

## Article

# Exploring Stress Factors and Coping Strategies in Italian Teachers after COVID-19: Evidence from Qualitative Data

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**Abstract:** Teaching is a mentally and physically demanding profession that can be a source of stress and burnout. The COVID-19 pandemic put further pressure on teachers who had to face sudden challenges, such as online teaching and difficulties in holding students’ attention in virtual environments. Research has demonstrated that the negative effects of stress factors on teachers’ wellbeing can be modulated by coping strategies. This work explores the main sources of stress that jeopardized Italian teachers’ wellbeing after the COVID-19 pandemic and the coping strategies that they adopted. Eighty-six teachers, belonging to five school institutes located in Northern Italy, took part in three semi-structured group interviews, where their perceptions about wellbeing at school and occupational stress experiences were explored. Furthermore, they completed a survey with questions about recent stressful life events and the coping strategies that they had adopted in the last month. A thematic analysis revealed stressors related to four themes: adverse work conditions, a lack of support (from both school administrators and families), precariousness, and a demanding school system. A total of 22% of teachers experienced stressful events in the last month (e.g., health problems and loss), and 30% reported that they had adopted coping strategies, especially emotion-focused ones. The findings may drive educational policies to enhance protective factors for teachers’ professional wellbeing at school by reinforcing their individual resources and coping strategies, which can help them deal with challenging situations.



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**Keywords:** teachers; stress factors; coping strategies; wellbeing; COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, numerous studies have documented that teaching is one of the most challenging occupations because of its persistent demands and responsibilities [1,2]. Teachers of all school grades are at high risk of developing work-related stress and receiving a diagnosis of burnout syndrome, regardless of how many years of teaching experience that they might have. On the one hand, novice teachers tend to be more vulnerable in the first years of their teaching careers and are more likely to quit their job [3,4] or voluntarily migrate to other schools [5]. On the other hand, senior teachers often report decreased enthusiasm and increased dissatisfaction because of a workload that becomes harder to manage with age [6,7].

Stress factors can be attributed to both personal and organizational variables. Individual traits and resources, such as self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and social-emotional competencies, have been reported as being protective factors against stress and mental health issues [8–12]. For instance, a greater or lesser ability to positively interact with students, colleagues, and other school community members can limit or buffer teachers’ stress, respectively [13]. As teachers put pupils first in their job, their relationship with students is identified as potentially being the most impactful on stress and burnout [7,14]. Collaborative and supportive relationships with colleagues can also enhance teachers’ wellbeing [7,15].

Concerning organizational variables, Van Droogenbroeck et al. [7] stated that “the working conditions of teachers have changed significantly over recent decades. Teachers have experienced a noticeable increase in high-stakes accountability demands, administrative tasks, and standardization which may cause stress and feelings of deprofessionalization. This intensification of the profession is the result of teachers being increasingly subjected to external pressures and demands from policymakers, supervisors, parents, and experts” (p. 106). Time pressure, excessive workload, adverse working conditions (e.g., class size, a lack of safety, and inadequate environments and salary), imbalance between work and family life, sudden and frequent changes due to school reforms, red tape, and a lack of positive support from school administrators have been identified worldwide as frequent causes of stress for teachers [16–21]. In the Italian context, some organizational variables related to working conditions have been recognized as particularly challenging for teachers’ wellbeing. For example, school classes are usually overpopulated (i.e., approximately 25 children per class) and often include 3–4 children with special educational needs, the salary of teachers in Italy is significantly lower than that in other European countries, and opportunities for professional career advancement are scarce [22].

Teachers’ wellbeing often depends on a combination of job demands and available resources. Simbula et al. [23] identified three profiles of Italian teachers: those who perceive that they have ample job resources and are able to use them to effectively deal with high job demands; those who perceive that they have high levels of job resources in the face of low job demands; and, finally, those with deficient job resources, who are unable to cope with job demands. The latter group tends to show negative outcomes more often than the other two. Certain factors, such as a higher self-efficacy and mentalized affectivity, more positive emotions at school, and a higher hedonic balance concerning their professional role, may diminish teachers’ risk of burnout [24,25]. Lowering the levels of burnout can have positive effects, for instance, on teachers’ constructive attitudes and confidence in professional training [26].

