

# Factors Contributing to Violent Discipline in the Classroom: Findings From a Representative Sample of Primary School Teachers in Tanzania

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## Abstract

The need for intervention strategies aiming to reduce teachers' use of violent discipline methods has been expressed repeatedly, especially for countries where this practice is socially and legally accepted. Nevertheless, initial targets for interventions are not clearly identified, as factors contributing to teachers' use of violence are still understudied. In the present study, we examined the interplay between teachers' own experiences of violence, their attitudes, current stress, and their use of violent discipline in a representative sample of 173 Tanzanian primary school teachers (53.7% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 38.1$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 10$ ) using structural equation modeling. Our model showed good model fit ( $\chi^2 [48, n = 173] = 78.058$  ( $p = .004$ ), CFI = .962, TLI = .948, RMSEA = .060 [90% CI [.034, .084], PCLOSE = .233], SRMR = .048). Results indicated direct associations between positive attitudes toward violent discipline ( $\beta = .41$ ), stress ( $\beta = .23$ ), and teachers' own experiences of

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violence ( $\beta = .21$ ) with teachers' use of violence. Teachers' own experiences of violence were significantly associated with positive attitudes ( $\beta = .39$ ), and these significantly mediated the association between teachers' own experiences of violence and their use of violent discipline ( $\beta = .23$ ). Our findings underscore the relevance of past experiences, societal norms, and current working conditions in understanding teachers' violence against students. Interventions aiming to reduce teachers' use of violent discipline may focus on stress management, societal norms, personal beliefs on violent discipline, and how teachers' own previous experiences of violence may influence teacher's disciplining behavior.

### **Keywords**

school violence, predictors, teacher, cycle of violence, attitudes, stress

### **Introduction**

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child formalized the protection of the physical and psychological integrity of all children (Article 19; UN General Assembly, 2001). The convention explicitly prohibits violent discipline, defined as physical or psychological force used and intended to cause pain or discomfort in order to correct or control the child's behavior (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), 2007). Yet, corporal punishment, psychological aggression, and other forms of violent discipline are still prevalent in school settings around the globe, especially in Asia, Africa, and the USA (Gershoff, 2017; Heekes et al., 2020). In Tanzania, for instance, despite the fact that the country is a signatory of the convention (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019), corporal punishment at schools is still legal by law and highly prevalent (Hecker et al., 2018; The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2020; United Republic of Tanzania, 2002). The few restrictions on the use of corporal punishment only concern the amount of punishment and the persons authorized to apply it stipulated under the country's Corporal Punishment Guideline of 2000 (The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2020; United Republic of Tanzania, 2002). But even in countries with legal bans, violent discipline continues to be applied, raising the question why violent discipline is used by teachers even though it is outlawed (Ssenyonga et al., 2019).

The use of violent discipline is alarming, as many studies have shown the severe consequences of violent discipline for the wellbeing of children

(Hecker et al., 2016; Irigaray et al., 2013; Norman et al., 2012). Exposure to school violence has been linked to mental health problems, impaired school performance, and lower cognitive functioning (Gershoff, 2017). Thus, preventing violence in schools and other settings is crucial to allow for a healthy emotional and cognitive development of children. To this end, it is necessary to understand what drives authority figures to use violent discipline. Theoretical frameworks, like Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Belsky's theoretical model on parenting (Belsky, 1984), as well as the available research on parental use of violent discipline (Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999; Sriskandarajah et al., 2015) highlight the influence of personality, personal experience of violence, interpersonal conflicts, stress and emotional strain, and societal norms and beliefs on the use of violence against children. For teachers, in contrast to parents, the body of research on factors contributing to violent discipline is small and primarily from high income countries (Font & Gershoff, 2017; Gershoff, 2017), despite the fact that school violence is highly prevalent and that, after the home, the school setting is the second-most important environment for the development of children. Research among parents suggests that parents' own experience of violent disciplining in childhood, in particular, was associated with favorable attitudes toward the use of violent discipline in adulthood, as well as the actual use of violent discipline (Ellonen et al., 2017; Widom, 1989). This association seems to be intensified in contexts of strong societal norms and beliefs favorable toward violent discipline (Nkuba et al., 2018b), where violent disciplining is legalized under the Corporal Punishment Guideline of 2000 (The Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2020), and where parents are under emotional strain (Sriskandarajah et al., 2015). Thus, studying the interplay of factors potentially contributing to teacher violence is crucial to develop and refine intervention approaches aiming to reduce teacher violence.

