

Article

Resilient and Engaged: The Role of Kindergarten and Primary School Teachers' Personal Resources

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study explores the connections between resilience, work engagement, proactive strategies and personal resources among Italian kindergarten and primary school teachers. It specifically seeks to determine if and how personal resources can foster teachers' work engagement, resilience, and proactive strategies at work. The study was conducted using a sample of 183 full-time, in-service kindergarten and primary teachers at public schools in Italy. Data were collected through self-report questionnaires, including the Brief Resilience Scale, the Ultra-Short Measure for Work Engagement, the Proactive Strategy scale, the Self-Compassion Scale, the Life Orientation Test-Revised, the Experienced compassion at work scale. Data were analyzed using a path analysis model. Results indicated that teachers' self-compassion was positively associated with the use of proactive strategies and perceived received compassion was strongly related to work engagement. Moreover, higher levels of self-compassion were linked to greater work engagement. Teachers' optimism and self-compassion were both positively associated with resilience, whereas self-criticism showed a significant negative association. Our research supports the need for educational policymakers and school leaders to focus on personal resources and work-related well-being.

Keywords: resilience; work engagement; proactive strategies; personal resources

1. Introduction

The educational and school environment has undergone profound changes recently that have put a strain on teachers' professionalism and resilience, often leading to a redefinition of their role within the school system (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2023). The pandemic presented a crucial challenge: the interruption of face-to-face teaching, the sudden switch to distance learning, and increased workloads have placed significant pressure on teachers (Conte et al., 2024). These conditions increased teachers' stress, forcing them to resort to coping and emotional regulation strategies (Messineo & Tosto, 2023). At the same time, the global uncertainty experienced was associated with increased anxiety among children and adolescents and, consequently, an increase in their emotional needs (Ludwig-Walz et al., 2023). In this context, teachers play a key role in responding to the individual needs of students (Rahimi & Oh, 2024), but this task can place additional pressures on them, increasing the risk of stress and burnout (Chang et al., 2022). Resources such as resilience, the adoption of effective coping strategies, and a high level of work engagement can mitigate the impact



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of occupational stress arising from the pandemic and promote well-being and work quality among teachers (Conte et al., 2024; Pöysä et al., 2022). Therefore, we must recognize and cultivate personal resources that can support teachers in their daily work, contributing to their psychological and professional well-being (Assaf & Antoun, 2024). Among these, self-compassion, perceived compassion in the workplace, and optimism emerge as potential protective factors, although they remain under-explored in the school context (Buonomo et al., 2022; Rehman et al., 2024; Keshtegar et al., 2025).

While several studies have examined factors influencing teachers' work engagement (e.g., Hultell & Gustavsson, 2011; Burić & Macuka, 2018; Greenier et al., 2021; Xie, 2021), research in this area remains limited, particularly within kindergarten and primary school contexts. The existing literature has not yet addressed the simultaneous influence of self-compassion, optimism, and self-criticism on teachers' work engagement, resilience, and proactive strategies. The present study addresses this gap by offering new insights into the predictors of work engagement among early childhood educators and primary school teachers, with implications for the design of teacher education programs. To outline the theoretical frame of reference and to clarify the context in which the present study operates, as well as to fill the gaps it aims to address, the relationships between resilience, work engagement, proactive strategies and personal resources are examined in particular.

1.1. Resilience

Resilience is a multi-faceted psychological construct defined as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 543). Meta-analyses of resilience research (Britt et al., 2016; Hartmann et al., 2020) provide several definitions of resilience. These definitions tend to emphasize three aspects of the phenomenon. The first reflects an individual's ability to 'bounce back' from a stressful situation (Luthans, 2002). The second is associated with the ability to use resources, adapt to change, and demonstrate positive behavioral transformation when resolving challenging situations (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The third highlights a dynamic rather than static personal strength that can be cultivated and developed (A. B. Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

