



## Exploring teachers' perceptions of learner-aggressive behaviours in primary school at the Pinetown district in South Africa

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**Abstract**—Aggressive behaviour can be categorised into different forms, including physical violence, verbal aggression, and disruptive conduct. This study explores teachers' perceptions of learner-aggressive behaviour in inclusive school settings. It employed a qualitative approach, which used interpretive paradigm within the phenomenological design. It used semi-interviews and collages to gather data. The data analysis was done by utilising the thematic analyses technique to arrive at the overall findings. The study revealed that teachers perceive frustration as the leading cause of learner-aggressive behaviours within the classroom. The latter statement implies that learner-aggressive behaviours disrupt the learning environment and result in low learner academic achievement and teacher stress and burnout.

**Keywords:** Disruptive behaviour, Inclusive schools, Learner-aggressive behaviour, Teacher stress, Teacher burnouts, Physical violence

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### I. INTRODUCTION

LEARNER-AGGRESSION at school is considered a global issue by Ali et al. (2025). Their Jordanian study, which is echoed by McMahon et al. (2024) in the US, points out that school aggression and violence adversely affect school personnel's health and retention, as well as student achievement and development. In South Africa, Hendricks and Mutongoza (2024) revealed that schools are increasingly becoming areas for criminal activities, making the schooling environment hostile to teaching and learning. Such behaviour within the schools leads many education systems globally to seek solutions to the problem by introducing anti-violence programs within the schools. For example, Oti and Doe (2025) mentioned the case of Ghana. Hence, this study further explores the solutions by interrogating teachers' understanding of learner-aggressive behaviour within their classrooms

Learner-aggressive behaviour refers to actions by students that are hostile, disruptive, or harmful toward others, including peers, teachers, and themselves. This behaviour can reveal itself in various forms, such as verbal threats, physical violence, bullying, or subtle forms like social exclusion and manipulation (Venketsamy et al., 2023).

Globally, there is a growing recognition of the need for inclusive strategies that cater to the diverse needs of students, including those who exhibit aggressive behaviour (UNESCO, 2017; O'Leary et al., 2020). The study's anticipated contribution to educational psychology is that understanding teachers' perceptions of learner-aggressive behaviour is crucial, as their attitudes and strategies directly influence the classroom environment and the effectiveness of inclusive education (Dignath et al., 2022). These perceptions are shaped by various factors, such as the teachers' experiences, training, support systems, and the specific dynamics of their classrooms.

Within South Africa, learner-aggressive behavior is influenced more by

socioeconomic factors within their immediate environment (Adewuyi, 2023). The paramount challenge that directly influences learner-aggressive behavior is poverty (Sanders et al., 2020), which leads to an increase in violent behaviour within communities, and through observation, learners assimilate these behaviors and display them within the classroom. Such behavior impacts the teaching and learning within the classroom and the well-being of teachers and learners within the classroom. This study delves into the complexities of learner-aggressive behaviour in inclusive primary schools, examining how teachers perceive and respond to such behaviors by posing, 'What is your perception of learner-aggressive behaviour within an inclusive primary school context?'

### II. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Exploring learner-aggressive behaviour

Aggression in children can take many forms: angry tantrums, hitting, kicking, or biting (Jackson, 2024). Hot-headed outbursts that destroy property, cool-headed bullying, verbal attacks, and attempts to control others through threats or violence (Dewar, 2016-2023). When occurring within inclusive primary schools, these types of behaviour could hinder effective teaching and learning and result in teacher burnout. Hence, exploring their prevalence and influence within primary schools is essential. It is important to note that "aggression has a multifaceted construct and can affect the social, psychological and physical health of students and teachers (Salimi et al., 2019). This idea complements the previous notion to understand the prevalence and influence of aggressive behaviour in primary schools. It is vital to perceive it as having multiple facets and the potential to cause teacher and learner burnout (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

#### Inclusive education in primary schools

The operational definition of Inclusive education in this study takes a holistic approach to student development, focusing on academic achievement and social, emotional, and personal growth (Mumo et al., 2023). It aims to create a supportive and nurturing environment where

all students can thrive (Adeoye, 2024; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024). Considering the focus of the study, the above statement includes learners with challenging behaviour, such as learner aggression within the classroom. The question is how one ensures that all learners feel they belong in the safe learning environment (classroom) if some exhibit aggression towards other learners and teachers. However, it is worth noting that one of the benefits of inclusive education is Social Integration (Grunow et al., 2023), where inclusive education allows students with diverse abilities to learn and interact, understand, and build friendships (Molina Roldán et al., 2021) among themselves.