In contrast, work-related stress negatively affects teachers’ wellbeing. Hence, teachers may experience higher levels of mental health issues—such as depression, irritability, anxiety, and frustration [18]—lower quality interactions with children [27], less life satisfaction [10,22], and reduced self-efficacy at work [28], which also can affect students’ wellbeing and their school achievements [29–32].

### *1.1. The COVID-19 Emergency as a Stressor*

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this delicate situation. To prevent contagion, governments worldwide adopted urgent containment measures, such as avoiding crowds, keeping physical distance, and staying at home. These measures resulted in the interruption of most face-to-face activities, including on-site education [33]. Schools were closed, and teachers were suddenly required to shift to distance teaching to sustain students’ learning [34]. The challenges linked to these new teaching experiences (e.g., a lack of digital competences, work–family balance, disruptive student behaviors, increased working hours, and time pressure), the risks of contagion with related depression and anxiety symptoms, and the lack of support from administrators were identified as significant stress factors during the pandemic [35–40]. The unexpected situation also had psychological effects on teachers and impacted their quality of life. In fact, teachers reported increased levels of physical and mental health problems [41–44]. When the emergency was over and teachers and students went back to on-site schooling, they had to face new environments and routines. Again, anxiety was a common feeling for teachers, as they felt fear of the COVID-19 emergency, they encountered difficulties with the new teaching modes and communication with parents, they perceived inconsistent support from the administrators, and they felt that they did not receive respect or appreciation for their work at school [37,45].

Similar perceptions and negative feelings were diffuse among most people the world over, and the people of Italy were also strongly affected by the adversity of the pandemic. In fact, Italy was one of the first countries where COVID-19 spread. At the beginning of

2020, a state of emergency was officially declared throughout the entire national territory, and strict restrictions were applied. A dramatic increase in mental health issues, such as stress, anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties, was recorded, especially at the beginning of the pandemic [46,47]. It is noteworthy that people's fear of COVID-19 decreased over time, positively impacting their mental health and quality of life [48].

Italian teachers also experienced higher levels of mental health issues, such as depression, than the rest of the population [39]. Most teachers were unprepared to deal with remote learning and had to make great efforts to engage and motivate their students [49], especially younger pupils who were more restless and had limited attention spans, therefore needing more frequent breaks [50]. Messineo and Tosto [36] reported that teachers who perceived distance learning as a burden also experienced higher levels of stress and negative affect. Furthermore, their findings pointed out that both a lack of emotional regulation and negative coping strategies played a significant role. Their conclusions suggested that these variables need to be taken into account when exploring teachers' wellbeing and stress factors.

### *1.2. Dealing with Challenging Situations*

Stressful events lead people to use coping strategies, which are defined as voluntary cognitive and behavioral efforts that an individual uses when facing internal and external demands [51]. Scholars distinguish between approach and avoidant coping strategies on the basis of how much they are directed to face or avoid a problematic situation [52]. Some coping strategies, such as those that are problem-focused (i.e., planning how to address the specific problem), are more effective in reducing mental health issues, whereas those based on avoidance and emotional suppression result in less desirable outcomes. Other coping strategies can be categorized as social (e.g., seeking help and support from other people), emotion-focused (e.g., positive reframing and humor to reduce negative feelings linked to the problem), and cognitive-focused (i.e., when the individual tries to rationalize and make sense of a stressful situation) [53]. Notably, distinguishing between "good" and "bad" strategies could be detrimental because, although some strategies are apparently negative, they could be the most adequate in the short term to deal with a certain situation [52].