This study focuses on teacher resilience, recognizing it as a personal resource that enables teachers to cope with the stressors and setbacks that constitute the teaching profession (C. F. Mansfield, 2021). Given the importance of teacher resilience in instruction, researchers have examined the causes and effects of this construct (e.g., C. Mansfield & Beltman, 2019; Razmjoo & Ayoobiyan, 2019; Xie, 2021). Resilience strengthens teachers' professional qualities, such as work engagement (WE), motivation, and self-efficacy (Ugwu & Amazue, 2014; Wang & Pan, 2023; Dirgantoro et al., 2024; Nurfadhilah & Widiasih, 2024). These qualities are necessary to succeed in the profession and prevent emotional exhaustion (Beltman, 2021; Ustundag & Akar-Vural, 2025). Day and Gu (2013) state that resilient teachers are effective and dedicated in the long term. Several traits that define resilience have been identified. According to Tait (2008), resilient teachers often report high job satisfaction, respond positively to stressful situations, and demonstrate effective coping strategies. They are also highly effective, emotionally intelligent educators. Khanshan and Yousefi (2020) suggest that resilient teachers are self-confident, optimistic, capable of forming strong bonds with others, inspired, competent, and sensitive to crucial events. A study by Y. Hu (2023) found that resilient teachers are characterized by self-compassion, the ability to regulate their emotions, and the capacity to use emotion management strategies. Building on previous research, this study focuses on personal resources (compassion, both self-directed and perceived, and optimism) that may also impact and promote teacher resilience (Gu & Day, 2007; J. Chen, 2024).

1.2. Proactive Strategies

When faced with stressful situations, teachers use different strategies to manage them. For example, they can adapt to or ignore the challenges posed by the situation changing the environment and/or managing their emotions (Pietarinen et al., 2013; Arnold et al., 2010; Foley & Murphy, 2015; see also the seminal work by Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Prior research has mainly focused on teachers' reactions to stressful situations, i.e., on stress management (e.g., Austin et al., 2005; Carmona et al., 2006; Grossi, 1999; Gustems-Carnicer & Calderón, 2013; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Kieschke & Schaarschmidt, 2008; Kyriacou, 2001; Parker et al., 2012). However, teachers do not merely react to a given stressor but may also strive to deal with future stressors. As a result, they may use proactive strategies that aim to cope with immediate stressors and mitigate potential stressors in advance by building and using available resources (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Straud et al., 2015). Proactive strategies (both self-regulated and coregulated) involve preventing or acting pre-emptively to mitigate potentially stressful events, thus neutralizing the stressor before it becomes harmful (Pietarinen et al., 2013; Tikkanen et al., 2017; Väisänen et al., 2018). More specifically, self-regulated strategies are self-generated behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses that individuals deploy to cope more effectively with stressors; they can include better planning, seeking out new information, learning new skills, and reducing work tasks that feel burdensome.

On the basis of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), it is possible to argue that experiencing frequent positive affects, such as optimism and perceived compassion in the school context can enable individuals to broaden their cognitive and behavioral repertoires, and thereby contribute to an increase in sharing and discussing work-related concerns with colleagues. The relevance of addressing such strategies lies in the fact that the learning and the use of them depend on the social interaction of the schools where the teachers work so they can be intentionally promoted and sustained. Studying the predictors of proactive strategies can not only reduce the risk of teacher burnout, but also contribute to developing a positive work environment and increasing work engagement and resilience. However, to the best of our knowledge, the role of different teachers' personal resources to generate work engagement and person–organization fit has not yet been studied in depth.

1.3. Work Engagement

Schaufeli et al. (2002) define WE as an affective-motivational construct, describing it as a positive, work-related mental state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor refers to high energy and mental resilience in the workplace, as well as a willingness to invest effort and persist despite difficulties. *Dedication* reflects a strong involvement in one's work, accompanied by a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, and challenge. Finally, *absorption* is marked by deep concentration and immersion in work activities, to the point that time seems to pass quickly (A. Bakker, 2008).

Studies have shown that WE is associated with positive outcomes at individual and organizational levels, including enhanced job performance, improved health and well-being, and stronger alignment with organizational goals (A. B. Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Garg & Singh, 2020; Alnagbi et al., 2025). Recently, teacher WE has gained significant attention (Arens & Morin, 2016; Benevene et al., 2020; De Stasio et al., 2019; Fiorilli et al., 2020; Klassen & Tze, 2014). In particular, several authors emphasize that teachers' WE is critical for themselves and for students, families, schools, and the broader educational system (Burić & Macuka, 2018). Engaged teachers are described as energetic, enthusiastic about their work, deeply committed to student learning, persistent in the face of challenges, and attentive to students' needs. Higher levels of teacher engagement are associated with

increased student engagement and academic achievement, thus contributing to the overall quality of education (Zhang & Yang, 2021).

