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# Flourishing and occupational depression: a comparison of general and special education teachers

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#### ABSTRACT

Teachers constitute a vulnerable professional group in terms of the impact of work-related stress on depression. The present study examined flourishing and occupational depression in general education teachers (GETs) and special education teachers (SETs). A sample of 448 Italian teachers (69.6% of SETs), mostly women (85.5%), aged 26-67 (M = 40.32; SD = 9.01), completed the Flourishing Scale and the Occupational Depression Inventory. We found a negative association between flourishing and occupational depression, moderated by role (GETs versus SETs). The negative association between flourishing and occupational depression was stronger for GETs than for SETs. The potential role of individual and occupational factors in mitigating work-related stress and depression is discussed.

#### **ARTICLE HISTORY**

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#### **KEYWORDS**

Teachers; special education teacher; special education; occupational depression; flourishing

## Introduction

In recent years, studies of teacher well-being have multiplied (Hascher and Waber 2021). These studies suggest that teachers may constitute a vulnerable occupational group vis-àvis work-related stress and depression (Capone, Joshanloo, and Sang-Ah Park 2019; De Stasio et al. 2017; Schonfeld, Bianchi, and Luehring-Jones 2017, see Saade et al. 2022 for a review. Several risk factors for job-related distress have been identified, including red tape, lack of autonomy, role conflict, role ambiguity, absenteeism, and strained relationships with colleagues, school leaders, and students (e.g. Papastylianou, Kaila, and Polychronopoulos 2009). Job demands, however, need to be approached together with personal and job resources (Angelini 2023; Bakker, Demerouti, and Sanz-Vergel 2023). The present research examined the relationship between flourishing and occupational depression in General Education Teachers (GETs) and Special Education Teachers (SETs).

In the last decade, researchers have investigated flourishing as a state of flow, which refers to optimal engagement in one's activities of interest (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Compared to others, individuals who experience 'flourishing' more often express positive emotions and feelings such as happiness, joy, contentment, and life satisfaction (Diener et al. 2010). Flourishing individuals feel connected to others,

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contribute to their community, and are self-confident. Such individuals are characterised by emotional vitality, enthusiasm for life, and active participation in the world around them (Keyes 2007). Keyes's theory of well-being falls within Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, which holds that the building blocks of (work-related) well-being are positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. According to this perspective, flourishing is not only a desired end state but can constitute a protective factor for mental health (e.g. Keyes, Dhingra, and Simoes 2010).

Although many studies have examined the association between flourishing and depression (Grant et al. 2013; Lamers et al. 2015; Marijke et al. 2017), flourishing is one of the least investigated teacher resources (Capone and Petrillo 2020). To our knowledge, no previous study has examined the relationship between flourishing and occupational depression in SETs and GETs. Teaching students with special needs can expose teachers to several mental health risks (Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane 2014). Compared to GETs, SETs, on average, face more challenges. These challenges include understanding and assessing different disabilities and the impact of those disabilities on student learning, designing, and implementing individualised education plans based on learners' strengths and weaknesses, and developing appropriate interventions. Additionally, SETs must collaborate effectively with other professionals, such as psychotherapists, psychologists, and their teacher colleagues to provide comprehensive student support through an inclusive and collaborative approach (Bettini et al. 2017). High workloads are a risk factor for the development of depressive symptoms (Schonfeld and Chang 2017). Given the onerous workload encompassed by all these challenges, SETs are likely to be at risk for elevated levels of depressive symptoms (e.g. Tsarouchas, Antoniou, and Polychroni 2021).

Nonetheless, findings bearing on SETs' well-being have been somewhat inconsistent. Part of the literature indicates that the role of SET is more stressful than the role of GET (Bettini et al. 2017; Garwood et al. 2018; see Billingsley and Bettini 2019 for a review). However, another body of research found lower stress levels in SETs compared to GETs. For instance, some studies highlight a low tolerance among GETs for disruptive behaviours in their students (e.g. Kokkinos and Davazoglou, 2009). A study by Pepe and Addimando (2013) on Italian GETs and SETs showed the same trend. The authors found that for 80% of GETs, disruptive behaviours are experienced as very stressful. Additionally, 20% of GETs perceive disruptive behaviours as threatening the integrity and effectiveness of their role. In contrast, 57% of SETs are stressed by students with dysregulated behaviours that, in their opinion, threaten little or not at all their educational role. Other authors have documented similar levels of stress among GETs and SETs (Trendall 1989; Williams and Dikes 2015).

