

## Article

# Innovation, Participation and Tutoring as Key-Leverages to Sustain Well-Being at School

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**Abstract:** Background: Well-being at school is a recurrent hot topic within the educational field as a crucial issue for societies. Teachers often face tension with pupils and colleagues. Well-being is very often considered an individual achievement requiring individual measurement and support. This paper, in contrast, applies an approach that supports an *ecological perspective* of school well-being, implying a complex and multi-dimensional development investment. Methods: The paper investigates an innovative program initiative aimed at providing support to 50 Italian schools that have been deemed as critical for specific aspects (pupils' levels of learning, discomfort among teachers, scarce innovativeness, etc.) through evaluative qualitative research. Results: This work sheds light on well-being as a dynamic construct created through an integrative effort in which many factors can play a role. These factors are the possibility of professional tutoring to help engage the school management and involve teachers in a bottom-up involvement, the development of creative initiatives and innovative projects to respond to context-based challenges and pupils' needs, and the availability of space and time for collective sharing of ideas among teachers. These processes are closely related to the concept of well-being, which appears to be a systemic construct, rather than an issue related to the single individual. Conclusions: Focusing on the representation of schools' managers and tutors involved in the program, this research illustrates the application of an ecological perspective that creates well-being through social and productive sustainability processes.

**Keywords:** well-being; school management; education; innovative projects; tutoring; participation; teachers' engagement; evaluation program



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## 1. Introduction

The teaching profession has always been a crucial element of society, through which training, learning, innovation, and the circulation of knowledge are central factors in the development of young people, citizens, and professionals of the future.

Despite the importance of teachers, schools do not always succeed in accompanying and supporting the work of teachers and students through ideal conditions [1,2]. Aspects of well-being in educational contexts are crucial, and the topic of well-being among teachers in schools is recurrent in public debate. Teachers often face tension with pupils and colleagues; moreover, they often receive poor supports and have few if any consolidated forms of professional development and inter-personal investments. Such low investment at work can impact motivation, sense of belonging, professional identity [3], and organizational effectiveness.

The continuous intersection of tensions characterizes the teaching profession, which in many cases does not find adequate recognition or valorization; in fact, the educational sector is in many countries underpriced in terms of economic rewards for those who operate within primary and secondary schools [4]. These factors often obscure the pleasure of investing in relevant knowledge for advancing the school and society systems, leading to frustration and a lack of motivation.

However, investing in new competences, new activities, and a greater community scope can generate a sense of well-being [5].

For the above cited reasons, the teachers' professional category and the whole organizational school system require dedicated attention to improve sustainable forms of work experience.

The existing literature on the topic has long promoted an individual approach to well-being, even though the construct can be intended as multi-dimensional. Teachers' well-being is often treated as a sum of individual dimensions rather than the outcome of complex contextual dynamics [6].

The paper contributes to fill this gap, as it investigates the relational and organizational aspects of risk and potential support that can impact the teaching profession and the school context, thus influencing the well-being of teachers and the organizational actors within the school system. The concept of well-being is explored through the evaluative research of an innovative program designed within the Italian educational context and its effects on the schools involved.

The paper is structured into six main sections, including an outline of the main theoretical concepts characterizing the construct of well-being in school contexts, a section on the possible interventions for promoting well-being and for improving life conditions at school, a methodological section for illustrating the research case our paper is based on and the analysis of its results, followed by a discussion and concluding remarks.

## 2. Well-Being at School: Insights from the Recent Literature

Studies have long explored the topic of discontent within the educational field [6]. Many decades ago, Wilson [7] highlighted the problems and fragility of the teachers' role.

By considering the risk factors of Burn-Out Syndrome (BOS) in the teachers' population (for one of the first literature reviews, see Kyriacou [8]), an intricate intertwining of causes emerges, involving both intrinsic factors and extrinsic causes [9].

Broadly, these issues comprise both (1) subjective and individual aspects related to the professional identity, (2) group and organizational aspects, and (3) contextual and broader aspects at the macro level.

Professional identity is challenged by insufficient autonomy, scarce correspondence between professional expectations and their translation in practice, interpersonal characteristics of relating to students and colleagues, the decrease in self-esteem linked to the learning difficulties found in pupils, and the feeling of impotence and failure in the art of teaching [10].

