

Article

Job Satisfaction Among Early Childhood Educators and Preschool Teachers: The Role of Meaning at Work, Workplace Relationships and Teacher Stress

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Abstract

Teacher job satisfaction is a key component of teacher well-being and educational quality, particularly in early childhood education settings. This study examined how different dimensions of job satisfaction are associated with individual factors (sociodemographic characteristics and meaning at work) and work-related factors (perceived stress, workplace relationships, and satisfaction with training experiences) among Italian early childhood educators and preschool teachers. Participants were 259 professionals working with children aged 0–6 years who completed an online questionnaire assessing meaning at work, teacher stress, support from colleagues, and conflictual workplace relationships. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that Positive Meaning was the strongest and most consistent predictor across all dimensions of job satisfaction. Perceived support from colleagues positively predicted intrinsic, relational, and working conditions satisfaction, whereas conflictual workplace relationships negatively affected relational and working conditions satisfaction. Age, years of teaching experience, and work setting selectively influenced specific dimensions of job satisfaction. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of collaborative workplace climates and meaningful work in promoting teacher well-being in early childhood education contexts, suggesting that interventions should address both individual resources and the quality of workplace relationships.

Keywords: early childhood education; teacher wellbeing; job satisfaction; meaningful work; workplace relationships; teacher stress; collaborative practices; preschool teachers; early childhood educators



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1. Introduction

Teacher job satisfaction is widely recognized as a key factor in supporting occupational well-being (Wartenberg et al., 2023), teaching effectiveness (Alderman, 2013), and overall educational quality (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Higher job satisfaction is associated with greater professional commitment, teacher thriving and resilience, and higher-quality relationships with children (Chen et al., 2025; Wartenberg et al., 2023). Conversely, lower satisfaction is linked to reduced social-emotional support, a higher risk of burnout, increased attrition, and stronger intentions to quit (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Farewell et al., 2023; Hyseni Duraku et al., 2025; Scarzello & Prino, 2025). Teacher attrition has become a major international concern because it affects educational quality, organizational stability, and the continuity of children's learning experiences. Research has consistently identified

job satisfaction as a key factor associated with teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Accordingly, enhancing teacher job satisfaction has become a global priority in education, especially for professionals working with very young children, because high-quality early care and education (ECE) plays a crucial role in promoting children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Campbell et al., 2012; Reynolds et al., 2001).

1.1. Teachers' Job Satisfaction

Teacher job satisfaction is a component of subjective well-being and is generally defined as teachers' subjective evaluation of their professional experiences (Chen et al., 2025; Spector, 2022), encompassing both cognitive and emotional aspects (Weiss, 2002).

Since Hoppock's (1935) seminal work, research on job satisfaction has adopted diverse approaches, without reaching a unanimous consensus on its measurement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Some studies focus on overall job satisfaction, while others adopt multidimensional perspectives (Admiraal & Røberg, 2023; Ma et al., 2025; Spector, 2022), although there is still no agreement on its core dimensions. Additionally, different educational contexts may lead to variations in the structure and salience of job satisfaction dimensions (Ma et al., 2025; Toropova et al., 2021).

In this study, we refer to the framework originally proposed by Warr et al. (1979) and later adapted to the school context by Zurlo et al. (2013), which distinguishes four dimensions: intrinsic job satisfaction (the extent to which teachers find their work inherently rewarding and engaging), extrinsic job satisfaction (satisfaction with external aspects of the job, such as salary), satisfaction with working conditions (satisfaction with workload, resources, and the overall work environment), and satisfaction with employee relations (satisfaction with interpersonal relationships at work).

1.2. Factors Affecting Teachers' Job Satisfaction

To support both teacher and child well-being, it is crucial to identify the factors that contribute to job satisfaction among early childhood educators and teachers. Existing research highlights the importance of considering both individual and work-related factors (Hyseni Duraku et al., 2025). Regarding individual characteristics, the literature has examined both sociodemographic variables (e.g., age and years of teaching experience) and psychological factors.

1.2.1. Sociodemographic Factors and Job Satisfaction

The literature reports mixed findings on the relationship between teachers' age, years of experience, and job satisfaction (Li et al., 2025). Some studies suggest that late-career teachers may experience declining satisfaction (Mertler, 2002), and that age is associated with lower job satisfaction and a higher risk of burnout (Converso et al., 2015; Janovská et al., 2017). In contrast, other research indicates that years of experience are positively associated with job satisfaction (Alon & Bergman Deitcher, 2024) and younger and less experienced teachers report lower well-being and a higher risk of burnout and attrition (Antoniou et al., 2006; Nguyen et al., 2020; Räsänen et al., 2020), possibly due to limited coping resources, unrealistic expectations, and the "reality shock" experienced at career entry (Voss & Kunter, 2020).

1.2.2. Meaning at Work and Job Satisfaction

Among individual psychological factors, the sense of meaning at work has been identified as a key antecedent of job satisfaction. Meaningful work refers to a work experience characterized by a sense of significance and orientation toward a worthy goal (Blustein

et al., 2023). It involves the opportunity to express oneself through work, utilize personal strengths, and contribute positively to others' lives (Lavy & Bocker, 2018).

Rosso et al. (2010) systematized its theoretical foundations, and Steger et al. (2012) operationalized it as a multidimensional construct comprising three components: positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations. Positive meaning refers to the subjective significance attributed to one's work; meaning-making through work reflects the extent to which work fosters personal growth; and greater good motivations capture the perception that one's work contributes to the broader social good (Allan et al., 2019).

