TEACHER WELL-BEING AS A PILLAR OF EDUCATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract
This paper explores the central role of education in promoting sustainable development, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding teachers' well-being as a decisive factor in this process. Quality education is widely acknowledged as a cornerstone for achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offering solutions to interconnected environmental, social, and economic challenges. Yet, the extent to which education systems can contribute effectively to these goals depends greatly on the condition and empowerment of the teaching workforce.

Teachers are the backbone of every education system, shaping both the content and the quality of learning experiences. Their well-being—encompassing professional satisfaction, access to continuous training, mental health support, and fair remuneration—is indispensable for strengthening their capacity to inspire and innovate in the classroom. Educators who feel valued and supported are more capable of implementing creative pedagogical practices, fostering meaningful student engagement, and preparing learners to address pressing global concerns such as climate change, poverty, and inequality.

The paper argues that enhancing teachers' well-being not only benefits the educators themselves but also generates wider societal advantages. A supportive school culture and positive working conditions create a multiplier effect that advances sustainability, equity, and social cohesion. Furthermore, it examines the role of governments, school leaders, and communities in designing and implementing policies that place teachers' well-being at the center, while remaining aligned with long-term sustainability strategies.

In conclusion, the study highlights that constructing a sustainable future requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges teachers as critical agents of change. By coupling quality education with the protection and promotion of teachers' well-being, societies can establish a strong foundation for nurturing inclusive, equitable and sustainable communities, capable of responding effectively to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Key words: *Teachers' well-being, sustainable development, quality education, educational policy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a key prerequisite for sustainable development, as highlighted in the 2030 Agenda and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 4 (Quality Education) is recognized as a catalyst for achieving all other goals, as it is linked to poverty eradication, gender equality, health, decent work, climate action and social peace (UNESCO, 2019). However, the success of education systems depends not only on the existence and content of policies but primarily on teachers themselves, who are the backbone of the

educational process. The quality of education is inextricably tied to the quality of teachers' working lives, their professional satisfaction and their psychosocial well-being (OECD, 2020).

Teachers' well-being is not merely a matter of working conditions or professional development; it is a multidimensional factor that influences their capacity to innovate, inspire, and respond to complex social challenges. Research shows that teachers who are supported, fairly compensated, have access to continuous professional learning and enjoy psychological safety are more effective in teaching and contribute to higher learning outcomes (Schleicher, 2018). Conversely, lack of support leads to professional burnout, higher attrition rates and ultimately a decline in the quality of education (ILO, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021).

International discussions on education within the framework of sustainable development have often focused on the skills students should cultivate, such as critical thinking, environmental awareness and collaboration (UNESCO, 2020). Less attention, however, has been paid to the condition of those tasked with cultivating these skills—the teachers. As recognized by UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), sustainable education is impossible without the active participation and support of teaching staff. Teachers are considered agents of change who can shape citizens capable of responding to global crises such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and socioeconomic inequalities (OECD, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the critical nature of the issue in the most dramatic way. Between 2020 and 2022, millions of teachers worldwide faced the sudden transition to remote learning, increased work pressures, and the need to support students amid uncertainty. This experience highlighted that teachers' resilience cannot be taken for granted and that safeguarding their well-being is a precondition for the resilience of educational systems themselves (ILO, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). At the same time, studies in countries such as Germany and Canada showed that supporting teachers' mental health and ensuring access to professional development significantly contributed to maintaining teaching quality (Collie, 2021; König et al., 2020).

At theoretical level, the discussion of teachers' well-being is connected to two key frameworks: the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). Both posit that the balance between demands and resources is crucial for job satisfaction, professional growth and ultimately productivity and creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). Emphasizing autonomy and competence—fundamental psychological needs of teachers—provides a fertile framework for understanding how their well-being relates to effective teaching and the promotion of sustainability (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The well-being of teachers takes on particular significance in the context of sustainable development. An education that ignores teachers' needs cannot be truly sustainable, as it fails to create conditions for long-term quality and social cohesion. By contrast, when teachers feel respected, supported and involved, teaching becomes a space of creativity, innovation and social change (OECD, 2021). The OECD's Future of Education and Skills 2030 project emphasizes that empowering teachers is critical for developing educational systems capable of responding to uncertain and dynamic social environments (OECD, 2021).