At the group level, these factors are reported in the perception of lack of social support; the improvisation of methods and tools that are not shared within the same school; the intrinsic tensions implied in managing relationships with colleagues [11], school managers, and students' families; the reduction of one's own influence sphere, and the closure and withdrawal of the profession.

At the organizational level, increasing workloads, a lack of meritocratic criteria for evaluating and linking the quality of a teacher to the entity of compensation, and the fact that many organizational and institutional duties are assumed by individuals that opt for a voluntaristic dedication do not facilitate the perception of equity of treatment or collaboration among colleagues. Recent studies trace within these aspects the consequent perception of frustration and insecurity, the frequent experience of burnout, the lack of valorization, and the decrease in motivation and engagement [12].

Contextual aspects are also connected to the socio-cultural, socio-economical, and socio-territorial factors; for example, the presence of non-homogeneous conditions (schools' location, citizenship and demographic composition of the population, gender, culture, ethnic factors), the scarce social consideration of the teaching role in the public opinion, and the lack of integration with other professions and institutions. In Europe and overall, scholastic reforms often imply an excessive workload and a predominant bureaucracy,

determining psychological discomfort that is rarely recognized in the public and social representation [13].

Teachers, therefore, risk becoming squeezed between a strong ideal professional image and the efficacy of their actual practices [14].

The educational climate and culture in schools present a variety of personal, group, organizational, contextual, and environmental factors that influence teacher well-being. The magnitude of all of these factors together cannot be ignored, and directing attention towards the complexities teachers face daily is essential. For all of these reasons, the topic of well-being at work in the educational and scholastic field is of poignant relevance. Various disciplines, from educational to work psychology, all put at the center of their efforts the concept of tackling other challenges linked to the quality of teaching and of learning.

A recent review on teachers' well-being reported several limits of the current research on the topic [6].

More specifically, researchers underline that, despite the wide recognition of the multidimensionality of factors that sustain well-being, the great majority of studies measured teachers' well-being as a trait, while only few assessed it as a dynamic state.

We believe that it is fruitful to consider well-being neither in absolute terms (well-being *per se*) nor as an individual condition (well-being of one person), but rather to open the reflection to a professional group that operates under specific organizational conditions (teachers' well-being) so as to consider the different variables that intervene at different levels. Several relational aspects (the relationship with one's own identity, the multiprofessional and multidisciplinary integration, etc.), cultural features (organizational cultures playing a hidden although powerful role in the experience of teaching and learning), and psychosocial and organizational dynamics contribute to enable the organizational actors to interpret their context differently and to *become authors* of their own organizations by questioning the taken-for-granted routines and shape them differently through shared sensemaking processes [15–18]

### 3. Suggestions to Turn Malaise into Well-Being at Schools

In the school experience, a link arises between the positive and negative experience of students and the experience of teachers. If the teacher's lack of motivation negatively influences their students' curiosity and motivation to learn, similarly teachers' stress and burnout are often the consequence of not seeing the positive effects of one's own action or educational effectiveness [19,20]. The priority then becomes to break out of this vicious cycle.

The literature on well-being at school highlights a number of considerations, which we summarize here.

First, teachers do not teach in a vacuum [21]. They are part of an education system which includes policy and practices at the international, national, federal, and institutional levels and experience a range of relationships with key stakeholders such as school leaders, colleagues, students, parents, and other community representatives. All of these factors comprise teachers' professional lives and can impact their well-being and job satisfaction [22,23].

The recognition of these intertwined aspects supports the *ecological perspective* on teaching [21], calling for specific attention to fundamental alliances that must be built among teachers and other educational partners. Such alliances sustain teachers' perception of the completeness of their mandate, supporting the internal and external image of their profession.

Second, teachers can maintain a projectual and vital force in the continuous development of their own relational, educational, and didactic methodologies. When this is possible, harmony between teachers and the organisation is nurtured. Conversely, the impoverishment of this vital tension results in suffering, withdrawal, and/or marginalisation [14,24].

Third, schools can enhance the skills and professionalism of managers and teachers rather than levelling out the possibilities of a profession, not only in teaching but also in building meaningful relationships with pupils and colleagues, parents, and territorial agencies [14]. From this point of view, school can play a positive role by promoting the development of people's potential and favouring the construction of conditions to build bridges between the different actors in the educational service network.

Lastly, investing in well-being in the teaching profession means recognising and focusing on a broader and dynamic concept of organizational health, connected to the promotion of coexistence processes [14,25] and to the investment in the quality of the experience of individuals and groups within organisations [26].

