

The Determinants of Learners' Aggressive Behaviour

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ABSTRACT This study was undertaken to determine the factors that contribute to learners' aggressive behaviour. An extensive literature review showed that this behaviour is often attributed to factors such as family background, community and school socialisation. A small-scale survey was administered in the Free State province, South Africa, to ascertain whether the framework and findings from the literature on learners' aggressive behaviour apply in the context of South Africa. The data shows significant traces of aggressive behaviour in the family, the community and school. The study recommends inclusive intervention programmes that target learners, family, school and community members in order to reduce learners' aggressive behaviour.

I. INTRODUCTION

Aggressive behaviour exhibited by learners in schools is a concern for everyone. Most learners are involved either directly or indirectly in this situation. The experience of aggression not only impacts on learners themselves, but also on education personnel, teachers, parents, school governing bodies and the community at large. This behaviour frequently interrupts the smooth running of the school and leads to a climate that is conducive to neither learning nor teaching. It places everybody's life at risk and makes the culture of learning and teaching very difficult.

We appear to live in a world that is increasingly violent and out of control. Unfortunately, learners are not immune to this aggressive behaviour, either as perpetrators or victims, but the question is: are they responsible for what is happening or is there an external, contributory factor to their behaviour? A large body of literature points to the fact that learners' aggressive behaviour is based on different factors (Budhal 2006; Kincheloe and Steinberg 2005; Preininger 2007; Richardson 2007). It can be traced to learners' family backgrounds, community, schools and value systems. If the learner is brought up in a disrupted family, in an unstable community and in a school where conditions are not conducive to learning, he (or she) may suddenly display deviant behaviour; be emotionally disturbed and exhibit destructive tendencies (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2005; Preininger 2007).

The literature also makes it clear that coming into contact with aggressive people is likely to lead to any individual becoming involved in aggressive episodes. In addition to all this, it is argued that the presence of aggressive models increases the likelihood of imitation (Felson and Tedeschi 1993; Budhal 2006). The highest rates of aggressive behaviour may be found in environments where aggressive models abound and where aggressiveness is regarded as a valuable attribute (Bandura 1973; Kincheloe and Steinberg 2005).

The main aim of this paper is to investigate the role played by the family, the community and the school and the way in which these influence learners (that is, encourage them to be aggressive). The researcher has to examine the related literature and the way in which learners perceive the influence of the family, community and school on their daily lives. The paper concludes by outlining the recommendations that might help to curb aggressive behaviour exhibited by learners inside and outside the school premises.

II. LITERATURE ON LEARNERS' AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND ITS DETERMINANTS

The display of aggressive behaviour by learners in South Africa is recognised as one of the most pressing concerns facing education today. For example, there is strong evidence that most South African schools are confronted with problems of violence – this includes the posse-

ssion of guns, knife attacks and attacks using open scissors (Harper 2001). This continual exposure to violence may well desensitise learners and encourage them to accept aggressive acts as a normal mode of conflict resolution (Budhal 2006).

The family is regarded as an important support system both to the child and, later, the adolescent. Consequently, any disturbance of this support system – whether as a result of parental separation or divorce, domestic violence, abusive parents, negative parenting style, substance dependency and low socio-economic status (of the parents) – has implications for adolescent functioning (Heavens 2001; Richardson 2007). Divorce and separation have been identified as causing stress for the whole family. Learners who are part of this situation are likely to feel frustrated and often display behavioural problems. These behavioural problems may be manifested in outbursts of anger, disruptive behaviour and aggression (Neuhaus 1974; Lösel et al. 2007). Parents who are going through the process of divorce and separation may also become frustrated and start to retaliate. They may abuse their children physically or emotionally and, sometimes, may resort to alcohol. In some cases, parental hostility becomes extreme and spirals out of control, leading to children and adolescents being seriously abused (Conger 1991; Mabitla 2006). Learners who are exposed to this kind of home life are often traumatised and start to show deviant behaviour, delinquency and maladjustment. They might also resort to aggression as a form of attention seeking (Budhal 2006).