#### Aim and hypothesis

The present study examined the relationship between flourishing and occupational depression in SETs and GETS). We tested three hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 1:** GETs and SETs differ from each other in terms of occupational depression and flourishing (H1).

Hypothesis 2: Flourishing is negatively correlated with occupational depression (H2).

**Hypothesis 3:** Teachers' role (GET versus SET) negatively moderates the association between flourishing and occupational depression (**H3**).

Because age and years of service may influence feelings of exhaustion and depressive symptoms (e.g. Brady, McDaniel, and Choi 2023; Lau, Yuen, and Chan 2005), these variables were controlled in our moderation analysis.

## **Materials and methods**

#### **Participants**

The study included 448 in-service primary school Italian teachers (age range 26–67 years;  $M_{age}$ = 40.32 years, SD = 9.01), most of whom were women (85.5%). Most were SETs (N = 312; 69.6%), while the rest were GETs (N = 136; 30.4%), with a range of career years from 0 (first year of service not completed) to 48 years ( $M_{service}$  = 7.17 years, SD = 6.93). The criteria for inclusion in the study were that the participants were Italian teachers and voluntarily agreed to participate.

#### Procedure

The study was cross-sectional and involved convenience sampling. The data were collected online in the context of a professional development training course, carried out during the first meeting, so as not to influence the participants. The participating teachers were informed of the research objectives and gave their informed consent. Teachers were assured that participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous. The study was conducted under the privacy and informed consent requirements laid down by current Italian law (Law Decree DL-196/2003). The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee for Scientific Research (CERS) of LUMSA University, and the study was conducted in conformity with the Declaration of Helsinki.

#### Measures

## Flourishing scale

The Flourishing Scale (FS, Diener et al. 2010, Italian version; Di Fabio 2014) evaluates respondents' self-esteem, purpose, optimism, and relationship success (M = 45.84; SD = 5.99). The FS comprises eight items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 7 (strongly agree'). The scale provides a single psychological well-being score (Cronbach's alpha = 0.833; McDonald's omega = 0.835).

#### **Occupational depression inventory**

The Occupational Depression Inventory (ODI, Bianchi and Schonfeld 2020, Italian version; Bianchi et al. 2022) was employed to assess occupational depression (M = 5.39; SD = 4.34). The items were rated on a 4-point scale from 0 (*'never or almost never'*) to 3 (*'nearly every day'*). Consistent with *DSM-5* diagnostic criteria for major depression (American 4 😉 G. ANGELINI ET AL.

Psychiatric Association 2013), the ODI assesses anhedonia, depressed mood, sleep alterations, fatigue/loss of energy, appetite alterations, cognitive impairment, psychomotor alterations, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal ideation over the past two weeks (Cronbach's alpha = 0.861; McDonald's omega = 0.871).

# Socio-demographic and job-related characteristics

We inquired into the socio-demographic characteristics of the members of the sample, i.e. age and years as a teacher, and whether they were a GET or a SET.

# Data analysis

All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 27 (IBM Corporation 2020) and Mplus 8.7 (Muthén and Muthén 1998). We considered a two-sided p-value of < 0.05 (moderate evidence) as a definition of statistically significant. Descriptive statistics were calculated. An independent samples t-test was used to compare the means of flourishing and occupational depression scores in the GET and SET groups. Cohen's ds were calculated to evaluate the effect size. The Pearson rs were calculated to estimate the association between the continuous variables. The hypothesised moderation model was tested through the macro-program PROCESS 4.0 (Hayes 2018) by performing Model 1 to explore the extent to which SET versus GET moderates the association between flourishing and occupational depression. In the moderation model, the role was a dummy variable in which GET was coded as 0 and SET as 1. For completeness, the potential confounding role of age and years of service was also explored in the model. Finally, a bootstrapping procedure with 90% CI at 5000 samples was used to confirm the statistical significance of the moderation effect, considering the effect significant when the bootstrapped confidence interval (from boot LLCI=Lower Limit to boot ULCI= Upper Limit) does not contain zero (Preacher and Hayes 2008).

# Results

Table 1, which shows the results of the independent-samples *t*-tests, indicates that the mean GET score for occupational depression was significantly higher than the mean SET score (t(219.606) = 2.836; p < 0.01). The results also indicated that there was a marginally significant mean difference favouring the SET group on flourishing (t(219.293) = -1.890; p < 0.06). The degrees of freedom of the *t*-tests were adjusted for heteroscedasticity variance.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the General Education Teachers (GETs) and the Special Education Teachers (SET) on the levels of occupational depression, flourishing, age, and years of service.