A broad strand of studies in the literature questions certain approaches to improvement within the school system [27,28]. The cornerstones can be summarized as follows: *principle of organisational rationality*; the better the school functions, the better the conditions are for good learning. As such, investment in the central role of school leadership plays a fundamental role in school development [29]. *Distribution of leadership among the best teachers* indicates promoting collaboration among teachers, fostering teamwork and shared decision-making processes, and getting schools to network with others [30]. A *"personalised" improvement approach* is based on the characteristics of each institution with participatory mentoring with managers and teachers [31]. Lastly, *Maximum investment in teachers* includes attention to motivational aspects, promotion of good practice, and building networks of professional communities [32].

In order to invest in well-being, it is therefore crucial to maintain a multi-level vision and to design initiatives that aim to support and improve the whole school system.

In the next section, we dedicate a specific focus to an initiative launched in the Italian educational context that follows these principles. We use this focus to analyze how complex and multi-level investments can produce positive cascading effects for the well-being of the actors.

## 4. Materials and Methods: Case Illustration and Methodology

### 4.1. The Program Context

To monitor learning outcomes in the Italian school system, the Ministry of Education presides over a central evaluation program for schools' performance using learning outcomes indicators that allow schools to maintain comparability nationally.

Fewer initiatives and monitoring programs are provided with regard to climate and well-being within the school contexts.

The project we illustrate herein is specifically aimed at some *failing schools* (those schools performing low in the national outcomes indicators) in Italy. This project, in light of its innovative character in terms of hypotheses and methodologies for the development of well-being in school contexts, has been the object of the evaluation research presented below, funded by the School Foundation.

The School Foundation is a non-for-profit Italian association with the mission to grant specific funds to school projects in different regions in Italy. The foundation is committed to advance the quality of schools, reduce inequalities in access to resources, and innovate through specific projects that enable the school system to evolve. In congruence with its mission, the foundation decided to dedicate its funds to an innovative program named *"Together-school"*, aiming to sustain schools that faced difficulties according to the National evaluation indicators system.

The *failing schools* were analysed according to performance indicators (pupils' learning outcomes), although very different reasons could generate the same (poor) results. Causes of difficulties can be manifest for example through the fragility or marginality of a territory, or in the presence of disadvantaged pupils and families, or again in scarcely motivated professionals.

The “Together-school” program aimed to sustain 50 failing schools by re-designing some aspects of their own functions and then achieve better learning results in the time span of three years.

The strong assumption of the program was that, in order to have an impact on students’ final learning outcomes, it was important to work on teachers’ activation and participation in new projects, which are considered key components of well-being. Teachers and managers were therefore challenged to take an active part in designing a specific school project through a participative and bottom-up process under the hypothesis that this transformative movement could have an impact on professional and organizational well-being.

The “Together-school” program was based on two main levels of intervention aimed at supporting improvement: (1) a capacity-building action through specific mentoring dedicated to school teachers and school managers and networking among different institutions, and (2) a financial contribution aimed at developing new projects (with a time span of three years) to enhance learning at school.

The care of each school was entrusted to two tutors, chosen from a population of well-experienced school leaders or former school managers in retirement. Their task was to organize periodical meetings in the school: (a) to provide the school management with specific advice regarding their leadership, (b) to train teachers towards a self-reflective perspective starting from their own experience in order to develop plans for improving teaching practices, and (c) to supervise the development of the specific new projects implemented in each school.

The fulcrum of the “Together-school” program was the support activity provided by the tutors, with their specific dedicated attention to the different schools that was directed to the acquisition or reinforcement of new managers’ and teachers’ competences.

Such high investment was accompanied by an intensive phase of qualitative and participatory evaluation research, illustrated in the next section.

#### 4.2. *The Methodology: Participative Evaluation*

The evaluation research involved collecting voices, representations, and reflections emerging from the actors directly involved in the program, specifically the tutors and the school managers. Given the high investment made by the foundation, monitoring the effectiveness and the most appreciated aspects of the whole process was important to also relaunch future developments or program extensions.