Research shows that perceiving one's work as meaningful is associated with higher job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019; Humphrey et al., 2007). Among teachers, meaningful work acts as a protective factor against stress (Minkkinen et al., 2020), enhances engagement and satisfaction, and reduces burnout (Lavy & Bocker, 2018; Pöysä et al., 2026; Suyatno et al., 2022; Van Wingerden & Poell, 2019).

Teaching is often considered an inherently meaningful profession due to its impact on children and society. A strong sense of meaning is central to teachers' engagement, driven by the desire to support children's development and contribute to the common good (Lavy & Bocker, 2018; Oplatka, 2006; Schnell et al., 2016). However, despite this potential for meaningfulness, teachers report high levels of burnout (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003). Organizational constraints—such as excessive workload and poor school climate—may limit the perceived social impact of teaching (Hakanen et al., 2006; Pines, 2002), creating a gap between expectations and reality that can erode initial motivation (Lavy, 2022). This suggests that the relationship between meaning at work and job satisfaction warrants further investigation. Moreover, teachers may find sources of meaning beyond their immediate workplace. Participation in broader professional communities, collaborative learning networks, and value-driven educational initiatives can provide alternative opportunities to experience purpose, professional identity, and social contribution, especially when everyday organizational conditions limit the meaningfulness of work (Pantazidis & Moisiadou, 2025). These alternative sources of professional meaning may help maintain a sense of purpose even when organizational recognition or material rewards are perceived as insufficient.

The extent to which meaning at work operates in conjunction with work-related factors—such as stress and workplace relationships—in shaping teachers' job satisfaction remains underexplored. Importantly, job satisfaction should not be understood in isolation from contextual influences. It results from the interaction between individual and work-related factors, including perceived stress and quality of work relationships. Overall, this study adopts an integrative perspective, according to which teachers' job satisfaction is shaped both by individual resources (e.g., meaning at work) and work-related factors (e.g., stress and workplace relationships).

1.2.3. Relationships with Colleagues and Job Satisfaction

With regard to the role that school-level factors play in job satisfaction, it is necessary to refer to the relational climate. Early childhood education has been described as an "intensely interpersonal" profession (Nislin et al., 2016, p. 28). High-quality collegial relationships and a respectful professional culture are associated with more positive emotional experiences and higher job satisfaction (Kılınç et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2025; Marcionetti & Castelli, 2023; Toropova et al., 2021; Xia et al., 2023; Zhao & Jeon, 2024). Supportive work environments—where teachers can share ideas and receive encouragement—play a crucial role in fostering job satisfaction (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016). Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that collaborative organizational climates support teacher retention by sustaining professional

collaboration, while poor communication and relational difficulties may increase conflict, stress, and intentions to leave the profession (Downey et al., 2025).

Positive relationships with colleagues and work-related sources of support directly affect job demand perception and moderate burnout (Cano-García et al., 2005; Gavish & Friedman, 2010). Collegial support enhances belonging, professional efficacy, and shared responsibility, thereby improving perceptions of the work environment (Collie et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Recent studies on preschool and special education teachers confirm a positive association between social support, job satisfaction, and the well-being of educators and teachers, especially in high-stress contexts (Alon & Bergman Deitcher, 2024; Bergman Deitcher & Alon, 2025). Conversely, relational conflict undermines trust and collaboration, increases emotional strain, and reduces job satisfaction (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007). Unsupportive environments may also contribute to emotional exhaustion and reduced responsiveness to children's needs (Lower & Cassidy, 2007).

1.2.4. Teacher Stress and Job Satisfaction

Teaching is widely recognized as a highly stressful profession (Johnson et al., 2005). The construct of teacher stress refers to a negative psychological response to work-related demands, often characterized by emotional strain or a perceived lack of coping resources (Kyriacou, 2001; Prilleltensky et al., 2016).

Early childhood educators are particularly exposed to stress (Steigleder et al., 2023; Tebben et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2020), due to the emotional intensity of close interactions with children and families, demanding parental expectations, responsibility for children's safety, and often challenging working conditions such as high noise levels and unfavorable educator–child ratios (Converso et al., 2015; De Los Santos et al., 2023). In the Italian context, these stressors may be exacerbated by limited social recognition of professionals working in the 0–6 sector, whose role is sometimes framed more as caregiving than education (De Stasio et al., 2017), particularly in nursery schools.

In line with previous research (Chen et al., 2022), teacher stress in the present study is conceptualized as arising from two main sources: teaching-related demands (e.g., workload) and lack of organizational support (e.g., limited support from colleagues and administrators). The literature consistently reports a negative association between teacher stress and job satisfaction, particularly in early childhood settings (Carson et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2025; Zhao & Jeon, 2024). However, few studies have examined how stress interacts with other individual and contextual variables in shaping job satisfaction.

Building on this framework, the present study focuses on a set of variables consistently identified in the literature as central to teachers' job satisfaction, while addressing gaps in their joint investigation, particularly in early childhood contexts.

1.3. Current Study

Teacher well-being issues may be particularly critical in early childhood contexts, where children's emotional regulation is still developing and requires greater support from teachers (Hindman & Bustamante, 2019). Despite the growing body of international research, empirical evidence on job satisfaction among early childhood professionals in the Italian context remains limited, particularly with regard to the combined role of individual and work-related factors. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions.

