THE SCHOOL AS A SPACE OF PROTECTION: TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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Sara Janai Corado Lopes[1], Thayna Eduarda Marcelino[2], Franderta Corado Lopes[3], Sara Falcão de Sousa[4], Leidiene Ferreira Santos[5] and Northom Alvarenga de Oliveira[6]

Abstract

Violence against children and adolescents is a serious social and public health problem that requires identification and intervention measures within the school context. This theoretical study, based on a literature review, aims to analyze the knowledge, attitudes, and challenges faced by Basic Education teachers in identifying and addressing violence against children and adolescents, taking into account teacher education, legal provisions, and intersectoral coordination. The methodology consists of a discussion of scientific publications and normative documents related to the subject, focusing on teachers' work and comprehensive protection. The analysis shows that, although teachers occupy a strategic position in recognizing potential situations of violence, difficulties persist in identifying less visible manifestations, such as psychological violence and neglect. The main challenges include insufficient

[1] Master's student in the Stricto Sensu Graduate Program in Biosciences and Health (PPGBS), Universidade de Gurupi – UnirG.
E-mail:janaisinha@hotmail.com
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/3199193467116521
[2] Bachelor's Degree Program in Nursing, Faculdade AFYA Porto Nacional.
E-mail: thainamarcelino13@gmail.com
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/8138926668162394
[3] Master's student in the Stricto Sensu Graduate Program in Biosciences and Health (PPGBS), Universidade de Gurupi – UnirG.
E-mail: franderta.lopes@gmail.com.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/6355210330921183
[4] Pharmacist. PhD in Health Sciences from the Universidade Federal de Goiás (UFG). Faculty member in the Stricto Sensu Graduate Program in Biosciences and Health (PPGBS), Universidade de Gurupi – UnirG.
E-mail: sarafalcao@unirg.edu.br.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/1230477171892059
[5] Nurse. PhD in Health Sciences from the Graduate Program in Health Sciences at the Universidade Federal de Goiás (UFG). Master's degree in Nursing from the Faculdade de Enfermagem da UFG (FEN/UFG). Faculty member in the Graduate Program in Science and Health Education at the Universidade Federal do Tocantins (UFT).
E-mail: leidienesantos@mail.uft.edu.br.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/8082542010566584
[6] Undergraduate student in the Bachelor's Degree Program in Psychology, Faculdade AFYA Porto Nacional.
E-mail: northom09912@gmail.com.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/7091130756434536

specialized and continuing education, uncertainty when reporting suspected cases, lack of knowledge of protective legislation, and weaknesses in coordination with the protection network. It is concluded that strengthening teachers' competencies, implementing institutional protocols, and providing continuing education are essential to improve the identification and referral of situations of violence, prevent revictimization, and consolidate the school as a space for comprehensive protection and the promotion of the rights of children and adolescents.

Keywords: Basic Education, Comprehensive protection, Protection network, Teacher education, Violence against children and adolescents.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children and adolescents is a serious social and public health problem, with repercussions for physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development during childhood and adolescence (World Health Organization, 2023). Its various manifestations include physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, all of which may compromise a child's health, safety, and dignity (Gün; Çopur; Balcı, 2022). In the Brazilian context, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente – ECA) establishes the doctrine of comprehensive protection and assigns shared responsibility to the family, society, and the State for safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents (Brasil, 1990).

In this context, the school occupies a strategic position in preventing, identifying, and addressing violence. Teachers have daily and prolonged contact with children, placing them in a privileged position to notice behavioral changes, physical signs, learning difficulties, isolation, and other manifestations that may indicate situations of abuse or neglect (Gün; Çopur; Balcı, 2022). However, proximity to students alone does not ensure effective protective action. Teachers must possess specialized knowledge, sensitivity to recognize warning signs, confidence to act, and a clear understanding of referral procedures.

The literature indicates that continuing education can expand both teachers' knowledge and their willingness to report suspected cases to the competent authorities. In a study conducted in Türkiye, Gün, Çopur, and Balcı (2022) found that, following training on child neglect and abuse, the percentage of teachers who considered themselves capable of identifying such situations increased from 40.9% to 82.3%. The proportion of those who stated that they would report a case to the authorities also increased. These findings reinforce the importance of systematically incorporating content on violence against children, legal aspects, and referral procedures into preservice and continuing teacher education.

