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# The role of attitudes and empathy in the interventional behaviour of teachers in cases of peer violence

**Abstract:** In general, the role of teachers in the suppression of peer violence has not been sufficiently investigated. In particular, little is known about the role of teachers' attitudes in predicting if they will intervene. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between attitudes about peer violence and perceptions of the severity of violence, the level of empathy and the likelihood of teacher intervention in cases of direct and indirect forms of peer violence. The participants in the research were 639 primary school teachers, average age 43, from all macro regions of the Republic of Croatia. The Sociodemographic Variables Questionnaire, extended vignettes and the Peer Violence Attitude Scale were used to collect data. It was found that some sociodemographic factors (gender and seniority of the teacher) are correlated with the perception of the severity of violence, empathy and the likelihood of intervention only in the case of indirect forms of peer violence. Attitudes proved to be significant predictors of the perception of the severity of violence, the level of empathy and the probability of teacher intervention in cases of direct and indirect forms of peer violence. In addition, it was determined that stereotypical attitudes are the most important predictors of the perception of the severity of direct forms of violence, of empathy and the probability of intervention for both forms of violence, while controllability of violence is the most important predictor of the perception of the severity of indirect forms of violence. In conclusion, the study stresses the importance of raising awareness about the suppression of peer violence and the need for the permanent professional development of teachers.

**Keywords:** *teachers, attitudes, prevention, interventions, peer violence.*

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## Introduction

Peer violence is considered one of the most common negative events faced by children in all age groups (Williford et al., 2021). This type of violence is usually defined as comprising malicious, hostile, repeated or persistent (direct or indirect) actions committed by one or more peers of unequal real or perceived power (physical, mental or social), due to which victims suffer physical, emotional or social harm in the real world (classical) and/or the virtual world (cyberbullying), and against which the victims are powerless to resist and defend themselves (Bilić, 2018; Bjereld et al., 2021; van Aalst et al., 2022). Direct forms of classical violence are the most easily observed, especially physical (pushing, hitting with hands, feet, objects, etc.) and verbal, as in inflicting pain with words (insulting, calling names, mocking, etc.). It is much more difficult to identify indirect or covert forms of violence, such as relational and electronic. This is because perpetrators of relational violence use various sophisticated, perfidious, covert forms of manipulation with the aim of sabotaging the victim's social position, devastating her close relationships (friendly, romantic) and causing damage to her reputation and well-being (Bilić, 2018; Chester et al., 2017). In doing so, they gossip, spread untruths, ridicule, isolate from the group, deliberately ignore, and so forth. The aforementioned behaviours are increasingly moving from schools to virtual spaces due to the popularity and availability of modern technology (smartphones, computers, etc.), which children too often use with the aim of embarrassing and causing suffering and pain to their peers. This is categorized as electronic violence. Today, peer violence is perceived as a prevalent, universal school problem. This is supported by data collected in 71 countries by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which show that 33% of school children experience peer violence once or more per month (Rigby, 2022, p.1). As many as 43% of teachers believe that classic peer violence is an important or main problem in their schools (Bradshaw et al., 2013), and 90% state that electronic violence currently an even bigger problem (Dawes et al., 2023). The frequency of violence among peers is affected by the individual characteristics of children, various family and school factors, as well as the tolerance of violence in local com-

munities, in the media and so forth (Rigby, 2022, p. 3). In addition to the prevalence of violence, the serious short- and long-term consequences that have been observed in the victims, perpetrators and observers of violence cause concern. However, of these, the victims are the most vulnerable, and are diagnosed with various psychosomatic (headaches, stomach aches, sleep problems, dizziness, etc.) and internalized problems, especially anxiety and depression, but also a tendency to self-harm, suicidal ideation and attempted suicide. All of these adversely affect their school success, healthy development and well-being (Okumu et al., 2020; Vaillancourt et al., 2017).

Although great efforts have been made by practitioners and scientists to deal with peer violence, prevalence data suggest that they have not been successful. In fact, the aforementioned UNESCO report states that, despite all efforts, no reduction in this form of violence has been recorded in 55% of the countries analysed (Rigby, 2022, p 1). This suggests that something needs to be changed in the prevention and suppression of violence, of whom students are the predominant focus. Therefore, it is not surprising that increasing attention has recently been paid to the insufficiently researched role of teachers and their contribution to the suppression of violence. Since teachers are most often present or are among the first to learn about peer violence when it occurs, and because in their daily work they have the opportunity to create an atmosphere, norms and attitudes that could foster an environment of non-violence, many perceive them to be key agents of change (Dawes et al., 2023; De Luca et al., 2019; Veenstra et al., 2014; Van Verseveld et al., 2019; Yoon and Bauman, 2014). The literature points out that teachers' responses to peer violence have an important effect on its prevention and reduction, while analyses of the individual and contextual features of these responses are linked to quality interventions (van Aalst et al., 2022; Yoon and Bauman, 2014).

Unfortunately, some teachers do not intervene in situations of peer violence, instead choosing to passively observe or ignore it (De Luca et al., 2019). Those teachers who do intervene use several strategies, with the most popular and widespread authoritarian-punitive strategies being based on the condemnation of the violent behaviour and the sanctioning of perpetrators (Yoon et al., 2016). Although these strategies may have short-term effects, they do not affect offender behaviour changes in the long-term. Some teachers prefer individual-supportive strategies that are non-punitive, proactive and focused on individual work with victims, with the aim of strengthening their resilience or changing the behaviour of perpetrators (Yoon et al., 2016). In recent times, research has noted the importance of cooperative strategies that seek to solve the problem of violence, engage all students and motivate them to cooperate, precisely determine their activities and education at the class and school level, and which involve teachers, parents and so forth (Bjereld et al., 2021; De Luca et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2016).

