

## Exploring occupational well-being of primary school teachers in educational quality

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### Abstract

**Background:** Teacher occupational well-being plays a central role in educational quality, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement. Although research has underscored its multidimensional nature, comprehensive and culturally relevant instruments remain scarce, particularly in developing countries.

**Objective:** This study aimed to identify and classify the components of occupational well-being among primary school teachers as an initial step toward developing a validated, context-responsive measurement tool.

**Methods:** A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 primary school teachers (≥5 years' experience) and 10 experts in elementary education from five districts in Tehran. Data were collected over a six-month period and analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method, supported by MAXQDA software. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved.

**Results:** Analysis produced seven overarching themes and 23 subthemes representing the multidimensional nature of occupational well-being: (1) educational factors; (2) economic conditions; (3) social status and public representation; (4) physical and mental health; (5) organizational practices; (6) job security and stability; and (7) family-related issues.

**Conclusion:** The findings provide an empirically grounded framework that reflects the socio-cultural realities of teachers working in resource-constrained contexts. This framework offers a foundation for the development of a psychometrically robust questionnaire and can inform policy interventions aimed at improving teacher support, retention, and educational quality.

**Keywords:** Teacher occupational well-being; phenomenological study; primary education; qualitative research.

## Explorando el bienestar ocupacional de los docentes de primaria en la calidad educativa

### Resumen

**Antecedentes:** El bienestar ocupacional docente desempeña un papel fundamental en la calidad educativa, la eficacia del profesorado y el rendimiento estudiantil. Aunque la literatura internacional ha destacado su naturaleza multidimensional, aún existen pocas herramientas de medición que sean integrales y culturalmente pertinentes, especialmente en países en desarrollo como Irán.

**Objetivo:** Este estudio tuvo como propósito identificar y clasificar los componentes del bienestar ocupacional en docentes de educación primaria, como paso inicial para el desarrollo de un instrumento de medición válido y contextualizado.

**Métodos:** Se adoptó un diseño cualitativo fenomenológico. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con 24 docentes de educación primaria (≥5 años de experiencia) y 10 expertos en educación básica de cinco distritos de Teherán. Los datos se recolectaron durante seis meses y se analizaron mediante el método de siete pasos de Colaizzi (1978), con apoyo del software MAXQDA. El muestreo se prolongó hasta alcanzar la saturación teórica.

**Resultados:** El análisis produjo siete temas principales y 23 subtemas que reflejan la naturaleza multidimensional del bienestar ocupacional: (1) factores educativos; (2) condiciones económicas; (3) estatus social y representación pública; (4) salud física y mental; (5) prácticas organizacionales; (6) seguridad y estabilidad laboral; y (7) aspectos familiares.

**Conclusiones:** Los hallazgos proporcionan un marco conceptual empíricamente fundamentado que refleja las realidades socioculturales de los docentes en contextos con recursos limitados. Este marco constituye una base para el desarrollo de un instrumento psicométrico robusto y puede orientar políticas destinadas a mejorar el apoyo docente, la retención del profesorado y la calidad educativa.

**Palabras clave:** Bienestar ocupacional docente; educación primaria; estudio fenomenológico; investigación cualitativa.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers are the backbone of any educational system, and their psychological and physical well-being is directly linked to instructional quality and student outcomes (OECD, 2020; Dreer, 2023). Research has shown that teachers with high levels of well-being demonstrate greater resilience, motivation, and job satisfaction (Dreer, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Conversely, low occupational well-being is associated with emotional exhaustion, reduced organizational commitment, and somatic complaints (Belcastro, 1982; Dreer, 2023). Teacher well-being is widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing psychological, physical, social, and cognitive domains.

Research has demonstrated that these dimensions are closely linked to instructional quality, student outcomes, teacher attrition, and broader policy contexts (OECD, 2020; Granziera et al., 2023). Recent reviews highlight that teacher well-being is shaped by a combination of individual and organizational antecedents, including workload, class size, leadership practices, and access to professional development.

These factors have been shown to influence classroom processes, turnover intentions, and ultimately student learning outcomes (Aziku et al., 2024; Nwoko et al., 2024). Contemporary empirical work also shows dynamic changes in teachers' well-being across a term and its associations with relatedness, job demands, and resources (Collie, 2023). Nonetheless, validated and context-responsive measures of teacher occupational well-being remain scarce, particularly for primary school teachers in non-Western settings such as Iran.

