From burnout to growth: the relationship between teachers' job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health

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In contrast to previous studies focused on the negative impact of teacher stress and burnout, recently there has been a shift towards processes which help to support teachers' wellbeing and mental health. The objective of the present study is to examine the status of the job satisfaction, wellbeing, and mental health of schoolteachers in Maltese schools and examine the interrelations between these key variables. A total of 351 primary and secondary school teachers completed an anonymous online survey on their mental health, wellbeing, and job satisfaction. The findings portray a mixed profile of teachers experiencing a moderate level of distress, but feeling connected and efficacious, and having mixed feelings about different aspects of their profession. Job satisfaction, particularly relationships with colleagues and nature of work, and sense of wellbeing, particularly connectedness, foster teachers' mental health and help to protect them against burnout and mental health issues. School connectedness appears to be one of the strongest health promoting and protective factors. On the other hand, young teachers with limited experience are the least satisfied and have lower levels of mental health and wellbeing, making them more at risk of burnout and attrition. Various recommendations are made on how to enhance the wellbeing and mental health of practicing teachers and make the profession more rewarding for early career teachers.

KEYWORDS

teachers, job-satisfaction, wellbeing, self-efficacy, connectedness, mental health

1 Introduction

Teaching is a rewarding profession with educators mentoring and leading children and young people into the adult world, empowering them to make good choices about their present and future as active, productive and autonomous citizens. As a profession deeply embedded in complex human interactions and continuous social, economic, and technological changes, teaching however is considered as a challenging profession, marked by higher levels of stress and attrition when compared to other professions. Close to one half of teachers in Europe report being highly stressed at work, while 40% are concerned about their mental health and wellbeing (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021). Similar findings were reported by OECD (2019), with teachers reporting a high level of stress at work and consequently more likely to leave the profession. A recent global study by UNESCO and International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024) reported that Europe and North America are third on the list of regions in the world experiencing teacher shortages,

with a need for 4.8 million additional teachers. In Europe, teacher shortages are due to attrition and lack of attractiveness of the profession.

Occupational stress impacts teachers in various personal and professional ways, including their wellbeing and mental health, the quality of their work, their relationships with students, colleagues and parents, as well as students' wellbeing and academic learning (e.g., Cavioni et al., 2023; Gibson and Carroll, 2021; Harding et al., 2019; Hascher and Waber, 2021; Viac and Fraser, 2020; Zhou et al., 2024). Recently however, there has been a shift from the previous research focus on the negative impact of occupational stress on teachers' wellbeing, burnout and attrition, towards health promoting and resilience frameworks focused on processes which help to support teachers' wellbeing and mental health (Mansfield et al., 2016; McCallum, 2020). In their review of studies, McCallum et al. (2017) argue that many existing studies to date appeared primarily focused on the negative influences of factors related to teachers' work, such as working conditions, reform fatigue and dealing with constant change. Their review of 191 studies focuses instead on identifying enabling strategies that schools and educators may use to maintain their wellbeing, resilience and mental health. Similarly, Gray et al.'s (2017) review underlined how the promotion of mental health and wellbeing through a positive school climate may help to prevent burnout and attrition and promote the resilience of teachers. A recent review of studies with 44 research studies with data from over 76,990 teachers, reported a significant relationship between teacher wellbeing and desirable outcomes such as self-efficacy, retention, positive relationships with students, as well as positive student outcomes (Dreer, 2023).

The present study is underpinned by theoretical frameworks which emphasize this shift in research on teachers' wellbeing, namely the promotion of teachers' wellbeing as a health promotion resource and preventive approach against burnout and mental health issues. One of the commonly used frameworks is the job demands resource model (Demerouti et al., 2001) which links teacher wellbeing with teacher satisfaction, which is related to the resources made available for the teacher to adequately address the demands of the profession. McCallum's (2020) socio-ecological framework relates teacher wellbeing to the specific contexts where teachers work. Teachers' wellbeing is primarily related to how well teachers are prepared and supported in meeting the current challenges of the profession. Finally, Mansfield et al.'s (2016) teacher resilience framework takes an interactive individual-systems approach to teachers' wellbeing, that is, building the teachers' personal resources such as motivation; self-efficacy and social and emotional competences whilst mobilizing contextual resources such relationships with administration, colleagues and students, working conditions, and support networks. The contribution of these personal and contextual resources leads to adaptive coping strategies resulting in positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and wellbeing.

1.1 Relationship between teachers' wellbeing, work satisfaction and mental health

When teachers feel supported and valued, have healthy relationships with colleagues and manageable workloads, they experience high job satisfaction and sense of wellbeing, are better able to cope with the stresses of their profession and less likely to become burnout and experience mental health issues (Dreer, 2023). We distinguish between teachers' wellbeing and mental health even if they overlap to a significant degree, influence each other and may share similar underlying factors (e.g., Dreer, 2023; Gray et al., 2017). Overall wellbeing refers to a positive affective, relational and psychological state of functioning and adaptation and the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs (e.g., Cavioni, 2025; Keyes, 2002). Acton and Glasgow (2015) define teacher wellbeing as a personal sense of satisfaction, fulfillment, sense of purpose and positive affectivity that develops from the daily positive interactions with students and colleagues. Whilst positive mental health is very related to this definition of wellbeing, mental health issues such as burnout, anxiety and depression represent a separate, different construct, focusing on signs and symptoms of ill-health. The absence of wellbeing or low level of wellbeing may contribute to mental health issues, while a state of wellbeing comprises both the presence of flourishing (satisfaction, fulfilment, happiness) and the absence of mental health issues (Keyes, 2002). Whilst teacher wellbeing and mental health are closely interrelated, in this study, however, we construe teacher wellbeing as being critical to the promotion of teachers' mental health (Dreer, 2023; Hussain et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024) and as a protective factor against mental health issues such as burnout and mental health conditions (Dreer, 2023; Gray et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2024).