#### Impact of Aggressive Behaviour on teaching and learning

Learner-aggressive behaviour can severely affect the learning environment. In this sense, it can disrupt the educational process and harm the well-being of students and teachers (Singh & Steyn, 2014; Wettstein et al., 2023; GABI et al., 2024). In cases where learner-aggressive behaviour is exhibited within the classroom, learners lose concentration, and teachers, in most cases, stop teaching and attend to such behaviour. Moreover, the victims of aggressive behaviour develop anxiety, stress, and fear. In this manner, the learning environment becomes hostile (Jones, 2015), hinders other learners' high academic performance, and develops teacher stress and burnout (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021; Thomas & Reyes, 2024). Hence, addressing aggression through effective interventions, fostering a positive school culture, and promoting conflict resolution skills are essential for maintaining a safe and conducive learning environment.

### III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study explores teachers' understanding of learner-aggressive behaviour to seek solutions to the problem of violence within the classroom. Teachers are the ones who experience this type of behaviour most frequently whether it is directed to them or their learners.

### IV. METHODS

#### Research approach

This research has adopted a qualitative approach (Bandari, 2023; Delmas & Giles, 2023) to understand teachers' perceptions of learner-aggressive behaviour at the primary phase. The researcher used this approach since the intention was to gather in-depth information from the teachers and then interpret it.

#### Research design

A phenomenological design was used in this study because the design focuses on how the participants experience their world (Pilarska, 2021). In this case, the teachers will give their understanding of learner-aggressive behaviour as they experience it within their classroom. Moreover, the relevance of this design is that the researcher intended to use interviews as a data-collecting tool.

#### Research paradigm

The interpretivism paradigm was used since it enabled the researchers to interpret teachers' understandings of learner-aggressive behaviour and the perspectives they have of the causes and the impact of this type of behaviours within their classrooms (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

#### Participants

Three primary school teachers were selected from a selected school in Pinetown district, district in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. They were selected because of their knowledge and experience with aggressive learner behaviour directed to them and their learners within the classroom.

#### Data collection instruments

##### Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews help participants elaborate on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, providing rich qualitative data. Moreover, these data-gathering tools promote flexibility (Galletta, 2013). While there is a set of prepared questions, the format allows for deviations based on the interviewee's responses, enabling the researcher

to explore exciting or unexpected topics in more depth.

#### Collages

Collages refer to a piece of art where individuals combine different materials to portray a particular meaning or understanding of a phenomenon. According to Dragu (2024), collages help collect rich data, which can be particularly beneficial for those who might find it challenging to articulate their thoughts verbally or in writing. Furthermore, creating a collage involves selecting, organising, and arranging different elements, which can help develop critical thinking and decision-making skills. In this study, once the collage had been completed, the participants could explain why those images were chosen and their meaning (Zhang et al., 2024) In response to their understanding of learner-aggressive behaviours within their classroom. The latter statement gave the researcher an understanding of the participants' expressions and feelings regarding aggressive learner behaviours.

#### Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data gathered verbatim from semi-structured interviews and collages according to Braun et al., (2022) analysis method. Hence, data was coded and analysed in search of the themes that would emerge. These themes were categorised resulting to overall findings of the study.

### V. RESULTS

Biographic information of the participants:

Participant	Age	gender	Education	Experience	Grade taught
Teacher A	30 years	Female	Bachelor of Education	Five years	six
Teacher B	45 years	male	Higher Diploma	Fifteen years	five
Teacher C	48 years	female	Diploma in education	20 years	four

#### Teachers' perception of learner-aggressive behaviour in inclusive primary schools

Teacher A: Nobody likes to feel angry; however, we all experience this emotion occasionally. Given that many adults find it difficult to express anger healthily and productively. Similarly, it is unsurprising that aggressive behaviour has become common among young children. As a foundation phase teacher, I have crossed paths with learners who portray aggressive behaviour in the classroom. Many learners who show signs of aggression struggle to express themselves. A common trigger of aggression is frustration. When children cannot get what they want or are asked to do something they might not like, they become frustrated and act out. Children usually express their frustration by acting out or shutting down. The environment is essential when collaborating with aggressive individuals, as stressful situations hamper their aggression.