Successful interventions by teachers, including their willingness and responsibility to react adequately, are also connected with teachers' attitudes towards the phenomenon of violence (Dawes et al., 2023; van Verseveld et al., 2019; Williford et al., 2021). Existing studies suggest that teachers' attitudes to violence play

a significant role in assessing violent situations (Yoon et al., 2016), distinguishing types of violence (Banas, 2015) and choosing strategies and interventions (De Luca et al., 2019; Hajdaraj, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between teachers' attitudes towards peer violence and the perception of the severity of that violence, the level of teachers empathy and the likelihood of teacher intervention in cases of different forms of peer violence.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) is increasingly used as a suitable framework in works dealing with teacher interventions in situations of peer violence. According to TPB, intention is the fundamental factor that motivates a person to engage in a certain behaviour; that is, the intention of the behaviour and the actual behaviour are inextricably linked. As this paper deals with teachers' attitudes about peer violence, it must be said that they can hinder or encourage the degree to which an individual intends to perform a certain behaviour—that is, to intervene (Williford et al., 2021). Research shows that teachers' perceptions of the severity of violence (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015) and their attitudes about violence (DeSmet et al., 2015) can predict their behaviour and influence their reactions and interventions.

### **Perception of the severity of violence and the role of attitudes and empathy in the intervention behaviour of teachers**

The perception of the severity of violence, or the estimated severity of damage that can be caused by violence, is a key determinant and predictor of intervention behaviour; that is, it is a factor that determines whether or not teachers will react to stop peer violence (Hajdaraj, 2017; Williford et al., 2021). If teachers do not perceive a violent incident as a serious problem that requires their urgent reaction, it is unlikely that they will decide to intervene (Dawes et al., 2023; Hajdaraj, 2017; Williford et al., 2021). Some studies have confirmed that teachers' decision to intervene in cases of peer violence depended on how serious they assessed the incident to be (Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2013). Their assessment of the seriousness of violence, however, is influenced by their attitudes. According to TPB, attitudes motivate our actions and predict our behaviour in everyday situations, and thus have an important place in the research of various societal phenomena, including the phenomenon of peer violence. Attitude is defined as an acquired, relatively permanent and stable organization of positive or negative emotions (affective component), evaluation (cognitive component) and reaction (conative or action component) towards objects or phenomena (Petz, 1992; Beck, 2003). Some authors suggest that teachers' attitudes can be related to differences in their perception of the severity of violence, and that they can predict which interventions will be successful (De Luca et al., 2019; Hajdaraj, 2017; van Aalst et al., 2022).

The literature highlights the teachers' position that direct forms of peer violence, especially physical and to a lesser extent verbal violence, are much more serious problems than indirect, non-physical forms of violence, especially relational and then electronic, which are more often perceived as less harmful (Bauman

and Del Rio, 2006; Byers et al., 2011; Hajdaraj, 2017; Mishna et al., 2005; Yoon and Kerber, 2003). Compared to other classic forms, teachers generally consider physical violence to be the most serious or harmful (Bauman and Del Rio, 2006; Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2013; Williford et al., 2021). This clearly contributes to the perception that children exposed to physical violence are objectively in greater danger and that the consequences of that violence are visible (Bilić, 2018). However, teachers consider relational violence—apparently due to its ambiguous nature and barely noticeable consequences compared to physical and verbal violence—to be the least harmful, treating incidents of such as benign, minimising its effects or not perceiving it as violence at all (Boulton et al., 2014; Byers et al., 2011; Chester et al., 2017; Dedousis-Wallace et al., 2013; Yoon and Bauman, 2014). For similar reasons, teachers consider classical forms of violence among peers to be a bigger problem than electronic forms (Boulton et al., 2014; Bradshaw et al., 2013). It is generally more likely that they will more often intervene in cases of direct than indirect violence (Fischr and Biltz, 2019). It is interesting that changes in attitudes have been observed in recent times, with some authors stating that verbal violence is more serious than physical violence because it hurts people more and for a longer period of time than do other forms of violence (Psalti, 2017, according to Dawes et al., 2023), and that relational violence is the most serious and harmful form of victimization (Chester et al., 2017). Changes in the perception of electronic violence have also been noted (Dawes et al., 2023). In any case, the way teachers perceive violence affects their decision-making as to whether and how they intervene.

Some teachers still believe that, since children are of equal physical strength, peer violence does not exist, and they perceive electronic violence as a form of fun or a joke, and consider that violence is a normal part of growing up that can even help children learn social norms. Unfortunately, such rigid, biased, simplified, mostly negative attitudes and beliefs, or stereotypes (Petz, 1992, p. 427), are not rare among teachers. Although they may say that they are concerned about violence, they are less likely to intervene in presumably violent situations if they do not perceive violence to be a big problem (Dawes et al., 2023). Due to the attitude that violence can help children learn to resolve conflicts if adults do not interfere, or that violence can help them learn to fight for themselves and deal with difficult situations in the future, teachers do not want to intervene because they perceive all of the above as opportunities to learn from experience (Dawes et al., 2023). If teachers believe that violence is part of growing up, they are more likely to leave the victims to deal with the situation on their own, and are less likely to punish or help the perpetrators to correct their behaviour. The stereotyped, worrying attitudes of some teachers towards victims are also highlighted in the literature. Deserving of special warning are those attitudes that hold victims responsible for the violence inflicted upon them, including the belief that they deserve to be victimized because they misunderstood a situation (such as teasing) or because some of their behaviours irritate their peers (such as hyperactive children or those who are perpetrator-victims). These attitudes make it less likely that teachers who hold these beliefs will intervene in situations involving violence among students

(Mishna et al., 2005; Troop-Gordon and Ladd, 2015; Williford et al., 2021). It must be said that little is known about the influence of stereotypes on teacher interventions, and even less about the controllability of violence.

Those teachers who believe that they have an important role in combating violence—in particular, through their persistent work in the classroom and at school—and that they can effect changes in the attitudes of parents and students about violence and help them to correct bad and violent behaviour, means that they think they have the ability to control the outcome of the performance. This is connected to the assessment of their responsibility and intention. When teachers think that the outcome is under their personal control—that is, that they can potentially control the performance outcome—this is called, according to Weiner's attributional theory of achievement, controllability (Weiner, 1985, according to Beck, 2003, p. 329). Controllability connects with the cognitive and emotional reactions that directly affect behaviour and responses, and these are determined by the expectation of certain outcomes. Unfortunately, teachers often think that they cannot suppress violence with their activities and efforts; that is, that they do not have the ability to control the outcomes of such activities among students. They think that such actions are uncontrollable, which can certainly affect their interventions. However, little is known about these aspects of perceived teacher control.

