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Childhood trauma and factors influencing primary school teachers' reporting of child abuse: Insights from Italy

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ABSTRACT

Background: Childhood traumatic experiences can profoundly impact individuals, posing risks to the physical and psychological well-being of children and influencing their psychological development. Teachers in primary schools play a critical role in identifying and reporting suspected cases of child abuse and maltreatment (CAM), which initiates child protection interventions. However, the psychological factors that influence teachers' likelihood of reporting suspected CAM cases remain largely unexplored.

Aim: This study investigates the influence of teachers' childhood traumatic experiences and psychological factors (i.e., cognitive empathy and psychological detachment) on their reporting behavior regarding child abuse and maltreatment, addressing an important social issue.

Participants: The study involved 1380 primary school teachers from Italy (88.3 % female; aged 21–69, M_{age} 46.7, DS 10.3).

Results: The results reveal that teachers with a history of childhood emotional abuse tend to report a higher number of suspected child abuse and maltreatment cases. Other forms of traumatic childhood experiences were not significantly associated with teachers' reporting suspected cases of CAM. Additionally, cognitive empathy and psychological detachment emerge as significant predictors of teachers' reporting behavior.

Conclusions: This research contributes to the existing literature by providing unique insights into actual reporting behavior within an unexplored cultural context.

1. Introduction

Child abuse and maltreatment (CAM) remain a social emergency today (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2020; Longobardi et al., 2022). In accordance with the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), we can define CAM as any type of maltreatment, neglect, physical or emotional mistreatment, sexual abuse, negligence, exposure to violent scenes, and/or any commercial or other exploitation performed to an underaged child or teenager, which results in an actual or potential harm to the child or adolescent's health, development, or dignity.

In order to protect children from forms of abuse and maltreatment, the school proves to be an important context (Fabris & Longobardi, 2023; Prino et al., 2018). School is the extrafamilial context where children spend the most time and where CAM prevention activities are often conducted (Solehati et al., 2022; Wolfersteig et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). The large number of hours'

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children spend in school also allows teachers to notice children's concerns or significant behavioral or emotional changes (Walsh et al., 2010). In addition, teachers have been compared to caregivers for children and adolescents (Fabris et al., 2022), and it is possible that students who experience closeness and trust with their teachers may make them recipients of calls for help with forms of victimization (Osofsky & Lieberman, 2011). Thus, teachers play an important role in child protection, as they can collect statements about suspected CAM and, in addition to providing an initial response of support and closeness, are called upon to report the suspected case to the judicial authority. In fact, in Italy, as in many other countries, the teacher is obliged to report to the judicial authority any situation in which there is a suspicion of abuse or maltreatment of the child. However, recent literature strongly suggests the need to investigate what psychological factors play a role in the teacher's intention to report or not to report a suspected case of CAM (Alazri & Hanna, 2020). The existing body of international literature indicates that a significant proportion of reports concerning child abuse and maltreatment originate from school personnel. However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the legal obligation to report such cases, a notable percentage of teachers, ranging from 4 to 11 %, admit to not reporting suspected cases of child abuse (Alazri & Hanna, 2020). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to increase our knowledge about the possible psychological correlates associated with the behavior of reporting a suspicion of CAM by a teacher in the Italian context, where such research has never been conducted. We will focus on some sociodemographic and psychological factors, in particular cognitive empathy, psychological distance in the relationship with the student (psychological detachment), and previous traumatic experiences in the developmental history of the teacher.

1.1. Teacher Reporting Child Abuse and Maltreatment, teachers' gender and years of teaching experience

Some studies have attempted to examine the predictive value of certain sociodemographic characteristics in relation to the likelihood of reporting a suspicion CAM. Among these, gender and length of teaching tenure have been the most commonly examined (Alazri & Hanna, 2020). With respect to gender, the literature appears to be mixed-some studies have found no significant differences between genders in the tendency to report more cases of suspected child sexual abuse (Walsh et al., 2012) or more general forms of child victimization (Choo et al., 2013; Goebbels et al., 2008; Greco et al., 2020). In contrast, other studies find that the female gender is more likely to recognize and report suspected cases of child maltreatment (Kenny, 2001; O'Toole et al., 1999). It is not easy to explain these data, but it may be that females show higher levels of emotional empathy and different emotional responsiveness than males, and in particular, there is evidence that females tend to show more empathy and more helping behaviors than males in relationships with significant others with whom they have a positive relationship (Rueckert et al., 2011). However, the data on the relationship between gender and reporting suspicions CAM need to be expanded. More consistent, however, are data on teachers' professional experience, which tend to show that fewer years of teaching experience are associated with a lower likelihood of reporting suspected cases of child abuse and neglect (Choo et al., 2013; Goebbels et al., 2008; Greco et al., 2020).

