

## Article

# Empowering Novice Teachers: The Design and Validation of a Competence Model to Manage Verbal Aggressive Behaviour in the Classroom

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**Abstract:** (1) Background: Dealing with students' maladaptive behaviour in the classroom, such as verbal aggressive behaviour, is challenging, particularly for novice teachers. They often encounter limited opportunities for training and practice in handling such incidents during their pre-service education, rendering them ill-equipped and uncertain when confronted with instances of verbal aggression during their initial teaching experiences. This article reports on the design and validation of a verbal aggression management competence model to guide and substantiate novice teachers' immediate reactions. (2) Methods: The model's construction and validation processes were informed by a dual-pronged approach, encompassing a literature analysis to explore theoretical concepts and semi-structured interviews involving 32 educational experts to validate its practical applicability. (3) Results: The design and validation processes resulted in a comprehensive competence model consisting of concrete steps to be taken during or immediately following an incident and overarching attitudes to be adopted throughout the incident managing process. (4) Conclusions: This study contributes a structured framework to empower novice teachers, offering tools to address verbal aggressive behaviour within the classroom environment. Furthermore, it highlights the potential of incorporating this model into teacher education programs, facilitating the competence development of future teachers, and fostering conducive learning environments.



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**Keywords:** verbal aggression management; competence development; classroom management; competence development; validation

## 1. Introduction

Worldwide, students' aggressive behaviour in schools remains a topic of concern (e.g., [1,2]). Incidents of aggression significantly affect the learning environment, including students' and teachers' well-being [3]. Therefore, teachers must effectively manage these incidents [4,5]. How teachers understand the nature of classroom management (CM) strategies [6] or make adequate management decisions [7] appears dependent on their professional development. Although teacher education programmes (TEPs) cover CM, novice teachers struggle with students' behaviour management [8]. They report feeling ill-prepared and experiencing a theory–practice gap when applying what they learned during training in actual classroom situations [6,9]. This experience stems from two interconnected elements. First, practical experiences are substantial in developing competences [10,11]. However, due to organisational, ethical, and financial constraints, TEPs rarely offer practice opportunities in authentic, real-life settings. Second, prevention is central to most teacher educational literature, emphasising school- or classroom-level approaches [4,12]. Consequently, far less is published on how to react in a structured way to students' aggressive behaviour. CM courses, for example, favour introducing universal prevention management strategies instead of teaching specific skills and providing training opportunities to preservice teachers to handle classroom disruptions or misconduct [13,14]. Although prevention

is crucial, teachers will likely encounter maladaptive behaviour requiring immediate reactive strategies [15]. In general, maladaptive behaviour can be understood as ‘behaviour that undermines the individual well-being and group functioning’ [16] (p. 257). Within the educational context, maladaptive behaviour pertains to ‘any type of behaviour by students in a classroom or school environment that violates a written or unwritten social norm or school rule’ [17] (p. 602). The classification of such behaviours is primarily influenced by cultural norms, with aggression often being identified as a specific manifestation of maladaptive behaviour. However, to the best of our knowledge, no state-of-the-art, comprehensive, and validated competence model is available to guide teachers’ responses to classroom aggression, predominantly verbal aggression [18,19]. Novice teachers primarily rely on their prior school experiences and attitudes/beliefs to respond to verbal aggression incidents as they have not had the opportunity to discover which strategies are successful [20,21]. This introduces the aim of the present study to design and validate a verbal aggression management competence (V-AMC) model, assisting novice teachers whose behavioural repertoire to deal with students’ verbal aggressive behaviour (VAB) is still limited.

### *1.1. Aggression in the Classroom*

The concept of aggression has been studied in various disciplines, such as psychology, education, health, and criminology [22–24]. It is, however, a complex construct challenging to define [25]. Furthermore, the common usage of the term ‘aggression’ may not always align with its scientific interpretation [26]. In the present study, we adopt the social-psychological perspective as articulated by Allen and Anderson, in which aggression, carried out by one or more persons, is characterised as observable and intentional behaviour aimed at causing harm to another individual who is motivated to avoid that harm [27,28]. This perspective provides a framework for understanding and analysing aggressive behaviours within educational settings and allows distinguishing ‘aggression’ from broader phenomena such as antisocial behaviour [29] or specific subsets of aggression such as violence [30] or bullying [31].

Various classifications are available regarding aggression. In this study, we focus on verbal aggression—characterised by using words to attack others (e.g., insulting, swearing, name calling, threatening; [32])—as this type of aggression is the most prevalent in school settings [33,34]. The choice to highlight only verbal aggression builds on several reasons. Typically, aggression incidents follow a cyclical process, conceptualised as the ‘assault cycle’ (see [35]), consisting of five interrelated phases: trigger, escalation, crisis, recovery, and post-crisis depression. Intervening as early as possible, preferably during the trigger or the escalation phase, is recommended to avoid further escalation [36]. During these phases, rational argumentation-based intervention is still possible. In the subsequent crisis phase, arousal increases, and emotions get the upper hand, which makes rational and constructive control of the situation less likely [37]. Verbal aggression peaks during the escalation phase, highlighting the importance of verbal aggression management strategies [38]. However, selecting and applying such strategies necessitate mastering well-developed competences. Since VAB might be a precursor of physical aggression [33], early intervention also reduces the likelihood of physical consequences.

Another reason to focus on VAB is its impact on adolescents. Adolescence, encompassing the period between 11 and 19 years old, is a sensitive period. It is marked not only by biological changes but also by the development, i.e., improvement or deterioration, of social skills and cognitive control [39,40]. The transition to adulthood, and consequently, these developments, unfolds gradually, leading to further categorisation into early (11–13 years), middle (14–17 years), and late adolescence (17–19 years; [41]). Although exhibiting both verbal and physical aggression [42], adolescents tend to express more verbal threats and abuse as they mature [43]. Such VAB is triggered by different factors. In addition to biological, sociological, economic, and psychiatric factors, research highlights situational elements, such as sudden changes in the environment, invoking the display of aggressive behaviour [22]. Moreover, social status and peer acceptance are pivotal, especially during

middle adolescence, making these young people sensitive to social pressure and peer opinions [39]. This explains why the display of aggressive behaviour might result in positive peer status and popularity [44,45]. Aggression can, therefore, be seen as social conduct influenced by adolescents' social context [46,47]. Models help map this intricate synergy. For instance, social-ecological models focus on the interplay of individual characteristics and contextual systems [48], whereas cognitive-ecological models stress the cognitive processing of experiences resulting from this interplay [22]. Emphasis on those social and cognitive underpinnings must be considered in determining adequate CM strategies.