It is in the school setting that learners learn new behaviours. Some of these behaviours may be positive or negative, depending on the school environment. Teachers and peers play a dominant role in shaping these behaviours – either positively or negatively. Peer interaction or peer pressure has been highlighted, among other school factors, as particularly crucial in shaping learners' behaviour (Mabitla 2006). Preininger (2007) found that peer pressure sometimes leads to norms of risky behaviour and irresponsibility. The peer group not only provides support, fairly clear norms and the structure that most learners want but also, on occasion, insists on conformity. As a result, a learner's personal moral standards may be violated. Some secondary school learners express aggressiveness with a view to gaining popularity among their peers. Still others become aggressive, act immaturely and display disruptive

and deviant behaviour if they are not accepted by a peer group (Budhal 1998; Mabitla 2006).

Excessive discipline can also be identified as one of the factors that shape learners' behaviour. Excessive discipline (such as corporal punishment) did not prove to be effective and has therefore been abolished (by legislation) in South Africa (Cicognani 2004). It was popular because it was quick and easy, but it caused a form of stress which, in turn, created negative feelings in the learner. These feelings, in turn, lead to the learner adopting attitudes that resulted in misbehaviour, particularly aggressive behaviour (Riak 2001; Richardson 2007). Empirical evidence shows that offenders who are punished by corporal means are actually slightly more likely to commit further crimes (New Encyclopaedia Britannica 1995). Skinner (in Riak 2001: 11) once said: The more serious the punishment, the more violent the by-product. The frustration that excessive discipline causes may lead to hostility which, in turn, will encourage the learner to be violent when he or she reaches adulthood.

Instability within the community also shapes learners' behaviour. The instability of a community may consist of political violence, social violence, suicides and crimes such as hijacking, kidnapping, rape, hostage-taking, house-breaking, senseless killing, and gangsterism. Such a community or environment will place learners in a stressful situation and in effect compel them to be aggressive. Learners in such an environment are likely to experience psychological problems in adjusting to normality and end up believing that violence is the only way to address problems. Because of these incidents learners lose respect for authority and soon come to reject any form of restraint or discipline (Kimaryo and Hilsum 1993; Kincheloe and Steinberg 2005).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative approach: a questionnaire was used to obtain data. A literature review enabled the researcher to compile questions suitable for the problem. The draft instrument was developed in a form of self-report. The motivation for using a self-report measure was that it allows anonymity: more candid responses can be obtained from a self-report measure than from a personal interview (Avery and Walker 1993). This type of questionnaire was also regarded as the most appropriate for scoring

purposes. The questionnaire implemented a Likert-type response scale, and respondents were required to respond with a: 'No', 'Undecided' or 'Yes'. I decided to format the self-report instrument into a series of short statements. To prevent the questions from being misinterpreted, I followed some of Babbie's (1998) guidelines when I formulated the items.

Two aspects of validity were considered, namely, content validity and face validity. According to Ary et al. (1990), content validity refers to whether or not the items are adequate for measuring what they are supposed to measure and whether they constitute a representative sample of the behaviour domain under investigation. Face validity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which, on the face of it, the questions measure the construct they are supposed to measure (for example, family, school and community climate). Both types of validity are then judged by experts. In this case the questionnaire was evaluated by two experts and, according to their judgment, the questionnaire had content and face validity. A questionnaire is reliable to the extent that, independent of its administration or that of a comparable instrument, it consistently yields similar results under comparable conditions (Avery and Walker 1993).

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient was used to analyse the results of this research. This is a split-halves method. The Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient is 0.743, which is acceptable for this kind of questionnaire (Ary et al. 1990; Babbie 2007).

Seven secondary schools in the Thabo Mofutsanyane District of the Free State Province, South Africa were selected. These schools were selected because they were deemed to represent learners from all backgrounds and different environmental upbringing, and learners who had directly and indirectly been involved in aggressive behaviour. Grade 10 learners were selected randomly as respondents because all the schools identified had Grade 10 classes. Some of the learners in these schools were directly involved in violence: these included gangsters who had been involved in the committing of certain deeds of violence. Others were indirectly involved because they had witnessed aggressive behaviour in their home, community and their schools and among their friends. The list of names of all the learners in each of the Grade 10 classes was obtained. The names of the respondents were

selected randomly, using the lists of learners' names. The list of selected names in each school was drawn up, and the instrument was applied in the natural school environment during the Life Orientation period. The questionnaire was handed to each learner individually and instructions were read out and explained. Most learners completed the test instrument within 45 minutes. The sample consisted of 198 learners, made up of 90 boys and 108 girls, aged between 15 and 19.