In the present study we construe teachers' wellbeing more specifically in terms of work-related wellbeing consisting of perceived self-efficacy and connectedness to school (Palikara et al., 2022). Teacher self-efficacy, namely how confident teachers feel about themselves as educators, contributes both to teachers' wellbeing overall job satisfaction and operates as a protective factor against stress and burnout (Avola et al., 2025; Capone and Petrillo, 2020). A review of 165 papers reported that teacher self-efficacy is positively related to teachers' wellbeing, including personal fulfilment, motivation and job satisfaction (Zee and Koomen, 2016). Similarly school connectedness, namely teachers' sense of being valued, supported and connected within the school community, is another integral component of teacher wellbeing (Osterman, 2000). School teachers who perceive a collegial and supportive school environment report higher levels of wellbeing and resilience and lower levels of stress and burnout (Collie et al., 2012; Ferreira et al., 2024). As in the case of self-efficacy, school connectedness is related both to the promotion and maintenance of wellbeing, whilst acting as protective factor against stress, burnout and mental health issues. Mental health and wellbeing, self-efficacy and school connectedness are closely related to teacher satisfaction (Dreer, 2023; Hussain et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Teacher job satisfaction, namely how fulfilled and valued teachers feel and how positive they see their role and their work environment (Toropova et al., 2020) is influenced by such factors as working conditions, autonomy, recognition, relationships with staff and students, and opportunities for professional growth (Toropova et al., 2020; Viac and Fraser, 2020). When teachers feel satisfied in their work, they are more likely to enjoy an overall sense of wellbeing and mental health (Dreer, 2023; Hussain et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024), effectively manage the challenges of their profession (Simbula et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2024), and are protected from excessive stress, burnout and mental health issues (Kidger et al., 2016; Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2018; Viac and Fraser, 2020; Wang et al., 2024).

The relationship between job satisfaction and wellbeing, self-efficacy and school connectedness, and mental health, however, is reciprocal and dynamic, and teacher wellbeing and mental health in turn contribute to job satisfaction (Dreer, 2023). High self-efficacy is a key determinant of work satisfaction as well as overall wellbeing and mental health (Kasalak and Dağyar, 2020; Xiao and Zheng, 2025; Zee and Koomen, 2016). Similarly, teachers who feel supported, recognized and connected are more satisfied and fulfilled in their profession (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2018; Collie et al., 2012) and enjoy higher levels of overall wellbeing and mental health (Osterman, 2000). Self-efficacious and connected teachers are thus more satisfied in their job and enjoy overall wellbeing and mental health, whilst satisfied teachers experience higher levels of wellbeing and mental health and are less likely to suffer from burnout and mental health issues. In the present study we examine teachers' job satisfaction, work-related wellbeing and mental health to have a more in-depth understanding of teachers' job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health and what protects them from burnout and mental health issues. We hypothesize that teacher satisfaction and overall wellbeing, where teachers feel satisfied, fulfilled, self-efficacious, connected and supported, operate as an adaptive and resilience process, helping to promote positive mental health, prevent burnout and act as a protective factor against mental health issues (Dreer, 2023; Gray et al., 2017; Mansfield et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2024).

1.2 Context and objectives of the study

The objectives of the present study are to examine the status of the job satisfaction, wellbeing, and mental health of schoolteachers in Malta. Local studies on teachers' stress and wellbeing show a similar trend to that of teachers in Europe and other parts of the world (e.g., European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; OECD, 2019). Recently there has also been an increase in the number of local educators leaving the profession (Attard Tonna and Calleja, 2023; Bezzina, under review), with main reasons including working conditions, resources and facilities, stress and job satisfaction, employability and career advancement, relationships with students, staff, parents and recognition of the profession (Galea, 2020). In the Teachers in Europe: Careers, Development, and Wellbeing Survey by the European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2021) it was reported that 64% of Maltese teachers in lower secondary schools experienced work-related stress and 29% reported high levels of stress. A recent survey study on educators' subjective wellbeing and job satisfaction was conducted with 1,678 educators in Malta, with the majority of participants being teachers (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2024a). It reported that most educators across various roles reported moderate levels of satisfaction and subjective wellbeing, but teachers exhibited lower levels of satisfaction than other grades such as members of the administration and Kindergarten Assistants. Key areas of concern in educators' wellbeing and satisfaction include high levels of stress, frequent negative affectivity, and lack of optimism about their future.