Given the diversity of the contexts and projects that were actually developed in the schools on the basis of the investment offered by the foundation, the qualitative research phase involved analysing the operating methods adopted, the options chosen, the working styles applied, and the collaboration built between tutors and schools. Specifically, the focus was on the investments and degree of participation activated among all the actors involved in the process and on the impact that the project had on organizational well-being. The question that guided the evaluation research was: *In implementing the new school projects, what conditions did or did not favor an impact on well-being among teachers?*

At the methodological level, the research proceeded through two steps: a first phase of documentary analysis and a subsequent phase of focus groups with tutors and managers from the different schools.

##### 4.2.1. First Phase: Documentary Analysis

The schools involved in “Together-school” had the opportunity to build projects according to their own will. They could invest to enhance learning in language (Italian) and mathematics or in other specific needs or orientations. They were asked to document the progress of their work over a specified time period (three years).

The first part of the research data consisted therefore of written documentation produced by the schools (managers and referents) and by the tutors.

In particular, the analysis focused on:

- tutors' project logbooks, with notes regarding each facilitation/advisory meeting with schools.
- annual reports, compiled by the tutors and the school management at the end of each year.

The aim of the documents was to reconstruct an overall picture of the specific projects implemented in the schools and trace their contextual differences, their evolution over time, and their development, with specific attention to process elements regarding the work with the schools (involvement and activation of teachers, activation of change, and innovation processes).

The process dimensions were then explored in the second phase of data collection.

#### 4.2.2. Second Phase: Focus Group

Five focus groups were conducted in total: two sessions with the tutors involved, and three focus group sessions with the school managers, with the aim of gathering several voices and lived experiences and to put them into dialogue by activating a moment of confrontation (within the two populations of tutors and managers). All 13 tutors were engaged, and 17 managers (randomly selected among the 50 managers) were involved. As tutors represented a methodologically relevant element of the "Together-school" program, they were invited to a specific focus group to collect their evaluation of the experience and facilitating or hindering aspects of their own function.

Listening to the perspectives of school managers in a separate way was intended to leave them free to evaluate the accompanying process and the benefit of such investment and to have a direct perspective of how the project impacted the school internal dynamics and well-being.

The areas of investigation during the focus groups were the initial expectations and investment in the project, its practical implementation, the participation and schools' engagement, and the impact of the project on the schools' functioning, the overall climate, and the teachers' and organizational well-being.

#### 4.3. Data Analysis

Each focus group lasted approximately two hours. All sessions were audio-recorded, the content was transcribed verbatim, and a paper-to-pencil content analysis was conducted.

All material was analysed by an inductive thematic analysis. Following the path of data analysis proposed by Braun and Clark [33], the researchers independently analysed the data (focus groups, annual reports, and the tutor's logbook) and wrote down ideas regarding the emergent themes (familiarising with the data). In the second phase, the researchers continued to identify the codes (Generating initial codes). They then separately grouped the traced codes into broader themes (Searching for themes). Once the themes were traced, they created a conceptual map and interpreted the themes in light of the entire corpus of data (Reviewing themes). They finally gave a definition and name to each theme (Defining and naming themes). At this point, they started working together to compare the themes and discuss the convergences and divergences of the final outputs. They agreed on the identification of four main themes that resulted in the final corpus of results.

The trustworthiness and validity of the data analysis was guaranteed through a process of data triangulation [34]. We triangulated themes that emerged through different sources (tutors, school managers, annual reports, and the tutors' logbooks). Divergences, communalities, and connections across themes were internally discussed until agreement was achieved.

### 5. Results

This section presents the results of the evaluation research.

First, the analysis of the data collected shows that the program generated diverse degrees of impact intensity in terms of well-being for teachers and organizational actors.

The data analysis shows different nuances of reactions towards the School Foundation investment. Three major typologies can be described regarding the program positioning, its meaning, and its aims:

1. Scarce alignment and weak engagement in the program. In some situations, schools showed utilitarian drivers and opted to develop projects with the aim to achieve funds rather than investing in learning improvement. The tutors perceived their role more as evaluators and controllers, instead of allies for developing new school potential. This turned out to be very negative for the teachers who felt the presence of the tutors as judges rather than sustainors of school positive resources.
2. Initial acceptance, followed by internal and external contextual difficulties. After their initial interest, some schools felt impeded by teachers' turnover, scarce presence of the school manager, only a fragmented participation of colleagues, and scarce cultural propensity to innovate.
3. Full subscription to the "Together-school" program. In this third typology, schools showed high support and wide collaboration between tutors, teachers, and managers. The circulating projects in the school contributed to the spread of good practices and new advancements.

