

Article

Rethinking School Violence: Narrative and Empathic Transformation among Educators in a Psychoanalytic Group Program

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Abstract: School violence in early childhood education poses complex challenges for educators, particularly in contexts of social vulnerability. This study presents findings from the implementation of Psychoanalytically Oriented Conversation Circles (RCOP, from the Portuguese Rodas de Conversa de Orientação Psicanalítica), a group-based continuing education method conducted through an interinstitutional partnership between the Municipal Secretariat of Education of Porto Alegre (SMED, from the Portuguese Secretaria Municipal de Educação) and the Porto Alegre Psychoanalytic Society (SPPA), in use since 2007. Adopting a naturalistic qualitative design, this study explored how a single group of early childhood educators, participating in eight weekly 90-min RCOP meetings, made sense of endemic school violence. All meetings were video-recorded with informed consent; the second through seventh meetings were transcribed verbatim and submitted to inductive thematic content analysis, following Bardin's methodological framework. Findings revealed a shift in educators' understanding of violence, from an initial, simplistic view attributing it exclusively to factors external to the classroom, toward a broader, more integrative comprehension of the phenomenon. This shift was accompanied by a progressive development of empathy toward the families, schools, and limited external resources involved, which was associated with increased self-esteem and pedagogical creativity among the educators. These findings are discussed in light of psychoanalytic and competency-based theoretical frameworks. Future research employing longitudinal designs is recommended to assess whether these narrative and empathic gains are sustained over time and translate into observable classroom practices.

Keywords: School Violence; Early Childhood Education; Psychoanalytic Group Intervention; Teacher Empathy; Qualitative Research

1. Introduction

From a public health perspective, the study of exposure to traumatic experiences in early childhood has become highly relevant, reaching epidemic proportions in many social contexts. Evidence highlights the central role of adverse environmental exposures—Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—in short- and long-term mental health outcomes [1,2], with cumulative and multiplicative effects that extend beyond childhood, increasing the risk of mental disorders, chronic diseases, and social maladjustment across the life course. We define school violence as any occurrence within the school setting—arising from causes inside or outside the institution—that disrupts pedagogical work and leaves educators feeling unsafe or afraid. Its manifestations are heterogeneous, spanning verbal and physical aggression as well as psychological, economic, and sexual abuse. A substantial body of research

has evaluated programs to prevent such violence among school-age children more broadly [3,4], yet comparatively little is known about how it is experienced and addressed among early childhood educators specifically. Since 2007, successive generations of educators have participated in the RCOP, often re-enrolling, as part of SMED's continuing education activities; over the years, several municipal administrations, representing different political parties, have not interrupted its implementation. This study aims to examine the transformative nature of this interdisciplinary pedagogical-psychoanalytic intervention.

There is a scarcity in the literature regarding studies aimed at understanding the effects of violence in early childhood schools [5]. This gap is further amplified when considering the publication of results from psychoanalytically oriented group interventions focused on providing a space for listening and dialogue for educators, who are the professionals directly responsible for the pedagogical care of young children. This study seeks to answer the following research question: how does participation in Psychoanalytically Oriented Conversation Circles (RCOP) transform early childhood educators' understanding of endemic school violence?

The method of Psychoanalytically Oriented Conversation Circles (RCOP) comprises the following stages:

- a) Coordination: under the coordination of the Municipal Secretariat of Education (SMED) and aligned with educators' needs, a general theme and seven specific subtopics are selected to serve as guiding prompts for discussion during the first seven meetings. The eighth meeting is dedicated to synthesizing and integrating the group's collective procedural insights.
- b) Group formation: participants meet at the premises of the Porto Alegre Psychoanalytic Society (SPPA) and are divided into discussion groups composed of two SPPA psychoanalysts, one SMED education technician, and educators from schools who voluntarily enrolled in the Continuing Education Program.
- c) Group dynamics: group composition remains stable across the eight meetings. Each session begins with a plenary in which a representative from one of the schools briefly presents a school-related experience relevant to the session's subtopic. A psychoanalyst and an education technician then offer brief contextual comments. Participants subsequently convene in their groups to further discuss the issue raised during the plenary session. Conversations proceed through free association.
- d) Final synthesis: in the eighth meeting, all groups reconvene to collectively review the procedural outcomes. A celebration among all participants marks the conclusion of the program.