The recent National Education Strategy 2025–2030 (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2024b) acknowledges the challenges impacting educators in Malta and introduced educator and learner wellbeing as the first pillar of education for the coming 5 years. The Strategy recognizes the challenges educators face in their work such as "the volatile demographics in the classroom, students' diverse needs and the unfavorable ramifications of social media" (p. 32) and proposes various measures to support educators in addressing these challenges, reduce causes of stress, and increase their satisfaction and wellbeing. The present study is aligned with and contributes to these initiatives to promote teachers' wellbeing in Malta by seeking to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between teachers' job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health. In contrast to many of the previous local studies, it shifts the focus away from teacher stress and burnout towards wellbeing and satisfaction and the processes that contribute towards teachers' wellbeing and mental health. More specifically the present study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- What is the status of teachers' work-related well-being, job satisfaction and mental health in the Maltese educational context?
- How do teachers' wellbeing, mental health and job satisfaction vary by gender, age, qualifications, years of teaching experience, Year group taught and school type?
- What is the relationship between teachers' job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health? Do teachers' satisfaction and wellbeing help to prevent mental health issues?

2 Methodology

2.1 Sampling and data collection

All state, Church and Independent schools in Malta and Gozo, including kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, were invited to participate in the study. Out of 131 schools contacted, 29 State, 11 Church and 4 Independent schools accepted to participate in the study and circulated an online survey amongst all teachers at their respective schools. Various reminders were sent to the schools to encourage teacher participation, and the duration of the data collection period was extended from April 2023 till June 2024. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta, the Research and School Internal Review Directorate within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, and the Secretariat for Catholic Education. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Overall, 351 teachers from primary to secondary state, church and independent schools completed the anonymous online survey on their mental health, wellbeing, and job satisfaction. Following data checking and cleaning, 5 responses were removed with the final sample comprising 346 teachers (Table 1). A sample of 346 teachers selected from a population 6,483 teachers guarantee a maximum margin of error of 5.13% assuming a 95% confidence level. This can be considered sufficient and statistically robust for the planned analyses according to widely accepted methodological guidelines (e.g., Field, 2024). Most of the participants were female (65.9%), aged between 30 and 49 years (62%), had more than 11 years of teaching experience (68.2%), taught at secondary school level (69.1%) and had an undergraduate degree (58.3%). Just under half (48.1%) taught at a state school, 36.7% worked at a church school, whilst the remaining 15.2% worked in independent schools. (Table 1).

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics.

Sample characteristics	N	%
Gender		
Female	228	65.9%
Male	118	34.1%
Age		
<30 years	46	13.2%
30–39 years	108	31.2%
40–49 years	110	31.9%
50 + years	82	23.6%
Qualifications		
Undergraduate (Diploma, First Degree, PGCE)	202	58.3%
Postgraduate	144	41.7%
Duration in teaching role		
Less than 5 years	36	10.4%
5–10 years	72	20.9%
11–20 years	120	34.6%
21 + years	118	34.2%
Year group taught		
Primary school	106	30.6%
Middle school	104	30.1%
Secondary school	136	39.3%
Type of school		
State	166	48.1%
Church	127	36.7%
Independent	53	15.2%

2.2 Instruments used

This project made use of the instruments proposed by Palikara et al. (2022) in their international research project on global perspectives on teachers' wellbeing and mental health following the COVID-19 pandemic. The anonymous online questionnaire completed by teachers included a section which collected demographic details such as gender, school level, school sector, age, qualifications and years of teaching, and comprised the following instruments:

Teacher Subjective Well-being Questionnaire (TSWQ; Renshaw et al., 2015) ($\alpha = 0.83$) is an 8-item, self-report, rating scale for assessing teachers' work-related wellbeing. The TSWQ scale contains two subscales, namely Teaching Efficacy ($\alpha = 0.89$) and School Connectedness ($\alpha = 0.83$). Participants were asked to rate their wellbeing on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = almost never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = almost always), with respect to different aspects of their work, with high scores reflecting high levels of well-being (e.g., "I feel like I belong at this school" and "I am good at helping students learn new things"). In the present study. Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 for Teaching Efficacy, 0.81 for School Connectedness and 0.81 for the Wellbeing composite score were observed, indicating acceptable levels of internal consistency.

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg and Williams, 1988) ($\alpha = 0.84$) was used to measure the mental health of teachers. The short form of GHQ consists of 12 items that assess the severity of mental health issues among teachers during the last few weeks preceding the study (e.g., "Over the past few weeks, have you been able to concentrate on whatever you are doing?"). It makes use of a four-point Likert scale (0 = more so than usual, 1, 2, 3 = much less than usual). Positively phrased items which consist of half of the 12 items were reverse scored so that a higher score shows higher psychological distress. All items were added to obtain the total score, making the score range 0–36 (with a higher score indicating a higher level of psychological distress). Scores over the cut-off point of 12 could be classified as indications of mental health issues. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 was observed, indicating a reliable level of internal consistency.

Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS; Spector, 1985; Spector, 2022), ($\alpha = 0.91$) is a 36-item survey which assesses teachers' attitudes about various aspects of their job. The JSS evaluates nine dimensions of job satisfaction related to overall satisfaction, namely pay ($\alpha = 0.75$), promotion ($\alpha = 0.73$), supervision ($\alpha = 0.82$), fringe benefits ($\alpha = 0.73$), contingent rewards ($\alpha = 0.76$), operating procedures ($\alpha = 0.62$), co-workers ($\alpha = 0.60$), nature of work ($\alpha = 0.78$), and communication ($\alpha = 0.71$). Each dimension is assessed with four items (e.g., "I sometimes feel like my job is meaningless") and a total score is computed from all items. For each item, participants were required to choose from a six-choice rating scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." About half of the items were reverse scored since the items are written in both directions. Analysis in the present study showed satisfactory internal consistency for all dimensions except one, ranging from 0.89 to 0.072. In the case of 'operating conditions' the Cronbach alpha of 0.49 was not considered satisfactory and it was excluded from the analysis.