RQ1: To what extent are the different dimensions of job satisfaction (intrinsic, extrinsic, employee relations, and working conditions satisfaction) associated with individual factors (sociodemographic characteristics and meaning at work) and work-related factors (perceived stress, workplace relationships, and satisfaction with training experiences)?

RQ2: Do early childhood educators working with children aged 0–3 years and preschool teachers working with children aged 3–6 years differ in the dimensions of job satisfaction?

Based on the previous literature, we expected meaning at work and positive workplace relationships to be positively associated with job satisfaction, whereas perceived stress and conflictual relationships were expected to show negative associations. Given the mixed findings in previous research, no specific expectations were formulated regarding age, years of experience, and work setting.

This study makes three specific contributions. First, it provides evidence on job satisfaction among professionals in the Italian 0–6 education system, a context that has received limited empirical attention. Second, it examines the combined effects of individual resources, particularly meaning at work, and workplace factors, including stress and collegial relationships, on different dimensions of job satisfaction. Third, it explores potential differences between professionals working with children aged 0–3 and those working with children aged 3–6, two groups operating in distinct organizational and contractual contexts in Italy.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Data were collected between September 2024 and June 2025 through an anonymous online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and unpaid. The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Turin, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms using a snowball sampling procedure (i.e., through school administrators, professional mailing lists, and social media¹). Participants were eligible if they were currently employed as nursery school educators or preschool teachers. The final sample consisted of 259 subjects, all of Italian nationality: 48.6% worked with children aged 0–3 years, and 51.4% worked with children aged 3–6 years. The vast majority of participants were women (99.2%), reflecting the well-documented gender imbalance in early childhood education settings in Italy and internationally. Most participants were married (56.4%) or cohabiting (17.4%) and worked in public services (68%). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 62 years ($M = 43.67$, $SD = 10.66$). Teaching experience ranged from 0 to 40 years ($M = 17.32$, $SD = 10.58$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction was assessed using the Job Satisfaction Scale (Warr et al., 1979; Italian version by Zurlo et al., 2013). Items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Extremely dissatisfied to Extremely satisfied. Higher scores indicate greater job satisfaction. The scale comprises 15 items divided into four subscales: Employee Relations Satisfaction (4 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$), Intrinsic and Job Itself Satisfaction (5 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$), Working Conditions Satisfaction (4 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$), and Extrinsic Job Satisfaction (2 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$).

2.2.2. Meaningful Work

Meaningful work was measured using the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012; Italian version by Magnano et al., 2023). It consists of 10 items with a 5-point Likert scale from absolutely untrue to absolutely true. Higher scores indicate higher levels of experienced meaningful work.

The scale comprises three subscales: Positive Meaning—PM (4 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$), Meaning-Making Through Work—MM (3 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$), and Greater Good Motivation—GG (3 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$).

2.2.3. Perceived Support from Colleagues

Perceived support from colleagues was measured using the Peer support Scale from the HSE Stress Indicator Tool, developed by Edwards et al. (2008), validated in Italy by Toderi et al. (2013). This scale consists of 4 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never to always (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$).

2.2.4. Conflictual Relationships

The presence of conflictual relationships among colleagues was measured using the Relationship scale from the HSE Stress Indicator Tool, developed by Edwards et al. (2008), validated in Italy by Toderi et al. (2013). This scale consists of 4 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never to always (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$).

2.2.5. Teacher Stress

Teacher stress was assessed using the 7-item Teacher Stress Scale (TSS; Chen et al., 2022), which includes two subscales: Teaching-related Demands—TRD (4 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$), and Inadequate School-based Support—ISS (3 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Higher scores indicate greater perceived stress.

2.2.6. Satisfaction with the Training Course Attended

Participants were also asked an additional question regarding their level of satisfaction with the training courses they had attended in the last year, which required a response on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Extremely dissatisfied to Extremely satisfied.

2.3. Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30).

Given that all study variables were collected through self-report measures, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess the potential influence of common method variance (CMV). The first unrotated factor accounted for 32.24% of the total variance, indicating that CMV was unlikely to represent a substantial threat to the validity of the findings.

To examine associations among the study variables, analyses of variance and bivariate Pearson's correlations were conducted, depending on the level of measurement of each variable.

To investigate predictors of the different dimensions of job satisfaction (Intrinsic Satisfaction, Extrinsic Satisfaction, Employee Relations Satisfaction, and Working Conditions Satisfaction), four separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed, each including one dimension as the dependent variable. Changes in R^2 (ΔR^2) were computed to assess the incremental contribution of each block of variables, and statistical significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

3. Results

Preliminary analyses were conducted to explore relationships among variables using bivariate correlations, considering the total scores of all scales.

Bivariate correlations among the studied variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Job satisfaction	-	−0.088	−0.045	0.541 **	0.246 **	−0.216 *	0.492 **	−0.414 *
2. Age		-	0.836 **	−0.138 *	−0.062	0.075	−0.04	0.068
3. Year of teaching experience			-	−0.116	−0.014	0.078	−0.064	0.130 *
4. WAMI				-	0.223 **	−0.086	0.272 **	−0.166 **
5. Satisfaction with training experience					-	−0.075	0.111	−0.154 *
6. TSS						-	−0.286 **	0.258 **
7. Perceived support from colleagues							-	−0.645 **
8. Conflictual relationships between colleagues								-

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed). ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Regarding sociodemographic variables and variables related to work experience, no significant associations emerged between overall job satisfaction (total score), teachers' age, and years of teaching experience. Similarly, analysis of variance indicated no significant differences in total job satisfaction between educators working with children aged 0–3 and teachers working with children aged 3–6 ($F = 1.312$; $p = 0.271$).