During the discussion of results, the following conceptual elements were of particular importance:

Empathy:

According to Kohut [6], the analyst uses empathy as an important instrument to make contact with the patient's inner world, and, at the same time, as a fundamental device in carrying out psychoanalytic work. According to this author, the importance of empathy is not restricted to the clinical field, also constituting an essential instrument for research and for understanding human relationships in general [7]. In the present study, the expansion of educators' empathic capacity—evidenced by recognizing that school violence encompassed the entire community surrounding the school, involving family members, students, and institutions—was associated with strengthened self-esteem and increased creativity in pedagogical work.

Competencies:

Competency-based pedagogy, or competency-based learning, is an educational approach that emphasizes the development of practical skills and knowledge applicable to real-life situations [8–10]. According to these authors, competency development relates to the capacity to mobilize, articulate, and put into action a specific set of knowledge, namely, identifying the problem itself, grasping the practical action required in response, and developing a stance that supports the use of acquired knowledge. From this perspective, competency development is not the isolated possession of knowledge, skills, or attitudes, but the dynamic articulation of cognitive-emotional elements across these three dimensions, in response to a highly particular circumstance. This configuration also constitutes a collective phenomenon [11], a consequence of collectively articulated abilities that transcends the sum of individual efforts.

Psychoanalytic Listening:

Psychoanalytic listening differs radically from everyday listening, oriented by the logic of understanding explicit, conscious discourse. This broad concept is addressed here through a scope sufficient for this article's purposes: evenly suspended attention (Freud, 1912), reverie (Bion, 1962), and holding (Winnicott, 1971).

According to Freud [12], the analyst must deliberately suspend habitual selective attention, normally subject to conscious organizers such as concepts, preconceptions, or sympathy/antipathy, allowing listening to remain equally available to the patient's unconscious elements. This mode of perception, termed evenly suspended attention (*Gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*), creates conditions for the analyst's unconscious to resonate with the patient's, capturing connections a rational, selective listening would miss.

Within this dimension of intersubjective communication, Bion [13] introduces the concept of reverie. Drawing on a model of mother-infant communication, in which the mother attunes to the infant's developing mind through specific unconscious mental elements, this function constitutes a form of elaboration and understanding of the infant's primitive emotions. By affectionately naming the child's mental states, this intimate interaction organizes the developing infant mind.

In describing the holding function, Winnicott [14] underscores the mother's capacity to tolerate the infant's moments of not understanding his or her still incipient psychic reality, states of "non-comprehension" that are part of normal development. This maternal capacity implies attuning to these states without prematurely "invading" the developing mind with her own ideas, helping the infant gradually develop its own notion regarding that state.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a naturalistic qualitative design to explore early childhood educators' understanding of endemic school violence in public early childhood education. The analytic strategy was thematic content analysis, following Bardin's framework. The corpus comprised narratives from the second through seventh meetings of the eight RCOP meetings.

2.2. Participants/Study Group

This study was conducted within a continuing education program for early childhood education professionals, implemented through an interinstitutional partnership between the Municipal Secretariat of Education of Porto Alegre (SMED) and the Porto Alegre Psychoanalytic Society (SPPA). The program targeted educators working in public schools located in socially vulnerable urban areas. Educators were invited to participate through their schools' administration, as part of the municipal continuing education program. Participants were randomly distributed into groups. The criterion for selecting the group for this study was the greatest coordination experience among the psychoanalysts.

The sample consisted of 20 educators, predominantly female (95.0%, $n = 19$), with one male participant (5.0%). Regarding marital status, the majority were married (55.0%, $n = 11$), followed by those classified as "other" (25.0%, $n = 5$) and single participants (20.0%, $n = 4$). In terms of educational attainment, most participants held either an undergraduate degree (40.0%, $n = 8$) or a postgraduate qualification (35.0%, $n = 7$), while a smaller proportion had completed only secondary (15.0%, $n = 3$) or primary education (10.0%, $n = 2$). With respect to prior professional development, the majority of participants (65.0%, $n = 13$) had not previously undergone SMED-sponsored training, whereas 35.0% ($n = 7$) reported prior participation in such training initiatives.