2.3 Statistical analysis

IBM SPSS v29 was used for analyzing weighted data. The use of weights based on gender in the data analysis ensured that the dataset has been adjusted to ensure that both genders are equally represented, regardless of their actual distribution in the sample. The sample closely met the assumptions of normality and equal variance, and a range of parametric statistical tests were used in the analysis. Descriptive statistical analyses, including mean scores and standard deviations, were conducted to explore the overall levels of teachers' psychological well-being, mental health, and job satisfaction. To examine differences across demographic and professional variables, specifically gender, age, qualifications, years of teaching experience, year group taught, and school type, independent samples *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs were performed. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the strength and direction of the relationships among job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health. Additionally, multiple regression analysis was carried out to investigate further the relationships between these variables, particularly how job satisfaction and wellbeing are related to mental health. A *p*-value of less than 0.05 (95% confidence) level of significance was applied in the analysis.

3 Results

Descriptive statistics and assessment of normality were conducted for all study scales. The Total Job Satisfaction scale had a mean of 119.21 (SD = 23.66, 95% CI [116.71, 121.71]), Teachers' General Health (reversed scored) had a mean of 17.83 (SD = 6.26, 95% CI [17.17, 18.49]), Teaching

Efficacy had a mean of 3.43 (SD = 0.48, 95% CI [3.38, 3.49]), School Connectedness had a mean of 3.22 (SD = 0.64, 95% CI [3.16, 3.29]), and Teacher Wellbeing had a mean of 3.33 (SD = 0.47, 95% CI [3.28, 3.38]). Normality was assessed using skewness, kurtosis, stem-and-leaf plots, and the Shapiro–Wilk test. Skewness values ranged from −0.71 to 0.20, and kurtosis values ranged from −0.52 to 0.09, indicating approximately normal distributions for all scales. Stem-and-leaf plots showed no substantial deviations from normality. The Shapiro–Wilk test results were non-significant for all scales ($p > 0.05$), supporting the assumption of normality. Therefore, parametric analyses were considered appropriate.

3.1 Mental health

Table 2 shows that the mean GHQ-12 score is 17.83 (SD = 6.26), which exceeds the commonly used cut-off point of 12 (Goldberg and Williams, 1988; Lütke Lanfer et al., 2022; Lundin et al., 2024), indicating a moderate level of distress amongst the participants. The highest average score of 1.82 indicates that participants struggle to concentrate (SD = 0.80) and find it difficult to enjoy their everyday activities (SD = 0.90). It is indicative that most of the participants do not feel very happy or that they are playing a useful part. Analysis of variance reveals a significant difference by age, with participants aged 39 years and under reporting the highest mean score (under 30: $M = 19.10$, SD = 5.17; 30–39 years: $M = 19.02$, SD = 6.70) while those aged 50 and over reported the lowest scores ($M = 15.73$, SD = 6.24) [$F_{(3, 341)} = 5.20$, $p < 0.01$]. This indicates that younger teachers experience higher levels of distress and mental health issues when compared to older teachers. On the other hand, no significant difference was found with gender, qualifications, teaching experience, year group and school sector.

3.2 Teacher wellbeing

The mean scores on the teachers' work-related wellbeing scale portray a more positive picture, indicating that participants enjoy a relatively high level of wellbeing ($M = 3.33$, SD = 0.47) with the great majority of participants responding almost always or often on the Likert scale. Participants expressed a high level of wellbeing in both subscales but scored relatively higher on teaching efficacy ($M = 3.43$) than on connectedness ($M = 3.22$). A total of 55.6% reported 'almost always' experiencing teaching efficacy at school, in contrast to 45.6% in connectedness; on the other hand, whilst only less than 2% reported any concerns with teaching efficacy, 12% did not feel connected at their school (Table 3).

Significant differences were observed across age groups in teaching efficacy and school connectedness, with teachers aged 50 years and over having the highest scores ($M = 3.56$, SD = 0.49; $M = 3.44$, SD = 0.55) and those under 30 years the lowest ($M = 3.22$, SD = 0.40; $M = 3.11$, SD = 0.65). The findings show higher levels of teacher efficacy [$F_{(3, 341)} = 5.29$, $p < 0.001$] and a stronger sense of belonging and attachment [$F_{(3, 341)} = 4.71$, $p < 0.01$] among older teachers. Similarly, in the composite score, teachers aged 50 and over scored highest ($M = 3.49$, SD = 0.42) while those under 30 scored lowest ($M = 3.16$, SD = 0.46) [$F_{(3, 341)} = 6.46$, $p < 0.001$]. A one-way ANOVA revealed that teachers in church schools had higher levels of connectedness [$F_{(2, 342)} = 8.08$, $p < 0.001$] and overall teacher wellbeing [$F_{(2, 342)} = 6.46$, $p < 0.01$] than state schoolteachers. Teachers in the early years and primary school level scored significantly higher in teaching efficacy than those in middle school [$F_{(2, 342)} = 6.48$, $p < 0.01$], whilst female teachers scored significantly higher than male teachers in teaching efficacy [$t_{(344)} = 2.95$, $p < 0.01$] and overall wellbeing [$t_{(344)} = 2.05$, $p < 0.05$].