Research on teachers has shown that these professionals mostly adopt functional (i.e., approach) coping strategies in their vocation, such as acceptance, positive reframing, planning, and active coping, whereas negative strategies are usually avoided (e.g., self-blame, denial, and the use of alcohol or drugs) [54,55]. However, the quality of the coping strategies that they adopt may depend on their levels of stress and burnout. Martinez et al. [56] found that teachers who were more personally accomplished and less emotionally exhausted more frequently adopted positive strategies, such as problem solving, seeking social support, and positive reframing. Conversely, teachers who experienced more emotional exhaustion and depersonalization often adopted non-functional strategies, such as self-criticism, resignation, and hostile attitudes.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers reported that they more frequently used positive rather than negative coping strategies, and their use depended on the specific stress factor that they experienced. For instance, they used functional strategies when the stressor was related to scarce parental engagement, and they used dysfunctional strategies when they perceived a lack of digital competencies to deal with distance learning. Furthermore, teachers used more coping strategies, especially negative ones (i.e., avoidant strategies), when they perceived higher levels of stress [34,55]. Messineo and Tosto [36] investigated the coping strategies that Italian teachers adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Spring 2021). Specifically, they found that higher levels of perceived stress were associated with negative coping strategies, such as the avoidance of the problem and less positive attitudes (i.e., accepting a challenging event and looking at it in a positive light). Interestingly, more stressed teachers sought more social support, which scholars also interpreted as a "negative" coping strategy because interactions with friends, colleagues, or relatives may intensify negative feelings and problems, without helping the individual to find a solution.

In light of the abovementioned literature on professional wellbeing, this paper intends to examine the stress factors that prevailed after the COVID-19 pandemic in Italian teachers and the coping strategies that they adopted. More specifically, we aimed to (1) identify the main stressors that they faced in their jobs and personal lives once the emergency had ended and most restrictions had been removed (at the beginning of 2022) and (2) investigate how they coped with stressors in their lives.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research was conducted as part of a larger Erasmus + Key Action 3 project entitled “Teaching to Be: Supporting teachers’ professional growth and wellbeing in the field of social and emotional learning” (2021–2024), which was co-funded by the European Commission. This international project involved eight European Countries and aimed to promote teachers’ professional wellbeing. The project consisted of the implementation of an online course, supplied as a videogame and a workbook that researchers developed ad hoc. To test the effectiveness of the course, a quasi-experimental design with two experimental groups (A and B) and a control (group C) was adopted. This paper presents the preliminary findings of the data collected from the five schools in the A group before the implementation of the course. For further information, please visit <https://teachingtobe.eu/> (accessed on 1 January 2024).

### 2.1. Participants

Participants comprised 86 teachers of all school grades, teaching in five public schools in Lombardy (N = 51; 3 schools) and Piedmont (N = 35; 2 schools), which are two regions located in Northern Italy. The schools were selected by convenience but reflect the most common education realities in Italy. In fact, we involved teachers from four cluster schools, which are the most common structures in the Italian education system. They are multi-site schools with the same principal and administrative framework, driven by the guidelines of the Ministry of Education; they host kindergarten, primary, and middle secondary school. The remaining school was a high school and we involved teachers teaching in grades 9 and 10, which nationally share the curriculum with other high school institutes. Teachers were distributed as follows: 8.1% taught in kindergarten, 59.3% in primary school, 9.3% in middle school, and the remaining 23.3% in high school. Though, on average, they had been working at their school for 9.46 years (SD = 8.46; range = 0–31 years), they had more years of teaching experience overall (mean age = 16.77 years; SD = 12.04; range 0–41 years). The majority worked full-time at school (97.6%). The participants, most of whom were women (88.4%), were aged between 19 and 65 years (mean age = 46.87 years; SD = 10.87), and they held high school diplomas (39.5%), a bachelor’s degree (15.1%), a master’s degree (36.1%), or a postgraduate diploma (9.3%). The teachers participated in the study voluntarily after their school principals informed them about the project. No monetary or other financial rewards were provided. They received details about the goals of the study and the research procedure. When they provided their informed consent to participate, they were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The research was conducted in conformity with the approval of the University of Milano-Bicocca Ethics Committee (protocol number: 0129650/21, 19 October 2021).

### 2.2. Materials and Procedure

Between January and April 2022, the teachers at each school attended three semi-structured group interviews, lasting one hour each, which were audio-recorded. Each group consisted of about 15–18 teachers. Overall, the researchers conducted fifteen interview sessions, which focused on the teachers’ perceptions of their wellbeing and the stress factors that they encountered at school. Each group of teacher participants sat in a circle as a way to stimulate interactions. The researcher–moderator welcomed the teachers and then asked the following questions (one for each session) to explore the sources of stress at school:

1. “What are the stressors at your school? Do you think they apply only to your school? Why?”;
2. “What does uncertainty mean for you at school?”;
3. “Could you provide specific examples of how you manage your emotions, thoughts, and behavior when faced with challenging situations at school?”.