### *1.2. Teachers' Role in Aggression-Related Classroom Management*

Models explaining the origins and triggers of aggression have helped to develop a range of prevention strategies to be adopted in educational environments (e.g., [49,50]). However, schoolwide prevention or intervention programmes appear to have a minor impact on reducing adolescents' aggression [51,52]. Nonetheless, Wilson and colleagues' meta-analysis of school-based bullying interventions revealed that high-intensity one-on-one interventions administered by teachers were the most effective [53]. Although focusing on bullying, these findings align with more recent research suggesting that teachers influence their students' use of aggression [17,54]. Teachers interact directly with students during teaching activities and seem critical in impacting students' social context in schools [5]. In addition, teachers are accountable for developing and maintaining a safe learning environment to ensure student learning [6,55]. Appropriate CM decisions enable them to maximise instructional time and minimise the likelihood of disruptive behaviour [12]. Next to preventive strategies, however, effective CM also requires reactive strategies [11]. As stressed above, unaddressed aggressive behaviour disrupts relationships among students and between students and the teacher, thus affecting the classroom atmosphere [56]. Furthermore, it might result in negative consequences for teachers (e.g., stress, burn-out) and students (e.g., academic failure, feelings of unsafety; [4,8]). This reinforces the importance of timely and effective intervention when aggression occurs [57].

Few concrete tools for dealing with VAB are discussed in educational research. A recent literature review on verbal aggression in schools pointed out that interventions focusing on reducing VAB, or empirical studies mapping self-reported reaction strategies to VAB are scarce to non-existent [34]. However, substantial research into aggression in other socio-economic areas resulted in mechanisms guiding practice [58]. In healthcare or law enforcement settings, for example, de-escalation is the recommended first-line strategy for tackling VAB during the escalation phase [59,60]. De-escalation, a psychosocial intervention, entails verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to negate, prevent, or manage a (potentially) aggression situation [61–63]. Furthermore, de-escalation helps minimise an incident within ten minutes but is less suitable as a long-term solution [64].

Aggression is a cross-sectional phenomenon, suggesting de-escalation strategies can also be applied in a range of disciplines within the public sector (which also includes education) where aggression occurs frequently [65,66]. Existing de-escalation strategies are generally broadly defined and seem to vary across disciplines. As a result, no standardised protocol exists [37,60]. Nonetheless, some general features related to aggression management may be deduced. This enables translation and adaptation to the educational field while considering domain-specific features [24]. Such strategies can assist teachers in responding to VAB as active teacher responses remain scarce [67]. Many teachers believe ignoring VAB is an effective tactic [54], and responding appropriately seems challenging [68]. In addition, CM-related reactions are mostly intuitive, resulting from personal experiences, professional development workshops, interpretations from field observations, etc. [69,70]. It is, therefore, not surprising that novice teachers indicate they feel incompetent in implementing them [9,71]. Though these strategies are on the agenda of teacher education curricula, these programs often do not provide preservice teachers with sufficient preparation for effective CM [10]. This is partly explained by the complex nature of (aggression management) competence development [72].

### 1.3. Competence Development

Interacting with an individual displaying aggressive behaviour during an incident is challenging [73], and being confronted with aggressive behaviour can evoke a sense of surprise and being overwhelmed [74]. Thinking about and practising ways to react before encountering aggression are prerequisites to successfully handling the behaviour [73]. In addition, repeated practice related to real-life situations is also a precondition for acquiring such complex competence [75]. To explain this development process, we build the model of Blömeke and colleagues, viewing competences as evolving along a continuum [76]. When dealing with an aggression situation, teachers build on their cognitive (i.e., knowledge and skills) and affective-motivational (i.e., values and beliefs) dispositions. These dispositions result from earlier experiences and influence teachers' thoughts and reactions [77]. This processing of experiences is often described as the formation of cognitive event schemas [78].

Schemas are mental structures resulting from the organisation and elaboration of information as perceived in the environment. These processes connect ideas and concepts about, e.g., behaviour and help develop meaning [79]. Applied to social interactions, cognitive schemas represent experienced and expected events and actions, helping to comprehend and respond to novel situations. Moreover, schemas can be interconnected, resulting in internal scripts defining a procedural sequence of reactions (i.e., 'if-then' events; [22]). These scripts serve as guides [80] to deploy situation-specific skills, also called PID-skills (i.e., perception of classroom events, interpretation of that perception, and decision-making; [81]). These PID-skills are central to the competence continuum, connecting dispositions to observable behaviour.

Applied to aggression management competences, we argue that novice teachers' dispositions are insufficiently developed to deal with students' aggressive behaviour. This assumption is based on the discussion held in the introductory section of this paper, where it was highlighted that TEPs do not focus on theoretical frameworks regarding responsive strategies concerning aggression and the lack of authentic, real-life practice opportunities. In addition, novice teachers have difficulties in noticing (i.e., selectively attending to information in classroom situations) and reasoning about (i.e., interpreting noticed information based on existing knowledge) events [82,83]. This noticing and knowledge-based reasoning, conceptualised as professional vision [84], improves when teachers are sufficiently exposed to authentic classroom situations that help develop relevant competences [83]. As suggested by Carmien and colleagues, it seems feasible to provide teachers with external scripts designed by professionals and researchers to compensate for their lack of internal scripts [85]. These external scripts offer teachers tools for reading and interpreting classroom happenings [86]. In other words, external scripts enrich the knowledge base of novice teachers, contributing to an increased professional vision and, thus, active engagement in competence development.

Dealing with VAB encompasses a tension between general and situation-specific responses. Each situation involving aggression is unique and influenced by personal and situational factors [30,87]. These factors might provoke VAB or increase the chance of an aggressive reaction. Triggered by different elements, such as biological features, social environments, or previous experiences, they pose a challenge in devising a cohesive approach. The external script must, therefore, be applicable across situations but also consider situation specificity. This assumption aligns with a social-cognitive approach whereby cognitions are seen as providing stable behavioural patterns across a range of settings but are frequently accompanied by situational peculiarity [30]. In this approach, how people interpret and respond to incidents in the environment is contingent on particular situational (social) elements within that environment as well as on knowledge (cognitive) components they have acquired and integrated into their habitual responses. In addition, these processes are impacted by and affect emotions [30]. However, to our knowledge, such external VAB management scripts do not yet exist. This introduces the objective of the present study, which is to develop a coherent competence model acting as an external script to guide

teachers' immediate responses to students' VAB in the classroom. This research objective is addressed by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: Which elements can be identified in the literature to develop a competence model that helps direct teachers' immediate response to students' VAB?
- RQ2: What is the validity of the competence model considering educational experts' experiences in dealing with students' VAB?

## 2. Materials and Methods

Various data collection methods were used to construct a coherent and grounded 'Verbal Aggression Management Competence' model. Literature covering several domains was consulted to answer the first research question. Given the second research question, validation interviews were used to capture the experiences of educational professionals. The participants and procedures are discussed in detail below.