3.3 Job satisfaction

Table 4 shows that most participants are satisfied with particular aspects of their work such as supervision at school ($M = 18.36$), colleagues ($M = 18.01$) and nature of work ($M = 17.99$), but dissatisfied with other aspects, particularly those related to working conditions, such as pay ($M = 8.34$), promotion ($M = 8.74$) and fringe benefits

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics for GHQ-12 items and summary scores ($N = 346$).

GHQ-12 items	Mean	Std. Dev.	Response frequencies (%)			
			0 More than usual	1	2	3 Much less than usual
Able to concentrate	1.82	0.80	2.9%	33.7%	41.8%	21.6%
Playing a useful part	1.62	0.82	7.5%	37.3%	41.3%	14%
Capable of making decisions	1.53	0.80	7.7%	43%	37.7%	11.5%
Enjoy your day-to-day activities	1.82	0.88	5.8%	31.9%	37%	25.2%
Face up to problems	1.48	0.72	4.6%	51.3%	35.2%	8.9%
Feeling reasonably happy	1.77	0.82	3.9%	36.5%	38.8%	20.8%
Lost much sleep	1.33	0.94	20.2%	39.5%	27.4%	12.9%
Under stress	1.62	0.93	10.3%	39.1%	29.5%	21.1%
Could not overcome difficulties	1.30	0.89	19.2%	41.9%	29.0%	9.9%
Feeling unhappy and depressed	1.36	0.98	21.9%	35.0%	28.7%	14.4%
Losing confidence	1.22	0.96	24.8%	40.3%	22.6%	12.3%
Thinking of self as worthless	0.97	0.94	37.0%	37.8%	16.6%	8.7%
Mean GHQ-12 score	17.83	6.26				

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics for Teacher Wellbeing Scale and summary scores (N = 346).

Teacher wellbeing scale	Mean	Std. dev.	Response frequencies (%)			
			1 Almost never	2 Sometimes	3 Often	4 Almost always
Teaching efficacy subscale	3.43	0.48	0%	1.6%	42.8%	55.6%
Connectedness subscale	3.22	0.64	0.5%	11.6%	42.3%	45.6%
Overall teacher wellbeing	3.33	0.47	0%	2.9%	50.5%	46.6%

(M = 8.56). The overall job satisfaction mean in the Maltese sample is lower (M = 119.21) than that of US teachers (M = 135.0), with Maltese means being lower on every dimension except communication (Spector, n.d.) (Table 4). One-way Anova revealed that teachers aged 50 and above reported higher satisfaction across multiple categories, namely pay [$F(3,341)$ = 4.16, $p < 0.01$], fringe benefits [$F(3,341)$ = 4.01, $p < 0.01$], nature of work; [$F(3,341)$ = 6.60, $p < 0.001$] and overall job satisfaction; [$F(3,341)$ = 4.17, $p < 0.01$]. Additionally, a significant positive correlation was found between overall job satisfaction and age, suggesting that job satisfaction increases in parallel with age (r = 0.136, $p < 0.01$). Significant differences were also observed across several work areas-by school sector, with teachers in independent schools consistently scoring highest and teachers in state schools lowest in pay [$F(2,342)$ = 15.99, $p < 0.001$], promotion [$F(2,342)$ = 20.40, $p < 0.001$], supervision [$F(2,342)$ = 10.05, $p < 0.001$], fringe benefits [$F(2,342)$ = 28.09, $p < 0.001$], contingent rewards [$F(2,342)$ = 17.40, $p < 0.001$], nature of work [$F(2,342)$ = 3.31, $p < 0.05$], and overall job satisfaction [$F(2,342)$ = 19.72, $p < 0.001$]. Teachers in church schools scored highest in communication, while those in state schools scored lowest; [$F(2,342)$ = 5.93, $p < 0.01$]. Female teachers are more satisfied than male colleagues with colleagues; [$t(344)$ = 2.64, $p < 0.01$] and nature of work; [$t(344)$ = 3.08, $p < 0.01$].

3.4 Relationships between mental health, wellbeing and job satisfaction

Table 5 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients of the relationships between overall teacher wellbeing, school connectedness, teaching efficacy, job satisfaction, and mental health. GHQ scores are moderately negatively correlated with overall teacher wellbeing (r = −0.384, $p < 0.001$), particularly school connectedness (r = −0.355, $p < 0.001$), and more strongly with job satisfaction (r = −0.414, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that teachers who are satisfied in their work and well connected to their school community tend to experience fewer symptoms of psychological distress. This is also true to a lesser extent of teaching efficacy. There is also a strong relationship between teacher satisfaction and overall being (r = −0.448, $p < 0.001$), with connectedness being again most strongly related to job satisfaction (r = −0.532, $p < 0.001$), in contrast to the low relationship between teaching efficacy and job satisfaction (r = −0.170, $p < 0.001$).

Multiple regression analysis between overall wellbeing and job satisfaction and mental health as outcome variable, indicated a significant negative linear relationship, supporting the Pearson correlations findings. The overall regression was statistically significant [$R2$ = 0.221, $F(2, 343)$ = 48.562, $p < 0.001$], with overall wellbeing and job

TABLE 4 Descriptive statistics for Job Satisfaction sub-scales and total score (N = 346).