The researcher guided the flow of the conversation and went deeper into the topics that appeared relevant to both the group and the research itself. Furthermore, once the interview sessions were completed, the participants filled in a survey on their social–demographic information and other data concerning their wellbeing. For the purposes of this research, we considered social demographics and the answers given to two open-ended questions about recent stressful life events and coping strategies:

1. “In the last month, have you experienced stressful life events in outside of work (e.g., COVID-19 contagion, bereavement, chronic disease, divorce)? If yes, please specify.”;
2. “In the last month, have you adopted specific coping strategies to enhance your wellbeing or reduce your stress (e.g., yoga, meditation)? If yes, please specify.”.

### 2.3. Coding

For the answers that the teachers provided in the interview sessions, Braun and Clarke’s [57] approach to thematic analysis was adopted. First, the audio recordings were transcribed, and the researchers carefully read them to familiarize themselves with the texts. Second, preliminary codes were generated to organize the data into units of meaning. Third, the researchers organized the codes into themes, identifying the main topics and meaningful patterns. Finally, the researchers reviewed the themes to examine whether they were unique and made sense, and then they set out the final list of themes. The three authors followed these steps individually, and then they reviewed and discussed them to find similarities or differences and to reach a unanimous consensus. The interrater agreement was  $k = 0.88$ .

With regard to the open-ended questions in the survey, for each of the two questions, we put together answers that reflected the same meaning to calculate their occurrences. The interrater agreement among the authors was  $k = 0.96$  for stressful life events and  $k = 0.85$  for coping strategies. If there was a disagreement, the specific answer was discussed so that a consensus could be reached. For the coping strategies that the teachers reported, the four categories identified in the literature (i.e., social-, problem-, emotion-, and cognitive-focused) [53] were used as a theoretical framework for an initial classification.

## 3. Results

In this section, we first present the main findings concerning the stressors perceived by the teachers in their work and personal life, and then we present the coping strategies that they reported to use after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3.1. Main Stress Factors at School and in Personal Life

The thematic analysis based on the interviews revealed four categories of stress factors, all related to organizational dimensions: adverse work conditions, a lack of support, precariousness, and a demanding school system. *Adverse work conditions* included three subthemes: (1) environments, which referred to inadequate spaces for both teachers (e.g., the absence of a teacher’s lounge) and students (e.g., small rooms and no school courtyard); (2) role recognition, which concerned the low salary and negative representations of the teaching profession that resulted in social criticism (e.g., for long summer holidays); and (3) personal–professional life balance, which was related to the difficulties that the teachers faced by working at school (e.g., tasks brought home to be completed in the evenings or over the weekends and phone/video calls with parents after working hours). This theme emerged from the teachers in four out of the five schools involved.

The issue around a *lack of support* referred to scarce communication and collaboration with families and school principals, respectively. The teachers reported (1) difficulties when

interacting with parents (e.g., belonging to disadvantaged backgrounds and not accepting their children's special education needs) and (2) stress due to challenging relationships with their school principal because of their absence and ineffective leadership. This theme emerged from teachers in every participating school.

*Precariousness* concerned staff turnover at the school. Specifically, the teachers referred to having a provisional rather than a permanent job; they experienced frequent entries of new colleagues or principals and the exit of colleagues whose contracts had expired and/or moved to other schools. This theme emerged in all five schools involved in the study.

The issue of a *demanding school system* included two subthemes: (1) an excessive workload, which concerned the burden that the teachers perceived was placed on them, specifically their being stressed by the imbalance between the small amount of time available and the number of tasks that there was to do or the amount of bureaucratic red tape (i.e., the need to fill out many forms for the principal, the school community, or the Ministry of Education), and (2) new responsibilities, concerning the assignment of tasks that are not typical duties for teachers (e.g., supervising students during breaks between classes, repairing objects and equipment at the school, and monitoring compliance with ministerial COVID-19 requirements that were still in place). This theme emerged from teachers at all five schools. See Table 1 for a complete list of the themes and subthemes with corresponding examples of quotes.