In the literature, it is postulated that empathy, as a fundamental determinant of prosocial behaviour in general, can also play an important role in identifying different forms of violence among peers, especially indirect violence, and encouraging teachers to want to help, take responsibility and successfully intervene (van Aalst et al., 2022; Bauman and Del Rio, 2006; Boulton et al., 2014; Eldridge and Jenkins, 2020). Empathy, an important characteristic of a teacher, is most often defined as the ability to sympathize or imagine and experience the emotions of another person, in this case a student (affective component), and the ability to understand their emotions and perspective (cognitive component) (Cuff et al., 2016; Johander et al., 2022). Thus, as empathy can help teachers understand how victimized students feel and what they are going through, it is expected that they will more often intervene and report such cases (Boulton et al., 2014; Dedoussis-Wallace et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2018). In the end, the teacher's empathy can play an important role in suppressing violence among peers, and the quality of the relationship between teacher and student will depend largely on the quality of the general emotional attitude on which that relationship is based.

Because of all of the above, there is a need to examine the attitudes of elementary school teachers in the Republic of Croatia and their role in preventing peer violence.

## Method

To examine the role of teachers' attitudes in predicting interventions in cases of peer violence, we conducted a quantitative empirical study.

The aim of this research is to examine the relationship between attitudes about peer violence and perceptions of the severity of violence, the level of empathy and the likelihood of teacher intervention in cases of direct and indirect forms of peer violence.

### *Research problems and hypotheses:*

1. Check the connection between personal factors (gender, age, seniority, workplace [classroom or subject teaching]), attitudes, perceived severity of violence and empathy, and the likelihood of teacher intervention in cases of direct and indirect violence among students.
  - **H1:** Some personal factors will be significantly related to attitudes towards peer violence.
  - **H2:** Perception of the severity of violence, empathy and likelihood of intervention will be significantly related to some personal factors and attitudes about violence in cases of direct and indirect forms of violence among peers.
2. Check the relative contribution of personal factors and attitudes to the perceived seriousness of violence in direct and indirect forms of violence.
  - **H3:** Personal factors and attitudes towards violence will have a significant effect on the perception of the seriousness of direct and indirect forms of violence.
3. Check the relative contribution of personal factors and attitudes to the level of empathy in direct and indirect forms of violence.
  - **H4:** Personal factors and attitudes towards violence will have a significant effect on the level of empathy in the case of direct and indirect forms of violence.
4. Check the relative contribution of personal factors and attitudes to the likelihood of intervention in direct and indirect forms of violence.
  - **H5:** Personal factors and attitudes towards violence will have a significant effect on the likelihood of intervention in the case of direct and indirect forms of violence.

### *Participants*

A total of 639 (89% women and 11% men) primary school teachers, average age 43, participated in the research. The standard deviation was 10.599 and the average length of service was about 17 years ( $M = 16.84$ ,  $SD = 10.858$ ). The majority had graduated from university (74%), and an equal number taught classroom (47%) and subject (53%) classes, mostly in urban schools (56%).

### *Procedure*

Schools from different regions of the Republic of Croatia were randomly selected, after which the informed consent of school principals and teachers was obtained. Only one school refused to participate in this research. The teachers participated in this research voluntarily and anonymously. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the purpose of the research was explained to the participants, anonymity was guaranteed and participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time. All provisions of the Code of Ethics on research with human subjects were respected.

### **Instruments**

The Sociodemographic Variables Questionnaire contained questions about gender, age, length of service, workplace (classroom or subject teaching) and school location.

The vignettes used in this paper were originally created by Yoon and Kerber (2003), who suggested six vignettes related to classic forms of violence (physical, verbal and relational), to which we added two more vignettes for cyberbullying. Vignettes are usually described as short, carefully constructed hypothetical situations that summarize the characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation. Their use is considered to be a suitable technique for examining sensitive topics such as violence because they allow participants to engage in a way that is not threatening to them, express their responses or attitudes towards a delicate situation and enable them to give a more honest assessment in order to act (Brković et al., 2012). Each vignette, or story, begins with a description of the situation of violence. For example: *When entering the classroom, you hear a child telling another child that he will publish ugly things about him and his parents on social networks again if he does not write his homework for him. This is not the first time that this has happened.* The vignettes present violence as a repeated pattern of behaviour, can be applied at all levels of education regardless of gender and age, and consistently use the term child. On a five-point scale (from 1 = not at all to 5 = very serious), the participants assessed the seriousness of each described situation and their feeling of empathy (from 1 = not at all to 5 = extreme sympathy

for the child). They then assessed the probability that they would intervene in the described situation on a five-point scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very likely).

Peer Violence Attitude Scale was constructed for the purposes of this work based on the literature. To verify the factor structure of the scale of attitudes about peer violence, an exploratory factor analysis using the method of principal components was performed. After 9 problematic particles were excluded, according to the criterion of the size of the characteristic root, 3 components were singled out, and these explain 54% of the total variance. These components are called stereotypical attitudes on violence (5 items), perception of the controllability of violence (5 items) and attitudes towards different types of peer violence (3 items). All items have answers expressed on a scale of 4 degrees, in which 1 means complete disagreement and 4 means complete agreement. On each of the subscales, the total score is obtained by adding up all responses to the corresponding items. A higher score indicates higher levels of stereotypical attitudes, the perception of more controllability of violence by teachers and a higher level of normalization of different types of violence. The reliabilities of the obtained subscales were also checked and were:  $\alpha = 0.75$  for the subscale of stereotypical attitudes about violence,  $\alpha = 0.74$  for the subscale of perception of the controllability of violence and  $\alpha = 0.69$  for the subscale of attitudes about different types of violence. The factor structure is shown in Table 1.