### 2.1. Participants

Present study aimed to involve teachers and other educational professionals working with secondary school students in Flanders, such as social workers, psychologists and psycho-pedagogical counsellors working in student counselling centres (CLBs), and student counsellors at secondary schools. Given the intention to validate the model's practical applicability in today's classroom context (RQ2), individuals who are actively engaged in teaching and/or possess practical experience in dealing with verbal aggressive behaviour from adolescents were targeted. Participants of the validation study were recruited by publishing a call for participation in online educational communities via social media since the COVID-19 context resulted in modifying traditional sampling procedures. In addition, researchers sent targeted e-mails to learner guidance centres and requested acquaintances to address their network. In the call, an informative video outlined the general purpose of the study, followed by an invitation to participate in an online interview. Those interested were invited to register online and provide demographic information. After registration, 41 volunteers were screened based on the following criteria: having job-related experiences with students in middle adolescence, employment in Flanders, and having direct experience with students' VAB. These criteria were deliberately chosen as students in middle adolescence constitute the target audience to which the model will be applied. Since the study was conducted in Flanders, this specifically implies students in the second and third grades. Nine participants were excluded based on the eligibility criteria, resulting in a selection of 32 participants who were interviewed between April and June 2020. Table 1 outlines their key characteristics.

**Table 1.** Participants' demographics.

Demographics	Indicators	Teachers ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Other Educational Professionals ( <i>n</i> = 7)
Gender	Male	6	1
	Female	19	6
Education type *	General	9	1
	Technical	17	5
	Art	1	0
	Vocational	12	5
	Special Education	2	2
Mean years of experience (SD)		11.69 (10.42)	10.4 (6.55)

\* The frequencies reported in this table reflect the number of participants meeting the criteria. Participants with experiences in multiple education types were categorised under each type that applies, raising the overall total.



## 2.2. Procedure

### 2.2.1. Designing the V-AMC Model (RQ1)

Following the aforementioned social-cognitive focus, key elements of social-cognitive problem-solving models (e.g., [88,89]) served as a blueprint for model construction. These models represent a stepwise method to solve conflicts peacefully and are mostly part of a curriculum focusing on social skills training to prevent students' anti-social behaviour. Next, literature concerning aggression, CM, and other relevant sources (i.e., workshops, prevention programmes, and local government initiatives) was consulted. The following search terms were combined to identify relevant articles: 'aggression', 'training', 'teacher', 'managing', 'class', and 'student'. To further refine the search, articles focusing on VAB of adolescent students expressed in the classroom, towards each other or towards the teacher, were selected. Combining the results of both steps helped establish categories addressed in our competence model. As a final step in the design process, de-escalation methods applied in healthcare and law enforcement settings were consulted and translated to the educational field. As mentioned in the introductory section, extensive research on aggression has been conducted in these sectors where first-line strategies focusing on the de-escalation of an incident are already developed and widely implemented.

### 2.2.2. Validating the V-AMC Model (RQ2)

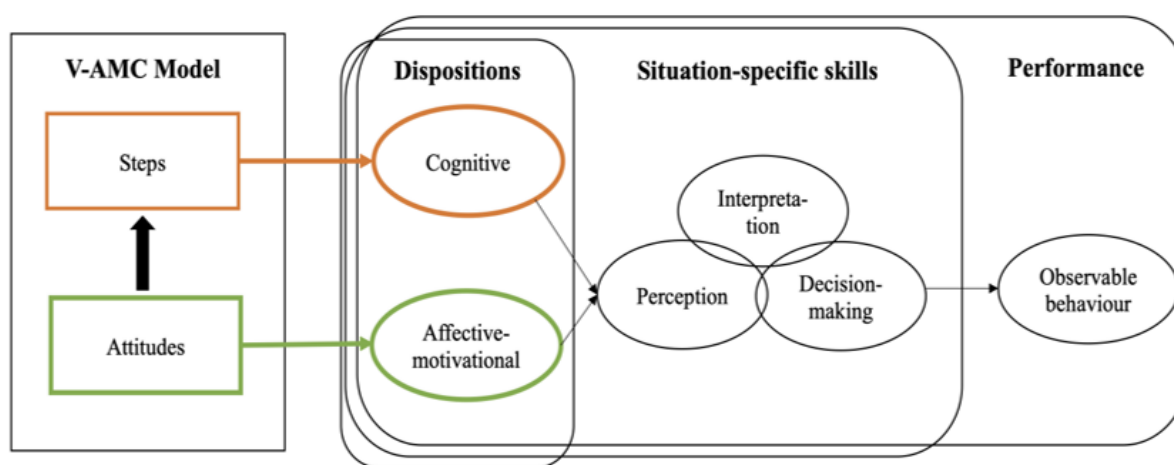
To ensure the validity of the V-AMC model, a multimodal format was adopted. A first validation strategy applies to methodological triangulation. Since this triangulation is seen as beneficial for theory development [90], we adopted validation interviews, i.e., 'a dialogue between interviewee and interviewer intended to confirm, substantiate, verify, or correct researchers' findings' [91] (p. 107). Each interview took place via videoconferencing, with an average duration of one hour and a half. A semi-structured interview guide, consisting of three main sections, was used to guide data collection. The first section focused on the participant's demographic background. The second section elaborated on experiences with students' aggressive behaviour. Both open-ended questions and a simulation video were used to identify corresponding strategies. The third section focused on the initial version of the V-AMC model. Participants were asked to provide feedback based on their experiences. The interview concluded with an open question to identify essential topics not yet covered. Each interview was recorded via the recording function in the videoconferencing platform and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, serving as an explanatory tool [92], was adopted to direct the research given the second research question. Coding of semi-structured interviews followed a two-step procedure congruent with Saldaña's approach [93]. First, the primary researcher selected and coded units of analysis of each interview, i.e., excerpts in which participants elaborated on responding strategies and provided feedback on elements of the V-AMC model. Next, a deductive approach was adopted. To identify strategies and attitudes adopted by the participants, a coding instrument (Appendix A) was developed. Coding categories in the instrument mirrored the steps and attitudes as described in the initial version of the model, and an additional category was created to cluster excerpts that did not fit in the existing framework. Subsequently, these excerpts were coded inductively by initially clustering them by theme and developing (sub)categories to delineate the themes of the newly created clusters. During multiple iterations, these categories were examined and revised. All transcripts were processed using QSR NVivo 12. To ensure reliability, a random sample reflecting 35% of the interviews was double-coded by two independent researchers. Inter-coder reliability resulted in a Kappa of 0.91, which can be considered 'excellent' reliability [94]. The primary researcher coded the remaining excerpts.

