

SCHOOL WELL-BEING AS A KEY DETERMINANT OF EDUCATIONAL QUALITY. WHAT IS THE TEACHER'S ROLE?

IL BENESSERE SCOLASTICO COME FATTORE DETERMINANTE DELLA QUALITÀ EDUCATIVA. QUAL È IL RUOLO DEL DOCENTE?

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the link between scholastic well-being and teaching professionalism. In today's diverse educational context, the teacher acts as a socio-emotional mediator, fostering inclusion and student engagement. Promoting a positive school climate through emotional skills and innovative strategies is crucial. A theoretical-empirical approach highlights methods for creating learning environments that support students' holistic development.

Questo studio esplora il legame tra benessere scolastico e professionalità docente. Nell'attuale contesto educativo eterogeneo, l'insegnante assume il ruolo di mediatore socio-emotivo, promuovendo inclusione e coinvolgimento degli studenti. Favorire un clima scolastico positivo, attraverso competenze emotive e strategie innovative, è fondamentale. Un approccio teorico-empirico evidenzia metodi per creare ambienti di apprendimento che sostengano lo sviluppo integrale degli studenti.

KEYWORDS

School well-being; Socio-emotional competences; Educational inclusion; School climate; Teaching profession.

Benessere scolastico; Competenze socio-emotive; Inclusione educativa; Clima scolastico; Professionalità docente.

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Introduction

In the context of educational sciences, the relational and communicative dimension of the teacher is a key factor in fostering school wellbeing and in developing meaningful and motivating learning environments (Menesatti, Formella, 2020, 138). This contribution aims to explore the extent of teachers' awareness of the pedagogical value of the educational relationship and the crucial role played by communication within the teacher-learner dynamic. It takes as its starting point a series of central questions: What importance is attributed to the relational and communicative aspects of the teaching role in promoting students' perceived wellbeing? What leadership style do teachers adopt in classroom management, and how does this influence the relational climate? What communication strategies are implemented to facilitate educational dialogue and support pupils' active participation? Furthermore, to what extent do teachers adopt a reflective stance towards the expectations, needs, and representations that students express within the school context?

These questions, which define the epistemological horizon of the present analysis, are grounded in a solid theoretical framework which, at the international level, has long emphasised the correlation between the quality of educational relationships, the perception of school wellbeing, and educational outcomes. In particular, numerous contributions (Cefai et al., 2021; Losada-Puente et al., 2022; Chuecas et al., 2022) converge in highlighting how the perception of a positive school environment—based on authentic and supportive relationships—leads to increased students' psychosocial wellbeing and, consequently, to better outcomes in terms of motivation, participation, and learning.

Hence, the hypothesis that the quality of the communicative and relational interactions fostered by teachers constitutes not only an indicator of educational effectiveness, but also an essential driver in building an inclusive, equitable, and wellbeing-oriented school context, where students can recognise themselves, express themselves, and feel valued.

Therefore, the aim of this reflection is to contribute to a critical understanding of teachers' relational practices, underlining the need for professional development that enhances the emotional and communicative dimension of teaching as a transversal and strategic pedagogical competence.

In recent years, the concept of well-being has progressively taken on a strategic and central role within the educational panorama, with particular reference to the school environment, where the figure of the teacher is recognised as a primary agent of transformation and promoter of pedagogical innovation processes. In this

perspective, inclusion is conceived as a radical process, dense with meanings and implications, characterised by a strong drive for innovation and a need for constant critical rethinking of educational practices, to the point of constituting, as it suggests, a dynamic and sometimes destabilising—if not downright disruptive—movement, and therefore an authentic epistemological and value horizon of reference (Dovigo, 2016).

In this perspective, the inclusive school is inevitably also understood as a privileged place for the construction and promotion of well-being. However, univocally delineating the concept of well-being proves to be a complex operation, since it represents a polysemic theoretical construct, characterised by an intrinsically multidimensional nature and by an intersection of different disciplinary approaches (Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Having said this, it seems necessary to emphasise that reflection on well-being is articulated around three main conceptual dimensions that guide its theoretical analysis and practical operation.

