects do not make you feel successful? - Regarding those aspects, what do you believe should be changed or improved?
Space for synthesis, modifications, rethinking		Before we conclude, would you like to add or modify anything regarding what has emerged during our conversation?

Appendix 2. Professional Resources and the Development of Career Sustainability: Evidence from Early-Career Teachers in Italy – Interview Guide for the Preliminary Study

Before starting the interview, we would like to take a moment to discuss some matters related to data management and your personal information:

- Your participation is completely voluntary. You may stop the interview at any time, refuse to answer a question, or modify a response you have previously given.
- Your personal data (to be explained if needed) will be anonymized (procedure to be explained if needed), so that it will be impossible to trace your identity from the interviewer's notes in any way. Any personal information will not be disclosed, even in any scientific publications resulting from this research: all data will be presented in aggregated form, and none of your answers will be personally identifiable.
- Any notes taken during the interview will be stored only for the time necessary to carry out the research.

1. Challenges and Resources in the Early Years	- What would you say were the main challenges you faced during your first years of teaching? In which situations did you feel you needed help? - In those cases, where did you look for solutions to the problems you encountered? Which resources did you find most helpful?
2. Mentoring Relationships	- Are there any teachers (colleagues in your current school or elsewhere) with whom you have a close relationship, and who you would say have helped you improve as a professional and care about your growth? - Would you say that, in some way, this person is a model of teaching you aspire to? - What kind of activities do you do together / what kind of support does this person provide? (refer back, if needed, to the list of activities in point 2) - How often do you meet? - In what ways would you say you are similar? (e.g., personal values, personality, working styles, career goals, priorities, ways of dealing with problems at work, problem-solving styles, thinking patterns, perspectives, attitudes toward work and life, judgments in various aspects of work)

	- What kind of advice does this person give you? Do you find it accurate and useful?
3. Collaboration with Colleagues	In the school where you currently work, would you say there is a collaborative climate among teachers? How often do you: • Share teaching materials? • Plan lessons together? • Create materials collaboratively? • Observe each other's lessons / co-teach? • Receive feedback from colleagues on your work? • Discuss challenging cases involving students, parents, or problematic work situations together? And in the other schools where you worked before this one, what kind of climate did you experience? Did you engage in any of the activities mentioned above with colleagues? Are there other activities you do together that you would say have helped (or currently help) you in your work?
4. Other Resources A) Training, university courses, online lessons, master's programs B) Online materials (YouTube, educational platforms, etc.) C) Collaboration with other early-career teachers D) Contacts with teachers in other schools	I'd like to explore other resources you may have found helpful in dealing with the challenges of your first years of teaching. A) Have you enrolled in any master's programs, advanced training courses, or similar? Were they useful? If yes, why; if not, why not, and what would you have liked to be different? Did they provide you with tools you could use to address some of your initial difficulties? B) Are there online materials or resources you found particularly effective? For example, any educational platforms, YouTube channels, or people you follow on social media who gave you tips, suggestions, or (in)direct advice on how to deal with some of the challenges you faced? C) Have you had useful exchanges with other newly hired colleagues at your school, or with peers you met at university or elsewhere? Do you think collaboration or peer support has been a valuable resource for you in your first years? D) Have there been other teachers—perhaps not in your current school but whom you already knew (for example, your former teachers)—who have helped you? (If yes, follow up using the activities in point 2 and the questions in point 3.)
5. The Role of the School Leader (Principal)	What experiences have you had so far with school leaders (principals)? Have you found any who were attentive to your needs as a newly hired teacher, or who showed interest in your work and the difficulties you encountered? Have you found principals who encouraged collaboration among teachers? Do you think a principal should or could play an important role in supporting early-career teachers?

Appendix 3. Stepping Quietly into the School: An Analysis of the Professional Integration of Second-Career Teachers over 50 – Interview Guide for the Study

During this interview, I will ask you some questions about your experience as a teacher, in order to better understand aspects related to your integration into the primary school where you currently teach. Your professional career began at a slightly different stage of life compared to most teachers; this particular aspect will be the focus around which we will try to reconstruct key moments of your experience, especially in terms of your well-being at work.

I will ask you to describe in more detail some important events — such as your entry into the school where you currently teach — and to reflect on some relevant elements, for example, the challenges and the types of support you have encountered along the way.

These interviews aim to shed light on certain concepts from Work and Organizational Psychology, which is my field of study. Your contribution will help deepen these topics, always with full respect for your privacy and personal needs.

Before we begin the interview, we would like to take a few moments to address some issues related to the management of your data and personal information. It is important to remind you that:

- Your participation is completely voluntary. At any time, you may interrupt the interview, refuse to answer a question, or modify a response you have previously given.
- Your personal data (to be explained if necessary) will be anonymized (procedure to be explained if necessary), and the recording — if you agree to it — will be deleted from all storage devices once it has been fully transcribed.

In any case, no personal information will be disclosed, not even in any scientific publications resulting from this research: the data will be presented in aggregate form, and none of your responses will be personally identifiable.

- Any notes taken during the interview will be stored following the same security procedures.