Socioeconomic context of the sample. As in several medium- and large-sized Latin American cities, Porto Alegre presents marked territorial inequality, with high-income areas and socially vulnerable territories coexisting within the same urban space. Data from the Municipality of Porto Alegre's ObservaPOA platform [15] illustrate this disparity when comparing citywide averages with indicators for the neighborhood representative of the schools where the sampled educators worked. At the municipal level, 99.67% of households have regular waste collection, 82.7% have tree-lined streets, 99.90% have access to electricity, 93.8% have public lighting, 87.9% of streets are paved, and 82.57% of households have sewage treatment. By contrast, the representative neighborhood has 60,729 inhabitants (4.31% of the municipal population) across an area of 38.56 km² (8.10% of the municipal area), with a population density of 1,574.92 inhabitants/km². The illiteracy rate in this neighborhood was 4.03%, and the aver-

age household head income was 2.1 times the national minimum wage (2010 data). The average years of schooling among household heads was 6.2 years for men and 4.0 years for women. Approximately half of the households in this neighborhood (49.9%) were headed by men, suggesting a relatively balanced distribution of household headship by gender in the surrounding community. It should be noted that neighborhood-level socioeconomic indicators such as income and literacy remain based on 2010 census data, as more granular updates at this territorial level were not yet available at the time of writing.

This manuscript reports a complementary analysis of the same RCOP cohort described in an earlier case study, which centered on the competency-based dimensions of the intervention [16]. The present analysis instead traces the narrative and empathic transformation evident in educators' discourse, examined here through a preliminary psychoanalytic lens; a more in-depth psychoanalytic reading of this same dataset, centered on the concept of the group psychoanalytic setting, is being developed for a separate publication.

2.3. Data Collection Tools

Over eight weekly 90-min meetings, the composition of the groups—that is, the educators, two psychoanalysts, and one education technician—remained stable. Fieldwork took place in 2019, prior to the implementation of pandemic-related restrictions in Brazil. The subtopics of each meeting were previously selected based on suggestions and demands from participating schools. The second meeting addressed “violence among children”; the third, “children’s narratives about violence”; the fourth, “physical violence at school”; the fifth, “when violence breaks bonds of trust”; the sixth, “normalization of violence”; and the seventh, “different expressions of violence.” All meetings were video-recorded with informed consent.

2.4. Researcher Role

The principal investigator coordinated and oversaw all stages of the research, from its conception to the final analysis of the data, including the inter-institutional interactions between SMED and SPPA and the leadership of the SMED–SPPA Inter-institutional and Interdisciplinary Research Group.

He was also responsible for defining the methodological design, a process that included participation in the Research Training Programme (RTP) promoted by the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA), in which a possible methodological design for the study of the Conversation Circles was discussed with a group of IPA international consultants. As part of this same effort, the principal investigator pursued a PhD in Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the Graduate Program of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS).

He further coordinated the fieldwork, the IPA research grant, the hiring of specialized service providers for data collection, and the assembly of the independent research team that supported data analysis.

Co-author Lucia Helena Freitas, the principal investigator’s doctoral advisor, provided intensive methodological guidance throughout the research design process, as well as general supervision of the fieldwork. Co-author Luciane Both contributed to data analysis support and to the descriptive writing of the fieldwork stages.

2.5. Data Collection Processes

The eight meetings of the Psychoanalytically Oriented Conversation Circles (RCOP) were fully video-recorded, a procedure that allowed for a faithful record of the verbal and non-verbal interactions that occurred throughout the meetings. The recordings were subsequently submitted to verbatim transcription, carried out by an independent researcher not involved in the coordination or conduct of the meetings, in order to preserve the fidelity of the material and safeguard the validity of the subsequent analytic process.

For the composition of the research corpus, the first and last meetings of the transcribed set were excluded. The first meeting was excluded because it was devoted essentially to establishing the group’s ethical procedures, and therefore did not constitute a thematic discussion space per se. The eighth and final meeting was excluded because it corresponded to a moment of procedural synthesis, aimed at revisiting and consolidating content previously elaborated during earlier meetings, rather than the emergence of new themes related to school violence. Accordingly, the analyzed corpus consisted of the verbatim transcripts of the six intermediate meetings, considered the most representative of the group’s thematic elaboration process.