Firstly, subjective well-being, as outlined in Diener's studies (1984), is conceived as an eminently individual experiential condition, defined in terms of satisfaction with one's own existence and global perception of personal fulfilment.

Secondly, psychological well-being is conceptualised as a state of optimal functioning or full mental health, in a perspective that identifies happiness—understood as personal fulfilment—as the individual's existential goal (Keyes, Shmotkin & Ryff, 2002).

Finally, the third component, that of social well-being, offers a relational reading of well-being, based on the continuous exchange between subjective experience and collective dynamics, promoting a conception of 'being well' as the result of an interactive and circular process between the individual and the context (Bassi, Fianco, Preziosa, Steca & Delle Fave, 2008).

The concept of well-being, as already mentioned, can therefore no longer be understood as an absolute, stable and universally defined dimension but assumes the traits of intersubjective co-construction, reflecting the dynamic and contextual nature of individual adaptation.

When social wellbeing is interpreted within the school context, it is transformed into educational wellbeing, thus becoming an enabling and generative factor of practices aimed at promoting a sense of personal and collective efficacy, the development of metacognitive strategies, the activation of intrinsic motivation, the perception of oneself as a socially situated and recognised subject, and the construction of a positive self-image—all elements that contribute to shaping a favourable and participatory learning environment (Stanzione, 2021; Zini &

Scipione, 2024). These factors constitute the fertile ground within which meaningful knowledge—based on experience, interaction, and reflection—is constructed (Dewey, 1916, 1938; Vygotsky, 1934; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogers, 1951).

However, while the Positive Psychology approach to the educational sphere emphasises an idea of wellbeing often attributable to intentional actions and external interventions aimed at fostering optimal functioning, it also highlights the need to reconceptualise the construct by shifting its centre of gravity towards everyday pedagogical practices rooted in the relational dimension and in the learning processes activated in daily school life. This shift underscores the transformative role of the school environment as a generative space for intrinsic and shared wellbeing.

Therefore, an integrated school approach can create favourable conditions for promoting psychosocial health, active engagement, and educational success, where students are able to fully express their potential (Roffey, 2011). Castoldi (2015) proposes an articulated interpretation of the educational relationship between teacher and learner, structured around three interdependent dimensions: the methodological-didactic dimension, concerning the methodologies, strategies, and media devices employed in the teaching-learning process; the organisational dimension, referring to the design of the learning setting and the quality of the educational environment; and finally, the relational-communicative dimension, within which the interpersonal dynamics among school actors, the instructional style, the value attributed to the class group, the degree of flexibility in managing interactions, and the recognition of individual contributions—as well as other significant variables for the quality of educational coexistence—are situated.

It is within this latter dimension, conceived as a privileged space for constructing the educational experience, that the present contribution is situated. It aims to investigate the practices, behavioural dynamics, and contextual conditions capable of significantly influencing the perception of wellbeing within the school environment.

Particular emphasis is placed on the quality of interpersonal relationships established between the class group and the teacher, acknowledged as fundamental mechanisms in promoting an educational climate conducive to learning and individual and collective wellbeing.

It is therefore necessary to rethink the teaching profession in light of a renewed awareness of the centrality of student wellbeing, conceived not as an accessory element but as a foundational construct of teaching practice.

This implies the adoption of a robust theoretical framework capable of guiding and sustaining the entire educational planning process, serving as an integrative background that ensures epistemological, ethical, and operational coherence in the methodological and relational choices made by teachers in daily practice. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a school context characterised by growing structural and functional complexity, in which the teacher is called to operate, the professional role of the teacher assumes increasingly complex and multifaceted connotations (Mura & Zurru, 2022), requiring a broad range of knowledge and skills aimed at promoting educational practices focused on the holistic wellbeing of students (Baldacci et al., 2020).

Pedagogical action, in fact, can no longer be limited to the mastery of disciplinary knowledge and classroom management skills alone, but must necessarily integrate a repertoire of communicative, socio-emotional, metacognitive, and reflective competences. These have proven fundamental in responding to the didactic demands and emotional-relational needs expressed by the class group, as well as in constructively addressing daily tensions which, if not adequately processed, may generate stress, insecurity, and frustration, negatively impacting teaching-learning processes and student behaviour (Mura & Bonaiuti, 2022).