Summarizing, the discussion on education and sustainability cannot ignore teachers' well-being. Teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge; they are a prerequisite for social change. Safeguarding their well-being is not only a moral obligation but also a strategic necessity for building resilient and sustainable societies in the 21st century. The following article provides an in-depth analysis of the role of education in sustainable development, the theoretical and practical dimensions of teachers' well-being, the policies that promote it and the societal impacts of an education that places teachers at its center.

2. EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Recent debates on sustainable development have made it clear that education is not only a fundamental human right but also one of the most powerful mechanisms for social transformation. The United Nations' 2030 Agenda places Goal 4—quality education—at the center, recognizing that without ensuring equitable and inclusive access to education, the remaining SDGs become practically unattainable (UNESCO, 2019). Education shapes the values, knowledge and skills that enable citizens to understand and address the environmental, social and economic challenges of the 21st century.

According to UNESCO (2020), education for sustainable development aims to equip individuals to make informed decisions and take responsible actions for environmental protection, economic sustainability and social justice. In this context, education is not confined to the transmission of knowledge. It includes the development of values and attitudes related to responsibility, critical thinking, and collective action (UNESCO, 2020).

Research across various countries indicates that education systems investing in sustainability education positively influence the formation of citizens with environmental consciousness and social responsibility. For example, Finland's national curriculum incorporates sustainability-related goals and promotes interdisciplinary approaches, while in Singapore sustainable development is integrated into STEM education, encouraging students to seek innovative solutions to environmental problems (OECD, 2021).

The social dimension of education for sustainable development is equally important. Equitable access to education enhances social mobility, reduces inequalities and fosters conditions for social cohesion. As UNESCO (2020) notes, societies with strong and inclusive education systems are better equipped to respond to crises and to build peaceful and democratic communities.

Moreover, education is closely linked to economic development, as it prepares human capital with the knowledge and skills required by the labor market. According to the OECD (2020), investing in education increases productivity, fosters innovation and promotes social mobility. In economies undergoing constant change due to technological advances and the green transition, education plays a crucial role in preparing citizens to cope with new conditions (OECD, 2020).

Beyond vocational training, education for sustainability encourages the development of skills such as collaboration, innovation and complexity management—skills necessary for societies seeking balanced economic and social development. These skills are embedded in the "OECD Learning Compass 2030" which outlines the core competencies students need to shape a sustainable future (OECD, 2021).

The environmental dimension of education for sustainable development is decisive, as the climate crisis has emerged as the greatest threat to humanity (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020). UNESCO (2021) stresses that climate education should become compulsory at all levels of education to shape citizens capable of acting against climate change. At the same time, embedding sustainable practices in school operations (e.g., energy efficiency, recycling, green infrastructure) provides students with hands-on examples of responsible behavior.

Studies show that students participating in environmental education programs develop higher levels of ecological awareness and are more inclined toward environmental action (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020). Education thus becomes a tool for prevention and adaptation to the climate crisis, contributing to the creation of environmentally responsible societies.

Education is also a powerful means of promoting social justice and equality. UNESCO (2020) emphasizes that inclusive education is critical for achieving all other SDGs, as it

narrows gaps between social groups and strengthens social cohesion. In particular, girls' education has been shown to generate multiplier effects, improving indicators of health, income and civic participation (World Bank, 2018). In societies with pronounced inequalities, investment in education functions as a tool for overcoming exclusion and fostering democratic participation. Providing equal opportunities for learning empowers the most vulnerable groups, creating conditions for social and political inclusion.

Despite international recognition of the importance of education for sustainable development, challenges persist. Unequal resource distribution, underfunded public education systems, teacher shortages and social inequalities continue to hinder goal attainment (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed new forms of exclusion, as millions of students lacked access to digital learning tools, exacerbating existing disparities (OECD, 2021).

Nevertheless, the outlook is encouraging. Growing international commitment to the green transition, new technologies and strengthened international cooperation can create fresh opportunities for truly sustainable education systems. The key lies in empowering teachers, investing continuously in innovative pedagogies and devising policies that place education at the heart of strategies for sustainable development.