Teacher B: Aggressive behaviour is expressing oneself negatively. Aggressive behaviour can occur when a child finds it difficult to express his/her feelings through words. They reach a level of frustration that leads to screaming, shouting, hitting, and fighting. So, it stems from an emotional aspect, which leads to the physical reactions displayed. Aggressive behaviour could also occur in children if they are exposed to it through personal experiences at home or viewing it on social media or with peers.

Teacher C: Learners at a primary school often display acts of aggression through various forms. Behaviour that includes but is not limited to hitting, kicking, pinching, biting, and the like can be regarded as physical aggression. There is also a prevalence of verbal aggression at a primary school, which can be identified by screaming at peers or teachers, the use of profane language, ridiculing, and verbally bullying other learners. These verbal outbursts are done to harm someone with the use of words.

#### Teachers' responses to a semi-structured interview

*Emotions Play a Significant Role in the Display of Learner Aggression.*

"Children who are unhappy or have learning/behaviour issues display aggressive personalities. They get frustrated when they do not understand a topic or cannot understand what is happening at home or in surrounding environments. This frustration leads to the failure of the child at school. The grades start to drop, and the attention span becomes low. They have other issues; school is the last place they want to be. Learners who cannot comprehend their emotions are usually unhappy and get into class fights or arguments with the teachers. Learners who are emotional and frustrated tend to disrupt the class and display unruly behaviour" (Participant 1).

"Emotions play a significant role in the display of learner-aggressive behaviour. When learners arrive at school upset or angry, they tend to displace those emotions on other learners in the classroom through angry verbal outbursts. The learner's feelings of anger lead to their aggressive behaviour, and it can be noted that a positive correlation exists between anger and aggressive behaviour." (Participant 2)

#### **Learners' environment influences aggressive behaviour**

The learners' environment influences aggressive behaviour. Behaviour is learned. Therefore, the behaviour that learners are exposed to at home is internalised by the learner and displayed in other societal contexts, in this case, my classroom. When learners witness conflict resolved through aggression and violence, they develop a mindset and attitude that this is the preferred approach to managing stressful situations. If the learners are constantly exposed to obscene language and aggressive outbursts at home, the learner will display this in the classroom and at school. It eventually becomes a norm and an acceptable response to conflict." (Participant 3)

"I feel that one's environment influences one's behavioural patterns. Some learners are only exposed to aggressive behavioural patterns, and others are not and are exposed to correct behavioural patterns" (Participant 2).

#### **Family socioeconomic status influences learners' aggressive behaviour**

"I understand that a family's socioeconomic status influences learner-aggressive behaviour. Learners who come from low-income families feel inferior to their peers who come from high-earning income families. Not being able to afford what their peers have may ignite resentment, sadness, envy, and anger, eventually leading to aggressive outbursts" (Participant 1).

"Parental financial status can have a major influence on the classroom. On the one hand, we can factor in a less fortunate child who observes other children having things they do not. The child can become frustrated, which can lead to aggression and bullying. On the other hand, we can factor in a child who comes from a wealthy household and would likely bully children who may not have things that he/she has" (Participant 1).

#### **Influence of hormones on aggressive behaviour**

"Hormones are likely to trigger aggression in children as they develop. According to psychology, it is only natural that aggression levels rise and fall with frustration. Hormones activate the subcortical areas of the brain to produce aggression" (Participant 3).

"A relationship does exist between hormones and aggressive behaviour. The older a learner gets, the more aggressive they become (positive correlation). This aggression comes with the developing hormones, which sometimes cannot be controlled by the learner, leading to aggressive outbursts" (Participant 2).