Educational, economic, and societal conditions in Iran differ substantially from those in Europe and North America, limiting the applicability of existing instruments.

This gap justifies the use of a qualitative, phenomenological approach to ground measurement development in teachers' lived experiences. While international studies have addressed various dimensions of teacher well-being—psychological, social, emotional, and physical (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Kurrle, Klusmann & Raufelder, 2025), little attention has been paid to the specific challenges faced by teachers in Iran and other developing

countries. There is no validated instrument capturing the multidimensional nature of primary school teachers' occupational well-being in Iran, where teachers face high levels of stress due to economic pressures, large class sizes, and limited professional development opportunities. This study presents a novel contribution by identifying the specific components of occupational well-being for Iranian primary school teachers. This framework not only advances the understanding of teacher well-being but also provides a context-specific instrument that could be adapted to other regions with similar socio-economic challenges, such as Latin America. Given the pivotal role of elementary education in shaping children's cognitive and social development, and the high levels of stress reported by Iranian teachers, identifying the components of their occupational well-being is an urgent priority. Furthermore, many of the challenges identified in the Iranian context—such as economic constraints, large class sizes, and limited institutional support—are also reported in several Latin American countries.

As such, examining teachers' occupational well-being in Iran can generate context-sensitive insights that may be informative for other educational systems facing similar socio-economic conditions.

The study of Iranian teachers' well-being is not only essential for improving their working conditions but also contributes to the global conversation about the importance of teacher support in enhancing educational outcomes. This study reports the qualitative phase of a larger mixed-methods project aimed at constructing and validating an occupational well-being questionnaire for primary school teachers. The qualitative phase was designed to explore teachers' lived experiences and expert perspectives to identify the main and subcomponents of occupational well-being. Importantly, the scope and focus of the study align with the scientific mission of Ciencia UNEMI, which prioritizes research that advances educational quality and supports evidence-based policy development. The findings provide practical implications for policymakers, particularly in developing countries, where challenges such as economic instability, large class sizes, and limited professional development opportunities are prevalent.

## II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Design

A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted to explore primary school teachers' lived experiences of occupational well-being and to generate an empirically grounded framework to inform subsequent instrument development. This approach was chosen because it facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective meanings and contextual realities prior to quantitative operationalization (Neubauer et al., 2019; Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022).

### Participants and Sampling

Participants included 24 primary school teachers (19 female, 5 male) with a minimum of five years of teaching experience and 10 experts in elementary education with at least 20 years of professional experience. Teachers were eligible to participate if they: (a) were currently employed in a primary school; (b) had at least five years of teaching

experience; and (c) were willing to discuss their experiences of occupational well-being. Experts were selected based on their extensive professional experience, familiarity with national curriculum policies, and involvement in teacher training or educational consultancy. Participants were recruited from five districts in Tehran (1, 2, 6, 14, and 19) using purposive criterion sampling to capture variation in socio-economic conditions, resource availability, and cultural context. Sampling and preliminary analysis occurred concurrently. Theoretical saturation was reached when no new codes, categories, or meaningful variations emerged in the final interviews, indicating that additional data would not generate further conceptual insights.

Experts were interviewed to provide contextual and pedagogical perspectives and contributed to validating the relevance and completeness of emerging categories during analysis. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant (ID)	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Education level	Grade taught
1	Female	25	Master's	Grade 1
2	Female	12	Bachelor's	Grade 6
3	Female	10	Associate	Grade 3
4	Male	15	Bachelor's	Grade 2
5	Female	25	Bachelor's	Grade 4
6	Female	8	Bachelor's	Grade 6
7	Male	22	Bachelor's	Grade 5
8	Female	22	Diploma	Grade 3
9	Female	11	Master's	Grade 1
10	Female	10	Master's	Grade 6
11	Male	8	Bachelor's	Grade 4
12	Male	10	Diploma	Grade 2
13	Female	14	Bachelor's	Grade 6
14	Female	15	Bachelor's	Grade 1
15	Female	9	Master's	Grade 5
16	Female	28	Bachelor's	Grade 3
17	Male	11	Bachelor's	Grade 2
18	Female	17	Master's	Grade 3
19	Female	5	Bachelor's	Grade 1
20	Male	16	Diploma	Grade 5
21	Female	19	Master's	Grade 3
22	Female	7	Bachelor's	Grade 1
23	Female	6	Master's	Grade 3
24	Female	12	Bachelor's	Grade 1

### Data Collection

Data were collected over a six-month period through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes, conducted face-to-face, by phone, or through online platforms, depending on participants' availability and preference. Interviews began with broad, open-ended questions such as:

“What does teacher well-being mean to you?”