1.2. Teacher Reporting Child Abuse and Maltreatment and Teachers' psychological factors

Researchers sought to examine what psychological factors might play a role in the decision to report or not report a suspected case CAM (Alazri & Hanna, 2020). These data are based on the finding that while knowledge about child abuse and how to report it is useful in supporting a teacher's decision to report a suspected case, other potential psychological factors that could directly contribute to increasing the likelihood of reporting are not considered. One of these factors could be psychological detachment, which is considered a psychological defense strategy that the subject uses to emotionally distance themselves from others (Denne et al., 2019).

1.3. Psychological detachment: a defense strategy

Psychological detachment is a defense strategy that the subject may activate after intense and prolonged periods of stress. Teachers are a vulnerable group to stress and burnout (Oberg et al., 2023; Ormiston et al., 2022; Roloff et al., 2022). Some evidence suggests that teachers with high levels of stress may develop higher levels of psychological detachment from their relationship with their students, resulting in a lower willingness to report suspected instances of child maltreatment (Hupe & Stevenson, 2019). Similarly, Denne et al. (2019) found that social workers with higher levels of secondary traumatic stress showed greater psychological detachment from hypothetical cases of neglected children reported in some vignettes.

1.4. Empathy and its components

Psychological detachment appears to be closely related to an individual's reluctance to empathize with others, particularly in the context of students facing potential CAM. It is seen as a consequence of compassion fatigue, which is characterized by a reduced ability or motivation to empathize with others after prolonged exposure to their suffering, and draws on the concepts of secondary traumatic stress and burnout (Figley, 1995).

However, empathy is not a unitary construct; it can be divided into two components: affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Affective empathy involves experiencing emotions in response to the emotional experiences of others, which can lead to personal distress when confronted with intense suffering, often resulting in avoidance behavior (Stevens & Taber, 2021). In the context of this study, this could lead to an underestimation of the child's situation or a tendency toward psychological distancing characterized by emotional detachment.

In contrast, cognitive empathy, which is associated with the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others without necessarily experiencing the emotions oneself, may play a particular role (Brazil et al., 2022; Pang et al., 2022; Stevens & Taber, 2021).

It enables individuals to understand the mental states of others without succumbing to the negative effects of emotional contagion and personal suffering associated with affective empathy. Recent evidence even suggests that cognitive empathy may act as a protective factor against burnout, leading to less emotional impairment in cognitive tasks and better emotion regulation (Thompson et al., 2022).

In summary, these data suggest that cognitive empathy can significantly influence a teacher's decision to report a suspected case of CAM. Teachers with higher levels of cognitive empathy might better understand the child's perspective and effectively manage emotional stress, potentially improving their ability to respond to the situation. Notably, no previous study has directly examined the relationship between cognitive empathy and teachers' propensity to report suspected cases of CAM.

1.5. Teachers' childhood traumatic experiences and reporting of suspected childhood abuse and maltreatment

Another factor possibly related to teachers' propensity to report suspected cases of CAM could be traumatic experiences in teachers' childhood. While there is evidence that exposure to traumatic experiences in childhood may lead to a lower propensity to report suspected cases (Hupe & Stevenson, 2019), we must note that no study to date has looked at specific prior traumatic experiences of teachers as a factor that may be associated with reporting CAM suspected cases. However, there are several reasons to consider whether prior traumatic experiences, such as sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, might be associated with a higher or lower likelihood of reporting suspicions CAM. Some evidence suggests that adults who have had traumatic experiences tend to be hypervigilant about the possibility of abuse against themselves or others and tend to be overprotective of vulnerable populations, such as children (Cieminski, 2022; Jones et al., 2020). Along these lines, Jones et al.' (2020) meta-analysis found that jurors who had been sexually abused in childhood were more inclined to empathize with victims of sexual abuse, which led them to believe the victim was more credible and to assign higher guilt to the defendant. It should be noted, however, that several works in the literature find a link between prior traumatic experiences and altruistic behavior, while other works tend to argue the opposite, thus identifying prior traumatic experiences as a factor associated with lower altruistic behavior (Gomis Pomares & Villanueva Badenes, 2020; Prior et al., 2021).