Longo and Zanniello (2022) underline that the educational bond between teacher and learner must be based on mutual trust, capable of nurturing students' self-esteem and awareness of their own resources—indispensable conditions for the full development of a harmonious personality and the activation of creative and relational potential. The emancipatory function of knowledge requires skills oriented towards autonomy and responsibility. Humanising the school means making it generative within a perspective of building 'Thinking Communities' aimed at fostering forms of existential and intellectual freedom (Cerrocchi & Dozza, 2018). This article enriches the existing literature by integrating the multidimensional role of the teacher as a reflective practitioner, relational agent, and ethical professional in promoting school wellbeing. It highlights the inseparability of pedagogical competence, emotional care, and the spatial-temporal organization of learning environments, providing a holistic framework that connects theory and practice in educational wellbeing.

1. The teacher's role in promoting school well-being

Every difficulty that a student faces is conceived as an intrinsically twofold challenge, as it involves not only the learner but also the teacher, who assumes the

responsibility of formative care and becomes an integral part of the educational response process (Albanesi, Marcon, & Cicognani, 2010).

If the teacher's goal is to promote authentic conditions of wellbeing for younger generations, it is necessary to adopt intentional relational and pedagogical stances, capable of identifying and meeting the complex and evolving needs of students in a targeted manner.

This task, which is far from easy, requires the teacher to engage with three interrelated levels of competence: first, knowing—that is, possessing a solid and in-depth understanding of one's discipline; second, knowing how to do—understood as the ability to translate theoretical knowledge into effective and accessible teaching practices; and finally, knowing how to be—i.e., developing a personal and relational dimension grounded in human qualities, empathic sensitivity, and communicative skills, all of which are essential for establishing authentic and meaningful educational relationships within the school context (Buccolo, 2022).

As far as the dimension of social needs is concerned, the school is understood as a privileged context for addressing them—provided, however, that it is inhabited by professionals capable of designing and supporting educational environments conducive to the development of social skills and active citizenship (Ferrero & Mulas, 2021).

From this perspective, the teacher assumes a fundamental role as an additional adult point of reference for young people, capable of expanding their horizons of meaning and worldview. Students express a deep need to feel desired within the educational relationship, to perceive themselves as worthy of attention and of being heard, to be recognised in their uniqueness, and to be valued for their personal potential.

These are needs that find a response in educational communication based on continuity, reciprocity, and the construction of shared meaning. In this direction, the class group is called upon to function as a protected and generative space in which students can practise and strengthen their relational abilities, while the teacher adopts a facilitative stance (Zanetti & Renati, 2009), implementing teaching practices oriented towards an authentic centrality of the student as a whole person. Within the group dynamic, the teacher is required to take on an active and reflective role, engaging their subjectivity in an authentic and intentional way in order to build an educational relationship marked by a positive and generative affective dimension with the learner.

This relationship is based on the unconditional acceptance of the learner, the legitimisation of their personal identity, and the attribution of formative value to

error—understood not as a sign of inadequacy, but as a meaningful stage in the learning process.

Pedagogical action, from this perspective, requires the teacher not only to create the conditions for the free emotional expression of students, but also to manage relational dynamics within the class group, fostering integration and cohesion.

The teacher must be able to exercise a form of professional empathy, capable of addressing both the group and the individual, and offering the learning community a shared and conscious reading of the dynamics at play (Ferrero, 2021).

In its deepest dimension, teaching is conceived as a process intrinsically connected to educational care, oriented toward promoting the wellbeing of others through the co-construction of meaningful experiences and formative moments that foster the possibility of "being well" (Mortari, 2022).