A second validity strategy involved triangulation by experts. Peer debriefing by an expert panel ( $n = 4$ ) was undertaken routinely throughout the study to add credibility to the validation process [95]. Experts with several years of research experience in health care ( $n = 2$ ) and education ( $n = 2$ ) gathered to discuss results and offer modifications. This additional phase ensured that the primary purpose of the research was preserved and retained a critical eye throughout the process.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Designing the V-AMC Model (RQ1)

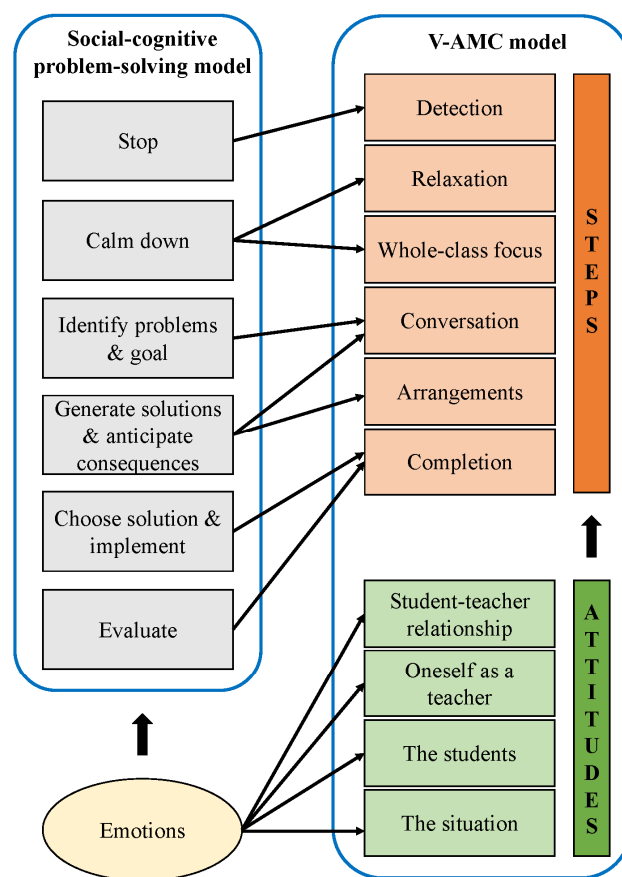
The first research question aimed at identifying elements from the literature to guide the design process. Inspired by the model of Blömeke and colleagues [76] and the social-cognitive approach to behaviour [30], the V-AMC model was subdivided into steps that can be taken during and immediately after an incident of VAB and teacher attitudes during such incidents. These attitudes influence day-to-day educational practices but play a specific role in addressing students' VAB. Connected to the competence development continuum, the steps correspond to knowledge and skills deployed in a particular situation (i.e., cognitive disposition), while the attitudes encompass beliefs and emotions associated with comprehending the situation (i.e., affective-motivational disposition; [96]). This is depicted in Figure 1. Both dispositions strengthen the knowledge base from which teachers draw when using their PID-skills regarding an incident. We reiterate that the V-AMC model is not intended as a one-size-fits-all model. Some steps of the competence model might (not) be applicable in a particular situation. In addition, the model does not lend itself to strict or blind adherence. It does not provide a rigid step-by-step approach for dealing with every VAB-related incident and is, therefore, not to be considered a protocol.



**Figure 1.** V-AMC model related to the competence development continuum.

##### 3.1.1. Steps

The steps of the V-AMC model were developed with social-cognitive problem-solving models in mind (see Figure 2), containing a three-phased classification: the initial phase (containing step 1), the de-escalation phase (containing steps 2 to 4), and the follow-up phase (containing steps 5 to 7).



**Figure 2.** V-AMC model related to elements of social-cognitive problem-solving models.

**Step 1: Detection.** Perceiving and identifying early warning signs as possible precursors to VAB contribute to both prevention and intervention, enhancing the success of subsequent strategies [97,98]. Warning signs are either person-related, manifesting as (non-)verbal cues, or contextualised, affecting a group. They often occur concurrently and should be considered in relation to students' standard behaviour. Therefore, this step focuses on detecting deviations in situations and behaviour [99].

**Step 2: Relaxation.** A first de-escalation strategy is calming students down by redirecting their attention to help them regain control. Depending on the situation, a range of activities can be employed. The primary purpose of these activities is to create distractions by diverting students' attention to a less emotionally charged topic or away from stimuli eliciting a reaction [98,100]. The least intrusive strategy is addressing students by name and describing the current situation. This might help orient, regain attention, and refocus on the present [101,102]. Additionally, humour can alleviate tension. Considering it might also provoke students [98], the strategy's appropriateness should always be assessed. If redirection strategies fail to produce the desired effect, maintaining students' mental and physical safety in the classroom becomes the main concern [103]. Since environmental factors influence the success of de-escalation techniques, this can be accomplished by removing triggering factors or relocating agitated students [100,104]. Retaining a safe distance with respect for students' personal space during removal contributes to a non-threatening atmosphere [60,101]. Moreover, granting time and space to calm down facilitates subsequent steps towards positively handling the situation. Allowing students to choose a time-out period can be advantageous as it supports autonomy [24,105]. Although removing students might benefit all parties involved, forced removal can be perceived as a punishment or humiliating, encouraging further escalation [59,60,102]. It is therefore advisable to properly frame reasons for removal and emphasise the measure's calming function as beneficial. Another disadvantage is that removal may be counterproductive, negatively reinforcing



VAB. Removal exempts students from participation in classroom events, which might result in long-term academic lag. When used frequently as the sole ‘consequence’ of VAB, it might encourage students to exhibit this behaviour more often [106]. If the classroom setting permits physical flexibility, inclusion time-out where students are faced away or secluded from their classmates while remaining in the classroom is preferable [104,107].

**Step 3:** Whole-class focus. Teachers are responsible for all their students in the classroom. Therefore, they should not focus exclusively on agitated students while forgetting the others [107]. Employing class-wide instructional activities requiring group focus or seeking the assistance of a third party (e.g., a colleague) to supervise the class or escort agitated students to a low-stimulus location [63] may be considered.

**Step 4:** Evaluation of the situation. After respecting the aforementioned time-out period, initiating a conversation with the students is advisable. It is up to the teacher to decide when this conversation can occur, considering the severity of the incident and the time available for all parties. If it is noticed that students experience a class-wide problem, pausing and having a group discussion about the issue is recommended. When the situation is problematic for a limited number of students, one-to-one conversations outside class hours are preferable since students are more receptive to teachers’ arguments in a private setting [108]. A full-fledged discussion may be postponed, eliminating interference with classroom activities. Key to the conversation is problem identification, i.e., determining the cause of the aggressive behaviour, and problem-solving, i.e., negotiating agreements and proposing solutions [100,105]. Using close-ended questions reduces the participation barrier. Once there is a verbal response, it is advisable to proceed with open-ended questions, allowing students to engage in information-rich and direct dialogue. Additionally, it is beneficial to allow students time to express their feelings, explain their opinions, and point out their requests [63,105]. Opportunities to express a solution or agree on handling the situation and future conduct might be addressed. Given the dialogical nature of the conversation, all parties should support the agreements [59].

**Step 5:** Establishing rules of conduct. The emphasis on general rules of conduct stems from preventive CM strategies (e.g., [55]). Investing in the joint creation of clear, concrete, and observable rules and procedures at the start of a semester contributes to efficient CM and immediately informs students which behaviour is (not) expected [109]. Students demonstrating VAB violate mutually agreed rules. The teacher is responsible for emphasising this by clearly disapproving of the behaviour and specifying which practices cannot be tolerated. In addition, students can be reminded about the repercussions they agreed upon earlier [110]. In terms of behaviour management, the general rules can provide a framework or foundation for teachers to assess the VAB and disapprove of actions that do not comply with the rules [109]. Furthermore, they also offer the opportunity to be modified in consultation with the student (see step 4). If necessary, feedback can also be provided to the entire class about what just happened, how it was addressed by the teacher, and what agreements were made. It is advisable to check in collaboration with the class group whether the rules are still relevant and appropriate and where adjustments may be needed.