3. TEACHERS' WELL-BEING

In recent years, teachers' well-being has emerged as a central topic in international research and policy discourse. The attention it receives reflects a growing recognition that teachers are the most important determinant of educational quality and, by extension, of advancing sustainable development. Job satisfaction, psychological resilience, sense of purpose and opportunities for continuous professional growth constitute critical dimensions of well-being that shape teachers' capacity to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Collie, 2021).

Teachers' well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing psychological, social, professional and material factors. The OECD (2020) defines professional well-being as the quality of teachers' working lives, reflected in job satisfaction, mental health, professional autonomy and sense of purpose. Research indicates that well-being is influenced by many factors, including working conditions (workload, preparation time), peer and school leadership support, pay and job security, opportunities for professional development and psychosocial support and recognition (OECD, 2020). This holistic understanding aligns closely with work psychology models emphasizing the relationship between demands and resources.

The JD-R model (Job Demands–Resources Model) has been widely applied in education to explain how demands and available resources shape teachers' well-being. Job demands include factors such as intensified teaching, classroom behavior management, assessment and administrative duties. When these demands exceed teachers' endurance without adequate resources, the likelihood of burnout increases. Conversely, resources—such as supportive leadership, decision-making autonomy and access to professional learning—enhance job satisfaction and professional commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018).

Indicatively, research in schools in Canada and Australia showed that supportive climates and resources positively affect teachers' resilience and classroom innovation (Collie, 2021). The JD-R framework thus offers a practical tool for understanding how policy and school leadership can mitigate the negative effects of heightened demands and strengthen professional well-being.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) provides a complementary lens. It highlights three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. When these needs are fulfilled, teachers develop intrinsic motivation, enhanced resilience and

professional commitment. Recent studies show that teachers who experience high levels of classroom autonomy and feel that their contributions are recognized by the community report higher job satisfaction and fewer symptoms of anxiety (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Collie, 2021). Moreover, collaborative practices at the school level strengthen relatedness, promoting psychological well-being and professional engagement.

Conversely, the absence of fundamental resources and unmet psychological needs lead to serious consequences for teachers and the educational process overall. Studies confirm rising cases of burnout, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the pressure to rapidly adapt to digital teaching further burdened an already demanding role (König et al., 2020). By contrast, well-being bolsters occupational resilience, fosters creative pedagogical methods and nurtures positive learning environments. Evidence from Canada shows that schools implementing policies to support teachers' mental health achieved higher staff retention and better student learning outcomes (Collie, 2021).

These observations lead to the conclusion that teachers' well-being is not simply one issue among many; it is a precondition for the success of education for sustainable development. The JD-R and SDT frameworks demonstrate that when teachers' needs are met, conditions are created for high-quality teaching, creative learning and social transformation. When these needs are neglected, education risks becoming unsustainable, reproducing inequalities and social vulnerabilities. Future policy and research must therefore place teachers' well-being at the core of strategies for education. Only then can education systems achieve the SDGs and contribute to just, resilient and sustainable societies.

4. TEACHERS' WELL-BEING AS A DRIVER OF SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION

Education for sustainable development presupposes a workforce capable of meeting increasing challenges, innovating pedagogically and shaping citizens who demonstrate critical thinking, social responsibility and environmental consciousness. At the heart of this process are teachers. Their well-being, in all its dimensions, is not a workplace privilege or secondary condition but the cornerstone of sustainable education. The quality of educational practice, the long-term resilience of education systems and social cohesion depend directly on whether teachers are supported, recognized, and empowered (OECD, 2021).

The link between teachers' well-being and the quality of teaching is direct. Teachers who enjoy positive work experiences, a sense of autonomy and professional support are more inclined to incorporate innovative methods in the classroom. According to Collie (2021), teachers who experience psychological safety and feel supported by school leadership display higher levels of creativity and readiness to implement learning practices that strengthen critical thinking and collaboration.

On the contrary, a lack of well-being leads to conservative teaching practices. Teachers who feel exhausted or unrecognized tend to adopt traditional methods, limiting students' developmental potential. Sustainable education—which requires active student participation, interdisciplinary connections and critical understanding of complex issues—is difficult to advance when teachers are in a state of psychological and professional fatigue (König et al., 2020).