While the existing literature offers different perspectives, it is plausible that previous traumatic experiences may increase a teacher's sensitivity to signs or statements that indicate suspected CAM in children. Teachers with such experiences may be more inclined to intervene when confronted with a student's distress, increasing the likelihood that they will report suspected cases of CAM. Given these complexities, it is evident that there is a significant need for further research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors associated with a teacher's decision to report suspected CAM cases.

1.6. The aim of the study

The present study aims to advance existing information by expanding upon a sample of primary school teachers in Italy. This study specifically investigated several socio-demographic aspects, including gender and years of teaching experience, as well as teachers' childhood traumatic experiences and psychological components, specifically cognitive empathy and psychological detachment. The present study posits that there is a positive relationship between years of teaching experience (H1) and the gender of teachers (H2) with the frequency of reported suspected cases of CAM. Moreover, we anticipate a negative and significant relationship between high levels of psychological detachment and teachers' reporting of suspected cases of CAM (H3). Furthermore, we propose a hypothesis that posits a positive and significant correlation between cognitive empathy and teachers' reporting of suspected cases of CAM (H4). In conclusion, it is postulated that teachers who have encountered traumatic incidents during their childhood, such as emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect, are more likely to report suspected cases of CAM (H5).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 1300 primary school teachers (88.3 % female; age: 21–69 years, $M_{\text{age}} = 46.7$; $SD = 10.3$). The majority of the teachers work in a public school (89.2 %) and on average these teachers had 17.66 (range: 0–43, $SD = 11.42$) years of teaching experience.

2.2. Procedure

This study followed ethical guidelines set forth by the Italian Association for Psychology (AIP) regarding informed consent, data confidentiality, and voluntary participation and was approved by the University IRB (approval #0445647).

For the study, 36 primary schools throughout Italy were contacted during the 2021–2022 school year. These schools were strategically chosen to ensure a comprehensive representation from various parts of Italy, including the northern, central, and southern regions. We also ensured a balance between urban and rural areas, and between public and private institutions.

Of the schools approached, 31 primary school principals, after reviewing the research protocol and aims, agreed to forward the invitation to participate in the research to their school teachers. It's important to note that the schools which chose not to participate were not systematically different from those that did. Both sets of schools were diverse in terms of their geographical location, urban-rural classification, and public-private status.

Teachers received by email an informative sheet, the informed consent form and a link to access to an online questionnaire. Only the teachers that signed the informed consent were allowed to fill in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was anonymous, and

respondents' IP was not stored. No reward was offered for completing the questionnaire, which was voluntary and anonymous.

To increase participation, a "snowball" technique (Etikan et al., 2016) was used, where primary teachers were asked at the end of the questionnaire to forward the link to colleagues in other educational institutions. Principals who participated in the survey were also asked to forward the invitation to complete the questionnaire to their colleagues in other educational settings.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Teacher's reporting suspected case of child abuse and maltreatment (CAM)

Reporting of Suspected Abuse by Teachers CAM was assessed with a single item that asked teachers to indicate whether they had reported a suspected case of abuse or mistreatment of a student to the judicial authority or principal in their professional career. The response to the single item included a dichotomous choice (0 = "Never", 1 = "At least once").

2.3.2. The Basic Empathy Scale – Cognitive Empathy subscale (CE-BES; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006; Italian version by Albiro et al., 2009)

Cognitive empathy was measured using the Cognitive Empathy subscale of the Italian version of the Basic Empathy Scale. This scale assesses empathy level using 20 self-reports across two subscales: Affective Empathy (11 items) and Cognitive Empathy (9 items). For this study, only the cognitive empathy subscale was used. For each of the 9 items, teachers answered a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("I completely agree") to 5 ("I completely disagree"). Higher subscale scores indicate higher levels of cognitive empathy. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.71.

2.3.3. Psychological detachment

Psychological detachment was assessed with two items derived from the work of Denne et al. (2019) ("I try not to think about my students outside of work"; "I do not worry much about the well-being of my students"). For each item, teachers expressed their degree of agreement (1 = "I strongly agree"; 5 = "I strongly disagree"). The mean of the two items was calculated to define the total scale score. The total score was inverted, so higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological detachment. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.69.

The *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire—Short Form* (CTQ-SF; Bernstein et al., 2003; Italian validation by Sacchi et al., 2018) is a 28-item self-report instrument that assesses five types of traumatic childhood experiences: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Never true"; 5 = "Very often true"). CTQ-SF includes five scales assessing emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. Scale scores are determined by summing the respective item scores. Higher scores indicate greater frequency of traumatic experiences. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.94 for sexual abuse, 0.89 for physical abuse, 0.90 for emotional neglect, 0.87 for emotional abuse, and 0.70 for physical neglect, indicating adequate to very good internal reliability.