(I will make sure that everything is clear, ask if there are any remaining doubts or questions, and then

request your consent to record the interview

Dimensions Of Investigation	Sub-Dimensions Of Investigation	Questions
Socio-Demographic Information		Before we begin, we will collect some basic information, including name, age, gender, marital status, presence of children, caregiving responsibilities, commuting method, and level of education.
General Work And Career Background Information	Previous Work History	To start, we can explore some aspects related to your previous work experiences: - Have you had any other jobs before this one? (If yes, explore the challenges you encountered and any relevant changes in your daily life. - If you have previously worked as a teacher, explore aspects related to your former role, the school context, and the reasons for leaving.)
Workplace Integration	Current Work Context	Now, let's move on to describing more technical aspects of your current position: - Duration of employment - Age at which you started in this role - Type of current contract - Seniority achieved and related prospects for continuation (depending on contract type) - Subjects currently taught - Weekly working hours How did this work experience begin?
	Potential Impact Of Career Shocks	- How were you engaged to take on this role? - What steps did you take to obtain this position (e.g., registration on ranking lists, submitting applications)? - What type of contract did you start your teaching career with? - What training experiences have you had in the field of teaching?
	Identification Of Teacher Training And Preparation	- What kind of training did you receive before and during the beginning of your career? (We aim to understand how you prepared for the new teaching experience through specific training programs, internships, professional development courses, etc.) - Are there specific areas of specialization or interest within teaching for which you received targeted training? (e.g., differentiated instruction, inclusive education, student behavior management) - What type of support did you receive during your integration into your current class? (e.g., mentoring from more experienced teachers, supervision, tutoring programs, informal support)

	Support And Guidance	- How did you face and manage challenges encountered during your integration into your work environment? (related both to teaching methodologies and relationships with colleagues) - What strategies did you adopt to overcome initial obstacles, from practical to organizational challenges? (also consider external support outside the school context, caregiving responsibilities)
Career Sustainability	Indicators Of Sustainability Affecting The Individual's Well-Being, Health, And Professional Growth Subjective Indicators Of Happiness Productivity Indicators	In this part of the interview, we will explore aspects related to the main construct of this research project: career sustainability. The following questions help us understanding how, through life experiences, we can refine our ability to understand ourselves, our work, and the surrounding environment through a continuous learning process. - When you started working at school, were there moments in which you found yourself in difficult situations, such as facing challenges to adapt to the new job? - Did you ever feel worried or overwhelmed by the demands of the new job? (For example, was the introduction of new technologies initially an obstacle, did the subjects you had to teach require excessive preparation, or did communication with colleagues concern you?) - Do you feel satisfied with the balance between your private life and your work? - When you think about your current career as a teacher, do you feel you have found a balance between personal life and work? - Do you feel that your work as a teacher allows you to remain consistent and aligned with your values? Do you feel you are able to uphold them? - Do you feel able to manage well the commitments of private life and work, such that they fit together and allow you to feel satisfied in the end? - Knowing how demanding this work can be, I would also like to ask how productive you feel within your school environment — that is, whether you feel able to keep up with the demands that your work environment places on you. - Among the needs and tasks related to the school and the overall context, are there any that you find particularly difficult to manage? (e.g., afternoon planning) - Do you feel satisfied with the level your students have achieved? - Do you feel you have adapted fairly well to the use of more modern or technological tools?

		- Do you think that introducing certain technological innovations is an obstacle to carrying out your work as a teacher?
Dimensions For The Analysis Of Sustainable Careers	The Individual (Person-Centered Approach) Negative Career Shocks (Contextual Factors Understood As Setbacks) The Work Context The Context Of Private Life	- Thinking about your work at school, have there been difficult moments, unexpected changes, in which you felt you could not maintain control of the situation? - Have there been moments at work in which you had to respond to situations that were beyond your control (feeling overwhelmed or experiencing particularly negative emotions that made you wish you were not there at that moment)? - Do you consider your work important for yourself? What is the most important aspect when you think about your job? - Do you feel a sense of accomplishment when you think about your work? (We want to understand whether the work is fulfilling or not.) - Do you feel you have been able to overcome any “setbacks” that occurred during your work integration? - Within your school environment, and more specifically among the colleagues you interact with most, do you think there is a good relationship? - Do you feel that there is a good support system, and that you can rely on them (or some of them) when work-related difficulties arise? - Are you comfortable using computers, apps, and, more generally, managing the technological aspects of your work? (perceived usefulness) - Did you receive support from your family and/or friends when you started working at school? - Are there people close to you who significantly influenced your decision to start this job? (How much support did you receive from friends and family, and how did you experience it?) - Did your friends and family react positively to your decision to start working as a teacher? - Ultimately, did their reactions influence you positively or negatively? - Are you comfortable using computers, apps, and, more generally, managing the technological aspects of your work? (perceived usefulness) - Did you receive support from your family and/or friends when you started working at school? - Are there people close to you who significantly influenced your decision to start this job? (How much support did you receive from friends and family, and how did you experience it?) - Did your friends and family react positively to your decision to start working as a teacher?

	Unexpected Events Ongoing Professional Development Perceived Competence And Age-Related Factors	- Ultimately, did their reactions influence you positively or negatively? - Did anything happen that was impossible to foresee and that ultimately affected your choice to become a teacher? - -Do you currently follow any training programs that help you keep up with the demands of your school? - For all the new things you have had to learn since you started, have you ever felt inadequate — as if you were not capable — because of your age? - Do you think it was more difficult for you to start teaching compared to your younger colleagues? - Ultimately, do you feel that your age may have helped you perform well in the role of teacher? (Consider age as a potential barrier to acquiring new skills / if you previously worked outside teaching, ask whether that experience helped you manage the demands of the new role.) - In the end, was the time you spent on training for using digital tools well spent? - How difficult was it to start over and take on such a demanding job? - Do you think your current lifestyle has improved compared to before?
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