Student outcomes are likewise decisively influenced by teachers' well-being. The OECD's Teachers' Professional Learning and Well-being report (OECD, 2020) finds that students taught by satisfied and psychologically healthy teachers achieve better results, show higher levels of engagement and are more willing to participate in sustainability-related activities. Conversely, low teacher well-being weakens teacher–student relationships, undermining trust and student motivation.

Studies in diverse contexts corroborate this link. In Australia, teachers with access to mental health supports and collaborative teaching structures reported lower stress levels and their students demonstrated improved academic performance. Similarly, in Canada, research showed that teachers' professional well-being is associated with a positive learning climate and reduced dropout rates (Collie, 2021).

Teachers' well-being also functions as a lever for enhancing equity in education. In schools where necessary resources and appropriate support are provided, teachers can offer individualized assistance to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) underscores that educational equity cannot be achieved without simultaneously strengthening teachers, who are on the front line of efforts to combat social inequalities.

The experience of minority-area schools in the United States is illustrative. Teachers in such environments often face higher demands with limited resources, which strain their psychological state and drives higher staff turnover—thereby deepening disparities between affluent and poor areas. When policies are implemented to bolster teacher well-being (e.g., mentoring, coaching, and improved pay), teaching quality rises and students gain better opportunities (OECD, 2021).

Teachers are widely regarded as agents of change, capable of influencing entire societies. Their well-being is a prerequisite for fulfilling this role. As UNESCO (2021) emphasizes, teachers who have a voice in decision-making, see their work recognized and possess the tools for continuous learning are better able to cultivate in students attitudes of responsibility and critical civic engagement. The transition to a sustainability-centered society requires teachers' active participation as carriers of values. Through their well-being, they model for students that a just and equitable society begins with everyday school experience.

The relationship between teachers' well-being and sustainable education is evident in concrete examples. In Finland, the education system has consistently invested in teachers' professional development and well-being, resulting in high levels of satisfaction and long-term retention (Sahlberg, 2021). This has led to consistently strong student performance and the consolidation of a system widely regarded as a model of sustainable education. By contrast, in countries where teachers work in precarious conditions, with low pay and little support, signs of systemic breakdown appear. Nigeria is a case in point, where resource shortages and low teachers' well-being lead to poor education quality and high dropout rates (UNESCO, 2020). Such comparisons show that sustainable education cannot be conceived apart from teachers' well-being.

Regarding the resilience of teachers and education systems, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that it depends on the resilience of teachers themselves (Collie, 2021). Where policies strengthened teachers' well-being—through digital tools, psychological support, and professional learning—the transition to remote teaching was smoother. Where teachers' well-being was overlooked, the consequences were serious for both teachers and students (König et al., 2020).

Resilience is therefore not an abstract notion but a practical dimension of sustainable education grounded in teachers' well-being. Only when teachers feel safe, supported and empowered can they cultivate in students the resilience and adaptability skills essential for the 21st century. Teachers' well-being acts as a catalyst for every dimension of sustainable education, improving teaching quality, bolstering equity, fostering social cohesion and reinforcing the resilience of education systems. Policies aimed at achieving the SDGs must explicitly recognize that without happy, supported and empowered teachers, sustainable education remains an empty promise.

5. POLICIES AND STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE TEACHERS' WELL-BEING

Promoting teachers' well-being cannot be treated as an individual responsibility or confined to isolated school-level practices. It is a matter of broader education policy, strategic planning, and institutional support. Teachers are the cornerstone of education systems; thus, protecting and enhancing their well-being must be placed at the center of the sustainable development agenda.

Governments bear primary responsibility for designing and implementing policies that directly affect teachers' working lives. One key dimension is adequate education funding. Underfunding leads to excessive workload, staff shortages and deteriorating working conditions, which in turn undermine professional and psychological well-being (UNESCO, 2020). Policies ensuring stable investments in education—with priority given to salaries, recruitment and teacher training—are a prerequisite for sustainable and resilient education systems.

Setting fair and competitive salaries is equally crucial. In many countries, teachers' pay remains lower than that of professions requiring similar education levels, leading to low professional status and difficulties in attracting new entrants (OECD, 2020). Recent policies in countries such as Estonia and Portugal demonstrate that targeted salary increases, combined with improved working conditions, have enhanced the attractiveness of the profession and raised teachers' job satisfaction (OECD, 2021).