2.3.4. Strategy of analysis

The first step of the analyses was to calculate descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution, for each study variable, including gender, years of teaching experience, Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) subscales (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect), Psychological Detachment Scale, and Cognitive Empathy Scale.

Independent-samples *t*-tests and chi-square tests were conducted to examine the bivariate associations between reported suspected cases of CAM and other study variables. In addition, correlation analysis was performed using Pearson correlation coefficients for continuous variables and point biserial correlation coefficients for dichotomous variables. Point biserial correlation was used to examine the relationship between gender (coded as: female = 0; male = 1) and the other study measures. This step provided initial insight into the relationships among the predictors and between the predictors and the dependent variable.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables ($N = 1.380$).***

| Variables | M (SD) or % | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. |
|---|------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|
| 1. Gender | F = 88.4 % | – | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Years of teaching | 17.66 (11.42) | –0.06 | – | | | | | | | |
| 3. Reported suspect cases of sexual abuse | Y = 37.2 % | –0.07* | 0.25** | – | | | | | | |
| 4. CTQ - Emotional Abuse | 6.61 (2.83) | –0.05 | –0.04 | 0.10** | – | | | | | |
| 5. CTQ - Physical Abuse | 5.62 (2.08) | 0.07* | –0.01 | 0.03 | 0.58** | – | | | | |
| 6. CTQ - Sexual Abuse | 5.97 (2.78) | –0.05 | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.39** | 0.37** | – | | | |
| 7. CTQ - Emotional Neglect | 8.83 (4.14) | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.06* | 0.56** | 0.32** | 0.24** | – | | |
| 8. CTQ - Physical Neglect | 5.94 (1.75) | 0.01 | 0.03 | 0.04 | 0.38** | 0.32** | 0.25** | 0.55** | – | |
| 9. PD - Psychological Detachment | 3.83 (1.49) | 0.10** | –0.02 | –0.11** | –0.04 | –0.05 | –0.04 | 0.04 | 0.05 | – |
| 10. BES - Cognitive Empathy | 32.56 (4.62) | –0.15** | –0.02 | 0.09** | 0.01 | 0.01 | –0.01 | –0.05 | –0.09** | –0.20** |

Note. Gender (1 = male, 0 = female); Reported suspect cases of sexual abuse (1 = At least once, 0 = Never); CTQ: Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short scale; PD – Psychological detachment scale; BES – Basic Empathy Scale.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Finally, a logistic regression analysis was conducted to identify significant predictors of reporting suspected cases of child abuse and maltreatment, with “I have reported suspected cases of child abuse and maltreatment (CAM) (0 = ‘Never’, 1 = ‘At least once’)” serving as the dependent variable. Predictors entered were gender, years of teaching experience, CTQ subscales (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect), psychological disengagement scale, and cognitive empathy. Goodness of fit of the model was assessed using Nagelkerke’s R-square (Menard, 2002). All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS (version 28).

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analyses

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1.

In terms of gender differences in reporting suspected cases of CAM, the study found significant associations with other variables. Male teachers were less likely to have reported suspected cases of CAM ($r = -0.07^*$, $p < .05$) and demonstrated lower cognitive empathy ($r = -0.15^{**}$, $p < .01$) compared to their female counterparts. However, male teachers had higher scores in physical abuse ($r = 0.07^*$, $p < .05$) and psychological detachment ($r = 0.10^{**}$, $p < .01$).

The number of years of teaching experience was positively correlated with the likelihood of reporting suspected cases of CAM ($r = 0.25^{**}$, $p < .01$).

The likelihood of reporting suspected cases of CAM was positively correlated with experiences of emotional abuse ($r = 0.10^{**}$, $p < .01$) and emotional neglect ($r = 0.06^*$, $p < .05$). Conversely, it was negatively correlated with psychological detachment ($r = -0.11^{**}$, $p < .01$).

Furthermore, higher levels of emotional abuse were associated with higher levels of other forms of childhood trauma, including emotional neglect ($r = 0.56^{**}$, $p < .01$), physical abuse ($r = 0.58^{**}$, $p < .01$), sexual abuse ($r = 0.39^{**}$, $p < .01$), and physical neglect ($r = 0.38^{**}$, $p < .01$).