### *Own Experiences of Violence in Childhood*

One's own violence experiences in childhood have often been considered as an influencing factor on parental use of violence against children (Black et al., 2001). This goes in line with the cycle of violence hypothesis, stating that the exposure to (physical) violence in childhood increases the likelihood to be (physically) violent in adulthood (Widom, 1989). For teacher violence, this association has not been investigated comprehensively. Previous research on parents showed that having experienced corporal punishment in one's own childhood increases the risk to use violence against the own children in

adulthood (Ellonen et al., 2017). Furthermore, childhood maltreatment and intimate partner violence were shown to predict aggressive parenting behavior (Saile et al., 2014; Thornberry et al., 2012). Among practicing teachers in the USA, the use of violent discipline was more prevalent for those with past experiences of aversive disciplinary strategies (Lee & Weis, 1992). In Uganda, male teachers who experienced violence themselves were more likely to use physical violence in response to students' misbehavior (Devries et al., 2014). However, this latter study only asked for childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and nonpartner sexual violence. According to our knowledge, there is no sufficient empirical evidence that the hypothesized association exists between childhood experiences of violent discipline and the use of violent discipline among teachers. However, hypothesizing this association is plausible when considering the robust findings from parental reports.

### *Societal Norms, Personal Attitudes, and Beliefs*

The role of beliefs and attitudes in understanding teachers' use of violent discipline was examined in two studies conducted in Uganda. They showed that teachers who approve physical violence were more likely to use it against students (Merrill et al., 2017; Ssenyonga et al., 2019). Similarly, in Israel, Khoury-Kassabri (Khoury-Kassabri, 2012) found teachers' attitudes toward violent discipline to be significantly correlated to their self-reported use of physical and verbal violence. Underlying beliefs about the effectiveness of violent discipline and traditions can be seen as an important reason for the approval of physical and emotional violence in disciplining children. Several studies, for example, in Tanzania, showed that teachers rate physical punishment as acceptable and even inevitable in disciplining children (Kaltenbach et al., 2018; Moyo et al., 2014; Semali & Vumilia, 2016). A common belief among teachers is that violent discipline teaches respect and compliance (Naker, 2005), and that it is cheap, easy, and quick to employ compared to alternative nonviolent disciplinary strategies (Naker & Sekitoleko, 2009). In addition, many teachers are convinced of violent discipline's positive effects on students' academic performance (Feinstein & Mwashombela, 2010; Semali & Vumilia, 2016; Tafa, 2002) even as they tend to underestimate the negative consequences (Naker & Sekitoleko, 2009). Thus, approving and supporting societal norms, national guideline, beliefs, and attitudes toward violent discipline seem to contribute to its use.

## Stress

Beyond past experiences and societal norms, current working conditions may also influence teachers' use of violence. For example, the level of stress may contribute to teachers' willingness to use violent discipline in schools. Teaching in general can be considered a "high stress" profession (Kyriacou, 2001). For teachers in East Africa, in particular, working conditions are characterized by large classes, few teaching resources, and long working hours for low payment (Hecker et al., 2018). Perceived teaching difficulties and feelings of pressure as determined by such factors as teachers' socioeconomic status, age, and the number of students being taught were shown to influence the level of stress (Hecker et al., 2018). Likewise, financial and emotional problems contributed to teachers' stress level (Butchart et al., 2006). Higher levels of stress were found to increase negative affect and dysfunctional educational practices (Flook et al., 2013) as well as the potential for aggression (Knezevic et al., 2011). Unsurprisingly, teachers working under demanding conditions were more likely to respond to students' misbehavior with violent punishment (Hecker et al., 2018; Mweru, 2010). Indeed, higher levels of stress were associated with more emotional and physical violence. In a sample of Ugandan teachers, this association between stress and violent discipline was partially mediated by teachers' attitudes toward violent discipline (Ssenyonga et al., 2019).