	Component		
	Stereotypical attitudes on peer violence	Perception of controllability of peer violence	Attitudes towards different types of peer violence
There is no such thing as peer violence since children are of equal strength; it is about conflicts.	.760		
There has always been violence among children, it's a normal part of growing up, but today it's overblown.	.703		
Violence among peers helps children learn social norms.	.685		
The violence that occurs among students does not affect the learning and success of students.	.648		
Teachers cannot stop violence or achieve any result concerning it.	.634		
Violence can be prevented by persisting with work in class and in school.		.796	
The most important role in preventing violence is played by teachers.		.685	
Good always triumphs over evil.		.683	

The teacher can influence changes in parents' and students' attitudes about violence as a phenomenon.		.682	
It is possible to help children correct bad and violent behaviour.		.623	
Cyberbullying is a type of entertainment or joke.			.865
Gossip and mean words are normal in school and are completely harmless.			.855
Physical assaults are a serious form of violence.			-.454

Table 1: Factor structure of the attitude scale

## Results

Table 2 shows the minimums, maximums, arithmetic means and standard deviations for all scales used: three subscales of attitudes about peer violence, as well as the perception of the severity, the level of empathy and the likelihood of intervention in cases of direct and indirect forms of violence.

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Stereotypical attitudes	630	5.00	20.00	7.76	2.728
Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	632	6.00	20.00	14.53	2.484
Attitudes towards different types of violence	638	3.00	12.00	3.84	1.547
Seriousness of direct forms of violence	638	2.00	5.00	4.48	0.399
The severity of indirect forms of violence	638	2.50	5.00	4.45	0.400
Empathy in the case of direct forms of violence	638	2.25	5.00	4.47	0.476
Empathy in the case of indirect forms of violence	638	2.00	5.00	4.47	0.458
The likelihood of intervention in direct forms of violence	638	2.75	5.00	4.78	0.326
The likelihood of intervention in indirect forms of violence	638	2.50	5.00	4.70	0.359

Table 2: Descriptive indicators of the scales used

## Perception of the severity of violence

To check the extent to which attitudes towards peer violence can predict how seriously teachers will experience it, Pearson correlations were calculated and re-

gression analysis was performed. The analysis was carried out separately for direct forms of violence and for indirect forms of violence. Some sociodemographic indicators, such as gender, length of service and lectures in class or subject classes, were also taken into account.

According to the correlation matrix (Table 3), we see that sociodemographic indicators correlate significantly with the perceived severity of violence only when it comes to indirect forms of violence, while these correlations were not found in direct forms of violence. At the same time, gender and length of work experience show low and positive correlations with the perception of the severity of indirect forms of violence, which indicates that female participants, as well as teachers with longer work experience, took indirect forms of violence more seriously than male participants and teachers with shorter work experience. Furthermore, we see that there is no significant connection between the three subscale attitudes with gender and length of service, but that there are low and negative correlations between the perception of the controllability of violence and classroom and subject teaching. The results show that the participants who taught in the classroom expressed more positive attitudes about the greater controllability of violence than did their colleagues from subject classes.

	Gender	Years of service in teaching	Classroom of subject teaching	Stereotypical attitudes	Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	Attitudes towards different types of violence	Severity of direct forms of violence
Years of service in teaching	.032						
Classroom or subject classes	-.189**	-.110**					
Stereotypical attitudes	-.125**	.035	.007				
Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	.055	-.060	-.100*	-.052			
Attitudes towards different types of violence	-.051	.014	.005	.498**	-.139**		
The severity of direct forms of violence	.037	.041	-.032	-.263**	.120**	-.164**	
The severity of indirect forms of violence	.130**	.153**	-.060	-.169**	.155**	-.121**	.598**

Table 3: Correlation of perception of the severity of violence with demographic indicators and attitudes towards violence

\*The correlation is statistically significant at the level of .05; \*\* The correlation is statistically significant at the level of .01

Furthermore, in Table 3, we see that the perception of the severity of direct and indirect forms of violence is significantly and negatively related to stereotypical attitudes towards violence ( $r = -.263$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct violence and  $r = -.169$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which means that people who express more stereotypical attitudes experience both types of violence less seriously. Attitudes about the controllability of violence are, at the same time, low but significantly related to the perception of the severity of both types of violence ( $r = .120$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct violence and  $r = .155$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which indicates that people who perceive violence as more controllable (i.e. they believe that teachers can have an influence on peer violence) also perceive it as more serious. Finally, the perception of the seriousness of direct and indirect forms of violence is also low but significantly negatively related to attitudes that normalize different types of violence ( $r = -.164$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct and  $r = -.121$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which indicates that people who in their attitudes tend to normalize different types of violence also perceive them as less serious.

Regression analyses were performed according to the obtained correlations. In the analysis in which the criterion variable is the perception of the seriousness of direct forms of violence, only attitudes towards violence were included, and when examining the contribution to indirect forms of violence, sociodemographic factors that have been proven to be relevant (gender and length of service) were also included. For this reason, the first analysis was carried out in one step, while the second is of a hierarchical type: in the first step, the contribution of the sociodemographic indicators themselves was examined, while in the second step the subscales of attitudes were added as predictor variables. The results for direct and indirect forms of violence are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

	$\beta$	t	p	R2	F	p
Stereotypical attitudes	-.246	-5.527	.000	.084	18.916	.000
Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	.123	3.150	.000			
Attitudes towards different types of violence	-.016	-.353	.754			

Table 4: Ability to predict the perception of the severity of direct forms of peer violence based on attitudes towards violence

The results in Table 4 show that the three subscales of attitudes explain a relatively low but statistically significant percentage of the variance in the perception of the severity of direct forms of peer violence ( $R^2 = .084$ ; thus, 8.4%). The most important predictor was stereotypical attitudes towards violence ( $\beta = -.246$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A negative beta coefficient indicates that higher levels of stereotypical attitudes resulted in lower perceptions of the severity of direct forms of violence among the involved teachers. Attitudes about the controllability of violence also made a significant individual contribution in explaining the variance of the per-

ception of the severity of violence ( $\beta = .123$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Teachers who feel that they have more control over direct forms of peer violence at the same time experience direct violence more seriously than those of their colleagues who feel that they have less control. In this model, attitudes towards different forms of violence did not prove to be a statistically significant predictor.