In Brazil, studies have also indicated that Early Childhood Education teachers may possess knowledge and attitudes conducive to addressing intrafamilial violence, although these factors are influenced by education, professional experience, and previous contact with situations of violence (Monti; Sigolo, 2023). Furthermore, the way teachers respond to child maltreatment involves cognitive, emotional, and institutional dimensions, including recognition of the signs, assessment of severity, fear of exposing the child, and uncertainty about reporting procedures (Glouchkow; Weegar; Romano, 2023).

It is therefore important to investigate how Basic Education teachers understand, perceive, and intervene in situations involving violence against children. Understanding these dimensions may inform teacher-education policies, school protocols, and intersectoral measures capable of strengthening the Child and Adolescent Protection Network.

METHODOLOGY

This study is characterized as a narrative literature review with a qualitative, descriptive-exploratory approach, focusing on the analysis of scientific evidence concerning the knowledge, attitudes, and challenges faced by Basic Education teachers in identifying and addressing violence against children and adolescents. The review is guided by the following question: *What knowledge, attitudes, and difficulties are described in the scientific literature regarding the work of Basic Education teachers in*

situations involving violence against children and adolescents, considering teacher education and coordination with the protection network?

For the literature search, the period from January 2021 to November 2026 was established, corresponding to the six most recent calendar years. The search sources comprised Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), accessed through PubMed; Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO); Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde – LILACS), accessed through the Virtual Health Library (Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde – BVS); and PsycINFO. These sources were selected to encompass national and international publications related to education, collective health, psychology, and the protection of children and adolescents.

The search strategy was structured using the Health Sciences Descriptors (Descritores em Ciências da Saúde – DeCS), Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), and supplementary keywords in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. The terms considered were *"Maus-Tratos Infantis", "Violência Doméstica", "Professores", "Educação Básica", "Conhecimentos, Atitudes e Prática em Saúde", "Proteção da Criança",* "Child Abuse"*,* "Teachers"*,* "School Teachers"*,* "Child Protection"*,* "Mandatory Reporting"*,* "Teacher Training" and *"Violencia Infantil"*. The terms were combined using the Boolean operators AND and OR, with adaptations to the specific features of each database, to identify studies related to the recognition of violence, teachers' attitudes, professional education, the reporting of suspected cases, and referral procedures.

The inclusion criteria were original and review articles published between 2021 and 2026; studies available in full in Portuguese, English, or Spanish; publications addressing teachers' knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, experiences, or practices concerning violence against children and adolescents; research on the preservice or continuing education of education professionals for identifying and addressing situations of violence; and studies related to the school's role within the protection network, the reporting of suspected cases, and institutional responsibilities. Studies conducted in different countries

were also considered, provided that they made relevant contributions to understanding the phenomenon and discussing its implications for the Brazilian educational context.

The exclusion criteria were duplicate publications; articles published before 2021; studies for which the full text was unavailable; works not directly related to the guiding question; research focusing exclusively on violence between adults or on contexts unrelated to educational practice; and editorials, letters to the editor, conference abstracts, undergraduate final papers, master's dissertations, and doctoral theses. Official documents, legislation, and institutional publications, such as the Statute of the Child and Adolescent and Law No. 13,431/2017, were considered supplementary sources for normative contextualization, irrespective of the time frame applied to scientific articles.

The selection process was organized into three stages: (1) identification of publications in the databases, followed by the removal of duplicate records and analysis of titles and abstracts according to the eligibility criteria; (2) full-text reading of potentially relevant studies, with the extraction of information concerning authors, year of publication, country, objective, methodological design, study population, and main results; and (3) critical analysis and narrative synthesis of the evidence, seeking to identify convergences, divergences, knowledge gaps, and implications for the work of Basic Education teachers.

Five thematic areas were established for organizing and interpreting the studies: teachers' knowledge and identification of signs of violence; continuing education and attitudes toward reporting suspected cases; shared responsibility and institutional barriers to intervention; professional experience and sensitivity to situations of violence; and legislation, referral, and intersectoral coordination within the protection network. The analysis was guided by a critical interpretation of the findings, considering the methodological and contextual specificities of the publications, without conducting a meta-analysis or quantitative assessment of intervention effectiveness.