Ensuring access to continuous professional development is also essential. UNESCO (2021) and the OECD (2020) stress that professional learning should not be viewed as an obligation but as a right that empowers teachers. Policies incorporating mentoring for novice teachers, opportunities for international exchanges and access to innovative teaching methods are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and psychological resilience.

Governments should also build institutional frameworks that recognize mental health as a priority. During the COVID-19 period, several systems introduced psychological support programs for teachers, but these often proved fragmented (König et al., 2020). A coherent policy should include counseling services, stress-management programs and structures to prevent burnout.

The everyday experience of teachers is largely shaped by school leadership. According to Collie (2021), principals who adopt participatory and supportive leadership models enhance teachers' well-being by promoting instructional autonomy, fostering collaborative teacher teams, recognizing and rewarding good practice and cultivating a culture of trust and mutual respect. Leadership that is controlling and evaluation-heavy reduces job satisfaction and increases stress (Ryan & Deci, 2020). By contrast, transformational leadership is linked to higher levels of work engagement and psychological resilience, as it creates a sense of purpose and strengthens teachers' professional identities (Collie, 2021).

Developing school-level support mechanisms is also critical. The presence of school counselors, peer-mentoring programs and regular experience-sharing sessions reduces feelings of isolation and strengthens staff resilience. Experience from Canada and Australia shows that schools with robust internal support structures adapted better during remote learning (Collie, 2021).

Local communities play an important role in promoting teachers' well-being. Communities and parents can decisively contribute to creating a supportive environment. First, communities can actively participate in improving schools' material infrastructure. In many low-income areas, the lack of basic infrastructure burdens teachers and limits teaching possibilities. Collaboration with local authorities and organizations to upgrade school facilities eases pressure on teachers and creates a positive learning climate (UNESCO, 2021).

Enhancing social recognition of teachers' work is another key factor. Public awareness campaigns, local initiatives and parent partnerships can elevate the profession's status and foster a culture of respect (Schleicher, 2018). Social recognition is directly linked to psychological well-being, as it reduces feelings of devaluation and strengthens professional pride. Civil society organizations can also offer complementary support in areas such as mental health, professional development and equity promotion. In several countries, NGOs provide free counseling services to teachers or implement international good-practice exchange programs (ILO, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021).

The importance of teachers' well-being has been recognized internationally. Organizations such as UNESCO, the OECD, and the ILO have issued guidelines proposing specific policies and practices. UNESCO (2021) underscores that investing in teachers should be a central pillar of any sustainability strategy, recommending action along four axes: (a) improving working conditions; (b) access to quality professional learning; (c) strengthening mental health; and (d) promoting social recognition.

The OECD (2020, 2021) focuses on cultivating a culture of continuous learning, developing collaboration mechanisms and building leadership capacity. TALIS 2018 data indicate that systems with higher teacher well-being invest systematically in ongoing professional development and promote participatory forms of school leadership (OECD, 2020). In 2021 the ILO, in collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF, issued guidance on supporting teachers as schools resumed after the pandemic. The document emphasized the need for institutional policies to manage burnout and build resilience mechanisms (ILO, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021).

Despite such international guidance, implementing policies for teacher well-being faces significant challenges. In many countries, fiscal constraints and political instability result in limited education investments. Even in developed contexts, policies often remain fragmented and are not embedded in a comprehensive sustainability framework. Additionally, societal perceptions of the teaching profession affect the willingness to implement such policies. Where teachers are of low status, achieving social recognition and policy support is harder. Finally, the lack of teacher participation in policymaking is a serious barrier. Without active involvement, policies risk remaining theoretical and ineffective.

To overcome these challenges, the following strategies are proposed:

1. **Institutionalize national strategies** for teachers' well-being linked to the SDGs.
2. **Increase education funding** with specific commitments for salaries, professional learning, and mental health.
3. **Establish participatory mechanisms** enabling teachers to contribute actively to decision-making.
4. **Develop international collaborations** to exchange good practices and adopt innovative support models.
5. **Embed teacher well-being in national sustainability strategies,** recognizing it as a central precondition for social progress rather than a peripheral issue.