2.6. Data Analysis

Data were examined through inductive thematic content analysis, drawing on Bardin's framework. We adopted a constructivist stance, on the premise that making sense of a phenomenon of this collective complexity requires tracing how participants interacted with one another, and requires access to educators' own accounts, their narratives, memories, and descriptions of what the RCOP process meant to them. Because this orientation privileges the depth of individual subjectivity, it also opens the analysis to legitimate questions about trustworthiness. We addressed this by drawing on Lincoln and Guba's criteria [17,18]: sustaining fieldwork over time, building in recursive moments of reflexivity, and holding repeated joint discussions among the research team as a check against any single researcher's theoretical bias.

The analytic procedure unfolded as follows. First, an independent researcher produced a full verbatim transcription of the eight video-recorded sessions of the sampled group; consistent with the exclusion criteria described above, the opening and closing meetings were left out of the analytic corpus, so the steps below drew solely on the six intermediate transcripts (Meetings 2 through 7). Second, two researchers with prior experience in this analytic approach worked alongside the principal investigator to draft a preliminary set of candidate subcategories, grounded in the earliest transcripts in the corpus. Third, all three researchers coded the narratives independently against this preliminary scheme. Fourth, the team then met to reconcile their individual codings, checking each subcategory for internal consistency and adding new subcategories by consensus wherever the data required it. Fifth, this two-step procedure—independent coding followed by group reconciliation—continued across the remaining transcripts even after the category list had stabilized. Sixth, this first round of analysis yielded a set of subcategories nested under broader coding categories. Seventh, taken together, the coded material pointed to several overarching themes running through the group's process; these mapped onto the concerns educators returned to most often, which in turn helped define the competencies around which the learning process was organized. Eighth, a second analytic pass, following the same iterative logic, produced a visual synthesis of the elements feeding into competency-based learning, in effect, a map tracing how teachers' empathy expanded to take in aspects of the violence they had previously overlooked.

2.7. Credibility and Ethics

The research followed the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, together with Resolution 466/12 of Brazil's National Health Council, the country's "Guidelines and Regulatory Standards for Research Involving Human Subjects." The Ethics Committee of Porto Alegre's Municipal Health Department (SMSPA/5338) approved the protocol (no. 9527081890005338) in July 2019. All participants gave informed consent, including consent for their case material to appear in this journal.

Teachers who agreed to SMED's invitation first attended an orientation session at SMED headquarters, where they received a general overview of the Conversation Circles. At the opening RCOP session, held on SPPA premises, they were split at random into two groups and given fuller detail about the study design, including the fact that sessions would be filmed. Every participant signed the informed consent form. Consistent with standard RCOP practice, they were also told they could leave the program at any point and that psychological support would be made available through the institutions if needed. A handful of teachers dropped out before the third session; from that point on, retention was complete, and none of the educators requested individual psychological support.

Video recordings were stored on an external hard drive kept under the custody of the principal investigator, with access restricted exclusively to him and the two independent researchers responsible for transcription and coding of the data. Files were identified by numeric codes, and the verbatim transcripts used in the analysis were anonymized, with the real names of educators replaced by generic identifiers (e.g., "Teacher 1," "Teacher 2"). The original recordings remain stored under these restricted-access conditions and have not been made available to third parties outside the research team.

3. Findings

The macro-analysis of the RCOP narratives, described in the Method section, yielded two complementary levels of understanding. The first level identified five thematic categories that captured the educators' central concerns regarding school violence. The second level revealed a sequential pattern in which empathy deepened progressively

across four distinct foci over the course of the meetings. Both levels are presented below, illustrated with direct quotations from the participating teachers.

3.1. Thematic Categories Identified in the RCOP Narratives

The macro-analysis yielded five thematic categories and their subcategories, summarized in **Figure 1**.