Given these benefits, it is essential to investigate the antecedents of WE. Several studies indicate elements such as organizational culture, transformational leadership, and social support as distal factors identified as predictors of teacher engagement (Khan, 2016; Park et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2025). At the same time, growing attention is being paid to the role of internal psychological resources in fostering teachers' WE (De Stasio et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2025). To better understand the mechanisms underlying the development of WE, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) offers a valuable theoretical framework. According to this model, high job demands can lead to stress and health problems, whereas job resources foster motivation and engagement. Over time, the model has been expanded to include *personal resources* such as optimism and self-compassion as key factors that promote motivation, buffer the impact of demands, and enhance job performance (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). Within this framework, personal resources are defined as positive self-evaluations that are linked to resilience and goal attainment (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009). Recent empirical evidence further supports the crucial role of personal resources in the JD-R model for enhancing teachers' WE, especially under high job demands (Tesi et al., 2024).

From this perspective, the present study aimed to investigate the role of compassion (self-directed and perceived in the work context) and optimism as personal resources that may contribute to higher levels of WE in teachers. Indeed, previous research highlights that self-compassion has a positive effect on teachers' levels of engagement (DeOcampo, 2023). Cultivating a compassionate mindset and engaging in self-care practices can support intrapersonal and interpersonal social-emotional competence (Jennings, 2015). In contrast, self-criticism, often considered the opposite of self-compassion, has been associated with lower levels of engagement (Babenko et al., 2019). Optimism, defined as the tendency to interpret experiences in a positive light, to expect favorable outcomes, and to view difficulties as temporary and specific (Seligman, 1991) is another internal resource that can enhance teacher engagement (Dong & Xu, 2022). It influences how experiences are interpreted and functions as a key factor in sustaining commitment and dedication to work.

1.4. Compassion: Self-Directed and Perceived and Self Criticism

Compassion is a dispositional trait defined by Lazarus (1991, p. 289) as "*being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help*". In our study, we explored the impact of self-compassion and compassion received on the variables of resilience, proactive strategies, and WE. Self-compassion, as described by Neff (2023), involves offering oneself care and support in times of hardship, whether these challenges stem from internal struggles or external difficulties. Neff outlines six components within this framework: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification (Neff et al., 2018). Practicing self-compassion means facing one's pain with openness instead of avoidance and responding with kindness rather than self-criticism (Neff et al., 2018). While early research predominantly viewed self-compassion as a stable personal trait, a more recent shift in the field recognizes it as a skill that can be intentionally developed over time. By exploring self-compassion through trait-based and skills-based lenses, researchers are uncovering deeper insights into how it evolves and contributes to psychological well-being (Gunnell et al., 2017; Neff et al., 2018).

Teaching is widely recognized as a profession that carries high levels of stress on personal, social, and emotional levels (Stapleton et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2022). These stressors can have serious consequences for teachers' mental health, potentially leading to burnout (Marshall et al., 2024; Naemi & Faghihi, 2021). Equipping teachers with strategies

to manage stress is therefore crucial (Awwad-Tabry & Levkovich, 2024). Supporting teachers' mental well-being helps prevent burnout and contributes to higher retention rates, improved student outcomes, and more positive teaching experiences (Beames et al., 2023; Marshall et al., 2024). Research on how educators cope with professional stress has highlighted the value of self-compassion training and interventions. These approaches enhance job performance, promote emotionally supportive classroom environments, strengthen teachers' social and emotional skills, increase their capacity for self- and student-directed compassion and forgiveness, and improve overall well-being (Akpan & Saunders, 2017; Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2020; Tarrasch et al., 2020). Moreover, engaging in self-compassion has been linked to better interpersonal functioning, increased self-awareness, and more effective stress regulation (Naemi & Faghihi, 2021; Taylor et al., 2016). Finally, studies by Postareff et al. (2021) and Kasalak (2020) emphasize the importance of self-compassion as a protective factor against stress and burnout, especially in response to major challenges such as those brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Self-compassion may be an additional factor that promotes the resilience needed to cope with the demands of the teaching profession. Several studies of teachers (Badiable, 2025; Y. Hu, 2023; Uyanik & Çevik, 2022) have demonstrated a strong, positive, and significant relationship between self-compassion and resilience. Teachers who exhibit higher levels of self-compassion are better able to build resilience, thereby enhancing their psychological well-being (Abbas et al., 2025; J. J. Chen, 2022; Neff, 2003; Ragni et al., 2023). They may find it easier to cope with the stress and emotional demands of their work by treating themselves with kindness and understanding, recognizing their shared humanity with others, and mindfully acknowledging their experiences. In a study of 405 university teachers in Saudi Arabia, Rehman et al. (2024) found that self-compassion mediates the relationship between psychological resilience and mental health. Specifically, self-compassion enables individuals to manage difficult emotions more effectively, thereby reducing the negative impact of stress and promoting emotional balance. However, we must also consider self-criticism, which is the opposite of self-compassion. Self-criticism is defined as a process of self-evaluation in which individuals observe and condemn various aspects of themselves, such as intentions, thoughts, and behaviors (Shahar et al., 2015). Self-criticism is characterized by a poor sense of self-worth, fear of failure, and excessive concerns about social status. Self-criticism refers to the constant observation of oneself and a continuing fear of disapproval from significant others (Blatt, 2004). Particularly self-critical individuals perceive their own mistakes and their negative characteristics (inappropriate behaviors or bad abilities) and persistently reflect on them, leading to feelings of helplessness and fear for the future. Highly self-critical individuals self-disclose to others with lots of worries, have less perceived social support, are more distrustful of others, and are often inconsistent in their social behaviors. Gilbert (2004) defined self-criticism as a form of psychobiological attitude towards oneself, stating that people have developed specific competencies to be able to learn, understand, and approve different social roles, and it is precisely social competencies that are the basis for internal self-evaluation. These operate through the same mechanisms of information processing and patterns of behavior that develop from social relations (Gilbert et al., 2004). One potential downside is that self-criticism can hinder the development of resilience (Milovanović, 2018). A study of 200 university students found that self-criticism was a negative predictor of resilience (Stevanović et al., 2022). Extremely self-critical people constantly think about their perceived mistakes, leading to feelings of contempt directed towards themselves, and possibly resulting in feelings of helplessness. Few studies have examined the impact of self-criticism on teachers' work; therefore, this aspect should be considered in educational and scholastic settings. In addition, receiving compassion, as a positive relational experience, contributes to the development of durable personal re-