Sub-scale	Maltese Sample (N = 346)		US Sample* (N = 9,507) (Comparative norm)	
	Mean	Std. dev.	Mean	Std. dev.
Pay	8.34	4.05	12.0	2.1
Promotion	8.74	4.20	11.7	2.0
Supervision	18.36	4.73	19.1	2.0
Fringe benefits	8.56	4.20	14.3	1.8
Contingent rewards	11.21	4.56	13.6	1.6
Operating conditions	11.90	3.70	12.0	2.5
Co-workers	18.01	4.03	18.5	1.2
Nature of work	17.99	4.18	19.4	1.5
Communication	16.10	4.14	14.6	2.2
Job satisfaction score	119.21	23.66	135.0	7.3

* US comparative norms are not representative of the US population (Spector, n.d.).

satisfaction, explaining 22% of the variance in mental health issues. Both job satisfaction (β = −0.08, t = −5.675, $p < 0.001$) and teacher wellbeing (β = −3.295, t = −4.665, $p < 0.001$) emerged as significant predictors of GHQ-12 scores, indicating that higher job satisfaction and wellbeing are linked to better mental health (Table 6). The standardized coefficients suggest that job satisfaction has a somewhat stronger influence on mental health than wellbeing. Furthermore, with regards to wellbeing, the impact was primarily through connectedness rather than teaching efficacy, with connectedness being a much stronger impact factor in mental health.

4 Discussion

The findings of the present study portray a profile of positive and negative aspects in the mental health, wellbeing and job satisfaction of teachers in Maltese schools. In line with other studies both locally and abroad on teacher stress, burnout and mental health issues, the findings reveal indications of such negative experiences, with a high percentage of teachers finding it difficult to concentrate, enjoy everyday activities, not feeling happy and that they are playing a useful part. The moderate level of distress is a clear cause for concern, indicating that teachers are struggling with stress, which may lead to burnout and mental health issues (European Commission/EACEA/

TABLE 5 Pearson correlations between variables.

Key variables	Teaching efficacy	School connectedness	Teacher wellbeing (Composite score)	Job satisfaction	Mental health (GHQ)
Teaching efficacy	—	0.405**	0.785**	0.170**	−0.281**
School connectedness	0.405**	—	0.884**	0.532**	−0.355**
Teacher wellbeing	0.785**	0.884**	—	0.448**	−0.384**
Job satisfaction	0.170**	0.532**	0.448**	—	−0.414**
Mental health (GHQ-12)	−0.281**	−0.355**	−0.384**	−0.414**	—

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

TABLE 6 Multiple regression predicting teachers' mental health from job satisfaction and wellbeing.

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI for B
(Constant)	38.34	2.22	—	17.31	<0.001	[34.00, 42.68]
Job satisfaction (JSS Total)	−0.08	0.01	−0.30	−5.68	<0.001	[−0.107, −0.053]
Teacher wellbeing (Total Score)	−3.30	0.71	−0.25	−4.67	<0.001	[−4.68, −1.91]

Outcome variable: GHQ-12.

Eurydice, 2021; Harding et al., 2019; Hascher and Waber, 2021; Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2024a; Viac and Fraser, 2020; Zhou et al., 2024). Although teachers are more likely to experience such difficulties in the secondary sector (e.g., European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021), no significant difference was found by grade or school level. On the other hand, the younger teachers appeared to be experiencing more psychological distress than their older peers (especially those aged 40 years and over). This is in line with existing evidence which shows that teachers in the early stages of their career report significantly higher stress levels due to professional challenges such as early career challenges as well as personal life issues such work-life balance (e.g., Agyapong et al., 2022; National Education Union, 2025). It could also be that the rate of leaving the profession in Malta, whilst increasing, is still relatively low due to rigid training trajectories and reluctance to leave the stability of the profession at a time of securing home ownership or raising a family; on the other hand those who remain in the profession for a considerable number of years, develop good coping skills and have more benefits, access to resources and supports as a result of experience and networking (e.g., Malta Union of Teachers, 2024).

On the other hand, teachers' work-related wellbeing presents a more positive picture, with most of the participants experiencing a high level of overall wellbeing, both in terms of teaching efficacy and connectedness. This reflects the findings of a recent survey with a larger sample of Maltese educators on their subjective wellbeing (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2024b). Similarly to distress and mental health issues, the younger teachers reported lower levels of teaching efficacy and sense of belonging and connectedness, which may be expected as young teachers strive to gain more self confidence in their teaching and classroom management and build stronger collegial networks (Klassen and Chiu, 2011). Female teachers and teachers in the early years and primary schools scored significantly higher in teaching efficacy whilst female teachers had higher levels of overall wellbeing. Research on gender differences in self-efficacy has not been so conclusive, suggesting other factors may be more determinant than gender in teaching efficacy (Orakcı et al., 2023; Sun and Yin, 2025; Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy, 2002). On the other hand, female

participants had a significantly higher level of overall wellbeing than males, but not on sense of connectedness. Whilst this is indicative that female teachers may overall enjoy better subjective wellbeing than males, this needs to be treated cautiously since there is no significant difference on connectedness, one of the key indicators of wellbeing in this study. In fact, international research again suggests mixed findings, indicating that gender alone may not be a strong predictor of overall teacher wellbeing, and that other contextual variables such working conditions, family responsibilities and work-life balance may have a stronger impact on wellbeing (Erden et al., 2023; Karmakar et al., 2025; Stengård et al., 2022).