## Other Influencing Factors

Demographic and socioeconomic variables must also be considered when considering factors influencing teachers' use of violent discipline. Previous research on the influence of sociodemographic factors, though, has offered mixed results on the role of such factors. In some studies, no differences in teachers' use of violent discipline could be found for different demographics (Devries et al., 2014; Merrill et al., 2017; Ssenyonga et al., 2019). Yet, other studies showed effects on stress and attitudes toward the job for teachers' age (Hecker et al., 2018; Lackritz, 2004), their socioeconomic status (Hecker et al., 2018; Serrano et al., 2008), gender (Serrano et al., 2008), teaching experience (Louw et al., 2011), educational background (Luk et al., 2010), weekly working hours (Otero-López et al., 2008), and class size (Bümen, 2010). Additionally, Hecker et al. (2018) found age to be related to teachers' use of violent discipline. It must be stated, though, that these effects are probably not operating in a consistent, independent manner, but instead should be thought to interact with situational factors (Kyriacou, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

## *The Current Study*

The aim of the present study was to examine how teachers' own experiences of violence in childhood, attitudes toward violent discipline, and current stress are associated with teachers' use of violent discipline. For this purpose, we assessed teachers at primary schools distributed across Tanzania. With previously reported high prevalence of violent discipline (Feinstein & Mwahombela, 2010; Hecker et al., 2018), Tanzania provides suitable conditions to investigate the presented research question. As working conditions in lower middle-income countries like Tanzania are especially challenging and societal norms and beliefs are different from high-income countries, it is important to also examine the association in this setting. For the present study, we hypothesized that (1a) higher reports of teachers' own experiences of violence would be directly associated with more physical and emotional violence used against students, and (1b) with more positive attitudes toward the use of violent discipline. We further hypothesized that (2a) higher levels of perceived stress would be directly associated with more physical and emotional violence against students and (2b) with more positive attitudes toward violent discipline. Lastly, we hypothesized that (3a) attitudes toward violent discipline would partially mediate the association between teachers' own experiences of violence in childhood and the use of violent discipline against students and, likewise, (3b) the association between teachers' stress level and their use of violent discipline against students.

## **Methods**

### *Setting, Design, and Sampling*

The study was conducted in 12 public primary schools from 6 of the 26 regions in Tanzania from March to November 2019. Administratively, Tanzania is divided into five zones and the semi-autonomous Islands of Zanzibar. Due to relevant political and cultural differences, the latter were excluded. From each of the remaining five zones of mainland Tanzania (Coastal, Central, Northern Highlands, Southern Highlands, and Lake Zone), one region was selected randomly. The largest city of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, was intentionally included. It was added because of its unique population composition and significant contribution to the total number of primary schools in Tanzania (Masath et al., 2020). From each region, two districts were selected at random. One coeducational public primary day school (i.e., a school for boys and girls that live at home and come to school every day) with a minimum of 40 students per enrolment year from each

selected district (and the municipalities in Dar es Salaam) was randomly selected. All teachers working at these schools were invited to participate in the study. Primary schools in Tanzania comprise 7 years of formal schooling ranging from grade 1 to grade 7. Children enroll at the age of 6 and primary education leads to a qualification for secondary schooling.

### Participants

The sample consisted of 173 teachers from 12 primary schools (range of teachers per school: 8-20). The mean age was 38.1 years ( $SD = 10$ , range: 20-59). In total, 53.7% ( $n = 94$ ) were female. The majority (58.1%,  $n = 86$ ) of the teachers indicated having a Teaching Certificate (11 years of formal schooling plus two years of teacher training course), allowing them to teach in primary schools only. Teachers indicated an average working experience of 13.9 years ( $SD = 9.8$ , Md. = 11, range: 0-38) and worked an average of 45.5 hours per week at school ( $SD = 9.7$ , Md. = 45, range: 9-75). The classes had an average size of 87.7 students ( $SD = 36.41$ , Md. = 76, range: 23-203). Detailed sociodemographic information is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic Information About the Total Sample ( $N = 173$ ).

Age in years, $M$ ( $SD$ )	38.05 (9.96)
Gender (% female)	53.71
Marital status, $n$ (%)	
Single	35 (20.0)
Married and living together	113 (64.6)
Married but not living together	12 (6.9)
In a permanent relationship but not married	5 (2.9)
Separated/divorced	3 (1.7)
Widowed	5 (2.9)
Highest educational level <sup>a</sup> , $n$ (%)	
No teaching qualification	21 (12.0)
Teaching certificate	102 (58.3)
Diploma in teaching	33 (18.9)
Bachelor	17 (9.7)
Working experience in years, $M$ ( $SD$ )	13.9 (9.8)
Working hours per week, $M$ ( $SD$ )	45.46 (9.70)
Number of students per class, $M$ ( $SD$ )	87.66 (36.41)

(continued)