Promoting teachers' well-being is fundamental to the success of education and sustainable development. Governments, school leaders and local communities have decisive roles in shaping policies that ensure fair working conditions, provide psychological support, continuous professional development and social recognition. Despite challenges, international guidelines and good practices point the way toward education that places teachers at the center of reform. Strengthening teachers' well-being is not only a matter of justice but also a strategic investment for societies seeking resilience, equity and sustainability.

6. BROADER SOCIAL IMPACTS

Teachers' well-being influences not only teaching quality or the functioning of education systems; it directly affects social cohesion, equality and global progress. Recognizing and promoting the well-being of teachers creates a web of positive effects that extend beyond the classroom and shape fairer, more resilient and more sustainable societies.

Social cohesion is strengthened when teachers enjoy stable and dignified working conditions. According to the OECD (2020), teachers' job satisfaction is associated with their ability to build positive relationships with students and families, reinforcing trust in schools. When teachers feel safe, respected and empowered, the school functions as a nucleus of social cohesion and unity.

By contrast, low well-being leads to higher turnover, reduced teaching quality and, often, social tensions. In highly unequal communities, teachers frequently serve as the only stable link between students and institutions. The loss of this role has consequences that affect the very fabric of society (UNESCO, 2020).

Enhancing teachers' well-being directly contributes to reducing social and educational inequalities. In disadvantaged schools, teachers often face greater challenges—limited resources, higher student needs and social pressures. Without support, students in these areas are further excluded from learning opportunities (ILO, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). Conversely, policies promoting well-being—such as additional support, higher allowances and access to specialized mental health services—have proven particularly effective. Examples from Canada and Australia show that improving teachers' working conditions in vulnerable communities leads to higher school participation and better student performance (Collie, 2021).

Teachers' well-being is directly linked to social justice. Fair pay, recognition and psychological support are not privileges but basic human rights. UNESCO (2021) stresses that investing in teachers is an investment in justice and democracy, empowering both educators and their students to become active citizens. Promoting teachers' well-being operates as a tool for combating social exclusion. When teachers are encouraged to implement equity-based pedagogies, they can create learning environments where all students feel accepted. This is especially important for minorities, students with disabilities or refugee children who might otherwise be marginalized (OECD, 2021).

Teachers' well-being also has significant economic implications. According to the OECD (2020), systems that ensure professional satisfaction and support for teachers experience lower attrition, reducing the costs of recruiting and training new staff. Strengthening teachers' mental health also reduces sick leave and increases productivity. In the long term, investing in teachers' well-being contributes to stronger economies: students benefiting from high-quality teaching develop skills that make them more competitive in the labor market, leading to increased innovation and sustainable growth (World Bank, 2018).

Regarding teachers' mental health and social resilience, a strong connection is evident. During COVID-19, teachers with access to mental health programs were better able to meet the demands of remote teaching and support students experiencing heightened anxiety (König et al., 2020). The resilience of schools—and, by extension, communities—depends on teachers' psychological strength and adaptability. Embedding burnout-prevention policies helps create societies better prepared for crises. As emphasized by the ILO, UNESCO, and UNICEF (2021), protecting teachers' mental health is not only a matter of workplace policy but also a critical factor in social security.

Cultural perceptions of the profession likewise affect well-being. In societies where teachers' work is recognized and respected, psychological well-being is higher and trust in institutions stronger (Schleicher, 2018). Scandinavia provides a notable example, where the

profession's high status is associated with social cohesion and institutional trust (Sahlberg, 2021). Conversely, where teachers are undervalued, lack of recognition leads to feelings of devaluation and diminished willingness to innovate. Recognition is therefore not merely symbolic but a practical mechanism for strengthening social cohesion.

Over time, investing in teachers' well-being helps build societies that are fairer, more equal and more adaptable. Empowered teachers instill in students values of cooperation, responsibility, solidarity and environmental agency (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2019). In this way, future generations acquire the tools to collectively face global crises such as climate change, pandemics or economic shocks (OECD, 2021). The interaction between teachers' well-being and sustainable development is cyclical: societies that invest in teachers enjoy higher levels of social cohesion and resilience, which in turn reinforce sustainable progress.