In terms of impact, a fragmentation of teachers' engagement and recognition of the value of the project are reported. The analysis shows strong engagement from a core group of teachers and less engagement from other teachers. In some cases, this was helpful to sustain teachers' leadership within the activities and promote their self-efficacy and empowerment toward the project, with direct reinforcement of a sense of well-being. In other schools, managers highlight the lack of involvement of the whole class council as a critical element for the school.

The data revealed a number of factors and conditions that were crucial within the project for the development of well-being and engagement of the teachers and school's key actors. Four main themes emerged from the analysis, described in the following paragraphs and summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Facilitating factors to develop well-being: Main topics emerging from the research.

Facilitating Factors to Develop Well-Being	Description—How
1. The central role of tutor	Tutors as activators of new representations around schools problems, new initiatives and good practices, resources, and directions for development.
2. The role of school managers	School managers as activators of participative and collective forms of work collaboration among teachers.
3. The role of project activities	Project as a condition to promote actions and investments related to contextual practical needs.
4. Sustaining innovation	The program sustained teachers to find the space and time to share ideas and reflections, to create new practices, and to look toward innovative school implementation.

First, the tutor was described as a key activator of teachers' resources. Although in a few cases they were perceived more as controllers than as mentors, for the majority of the schools, the tutors provided teachers with enhanced opportunities to structure tailored and needs-based activities for their students.

Second, the schools' managers were mentioned as fundamental actors guiding the teachers in participative forms of work collaboration.

Furthermore, the teachers could freely choose the development of their activities within “Together School”, customizing the interventions on the basis of students’ capacities, needs, and resources, supported well-being.

Finally, the program sustained teachers to show their creativity and offered them the right space and time to innovate their own actions through peer sharing.

(1) The central role of tutor

Tutors, recognized as competent consultants that are neither external nor internal to the school context, played a central role in sustaining schools’ capacity building. Diverse representation of this professional role emerged according to the context and impacted the teachers’ response in terms of engagement and well-being.

*“Teachers expressed a very clear concern: they wanted a facilitator, rather than a project supervisor. They were afraid of judgement and control” (manager’s quote).*

The role of the tutor appears to be oriented between two polarities: for teachers, the tutor is an unexpected guest and controller of processes; tutors also serve as a reference point to guide the school toward improvement, especially in cases in which the presence of the school manager is perceived as strong and engaged. In these cases, tutors served as facilitators and activators of good practices, enhancing opportunities to structure tailored and need-based activities for their contexts and students.

Critical factors in the implementation of projects included the initial reactions of some teachers anchored to traditional routines of teaching school. In these cases, tutors were perceived as external controllers and put resistance in place with respect to their functions.

The fact that there were two tutors taking care of each school represented added value, with the possibility to share different considerations and reflections on schools. As the tutors were new in their role, the mutual mirroring provided the chance to reinforce their professionalism and self-develop their identity as process facilitators, *“We thus had a double pair of glasses for seeing the contexts and our own style of supporting them” (tutor’s quote).*

Furthermore, school teachers needed new stimuli in order to reconsider their own processes and to engage in changes, and the tutors felt that their role was challenged in this direction from the very beginning. They felt they could operate on a more profound cultural change by sustaining the initial steps of teachers’ activation and by facilitating awareness processes around weaknesses and single necessities (regarding teaching methods or educational/organizational processes in class, for example).

*“We were invited to class meeting and could participate in—and facilitate—collective reflections on how to organize activities for pupils and why. We saw from the very beginning that we could have a strong impact on collectively developing a method for understanding (and being aware of) the school function. We did not suggest how to proceed, but facilitated the internal emersion of functional practices” (tutor’s quote).*

Some other crucial factors emerged as positive and helpful in appreciating the articulated projects. One key element was also the relation developed between tutors and school managers, who recognized the tutors as key facilitators and supporters of new representations around schools’ problems, new initiatives to embark on, and competences to acquire.

*“As school manager, I felt less lonely in reflecting on the school’s needs. The possibility for dialogue with external colleagues, the tutor, helped me acquire a different perception of things and processes that I had taken for granted. I also learnt from tutors’ new competences” (manager’s quote).*

*“Tutors were helpful in making specific initiatives to circulate in the system. They assumed an external role that could have a new impact” (manager’s quote).*



## (2) The role of school managers

School managers played a key function as agents for the positive implementation of program actions within schools and the consequent motivation of teachers towards the program.