sources by eliciting emotions such as relief, comfort, and gratitude (Kanov et al., 2004). Compassion from another person shapes a sufferer's sense-making about oneself (e.g., seeing the self as more capable), one's peers (e.g., viewing one's peers as more humane), and one's organization (e.g., seeing the organization as caring), in all cases changing interpretations to be more positive (Lilius et al., 2008). Studies directly addressing the impact of receiving compassion on teachers' well-being are limited. Eldor and Shoshani (2016) found that higher perceived compassion was associated with emotional vigor and affective commitment among teachers, which are conceptually related to WE.

1.5. Optimism

Optimism refers to the general belief that good things rather than bad things will happen in the future (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Optimistic individuals tend to explain adverse situations using an adaptive attributional style, attributing positive events to internal, stable, and global causes and negative events to external, unstable, and specific factors (Seligman, 1991). Studies show that an optimistic attitude is associated with confidence and persistence even in difficult situations (Martínez & Ruch, 2017; Oriol et al., 2017). Attributing positive meaning to life events and adopting a problem-focused coping style helps generate positive emotions during adversity (Dawson & Pooley, 2013). Optimism is considered a personal resource among the personal factors believed to be important in the development of teacher resilience; when optimistic teachers face adversity, they keep trying and become flexible in their thinking to achieve goals (Li et al., 2019; C. F. Mansfield, 2021).

1.6. The Present Study

In Italy, teaching is widely characterized by high relational and organizational demands, time pressure, substantial administrative workload, and limited professional recognition, which are commonly reported as sources of stress within the Italian school system (OECD, 2025). In this context, kindergarten and primary school teachers are required to balance instructional and educational tasks with intensive relational and classroom management demands, often in large classes and under constrained working conditions, increasing the risk for stress and reduced well-being (De Stasio et al., 2017). Against this background, investigating personal resources and work related well-being is crucial to understand how teachers can sustain engagement, resilience, and proactive strategies in demanding educational contexts. Our primary research objective is to investigate the influence of teachers' optimism, self-compassion, and receiving compassion as predictors of their work engagement, resilience, and proactive strategies.

Cultivating resilience and work engagement is crucial to deliver quality education and address the diverse needs of their students. Moreover, primary school and kindergarten teachers frequently encounter situations where self-compassion and optimism strategies become necessary. They may need to conceal their genuine emotions to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere, motivate students, and foster inclusivity (Dewaele, 2015). Understanding how self-compassion, emotion regulation, and optimism function within the specific context of kindergarten and primary schools and teaching is pivotal in developing targeted interventions and support systems that enhance teacher resilience and overall work engagement. By examining these factors in the teaching context, our study contributes valuable insights into the dynamics and predictors of teacher resilience and engagement within this distinct educational setting. Through a comprehensive exploration of the objectives and significance of the teaching context, we provide a clearer understanding of its contextual importance and contribute to the existing literature on teacher resilience and work engagement in instruction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The current study included 183 teachers from Italy, 95.6% of whom were female. The age range of participants was 24 to 64 years, with an average age of 46.40 years ($SD = 8.84$). Regarding marital status, 61.5% were married, 21.2% single, 7.8% separated or divorced, and 9.5% widowed. Their teaching experience varied from 1 to 41 years, averaging 11.85 years ($SD = 10.24$). In terms of the educational level they taught, 85.2% were in primary schools (for children aged 6–11 years) and 14.7% in kindergartens (for children aged 3–5 years). The study population was a convenience sample and may not be taken as representative of the entire population of Italian teachers given that all participants were based in Central Italy. The authors organized plenary assemblies in schools to inform the teachers about the aims of the research and the procedures for completion of the questionnaires.