**Table 1. continued**

Age in years, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	38.05 (9.96)
Additional employment, <i>n</i> (%)	
No	92 (52.6)
Another informal job	4 (2.3)
Own business	76 (43.4)
Household income in TSH per month, <i>n</i> (%)	
Below 500,000	91 (52.0)
500,000-950,000	54 (30.9)
More than 1,000,000	28 (16.1)
No. of people living in the household, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	4.30 (1.99)
Religious affiliation, <i>n</i> (%)	
Catholic	58 (33.1)
Protestant/Anglican	50 (28.6)
Muslim	47 (26.9)
Born again	15 (8.6)
Other	2 (1.1)
Ethnic groups, amount (range) <sup>b</sup>	41 (1–23)

Note. <sup>a</sup>Teaching certificate: 11 years of formal schooling plus 2 years teachers' college allow one to teach in primary schools; Diploma in teaching: 13 years of formal schooling plus 2 years of teachers' college allow one to teach in primary and secondary (ordinary level) schools; Bachelor: 3 years at university or university college allows one to teach in primary and secondary (ordinary and advanced level) schools.

<sup>b</sup>Ethnic groups, amount (range): total amount of ethnic groups in the sample, range of no. of people per group.

## **Procedures**

A team of four local interviewers was trained in data collection in a 4-day workshop. Standardized procedures were developed to ensure objectivity and reliability. A pilot study at one primary school (not included in this study) was conducted to ensure the feasibility of the questionnaire administration. All questionnaires were administered in Swahili. Following established international guidelines (Brislin et al., 1973), Swahili native speakers translated all measures that were not available in Swahili from English to Swahili and then back to English in a blind written form. The back-translated measures were compared with the original measures to ensure correct translation and equivalence of the content and concepts.

Prior to data collection and to ensure clear understanding of the study, the research team provided information to all teachers in a formal information session. After being introduced to the project's objectives, teachers were invited to participate in the study. In total, 173 out of 178 invited teachers agreed to participate in the study (enrollment rate: 98%). Teachers who agreed to participate were asked to sign an informed consent form. Assessment took place between lessons under the supervision and guidance of an assessor in a one-on-one setting. The guided assessment aimed to help teachers clearly understand the questions and instructions in responding. The completion of the teacher questionnaires took an average of 30 minutes. The present study was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Review Board of Bielefeld University and research permits provided by the relevant institutions and authorities in Tanzania.

## Measures

### *Demographic details*

Demographic information formed the first part of our questionnaire. We assessed teachers' gender, age, marital status, highest academic qualification, work experience, working hours, and average class size (for details, see Table 1).

### *Use of violent discipline by teachers*

We assessed teachers' self-reported use of violence against students using the teachers' version of the physical and emotional violence subscales of the adapted Conflict Tactics Scale Parent-Child (CTSPC) version (Nkuba et al., 2018a; Straus et al., 1998). The scale is measured along a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 25 (*more than 20 times*). We used the CTSPC due to its good cross-cultural validity and because it has been used in comparable studies in East Africa (Hecker et al., 2018; Ssenyonga et al., 2019). In this study, 18 items of the CTSPC were used to assess physical violence (13 items) and emotional violence (5 items) used by teachers in the past month. Four items were excluded from further analysis because of their highly restricted variance, as no or only one teacher indicated any use of the respective practice ("How often have you grabbed them around the neck and choked them?,"  $n = 0$ ; "How often have you burned or scalded them on purpose?,"  $n = 1$ ; "How often have you threatened them with a knife, hoe, burning firewood or machete?,"  $n = 1$ ; "How often have you thrown or knocked them down?,"  $n = 0$ ). For analysis, a total sum score was calculated by adding all remaining item responses. The sum score ranged from 0 to 350 (14 items) and had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .73.

### *Attitudes toward violent discipline*

Teachers' attitudes toward the use of violent discipline were assessed using the physical (13 items) and emotional violence (five items) subscales of an adapted version of the CTSPC (Nkuba et al., 2018a; Ssenyonga et al., 2019). The scale is answered along a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never OK*) to 3 (*always OK*). For consistency and due to the restricted variance, all items measuring the corresponding attitudes toward the methods excluded from analysis for violent discipline. The maximum was 42. The total scale had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .84.