The school managers play a key role in communicating and sharing projectual aspects; very often the teachers' involvement and engagement in the initiatives depends on the managers' communication around them.

Tutors claimed that the only possibility for effective projects implementation was meeting a committed manager, *"I am strongly convinced that the initial manager's commitment was key. He/she cannot say: 'go on, as I have too much to do', otherwise teachers feel it and nothing really becomes an opportunity"* (tutor's quote).

*"Managers are picklocks for strongboxes"* (tutor's quote).

Moreover, accessibility of new funds by itself provoked a new entrepreneurial attitude in teachers, who had to define lines of investment and planned outcomes only in a few schools.

The teachers' well-being seems to be facilitated when an organizational fabric and background is intentionally fostered by the school manager, nurturing collective work and collaboration among the teachers. When this is not present, it seems difficult to create or activate involvement solely with the "Together-school" program. Data analysis confirms contextual elements that may facilitate engagement and involvement, such as the presence of an engaging and supportive school leader.

## (3) The role of project activities

One major aspect that was strongly appreciated both by tutors and school managers regarded the wide and open possibilities for schools and teachers to autonomously select their area of investment and the freedom to create new projects through "Together-school". This element of the initiative was reported as essential to sustain teachers' well-being, because they felt recognized in their capacity to identify what their students mostly needed. Furthermore, they felt supported in achieving their educational targets, in line with what they mostly recognized as relevant for their own teaching path.

In some cases, projects were oriented toward active citizenship or investments in the territory cultural features, and in other cases they considered lifestyle, food education, and conflict management. In other cases, attention was given to learning outcomes directly connected to the school's topics. The variety of project content shows that the perceived needs of school teachers was not solely related to scholastic achievement around mathematics and the Italian language, but rather impacted a broader activation that could mobilize the teachers' involvement or challenge traditional practices and program routines. Some projects implicitly challenged teachers to adopt a different interpretation of their role, for example, *"the project with the city council, which involved pupils and teachers in a participative evaluation of the institutional activities that were put in place for the green sustainability plan"* (extract from document analysis). This specific project called pupils and teachers to confront institutional contexts out of the usual settings and challenged their capacity to think out of the box or to change communication practices in accordance with different situations and players.

The possibility to work on problem setting and problem solving regarding the availability of funds for investments, was seen as an emancipatory process that is usually not very common, at least in the Italian school context. Italian schools are in fact very poorly prepared regarding aspects of self-evaluation. Their awareness and readiness to innovate or to play an authorial role is not very strong among the whole teacher population, and the role of tutors appeared crucial from the very beginning.

*"Projects were well-articulated, and schools were protagonists. Although they knew that outcomes should be expected in Italian and math, the schools found their own way to reach such potential and improvement. It was good to not have very detailed planning; it was important to leave it sufficiently open to engage resources in an active way. Teachers*

*knew their own weaknesses and strengths, and on that basis, they built their own project” (tutor’s quote).*

*“The intriguing part was creating something, instead of receiving an already made plan. I have money, I am expected to define how to use it, according to specific school issues” (manager’s quote).*

#### (4) Sustaining innovation through sharing

Another aspect that appeared during the initial steps was the hope of bringing “fresh air” and inquiry around the traditional way of organizing teaching. Managers who considered strategies to renew the teaching found the proposal attractive. They also saw the initiative as a way to attract more money, in a context of long reduction of investments and lack of resources, *“We come from decades in which school funding has been progressively reduced. It is a good thing to profit by new resources and to nurture with new potential the organization of the teaching” (manager’s quote).*

The expectation was also connected to more collaboration, more circulation of best practices among teachers, and the consequent climate improvement: *“New circulation of knowledge and sharing of ideas are necessary if we want to have a more sustainable and motivated work life” (manager’s quote).*

The initiative opened new opportunities for confrontation, reflection, and experimentation that in some cases reduced the old routines of “being old school” for reconstructing new ones, *“We have instilled the doubt that it is possible to teach in a different way. The great value of the project is this new movement of ideas” (tutor’s quote).*

Tutors confirm the elicitation of a more positive climate and better coexistence within the teachers’ groups. This well-being is derived from a space of dialogue, collaboration, and cohesion around work issues and ideas.