	Role	М	SD	р	Cohen's d
Occupational depression	GET	6.3235	4.85475	0.005	0.313
	SET	4.9776	4.02837		
Flourishing	GET	44.9706	6.75052	0.060	-0.209
	SET	46.2179	5.59432		

Note: M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; Role was a dummy variable in which GET was coded as 0 and SET, as 1.

Mean	Std. Deviation	Occupational depression	Flourishing	Age
5.39	4.34			
45.84	5.99	-0.342**		
40.32	9.01	0.020	-0.063	
7.17	6.93	0.023	-0.078	0.532**
	Mean 5.39 45.84 40.32 7.17	Mean Std. Deviation   5.39 4.34   45.84 5.99   40.32 9.01   7.17 6.93	Mean Std. Deviation Occupational depression   5.39 4.34 -0.342**   45.84 5.99 -0.342**   40.32 9.01 0.020   7.17 6.93 0.023	Mean Std. Deviation Occupational depression Flourishing   5.39 4.34 -0.342** -0.342**   40.32 9.01 0.020 -0.063   7.17 6.93 0.023 -0.078

Table 2. Mean, standard d	deviation, and	correlations c	of all	variables.
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*Note:* \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01; GET=General Education Teachers; SET=Special Education Teachers.

Table 2 shows Pearson's correlation coefficients involving flourishing and occupational depression. We found a negative correlation between the two variables (r=-0.342, p < 0.01). Furthermore, we found a positive correlation between age and years of service (r = 0.532, p < 0.01).

Concerning the hypothesised moderation model (see Figure 1), the results showed a significant and negative relationship between flourishing and occupational depression (B = -0.3266, p < 0.001), which was moderated by role (B = -7.5237, p < 0.05):  $\Delta R^2 = 0.139$ , F(5, 442) = 14.2533, p < 0.001 (see Table 3). The negative correlation between flourishing and occupational depression was significant, but stronger for GETs, estimate = -0.3266 (0.05), p < 0.001, than for SETs, estimate = -0.1856(0.04), p < 0.001. The covariates (age and years of service) were not significant. Furthermore, the bootstrapping procedure



Figure 1. Conceptual models. The moderation of role on the relationship between flourishing and occupational depression, controlling for age and years of service as covariates. *Note.* GET=General Education Teachers; SET=Special Education Teachers. Role was a dummy variable in which GET was coded as 0 and SET, as 1.

	Occupational depression					
Predictors	Estimate <sup>a</sup>	SE	β	р	90% Confidence Intervals	
Constant	20.848	2.527		0.000	16.683; 25.012	
Flourishing	-0.327	0.052	-0.451	0.000	-0.412; -0.242	
Role	-7.524	3.025	-0.799	0.013	-12.510; -2.537	
Flourishing x Role	0.141	0.066	0.708	0.033	0.032; 0.249	
Age	0.009	0.025	0.019	0.715	-0.032; 0.051	
Years of service	-0.022	0.034	-0.036	0.507	-0.078; 0.033	
		R <sup>2</sup> =	= 0.139. <i>F</i> (5. 442)	) = 14.253, <i>n</i> <	0.001	

Table 3. Coefficients of the moderation models.

Note: <sup>a</sup>Unstandardized coefficients (B).



**Figure 2.** Moderation chart. Graphical representation of the moderation effect. *Note.* GET=General Education Teachers; SET=Special Education Teachers. Role was a dummy variable in which GET was coded as 0 and SET, as 1.

confirmed the moderation effect's significance (Boot LLCI = 0.0211; Boot ULCI = 0.2582). Thus, regardless of age and years of service, the GET sample showed a more negative association between flourishing and occupational depression (see Figure 2).

In an ancillary analysis, we examined the correlation between the latent Flourishing factor and the latent Occupational Depression factor within a structural regression framework in Mplus 8.7 (Muthén and Muthén 1998). Consistent with our other findings, we found the two factors to correlate -0.568 in GET (N = 136) and -0.357 in SETs (N = 312). This supplementary analysis provides estimates that are unbiased by measurement error.

#### Discussion

This study examined the correlation between flourishing and occupational depression in GETs versus SETs. With respect to H1, occupational depression differed between the two groups, with GETs exhibiting higher levels of symptoms than SETs, with a medium effect size (d = 0.313). Flourishing was marginally higher in SETs with a smallish effect size (d=-0.209). Regarding H2, we found a negative correlation between flourishing and occupational depression. Regarding H3, we found the association between flourishing and occupational depression to be moderated by teachers' role. The negative association between flourishing and occupational depression was greater for GETs than for SETs. Bringing together our findings, two main points can be made.