We contend that promoting teachers' well-being is not merely an education policy concern but a strategy of social significance. Empowering teachers creates societies with greater cohesion, fewer inequalities, stronger economic dynamism and enhanced crisis resilience. Social justice, recognition and support for teachers are prerequisites for shaping a future in which education is not only a means of learning but also a driver of social progress. Investing in teachers' well-being is therefore an investment in the sustainability of societies themselves.

7. DISCUSSION – CONCLUSION AND PROSPECTS

The analysis above clearly shows that teachers' well-being is not a secondary aspect of education systems; it lies at the core of educational quality and, by extension, sustainable development. Strengthening teachers as professionals—and as individuals with psychological and social needs—creates the conditions for a transition toward fairer, more equitable and more resilient societies. This section synthesizes the findings, highlights key conclusions and outlines prospects for future research and policy.

First, teachers' well-being is directly linked to the quality of teaching and student outcomes. Recent studies show that teachers who enjoy high job satisfaction and supportive work environments implement more creative and effective pedagogies that foster students' critical thinking, collaboration and social responsibility (Collie, 2021). Conversely, lack of support leads to burnout, reduced commitment and ultimately lower levels of learning (König et al., 2020).

Second, teachers' well-being has a strong social dimension. Strengthening teachers in disadvantaged areas helps reduce inequalities and promotes social justice. When teachers have the means to provide quality education, even the most vulnerable groups gain access to learning opportunities and social inclusion (ILO, UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). This demonstrates that policy for teacher well-being is not merely professional support but a strategic intervention with social impact.

Third, teachers' well-being relates to the resilience of education systems in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that systems investing in mechanisms supporting teachers' mental health and professional learning adapted better to new conditions, while others faced serious dysfunctions (OECD, 2021). This confirms that sustainable education cannot exist without sustainable professional lives for teachers.

Despite international recognition of the importance of teachers' well-being, many policies remain fragmented and short-term. In some countries, interventions focus solely on financial incentives—such as salary increases—while overlooking the need for psychological support, professional recognition, and a supportive culture (UNESCO, 2020). Although pay

matters, research shows that job satisfaction is equally influenced by autonomy, collaboration, and sense of purpose (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Policymaking also often neglects the participation of teachers themselves. Decisions are taken at government level without substantive consultation with those directly involved, resulting in policies that do not meet the profession's real needs (OECD, 2020). A more participatory approach with teachers playing an active role in shaping strategies is essential for sustainable reforms.

Accordingly, the research community should delve deeper into specific aspects of the relationship between teacher well-being and sustainable development. Longitudinal studies are needed to track professional well-being over time and its effects on learning outcomes and social cohesion. Differences across cultural contexts also require investigation, as well-being is not a neutral concept but shaped by social and cultural factors (Sahlberg, 2021).

Another research area concerns the interplay between digital transformation and well-being. Remote teaching and new technologies create new demands but also new opportunities for teachers. Understanding how these changes affect teachers' psychological and professional states is critical for designing appropriate policies (König et al., 2020). Finally, more studies should examine the links between teachers' well-being and sustainable development at the macro-policy level, such as climate education, gender equality, and the promotion of democratic participation.

For policy at international and national levels, the following directions emerge:

1. **Holistic approach:** Address all dimensions of teachers' well-being—economic, psychological, social, and professional.
2. **Integration into sustainability strategies:** National SDG strategies should include teachers' well-being as a key precondition for achieving Goal 4 (Quality Education).
3. **Participatory policymaking:** Teachers must have an active role in shaping policies and strategies.
4. **Investment in professional development and mental health:** Continuous professional learning and mental health services should be treated as rights, not luxuries.
5. **Enhancing social recognition:** Changing societal perceptions of the teaching profession is as important as institutional reforms.

In conclusion, teachers' well-being cannot be treated as a peripheral issue. It is central to educational quality, the reduction of inequalities, social cohesion and the resilience of societies. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development cannot be achieved without the active support and empowerment of teachers. Investing in teachers creates a multiplier: it improves education, strengthens social justice and advances sustainability at all levels. In a world facing complex and interlinked challenges, teachers are the quintessential agents of change. Protecting and promoting their well-being is therefore not only a moral obligation but a strategic choice for a fairer, more resilient and sustainable future.

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