### *Personal experiences of violence in childhood*

Teachers' own experiences of violence by their parents or any family member during their childhood was measured using the Short Form of the CTSPC (CTSPCS) (Straus & Mattingly, 2007) consisting of 10 items. Six of the 10 items assessed physical violence (four items) and emotional violence (two items). The scale was answered along a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*cannot recall/never happened*) to 5 (*most of the time*). Concurrent validity, measured by the correlation between the CTSPCS and the original CTSPC scales ranged from .86 to .97 (Straus & Mattingly, 2007). For the current study, a total score was calculated by summing up all six items, with a maximum total score of 30. The current scale had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .73 for the six items assessed.

### *Stress and burnout*

Teachers' stress and burnout symptoms were measured using the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) (Kristensen et al., 2005). The CBI consists of 19 items. The scale was answered along a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 100 (*always*) for each item. For each subscale, mean scores were calculated ranging from 0 to 100. Scores  $\geq 25$  indicated an elevated stress level, and scores  $\geq 50$  indicated a high stress level in the respective subscales. In previous studies, the CBI proved to have good psychometric properties (Kristensen et al., 2005) and it has been successfully implemented in Tanzanian samples before (Hecker et al., 2018; Hermenau et al., 2015). For analysis, a total mean score was calculated by summing up all 19 items, with a maximum score of 100. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the total score was .89.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was carried out with R (version 3.6.3, R Core Team, 2019). Missing values in the data made up less than 0.001% ( $n = 12$ ). In the analysis, missing values were estimated using full information maximum likelihood

(Cham et al., 2017; Enders & Bandalos, 2001). Intraclass correlation coefficients were calculated to rule out systematic differences in the latent variables between schools. For all latent variables, intraclass correlations were lower than .10. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was calculated using the R package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012). Teachers' own experiences of violence, attitudes toward violent discipline, current stress, and use of violent discipline were all modeled as latent constructs. Variances of all latent variables were fixed to unity. Maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) was used, as this estimation method is generally considered the most stable and accurate for SEM (Schreiber et al., 2006). By using a robust estimator, violation of the normality assumption could be controlled for. All other statistical assumptions were met. Concerning the sample size, a minimum ratio of five cases per each parameter to be estimated in the model was proposed by Bentler and Chou (1987), making up to a minimum sample size of  $N = 185$  for this study with 37 parameters. Yet, our sample size was 173. However, smaller sample sizes can be sufficient for SEM if certain conditions are met, that is, the choice of a robust estimation method, item-parceling, and using indicators with good psychometric properties to allow for sufficient power (Iacobucci, 2010; Kyriazos, 2018). To test possible effects of sociodemographic variables on the latent variables, bivariate correlations (Pearson's  $r$ ) for continuous and dichotomous variables and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the categorical variable qualification were performed *a priori* (Antonakis et al., 2010). Only significant correlations  $r > .15$  were included in the SEM to maintain adequate statistical power in the model. Teachers' age, professional experience, and the number of household members were included as covariates for teachers' own experiences of violence in childhood in the SEM. The measurement model showed good model fit:  $\chi^2 [38, n = 173] = 58.047$  ( $p = .020$ ), CFI = .97, TLI = .96, IFI = .94, RMSEA = .055 [90% CI [.02, .08], PCLOSE = .36], SRMR = .038 (see Appendix A). For the assessment of goodness of model fit, several fit indices were used. Following Hu and Bentler (1999), cut-off was set to  $\geq .95$  for comparative fit index (CFI) as well as Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI),  $\leq .06$  for the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and  $\leq .08$  for standardized root mean square residuals (SRMR). For comparison of different structural models, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) were used. For both criteria, lower values indicate better model fit. Effect sizes were defined as small for  $\beta \geq .10$ , medium for  $\beta \geq .30$ , and large for  $\beta \geq .50$  (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). For the indirect effects, as suggested by Cohen (Cohen, 1992), the metric for a small effect size was .01, for a medium effect size .09, and for a large effect size .25. Two-tailed  $p$ -values with  $\alpha = .05$  were calculated for the *a priori* hypotheses.