This purpose is embodied in an act of ethical responsibility and relational respect, grounded in a logic of giving. These three coordinates effectively define the quality of the exchange that takes place within the teacher-learner relationship—as a dialogic space in which experiences, narratives, and reflections are shared. Promoting wellbeing in the school context thus implies the activation of transversal competences, ranging from management skills to support functions, understood not in a merely consultative sense, but as a relational disposition oriented toward building wellbeing among peers. This perspective should constitute the backbone of any educational model grounded in dialogic relations and in the epistemological reorganisation of the teacher's mindset, focused on the dynamics of growth, prevention, and the promotion of student wellbeing (Negri, 2014). This shift in perspective—which is especially evident in active listening and in the handling of problematic situations—grants teaching a marked pedagogical value, implying the duty to consider the student in their entirety and to embrace discomfort as a transformative opportunity for harmonious and conscious growth. Therefore, the teacher who pays attention to the wellbeing of their students must acquire the ability to identify problems, define coherent educational objectives, and support both motivation and the autonomous re-elaboration of acquired competences (Coquinati, 2023; Formella, Ricci, Maggi, 2023).

The teaching-learning process is framed as an authentic act of care, articulated through moments of maieutic listening and orientation in decoding reality. In this context, the teacher assumes the role of an expert in managing helping relationships, using their dialogic abilities and capacity for deep listening to support students in their search for meaning and formative development.

Such an approach not only contributes to individual educational success but also fosters social progress by promoting an educational environment that supports

both student growth and school wellbeing (Annacontini, Madrussan, & Striano, 2021).

Wellbeing-oriented teaching therefore responds to a profound need for inner and relational dialogue, promoting the development of each individual's socio-affective competences. When the school environment is structured to promote a state of widespread wellbeing—aimed at increasing awareness and autonomy—the enhancement of intrinsic motivation and the attribution of meaning to one's educational actions are framed as central training tools in the maturation of the person (Boffo, Iavarone, & Nuzzaci, 2022).

The educational purpose of every learning intervention must first and foremost respond to the fundamental and constitutive need of every human being: the attainment of self-awareness and autonomy.

Educational proposals aimed at consolidating and fostering these dimensions must therefore be embedded in an empathetic context, rich in meaningful communicative and relational exchanges—capable of generating wellbeing for both learners and educators—thus creating the conditions for mutual growth and for the construction of a cohesive and inclusive school community.

2. Methodological perspectives for building generative environments of well-being

There are two epistemological pillars for the promotion of learning oriented towards school wellbeing: on the one hand, the need for a radical reconsideration of educational spaces, which must overcome the formal rigidity of traditional layouts in order to emerge as dynamic, welcoming environments that foster meaningful educational relationships (Weyland, 2021); on the other hand, as already outlined in the previous paragraph, a redefinition of the teaching role is necessary—no longer limited to the transmissive function of standardised knowledge, but understood as a reflective figure and situated researcher, capable of activating transformative processes within the fabric of the school community (Michellini, 2013).

The way in which school environments are designed, organised, and arranged constitutes a decisive variable in the teaching-learning process; spatial configuration directly impacts students' motivation and, consequently, the meaningfulness of learning, guiding the choice of teaching strategies and influencing, more broadly, the perception of school wellbeing (Caprino et. al, 2022).

It is therefore essential that this organisational dimension be the subject of intentional planning, grounded in an awareness of the close interdependence between educational space, teaching practices, student wellbeing, and the quality of learning outcomes.

Currently, in the Italian and European school context, a traditional model of spatial structuring persists—organised according to the classroom-corridor scheme, in which the latter are conceived merely as transit areas leading to classroom spaces framed as isolated microcosms designed for a pedagogy centred on the unidirectional transmission of knowledge, where the student takes on a predominantly receptive role (Carlini, D'Agostino, 2025).

In addition to considerations of a structural nature, it is necessary to emphasise the value of active and collaborative teaching, aimed at moving beyond the centrality of the frontal lesson. This pedagogical orientation—enhancing the role of the teacher as a researcher and reflective professional (Schön, 1993)—was already anticipated in the last century by Freinet (1969), who courageously challenged the exclusive use of institutional school textbooks by initiating with his students the collective production of didactic materials based on shared research paths.