“Which factors most influence your occupational well-being?”

“What strategies do you think could improve teachers' well-being?”

Probing questions were used to encourage elaboration and capture deeper meanings. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to monitor emerging trends. Saturation was confirmed when the final three interviews yielded no new codes or themes, suggesting conceptual redundancy and stability in the emerging framework.

### Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method: (1) reading and re-reading transcripts; (2) extracting significant statements; (3) formulating meanings; (4) clustering themes; (5) developing an exhaustive description; (6) producing the fundamental structure; and (7) validating findings by returning to participants. Coding and theme development were supported by MAXQDA software. Credibility and dependability were enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing and maintaining an audit trail.

Data were analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure immersion, followed by the extraction of significant statements representing participants' experiences. Meanings were inductively formulated from these statements and organized into conceptually related codes.

Coding and theme development were conducted in MAXQDA using an iterative, inductive approach. Initial open codes were generated from participants'

language and contextual descriptions. These codes were grouped into higher-order categories based on conceptual similarity and refined into subthemes and overarching themes through constant comparison. Coding criteria and category definitions were documented and revised throughout the process to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency.

To enhance methodological rigor, several strategies were implemented. Investigator triangulation was achieved by having two researchers independently code a subset of transcripts, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary themes with participants to verify interpretive accuracy. Additionally, peer debriefing and an audit trail were used to document analytic decisions, enhance confirmability, and support replicability.

Analysis continued until stable thematic patterns emerged, resulting in a coherent framework that reflected teachers' lived experiences and contextual challenges.

### Ethical Considerations

The study received permission from the Tehran Education Department. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

## III. RESULTS

Analysis yielded seven main themes with 23 subthemes reflecting the multidimensional nature of occupational well-being among primary school teachers.

Beyond listing the themes, the analysis revealed how these components interact to shape teachers' lived experiences. Educational, economic, and organizational pressures were not isolated factors but formed mutually reinforcing patterns that intensified stress and reduced well-being. These interconnections provide a deeper understanding of the systemic nature of occupational well-being in primary education.

Figure 1 illustrates the overall model of teachers' occupational well-being, showing the seven main components identified in the qualitative phase.



Figure 1. Model of Teachers' Occupational Well-Being

Thematic analysis produced seven main themes, each with several subthemes. Table 2 presents the main themes, subthemes, and representative categories illustrating teachers' occupational well-being.

Table 2. Main Themes, Subthemes, and Key Categories of Teachers' Occupational Well-Being

Main Theme	Subtheme	Key Categories / Examples
Education	Volume of educational content	Mismatch between content and time
	Facilities and educational space	Inadequate facilities; Unsafe classrooms
	Number and arrangement of students	Overcrowded classes; Poor student evaluation; Aggressive students
	Colleague relations	Lack of trust and collegiality
	Teacher's role	Teacher as manager/advisor
Economic	Income	Low income; Inflation gap; Financial worries
	Insurance and housing	High housing costs; Incomplete insurance
Social	Teachers' status and position	Low social value; Negative portrayal in media
	Mass media influence	Misrepresentation of teachers' role in society
Health	Mental health	Stress; Insomnia; Mental preoccupations
	Physical health	Neck pain; Long periods of writing
Organizational	Further education support	Professional growth opportunities; Modern teaching methods
	In-service training classes	Quality and timing of classes
	Creativity workshops	Innovative teaching
	Inefficient evaluation system	Bureaucracy; Subjective grading
	Managerial interference	Lack of decision-making power; Managerial imposition
	Appropriate feedback	Reward and recognition; Motivation improvement
Job stability	Teacher's authority in parents' view	Parental pressure; Lack of managerial support
	Job loss	Temporary contracts; Unfulfilled promises
	Fear of job change	Transfer threats
Family issues	Work-life balance	Limited time with family; Long commuting distances

Figure 2 further illustrates the hierarchical structure of the main themes, subthemes, and codes identified in the thematic analysis.