Job satisfaction (total score) was positively associated with meaningful work (WAMI total score), satisfaction with training experiences, and perceived support from colleagues, and negatively associated with perceived stress (TSS dimensions) and conflictual relationships among colleagues.

To further explore the relationship between the different dimensions of job satisfaction (Intrinsic, Extrinsic, Employee Relations, and Working Conditions Satisfaction) and the variables under study, four hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted, each including one dimension of job satisfaction as the dependent variable.

Predictors were entered in three blocks, in line with the theoretical framework outlined in the introduction. Specifically, sociodemographic and work-related variables were entered in the first block (age, years of teaching experience, and work setting: 0–3 vs. 3–6 years), as these represent background characteristics that may influence job satisfaction. In the second block, meaningful work was included as an individual-level psychological resource (WAMI subscales: Positive Meaning—PM, Meaning-Making through Work—MM, and Greater Good Motivation—GG) to assess its contribution beyond background factors. In the third block, work environment variables were entered, namely satisfaction with training experiences, perceived stress (TSS subscales: Teaching-Related Demands—TRD and Inadequate School-based Support—ISS), perceived support from colleagues, and conflictual relationships among colleagues. This final block was entered to examine the additional contribution of organizational and relational workplace factors beyond both background characteristics and individual psychological resources.

Multicollinearity was assessed in all regression models using tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics. In the final models, tolerance values ranged from 0.255 to 0.919 and VIF values ranged from 1.088 to 3.918, indicating acceptable levels of multicollinearity.

With regard to Intrinsic Satisfaction (Table 2), the first model showed that sociodemographic and work-related variables (age, years of teaching experience, and work setting) were not significant predictors. When meaningful work (WAMI subscales) was included in the second block, the model explained approximately 34% of the variance ($F_{(6, 219)} = 19.152$; $p < 0.001$), and the increase in explained variance was significant

($\Delta R^2 = 0.327$; $F_{(3, 219)} = 36.373$; $p = 0.001$). In the third block, the explained variance increased to 47% ($F_{(11, 214)} = 17.374$; $p < 0.001$), with a further significant increase in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.128$; $F_{(5, 214)} = 10.34$; $p < 0.001$). In the final model, the strongest predictors were Positive Meaning (WAMI-PM) ($\beta = 0.319$; $p < 0.001$) and perceived support from colleagues ($\beta = 0.261$; $p < 0.001$). Moreover, intrinsic satisfaction was negatively associated with teachers' age ($\beta = -0.193$; $p = 0.030$) and positively associated with years of teaching experience ($\beta = 0.183$; $p = 0.039$).

With regard to Extrinsic Satisfaction (Table 3) in the first model, the sociodemographic and work-related variables were not statistically significant predictors. When meaningful work (WAMI subscales) was included in the second block, the explained variance was approximately 24% ($F_{(6, 219)} = 11.387$; $p < 0.001$) and the increase in explained variance was significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.214$; $F_{(3, 219)} = 20.532$; $p < 0.001$).

In the third block, the explained variance increased to approximately 29% ($F_{(6, 219)} = 7.877$; $p < 0.001$), with a small but significant increase in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05$; $F_{(5, 214)} = 3.031$; $p = 0.012$).

In the final model, extrinsic satisfaction was positively predicted by Positive Meaning (WAMI-PM) ($\beta = 0.534$; $p < 0.001$) and satisfaction with training experiences ($\beta = 0.164$; $p = 0.008$). Furthermore, working with children aged 3–6 (vs. 0–3) was associated with higher extrinsic satisfaction ($\beta = 0.152$; $p = 0.012$). In contrast, Greater Good Motivation (WAMI-GG) was a negative predictor of extrinsic satisfaction ($\beta = -0.169$; $p = 0.032$).

With regard to Employee Relations Satisfaction (Table 4) in the first model, sociodemographic and work-related variables were not statistically significant predictors. When meaningful work (WAMI subscales) was included in the second block, the explained variance was approximately 26% ($F_{(6, 219)} = 12.859$; $p < 0.001$) and the increase in R^2 was significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.245$; $F_{(3, 219)} = 24.234$; $p < 0.001$). In the third block, the explained variance increased to 48% ($F_{(11, 219)} = 18.06$; $p < 0.001$), with a significant increase in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.221$; $F_{(5, 214)} = 18.321$; $p < 0.001$).

In this final model, Employee Relations Satisfaction was positively predicted by Positive Meaning (WAMI-PM) ($\beta = 0.366$; $p < 0.001$) and perceived support from colleagues ($\beta = 0.225$; $p = 0.002$), and negatively predicted by conflictual relationships among colleagues ($\beta = -0.245$; $p < 0.001$) and stress related to inadequate school-based support (TSS-ISS) ($\beta = -0.153$; $p = 0.027$).

With regard to Working Conditions Satisfaction (Table 5) in the first model, sociodemographic and work-related variables were not statistically significant predictors. When meaningful work (WAMI subscales) was included in the second block, the explained variance was approximately 28% ($F_{(6, 219)} = 14.386$; $p < 0.001$) and the increase in R^2 was significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.272$; $F_{(3, 219)} = 27.72$; $p < 0.001$). In the third block, the explained variance increased to 41% ($F_{(11, 214)} = 13.754$; $p < 0.001$), further significant, though smaller, increase in explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.131$; $F_{(5, 214)} = 9.604$; $p < 0.001$).