## Results

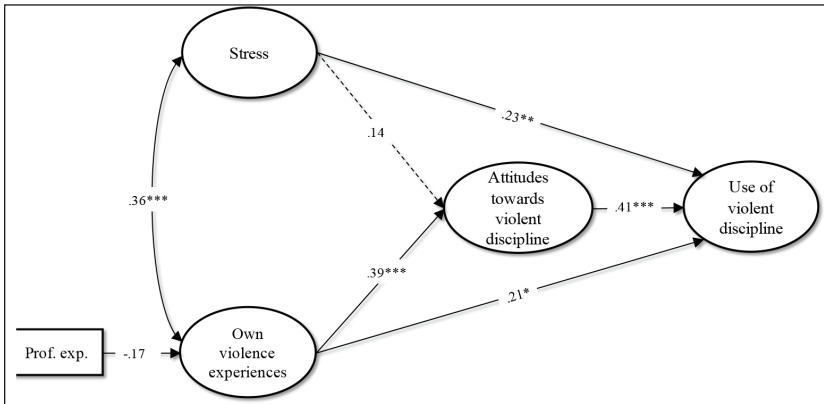
### *Descriptive Findings*

In total, 96% ( $n = 166$ ) of the teachers reported having used violence against their students in the past month and 86.1% ( $n = 146$ ) of the teachers reported positive attitude toward at least one form of violent discipline. Only 6.4% of the teachers ( $n = 11$ ) reported not to have experienced any kind of physical or emotional violence in their own childhood. The mean level of stress was  $M = 20.49$  ( $SD = 12.29$ , range 0-61.8). In total, 2.9% of the teachers ( $n = 5$ ) reported a high level of stress (mean score  $\geq 50$ ) and 31.8% of the teachers ( $n = 55$ ) reported somewhat elevated levels of stress (mean score  $\geq 25$ ). On work-related stress, the highest levels of stress were reported ( $M = 22.90$ ,  $SD = 14.35$ , range 0-75). In total, 43.9% of the teachers ( $n = 76$ ) had an elevated level of work-related stress and 5.8% ( $n = 10$ ) a high level. Further details are presented in Appendixes B-E.

### *Factors Contributing to Teachers' Use of Violent Discipline*

The structural equation model analyzing direct and mediational effects between teachers' variables showed good model fit:  $\chi^2 [48, n = 173] = 78.058$  ( $p = .004$ ), CFI = .962, TLI = .948, RMSEA = .060 [90% CI [.034, .084], PCLOSE = .233], SRMR = .048. The model is displayed in Figure 1. In the initial model, we controlled for the influence of age, number of household members, and professional experiences as covariates for teachers' own violence experiences. However, only professional experience showed a significant correlation with teachers' own experiences of violence and our final model showed better fit (AIC: 12458.69; BIC: 12591.13) than the initially tested model (AIC: 14137.00; BIC: 14297.82). In total, 42.9% of the variance in the latent variable use of violent discipline could be explained by the latent variables own experiences of violence, attitudes toward violent discipline, and stress. For the latent construct attitudes toward violent discipline, 21% of its variance could be explained by the latent variables stress and own experiences of violence. Direct, indirect, and total effects as well as covariances are displayed in Table 2. Intercorrelations are shown in Appendix F. Teachers' own experiences of violence in childhood were significantly associated with both more positive attitudes toward violent discipline and with the use of violent discipline with medium and small effect sizes, respectively. No significant direct association of stress with positive attitudes toward violent discipline was found. However, stress was significantly related to the use of violent discipline with a small effect. Finally, the direct association between

attitudes toward violent discipline and the use of violent discipline was significant, with a medium effect size. The indirect effect of own childhood experiences of violence on violent discipline via the mediator attitudes toward violent discipline was significant with a medium effect size, whereas the indirect effect of stress on violent discipline mediated by attitudes toward violent discipline did not reach significance.



**Figure 1.** Structural model of the hypothesized relation between stress, own experiences of violence, positive attitudes toward violent discipline, and teachers’ use of violent discipline.

Note. Prof. exp. = professional experience. Standardized parameters are shown.

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Table 2.** Maximum Likelihood Estimates of the SEM (Direct and Indirect Effects).

Criterion	Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Own experience of violence	Professional experience	-.02	.01	-.17
Attitudes toward violence	Own experience of violence	.43	.12	.39**
Discipline	Stress	.16	.11	.14
Use of violent discipline	Attitudes toward violent discipline	.48	.12	.41***
	Stress	.30	.12	.23**
	Own experience of violence	.27	.14	.21*

(continued)

**Table 2. continued**

Criterion	Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
	Stress $\times$ attitudes	.08	.06	.06
	Own experience of violence $\times$ attitudes	.30	.12	.23**
Covariances	Own experience of violence/stress	.36	.09	.36***
Total effects	Stress	.37	.13	.28**
	Own experiences of violence	.47	.14	.37***

Note.  $N = 173$ ,  $b$  = unstandardized maximum likelihood estimates;  $SE$  = standard error,  $\beta$  = standardized maximum likelihood estimates. Model fit:  $\chi^2 [63, n = 173] = 103.104$  ( $p = .001$ ), CFI = .949, TLI = .929, RMSEA = .061 [90% CI [.04, .08], PCLOSE = .196], SRMR = .0796.