Tables were drawn up to show the results from testing the null hypothesis. Most showed that, one way or another, aggression was present in the learners' homes, community and school environment. The raw data was computerised and analysed, and interpretation was carried out by examining the data in the light of the literature review.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interpretations were done by referring to the findings, which focus on the specific problem statements and their corresponding hypotheses. Two research problems were investigated. Firstly: is there any correlation between family, school and community climate and the learners' aggression instinct? Secondly: is there a significant difference in the average aggressive instinct of learners depending on the different types of people learners interact with (for example loving or violent and uninvolved members of the family or community)? In both instances the hypothesis was stated as: there is no significant correlation between the mentioned factors and the learners' aggression instincts.

In Table 1, Pearson's correlation was used to test the hypotheses. The correlation between the following was investigated: family climate; school climate; community climate; peer interaction; other social relationships and emotional self-concept. Results appear in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the null hypothesis may thus be rejected at the 1% level for the correlation between family climate, relations with friends and emotional self-concept, on the one hand, and aggression instinct, on the other hand. In rank order (from high to low), there are correlations, with aggression, between a learner's emotional self-concept, family climate, and then relationships with his or her peers. Although these correlations are low, they are all negative and they are all significant. This means that, the more

negative the family climate or influence of friends are, or the more negative the emotional self-concept of the learner, the more aggressive the learner is, and vice versa. The more positive the family climate or influence of friends are, or the more positive the emotional self-concept of the learner, the less aggressive the learner is.

Table 1: Correlation between various factors and aggression instinct

Factors	Correlation	Significance
Family climate	-.301	p<0.01
School climate	-.122	p>0.05
Community climate	-.091	p>0.05
Peer interaction	-.224	p<0.01
Other social relationships	-.087	p>0.05
Emotional self-concept	-.357	p<0.01

In Table 2, analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was used to test the hypotheses. Tukey's post hoc tests were performed where significant differences were found. In three instances significant differences were found for the type of people learners live with at home, type of friends in the community and type of community members. For these three factors, the null-hypotheses may be rejected. Results appear in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

Table 2: Mean aggression instinct of learners who live with different types of people at home

Types	N	Mean	Std. deviation	df	f	Significance
Loving	188	1.3271	.44410			
Violent	7	1.7143	.56695	2	4.267	.015
Uninvolved	3	1.8333	.57735			

According to Table 2, the null hypothesis may be rejected at the 5% level (p is 0.015, which is smaller than 0.05). This means that learners' aggression instinct differs significantly, depending on the types of people who live with them at home. The means indicate that the learners' aggression instinct is significantly lower (1.3271) if the people at home are affectionate than if they are violent (1.7143) or uninvolved (1.8333).

This supports Berkowitz (1993:187), who states that if children are exposed to aggression, they tend to become aggressively inclined themselves: '*violence breeds violence*'. Baron and Richardson (1994) agree that children who

witness physical violence between people at home are likely to use similar actions in their interactions with others. The above researchers also confirm that a violent upbringing teaches children to endorse violence.

Table 3: Mean aggression instinct of learners who interact with different types of friends in the community

Types	N	Mean	Std. deviation	df	f	Significance
Loving	71	1.3028	.44101			
Violent	23	1.6304	.54288	2	5.177	.006
Ordinary	104	1.3173	.42982			

According to Table 3, the null hypothesis may be rejected at the 1% level (p is 0.006, which is smaller than 0.01). This means that learners' aggression instinct differs significantly, depending on the types of friends they interact with in the community. The means indicate that the learners' aggression instinct is significantly lower (1.3028) if the friends they interact with in the community are loving than if they are violent (1.6304).

Felson and Tedeschi (1993) revealed that learners become aggressive simply because their aggression is rewarded by their peers and is regarded as a valuable attribute. Learners who are exposed to, and associate with, antisocial peers learn to participate in antisocial behaviour through the process of vicarious learning and the principle of reinforcement (Valois et al. 2002).