In the final model, Working Conditions Satisfaction was positively predicted by Positive Meaning (WAMI-PM) ($\beta = 0.359$; $p < 0.001$) and perceived support from colleagues ($\beta = 0.216$; $p = 0.004$), and negatively predicted by conflictual relationships among colleagues ($\beta = -0.184$; $p = 0.012$). In addition, years of teaching experience showed a small but significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.188$; $p = 0.044$), while satisfaction with training experiences showed a marginally significant positive association ($\beta = 0.106$; $p = 0.055$).

Table 2. Regression coefficients of the predictors for Intrinsic Satisfaction ¹.

	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3					VIF
	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	
Age	−0.144	0.078	[−0.298, 0.010]	−0.214	0.067	−0.095	0.064	[−0.222, 0.033]	−0.141	0.144	−0.130	0.059	[−0.246, −0.013]	−0.193	0.030	3.148
Year of teaching experience	0.084	0.078	[−0.069, 0.237]	0.125	0.282	0.071	0.064	[−0.055, 0.197]	0.106	0.267	0.123	0.059	[0.006, 0.239]	0.183	0.039	3.118
Work setting: (0–3 vs. 3–6 years)	0.334	0.690	[−0.025, 1.693]	0.033	0.629	0.059	0.570	[−1.063, 1.182]	0.006	0.917	0.409	0.523	[−0.623, 1.441]	0.040	0.436	1.088
WAMI-PM						1.055	0.234	[0.595, 1.516]	0.449	<0.001	0.750	0.218	[0.320, 1.180]	0.319	<0.001	3.484
WAMI-MM						0.344	0.327	[−0.300, 0.989]	0.113	0.294	0.381	0.300	[−0.210, 0.972]	0.125	0.205	3.918
WAMI-GG						0.172	0.281	[−0.381, 0.725]	0.045	0.541	0.119	0.259	[−0.390, 0.629]	0.031	0.645	1.848
Satisfaction with training experience											0.498	0.297	[−0.087, 1.083]	0.088	0.095	1.115
Perceived support from colleagues											0.542	0.147	[0.251, 0.832]	0.261	<0.001	2.038
Conflictual relationships between colleagues											−0.306	0.177	[−0.656, 0.043]	−0.119	0.085	1.923
TSS-TRD											−0.050	0.123	[−0.292, 0.192]	−0.026	0.686	1.676
TSS-ISS											−0.035	0.185	[−0.399, 0.329]	−0.013	0.849	1.955
R	0.132					0.587					0.687					
R ²	0.017					0.344					0.472					
R ² adj	0.004					0.326					0.445					
ΔR^2						0.327					0.128					

¹ Because the predictor set was unchanged across the four regression models, VIF values were identical and are reported only once in this table.

Table 3. Regression coefficients of the predictors for Extrinsic Satisfaction.

	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>
Age	−0.008	0.035	[0.076, 0.061]	−0.026	0.822	0.004	0.031	[−0.057, 0.065]	0.013	0.899	0.000	0.031	[−0.060, 0.061]	0.001	0.990
Year of teaching experience	−0.011	0.035	[−0.079, 0.057]	−0.037	0.751	−0.016	0.031	[−0.077, 0.045]	−0.053	0.606	−0.006	0.031	[−0.067, 0.054]	−0.021	0.835
Work setting: (0–3 vs. 3–6 years)	0.699	0.308	[0.093, 1.305]	0.155	0.024	0.537	0.275	[−0.005, 1.078]	0.119	0.052	0.689	0.272	[0.153, 1.225]	0.152	0.012
WAMI-PM						0.637	0.113	[0.415, 0.860]	0.606	<0.001	0.562	0.113	[0.339, 0.785]	0.534	<0.001
WAMI-MM						−0.137	0.158	[−0.448, 0.174]	−0.100	0.386	−0.099	0.156	[−0.406, 0.208]	−0.072	0.527
WAMI-GG						−0.236	0.135	[−0.503, 0.031]	−0.138	0.082	−0.290	0.134	[−0.555, −0.025]	−0.169	0.032
Satisfaction with training experience											0.416	0.154	[0.112, 0.720]	0.164	0.008
Perceived support from colleagues											0.044	0.077	[−0.107, 0.194]	0.047	0.569
Conflictual relationships between colleagues											−0.108	0.092	[−0.289, 0.074]	−0.093	0.244
TSS-TRD											−0.074	0.064	[−0.200, 0.052]	−0.087	0.247
TSS-ISS											0.018	0.096	[−0.171, 0.208]	0.015	0.848
R	0.153					0.488					0.537				
R ²	0.023					0.238					0.288				
R ² adj	0.010					0.217					0.252				
ΔR ²						0.214					0.050				

Table 4. Regression coefficients of the predictors for Employee Relations Satisfaction.