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

## Discussion

The present study addresses an important gap in the literature on the use of violent discipline in educational settings in low-resource settings. Specifically, the study assessed factors contributing to teachers' use of violent discipline in a representative sample of primary school teachers in Tanzania. The current study is the first to integrate teachers' personal experiences of violence in childhood, the presence of positive attitudes toward violence against children, and stress as potential contributing factors to teachers' use of violent discipline against their students in a joint model. In concordance with our first hypothesis, teachers' personal experiences of violence in childhood were significantly associated with more positive attitudes toward the use of violent discipline. This supports previous findings indicating an association between previous violence experiences in childhood and an approval for corporal punishment and emotional violence (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003; Rodriguez & Sutherland, 1999). However, previous reports came mainly from Western, high-income countries and only investigated parental disciplining behavior. Our study extends previous findings by showing this linkage in a sample of teachers in a lower-middle income country.

Furthermore, we found a significant association between teachers' experiences of violence and their use of violent discipline against students. Our findings are in line with studies on factors contributing to parental disciplinary behavior (Black et al., 2001), with studies in the school context in Western high-income countries (Lee & Weis, 1992), and with studies that examined the contributing effect of other forms of violent experiences (intimate partner

violence, childhood sexual abuse) on the use of violent discipline against students (Devries et al., 2014).

While previous studies documented an association between perceived stress, positive attitudes toward violent discipline, and the use of violent discipline in a similar context (Ssenyonga et al., 2019), we found no significant association in the current study. The possible reasons for this contradiction are twofold. First, the levels of stress in our sample were relatively low compared to similar studies assessing stress among teachers in Tanzania or other East African countries (Hecker et al., 2018; Kaltenbach et al., 2018; Ssenyonga et al., 2019). Second, our study was the first to integrate both stress and personal experiences of violent disciplining in one model with positive attitudes toward violent discipline and the use of violent discipline. In contrast to other studies that focused only on stress and attitudes, we controlled for the influence of past experiences of violence. Our findings suggest that stress levels are not directly associated with attitudes, but with violent discipline, while teachers' personal experiences of violence are directly associated with both attitudes toward and use of violent discipline. A post-hoc calculated model supported this explanatory approach, as stress was significantly related to positive attitudes toward violent discipline in our sample when teachers' personal experiences of violence were not included in the model (see Appendix G for detailed information on the alternative model). Since our study is the first to investigate the influence of stress, attitudes, and teachers' own experiences of violence on violent disciplining in schools in a joint model, our findings require replication, ideally in longitudinal studies, to better understand the causal mechanisms.

Subsequently, our results support other findings from similar contexts in Tanzania and Uganda (Hecker et al., 2018; Ssenyonga et al., 2019) with teachers' higher stress levels being significantly related with higher levels of applied violent discipline. This finding is in line with previous research on the role of stress for the disciplining behavior of teachers in secondary schools in Tanzania and Uganda. With the stressful working conditions that typically characterize the teaching profession in low- and middle-income countries (Hecker et al., 2018), as well as life hardships (Hoeffler, 2017), teachers who are exposed to high levels of stress are more likely to use violent disciplinary strategies against their students.

In line with previous studies that reported indirect effects of personal experiences of violence via attitudes toward violent discipline on the use of violent discipline in parents' sample (Deater-Deckard et al., 2003), our findings indicated that teachers' attitudes mediated the association between their personal experiences of violence in childhood and their later use of violent disciplining, too. To the best of our knowledge, our study was the first to

investigate this relation within a sample of teachers. Previous studies have shown a positive correlation between one's own experiences of violence in childhood and positive attitudes toward the use of violence against children in adulthood. In addition, one's own experiences of violence in childhood were repeatedly shown to contribute to the later use of violence against children (e.g., Black et al., 2001; Devries et al., 2014). By investigating those two direct associations for teachers and including the mediating role of attitudes in this context, our findings close a gap in research on factors associated with the use of violent discipline by teachers.

### *Diversity and Limitations*

Our general selection criterion included equal chance of selection for all teachers working in the selected school. We did not exclude them based on sociodemographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, religion, (dis)ability, and level of education or job experience. Additionally, an individual's sexual orientation neither formed part of the assessment nor was used as an inclusion or exclusion criteria. Therefore, we consider our sample as very diverse consisting of teachers from different ethnic groups of Tanzania (47 out of more than 120), rural and urban settings from 6 out of the 26 regions of Tanzania mainland.