Because this is a narrative review based on scientific publications and publicly available documents, with no direct involvement of participants or access to identifiable individual data,

submission to a Research Ethics Committee is not anticipated. The adopted design seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing teachers' responses to violence against children and adolescents, thereby contributing to discussions of educational strategies, institutional practices, and intersectoral policies aimed at strengthening the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: CONCEPTS AND REPERCUSSIONS

Violence against children and adolescents must be understood as a multicausal phenomenon involving individual, family, community, cultural, and institutional dimensions. It encompasses physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect. It produces effects that may compromise a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development (World Health Organization, 2023). In the field of intrafamilial violence, such practices frequently occur in contexts in which care, protection, and emotional bonds should prevail, thereby increasing their severity and complexity (Monti; Sigolo, 2023).

Intrafamilial violence may be normalized by cultural beliefs that associate physical punishment, control, and authoritarianism with child-rearing. According to Gondim and Bertoni (2025), some families still legitimize violent practices as supposedly educational measures, making it more difficult for society to recognize the problem and delaying help-seeking. This normalization may also have repercussions within the school environment, particularly when professionals lack sufficient education to distinguish child-rearing practices from situations of abuse or neglect.

The consequences of exposure to violence during childhood include harm to mental health, learning difficulties, behavioral changes, social isolation, and greater vulnerability to further violence throughout life. Early identification is therefore a central protection strategy, as it makes it possible to interrupt cycles of victimization and promptly engage specialized services (Gün; Çopur; Balcı, 2022).

THE SCHOOL AND THE TEACHER WITHIN THE PROTECTION NETWORK

The school is a privileged setting for observing child development because teachers interact with children daily and may notice physical, emotional, and behavioral changes, as well as changes in school performance. In this sense, teachers should not be understood solely as educational agents, but also as professionals who form part of the Child and Adolescent Protection Network (Brasil, 1990; Gün; Çopur; Balcı, 2022).

In Brazil, the Statute of the Child and Adolescent establishes the doctrine of comprehensive protection and stipulates that the family, society, and the State share responsibility for safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents. Schools therefore have a legal and ethical duty to identify suspected situations of violence, support the child, and refer cases to the competent bodies, such as the Guardianship Council, health services, social assistance services, and law-enforcement authorities, depending on the severity of the situation (Brasil, 1990).

Public policies reinforce this role. The School that Protects Program (Programa Escola que Protege – ProEP), established in 2025, seeks to train administrators and teachers to recognize signs of violence and neglect, establish referral protocols, and integrate schools into the intersectoral protection network (Brasil, 2025). This perspective confirms that teachers' actions must be supported by institutional guidelines, continuing education, and coordination with other services, rather than depending exclusively on each teacher's individual initiative.

TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTIFICATION OF SIGNS OF VIOLENCE

Recognizing situations of violence requires specialized knowledge of types of abuse, physical and behavioral indicators, risk and protective factors, and legal reporting procedures. Silva, Santos, and Souza (2024) note that many teachers have a limited understanding of the various forms of violence, particularly neglect and psychological and sexual violence, whose signs tend to be less visible than those of physical abuse.

In a study examining education professionals' perceptions of intrafamilial violence, Silva, Santos, and Souza (2024) showed that teachers more readily recognize physical and psychological violence but still feel uncertain about handling cases and referring them appropriately. This result suggests that the problem is not limited to a lack of awareness but also involves educational gaps, professional uncertainty, and difficulty implementing protection procedures.

Dorney, Elliott, and Busch (2026) found that early childhood educators often have an insufficient understanding of intrafamilial violence and its effects on child development. The study revealed that many of these professionals felt unprepared to identify, respond to, and support children exposed to domestic violence, attributing this weakness to the scarcity of content on the subject in both preservice and continuing education. This situation underscores the urgent need to incorporate the subject systematically into teacher-education curricula.

CONTINUING EDUCATION, ATTITUDES, AND WILLINGNESS TO REPORT

Continuing education is one of the main factors associated with strengthening teachers' responses to violence against children. Gün, Çopur, and Balcı (2022) found that, following training on child neglect and abuse, there was a substantial increase in the percentage of teachers who considered themselves capable of identifying situations of risk and willing to report them to the competent authorities. This demonstrates that educational interventions increase teachers' knowledge, awareness, and self-confidence.

Al-Hussein, Al-Balushi, and Al-Adawi (2023) found that teachers' participation in awareness-raising activities concerning child maltreatment is positively associated with the reporting of suspected physical and sexual abuse. This reinforces the principle that teacher education should not be limited to conveying theoretical content, but must also include case studies, simulations, and practical guidance on documentation, qualified listening, confidentiality, and intersectoral referral procedures.