Table 4: Mean aggression instinct of learners who interact with different types of community members

Types	N	Mean	Std. deviation	df	f	Significance
Loving	40	1.3000	.42062			
Violent	38	1.5526	.48685	2	4.869	.009
Ordinary	120	1.3000	.44509			

According to Table 4, the null hypothesis may be rejected at the 1% level (p is 0.009, which is smaller than 0.01). This means that learners' aggression instinct differs significantly, depending on the types of community members they interact with. The means indicate that the learners' aggression instinct is significantly lower (1.3000) if the members of the community are loving than if they are violent (1.5526).

Baron and Richardson (1994) reveal that most learners become involved in violent actions because of the behaviour of the community in which they live. Heavens (1999) also agrees that the aggression exhibited by youngsters may well have social antecedents.

V. CONCLUSION

Aggression does not take place in a vacuum: it is likely to be influenced by the presence and actions of other people in the social environment. This article discussed the influence that the family, school and community have on learners' aggressive behaviour. It focussed on disruptive parenting practices that are related to learners' antisocial behaviour, the harsh discipline that is applied by the school, which aggravates aggression, the role that is played by peers in exposing learners to aggression, the different groups that model aggression, and the misunderstanding and intolerance that bring frustration, aggression and confusion to learners' lives.

A great deal of aggressive behaviour on the part of learner involves social interaction with the community and their peers. Such interaction plays a crucial role, because the learners not only learn a number of social skills, but also important lessons that may stay with them for life. Learners do not feel angry and aggressive because their muscles are tense, their jaws clench, and their pulse rates increase, but because they are significantly influenced by the people in the surrounding environment.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an indication that the contribution of the school and community in shaping the behaviour of learners is very subtle and may be under estimated. As a result, as far as learners' aggressive behaviour is concerned, there have been very few intervention strategies that involve school personnel and community members. This article therefore calls for inclusive intervention programmes that involve the family, the school and the community. It needs to be understood that learners' aggressive behaviour may be a reflection of what is happening within the home, at the school and in the community. Family and schools are embedded within communities and in many ways reflect larger community-level

processes. An inclusive intervention programme will mean that the problem of aggressive behaviour will be tackled from all angles.

Schools can play a multiple role in the implementation of such programmes: school personnel/teachers can play a crucial role in coordinating these programmes and the school may also be used as a site where these programmes are conducted. I say this because the school is regarded as any learner's immediate community. That said, it needs to be noted that some of these programmes are not the responsibility of the schools and the school personnel/teachers might not possess the expertise needed to implement and conduct these programmes. School personnel/teachers may therefore have to accept the responsibility of seeking relevant information and consulting people with expertise in order to come and render the services required, voluntarily. As has been emphasised, these programmes address the needs of the learner not only as a member of the school and family, but also the community, which means that it is crucial to involve the members of community systems in the intervention.

Intervention programmes that target learners who display aggressive behaviour are also recommended. The first programme that can be singled out here is 'moral education training'. Training designed to enhance children's values and moral reasoning is critically important for the prevention of aggression. Youngsters who are exposed to moral dilemmas in a group context in which reasoning occurs at different levels will obviously experience cognitive conflict. The resolution of such cognitive conflict frequently brings their moral reasoning up to the same level as that of the higher-level peers in the group. It is believed that Kohlberg's moral reasoning, in combination with Anger Control Training, provides a comprehensive and effective arsenal for reducing aggression in learners (Reddy and Goldstein 2001).

Another programme that is recommended for learners who display aggressive behaviour is a 'peer support programme'. It is assumed that learners learn more easily and more willingly from peers. This is because peers are better placed to serve as role models. Activities that give learners the opportunity to think, consider and evaluate themselves should be encouraged through this programme. Active experiential learning should be planned – for example, small group discussions, role plays, debates and games. A quality learning programme with measurable learning outcomes

that build progressively on each other should be applied. Senior, experienced peer-support team members could adapt curricula in collaboration with the peer coordinator. Activities should not be presented in tightly controlled situations; instead, learners should be allowed to say things in the safety of the group, even if what they say is inaccurate, unhealthy, offensive and even immoral. It is better if learners say such things in a context where they can be argued and discredited, especially by other learners, than to simply say them, unchallenged, on the sports field or at a party. Structured activities can create opportunities for the peer team to recognise peers who need more help and assistance (Edwards-Meyer 2003).

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