Bivariate relationships between reporting suspected cases of CAM and other study variables.

With respect to gender, we performed a chi-square test in order to ascertain the presence of possible significant association with the likelihood of having reported at least a suspected case of CAM. We found that female teachers are more likely to have reported a suspected case of CAM than males, $\chi^2(1) = 5.60$, $p = .018$.

Table 2 presents *t*-test results examining the association between reporting suspected child abuse and maltreatment (CAM) and study variables, including CTQ subscales (e.g., Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse) and measures from the PD and BES scales. The analysis compares teachers who reported at least one suspected CAM case to those who didn’t, assessing the significance of mean differences and providing effect sizes (Cohen’s *d*) for each variable.

In terms of specific findings, it can be observed that teachers who reported at least one suspected case of CAM had higher mean scores on CTQ Emotional Abuse ($M = 6.99$, $SD = 3.30$) compared to those who did not report any cases ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 2.50$). The *t*-test indicated a significant difference ($t(1239) = -3.56$, $p < .001$) with a small effect size (Cohen’s $d = -0.21$).

Similarly, for CTQ Physical Abuse, CTQ Sexual Abuse, CTQ Emotional Neglect, and CTQ Physical Neglect, the *t*-tests revealed significant differences between the two groups with small effect sizes ($t(1239) = -1.28$, -1.36 , -2.30 , -1.62 , and $d = -0.07$, -0.08 , -0.13 , -0.09 , respectively).

Regarding the other variables, teachers who reported suspected cases of CAM showed lower mean scores on PD - Psychological Detachment ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.34$) compared to those who did not report any cases ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.55$), with a significant difference ($t(1239) = 3.91$, $p < .001$) and a small positive effect size ($d = 0.23$).

Similarly, teachers who reported suspected cases of CAM had higher mean scores on BES - Cognitive Empathy ($M = 37.25$, $SD = 4.80$) compared to those who did not report any cases ($M = 36.22$, $SD = 5.37$), with a significant difference ($t(1239) = -3.37$, $p < .001$) and a small negative effect size ($d = -0.19$).

All the significant effects observed in this study are relatively small according to the Cohen’s *d* effect size thresholds, except for

Table 2

t-tests to study the associations between having reported suspected cases of CAM and other study variables.

| | Reported suspect cases of sexual abuse | | <i>t</i> (<i>df</i>) | Cohen’s <i>d</i> |
|---------------------------------|--|------------------------|------------------------|------------------|
| | Yes, at least once | Never | | |
| | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | | |
| CTQ - Emotional Abuse** | 6.99 (3.30) | 6.40 (2.50) | -3.56 (1239) | -0.21 |
| CTQ - Physical Abuse* | 5.73 (2.38) | 5.57 (1.93) | -1.28 (1239) | -0.07 |
| CTQ - Sexual Abuse* | 6.10 (2.80) | 5.88 (2.74) | -1.36 (1239) | -0.08 |
| CTQ - Emotional Neglect** | 9.18 (4.33) | 8.62 (3.99) | -2.30 (1239) | -0.13 |
| CTQ - Physical Neglect* | 6.05 (1.89) | 5.88 (1.65) | -1.62 (1239) | -0.09 |
| PD - Psychological Detachment** | 3.61 (1.34) | 3.95 (1.55) | 3.91 (1239) | 0.23 |
| BES - Cognitive Empathy** | 37.25 (4.80) | 36.22 (5.37) | -3.37 (1239) | -0.19 |

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

emotional neglect which presents an effect size lower than 0.2.

3.2. Predictors of child abuse and maltreatment

This study employed logistic regression analysis to examine the psychological factors influencing teachers' likelihood of reporting suspected cases of CAM. The regression model included predictors such as gender (coded as *female* = 0, *male* = 1), years of teaching experience, and scores on the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) subscales measuring emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. Additionally, the model incorporated the Psychological Detachment (PD) and Cognitive Empathy subscales from the Basic Empathy Scale (BES). The odds ratios (OR) and their corresponding 95 % confidence intervals from the multivariate analyses are presented in Table 3.

The results of the regression analyses revealed significant main effects, indicating several significant predictors of reporting suspected cases of CAM. Specifically, years of teaching experience demonstrated a positive relationship with the likelihood of reporting suspected abuse and maltreatment (OR = 1.05, 95 % CI [1.026, 1.077], $p < .001$).