The survey was conducted online in December 2022, where participants were informed about Italian privacy laws, provided informed consent, and then participated in the study filling in the search protocol via a Google string. This research adhered to the ethical principles and code of conduct set by the [American Psychological Association \(2010\)](#).

2.2. Measures

Teachers' resilience was measured with *The Brief Resilience Scale* (BRS; [Smith et al., 2008](#)). The BRS includes six items. The respondents were asked to indicate how well each statement described their behavior and actions on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "1" = does not describe me at all to "5" = describes me very well (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$).

The *Ultra-Short Measure for Work Engagement* (UWES-3 [Schaufeli et al., 2017](#)) was used to measure work engagement. It is composed of three items, each for every dimension of work engagement: (1) "At my work, I feel bursting with energy" (vigor); (2) "I am enthusiastic about my job" (dedication); (3) "I am immersed in my work" (absorption). Items are measured on a Likert Scale ranging from 0 (never) to 6 (always/every day). The internal consistency reliability (α) in this study was 0.94.

The Proactive Strategy scale ([Salmela-Aro, 2009](#)) consists of 7 items, measuring the ability to identify and use resources to cope with stressors and seek and receive social support from colleagues. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.84.

The Self-Compassion Scale—Short Form (SCS; [Raes et al., 2011](#); [Petrocchi et al., 2014](#)) assesses the extent to which people have compassionate beliefs about themselves when facing failures or challenges. Specifically, the questionnaire measured how people usually behave toward themselves in difficult times. The questionnaire is composed of 12 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "almost never" to 5 = "almost always". Two subscales were created and used in this study: Self-Criticism (6 items, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$) and Self-Compassion (6 items, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$).

Dispositional optimism was measured with the *Life Orientation Test-Revised* (LOT-R) ([Scheier et al., 1994](#)), which consists of 10 items. Three items (1, 4, and 10) assess optimism, three items (3, 7, and 9) assess pessimism, and there are four filler items. On a 5-point Likert scale, response categories ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scores of the optimism and pessimism sub-scales are the sum of the scores of the corresponding items. A total score can be calculated, adding the optimism and the inverted pessimism score (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$).

Experienced compassion at work was measured through the *Experienced compassion at work scale* ([Lilius et al., 2008](#)). It includes three items measured on a 5-point Likert scale

(1 = “Never” and 5 = “Nearly all the time”). A sample item is: “How often have you experienced compassion at work?”. Cronbach’s alpha in this study was 0.90.

2.3. Data Analysis

First of all, preliminary bivariate correlations were performed with SPSS 29 (IBM, Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA) to explore the relationship between the studied variables. Secondly, using Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 2011) a path analysis model was performed to verify the predictive role of teachers’ dispositional optimism, received compassion, self-criticism, and self-compassion on their perceived resilience, work engagement, and proactive strategies. In addition to this, teachers’ age, marital status, and length of teaching experience were inserted in the model as covariates. The fit indices of the model were evaluated according to systematic fit assessment procedures (L. T. Hu & Bentler, 1999; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002; McDonald & Ho, 2002; Kline, 2010) and they included (Schermmelleh-Engel et al., 2003): the Chi-square test of exact fit (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI; ≥ 0.90 ; Tucker & Lewis, 1973; Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Bentler, 1990; L. T. Hu & Bentler, 1999), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; ≤ 0.10 ; Tucker & Lewis, 1973; Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Bentler, 1990; L. T. Hu & Bentler, 1999), and the root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA; ≤ 0.08] with its 90% confidence interval (L. T. Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh et al., 2005).