Teachers' satisfaction with their work overall appears to be low, particularly in aspects related to working conditions such as salary and promotion, and when compared to teachers in other countries such as the USA (Spector, n.d.). On the other hand, they are more satisfied with areas such as supervision, colleagues and nature of work. International trends show that teacher satisfaction in general is moderate and notably lower than in other professions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; OECD, 2019). Moreover, working conditions such as workload, relationships, support, work life balance, and sense of autonomy, are more important for job satisfaction than salary on its own (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2017; Dreer, 2023; Gray et al., 2017; Zhou et al., 2024). This provides a more nuanced understanding of teacher satisfaction in Malta, suggesting that though teachers may be dissatisfied by aspects of their work such as salaries and promotions, these may be offset by more positive aspects such as support, relationships and nature of work which may be related to autonomy and relatedness. Furthermore, since the data collection of the present study, the working conditions and rights of teachers in Malta, including salary and promotion, have been considerably improved through a new sectoral agreement in 2024 (Malta Union of Teachers, 2024).

As in the case of mental health issues and wellbeing, overall job satisfaction increases with age, with those over 50 years and with more teaching experience reporting higher satisfaction across multiple areas and overall job satisfaction. Female teachers are more satisfied with their colleagues and the nature of their work, reflecting the traditional caring, 'female' nature of the profession on one hand (Toropova et al.,

2020). On the other hand, female teachers may have more family roles and responsibilities in Maltese society, struggling with work-life balance, thus explaining the lack of gender differences in satisfaction with working conditions. Teachers in Independent and Church schools are more satisfied with various aspects of their work in contrast to those in state schools; as mentioned earlier, this study took place before the new sectoral agreement for teachers in state schools. Moreover, whilst the school sector differences are related to working conditions and nature of work, the respective student composition may be another determining factor in teachers' satisfaction. Independent and Church schools, in contrast to state schools, have more students coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

The final research question in the present study was the examination of the relationship between the three key variables examined in the study, namely teachers' mental health, wellbeing and job satisfaction. As expected, we found strong relationships between job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health. Teachers reporting higher levels of satisfaction and sense of wellbeing (especially connectedness) in their work tend to experience fewer mental health problems, while lower satisfaction and wellbeing are associated with increased mental health issues. Connectedness is more strongly related to mental health than teaching efficacy, underlying the key role of relationships in the promotion and protection of teachers' wellbeing and mental health (Dreer, 2023; Gray et al., 2017; Hascher and Waber, 2021). As in the previous finding on job satisfaction, where contextual and relational factors have a stronger influence than salary, this finding reiterates the importance of sense of connectedness and belonging for schoolteachers' wellbeing and mental health. Both job satisfaction and subjective wellbeing may protect teachers from mental health issues, with their combined effect being quite strong. This is in line with earlier findings that improving teacher job satisfaction and wellbeing is crucial in preventing and reducing burnout and mental health issues (Dreer, 2023; Gray et al., 2017; Kidger et al., 2016; Zhou et al., 2024), providing support for both the job demands resource model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and the socio-ecological framework of teacher wellbeing (McCallum, 2020). These findings highlight the protective role of positive occupational factors such as satisfaction with working conditions, relationships with colleagues, administration, students, and sense of efficacy in supporting teachers' wellbeing and mental health.

The conclusions reached about the relationships between job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health need to be considered with caution in view of cross-sectional nature of the study. Whilst we argue that teacher satisfaction and wellbeing, especially school connectedness, have a positive impact on teachers' mental health, mental health issues may also lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, connectedness and teaching efficacy. Similarly, while work related wellbeing contributes to positive mental health and protects against mental health issues; an increase in mental health issues may also lead to a decrease in sense of wellbeing. A longitudinal study would help to unravel the dynamics between job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health and how job satisfaction and sense of wellbeing may protect mental health amongst teachers.

4.1 Implications for practices

The findings of the present study indicate various avenues to improve teachers' satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health. First it is indicative that teachers in general are experiencing a considerable degree of distress manifested in psychosomatic symptoms and negative feelings about themselves. This calls for measures to alleviate the pressure on teachers such as reducing administrative tasks, providing sufficient resources and supports, nurturing and promoting connectedness, collegiality, and recognition, having flexible working arrangements to maintain a good work life balance, and providing opportunities for autonomy and participation in decision making. On the other hand, teachers could be encouraged and supported to take more care of their own health and wellbeing by providing, or supporting them to organize, programs in stress management, mindfulness, resilience, and mental health literacy. Finally, teachers need to have access to adequate mental health support and services as required, such as mentoring and counselling. The recent National Education Strategy 2024–2030 (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2024b) makes provisions to address some of these recommendations in the coming 5 years, including a support and training needs analysis, a wellbeing program for educators, a wellbeing unit providing mental health support for educators, and professional supervision services for educators facing challenges.

Secondly, increasing teacher satisfaction will help to ensure their engagement, sense of belonging, and wellbeing while protecting against stress and burnout. The dissatisfaction with salary, promotion and fringe benefits may have been addressed, at least in part, by the new sectoral agreement signed 1 year ago. However, in the long-term systemic support is more likely to ensure that teachers remain satisfied and fulfilled in their work, such as opportunities for continued professional and career development, enhanced autonomy and recognition, participation in curriculum design and assessment, a safe, supportive and flexible working environment, collegiality with peers and positive relationships with students and parents. The recent National Education Strategy (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2024b) is proposing amongst others more direct involvement of educators in policy development, more relevant teacher education that addresses the current challenges, as well as simplification and reduction of administrative work.