This innovative model of participatory pedagogy and co-construction of knowledge finds further legitimization in the reflections of Mario Lodi (1974), who proposed an educational paradigm in which the teacher, working alongside the students, assumes the role of co-researcher.

Such an approach would transform the teaching-learning process from an individualistic and competitive dynamic into a collaborative and democratically participatory one (Dewey, 1916), aimed at promoting forms of peer-to-peer interactive communication that allow students to shift from a passive stance to an active, participatory, and constructive role.

The design of educational action, from this perspective, must necessarily take into account the presence of agencies and information networks that today are far more pervasive and influential than the traditional school institution. One need only think of the vast array of resources available on the web.

It is therefore necessary to move beyond the frontal lesson in favour of an experiential approach to teaching, which values the multiple cognitive styles present within the class group and diversifies the communicative modes employed. This guarantees continuity in learning pathways and connection with prior knowledge through the activation of anticipatory organisers and logical structures that promote situated learning as the privileged paradigm of authentic learning (Rivoltella, 2014).

The school curriculum must be designed with a deep awareness of each student's individual potential, taking into account their strengths with the goal of developing talents. The objective is not merely to transmit knowledge, but to orient and prepare the new generations to face the challenges of contemporary society. This implies reflecting on the function of the school as a place for the integral development of the individual, where the learning process becomes an opportunity to form active, competent citizens, capable of navigating the complex dynamics of the modern world. The curriculum, therefore, cannot be a rigid set of contents, but must be structured to support an education that fosters not only cognitive abilities, but also social, emotional, and moral competences (Lichtner, 2019). Students, for their part, are called upon not only to develop cognitive skills, but also key social competences such as teamwork, peer support, conflict resolution, and respectful listening to others' opinions.

The school must therefore foster a climate of trust and mutual respect, where competition gives way to collaboration and mutual support (Giacconi & Del Bianco, 2019).

In this context, the teacher becomes a guide (Baldacci, 2023), a facilitator of relationships, promoting dialogue, mutual understanding, and the development of transversal competences. The organisation of teaching must thus allow for flexible and personalised lessons, capable of adapting to students' needs and learning rhythms. Moments of didactic negotiation, in which students have a voice in the selection of content, methods, and timing, represent a fundamental strategy for fostering a sense of responsibility and engagement.

This kind of pedagogical approach enables students to become active participants in the learning process, fostering intrinsic motivation and stimulating autonomy in learning (Traversetti, Rizzo, 2024).

Students must be able to choose, for example, how they wish to explore a topic or the type of activity to carry out, which helps them to feel like protagonists in their learning process and to develop greater awareness of their own needs and preferences.

Another crucial aspect is assessment, which must be conceived as a transparent, shared, and participatory process.

In a competence-based learning context, the teacher must necessarily involve students in defining assessment criteria and in monitoring their own progress. This kind of approach promotes a formative, continuous, and improvement-oriented vision of assessment, rather than a purely summative model.

Involving students in the definition of assessment criteria allows them to develop ownership of their learning, to understand their strengths, and to identify areas for

growth. This process becomes a powerful opportunity for reflection, as it enables students to compare their own perception of learning with that of the teacher (Ismail et al., 2022).

When self-assessment aligns with teacher assessment, a pedagogical resonance is achieved, which fosters greater awareness of cognitive processes and improved error management.

In this context, error is not seen as failure, but as a growth opportunity, stimulating reflection on the strategies used and encouraging the search for alternative solutions (Trincherio, 2021; Pastore, 2019).

The ability to integrate research and practice, in conclusion, enables the overcoming of the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, favouring the combination of dialogic teaching with targeted activities—activities that are not limited to reproducing classroom content but are conceived as meaningful experiences capable of merging theory and practice within an integrated, self-reflective, and self-regulated learning process.

3. Conclusions and future prospects

The teacher, in the course of their professional work, is constantly called upon to reflect critically and consciously on the teaching practices they adopt. In this context, intrapersonal reflection is conceived as a fundamental competence, as it allows for the analysis and reorientation of pedagogical actions, with the aim of ensuring coherence between theoretical models and practical actions. This reflective capacity is indispensable for professional growth, as without continuous verification and revision of one's practices, all development would be hindered. Reflective competence must therefore be understood as a constitutive element of teaching, an ever-active resource to be employed in every phase of the educational intervention, aimed at promoting qualitative growth and student wellbeing.