**Step 6:** Completion. The purpose of this competence model is to guide teachers in their immediate response to incidents of VAB. It attempts to handle the situation as efficiently as possible, consuming only limited teaching time. The preceding steps contribute to this. However, these steps do not necessarily eliminate the need for additional follow-up [24]. For example, one-to-one conversations with students usually occur after regular class time. The content of these conversations has already been addressed in step 4. It may also be necessary to involve parents, school administration, or educational counselling services to resolve the issue. This after-school follow-up, which is not solely a teacher’s responsibility, is not explicitly included in the current V-AMC model as it is designed to guide immediate responses from teachers, preferably within the allocated class time. As soon as other people become involved, a shared responsibility (and reaction) arises, wherein the teacher can seek assistance. This is, however, beyond the scope of this model’s objective and, therefore,

not further elaborated upon in this article. Not only follow-up regarding the students is important, but self-care is also an essential aspect. Experiencing VAB can have a lasting emotional impact on teachers, particularly novice teachers. Left unaddressed, it can result in feelings of incompetence, uneasiness, stress, and fear of future incidents, negatively affecting teachers' performance and mental health [111,112]. Therefore, (self-)debriefing and discussing the incident with colleagues is recommended [113]. In addition to its emotional advantages, debriefing facilitates the exchange of good practices. If debriefing with colleagues is impossible, teachers should at least engage in self-debriefing. Reflection on actions and reactions before, during, and after the event helps them identify what went well and what needs improvement [114]. This evaluation of the experiences, in turn, can enhance the cognitive and affective-motivational dispositions of the novice teacher, resulting in alternative strategies to be applied in a subsequent incident.

### 3.1.2. Attitudes

Besides steps, the V-AMC model also addresses teachers' attitudes. Considered transversal, these attitudes act on each step of the competence model.

**Attitudes related to the student–teacher relationship.** Investing in a supportive student–teacher relationship helps prevent disruptive behaviour [115] and facilitates effective management of arising problem situations [55]. Founded on mutual trust, respect, support, empathy, and concern, such a relationship reduces the likelihood of aggressive behaviour and provides students with alternative ways of communication [37,59]. Teachers who consistently exhibit these relational qualities and effectively manage disruptive behaviours are considered 'good' teachers whose students feel safe at school and in the classroom [116]. This perceived safety encourages students to express their frustration differently, removing the need for VAB. A positive relationship can also facilitate communication with the student(s) exhibiting VAB [63], increasing the likelihood of a constructive conversation. In addition, it offers teachers insight into which strategies are likely to be effective with particular students and which to avoid [37]. Furthermore, teachers function as a model for their students. Students of teachers who support and positively communicate with them are more inclined to mirror these behaviours in interactions with their peers, resulting in fewer aggressive responses [102,117]. Therefore, early and continuous investments in friendly, respectful, and empathic interactions are invaluable [63,72].

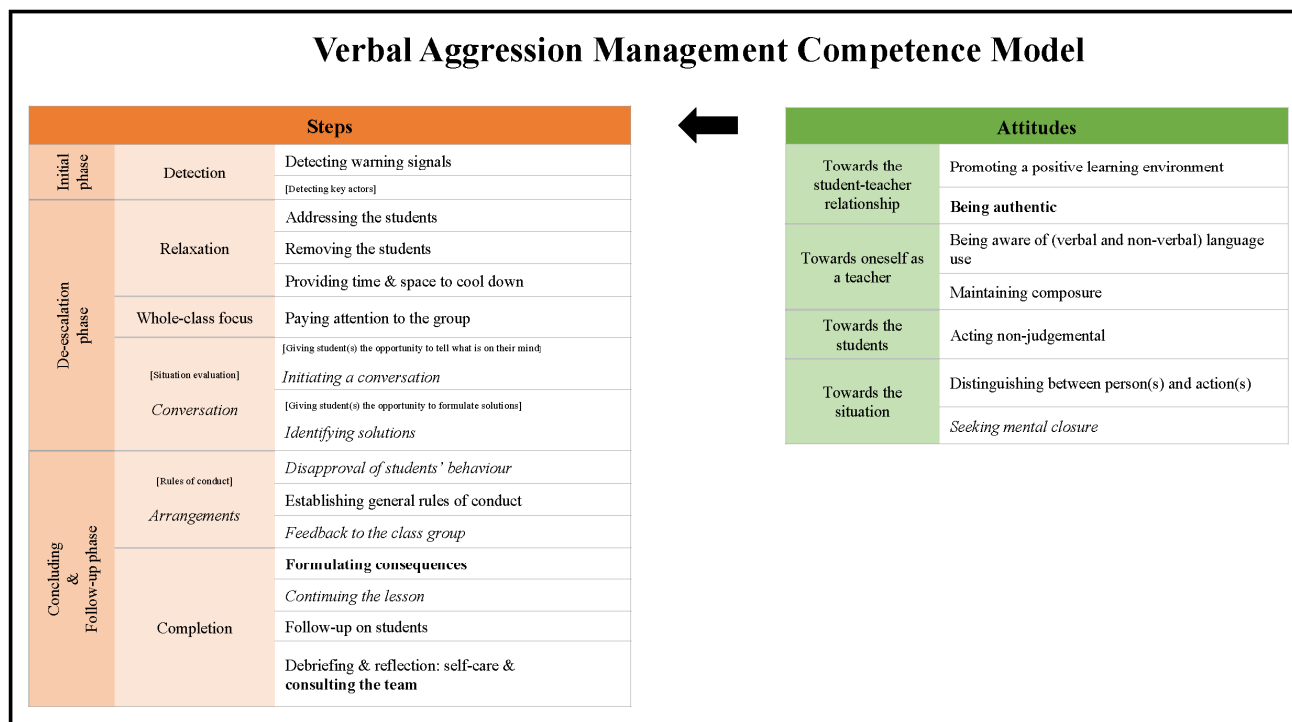
**Attitudes related to oneself as a teacher.** Interacting with aroused or aggressive students requires a high degree of self-awareness regarding one's verbal and non-verbal actions. Regardless of the situation, maintaining composure is recommended [63]. Teachers radiating calmness seem in charge, contributing to students' sense of safety in the classroom [98,105]. Addressing students in a controlled manner [118], using clear and respectful language [107], applying a gentle and soft tone with a low but clear volume [103], and maintaining a neutral facial expression [63] favour a calm demeanour. In addition, consistency between body language and speech is conducive to interaction [60,101], as is adopting an open, non-threatening posture [63,105].

**Attitudes related to the students.** Although calmness is recommended, it does not equate to passively enduring VAB. Being firm yet compassionate, setting limits, and consistently enforcing the class rules all contribute to students' sense of safety in the classroom [107,116]. Allowing feelings about students to interfere with situational management is strongly discouraged [59,103]. This also implies minimising judgements about students based on prior interactions or their 'reputation' [63]. Comparisons to siblings, events, or other students are off-limit since this aggravates the situation and creates an unsafe environment [101].