Emotional abuse, as assessed by the CTQ subscale, emerged as a significant predictor of reporting (OR = 1.09, 95 % CI [1.032, 1.169], $p = .003$). This suggests that teachers with a history of higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood were more likely to report suspected cases of CAM.

Psychological detachment exhibited a negative association with the likelihood of reporting (OR = 0.87, 95 % CI [0.805, 0.957], $p = .003$). The findings indicate that a decrease in psychological detachment is linked to an increased likelihood of reporting suspected cases of CAM.

Furthermore, cognitive empathy displayed a positive relationship with the likelihood of reporting suspected abuse (OR = 1.04, 95 % CI [1.010, 1.073], $p = .006$). This suggests that teachers with higher levels of cognitive empathy are more inclined to report suspected cases of CAM.

In contrast, gender (OR = 0.78, 95 % CI [0.515, 1.196], $p = .251$), physical abuse (OR = 0.92, 95 % CI [0.542, 1.699], $p = .296$), sexual abuse (OR = 0.98, 95 % CI [0.577, 1.689], $p = .603$), emotional neglect (OR = 1.00, 95 % CI [0.657, 1.533], $p = .903$), and physical neglect (OR = 1.01, 95 % CI [0.684, 1.507], $p = .741$) did not demonstrate a significant impact on the likelihood of reporting suspected cases of CAM in this sample of Italian teachers.

4. Discussion

Our study aimed to expand our knowledge of psychological factors associated with elementary school teachers' reporting behavior CAM. This is the first study we know of conducted with a group of teachers from Italy, and our data showed some significant associations between teachers' reporting of CAM and selected psychological factors. Based on our hypotheses, our data revealed a significant association between teaching experience and reporting a CAM case. That is, teachers with more years of teaching experience (H1) were more likely to report a suspected child abuse case. These data are consistent with current literature (Choo et al., 2013; Goebbels et al., 2008; Greco et al., 2020) and may suggest that teachers with more years of experience are more likely to encounter suspected cases of CAM and thus more likely to proceed to reporting. However, it could also be that teachers with more experience become more familiar with the law and intervention tools for suspected child abuse and maltreatment and more confident in their abilities and skills to handle the situation. In addition, our data show that female teachers tend to report more suspected cases of child abuse and maltreatment compared to male ones (H2). Previous literature has found conflicting data on the relationship between gender and the reporting of suspected cases of child abuse and neglect (Greco et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2012). However, some studies in the literature have found greater activation of female prosocial behavior in situations with known and significant others (Rueckert et al., 2011). It is possible that this tendency explains a greater propensity for females to report suspected cases of child abuse and maltreatment. However, the inclusion of gender in the logistic regression model was not found to be a predictor of teacher reporting CAM. Therefore, future studies should better clarify the association between gender and a greater propensity to report suspected cases CAM.

Among the psychological factors potentially related to the likelihood of a teacher reporting a suspected case of child abuse, we found a significant relationship between psychological distance and reporting CAM (H3). These data appear to be consistent with

Table 3

Estimated parameters for the logistic regression model predicting the variable "Reported suspect cases of sexual abuse (1 = At least once, 0 = Never)".

| Predictors | B | gl | p | OR |
|------------------------------------|--------|----|--------|-------|
| 1. Gender (F = 0; M = 1) | -0.242 | 1 | 0.251 | 0.785 |
| 2. Years of teaching** | 0.050 | 1 | <0.001 | 1.051 |
| 3. CTQ - Emotional Abuse** | 0.095 | 1 | 0.003 | 1.099 |
| 4. CTQ - Physical Abuse | -0.039 | 1 | 0.296 | 0.962 |
| 5. CTQ - Sexual Abuse | -0.013 | 1 | 0.603 | 0.987 |
| 6. CTQ - Emotional Neglect | 0.002 | 1 | 0.903 | 1.002 |
| 7. CTQ - Physical Neglect | 0.014 | 1 | 0.741 | 1.014 |
| 8. PD - Psychological Detachment** | -0.130 | 1 | 0.003 | 0.878 |
| 9. BES - Cognitive Empathy** | 0.040 | 1 | 0.006 | 1.041 |

** $p < .01$.

previous literature that has shown that greater psychological distance among teachers (Hupe & Stevenson, 2019) and social workers (Denne et al., 2019) tends to be associated with lower intentions to report suspicions CAM. However, these studies used vignettes and thus hypothetical cases. Our study tends to confirm similar findings by finding an association between lower psychological distance and reporting a suspicion CAM. Thus, it is possible that psychological distance, a psychological defense strategy for coping with emotional exhaustion and severe and prolonged emotional distress, may cause teachers to isolate themselves and become less able to engage in empathetic and close relationships with students. Thus, it is possible that psychological distancing leads teachers to be less responsive to students' emotional needs or to underestimate or ignore particularly stressful difficulties, such as dealing with a report to a supervisor or legal authority of suspected child abuse.