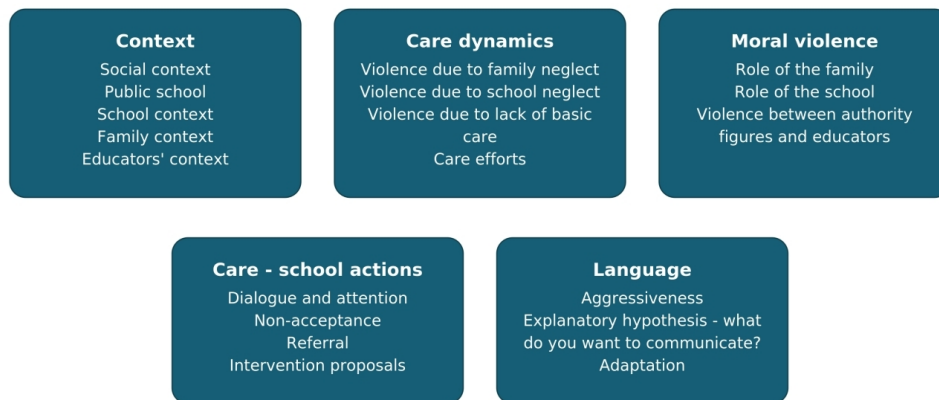


Figure 1. Thematic framework of categories and subcategories identified in the RCOP narratives.

Source: authors.

Context: Teacher 3 described a cascading effect of social neglect, in which the precarious conditions faced by families extend to educators themselves, leaving children caught in the middle:

It's an unassisted family, overwhelmed staff, and how are the children supposed to be? If the family doesn't have the means to eat, neither does the educator. Because no one supports either side. Oh, does the problem exist? Immensely! But no one listens. It's a huge snowball. (Teacher 3, Meeting 1)

Care dynamics: Teacher 1 emphasized the perception that family disengagement plays a central role in the emergence of school violence:

What's lacking in education, I think, is more family involvement. The family has to be involved — it's not all up to the teacher. You can't just drop it at school. No! The mother has responsibility. That mother [case discussed at the opening of the meeting], I think she's trying to get rid of the problem. (Teacher 1, Meeting 2)

A related account further illustrated how situations of material neglect placed additional demands on educators:

That worried us a lot. A while back we noticed there was a lot of hunger, really excessive. When we served the meal at midday, what others took 10 to 15 minutes to eat, they ate in 1 minute. So we had to serve more and keep an eye on it. That child's only meal was the one at school. The mother took a little while to accept it, to bring him to school every day. (Teacher 4, Meeting 1)

Moral violence: Teacher 3 pointed to the disconnect between theoretical guidance and the concrete demands of daily practice, highlighting unequal access to psychological support among staff:

It's all very nice, the theory is wonderful, but in practice we don't live it. It's you, 25 children, and you're on your own. No one comes in to guide you. You can't just leave it with the school office. The administration doesn't want problems either. So, like my colleague says: they have psychological support there to help them [the administration/office staff], but what about those who don't? (Teacher 3, Meeting 1)

A further account described a conflict of authority with an external professional, reflecting a similar dynamic of disqualification:

It took, I think, about three months for her to take him. When she finally did, the doctor sent me a letter this big [gesturing an enormous size with her hands], saying that I couldn't diagnose, that I wasn't a doctor, that I hadn't studied for that. (Teacher 5, Meeting 5)

Care—school actions: Teacher 2 described how the school's approach to a child with autism appeared to prioritize institutional justification over genuine inclusion:

This other boy, who's autistic, at school—the administration did all this back-and-forth with the mother. The mother denied it too, early on [the child's condition]. The only issue is that the school does this more to prove, 'look, this boy needs special education,' rather than to say, 'let's work this out here within the school.' The teachers keep trying, but the administration tries to remove the child. They don't understand how important it is for him to stay among the other children. (Teacher 2, Meeting 5)

Language: Teacher 4 described a child's escalating aggressive behavior as a form of communication whose underlying cause remained unclear to the staff:

This year he came back very rebellious. He fights a lot, fights with the teachers, kicks, hits. If you go talk to him and get your face too close, he hits you. You have to talk to him a lot. So, we're quite worried about this, because there isn't a very apparent justification. Why is this boy like this? What's going on with him? (Teacher 4, Meeting 1)

3.2. The Sequential Deepening of Empathy

This sequential deepening, moving from empathy with the child to empathy with the limited resources available outside the school, is presented in **Figure 2**.