From this perspective, the teacher's reflective competence does not refer solely to post-action reflection, but also includes reflection in action and, even more significantly, during action. This implies that reflection is not an episodic activity, but a continuous and dynamic process that accompanies the entire course of educational action.

This reflective modality thus plays an exploratory and self-regulatory role, enabling the teacher to monitor and adapt their approach constantly, ensuring that every instructional decision is based on careful and informed evaluation (Iavarone, 2008).

It is therefore necessary to integrate teaching expertise with a form of “caring professionalism”, understood not only as the ability to convey knowledge but as a comprehensive and conscious attention to the individual, their uniqueness, and their educational context.

From this perspective, caring professionalism implies a continuous analysis of relational and contextual dynamics, in order to foster a positive educational climate in which students’ processes of self-knowledge, self-perception, and self-fulfilment can develop fully. The essential conditions for such a process are congruence, empathy, and unconditional acceptance—expressed in the capacity to welcome the other in their uniqueness without judgment, even when their experiences and values differ profoundly from our own (Damiani, 2011).

Integrating the reflections presented with broader academic debates enhances the understanding of teaching as a dynamic, relational, and ethical practice. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that effective teaching transcends knowledge transmission, involving critical reflexivity and emotional engagement (Schön, 1993; Wortham et al., 2020).

The notion of “caring professionalism” aligns with ongoing discussions on teacher identity and ethical responsibility, which highlight the importance of empathy, relational trust, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Cooper, 2004; Howard, 2021). This synthesis underscores that promoting wellbeing in schools is not merely an individual effort but a systemic and culturally situated challenge, demanding continual professional growth and reflective practice to address diverse learner needs within complex social contexts.

Unconditional acceptance, however, does not imply unconditional approval of behaviour, but rather the recognition of the individual’s value regardless of their actions, always offering them the respect and attention they deserve in any circumstance.

Relational competence thus constitutes an essential and inescapable component of the professionalism of a teacher who is actively committed to the wellbeing of the class group. In this context, the teacher does not deal with abstract problems, conflicts, or difficulties, but with people who experience them in personal and situated ways. This crucial distinction entails the need to establish relationships based on mutual trust, understanding, respect, and collaboration. The construction of such relationships begins with active listening, which must not be reduced to a mere verbal decoding process, but understood as a deep and empathic communicative practice—prompting the teacher to move beyond surface-level language to grasp the emotional significance and intent of students’ messages (Baldacci et al., 2020). This fosters congruence and clarity in ideas, emotions, and

actions, contributing to communication that is both cognitively and emotionally functional.

A teacher's career should be viewed as a path of continuous growth—not only in terms of career progression, but also in terms of developing teaching, relational, and organisational skills. In this sense, the teacher is not only an instructional professional, but also an expert in helping relationships, able to manage interpersonal dynamics and support students' emotional and social development. Relational skills are thus an integral part of their professional role, and every teacher should possess them—with the possibility, for those more experienced, of taking on coordination responsibilities within a middle leadership structure. As educators, teachers are called to uphold ethical duties such as diligence, integrity, and impartiality—behaviours that serve as examples for students. A teacher's professionalism, also expressed through ethical conduct and positive relationships, should be assessed starting from the recruitment stage (Siddiqui, 2025).

With these competences, teachers can offer customised educational pathways, responding to students' needs and the school's educational objectives. Curriculum customisation, both vertical and horizontal, should be used to promote an inclusive culture, in which students internalise the principle of equity through differentiated assessment that accounts for their individual needs. The teacher of the third millennium must therefore be able to implement strategies, techniques, and tools that support both individual and collective wellbeing, avoiding improvisation.

Their educational commitment must always aim to support students' personal growth, promote social and civic responsibility, and transmit values—foundational elements for the harmonious development of the individual and their overall wellbeing.

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