	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>
Age	−0.067	0.073	[−0.211, 0.076]	−0.108	0.354	−0.031	0.064	[−0.156, 0.095]	−0.049	0.629	−0.089	0.055	[−0.197, 0.018]	−0.143	0.102
Year of teaching experience	−0.012	0.072	[−0.154, 0.131]	−0.019	0.870	−0.024	0.063	[−0.148, 0.1]	−0.038	0.705	0.052	0.054	[−0.055, 0.159]	0.084	0.336
Work setting: (0–3 vs. 3–6 years)	0.449	0.642	[−0.816, 1.713]	0.048	0.485	0.170	0.562	[−0.938, 1.278]	0.018	0.762	0.487	0.482	[−0.463, 1.437]	0.052	0.313
WAMI-PM						1.184	0.231	[0.729, 1.638]	0.542	<0.001	0.801	0.201	[0.405, 1.197]	0.366	<0.001
WAMI-MM						−0.156	0.323	[−0.793, 0.48]	−0.055	0.629	−0.067	0.276	[−0.611, 0.477]	−0.024	0.809
WAMI-GG						0.008	0.277	[−0.538, 0.554]	0.002	0.978	−0.039	0.238	[−0.508, 0.431]	−0.011	0.872
Satisfaction with training experience											0.207	0.273	[−0.332, 0.746]	0.039	0.450
Perceived support from colleagues											0.434	0.136	[0.167, 0.701]	0.225	0.002
Conflictual relationships between colleagues											−0.587	0.163	[−0.909, −0.265]	−0.245	<0.001
TSS-TRD											0.112	0.113	[−0.111, 0.334]	0.063	0.324
TSS-ISS											−0.378	0.170	[−0.713, −0.043]	−0.153	0.027
R	0.123					0.488					0.694				
R ²	0.015					0.238					0.481				
R ² adj	0.002					0.217					0.455				
ΔR ²						0.214					0.221				

Table 5. Regression coefficients of the predictors for Working Conditions Satisfaction.

	Step 1					Step 2					Step 3				
	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>	B	SE	95% CI	β	<i>p</i>
Age	−0.093	0.064	[−0.218, 0.033]	−0.169	0.149	−0.057	0.055	[−0.166, 0.051]	0.013	0.899	−0.084	0.051	[−0.185, 0.016]	−0.154	0.099
Year of teaching experience	0.071	0.064	[−0.054, 0.196]	0.130	0.266	0.061	0.055	[−0.047, 0.168]	−0.053	0.606	0.103	0.051	[0.003, 0.202]	0.188	0.044
Work setting: (0–3 vs. 3–6 years)	0.342	0.564	[−0.77, 1.453]	0.041	0.545	0.112	0.486	[−0.846, 1.069]	0.119	0.052	0.432	0.449	[−0.453, 1.318]	0.053	0.337
WAMI-PM						0.918	0.199	[0.526, 1.311]	0.606	<0.001	0.689	0.187	[0.32, 1.058]	0.359	<0.001
WAMI-MM						0.103	0.279	[−0.447, 0.652]	−0.100	0.386	0.154	0.257	[−0.353, 0.662]	0.062	0.549
WAMI-GG						0.055	0.239	[−0.417, 0.527]	−0.138	0.082	−0.026	0.222	[−0.464, 0.411]	−0.008	0.905
Satisfaction with training experience											0.491	0.255	[−0.011, 0.994]	0.106	0.055
Perceived support from colleagues											0.366	0.126	[0.117, 0.616]	0.216	0.004
Conflictual relationships between colleagues											−0.386	0.152	[−0.686, −0.086]	−0.184	0.012
TSS-TRD											−0.071	0.105	[−0.279, 0.137]	−0.046	0.502
TSS-ISS											0.089	0.159	[−0.223, 0.402]	0.041	0.575
R	0.102					0.532					0.644				
R ²	0.01					0.283					0.414				
R ² adj	−0.003					0.263					0.384				
ΔR ²						0.272					0.131				

In summary, for all four dimensions of job satisfaction, sociodemographic and work-related variables (age, years of teaching experience, and work setting), when entered alone, did not explain a significant proportion of variance.

The inclusion of meaningful work (WAMI subscales) in the second block resulted in a significant increase in explained variance across all models, and the addition of work context variables in the third block further improved model fit in all cases.

Considering the final models, teachers' age was significantly associated only with Intrinsic Satisfaction, showing a negative relationship. Years of teaching experience positively predicted Intrinsic Satisfaction and Working Conditions Satisfaction. Although age and years of service were strongly correlated ($r = 0.836$), their corresponding VIF (3.148–3.118) values did not indicate problematic multicollinearity. Nevertheless, the opposite associations observed for age and years of service in the Intrinsic Satisfaction model should be interpreted as adjusted (conditional) effects, reflecting the unique contribution of each predictor after controlling for the other, rather than as fully independent effects.

With respect to work setting, teaching children aged 3–6 (vs. 0–3) was associated with higher Extrinsic Satisfaction, whereas no significant effects emerged for the other dimensions.

Among the dimensions of meaningful work, Positive Meaning (WAMI-PM) consistently emerged as a strong positive predictor of all dimensions of job satisfaction. In contrast, Greater Good Motivation (WAMI-GG) showed a negative association only with Extrinsic Satisfaction, and Meaning-Making through Work (WAMI-MM) was not significantly associated with any outcome.

With regard to contextual variables, perceived support from colleagues emerged as a key positive predictor of Intrinsic, Employee Relations, and Working Conditions Satisfaction, whereas conflictual relationships among colleagues were negatively associated with Employee Relations and Working Conditions Satisfaction.

Satisfaction with training experiences was positively associated with Extrinsic Satisfaction and showed a marginal association with Working Conditions Satisfaction.

Finally, stress related to inadequate school-based support (TSS-ISS) negatively predicted Employee Relations Satisfaction, whereas stress related to teaching demands (TSS-TRD) was not significantly associated with any dimension of job satisfaction.