Concerning the survey's first question about the stressors that the teachers experienced in their personal lives in the previous month, out of the 86 participants, only 19 (22.09%) reported that they had recently faced stressful life events. In this sub-sample, 10.53% (N = 2) had to face family problems (e.g., conflicts and separation), 36.84% (N = 7) experienced the loss of a loved one, and 57.89% (N = 11) had to deal with health problems that involved themselves or a relative. A total of 31.58% (N = 6) explicitly linked these stressors to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3.2. Coping Strategies

With regard to the second survey question, 27 teachers (30.34%) reported having recently used coping strategies to deal with the stressors that they faced and to enhance their wellbeing. The teachers more often referred to emotion-focused strategies, such as practicing sports and physical activity (gym, yoga, Pilates, walking, dancing, swimming, and beach volley; N = 25, 92.59%); meditation, mindfulness, and breathing exercises (N = 7; 25.93%), listening to music (N = 2; 7.41%); and taking more time for themselves (N = 2; 7.41%). A smaller number of teachers also referred to problem-focused strategies, namely, achieving better organization at work and talking with a psychologist/psychotherapist (N = 2; 7.41%), cognitive-focused strategies (i.e., applying a change of attitude; N = 1; 3.70%), and social strategies (i.e., meeting friends and asking colleagues for advice; N = 1, 3.70%).

**Table 1.** Themes, subthemes, and examples of quotes concerning stress factors that teachers experienced at work.

Themes	Subthemes	Examples of Quotes
Adverse work conditions	Environments	"There's a lack of basic resources, like papers for photocopies, internet, Wi-Fi. We need to be creative and flexible to adapt to new challenges and problems".
	Role recognition	"We can't complain about school because we're perceived as those with an easy job, lots of holidays. . . We're not socially recognized; it's frustrating".
	Personal – professional life balance	"We are available 24 h per day, we can't have a life outside the school. We are forced to do it because if you don't do one thing they force you to do something else. We work collaboratively, in synergy, I'm enthusiastic and dedicated to my job, and results are visible also in students. But the cost is my family, neglecting my son, my husband. . .".
Lack of support	Families	"Building relationships with parents, in particular those of students with severe behavioral problems, is very stressful. We struggle with these children and find difficulties to convince parents to ask for professional help (e.g., to receive a diagnosis). So we often have to cope alone in our classes and find alternative strategies to help children, knowing that they have some problems, either cognitive, behavioral, etc., but no support from their families". "I see parents defending the impossible, so students do everything knowing families are on their side. [ . . . ] In the last years, we assisted a drastic change, moving from parents with whom there was a dialogue (they listened to you) to parents who talk and explain what you should do, how you should teach".
	School principal	"The head teacher is not valuing and helping us enough, maybe because our school is isolated from the headquarter where she works. We feel not supervised and supported because of our geographical isolation". "When I have a problem, I need to talk with the principal. The fact she isn't available to speak is a source of uncertainty. There's a lack of dialogue with her". "I'd like to have more appreciation from the head teacher and the coordinators. I wish to be seen, recognized, and valued for the efforts I have made to make everything work despite challenging situations, such as COVID-19".
Precariousness	School staff turnover	"There's a frequent turnover of our head teachers and it's not easy to adapt to their view of the school's objectives. This is very stressful as we perceive it like starting again from the beginning".
Demanding school system	Excessive workload	"For two years and a half we've been living in a constant emergency, we feel a mental and physical load. We have no time, we are always running after useless things". "There is so much useless bureaucracy. Most of the tasks don't provide any feedback, so we don't understand the reasons behind these requests".
	New responsibilities	"A source of stress is having responsibilities for things that go beyond my job. For instance, I was responsible for fixing the Internet line because it wasn't working, but it was essential to fill in the electronic register. My colleague, who was responsible for school safety, reported many times to the City Council that a door needed to be fixed, but nothing happened and parents kept complaining to her. Also having the responsibility of children when they are at the school canteen makes us feel undervalued".

#### 4. Discussion

This research aimed to examine the stress factors that Italian teachers experienced in their professional and personal lives after the COVID-19 pandemic and the coping strategies that they adopted. With regard to professional stress factors, teachers in each of the five schools identified stressors that recalled organizational dimensions. Specifically, the thematic analysis led to the identification of four clusters of stress factors, namely, adverse work conditions, a lack of support, precariousness, and a demanding school system, which are in accordance with those mostly identified in the literature [16–21].