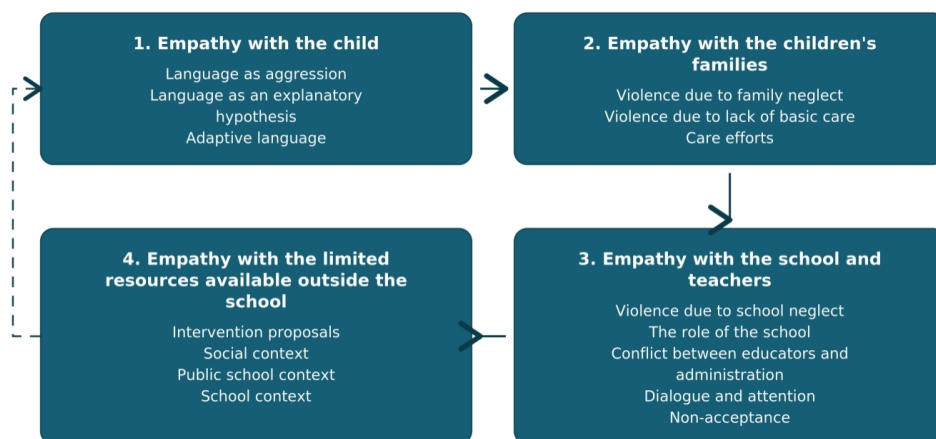


Figure 2. Competency-based learning developed during the RCOP on school violence: a set of competencies that emerge procedurally.

Source: authors.

Empathy with the child: Teacher 5 recounted a child's intense emotional response to being separated from school after an injury, illustrating the depth of his attachment to his teachers and peers:

He burned his little arm, you know. Then he had to stay home for a week because it was raw flesh. She said he would cry, grab his backpack, and scream. He wanted to come. And she [the mother] would say: 'you can't, look.' She'd show him the injury, and he'd cry holding his backpack. Then it happened that we

passed by in front of his house, because we'd been on an outing... when he saw us, he came running to the gate [imitating the child shaking the gate and screaming]. Then she said: 'calm down, they're going to stop to talk to you. They'll give you a kiss.' Then he kissed all of us and waved. (Teacher 5, Meeting 5)

Empathy with the children's families: Teacher 2 described developing a more empathetic understanding of a family's recent struggle to set limits with their daughter, recognizing the parents' disorientation rather than framing their behavior as mere negligence:

This girl who also has fighting at home—I had more direct contact with her parents, and at the beginning of this year they told me they'd had to start hitting her. Until last year, G. used to do whatever she wanted, because they thought she was too young to be told no, to be given rules. Then, at the end of last year and the beginning of this one, they want her to understand, and the mother doesn't know what to do anymore with a girl who doesn't obey, so she started hitting her. And she brings this up, maybe because it's so recent, right? This reality of hers, of this contact, of the parents hitting. (Teacher 2, Meeting 3)

Empathy with the school and teachers: Teacher 5 reflected on the emotional toll placed on educators who must manage a distressed child, drawing a parallel between the child's home environment and the teacher's own experience in the classroom:

If the mother yells, the child... so, imagine: a teacher who's already at her limit with the child. What is she going to feel? What's the child's feeling? The teacher's, right there, in that moment. (Teacher 5, Meeting 4)

A complementary account highlighted how a horizontal, collegial relationship between coordination and teaching staff was itself perceived as a valued and uncommon form of recognition:

It's good that you [addressing Teacher 5] have this awareness. I don't know if the other colleagues have it too. That's good! You treat them as your colleague — not as if you were 'the educator' and we were just 'the educators.' That's what I've come to understand. I don't interact with them daily, only through the meetings... I missed just one, because I was hospitalized and couldn't come... but from what I understood, she has that kind of exchange with the girls [the teachers]. We don't have that. (Teacher 6, Meeting 4)

Empathy with the limited resources available outside the school: Teacher 2 recalled a recent experience in which, despite the continued absence of a physician and a family initially resistant to intervention, the school was able to coordinate an in-person, multi-setting observation that ultimately engaged the family:

No, but you know, I remembered something important, a recent experience. A family that was also quite resistant about getting care for a boy—we managed to get the service that would provide care to come to the school to assess the boy... there's still no doctor... the municipal health staff who provide care... this was, he was still being seen at [the health center], over in [neighborhood]. Now that it's been sorted out, the school is closer. But it was the two professionals from there who came to observe the boy... they observed for an afternoon, watched him in the yard, in the classroom, in the cafeteria, talked with him and tried to do an activity... and based on what they observed, a meeting was also scheduled with the mother and, in this case, the grandfather. (Teacher 2, Meeting 5)

Taken together, these findings show a transformation in the teachers' understanding of school violence, from an initial, simplistic view locating its causes exclusively outside the classroom, toward a broader, more integrative comprehension of the phenomenon. This shift, evident both in the thematic categories and in the sequential deepening of empathy, is discussed below in relation to the existing literature.