4. Discussion

As the reviewed literature demonstrates, job satisfaction among teachers in early childhood education settings is a crucial factor in ensuring the well-being of these professionals and in promoting a high-quality learning and socialization environment for young children. Building on previous research on teacher well-being, the study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it provides evidence on job satisfaction among professionals working in the Italian 0–6 education system, a context that has received relatively little empirical attention. Second, it examines the combined roles of individual resources, particularly meaning at work, and workplace factors, including stress and collegial relationships, in shaping different dimensions of job satisfaction. Third, it explores potential differences between educators working with children aged 0–3 and teachers working with children aged 3–6, two groups operating within distinct organizational and contractual contexts.

To address these objectives, job satisfaction was examined as a multidimensional construct encompassing intrinsic, extrinsic, employee relations, and working conditions satisfaction. This approach provided a more nuanced understanding of job satisfaction in early childhood education settings and of how individual and contextual factors jointly contribute to teachers' well-being. The results confirm that job satisfaction is not a unidimensional construct but consists of several dimensions, each partly influenced by distinct

sets of predictors. Adopting a multidimensional perspective allowed identification of patterns of association that would not have emerged if job satisfaction had been considered a single construct and enabled better specification of the relative roles of job demands and resources (Admiraal & Røberg, 2023).

With regard to sociodemographic variables, controlling for other variables, teachers' age was negatively associated with intrinsic satisfaction and was not associated with other dimensions of job satisfaction. Years of work experience, in contrast, were positively associated with both intrinsic satisfaction and working conditions satisfaction.

The findings in the literature regarding the relationship between age, years of experience, and job satisfaction in school settings are inconsistent (Li et al., 2025). Our results suggest that age and experience, although strongly related, may be associated with different aspects of job satisfaction when their shared variance is statistically controlled.

On the one hand, years of teaching experience may function as a resource that supports job satisfaction by consolidating skills and a sense of efficacy (Gu & Day, 2007; Huberman, 1989). This interpretation is consistent with the positive associations observed with intrinsic and working conditions satisfaction.

Conversely, in educational settings, increasing age has been linked to greater vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and reduced enjoyment of daily teaching activities, particularly when organizational conditions are demanding or insufficiently supportive (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). However, given the strong correlation between age and years of service, these findings should be interpreted as adjusted (conditional) effects rather than as fully independent effects of the two variables.

Taken together, these findings suggest that professional experience and chronological age may capture partially distinct aspects of teachers' careers. While experience may strengthen professional competence and coping strategies, age-related factors may be associated with changes in the intrinsically rewarding aspects of teaching. These interpretations should nevertheless be considered with caution in light of the moderate collinearity between the two variables.

This highlights the need for organizational practices and professional development opportunities that both value accumulated experience and address age-related challenges, in order to sustain intrinsic aspects of job satisfaction and engagement across different career stages.

The results indicate that the work setting (0–3 vs. 3–6) is associated only with extrinsic satisfaction, which is higher among preschool teachers than among nursery educators. This finding is consistent with the structural differences between these sectors in the Italian context, particularly in terms of employment conditions and social recognition. In fact, working with very young children is often viewed as mere childcare rather than an educational activity (De Stasio et al., 2017).

No differences emerged for the other dimensions of satisfaction, suggesting that, despite organizational differences, nursery educators and preschool teachers share similar everyday work experiences.

It is worth noting that the proportion of variance explained in extrinsic satisfaction was lower compared to the other dimensions. This finding may reflect the fact that extrinsic aspects of job satisfaction—such as salary, contractual conditions, and institutional recognition—are more strongly influenced by structural and organizational factors that were not directly assessed in the present study.

With regard to the meaning attributed to work, the results indicate that Positive Meaning (WAMI-PM) emerges as a cross-cutting psychological resource, consistently associated with all forms of satisfaction considered. This finding strongly supports the integrative perspective adopted in this study, highlighting the central role of individual psychological

resources in shaping job satisfaction. Positive meaning can act as a cognitive-emotional filter through which teachers interpret their work experiences, enhancing resilience even in challenging conditions.

Conversely, the Greater Good Motivation (WAMI-GG) dimension shows a negative association with extrinsic satisfaction and is not associated with other types of satisfaction. The negative association between Greater Good Motivation and extrinsic satisfaction may suggest a mismatch between motivation and reward, in which teachers who highly value the social impact of their work feel frustrated when external recognition is lacking. Consistent with recent perspectives on meaningful work in education, teachers strongly motivated by broader social or educational goals may find meaning in professional communities and collective educational engagement beyond their immediate organizational context (Pantazidis & Moisiadou, 2025). These orientations may sustain a sense of purpose while also heightening sensitivity to perceived shortcomings in salary, recognition, or institutional support.

The dimension of work meaning measured by Meaning-Making through Work (WAMI-MM) does not show significant associations with any dimension of satisfaction. This suggests that not all aspects of meaningful work contribute equally to job satisfaction, reinforcing the importance of distinguishing between its components.

These findings confirm previous studies indicating that meaningful work is associated with higher job satisfaction (Allan et al., 2019; Humphrey et al., 2007), while also highlighting that it is a multidimensional construct whose components are differentially associated with teachers' job satisfaction, with Positive Meaning emerging as the most consistently related dimension across outcomes.

In addition to personal variables, work-related factors also emerged as key predictors of job satisfaction. In particular, perceived support from colleagues positively predicts Intrinsic Satisfaction, Employee Relations Satisfaction, and Working Conditions Satisfaction, while conflictual relationships are negatively associated with Employee Relations and Working Conditions Satisfaction.