**Attitudes related to the situation.** Seeing the incident as a confluence of situational factors instead of a personal attack can assist the teacher's decision-making process. Interpreting students' VAB as out of control or as the result of a crisis helps detach emotionally from the incident [59,105]. Although not easy, it is advisable to close the incident without resentment and to pay extra attention to encouraging students' positive behaviour [101].

### 3.2. Validating the V-AMC Model (RQ2)

The second research question sought to validate the V-AMC model through interviews with educational professionals ( $n = 32$ ). Analysis of the interview data resulted in renaming some categories, articulating pre-existing implicit steps more explicitly, eliminating steps not agreed upon, and adding two substeps and two attitude-related components to the V-AMC model. These modifications and the final V-AMC model can be examined in Figure 3. The additional steps and attitudes will be elaborated upon further below. It is important to note herein that these additions are also substantiated by recent literature on classroom management.



**Figure 3.** The V-AMC model resulting from RQ1 and RQ2. Elements in *italics* are formulated more explicitly, elements in [square brackets] are omitted in the final model, and elements in **bold** are added to the final model after the validation step.

The first substep, categorised under step 6, pertains to formulating consequences following acts of VAB. While participants endorsed the elements of the competence model, it was commonly mentioned that proper repercussions should follow students' VAB. Several explanations were provided. First, attaching consequences was considered by the participants as imperative to VAB as such behaviour could not be left unpunished. Although consequences should ideally be implemented as the final step, the repeated enactment of the same behaviour—after being already addressed—necessitates the imposition of consequences that are disadvantageous/undesirable for the student [110]. Second, interviewees reported a signalling function towards all students demonstrating this behaviour would not be tolerated in the classroom. This is in line with step 5 where behavioural guidelines are translated into general rules of conduct. These rules entail specific expectations from both students and teacher(s). Deviating from these rules, and thus engaging in behaviour that falls outside the parameters of the agreements, inevitably leads to certain consequences [119]. Alternatively, as one teacher puts it,

*'I think it is vital that students know the clear consequences when rules are established and not followed. (...) Rules are set, but what happens afterwards? That is frequently unclear to them.'*

This approach holds the student accountable for their actions, as the consequences to be endured result from an informed decision [110].

The second substep, which is also aligned with the sixth step of the model, involves consultation of the team. The school team's support was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Although interviewees acknowledged it is difficult for novice teachers to admit things are not going smoothly in their classroom, the majority emphasised the importance of engaging in dialogue with colleagues about their challenges.

*'Sometimes it can be helpful to have a colleague who also teaches in the same class, saying, 'I did this' or 'That did not work' or to hear that other colleagues find it challenging as well. Sometimes, it helps to know that it is not just you.'*

These conversations were considered beneficial for venting feelings and viewed as opportunities to exchange experiences and harmonise to align school-level practices and policies. However, according to some participants, the school's culture is crucial in determining whether or not teachers disclose encountered incidents. According to one interviewee,

*'A school culture also does many things (...). The culture at school, the team that supports you, and the administration that must always be on your side are ultimately very important as well. That feeling of safety.'*

Another participant commented,

*'Being supported by an entire culture and everything around it. If the culture says, 'making mistakes is not allowed', you have a problem since you will never be able to bring change.'*

The third element added to the model relates to teachers' attitudes concerning the student–teacher relationship. Most interviewees indicated that teachers should remain authentic to who they are and the values they consider important. Not only does this demonstrate humanity and, by extension, the possibility of making mistakes, but, as one teacher stated,

*'That can also help enormously in creating a safe situation. You have to dare to show humanity!'*

Students easily recognise whether their teacher is not sincere or feigning, hence resulting in consequences that are contrary to the teachers' original objectives [120]. According to the interviewees, being authentic also eliminates the need to challenge this:

*'Do not be the super-strict teacher if that does not work for you. Students sense the difference, that you are not authentic, and they will take advantage of that. Moreover, you will not be able to maintain this.'*

It was also suggested that authenticity implies being truthful about emotions and, more concretely, about the impact of the displayed behaviour. However, participants indicated that it is difficult to discern how much feelings and information should be shared:

*'I frequently tell things about myself or what I have experienced, so they know me reasonably well. The bits about my private life I keep limited. (...) Without divulging everything, I also demonstrate that I am only human.'*

*'I believe there is a narrow line in giving too much information. Indeed, I think it is appropriate to say: 'Look, folks. Today is not my day. I will do my very best. Try your best as well.' That approach differs from starting with: 'I will not do my best because my cat died.'*

#### 4. Discussion

Although reacting appropriately to students' VAB is crucial, TEPs seem to appear inadequate in preparing preservice teachers to manage students' maladaptive behaviour effectively [10,121]. Linked to competence development, it is argued that novice teachers lack internal cognitive scripts to deal with this behaviour. Combining literature with semi-structured validation interviews, the present study aimed to develop a competence model serving as an external cognitive script to guide teachers' responses [85]. Based on the literature, a stepwise procedure was conducted to design a V-AMC model. Validation interviews with educational professionals refined and validated the competence model.

Regarding the design of the V-AMC model, the construction process respected particular features of aggression conceptualisation and competence development. At the outset of the design process, the link between both was considered. The social-psychological definition of aggression directly refers to situation-specific skills concerning perception and interpretation [76]. The importance of perception features strongly in defining aggression as an observable behaviour. Next, interpretation is emphasised by stressing aggression as intentional behaviour to harm another [27,28]. Furthermore, design decisions were made to select and organise elements of the V-AMC model, keeping consistency in mind between the definition of aggression and the critical features of the competence development process. Building on the assumption of competences as dispositions, we proposed a distinction between steps and attitudes in the V-AMC model. Also, we stressed how the development of these dispositions depends on mobilising perception, interpretation, and decision-making skills (see Figure 1). Furthermore, scripts function as the basis for interpreting and responding to specific incidents [86]. This is aligned with the social-cognitive approach stressing that cognitive evaluation (i.e., perception) of events, interpretation of these events, and competency in responding in multiple ways (i.e., decision-making) drive self-regulatory mechanisms that steer social behaviour [30]. Looking again at the V-AMC model, teacher attention is directed towards classroom interaction elements by explicitly including detection as a separate step. This approach seems congruent with findings in the literature that novice teachers struggle to notice significant events in their classrooms [122]. Detection of warning signals provides insight into how the VAB potentially supports the incident's progression [123]. However, it should be stressed that detection remains essential in every aspect of the competence model given adjusting related strategies.