## **VI. DISCUSSION**

Teachers' responses in collages and interview data indicate that frustration is the common trigger of learner aggression in the classroom. They expressed that learners who show signs of aggressive behaviour struggle to express themselves; they are frustrated by emotions, environment, socioeconomic status, and hormonal development, which also influence their behaviour. Hence, it is essential to understand these perceptions in the light that education aims to produce rational, virtuous, and responsible citizens. In this case, an interpretation of why these learners is frustrated becomes the core issue in this discussion since learner-aggressive behaviour is counterproductive to the education process and creates a hostile learning environment that instills fear, anxiety, teacher stress, and burnout in most learners.

Moreover, it is vital to note that the child has no ideas or knowledge at birth. The child is a 'tabula rasa' without innate ideas or knowledge. However, all knowledge is learned and comes from experiences through the senses or the reflection of the mind on its operations (Locke, 2011). Thus, during the schooling period, some learners exhibit aggression caused by frustration, as the teachers perceive, which becomes a bone of contention of why these learners are frustrated. What are teachers' roles in this inclusive education process? Are the stakeholders in education focussing more on the learner's behaviour as deviant to the extent that the needs behind the behaviours are not recognised and cannot be attended to eliminate aggression? These questions require further educational research.

Emotions are complex psychological states that involve three distinct components: a subjective experience, a physiological response, and a behavioural or expressive response (Cherry, 2023). These complex psychological states can influence human behaviour and thought. Teacher data indicates that

"Emotions play a significant role in the display of learner-aggressive behaviour. When learners arrive at school upset or angry, they tend to displace those emotions on other learners in the classroom through angry verbal outbursts. The learner's feelings of anger lead to their aggressive behaviour, and it can be noted that a positive correlation exists between anger and aggressive behaviour" (Participant 2).

The excerpt suggests a strong connection between the emotional states of the learner and the behavioural outcome exhibited within the classroom environment. In this case, the learner arrives at school with some emotional needs that have not been met at home, which could be displayed in the classroom environment as aggressive behaviour. The latter statement could be described as 'displacement of emotions.' (Dolea, 2023). The learner arrives at school upset or angry and often projects these feelings onto their peers, resulting in aggressive actions like verbal outbursts.

Since education aims to produce citizens who can reason and are virtuous and responsible, conducive and safe learning environments are necessary. In a situation where learners display aggressive behaviour, the victims of that action develop fear and anxiety, as learner aggression is counterproductive to education outcomes. Hence, based on the above, managing emotions could be crucial in reducing aggression in educational environments.

Moreover, teachers advocated that education occurs at home and within the learners' community. These environments play a crucial role in influencing learner-aggressive behaviour within the classroom. The results indicated that learners' environment influences aggressive behaviour. Behaviour is learned. Therefore, the behaviour that learners are exposed to at home is internalised by the learner and displayed in other societal contexts, in this case, my classroom. When learners witness conflict resolved through aggression and violence, they develop a mindset and attitude that this is the preferred approach to managing stressful situations. If the learners are constantly exposed to obscene language and aggressive outbursts at home, the learner will display this in the classroom and at school. It eventually becomes a norm and an acceptable response to conflict. Hence, the idea that behaviour is learned confirms that a child is born as a 'tabula rasa'; all information is assimilated at a later stage through sensory experiences. The learner could observe aggressive behaviour at home or in a nearby environment and assimilate it as appropriate behaviour to respond to certain situations. These behavioural patterns eventually influence the thoughts and the actions of the learners observing the situation.

Furthermore, socioeconomic status within the child's family could severely influence learners' aggressive behaviour within the classroom environment. The results showed that family's socioeconomic status influences learner-aggressive behaviour. Learners who come from low-income families feel inferior to their peers who come from high-earning income families. Not being able to afford what their peers have may ignite resentment, sadness, envy, and anger, eventually leading to aggressive outbursts. In this manner, there is a correlation between the

learner's emotions, environment, and family socioeconomic status. These factors have the potential to promote aggression within the learner. These issues are brought into the classroom where learners from different backgrounds interact during the learning process and could result in the explosion of aggression amongst some of the learners. Learning appropriate behaviour could not be overlooked in this situation. This means that some learners, even though their family socioeconomic status is low, can develop into rational and responsible individuals who take responsibility for their actions and act appropriately.