4. Results and Discussion

A narrative transformation was observed among educators regarding their accounts of violence, an evolution from a reductionist understanding, dominated by the belief that violence stems primarily from factors external to

the classroom, toward a broader and more complete understanding of the phenomenon. This processual transition can be inferred from the thematic categories (**Figure 1**). Among the issues raised were the absence of minimally stable parental figures, compromising family structure, and the presence of aggressive children due to conditions suggestive of psychiatric impairment—situations that, while attesting to the severity of the phenomenon, exceed the reach of available pedagogical measures, generating feelings of helplessness among educators [19].

At the outset, conversations revolved primarily around the traumatic effects of endemic violence. As the method was applied, an evolution became established, describable as a virtuous circle (confidence in the method ↔ self-confidence ↔ creative functioning in the classroom), a phenomenon that we interpret, from a psychoanalytic perspective, as resonating with the process. Kohut [7] describes as self-reorganization through empathically sustained relational experiences, an interpretive reading offered here as a theoretical lens rather than as a claim of direct empirical correspondence. Being in the presence of someone capable of helping one tolerate suffering, while simultaneously allowing reflection on that experience, was a structuring factor. This pattern is consistent with broader evidence linking reflective, efficacy-building experiences to greater confidence and creative engagement in teaching [20], and with findings that psychological resources such as reflective functioning help protect teachers' emotional competence and wellbeing more generally [21]. The second significant dimension was the emergence of empathic phenomena among educators toward the children previously identified as the source of the problem (**Figure 2**). Initially, this empathy manifested in a polarized and split manner: teachers either aligned entirely with the child, condemning the family, or aligned with institutional pressures, to the detriment of an effective perception of the child's suffering. Over the meetings, a less dissociated empathic stance developed, materializing in greater awareness of the families' true situation, the school's difficulties, and the limited resources available in the community and support services.

This broader awareness, articulated through the RCOP's work, resembles Zarifian's [11] description of collective competence. Over the meetings, the conditions necessary for this group structure—responsible for the evolution of the empathic process—developed through: a) redundant circulation of relevant information; b) the emergence of a field of trust between educators and coordination; c) a more realistic awareness of the problem; and d) the definition of specific actions endorsed by the group itself. These operations stimulated the emergence of innovative ideas during the RCOP, verifiable through the recounting of stories about creative classroom moments within the same interval in which the group discussed violence: accounts of helplessness were interwoven with stories of creative actions facing the same phenomenon, functioning as an identificatory model that revealed possible ways out previously unperceived by the group. Along these lines, Perrenoud [9] explains that this innovative matrix can only develop when the learning subject is confronted with genuinely challenging problems, the decisive factor for learning in environments such as the continuing education offered through the SMED–SPPA partnership.

Guy Le Boterf [10] distinguishes between 'resources' and 'competence': resources, prior knowledge, skills, and personal qualities, are a necessary but not sufficient condition for new competencies to emerge. It is the capacity to articulate these resources innovatively that materializes the new competency. In the RCOP method, the regularity of meetings and the systematic conversation on school violence from multiple angles constituted the resources, or cognitive framework, while emotional intimacy and psychoanalytic listening played a determining role in the emergence of competencies. Through evenly suspended attention, coordinators created space to understand elements beyond the educators' rational discourse. From an interpretive standpoint, narratives about apparently incomprehensible violence may be read as experiences approaching what psychoanalytic theory terms the 'unthinkable', situations resistant to elaboration owing to their toxic emotional charge. We propose this reading as an analytic lens for understanding the educators' accounts, rather than as a diagnostic or empirically verified characterization of their psychic experience.