First, the higher level of occupational depression in GETs compared to SETs somewhat contrasts with previous studies that documented higher levels of occupational stress in SETs compared to GETs (Garwood et al. 2018, see Billingsley and Bettini 2019 for a review). To our knowledge, only one other Italian study yielded results similar to ours. Pepe and Addimando (2013) found that GETs report higher stress levels than teachers of students with challenging behaviours. A way to interpret these results is to consider that, within the Italian educational context, SETs might be better equipped to face stressful events because of their professional training (Fiorilli, Albanese, and Gabola 2017). Indeed, Italian teachers of students with special education needs are expected to attend a further 400-hour training focused on educational strategies to face students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. Pre-service SETs' training focuses on enhancing problem-based and support-request coping strategies, and when in service, they may count on a rich network of specialists to face and solve school-based difficulties (e.g. those linked to their students, parents, and relationships with other colleagues). Finally, SETs are typically in charge of a single student or a small group of students instead of an entire class (Pepe and Addimando 2013). Overall, the training that SETs follow may allow them to develop flexible skills, which, in turn, may help them to cope with work-related stress more effectively (Fiorilli et al. 2017; Kalyva 2013; Malaguzzi 2018; Stevn and Vawda 2014).

Our second point deals with the moderating effect of teachers' role (i.e. GET versus SET). As expected, for both GETs and SETs, as the levels of flourishing increase, the levels of occupational depression decrease. This result is consistent with studies by Capone and Petrillo (2020), who found that flourishing is a buffer against depression symptoms (see also Marijke et al. 2017). Flourishing and depression can in fact be regarded as antinomic, if not mutually exclusive, states (e.g. Freire et al. 2020; Walter et al. 2023).

In the current study, the association between flourishing and occupational depression was found to be greater among GETs than among SETs, even when teachers' age and years of service were controlled for. This might suggest that SETs' flourishing is less dependent on what goes on in their working life.

#### Limitations and future research

This study has at least three limitations. First, the study's cross-sectional design does not allow for causal interferences. Future research could explore how flourishing and occupational depression change over time and consider the role of factors such as social support (Fiorilli, Albanese, and Gabola 2017), job autonomy (McCarthy et al. 2017), and employment conditions (Ferguson, Frost, and Hall 2012).

Second, we relied on a convenience sample, which may limit the generalisability of our findings. Furthermore, despite roughly reflecting the percentage of female teachers in Italy, estimated at 78% (OECD 2019), the sample was unbalanced in favour of females and included only primary school teachers. Future studies could re-examine these variables with a more representative sample of teachers. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare teachers at different school levels.

Finally, we relied on self-reported measures, which increased the possibility of biases such as social desirability. Future research should combine self-report with structural interviews.

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#### **Practical implications**

The present study has practical implications for teachers. First, recognising that GETs have a stronger negative association between flourishing and occupational depression than SETs, mental health programmes designed for teachers could be tailored to address the specific stresses and challenges faced by these two groups. For GETs, interventions might focus more on coping strategies for the broader range of stressors they may face, while SETs might benefit from support specifically targeted to the challenges of working with special needs students. Second, our findings contribute to underlining the need for professional development programmes that not only focus on enhancing teaching skills but also on building resilience and well-being among teachers, not to mention enhanced classroom management training. Such programmes could include training in stress management, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and strategies for fostering a positive work environment. Third, policymakers and school administrators could implement policies that promote a healthier work-life balance for teachers in general. This might include reducing class sizes, providing adequate support staff, implementing flexible work schedules, and developing a school culture that values teacher well-being. Fourth, given the negative association between flourishing and occupational depression, initiatives aimed at enhancing flourishing among teachers could be beneficial. This might involve creating opportunities for positive relationships among staff, fostering a sense of accomplishment and meaning in work, and enabling engagement in activities that promote personal growth and well-being. Encouraging the development of strong support networks among teachers, where they can share experiences and coping strategies, might help mitigate feelings of isolation and stress. Peer support programmes and mentorship can be particularly valuable for new teachers or those transitioning to different roles within education. Finally, reducing the stigma around mental health issues in the teaching profession is important. Creating an environment where teachers feel safe to discuss their mental health challenges and seek help without fear of judgement or repercussions can make a significant difference in preventing work-related stress and depression.

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