These findings are fully consistent with the literature on the central role of social support and relational climate in educational settings, highlighting how supportive collegial environments foster well-being (Aldridge & Fraser, 2016; Alon & Bergman Deitcher, 2024; Bergman Deitcher & Alon, 2025; Kılınc et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2025; Marcionetti & Castelli, 2023; Toropova et al., 2021; Xia et al., 2023; Zhao & Jeon, 2024), whereas conflict undermines it (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007). They are also consistent with recent findings by Downey et al. (2025), who showed that supportive organizational climates help sustain collaborative practices and educator retention, while poor communication contributes to conflict, stress, and turnover intentions.

The importance of workplace relationships is further confirmed by the finding that stress related to inadequate school-based support (TSS-ISS) negatively affects Employee Relations Satisfaction. This suggests that lack of support is not only a stressor, but also a key factor shaping how teachers evaluate relational aspects of their work environment. This finding may reflect the inherently relational nature of early childhood education work. While teaching-related demands such as workload and time pressure are often considered expected features of the profession, stress from inadequate organizational support directly affects teachers' opportunities to collaborate, share responsibilities, and feel valued at work. Therefore, support-related stress may have a particularly strong impact on how teachers evaluate the relational quality of their work environment, making it more closely linked to Employee Relations Satisfaction than stress associated with teaching demands. Teaching-related stress (TSS-TRD) is not associated with any type of satisfaction. This result may indicate that workload-related stressors assessed by this scale (for example, too

much work, too little time) are perceived as inherent to the profession and therefore do not necessarily undermine job satisfaction. Consistent with this, some studies indicate that excessive work demands, including administrative duties and increased teaching hours, are often associated with lower job satisfaction; however, a moderate workload, especially when combined with meaningful work, may not necessarily decrease satisfaction (Eryilmaz et al., 2025).

Among contextual variables, satisfaction with training experiences was positively associated with Extrinsic Satisfaction and marginally associated with Working Conditions Satisfaction. This finding suggests that positive evaluations of training experiences may be linked to more favorable perceptions of professional recognition and work conditions. However, given that training satisfaction was assessed with a single-item measure, these results should be interpreted with caution. Although this interpretation remains tentative, it is broadly consistent with the literature emphasizing that professional development is essential for equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to improve the quality of education, reduce the stress associated with the teaching profession (Sandilos et al., 2018; Shakimova et al., 2024) and increase job satisfaction (Smet, 2022; Toropova et al., 2021).

Taken together, three main conclusions emerge from the present findings. First, Positive Meaning functions as a broad psychological resource, consistently associated with all dimensions of job satisfaction. Second, workplace relationships play a central role in shaping teachers' job satisfaction, as reflected in the importance of collegial support, fewer conflictual relationships, and perceived organizational support. Third, differences between professionals working in 0–3 and 3–6 settings emerged primarily in relation to extrinsic satisfaction, suggesting that contextual and structural factors—such as employment conditions, professional recognition, and organizational arrangements—may be particularly relevant in distinguishing these sectors.

Limitations

This study presents several limitations that warrant attention. First, the use of a convenience (snowball) sample, together with its limited size and limited geographic coverage, restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should therefore aim to include nationally representative or cross-cultural samples. Additionally, the sample consisted almost entirely of women, reflecting the gender distribution typically observed in early childhood education settings. While this increases the ecological validity of the sample, it limits the generalizability of the findings to male educators, whose experiences of job satisfaction and workplace well-being may differ.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents any inference of causal relationships among the variables: the associations observed may be bidirectional. For example, while supportive relationships may enhance job satisfaction, it is also plausible that more satisfied teachers perceive their work environment more positively.

Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to better investigate causal pathways and long-term associations among the variables. Such designs would also allow for a more precise examination of how age and experience influence job satisfaction over time.

Another limitation concerns the assessment of satisfaction with training experiences using a single-item measure. Although single-item indicators can capture global evaluations, they do not allow for the estimation of internal consistency and may provide a less comprehensive assessment of the construct. Therefore, findings regarding the role of training satisfaction should be interpreted with caution and replicated using validated multi-item measures.

Furthermore, the range of predictors included in the study was limited. Although the present research examined various individual and work-related factors, broader struc-

tural determinants of job satisfaction—such as salary, employment conditions, educational policies, and institutional recognition—were not directly assessed. Future studies should incorporate these contextual and systemic factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' job satisfaction, particularly regarding its extrinsic dimension.

Finally, although Harman's single-factor test suggested that common method variance was not a substantial concern, exclusive reliance on self-report measures may still have introduced some method-related bias. Future research could benefit from integrating multiple data sources, including reports from school principals or coordinators and observational measures, particularly regarding school organizational conditions.

5. Conclusions

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the dimensions of teachers' job satisfaction and the factors that influence them, which is crucial from a preventive perspective.

Overall, our findings suggest that Positive Meaning and the quality of workplace relationships represent key resources for teachers' job satisfaction, while the negative association between Greater Good Motivation and extrinsic satisfaction may reflect a potential mismatch between the perceived social value of one's work and external recognition.

Taken together, the findings delineate a pattern in which Positive Meaning operates as a general psychological resource across all dimensions of satisfaction, whereas contextual factors selectively influence specific facets.

To promote the well-being and resilience of teachers working with young children, it is important to implement prevention and intervention programs that address both individual resources—such as the meaning attributed to work—and contextual factors, with particular attention to fostering supportive and collaborative work environments.

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Note

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