In the Brazilian context, Monti and Sigolo (2023) observed that Early Childhood Education teachers were able to identify characteristics and situations of intrafamilial violence but hesitated to file

formal reports. The authors associated this difficulty with gaps in education, uncertainty about how to act, reliance on common-sense beliefs, and distrust of the bodies comprising the support network. This contradiction contributes to the present study by highlighting the critical gap between theoretically recognizing violence and effectively implementing protective intervention.

ATTITUDES, SHARED RESPONSIBILITY, AND BARRIERS TO INTERVENTION

Teachers' attitudes toward violence against children involve beliefs about the role of the school, perceptions of professional responsibility, assessments of case severity, and willingness to report suspicions. Glouchkow, Weegar, and Romano (2023) emphasize that teachers' responses to child maltreatment are influenced by cognitive, emotional, and institutional factors, including recognition of signs, fear of exposing the child, uncertainty about the consequences of reporting, and lack of clarity regarding procedures.

Barriers such as fear of damaging the relationship with the family, disbelief in the effectiveness of protection services, excessive workloads, and lack of support from school administrators may contribute to failure to report or underreporting. According to the authors, lack of institutional support, limited continuing education, and conceptual confusion between reporting an offense and submitting a formal notification are factors associated with the underreporting of cases of violence (Miura; Ferreira; Alves, 2025).

These factors indicate that responsibility for child protection is shared but cannot be transferred entirely to teachers. Schools must provide institutional conditions that support teachers' work, including clear protocols, supervision, opportunities to discuss cases, coordination with the intersectoral network, and guarantees of confidentiality. The absence of such institutional support results in ethical-political suffering, occupational vulnerability, and professional helplessness when dealing with complex demands (Glouchkow; Weegar; Romano, 2023).

TEACHING EXPERIENCE, CONTACT WITH CASES, AND PROFESSIONAL SENSITIVITY

Professional experience may influence how teachers perceive and respond to violence against children. Teachers with more years of experience or previous contact with situations of violence may develop greater sensitivity in identifying warning signs, understanding children's suffering, and recognizing the importance of emotional support within the school environment (Monti; Sigolo, 2023). From the perspective of Social Psychology, this situation is intertwined with the concept of ethical-political suffering formulated by Sawaia (2001). The author explains that suffering arising from social vulnerabilities affects not only those who directly experience it but also places an emotional and ethical burden on those who witness the suffering of others without having the institutional resources needed to intervene effectively.

Experience alone, however, does not ensure adequate preparation. Without theoretical education and institutional support, repeated contact with cases of violence may lead to emotional exhaustion, normalization of the problem, or the adoption of strategies based on common sense. Practical experience must therefore be integrated with reflective processes, pedagogical supervision, and continuing education (Silva; Santos; Souza, 2024).

Qualified listening to the child, nonjudgmental support, and preservation of the child's dignity are central principles of ethical practice. Teachers should avoid invasive questioning, promises that cannot be fulfilled, and exposing the child. They should instead prioritize the objective documentation of the signs observed and responsible referral to the competent professionals and bodies (Brasil, 2025; Gün; Çopur; Balcı, 2022).

LEGISLATION, REPORTING, AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROTECTION NETWORK

The Brazilian legal framework establishes that suspected or confirmed violence against a child or adolescent must be reported to the Guardianship Council and, as appropriate, to the competent authorities. In addition to the ECA, Law No. 13,431/2017 organizes the system for safeguarding the rights of children

and adolescents who are victims of or witnesses to violence, with particular emphasis on specialized listening, special testimony, and integrated protection (Brasil, 2017).

Nevertheless, a gap persists between legal provisions and school practice. Miura, Ferreira, and Alves (2025) found that teachers have only partial knowledge of their duties and experience difficulty distinguishing between reporting an offense and submitting a formal notification, identifying the appropriate body for referral, and dealing with institutional bureaucracy. This weakness compromises the effectiveness of the Protection Network and prolongs children's exposure to situations of risk.

Knowledge of protective legislation should therefore be regarded as an essential component of teacher education. When teachers understand their legal duties, the limits of their role, and the available institutional pathways, they tend to feel more confident in taking action, documenting suspicions, and engaging the protection network (Gün; Çopur; Balcı, 2022; Monti; Sigolo, 2023).

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