It is worth noting that the teachers also point out hormones in learners as a contributing factor in learners' aggressive behaviour within the classroom. They alluded that hormones are likely to trigger aggression in children as they develop. According to psychology, it is only natural that aggression levels rise and fall with frustration. Hormones activate the subcortical areas of the brain to produce aggression. (Carmichael, 2023). The incident is also mentioned by Participant 3. In this instance, the learner exhibits aggression due to the rise and fall of the hormone level in their bodies. Most learners who experience this process are in the adolescent stage, where they find their identity. The latter statement is emphasised by Participant 2 response, "A relationship does exist between hormones and aggressive behaviour. The older a learner gets, the more aggressive they become (positive correlation). This aggression comes with the developing hormones, which sometimes cannot be controlled by the learner, leading to aggressive outbursts." Hence, teachers' observations highlight the significant role that hormonal changes during adolescence play in contributing to aggressive behaviour, underscoring the need for understanding and managing these developmental challenges within the classroom environment.

Indirectly, the participants also referred to endorphin hormones, neurotransmitters released by the pituitary gland and hypothalamus in the brain. These natural hormones can alleviate pain, lower stress, improve mood and enhance well-being. (Shrihari, 2023). Although dopamine, serotonin, and other happiness hormones play an essential role in an individual's behaviour, this discussion focuses on endorphin hormones, as they are directly linked to aggressive behaviour displayed by learners within the inclusive classroom. In this regard, it is vital to note that endorphins promote memory and cognitive health and support a healthy immune system.

On the contrary, the lack of or low levels of endorphins leads to depression, anxiety, and moodiness. Hence, teachers pointed out that the root cause of aggressive behaviour in learners stems from emotions caused by frustration and results in inappropriate behaviour such as aggression. The argument, in this case, is how these hormones influence the display of aggressive behaviour and how such behaviour could be eliminated or controlled within inclusive learning environments since it is counterproductive to the goals of education of producing rational and responsible citizens.

The positive effects of high levels of endorphins and the negative effect of the lack or lower levels of these hormones have been directly linked with identifying and accommodating learners' unique needs stemming from unmet emotional needs within the family and the immediate environment in their communities that have the potential to lead to frustration and eventually the display of aggressive behaviour. Thus, Considering the positive effect of high levels of endorphins, exercise, in this case, is relevant to increase the amount of these hormones, lower stress, improve mood and enhance a sense of well-being in learners exhibiting aggressive behaviour. School sports, in this regard, become the critical vehicle to achieve this goal, and the lack of sporting activities within an inclusive learning environment will produce a negative effect in this matter, which is moodiness, anxiety, and depression. Hence, the schooling system should seriously consider this process to address the issue of learner-aggressive behaviour within inclusive learning environments.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Frustration in learners triggers aggressive behaviour within the classroom and is mainly caused by emotions, environments, socioeconomic status, and hormonal levels. These behaviours disrupt the learning environment and result in low learner academic achievement and teacher stress and burnout. Since education aims to produce functional citizens capable of critical thought and reasoning, inappropriate behaviour that hinders learning and teaching should be eliminated to promote high levels of learner academic achievement and teacher well-being. Stakeholders in education should look beyond learners' aggressive behaviour to acknowledge that such behaviour is crying for the unmet learners' needs from their immediate environment. To meet the objective of education, inclusive strategies to accommodate these needs should be implemented to bring about a healthy and conducive learning environment within the classroom. In this sense, teachers need to implement specialised strategies or interventions to manage aggressive behaviour, which can require additional time, resources, and training, potentially diverting focus from the broader educational goals.

These findings are essential because aggressive behaviour exhibited by learners within the classroom is not intentional. It results from the unmet needs of the learners, who show aggression. The impact of these behaviours on teaching and learning is severe within an inclusive learning environment. Hence, the learning environment becomes hostile to the learning process and leads to low learner academic achievement, school dropout, and teacher stress and burnout. The results of the study are consistent with the claims made by previous researchers that aggression arises from various factors, including cognitive differences (Huesmann, 2018). Adewuyi (2023) added to the latter finding, stating that within South Africa, learner aggression is influenced by social factors. Hence, understanding teachers' perceptions of learners' aggressive behaviour within inclusive classrooms is crucial because teachers' attitudes and strategies in dealing with this matter influence the classroom environment and the effectiveness of inclusive education (Dignath et al., 2022).

## VIII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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