		$\beta$	t	p	R2	F	p	$\Delta R$	F	p
1	Gender	.129	3.245	.001	.036	11.464	.000	/	/	/
	Years of service in teaching	.134	3.381	.001						
2	Gender	.102	2.594	.010	.088	11.757	.000	.052	11.556	.000
	Years of service in teaching	.150	3.860	.000						
	Stereotypical attitudes	-.139	-3.076	.002						
	Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	.164	4.161	.000						
	Attitudes towards different types of violence	-.022	-.480	.631						

Table 5: The possibility of predicting the perception of the severity of indirect forms of peer violence based on sociodemographic factors and attitudes towards violence

According to the results in Table 5, we see that gender and years of work experience explain a significant, albeit low, percentage of the variance in the perception of the severity of indirect forms of peer violence ( $R^2 = .036$ ; i.e. 3.6%). When, in the second step of the analysis, the three subscales of attitudes were included, the explained variance increased significantly ( $\Delta R = .052$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with sociodemographic factors and attitudes together explaining 8.8% of the variance in the perception of the severity of indirect forms of violence. Although low, this percentage is significant. Attitudes about the controllability of violence ( $\beta = .164$ ,  $p < .01$ ), such that teachers who perceive violence as more controllable also perceive it as more serious, constituted the most important predictor. The next most important predictor in the model was years of service ( $\beta = .150$ ,  $p < .01$ ), which is to say that teachers with longer service experience indirect forms of violence more seriously than teachers with less experience. Here again, stereotypical attitudes about violence proved to be a significant and negative predictor ( $\beta = -.139$ ,  $p < .01$ ) of the perception of the severity of violence, while in this model attitudes towards different types of violence did not show a significant individual contribution.

## Empathy

We also checked the correlation of the level of empathy in cases of peer violence with sociodemographic factors and attitudes about peer violence using Pearson's correlations, which are shown in Table 6.

Gender and years of work experience are low but significantly related to levels of empathy only in the case of indirect forms of violence, while there are no such connections in the case of direct forms of violence. As before, when it comes to indirect forms of violence female participants and those with longer work experience showed slightly higher levels of empathy than did participants with shorter work experience.

As for attitudes about violence, empathy in the case of direct and indirect forms was significantly and negatively related to stereotypical attitudes ( $r = -.271$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct violence and  $r = -.205$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which means that people who express more stereotypical attitudes also show lower levels of empathy concerning both forms of violence. Attitudes about the controllability of violence are low but significantly related to expressed empathy in both types of violence ( $r = .172$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct and  $r = .180$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which indicates that people who consider themselves to have an influence on peer violence also show higher levels of empathy. Empathy in the case of direct and indirect forms of violence is also low, but is significantly and negatively related to attitudes that normalize different types of violence ( $r = -.128$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct and  $r = -.119$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which indicates that people who in their attitudes are more inclined to normalize different types of violence show slightly lower levels of empathy.

	Gender	Years of service in teaching	Classroom or subject teaching	Stereotypical attitudes	Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	Attitudes towards different types of violence	Empathy in direct forms of violence
Years of service in teaching	.032						
Classroom or subject classes	-.189**	-.110**					
Stereotypical attitudes	-.125**	.035	.007				
Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	.055	-.060	-.100*	-.052			
Attitudes towards different types of violence	-.051	.014	.005	.498**	-.139**		
Empathy in direct forms of violence	.039	.048	-.035	-.217**	.172**	-.128**	
Empathy in indirect forms of violence	.095*	.098*	-.065	-.205**	.180**	-.119**	.762**

Table 6: Correlation of empathy in case of violence with demographic indicators and attitudes towards violence

\*The correlation is statistically significant at the level of .05; \*\* The correlation is statistically significant at the level of .01

Tables 7 and 8 show the results of the regression analyses with criterion variables of empathy in the case of direct and indirect forms of peer violence.

	$\beta$	t	p	R2	F	p
Stereotypical attitudes	-.209	-4.670	.000	.078	17.479	.000
Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	.181	4.643	.000			
Attitudes towards different types of violence	.010	.229	.819			

Table 7: Ability to predict the level of empathy in the case of direct forms of peer violence based on attitudes towards violence

The three subscales of attitudes also explain a relatively low but statistically significant percentage of variance in the level of empathy in the case of direct

forms of peer violence ( $R^2 = .078$ ; i.e. 7.8%; Table 7). The most important predictor is stereotypical attitudes towards violence ( $\beta = -.209$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereby higher levels of stereotypical attitudes result in lower empathy in the case of direct forms of violence. Attitudes about the controllability of violence also make a significant individual contribution in the model ( $\beta = .181$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Participants who believed that they had greater control over direct forms of peer violence also expressed more empathy than participants who believed that they had a lower possibility of control over peer violence. Attitudes towards different forms of violence, even in this model, did not prove to be a statistically significant predictor.

Table 8 shows a hierarchical regression analysis which shows the contribution of relevant sociodemographic factors in the first step of the attitudes towards peer violence in the second step of the analysis.

		$\beta$	t	p	R <sup>2</sup>	F	p	$\Delta R$	F	p
1	Gender	.093	2.316	.021	.017	5.301	.005	/	/	/
	Years of service in teaching	.088	2.189	.029						
2	Gender	.058	1.491	.136	.093	12.397	.000	.075	16.851	.000
	Years of service in teaching	.107	2.760	.006						
	Stereotypical attitudes	-.197	-4.373	.000						
	Attitudes about the controllability of violence	.194	4.957	.000						
	Attitudes towards different types of violence	.014	.319	.750						

Table 8: *The possibility of predicting the level of empathy in the case of indirect forms of peer violence based on sociodemographic factors and attitudes towards violence*

Gender and years of work experience explain a very low but significant percentage of the variance of empathy in the case of indirect forms of peer violence ( $R^2 = .017$ ; i.e. 1.7%). When, in the second step of the analysis, the three subscales of attitudes were included, the explained variance increased significantly ( $\Delta R = .075$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the total percentage of the explained variance of empathy was 9.3%. Stereotypical attitudes ( $\beta = -.197$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and attitudes about the controllability of violence proved to be the most important predictors. Teachers who perceived violence as more controllable showed higher levels of empathy, while teachers with more stereotypical attitudes towards violence showed lower levels of empathy in the case of indirect forms of violence. Also, teachers with longer

working experience showed higher levels of empathy ( $\beta = -.107$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Neither gender nor attitudes towards different types of violence showed a significant individual contribution to empathy in this model.