Thirdly, connectedness emerged as a strong protective factor in the study, and this strength could be utilized to promote and protect the wellbeing and mental health of schoolteachers. Fostering and strengthening collaboration amongst teachers, such as facilitating professional social networks and learning communities, mentoring and team teaching; recognizing and celebrating teachers' strengths and achievements; organizing wellbeing initiatives such as mindfulness, physical exercise and nature based activities; and providing distributed leadership with active teacher participation in decision making, are some strategies which may nurture teachers' sense of belonging to, and connectedness with, the school community.

Finally, the findings clearly indicate that the younger teachers, particularly in state schools, are the least satisfied and enjoy lower levels of mental health and wellbeing when compared to older teachers with more experience. Younger teachers may enjoy less benefits and less opportunities for promotion due to their limited years of experience, may struggle more with finding a good work-life balance due to family roles, and may be less skilled in classroom management and stress management. In order to attract young people to the profession and prevent promising young teachers from leaving, teaching needs to become more attractive for them by increasing benefits such as attractive salary, enhanced opportunities for

professional and career development, recognition of expertise, and more participation in decisions, whilst removing challenges by increasing flexibility and autonomy and reducing administrative tasks. The proposed national promotional campaign on the teaching profession and the peer support program for newly qualified teachers in the National Education Strategy (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2024b) should also be helpful in attracting and retaining young teachers in the profession.

4.2 Limitations and areas for further research

The findings and conclusions of the study need to be considered in view of the limitations and nature of the study. This was a cross-sectional study at one point in time (post Covid) making use of a self-report online questionnaire. A larger, more representative sample across different grades and school sectors, integrating quantitative with qualitative in-depth data, would ensure more robust and comprehensive findings and conclusions. Moreover, the investigation of teachers' wellbeing and mental health would particularly benefit from longitudinal studies, tracking wellbeing at different points in time and its link to teacher retention as well as students' learning and wellbeing. A longitudinal study would also help to unravel the dynamics between satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health and how job satisfaction and work-related wellbeing may promote and protect mental health amongst teachers. Future research could build upon the general findings of this study to develop a conceptual framework that captures the interrelations among selected dimensions of well-being, mental health, and job satisfaction, and examine whether any of the factors associated with these constructs serve as mediating variables.

The present study took the whole teacher cohort as one group even if it looked for differences across grades. Further studies may focus on particular groups of teachers such as early years', primary school or secondary school teachers, who operate in different contexts and realities. Furthermore, the sample was not large enough to study the wellbeing and mental health of teachers who may be more at risk, such as teachers with disability, teachers from a migrant background, teachers with mental health issues, LGBTIQ teachers, as well as teachers in challenging teaching situations. These teachers may have different realities and challenges and would require a more focused lens to capture their specific wellbeing and mental health needs. An inclusive, equity-based lens would help to address a present gap in teachers' wellbeing and mental health research. In view of the finding that younger teachers are less satisfied and enjoy relatively lower levels of wellbeing and mental health, further studies may also focus on the needs of early career teachers, who may also be regarded as a vulnerable group.

The present study investigated teachers' work-related wellbeing with a measure integrating teaching efficacy and school connectedness. Wellbeing is a multidimensional phenomenon, and further studies may make use of a more comprehensive tool assessing the different aspects of wellbeing such as physical, psychological, social, and professional wellbeing. Moreover, it is important to examine teachers' subjective wellbeing from an affective-psychological perspective, namely hedonic wellbeing, balancing negative and positive emotions and satisfaction with life, and eudaimonic wellbeing, addressing personal functioning, sense of meaning and self-actualization. A measure of teachers'

resilience, seeking to identify the protective factors which help teachers to grow and flourish in the face of the challenges in their profession, would also be in line with the paradigm shift to growth and positive development in the study of teachers' wellbeing and mental health. The focus on resilience, however, needs to be more on systemic support and resources rather than on teacher individual resilience so as to avoid putting the onus of responsibility on the teachers themselves.

A whole school, systemic approach to teacher wellbeing and mental health, researching teachers' wellbeing in relation to the school's culture and climate, policies and structures, and curricular, organizational and relational layers, would provide a more ecologically valid examination of teachers' wellbeing and mental health rather than just focusing on individual teachers' stress and wellbeing. Finally, there needs to be more participatory, intervention-based studies, evaluating interventions and practices to improve teacher wellbeing and mental health, with the teachers themselves being actively involved in the research process.

5 Conclusion

This study throws light on the job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health of teachers in Malta, providing a mixed portrait of teachers struggling with stress and distress but feeling connected and efficacious, and having mixed feelings about different aspects of their profession. It shows that teacher self-efficacy, school connectedness, job satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health are highly related and collectively shape teachers' professional experiences. The study suggests that teachers' job satisfaction and sense of wellbeing, particularly their school connectedness, help to protect them against burnout, attrition and mental health issues. The study also underlines how teachers' satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health are highly related to the specific context where they work, and the need to support teachers adequately to meet the dynamic ongoing challenges of the profession. In this respect, schools are called to operate as health promoting contexts not only for their students but for their staff as well. In strengthening the teaching profession, they need also to pay particular attention to vulnerable teachers, such as early career teachers, teachers with mental health issues, teachers from a minority or migrant background, and teachers in challenging teaching conditions.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Author contributions

CC: Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Validation, Formal analysis, Project administration. NG: Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Visualization, Project administration, Software, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Methodology. RS: Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Software, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Project administration. VC: Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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