Research showed that some organizational variables related to inadequate work conditions (e.g., class size and a low salary) are particularly relevant to Italian teachers' mental health [22]. These aspects also emerged in our interview sessions with the participant

teachers, together with the acknowledgment that managing their time was problematic (i.e., personal–professional life balance). In this regard, although some teachers indicated that technologies seemed to be especially valuable tools for communicating with families during the pandemic, they also became a double-edged sword. Indeed, even once the emergency had been declared over, some parents kept on requesting distance meetings, which often extended after working hours (e.g., dinner time). This made the teachers uncomfortable and stressed because their having to dedicate even more time to their work meant that their families would be deprived of quality time [37,45]. In this regard, we must consider that the majority of the sample consisted of females. Although this reflects the typical situation in Italy, where most teachers are women, this is a shortcoming that needs to be accounted for when interpreting the results. In fact, a personal–professional life imbalance is undoubtedly more strongly experienced by females, especially mothers, who still have the primary care role in Italian families. Future research may consider a more equal distribution by gender to provide clearer insights.

Difficulties in communication with parents and school principals were also reported as another source of stress for the teachers. Students' families have been identified as more and more demanding, and collaboration with parents has been frequently recognized as a stressor [7], especially during the period when schools were re-opened in the 2020/2021 school year [37,45]. Furthermore, the teachers involved in this study mostly belonged to cluster schools, wherein multiple small- and medium-sized schools located in surrounding towns were organized around a headquarters school. The lack of support from school principals was perceived especially by the teachers who worked in the "satellite" schools and thus had no direct contact with the principal. The physical distance may have increased the perceptions of "abandonment" and a lack of support from school administrators, which have frequently been identified as detrimental to teachers' mental health [7,37].

Another relevant source of stress for our participants was the precariousness, which the teachers experienced themselves or through the rest of the school staff. In fact, having a provisional job may make teachers insecure about their future, with potential consequences on their investment of time and energy in the school (e.g., participation in training programs and taking relevant roles). Furthermore, because of work instability, the teachers struggled to create and maintain strong relationships with the school principal and their colleagues, who are usually recognized as sources of professional and personal support in the school environment [58].

Finally, the teachers reported being frustrated by the demands of the school system, such as excessive workloads and new responsibilities. On the one hand, they perceived a lack of time associated with a very large number of tasks and documents to fill in, to such an extent that they were hardly able to manage everything [6,7]. Given that teachers believe that their job should consist of teaching and working with students, external requests are often viewed as a waste of time and a distraction from pedagogical activities [7]. Even if the teachers did not associate this stress factor with the pandemic, it is plausible that, with the COVID-19 emergency, the time pressure increased because of the need to keep track of and record their activities in the classroom [35,36]. On the other hand, the nature of the tasks changed, so the teachers felt that they had been assigned duties that were unusual for teachers, such as repairing objects and equipment or supervising students and ensuring their compliance with COVID-19-related requirements. Thus, beyond the teaching and red tape that they faced before, the teachers felt that they had also been gradually beset with these new responsibilities, which, in the past, were the common duties of technical staff in the Italian school system. The pandemic seemed to have upset the balance in the schools, which were unprepared for dealing with similar circumstances and struggled to manage the staff according to the new set of tasks being demanded. The experience of a demanding environment was particularly taxing for the teachers with more years of experience, who often compared the current situation at school with what was expected of them when they first entered the school world.



Although all these stressors overlap with the ones commonly reported in the literature before the pandemic [16–21], we must recognize that some sources of stress may have become more challenging after the spread of COVID-19 (e.g., those concerning adverse work conditions or a demanding school system). However, this is only speculation since the current study was cross-sectional and did not compare the pre- and post-pandemic stressors that the teachers perceived in their lives. During the group interviews, the teachers did not talk extensively about the pandemic's repercussions over time, so the researchers did not go deeply into this topic. This is of course a shortcoming of group interviews, where the moderator delves into the topics that are relevant to the participants at that moment; however, it suggests that the teachers found other topics to be more relevant. Furthermore, we must recognize that teachers from other Italian regions may have identified different stressors. Although the schools involved in this study are representative of the Italian education system (e.g., in terms of the characteristics of the school staff and education provided), this is an explorative study, and future research may investigate similarities or differences in teachers working in the whole national territory.