### Probability of intervention

Ultimately, we investigated the relationship between attitudes towards peer violence and the likelihood of intervention in the case of both direct and indirect forms of peer violence. The correlations are presented in Table 9.

	Gender	Years of service in teaching	Classroom or subject teaching	Stereotypical attitudes	Attitudes towards the controllability of violence	Attitudes towards different types of violence	Probability of intervention in direct forms of violence
Years of service in teaching	.032						
Classroom or subject classes	-.189**	-.110**					
Stereotypical attitudes	-.125**	.035	.007				
Attitudes about the controllability of violence	.055	-.060	-.100*	-.052			
Attitudes towards different types of violence	-.051	.014	.005	.498**	-.139**		
Probability of intervention in direct forms of violence	.054	.028	-.037	-.268**	.127**	-.184**	
Probability of intervention in indirect forms of violence	.111**	.098*	-.094*	-.254**	.196**	-.187**	.672**

Table 9: Correlations of the likelihood of intervention in the case of violence with demographic indicators and attitudes towards violence

\*The correlation is statistically significant at the level of .05; \*\* The correlation is statistically significant at the level of .01

When discussing sociodemographic factors, gender, years of service and the participant's type of teaching were found to be significantly related to the probability of intervention only in indirect forms of violence. Female participants, people with longer working experience and classroom teachers showed a greater likelihood of intervention in cases of indirect forms of violence.

Furthermore, the probability of intervention in cases of direct and indirect forms of violence was significantly and negatively related to stereotypical attitudes ( $r = -.268$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct violence and  $r = -.254$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which means that those who expressed more stereotypical attitudes were less likely to intervene in cases of both forms of violence. Attitudes about the controllability of violence were low but significantly related to the likelihood of intervention in both types of violence ( $r = .127$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct and  $r = .196$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), indicating that those who believe they have control over peer violence will be likelier to intervene. The probability of intervention, in the case of direct and indirect forms of violence, was low but significantly negatively related to attitudes about different types of violence ( $r = -.184$ ,  $p < .01$  for direct and  $r = -.187$ ,  $p < .01$  for indirect violence), which indicates that people who in their attitudes are more inclined to normalize different types of violence are slightly less likely to intervene in cases of violence.

Table 10 shows the contribution of attitudes about peer violence in explaining the probability of intervention in direct forms of peer violence.

	$\beta$	t	p	R2	F	p
Stereotypical attitudes	-.238	-5.359	.000	.090	20.436	.000
Attitudes about the controllability of violence	.133	3.437	.001			
Attitudes towards different types of violence	-.038	-.840	.401			

Table 10: The possibility of predicting the likelihood of intervention in the case of direct forms of peer violence based on attitudes towards violence

The results in Table 10 show that attitudes about violence explain a relatively low but statistically significant percentage of the variance in the level of empathy in the case of direct forms of peer violence ( $R^2 = .090$ ; i.e. 9%). The most important predictor was stereotypical attitudes about violence ( $\beta = -.238$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereby higher levels of stereotypical attitudes result in a lower probability of intervention in the case of direct forms of violence. Attitudes about the controllability of violence also make a significant individual contribution ( $\beta = .133$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This means that participants who felt that they had more control over direct forms of peer violence will be likelier to intervene. Attitudes towards different forms of violence, even in this model, did not prove to be a statistically significant predictor.

Table 11 shows how sociodemographic factors and attitudes towards peer violence contribute to the explanation of the probability of intervention in indirect forms of violence.

		$\beta$	t	p	R2	F	p	$\Delta R$	F	p
1	Gender	.088	2.147	.032	.024	4.944	.002			
	Years of service in teaching	.075	1.843	.066						
	Classroom or subject classes	-.079	-1.934	.054						
2	Gender	.053	1.357	.175	.127	14.576	.000	.103	23.652	.000
	Years of service in teaching	.098	2.540	.011						
	Classroom or subject classes	-.062	-1.578	.115						
	Stereotypical attitudes	-.214	-4.829	.000						
	Attitudes about the controllability of violence	.204	5.244	.000						
	Attitudes towards different types of violence	-.043	-.964	.335						

Table 11: The possibility of predicting the likelihood of intervention in indirect forms of peer violence based on sociodemographic factors and attitudes towards violence

Gender, years of service and the participant's type of teaching explain a very low but significant percentage of the variance of the probability of intervention in the case of indirect forms of peer violence ( $R^2 = .024$ ; i.e. 2.4%). When, in the second step of the analysis, the subscales of attitudes were included, the explained variance increased significantly ( $\Delta R = .103$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and the total percentage of the explained variance was 12.7%. The most important predictor was stereotypical attitudes ( $\beta = -.214$ ,  $p < .01$ ), followed by attitudes about the controllability of violence ( $\beta = -.204$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Participants with more stereotypical attitudes towards violence had a lower probability of intervention in indirect forms of violence, while those who perceived violence as more controllable had a higher probability of intervention in indirect forms of violence. In the final model, only years of service proved to be a significant individual predictor of the probability of intervention, while gender and type of teaching showed no significant individual contribution. At the same time, teachers with longer working experience showed a higher probability of intervention ( $\beta = -.098$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Attitudes towards different

types of violence did not show a significant individual contribution to the probability of intervention in this model.