Another factor we examined that was significantly related to teacher reporting CAM was cognitive empathy (H4). Our data suggest that higher levels of cognitive empathy tend to be associated with higher likelihood of teachers reporting suspicions CAM. To our knowledge, no previous study has examined this relationship. Our data therefore add cognitive empathy as a possible factor that may be associated with teachers' propensity to report suspected cases of child abuse and maltreatment. This could be due to the fact that empathy plays an important role in helping and prosocial behaviors and that the ability to put oneself in the other person's perspective encourages more helping behaviors, such as helping a suspected victim of CAM by reporting it to the authorities. Cognitive empathy might have the advantage of allowing the subject to represent the mental state, in this case suffering, of the other, but reduce the impact on their own distress. In other words, a high level of cognitive empathy might allow the teacher to adequately represent the child's distress while protecting him or herself from the potential impact of the negative emotions associated with concern for the student, thereby reducing the possibility that these negative emotions will lead to the onset of personal distress with subsequent avoidance behaviors. In this sense, better cognitive empathy could be associated with a greater ability for individuals to regulate their emotions and thus better cope with a highly stressful and painful situation.

Finally, our study sought to expand current knowledge about the relationship between previous traumatic experiences in teachers and the reporting of suspected cases CAM (H5). This question has not yet been examined in any study, and therefore we do not have comparative data. However, from a theoretical perspective, there is a strong case for an association between prior traumatic experiences and reporting CAM. However, our data did not reveal a significant association between the different types of prior traumatic experiences of teachers and the reporting of suspected CAM, with the exception of emotional abuse. In fact, the data showed a significant positive association between having been a victim of emotional abuse in childhood and reporting suspicion CAM. Several data in the literature seem to indicate that traumatic experiences, and emotional abuse in particular, are significantly associated with decreases in prosocial behaviors (Prior et al., 2021) and empathic skills (Zhang et al., 2021). However, the literature does not agree on all points, and some evidence suggests that individuals who experienced emotional abuse in childhood tend to exhibit more empathy than nonvictimized individuals (Flasbeck et al., 2018; Ozdemir & Sahin, 2020). In addition, there is evidence that child abuse tends to be associated with more prosocial behavior (Prior et al., 2021; Vollhardt, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that previous negative experiences, particularly emotional abuse, sensitize teachers by making them more likely to perceive the student's distress and thus more likely to report suspicions at CAM. It is possible that individuals who were emotionally abused in childhood may have experienced strong feelings of abandonment, rejection, and exclusion, which may have made them particularly sensitive to the emotional distress of others and thus lead to a greater willingness to report cases of suspicion CAM. In addition, it should be noted that emotional maltreatment often accompanies other forms of abuse and maltreatment and is therefore the most common form of child maltreatment. Further research is needed to determine whether emotional maltreatment or other forms of maltreatment and abuse lead to a greater willingness to report suspected CAM, particularly when the forms of victimization occur together. Indeed, our data showed no association between other forms of traumatic childhood experiences and reporting CAM. Future research is needed to understand the relationship between teachers' reports of CAM and the various forms of abuse and maltreatment that teachers have experienced over the course of their lives and to learn more about the mechanisms that explain these relationships.

4.1. Strengths, limits and future directions

Our study has the advantage of adding to the literature data on psychological factors related to the reporting of child abuse and maltreatment by teachers because it includes Italian teachers, thus providing data from a cultural context not previously studied. In addition, many studies to date have focused on teachers' attitudes toward reporting suspected child abuse. However, although attitude may be considered a good predictor of child abuse reporting behavior, other psychological and social factors may also play a role in the transition from attitude to actual action. Therefore, our study has the advantage of examining reporting CAM by considering whether or not the teacher actually practiced reporting. This allowed us to examine the possible psychological factors related to actual behavior rather than attitude. Despite the strengths of our data, it is important to keep in mind, of course, the not insignificant limitations of our empirical work when analyzing them. First, we focused exclusively on self-assessments. Therefore, factors related to memory, text comprehension, and especially social desirability may have influenced teachers' responses. Future studies could use alternative instruments and third-party data.