*“They have found cohesion around the project ( . . . ) A very nice spirit all over, trust and mutual respect, have created satisfaction in the final achievement. They now know one another; they know they can count on each other during future problems” (manager’s quote).*

*“At school, teachers struggle to reach a shared mission. This project allowed the necessary space for building a clear vision of where to go as a whole system” (manager’s quote).*

*“Shared time means also collaboration time, and collaboration is becoming a new style of work” (manager’s quote).*

The creation of a “shared time” among teachers to uncover and exchange teaching modalities was perceived to have great value and created positive bonds, impacting professionals’ motivation and well-being. Moreover, effects were visible in the application of new methods with pupils, too:

*“The project brought a small and giant revolution in the methods of studying, in the method of working and teaching . . . discovering innovative ways to proceed toward the future” (manager’s quote).*

*“The outcome is also a stronger engagement among pupils. They are more motivated, they happily wait to go to laboratories, and they study more. Sure, they still might have difficulties with some topics, however they are more generally enthusiastic of what they can find at school. This affects tremendously the teachers’ feelings and perceptions” (manager’s quote).*

## 6. Discussion

An initial assumption motivated by the “Together-school” initiative is as follows: pupils’ learning depends on the professional and managerial activation at the classroom and organizational levels. Activation and motivation become here connected to the idea of creating a general good climate and a diffuse well-being, both professional and organizational.

Although the primary aim of the three-year “Together-school” program was to improve pupils’ overall school performance, the evaluative research shows that, in many schools, the program impacted well-being because it generated multiple responses.

The program aimed to generate new reflections and new best practices at school following the principle that school autonomy can be an advantage and a positive aspect in cases in which a level of sharing and partnering is guaranteed within a community engaged to improve educative strategies, exchange ideas, and circulate fruitful innovation. Within this investment, major aspects relate to the possibility of generating innovation and improvement through a combination of top-down and bottom-up processes, changing the culture of programming at schools, and connecting projects with local opportunities and specificities.

Well-being is nurtured through an ecological approach and through multidimensional investments.

The program impacted teaching [21] by activating different key actors (managers, tutors, teachers, students, etc.) working toward the same priorities: to identify key aspects that develop new projects and to aggregate resources for implementing them. In doing this, teachers rediscovered the necessity of their mandate and the activable levels of collaboration and had the chance to author a different strategy to accomplish their educational work. Authoring their own practices is a key element of expressing the vital force of own profession and call for progressive engagement with respect to pupils and also the system of relations within the organization. With this possibility, we recognize the benefit of getting out of individual boxes (i.e., the class as a single entity and the jurisdiction of single teachers) and connect with a broader and community-level scope. The activation process at the organizational level can disrupt certain routines and influence new processes to rethink the coexistence processes [14,25] among organizational actors (e.g., colleagues, students, families).

Related to these processes is the idea that the well-being of a system is connected with its ecological, social, and productive sustainability, especially in the school system, where professional aspiration is often connected to values and the willingness to impact future cultural and societal progress.

School contexts need spaces for creativity and innovation. Teachers face constant challenges related to the specific classes’ needs and the situations they encounter; achieving the capacity to construct different ways to deal with those challenges reduces the risk of feeling the burden and fatigue associated with them.

To innovate and find creative solutions, schools need spaces for reflection and dialogue around possible solutions to problems, for generating stimuli and experiments in the direction of original responses.

The program has facilitated and constituted such practiced space, where teachers reflect together and initiate collective movements. The tutoring activity, specifically dedicated to the sustainment of these new actions, helps build new scenarios without imposing the demolition of old ways to be school. Tutors have challenged the system of relations in the school to incrementally enrich the educational possibilities.

However, facilitating aspects are also accompanied by some risks and limits. The risk is that stimulating change can also represent a burden for people who already feel aggravated by duties and heavy tasks. This is why, in such a program, it can also be expected that somebody is keener to pursuing the change, whilst others are not. A close tutorship that can understand the specificities and possibilities of each teacher’s community is in this case essential. Activation of one part of the school must not create conflict in another part.

There is also the need to invest in a stronger and continuous way to let new practices infiltrate the school, *“It should not be a single and unique pilot experiment. We must find a way to make it a common and continuative practice, at system level, to become effective and durable”* (tutor’s quote).

Of course, participation and results depend also on the territorial characteristic; the social fragility of population in some territories and peripheral participation from relevant cities' activities or opportunities impact negatively on the possibility to use the project as a jumping board for a different social and cultural possibility for schools and for teachers.