Second, aggression is multidimensional [124], with cause and effect often indistinguishable and influenced by several factors situated in and outside the classroom. Because of this multidimensionality, it is challenging for teachers to respond instantly. However, an immediate reaction might prevent further escalation of aggressive behaviour [33,56]. The V-AMC model incorporated two elements to reconcile contextual influences and instant response: the inclusion of relaxation and immediate-effect de-escalation techniques and a strong emphasis on the importance of follow-up. During this follow-up, additional emphasis can be placed on future prevention of VAB, for instance, by focusing on students' prosocial behaviour development. However, as stated before, the primary focus of this V-AMC model is reaction rather than prevention. Hence, preventive strategies were addressed in the model solely in the functionality of the reactive strategies. This can be seen, for example, in the formulation of general rules of conduct (step 4). These rules can be seen as preventive measures since they provide a guiding framework for 'appropriate' classroom behaviour. However, within the V-AMC model, they serve a functional role in the teacher's response strategy. On the one hand, they provide a framework by which the teacher can indicate and label the observed behaviour as a violation of the rules and, therefore, not in accordance with the general classroom agreements. On the other hand, they can assist the teacher in formulating consequences for the behaviour, both on an individual and group level. Furthermore, as the concept of aggression is subject to situational and contextual factors, applying the V-AMC model is likewise highly situational. This is reflected in the recommended application of the competence model. Instead of following steps in a rigid



order, the model is intended as a ‘menu of options’ from which teachers can select what is relevant to the situation and choose to deploy steps interchangeably.

Third, dealing with VAB is partly a subjective undertaking. Interpretation of behaviour is individual-dependent: what one considers aggressive behaviour may be characterised as mischief by another [37]. How teachers react to VAB depends on their perception and interpretation of that behaviour [57], which is also fundamental to competence development (i.e., professional vision; [84]). Focusing on the continuous development of situation-specific skills, i.e., perception, interpretation, and decision-making, cognitive and affective-motivational dispositions are further organised and elaborated [76]. Therefore, developing teachers’ V-AMC is not straightforward. Again, the flexible structure of the V-AMC model is advantageous: teachers consciously select strategies based on their interpretation of VAB and adhere to attitudes fitting their personality. In line with this, ignoring students’ VAB was deliberately not included as a strategy in the V-AMC model. Ignoring can be helpful when students display VAB to obtain attention [21], often deployed in the hope that the behaviour will disappear [125]. However, this strategy seems dependent on making accurate predictions, considering that ignoring VAB might result in social maladjustment [3]. Both this identification process [122], or noticing and reasoning about classroom behaviour, and the ability to make predictions [68] are less developed in novice teachers due to their limited classroom experiences. Thus, ignoring VAB contradicts the purpose of our competence model, i.e., guiding novice teachers’ responses to VAB by providing an external script to compensate for their lack of experience [85].

The present study was one of the first attempts to specifically interview teachers about and investigate their responses to incidents of VAB in the classroom [34]. Combining literature with a validation activity resulted in a competence model addressing novice teachers’ lack of V-AMC. This model is particularly relevant to the design of TEPs or professional development initiatives as it can be used to elevate teacher competence regarding verbal aggression management. In line with this, the current study also offers a significant contribution to the growing body of research aiming at bridging the theory–practice gap by providing concrete strategies and tools for addressing instances of VAB.

Nevertheless, this study, and therefore the generalisability of the final model, is subject to certain limitations. The first issue with the current study pertains to the participants of the validation activity. This validation was only aimed at educational experts’ perspectives. These experts volunteered to participate in the study, which might raise concerns regarding the representativeness of the educational area. As previously stated, aggression is a subjective concept; hence, those who may have experienced verbal aggression but did not identify it as such were not included in the study. Furthermore, the majority of the participants were female. Despite the lack of consensus on the impact of gender on manifestations of verbal aggression (for example, some studies indicate that female teachers report more instances of verbal aggression than their male counterparts, e.g., [8], whereas others report no apparent associations, e.g., [106]), the effect of gender on management procedures is not well documented. This raises the possibility that the management of such incidents might be influenced by gender, which, therefore, also affects the results of our study. The second source of uncertainty is associated with the context of the Flemish education system. This system exhibits a diverse educational landscape in terms of socio-economic and ethnic school segregation [126]. As researchers, we had no control over the representation of these schools in our sample due to the voluntary nature of the sampling procedure. Previously, however, we alluded to the notion that the school culture plays a pivotal role in addressing verbal aggressive behaviour. The absence of a rigorous approach to participant recruitment introduces an additional potential impact on the overall applicability of the model.

To address some of these limitations, suggestions for future research are made. First, the orientation on educational experts precluded us from incorporating students' opinions into our narrative. Further studies focusing on their remarks can establish a comprehensive perspective on effective reaction strategies. Second, as stated before, the generalisability of the model should be approached with some caution. Although international intervention studies and practices guided the development process, the model was only validated by professionals in or associated with the Flemish education system. To make conclusive statements regarding the transferability of the V-AMC model, it is advisable to assess the extent to which the model can be applied in other international educational contexts and identify any context-specific elements that may need to be considered. Linked to this, evaluating the V-AMC model in actual classrooms might assist in outlining the model's feasibility. These effectiveness studies can encourage the implementation of the V-AMC model in TEPs. Indeed, developing an external script focusing on the cognitive and affective-motivational dispositions of the V-AMC is merely the initial step in developing this competence. Implementing and practising the competence model in TEPs should be the next. Specifically, conducting additional research on methods to rehearse this competence model is necessary. Competence development should be observed in relation to real-life situations [75]. Therefore, studies on embedding authentic situations in TEPs related to V-AMC development are suggested. Simulation-based learning proved effective in acquiring complex competences, such as those related to CM [127]. Given the contextual nature of aggression, it is important that these simulations accurately incorporate the cultural and situational factors that are unique to the settings they want to mirror in order to be viewed as authentic [30,87]. Therefore, we recommend implementing simulations focusing on various situations encompassing VAB to assist this competence development process.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1.** Initial coding instrument.

Steps	Category	Subcategory	Example
Detection	Detecting warning signals	/	<i>"And then, in the classroom, when they start shuffling their chairs, looking at others, and trying to interact with them. . . if they hesitate to take their materials or start nudging other students or bumping into desks while getting their materials, we already notice, 'oh, this one is struggling, we can expect something here'."</i>
	Detecting key actors	/	<i>"It's not always clear who did what, they say that too: 'But ma'am, he was also throwing and you're not addressing him.' Then I say that I only saw it from that one student and therefore only address him."</i>

Table A1. Cont.