Only a small percentage of the teachers reported that they experienced stressful events in their personal lives. Specifically, most teachers mentioned health problems that involved themselves or their relatives, followed by the loss of a loved one and family problems. In less than half of the cases, the teachers associated these stressful events with the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that the emergency was no longer perceived as a major source of stress in their private lives. Since the data for this paper were collected in 2022, the teachers' concern about the pandemic had likely decreased significantly [48].

Finally, the teachers reported that they adopted many strategies to cope with stress factors and to enhance their feelings of wellbeing. They indicated that they had mostly used emotion-focused strategies rather than those focused, for instance, on the problem itself, on rationalizing, or on asking for social support. Even if planning how to solve the problem has been recognized as the most effective strategy [53], other positive strategies can be helpful in enhancing feelings of wellbeing. Specifically, the teachers in our sample reported adopting approach strategies, which probably worked better and had more positive outcomes for them than avoidant ones (e.g., denial and disengagement) [55]. Interestingly, almost all of the coping strategies concerned practicing sports and physical activity. There is evidence that physical activity is strongly associated with mental wellbeing and physical health [59]. Furthermore, during the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the population was forced into confinement, and sports facilities were closed. Thus, when the strict restrictions ended, the population once again had the opportunity to enjoy community activities that they could practice with friends or other people.

It is noteworthy that, in the survey, more than sixty teachers, which is more than half of the sample, did not indicate in their answers that they adopted strategies to cope with the stressors experienced in their work or personal life. Two explanations might account for this finding. First, it is possible that the teachers actually adopted coping strategies but were not aware of their potential to reduce mental health issues and enhance their feelings of wellbeing. For instance, talking with friends, colleagues, or family members may be viewed as a routine practice, without thinking that it might be a specific coping strategy. Second, it is likely that, despite the number of stress factors that they identified, the teachers' levels of stress were not so high that they required the adoption of specific coping strategies [34]. Moreover, no one mentioned negative coping strategies. Although this may be due to social desirability bias, previous research has suggested that most teachers usually adopt positive rather than negative coping strategies in their professional life [54,55], again, especially if their levels of stress are low or moderate [36,56]. Future research may investigate coping strategies more deeply and monitor them over time to understand if and how they change in parallel with stress levels.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper highlights that, after the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers experienced stress factors similar to those that prevailed before the pandemic, as reported in the past literature. However, some of the factors, such as those that referred to inadequate work conditions and a demanding school system, could have become more tangible and relevant in the teachers' school life after the pandemic emergency. Moreover, in this sample, the teachers rarely experienced stressful events in their private life, suggesting that their profession was the main source of stress. Even if some teachers reported using approach coping strategies to deal with stressors—mainly emotion-focused ones—the majority did not. As discussed above, this may be due to different reasons, such as the teachers' lack of knowledge of coping strategies or their current levels of stress.

The overall findings support the need for both organizational interventions and training programs that can enhance teachers' individual and collective feelings of wellbeing at school. On the one hand, institutes should improve the school climate by empowering a supportive leadership, teachers' autonomy, and reciprocal respect between the school staff [60]. On the other hand, promoting teachers' individual traits and resources, such as social-emotional competencies, self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence, may prevent work-related stress and mental health issues [8–12,61]. Learning practical strategies aimed at, for instance, recognizing one's own negative emotions and effectively lowering their intensity, enhancing the quality of the communication with the school staff and students and improving assertiveness, understanding how to manage disagreements and conflicts, and finding effective ways to engage students in the classroom could be beneficial for teachers' wellbeing. If teachers feel that they have the resources that they require to face difficulties, they will also be able to cope with the demands of their jobs [23] and improve their relationships at school [60]. Furthermore, it is abundantly clear that teaching positive coping strategies, such as mindfulness, could be a way to reduce teachers' stress [62]. Supporting teachers' feelings of wellbeing will have a positive impact not only on their job satisfaction and the quality of their teaching but also on the wellbeing of their students and the entire school community [14,31].

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