A limit of the initiative and its impact is the high turnover among teachers. The loss of colleagues from one year to the other affects the continuity within the project's aim and meaning. The turnover limits teachers' involvement and participation in the program.

Lower turnover helped the mutual sharing and learning of teaching practices, *"Before, classes were not used to dialogue. Only the constant participation of teachers to conversations and collaboration impacted on a different style of work"* (tutor's quote).

Another limit the tutors faced was the initial resistance among teachers. To weaken the resistance, the effort focused on creating constant occasions for sharing and working toward the integration of the whole system, considering classes not as an archipelago, but as a unified territory.

*"As a result, a new awareness circulates in many schools now, together with the feeling that a common mission may act as glue for future projects"* (manager's quote).

This kind of activation requires a long time to take root and to be considered the usual way to operate (as said above, participation and bottom-up evaluation are not well-trained paradigms of work in school).

## 7. Conclusions and Practical Implications

This paper explored a program to support schools in difficulty and analyzed the secondary impact of such an initiative on the well-being generated at a school level. The program invested in school leadership; promoted collaboration, teamwork, and shared decision-making among teachers; and supported disadvantaged schools in a personalized manner, offering tutorship dedicated to investing in the promotion of good practices and in bottom-up transformative processes. The research shows different levels of impact on well-being and how these develop within a system of relationships and constructions of meanings that are strongly contextual.

A limitation of this study is that it is based on the representations of tutors and managers, without directly addressing the teachers and pupils' voices in the research. However, Hascher and Waber [6] claim that most studies on teachers' well-being mainly rely on the participating teachers' subjective experiences and evaluations [35,36]. To improve research on the topic, future research could consider additional perspectives (e.g., from colleagues and managers) when assessing the dimension. Our contribution, in this sense, addresses this concern and responds to this invitation, in the pursuit of engaging with different perspectives on the topic.

The paper suggests how organizational well-being moves and take shape within a texture of relationship and meanings that are contextually co-built. Rather than viewing well-being as a subjective variable, our analysis shows its multiple components. Our results support the idea of organizational well-being as a concept that goes beyond the boundaries of the individual sphere and is dynamically co-constructed in the relationship and in the mutual creation of meanings within the organizational contexts [4,25,35].

Future research should integrate every component of this multi-perspective picture. Moreover, this study is based on the Italian school context and culture. Future research could compare different countries and cultures within the school setting. A comparative perspective, which considers the different use of resources invested in school and their interpretation and impact, is surely promising.

In light of this experience, we highlight some major practical implications that emerged and could prove helpful in other programs of this kind.

First, the program did not address specifically the well-being issue. However, being created with the aim to invest in and improve the conditions of schools defined as disadvantaged (or failing), it impacted the well-being without specifically naming this scope. This approach worked because it activated organizational processes that as a whole were

directed to new collective possibilities, new sharing spaces, and new ideas to deal with the real issues, meanings, and necessities of the school.

Second, a promising strategy was the use of a top-down and bottom-up push. Without a top-down mandate, schools (facing difficulties and weariness) could be motionless. Nonetheless, bottom-up processes designed projects that were sustainable and generative for the teachers themselves.

Bottom-up activation does not happen, though, without a supporting leadership. Managers were trained and helped by tutors to exercise leading competences and in facilitating the construction of alliances, dialogue, and participation at the school level. These managers were capable of accepting (and supporting) the notion that there could be a direction given and an original direction created by the teachers themselves.

Tutors were key actors to create these possibilities; they acted as bridges between colleagues and hierarchies, and they were mediators of ideas and activators of internal resources. Tutors also became sources for identification processes, a sort of role model for teachers to project the future co-evolution of their own profession and professional system.

These issues create a crucial reflection in the school field, which is the relevance of introducing an external consultant to support the internal processes [37], which in Italy is a very rare possibility because of the general scarcity of resources [38].

In conclusion, well-being is a dynamic construct that is created by integrative effort in which many factors can play a role. For example, professional mentoring, investment in lifelong learning, the development of creative initiatives and innovative projects, and support to groups and collective sensemaking processes can contribute to overall well-being within schools. The contribution of this paper shows that all of these aspects can contribute to generating a cascade effect on individual motivation, professional identity confirmation and development, organizational effectiveness, and contribution to a greater community scope—all elements that, taken together, generate a sense of well-being [35].

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