## Discussion

As part of the first research task, we checked the connection between personal factors (gender, age, level of education, length of service, workplace, and attitudes, perceived severity of violence, empathy), and the likelihood of teacher intervention in cases of direct and indirect violence among students. It was found that sociodemographic indicators significantly correlate with the perception of the severity of violence, empathy and the likelihood of interventions only when it comes to indirect forms of violence, while these correlations were not found for direct forms of violence. Female participants and teachers with longer working experience perceived indirect forms of violence as more serious, had higher levels of empathy and intervened more often than did male participants and teachers with shorter working experience. Older research contains clear evidence that teachers perceive direct forms of violence as being a more serious problem than indirect forms and react to them more often (Bauman and Del Rio, 2006; Byers et al., 2011; Mishna et al., 2005; Yoon and Kerber, 2003). Precisely for this reason, but also due to the dominance of sophisticated forms of violence, more and more attention is being paid in teacher education to the characteristics and consequences of indirect forms of violence, which are more difficult to perceive and react to, and this could have influenced these results. The findings of this research suggest that, compared to their male colleagues, female teachers and all teachers with longer working experience take indirect forms of violence more seriously. It is possible that female teachers have better insight into problems that are not easily observable because they are more empathetic, show more care and interest in their students and are more inclined to deal with their feelings than their colleagues (Stanković Đorđević, 2012). This is probably due in part to their upbringing and gender roles.

It is also possible that teachers who have more experience with peer violence and who have received education at schools can more easily recognize hidden forms of violence. Furthermore, recent research is paying an increasing amount of attention to indirect forms of peer violence, including pointing out the seriousness and harmful consequences of such violence (Chester et al., 2017; Psalti, 2017 according to Dawes et al. 2023). Moreover, a low and negative correlation was established between participants' perception of the controllability of violence and their workplace; that is, teachers who taught in classrooms believed that they had a greater ability to control violence among peers. This result is expected because teachers spend more time with their students in class, know them better and therefore have a better sense of control over their behaviour. Those teachers who are more empathetic, know their class better and have fewer stereotypical attitudes are, according to the results of this research, more likely to intervene. The findings of this research suggest that teachers who express more stereotyp-

ical attitudes and who are more inclined to normalize different types of violence show lower levels of empathy and are less likely to intervene in cases of direct and indirect forms of violence; thus, the first and second hypotheses are partially confirmed.

The perception of the severity of violence is the starting point for many analyses in research on the role of teachers in suppressing peer violence, and the results of this research make an important contribution to this work by expanding our knowledge about the factors that affect its perception. It was found that higher levels of stereotypical attitudes result in lower perceptions of the severity of both direct and indirect forms of violence. Conversely, teachers who perceived direct and indirect forms of violence as more controllable perceived them as a more serious problem. However, in this model, attitudes towards different types of violence did not show a significant individual contribution. It was confirmed that teachers with more experience take indirect forms of violence more seriously. Therefore, teacher seniority, stereotypical attitudes about violence and the perception of controllability have significant effects on the assessment of the severity of direct and indirect forms of violence among peers, thus partially confirming the third hypothesis.

Although the authors agree that the assessment of the severity of the damage caused by peer violence is an important determinant of the preventive and intervention behaviour of teachers (Dedouis-Wallace et al., 2013; Hajdaraj, 2017; Williford et al., 2021), we lack sufficient knowledge of the factors that affect that assessment, and these are extraordinarily important for understanding the role of the teacher. The results of this research suggest that teachers with more seniority take indirect forms of violence more seriously. Since the hidden nature of these forms of violence makes them difficult to spot, their detection may be attributable to the experience of teachers. The expected result is that stereotypical attitudes about violence result in a lower perception of the seriousness of both direct and indirect forms of violence. The negative, rigid, biased and simplistic attitudes of teachers—for example, that violence among peers does not exist because the students are of equal strength, or that cyber bullying is a joke and that the victims themselves contribute to violence (Bilić, 2018; Mishna et al., 2005)—may justify their belief that they can influence the perception of the damage that these forms of violence can cause. Since there is not enough research on aspects of perceived control, the result which shows that teachers who believe that the outcomes of peer behaviour can be under their control perceive direct and indirect forms of violence as a serious problem is of particular importance. According to Ajzen's theory (1991), behavioural control encourages an individual's intention to perform a certain behaviour, and the results of this research suggest that this can be connected with the perception of seriousness—that is, a deeper understanding of the problem being analysed, which should be further empirically verified.

As part of the third research task, we checked the relative contribution of personal factors and attitudes to the level of empathy in direct and indirect forms of violence. When it comes to personal factors, it was found that teachers with longer working experience showed higher levels of empathy. Although it is often

stated that teachers with fewer years of service are generationally closer to their students and can therefore more easily understand their emotions and perspectives, empirical research (Stanković Đorđević, 2012) shows that teachers with more years of service are more empathetic, which accords with the findings of this research. It is possible that young teachers with less working experience are often self-absorbed, tend to be concerned with their own feelings and problems, have high aspirations and a need to prove themselves and are more preoccupied with professional success. In addition, among a certain number of younger teachers there is a tendency to maintain a hierarchical distance and a perception of their professional role as, “My job is to teach, not to deal with student relations”. Unlike these teachers, those with many years of experience who have proven themselves to be competent professionals are skilled in social interactions and aware of the importance of empathy in the field of education (Stanković Đorđević, 2012). On the other hand, it seems that professional training and development can play an important role in the development of empathic potential. Research suggests that teachers who have undergone additional training (for example, concerning the problems of peer violence) show better results on measures of cognitive empathy; that is, they have a more developed ability to put themselves in the position of others, to better understand their students, and to express interest in their concerns and problems (Stojiljković et al., 2012). After all, Hoffman (2003) pointed out that empathy develops throughout life. Thus, the interpersonal relations experience that teachers acquire in their daily work and through additional education can positively influence the fundamental aspects of empathy, and those who have more empathy are more successful in various helping professions. The result showing that teachers with more stereotypical attitudes towards violence show lower levels of empathy concerning both direct and indirect forms of violence among peers is quite expected. Other authors have stated that teachers who have less empathy often do not see negative interactions among their students. They tend to minimize the severity of violence (according to Murphy et al., 2018), and this can be connected with negative attitudes towards peer violence.