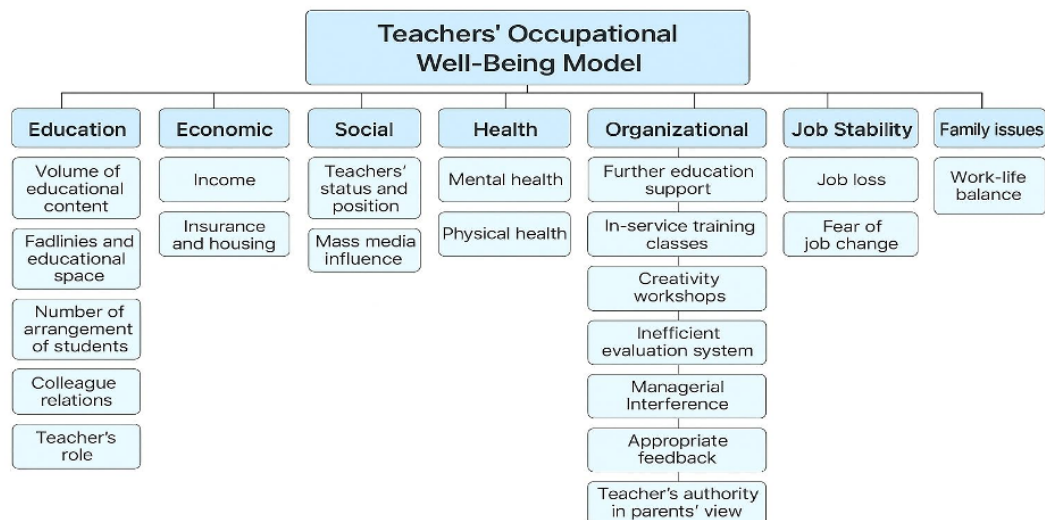


Figure 2. Thematic tree of teachers' occupational well-being derived from qualitative analysis.

1. Educational Factors

Teachers highlighted several constraints within the teaching–learning environment. Excessive curriculum load and administrative paperwork limited opportunities for meaningful instruction (“With a 4-hour shift and 35 students, I spend more time silencing the class than teaching” – Teacher 12). Inadequate facilities, such as unsafe classrooms and lack of modern equipment, further impaired instructional quality. Large class sizes (35–40 students) hindered assessment and classroom management, while behavioural challenges and strained collegial relationships contributed additional stress. Many teachers reported assuming multiple informal roles—including social worker—without institutional support. These findings indicate that educational pressures collectively restricted teachers’ autonomy, reduced instructional quality, and generated cumulative strain that shaped daily professional experiences.

2. Economic Factors

Financial strain emerged as one of the most influential determinants of well-being. Many teachers described a pronounced mismatch between income and workload (“With this salary you can barely survive” – Teacher 2). High housing costs and inadequate supplementary insurance intensified financial insecurity (“Even with 34

years of service some teachers still rent” – Teacher 8). Economic pressures extended beyond material hardship, influencing teachers’ motivation, sense of professional worth, and long-term retention within the system.

3. Social Status

Participants emphasized the impact of societal perceptions on their professional identity. Teachers felt undervalued by parents and administrators (“Parents’ opinions are prioritised over ours” – Teacher 6). Media portrayals often depicted teachers negatively, reinforcing stereotypes and diminishing public respect. Low social status interacted with organizational and economic pressures, weakening teachers’ sense of recognition and reducing their emotional resilience in the workplace.

4. Health

Teachers described well-being as inseparable from physical and mental health. Long periods of writing and speaking contributed to musculoskeletal problems (“Many experienced teachers develop arthritis in neck and hands” – Teacher 5). Financial stress and excessive workload triggered anxiety, rumination, and disrupted sleep (“I’m constantly worried; I can’t sleep” – Teacher 2). Health challenges reflected the cumulative effects of organizational conditions, demonstrating how physical and

psychological strain reinforced broader patterns of occupational stress.

#### 5. Organizational Factors

Internal policies and managerial practices significantly shaped teachers' experiences. Participants reported insufficient opportunities for professional development, low-quality training sessions, and limited support for further education. Performance evaluations were often perceived as subjective and lacking transparency ("Managers impose their personal opinions" – Teacher 16). Teachers also felt their authority was undermined by parental interference and inconsistent administrative backing. These patterns highlight the importance of organizational culture and leadership in shaping teachers' sense of fairness, professional growth, and control over their work.

#### 6. Job Security and Stability

Employment instability was a persistent concern, particularly for teachers who had not transitioned to permanent posts despite years of service ("Every protest brings threats of transfer" – Teacher 11). Fear of retaliation and uncertainty about future placement created constant anxiety and discouraged open communication. Job insecurity undermined long-term commitment and trust in the educational system, functioning as a core structural stressor.