Steps	Category	Subcategory	Example
Relaxation	Addressing the student(s)	/	<i>"From the very beginning, I would address that girl right away by telling her that she should show some respect for someone who is reading, even if she thinks it's wrong. That's not an appropriate way to react to fellow students."</i>
	Removing the student(s)	Surprise-effect/humour	<i>"I didn't know what to do anymore, so I suddenly started singing a song. Everyone went quiet and looked at me like 'what on earth is she doing.' They forgot they were actually arguing because I was standing there singing so silly. So, that worked."</i>
		Physical removal	<i>"I then sent that student out into the hallway; there was no other way to continue the lesson."</i>
	Providing time & space to cool down	Time to cool down	<i>"We also have small sofas where they can sit. If they feel the need to sit in the sofa, I say, 'You can take some time to sit in the sofa now, and when you're ready, just give me a signal; it can be a small signal like raising your hand or telling me, 'Ma'am, I'm ready to start again.' That's all okay with me. Indeed, giving them time to cool down is very important."</i>
		Providing low-stimulation environment	<i>"We also have a few tables in the hallway where they can work completely alone if they don't need other students, other people, or other stimuli—they can say 'okay, I'll sit in the hallway and work there alone'."</i>
Whole class focus	Paying attention to the group	Respecting student's personal space	<i>"Never give a pat on their shoulder; they just pat you back because they think you're attacking them!"</i>
		/	<i>"Usually, my approach is—after placing that student in the hallway—to take a moment to reflect on my own behaviour towards the class, and then continue with what I intended to accomplish, period."</i>
	Giving student(s) the opportunity to tell what is on their mind	/	<i>"Then I ask, 'Can you please explain what happened?' Often, they don't respond immediately, but if you keep pressing a bit, usually some part of the story comes out. And then you can build on that."</i>
Situation evaluation	Giving student(s) the opportunity to formulate solutions	/	<i>"I would actually go to those students to work with them on 'how can you deal with this better?', 'what can you do when you're angry?', because being angry is also a part of life, but what else can you do: count to ten before throwing a chair or take a few deep breaths down to your toes or ..."</i>
Rules of conduct	Establishing general rules of conduct	Disapproval of behaviour	<i>"Just acknowledging it, and often in a very objective manner because sometimes the student might not even realise why it's a problem, like 'You just said this to your classmate or teacher, and that's language we don't use. . . it's impolite language, and you'd better. . .'"</i>
		Co-creating rules and expectations	<i>"If he feels like he's getting angry again, we agreed that he'll place a red pen on his desk. Then I know I should leave him alone for a while."</i>
	Communicating the rules to the class group	/	<i>"For example, if you've just sent a student out of the class, you can bring it up with the group: 'Wow, that was intense, you can express your opinion but let's do it respectfully.' Addressing the whole class immediately, 'Wow, that got a bit heated—you know that's not how we do it, that's not polite, and it's not how we address people.' And then the class nods, and we move on like that."</i>
Completion	Follow-up on students	/	<i>"If necessary, I will also involve the CLB. As a teacher, I can't extinguish every fire; sometimes, it goes beyond my capabilities. And then there are those professionals available to support you in such situations."</i>
	Debriefing & reflection: self-care	/	<i>"Reflecting to pause and consider what things trigger you and how you might feel. . . but it's also about 'am I already triggered before I enter a lesson' and, before entering a class, checking in with yourself to see if you're tired, irritated, have a sore throat, etc., to already know for yourself whether you're likely to be sensitive to triggers or not."</i>

Table A1. Cont.

Attitudes	Category	Subcategory	Example
Student-teacher relationship	Promoting a positive learning environment	Safety	<i>"The graphic school has developed specific characters around our '4R' approach, where, at the beginning of the school year, we ask our students to ultimately consider these 4Rs. It's about creating an environment where everyone feels safe, where we respect each other, and where, ultimately, we listen to each other. . . well, it's all part of our school philosophy, really. Something like that."</i>
		Investing in a positive S-T relationship	<i>"I believe it's important to ask how their holiday was, what they did, especially after a holiday break. Just to know a bit about what those kids are up to and show an interest in them."</i>
		Mutual respect	<i>"They are allowed to say a lot in my lessons, but it always has to remain polite and respectful. I tell them that explicitly: it's certainly possible that I'm not teaching well but communicate that in a different way than starting to make accusations."</i>
		Trust	<i>"Some of them also come to talk about their difficult home situations after the lesson. Even though they know I can't really do anything about it, the fact that they can vent to someone without that person immediately informing their parents also helps them."</i>
		Understanding	<i>"I know that boy has a difficult home situation. I know that; he carries that with him, and as a teacher, you also have to take that into account. I told him that in the hallway, 'Look, I know you're going through a tough time, and I know life isn't fair, especially not for you. But that doesn't mean that you can behave the way you did.'"</i>
		Active listening	<i>"It's important that I, as a teacher, make them feel like I'm listening. I think in many cases, even among older teachers who have been teaching for a long time, this often doesn't happen. Students may think, 'I express what I don't like here, but they don't listen to me anyway.' I believe that's where things often go wrong."</i>
Oneself as a teacher	Being aware of language use	Verbal language	<i>"Like I've said before, never raise your voice. . ."</i>
		Non-verbal language	<i>"Your demeanor at that moment is actually very important. If you also become agitated, that's pure interaction, that's dynamics. You elevate each other, and then even higher tension, even higher stimuli, doesn't work well."</i>
	Maintaining composure	Remaining calm	<i>"I always try to stay calm in such situations, even if I'm boiling inside, but the students shouldn't see it, or they'll take advantage of it."</i>
		Controlling the own emotions	<i>"In that one situation, I wanted to start crying. I tried to keep it under control for as long as possible and especially avoid that confrontation in the classroom. It's already difficult to walk out crying as a teacher; you would really lose face. You can't let it get the best of you either."</i>
The students	Acting non-judgemental	Being mindful of personal biases	<i>"In the teachers' lounge, you sometimes hear, 'Oh no, I really struggled with that class last year.' But if you listen to that too much, you might start approaching that class differently from the start. You have to be careful about that!"</i>
		Setting aside past experiences	<i>"Just because he disrupted your class last week doesn't mean you have to constantly remind him or punish him at the slightest thing he does without your permission."</i>
		Detaching from personal feelings	<i>"Just because you don't click with a particular student doesn't mean you should treat them 'differently' as a result."</i>
		Reserving judgment without discussion	<i>"I sometimes hear from colleagues, 'yes, that's typical, he behaves like that, he comes from a less privileged background.' But often, that's too simplistic, and there's a different reason for that behaviour. And you can't know it unless you have a conversation."</i>

Table A1. Cont.

Attitudes	Category	Subcategory	Example
The situation	Distinguishing between person(s) and action(s)	Disapproving the action rather than the person	"Adolescents are very sensitive to that, you know. 'But ma'am, do you think I'm dumb?' And then I have to say very clearly: no, I don't think you're dumb, but what you did just now was dumb. It's a fine line."
		Holding no grudges	"... just a small understanding, empathetic remark or... so that the student still feels that the relationship is okay, that you no longer hold a grudge, and that they can just start fresh."
Additional steps/attitudes *	Category	Subcategory	Example
Student-teacher relationship	Promoting a positive learning environment	Authenticity	"This is a form of authenticity that you must demonstrate, and students and people can quickly sense to what extent you are being yourself. I know that at some point, almost all teachers do this... well, I know that many colleagues do it. You don't feel physically top-notch every day, and there are times when you tell the students, 'Well, today isn't really my day. I don't feel that great, so we're going to take it a bit easier.'"

\* In the appendix, only one example of additionally created (sub)categories is given as an example. Coders were instructed to indicate what they would add (in this case, it is the subcategory 'authenticity'), under which category and/or step/attitude it belongs, and which different statements are examples of this new (sub)category.

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