3. Results

3.1. Bivariate Correlations

Table 1 reports correlations among all study variables. Age was positively correlated with years in service ($r = 0.575$, $p < 0.001$) and with marital status ($r = 0.246$, $p < 0.001$), while it was negatively associated with self-criticism ($r = -0.201$, $p < 0.01$). In addition, years in service was negatively associated with self-criticism ($r = -0.134$, $p < 0.05$). Resilience was positively correlated with work engagement ($r = 0.229$, $p < 0.001$), self-compassion ($r = 0.564$, $p < 0.001$), received compassion ($r = 0.213$, $p < 0.01$), and optimism ($r = 0.542$, $p < 0.001$), while it was negatively associated with self-criticism ($r = -0.533$, $p < 0.001$). Work engagement was positively associated with self-regulation ($r = 0.138$, $p < 0.05$), self-compassion ($r = 0.290$, $p < 0.001$), received compassion ($r = 0.423$, $p < 0.001$), and optimism ($r = 0.230$, $p < 0.001$). Co-regulation was positively correlated with self-regulation ($r = 0.594$, $p < 0.001$) and with self-compassion ($r = 0.209$, $p < 0.01$). Self-compassion was positively associated with received compassion ($r = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$) and optimism ($r = 0.437$, $p < 0.001$), while it was negatively related to self-criticism ($r = -0.256$, $p < 0.001$). Received compassion was positively correlated with optimism ($r = 0.265$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Bivariate correlation matrix.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Years	—										
2 Years in service	0.575 ***	—									
3 Marital status	0.246 ***	104	—								
4 Work Engagement	−3	−35	−108	—							
5 Resilience	131	42	68	0.229 ***	—						
6 Co_reg.	−9	−81	−9	112	76	—					
7 Self reg.	0	−43	11	0.138 *	24	0.594 ***	—				
8 Self comp.	110	−34	−50	0.290 ***	0.564 ***	0.209 **	122	—			
9 Self crit.	−0.201 **	−0.134 *	−78	−31	−0.533 ***	3	57	−0.256 ***	—		
10 Received comp.	44	−23	−18	0.423 ***	0.213 **	119	96	0.252 ***	−66	—	
11 Optimism	87	−2	11	0.230 ***	0.542 ***	125	−21	0.437 ***	−0.436 ***	0.265 ***	—

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.0001$; comp: compassion; crit: criticism; reg.: regulation.

3.2. Path Analysis Model

The path analysis model performed to test associations between the studied variables (Figure 1) showed a good fit to the data $\chi^2(13) = 13.836$, $p = 0.3855$, CFI = 0.996, TLI = 0.992,

RMSEA = 0.019 (90% CI = 0.000–0.077), $p = 0.750$, SRMR = 0.041. Specifically, the model showed a positive association between teachers' self-compassion and proactive strategies ($b = 0.274$, $p = 0.018$) and between teachers' perceived received compassion and work engagement ($b = 0.660$, $p = 0.000$). Additionally, higher levels of perceived self-compassion were associated with higher levels of work engagement ($b = 0.130$, $p = 0.031$). With regard to teachers' resilience, positive associations between teachers' optimism and *resilience* ($b = 0.420$, $p = 0.000$) and between self-compassion and *resilience* ($b = 0.202$, $p = 0.000$) were found. Finally, higher levels of teachers' self-criticism were significantly associated with lower levels of *resilience* ($b = -0.256$, $p = 0.000$).