Our study has a cross-sectional design, which means we can't establish causal relationships between the variables we examined. It's important to note that teacher participation was entirely voluntary; school principals did not exert any pressure to participate. This voluntary nature, combined with our use of snowball sampling, increases the risk of selection bias in our study. Although our sample size is large and closely mirrors the gender and age distribution of Italian teachers (INVALSI, 2021; OECD, 2018), it's not fully representative. This limits how much our findings can be generalized to the broader Italian educational context. For more robust conclusions, future research should consider using longitudinal designs and more representative samples.

Future studies could also investigate characteristics related to the context in which teachers work, such as the relationship between

constructs by comparing the responses of teachers working in schools located in different geographical areas (e.g., northern or southern Italy), in urban contexts (cities or rural areas), and with different sociocultural risks (e.g., high or low crime rate). Furthermore, we acknowledge as a limitation of the study the potential variability in child maltreatment exposure across schools due to socio-economic factors. Precise data on maltreatment reports per school was challenging to obtain, given its sensitive nature and the lack of annual counts. Additionally, the high teacher turnover in Italian primary schools led us to focus on individual teacher experiences rather than school-specific data. Thus, while our findings shed light on teachers' perspectives, broader school-based factors might also influence maltreatment reporting. Finally, we did not consider some factors related to the type of abuse reported (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional maltreatment), the severity of the abuse, or the characteristics of the alleged victim (e.g., age, gender, or ethnicity). Future studies could consider these characteristics along with some teacher characteristics (e.g., previous child abuse training, ethnicity, etc.) or CAM (e.g., frequency of reporting, support from school organization, etc.). Finally, our study is quantitative, so the individual subjective experiences related to the reporting processes or the psychological factors involved could be the subject of appropriate future qualitative research to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon.

4.2. Practical implications

Our study has some practical implications. Trying to understand what factors are involved in a teacher's decision to report a suspected case of CAM is important because failure or hesitation to report suspected cases could have serious consequences for children and their families. Developing training programs that promote better knowledge of the phenomenon CAM, its effects, and strategies to prevent and report such victimization is certainly helpful but may not be sufficient (Alazri & Hanna, 2020). Helping teachers develop better attitudes about reporting suspected cases is helpful but does not necessarily lead to concrete action when they learn of a suspected victimized child. Therefore, psychological factors related to suspected reporting behaviors at CAM need to be considered in training and interventions with teachers to assist them in child protection processes.

In this sense, therefore, training courses on child protection addressed to teachers could include activities aimed at promoting a greater awareness in teachers of how some of their psychological characteristics may be associated with a reduction in the tendency to report suspected cases of CAM. These training courses could also incorporate regular reflective and restorative supervision sessions, particularly targeting teachers who exhibit psychological distance from their students. Early identification of such teachers could be facilitated through assessments of psychological factors, starting from the earliest years of one's career.

Moreover, trainings could be enriched with workshop and experiential activities in order to solicit a greater empathic attitude and a closer relationship with students on the part of teachers. These could include spaces within a school psychology service where teachers can elaborate on past traumatic or dysfunctional experiences, thereby potentially increasing their willingness to report suspected cases of CAM.

More generally, teachers' past trauma and psychological variables such as empathy and psychological detachment in the teacher-student relationship could become target goals for practitioners involved in the promotion of school psychological well-being, considering the potential impacts on child protection. Promoting relationship-focused reflection interventions may be useful to help teachers improve their relationship with their students and thus develop a closer and more supportive relationship. This could be especially important for those teachers who present a strong psychological detachment from their students.

Finally, we believe that it would be particularly useful to implement training on childhood trauma and the role of teachers in preventing and combating child victimization from the university training years of future teachers.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study has contributed to extend current knowledge on the possible role of prior traumatic experiences and psychological characteristics of the teacher in teachers' reporting suspected cases of CAM. In particular, our study suggests that previous experiences of emotional abuse in childhood, more years of professional experience, low levels of cognitive empathy and high levels of psychological detachment tend to be associated with a lower frequency of reporting suspected cases of CAM in primary school teachers. Further research is required to understand what factors are involved in teachers' decision to report a suspected case of CAM and what mechanisms are involved. In order to effectively handle various forms of child abuse and neglect and enhance child protection protocols, it is imperative to possess a comprehensive comprehension of the factors that impact a teacher's decision to report a suspected case of CAM.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Not applicable.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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Informed consent

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

Code availability

For this research we used SPSS 20 software available from our University.

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