#### 7. Family and Personal Issues

Work–life balance emerged as a major challenge. Teachers described heavy workloads that left little time or energy for family responsibilities ("I'm so exhausted I can't take care of my family" – Teacher 14). Long commutes contributed to fatigue, while limited childcare options created additional stress for teachers with young children ("Leaving my child at a faraway kindergarten is hard for both of us" – Teacher 20).

These experiences illustrate how occupational demands spill over into personal life, highlighting the porous boundary between professional responsibilities and family well-being.

### IV. DISCUSSION

This study provides a comprehensive, empirically grounded framework of occupational well-being

among Iranian primary school teachers. While the seven identified themes resonate with established international models of teacher well-being—such as Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being framework and McCallum and Price's (2010) multidimensional model—the findings also reveal context-specific dynamics that are less visible in studies conducted in high-income educational systems. In particular, economic insecurity, housing instability, and negative media portrayals emerged as central determinants shaping teachers' lived experiences.

From a comparative perspective, the prominence of economic strain in this study aligns with international evidence linking financial insecurity to reduced teacher motivation and retention (OECD, 2020; Dreer, 2023). However, unlike many studies from Western contexts where workload or autonomy are often the dominant stressors, financial pressure in the Iranian context functioned as a structural condition that permeated multiple domains of well-being. This finding suggests that teacher well-being in resource-constrained systems may be more strongly shaped by macroeconomic and labor conditions than by individual or school-level factors alone.

Theoretically, these findings extend existing models of teacher well-being by emphasizing the interaction between individual, organizational, and socio-economic dimensions. While prevailing frameworks often conceptualize well-being primarily at the psychological or organizational level, the present study highlights the need to incorporate broader structural and societal conditions—such as employment security and public valuation of the teaching profession—into theoretical accounts of occupational well-being. In this sense, the study contributes a context-sensitive perspective that complements and refines dominant Western-centric models.

The results also carry important implications for educational policy and practice. Consistent with critiques of neoliberal approaches to educational reform (Acton & Glasgow, 2015), the findings suggest that interventions focused solely on enhancing individual resilience or coping skills are unlikely to produce sustainable improvements in teacher well-being. Instead, effective policy responses should prioritize structural reforms, including reducing class sizes, addressing income insecurity, improving

housing and insurance support, and ensuring transparent and fair evaluation systems. Without such systemic changes, efforts to improve well-being risk placing responsibility on individual teachers rather than addressing the conditions that generate occupational stress.

Although grounded in the Iranian educational context, the findings have relevance for other developing and middle-income countries, particularly in regions such as Latin America where teachers face similar economic constraints, large class sizes, and limited institutional support. Nevertheless, caution is warranted in transferring these results to contexts with different labor regulations or welfare systems. Future research could examine the applicability of the proposed framework across diverse educational settings and explore how policy environments moderate the relationship between structural conditions and teacher well-being.

Finally, the qualitative insights generated in this phase informed the development of a subsequent quantitative instrument, ensuring strong content validity by grounding measurement items in teachers' lived experiences. Together, these findings provide a foundation for both theory-driven research and evidence-based policy aimed at improving teacher well-being and educational quality.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore teachers' and experts' lived experiences of occupational well-being and identified seven interconnected components and 23 subcomponents shaping primary school teachers' professional lives in Iran. These findings confirm the multidimensional nature of teacher well-being and highlight the influence of educational, organizational, economic, and social conditions.

From a theoretical perspective, the study extends existing models of teacher well-being by incorporating context-specific structural and societal factors that are often underrepresented in dominant frameworks. The proposed conceptual model emphasizes the interaction between individual experiences and broader institutional and socio-economic conditions, offering a more comprehensive understanding of occupational well-being in resource-constrained educational settings.

Methodologically, this research demonstrates the value of phenomenological inquiry as a foundation for measurement development. By grounding the framework in qualitative evidence derived from both teachers and experts, the study provides a robust empirical basis for the subsequent construction and validation of a context-sensitive occupational well-being questionnaire.

In practical terms, the findings underscore the need for policy and organizational interventions that move beyond individual-level solutions and address systemic determinants of teacher well-being, including workload, job security, income stability, and organizational support. Future research may examine the applicability of this framework in other educational contexts and evaluate its utility for informing policy reforms aimed at improving teacher support, retention, and educational quality.

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