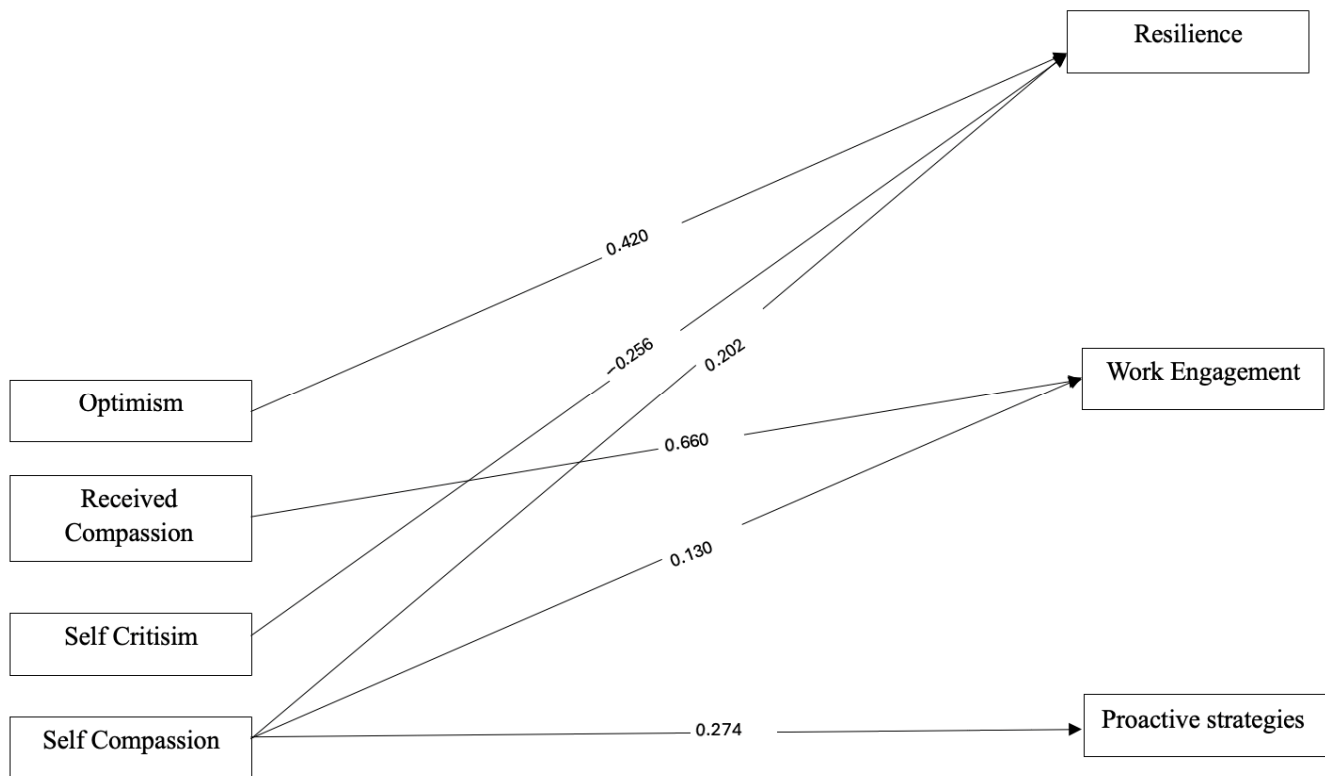


Figure 1. Path analysis model. Note. The figure displays only the associations that reached statistical significance.

4. Discussion

This study has highlighted how self-compassion, optimism, and perception of receiving compassion are important psychological resources for kindergarten and primary school teachers, positively affecting resilience, proactive coping strategies, and work engagement. The data are consistent with the international literature (e.g., Gałazka & Jarosz, 2022; Kemper et al., 2015; Y. Hu, 2023; Pathak & Lata, 2018; Eldor, 2017) and offer original contributions to the Italian context, broadening our understanding of the mechanisms through which these resources support teachers' well-being.

4.1. Resilience and Personal Resources

Our findings reveal a significant association between optimism and resilience, with optimism exerting a direct positive influence on resilience. This evidence is consistent with previous literature, highlighting a significant and positive association between optimism and resilience (Pathak & Lata, 2018). Moreover, this result is consistent with the Explanatory Style Theory (Seligman, 1991; Forgeard & Seligman, 2012), which conceptualizes optimism as a cognitive style characterized by the tendency to attribute positive events to internal,

stable, and global causes and negative events to external, unstable, and specific factors. In accordance with the Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001), focusing on positive stimuli allows for the accumulation of adaptive resources, which are particularly relevant in educational contexts, where emotional and relational demands are constantly being managed (Falavarjani & Yeh, 2019). These data, although preliminary, suggest that optimistic teachers are better at transforming stressful events into opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Our study also revealed that the more teachers reported higher levels of self-compassion, the more they perceived higher levels of resilience. We also found a significant association between higher levels of self-criticism and lower levels of resilience in our sample. This result helps define self-compassion as a valuable resource. Previous studies had identified self-compassion as a protective factor against stress, capable of promoting the transition from self-judgment to self-kindness and increasing socio-emotional awareness (J. J. Chen, 2022; Ragni et al., 2023). According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001), self-compassion broadens the repertoire of available thoughts and actions, facilitating a resilient response to difficulties. Thus, our finding resonates with the evidence that resilience is positively correlated with self-compassion (Kemper et al., 2015) and that self-compassion contributes to resilience in the face of adversity (Allen & Leary, 2010; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2007). From this perspective, resilience can be understood as a corollary of self-compassion, as teachers who are more compassionate towards themselves tend to have better mental health outcomes and lower levels of stress (Maratos et al., 2024).