Likewise, teachers who find direct and indirect forms of violence to be more controllable show higher levels of empathy than do their colleagues who feel that they are less able to control peer violence. In the introductory presentation, it was pointed out that controllability of peer violence is associated with cognitive and emotional reactions, and that these directly affect behaviour as it relates to teachers’ responses (Cuff et al., 2016; Johander et al., 2022), as stated by other authors (Eldridge and Jenkins, 2020). In this model, attitudes towards different forms of violence did not prove to be a statistically significant predictor, and thus the fourth hypothesis was also partially confirmed.

We then checked the possibility of predicting the probability of intervention in cases of direct and indirect forms of peer violence based on sociodemographic factors and teachers’ attitudes towards violence. It was found that those participants with more stereotypical attitudes towards violence had a lower probability of intervention, while the participants who perceived violence as more controlla-

ble had a higher probability of intervention in cases of both direct and indirect forms of peer violence. Other research has found that teachers' attitudes towards peer violence play an important role in predicting their interventions (Dawes et al., 2023; De Luca et al., 2019; DeSmet et al., 2015; van Verseveld et al., 2019; Williford et al., 2021). However, the results of this study expand our knowledge concerning the effects of different attitudes; that is, while stereotypical attitudes reduce the likelihood of interventions, perceptions of controllability increase their likelihood. This result, as in previous analyses, indicates the harmfulness of the stereotypical attitudes that deny violence or perceive it as a way of social learning, as teachers who understand the problem in this way do not even need to intervene. On the contrary, the perception that the outcomes of violence can be under teachers' control directly affects their behaviour; that is, they are likelier to intervene in cases of direct and indirect forms of peer violence. As in previous models, attitudes towards different forms of violence in this model do not show a significant individual contribution to the probability of intervention, which could also be influenced by the characteristics of the measuring instrument. However, of the sociodemographic variables, only years of service proved to be a significant individual predictor of the probability of intervention, and thus the fifth hypothesis was partially confirmed. The expected result is that teachers with longer working experience show a higher probability of intervention, which can be connected to the previous result indicating that this group of teachers has more empathy associated with interventions, more experience in dealing with peer violence and is better educated than their colleagues who have less work experience at school.

Although this work contributes to a better understanding and expansion of our knowledge about the relationship between some personal factors and teachers' interventions in cases of different forms of violence among students, it has its limitations. First, the participants responded to hypothetical situations, and it is possible that they would respond differently to real incidents of violence among their students. The scale of attitudes did not show high reliability, and the nature of this research did not allow for the defining of cause-and-effect relationships.

## **Conclusion**

In the theoretical part of this work, relevant knowledge about the role of teachers in the suppression of peer violence is systematized (Bjereld et al., 2021; De Luca et al., 2019; Verseveld et al., 2019; Williford et al., 2021; Yoon et al., 2014, 2016) and is expanded upon with the results of empirical research that contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between attitudes, the perception of the severity of violence, empathy and the intervention behaviours of teachers. In this relationship, attitudes proved to be significant predictors of the perception of seriousness, the level of empathy and the probability of teacher intervention in direct and indirect forms of peer violence. Stereotypical attitudes proved to be the most important predictor of the perception of the seriousness of direct forms of violence, as well as empathy and the likelihood of intervention for both forms

of violence. The important contribution of the controllability of violence, which is the most important predictor of the perception of the severity of indirect forms of violence, was also determined. Of the sociodemographic variables, gender and work experience were correlated with the perception of seriousness, empathy and the likelihood of intervention only in the case of indirect forms of peer violence

The results of this research can have important implications for the preparation and professional development of teachers in the prevention and suppression of peer violence and can be of interest to anyone—principals, policy makers, scientists—who wants to contribute to the quality of work of teachers and the safety of students in educational institutions.

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## DEJAVNIKI VPLIVA NA UČITELJEVO RAVNANJE V PRIMERIH MEDVRSTNIŠKEGA NASILJA

**Povzetek:** Na splošno vloga učiteljev pri zatiranju medvrstniškega nasilja ni dovolj raziskana, še posebej pa je malo znanega o vlogi njihovih stališč pri napovedovanju intervencij. Zato je cilj prispevka preučiti razmerje med stališči do medvrstniškega nasilja in percepcijo resnosti nasilja, stopnjo empatije in verjetnostjo intervencije učiteljev v primerih neposrednega in posrednega medvrstniškega nasilja. V raziskavi je sodelovalo 639 osnovnošolskih učiteljev, njihova povprečna starost je bila 43 let iz vseh makroregij Republike Hrvaške. Za zbiranje podatkov smo poleg vprašalnika za sociodemografske spremenljivke uporabili še razširjene vinjete (Yoon in Kerber 2003) in lestvico odnosa do medvrstniškega nasilja. Ugotovili smo, da se nekateri sociodemografski dejavniki (spol in delovna doba učitelja) povezujejo z zaznavo resnosti nasilja, empatijo in verjetnostjo posredovanja le v primeru posrednih oblik medvrstniškega nasilja. Stališča so se izkazala za pomembne napovedovalce zaznavanja resnosti nasilja, stopnje empatije in verjetnosti posredovanja učiteljev v primerih neposrednega in posrednega medvrstniškega nasilja. Poleg tega smo ugotovili, da so stereotipna stališča najpomembnejši napovedovalec percepcije resnosti neposrednih oblik nasilja in empatije ter verjetnosti intervencije v primeru obeh oblik nasilja, medtem ko je obvladljivost nasilja najpomembnejši napovedovalec percepcije resnosti posrednih oblik nasilja. V sklepu smo opozorili na pomen ozaveščanja o zatiranju medvrstniškega nasilja in na nujnost stalnega strokovnega izpopolnjevanja učiteljev.

**Ključne besede:** učitelji, odnosi, preventiva, intervencije, medvrstniško nasilje

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