The following limitations need to be noted. First, based on our cross-sectional design, no directionality of associations can be established. For teachers' personal experiences of violence, a directional influence might be assumed as per definition those experiences lie in the past while both attitudes toward violent discipline and the application of violent discipline strategies are asked for in the present. Nevertheless, as past violence experiences were assessed with self-reports, a memory bias cannot be ruled out. On top of that, teachers reported own experience of violence by their parents and/or family member. Thus, we cannot conclude on any associations between the exposure to violence by teachers in their own childhood and their current use of violent discipline.

Second, the sample size falls short of the recommended power limit for SEM calculation. However, by using a robust estimation method, item-parcelling, and indicators with adequate psychometric properties, we have followed the current recommendations and can assume that our calculations are not under-powered (Iacobucci, 2010; Kyriazos, 2018). Third, all information used for our study was collected with self-reporting instruments and are thus subject to mono-method bias. With this, social desirability cannot be ruled out completely. However, concerns regarding a response tendency toward minimizing the frequency of the use of violence may be addressed by the

acknowledgment of the high levels of social acceptance and legality of violent disciplinary strategies in Tanzanian schools.

### *Implications and Future Research*

Our findings are highly relevant for defining starting points for interventions. First of all, our and others' findings indicate that violent disciplining characterizes teachers' daily school life in Tanzania and many other countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In Tanzania, this is contrary to the existing laws, guidelines, and the National Action Plan to end violence against children (United Republic of Tanzania, 2009; United Republic of Tanzania, 2016). Therefore, we urge the relevant government authorities, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and teacher colleges to campaign and integrate alternative, nonviolent disciplinary strategies into teacher training programs. In addition, existing legal disciplinary measures should be strongly enforced against all teachers violating the existing law and guidelines. Furthermore, our results, as well as previous research, suggest that reducing stress might be important for reducing teachers' use of violent disciplinary strategies (Hecker et al., 2018). In order to achieve this goal, fundamental structural changes to existing educational systems are needed immediately, for example, equipping teachers with appropriate teaching resources, with adequate payment, and smaller classes (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GIEACPC) & Save the Children Sweden, 2010). In addition to the reduction of stress, our findings underscore the importance of taking a closer look at teachers' own childhood experiences in intervention programs. While existing interventions, such as *Interaction Competencies with Children for Teachers* (Nkuba et al., 2018a) and *The Good School Toolkit* (Devries et al., 2015) cannot directly change the childhood experiences of teachers, critically reflecting upon one's aversive childhood experiences can raise awareness of why teachers use certain strategies. Intervention programs targeting teachers' stress, personal experiences of violence in the past and/or attitudes, and beliefs toward the use of violent discipline, such as *ICC-T* and *The Good School Toolkit* have proved their potential to reduce violence by teachers. However, replications are still needed in other countries, other school settings, and with a longer follow-up period to demonstrate the sustainability of the effects.

Furthermore, our study explores the factors contributing to teachers' use of violent discipline against students and those factors' interrelations in a country where this practice is legal and socially accepted. Replications of our findings using larger samples are needed to examine the associations of teachers' own experiences of violence, attitudes toward violent discipline,

and current stress more closely. Additionally, future research should investigate additional factors that may be contributing to the use of violent discipline on the individual level, such as teachers' mental health, as well as on structural and institutional levels, such as legal structures, poverty, or migration experiences. A deeper understanding of drivers of violent discipline helps further refining preventative approaches aiming to reduce violence against children. To understand causal mechanisms that predict teachers' use of violence toward students, experimental studies manipulating the level of violence by implementing preventative intervention approaches offer a great opportunity without violating ethical standards.

## **Conclusion**

While a number of measures to end violence against children exist in Tanzania, violent discipline still characterizes students' daily life in primary schools. This study highlights the role of teachers' previous experience of violence, their positive attitude toward violent discipline, and their current stress in their use of violence. Our findings indicate that the existing guideline, laws, and the National Action Plan may not be sufficient to reduce teacher violence. In addition, we suggest the implementation of intervention approaches that challenge teachers' attitudes and beliefs on violent discipline and equip them with non-violent alternatives. In the long-term, we advocate for such strategies to be integrated into the curriculum in regular teacher training programs.

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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