4.2. Proactive Strategies and Personal Resources

Our study found a significant association between self-compassion and the adoption of proactive coping strategies. Previous studies have found a similar association, highlighting how teachers trained in mindfulness and compassion programs develop greater emotional regulation skills and more effective ways of coping with stressful situations (Hatton-Bowers et al., 2023). By treating themselves with kindness and understanding, teachers can cope better with the emotional and cognitive demands of their work (Y. Hu, 2023). This prevents high levels of stress and burnout and contributes to creating a more peaceful and supportive work environment (De Stasio et al., 2020). By deploying these strategies in the classroom, teachers likely provide models and practice opportunities alongside more sensitive, non-reactive environments that support children's regulation and relationship-building (Jeon et al., 2016).

4.3. Work Engagement and Personal Resources

Our results show a positive association between self-compassion and perceived work engagement. This finding is consistent with a broader body of literature documenting how self-compassion is associated with various indicators of well-being, including lower levels of burnout, stress, and depressive symptoms, and higher levels of job satisfaction and performance (Kotera et al., 2021; Reizer, 2019). In the school context, the recent literature suggests that self-kindness mitigates the decline in performance associated with stressful events such as the pandemic (Gałazka & Jarosz, 2022) and that compassion-based interventions promote energy, vitality, and work engagement (Matos et al., 2024; Dvořáková et al., 2024). In line with the Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) model (Gilbert, 2010), self-compassion acts by regulating the motivational systems of "drive" and "soothing-safeness," generating positive emotions that fuel engagement. These results highlighted the importance of developing teachers' compassionate motivational systems, specifically, their competencies to be sensitive to their difficulties, distress, and their commitment and ability

to deal with these difficulties to alleviate their psychological distress, reduce burnout and promote their work engagement.

Finally, these findings highlight the relevance of receiving compassion as a psychosocial resource that promotes work engagement among teaching professionals. This result aligns with a growing body of literature indicating that compassionate interactions in the workplace, particularly those involving colleagues and supervisors, can foster employees' emotional connection to their work, resulting in increased energy, dedication, and absorption (Eldor, 2017; Ali et al., 2021; Nazir & Islam, 2020). According to the Affective Events Theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), emotionally salient experiences in the workplace, including those involving interpersonal support, influence long-term attitudes and motivation. Repeated experience of receiving compassion may thus reinforce positive affective evaluations of one's job and work context, ultimately enhancing engagement (Lyons, 2006; Shim & Rohrbaugh, 2011). In the school context, Eldor and Shoshani (2016) found that higher perceived compassion was associated with emotional vigor and affective commitment among teachers, which are conceptually related to work engagement. Feeling supported by compassionate colleagues, therefore, seems to constitute a relational buffer that fuels the energy and dedication of teachers who perform an emotionally intense educational role, such as early childhood and primary education.

4.4. Limitations and Future Perspectives

Despite the promising results, this study has some limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. First, the cross-sectional nature of the research does not allow for establishing causal relationships between the variables investigated; future studies with longitudinal or experimental designs may better clarify the directionality of the observed relationships. Furthermore, the sample considered consists mainly of women, partly reflecting the typical composition of the teaching staff in nursery and primary schools, but reducing the possibility of generalizing the results to a more heterogeneous teaching population. In addition, the sample size was relatively limited and based on convenience recruitment, which further constrains the generalizability of the findings. A further area for exploration concerns the role of co-regulation strategies, i.e., practices of shared management of emotions and stress among colleagues, which could constitute an additional protective factor regarding well-being and engagement. Future integration of these dimensions using mixed methods that combine quantitative and qualitative measures may offer a more detailed understanding of resilience processes and psychological resources in education.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study offers a significant theoretical and practical contribution to the existing literature. Our results expand the literature on teachers' psychological resources, highlighting the role of self-compassion, optimism, and the perception of compassion received as protective factors that can support resilience, engagement, and adaptive coping strategies. Our findings also provide a concrete basis for the development of training interventions and support programs to promote the professional well-being of teaching staff and prevent the risk of burnout.

These implications are particularly relevant when viewed in the context of the instability and uncertainty that have characterized education in recent years. The pandemic has profoundly impacted teachers' work, imposing sudden changes in teaching organization and increasing emotional and relational demands from students (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2023; Conte et al., 2024). In this scenario, strengthening personal resources such as self-compassion and optimism, together with the perception of a climate of compassion and

support in the workplace, appear crucial to protect teachers' psychological and professional health and to ensure an educational response that is sensitive to the emerging needs of students. Given the above, it is crucial to promote programs that focus on cultivating compassionate and optimistic attitudes, which can support teachers' well-being and, at the same time, the overall quality of the educational environment.

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