This passage from resource to competence also parallels Schön's [8] distinction between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. By bringing educators together weekly in a protected space away from the classroom, the RCOP functioned primarily as a device for reflection-on-action, revisiting, from a distance, episodes already experienced and collectively constructing meaning in light of the psychoanalytic listening provided by the coordination. It is plausible to suppose that this retrospective reflection prepared the ground for educators to display moments of reflection-in-action, apparent in narratives recounting creative classroom episodes. This hypothesis finds indirect support in the group's own narratives: accounts of helplessness were interwoven with accounts of creative classroom initiatives, indicating that the elaboration occurring during the RCOP was already beginning to manifest in

pedagogical practice. This pattern parallels findings from other reflective group interventions with professionals facing emotionally demanding work, such as Balint-style groups with teachers [22] and psychiatry trainees [23], with recent reviews confirming similar benefits for empathy and professional wellbeing across medical education more broadly [24,25].

The emergence of competencies may also be interpreted through the lens of the holding and reverie functions. The virtuous circle described above—confidence in the method ↔ self-confidence ↔ creative functioning in the classroom—can be reformulated and presented as a processual sequence in three moments: (a) an initial, provisional confidence in the capacity to tolerate the helplessness triggered by incomprehensible violence, associated with the holding function; (b) self-confidence that the group itself makes it possible to think about this incomprehensible violence, corresponding to a first moment of reverie; and (c) the expression of this elaboration accompanied by a creative gesture, both within the meetings themselves and in the classroom—a moment in which the reverie function would also be present. We propose this as an interpretive parallel rather than an empirical demonstration: the educators' transformational journey can be read as replicating, on a group scale, the dynamic Winnicott [14] and Bion [13] describe for the subject/object dyad—a reading that, while theoretically coherent with the narrative data, was not directly measured and should be understood as one possible analytic framework among others. This group-level extension of the holding and reverie functions resonates with more recent scholarship situating Bion's and Winnicott's dyadic concepts within the internal and actual dynamics of groups and institutions [26].

Limitations

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study:

- a) Selection bias with low external validity: the qualitative design and the focus on a single group, embedded within a specific institutional and sociocultural context, limit the generalizability of the results.
- b) Attrition bias: the data are based on a subset of group meetings and on participants who remained engaged throughout the process; the results may not capture the perspectives of those who discontinued participation.
- c) Social desirability, observer/interviewer, and group-influence bias: the study is based on self-reported narratives generated within a facilitated group setting. Although methodologically consistent with the psychoanalytic and experiential nature of the RCOP, such data are inherently shaped by group dynamics, facilitator influence, and participants' willingness to share sensitive experiences.
- d) Researcher bias: although several researchers participated in coding and validating the categories, the interpretive nature of qualitative content analysis implies that analytic decisions are inevitably influenced by the researchers' theoretical frameworks and professional backgrounds.

5. Recommendations

Based on these findings, we suggest the following directions:

1. Given the consistent gains reported in educators' self-esteem and pedagogical creativity, municipal education networks facing similar conditions of endemic school violence might consider incorporating group-based, psychoanalytically informed dialogue spaces into continuing education programs for early childhood educators, particularly in schools serving socially vulnerable communities.
2. Future research should include longitudinal follow-up to assess whether the empathic and reflective gains observed across the six meetings are sustained over time, and whether they translate into measurable changes in classroom practice.
3. Comparative studies across different institutional partnerships (municipal-psychoanalytic, municipal-university, or purely intra-school models) would help clarify which structural features of the RCOP method are essential versus context-specific, as illustrated by scaling efforts of early childhood violence prevention programs in other settings [27,28].
4. Complementary research employing validated instruments to assess secondary traumatic stress and empathy among participating educators, used alongside, rather than in place of, the qualitative narrative approach adopted here, could help substantiate and extend the interpretive findings of this study.

Author Contributions

Conception and design: C.A.F.F. and L.H.F.; data collection and coordination: C.A.F.F. and L.B.; data analysis: C.A.F.F., L.B. and L.H.F.; manuscript drafting and revision: C.A.F.F. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The ethics committee approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Municipal Health Department of Porto Alegre (SMSPA/5338), under protocol number 9527081890005338, approved in July 2019.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the recorded material and the privacy of the participants (early childhood educators) and the children discussed therein, and to comply with the terms of the informed consent obtained. De-identified excerpts of the transcripts may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional and ethics committee approval.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used an AI-based language assistant to assist with language editing, structural organization, and reference formatting. All data analysis, interpretation, and scientific content were developed and written by the authors. The authors reviewed, edited, and take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the final work.

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