Acta Academica 2003 35(2): 103-126

Tilla Olivier

Aggressive adolescent behaviour in privileged schools

First submission: August 2002

This article offers a perspective on the topic from educational psychology, with a focus on adolescents, who often air their frustrations at growing up and developing their own unique identity by way of opposition. The literature suggests that aggressive behaviour correlates with the social environment and reaches higher levels in lower socio-economic environments. The purpose of this research was to determine teachers' experiences of aggressive adolescent behaviour at a privileged school and to provide guidelines for dealing effectively with it. A qualitative research approach was chosen. By means of analyses of the transcribed interviews central themes could be identified, and recommendations made.

Aggressiewe adolessentegedrag in skole vir bevoorregtes

Hierdie artikel bied 'n opvoedkundig-sielkundige perspektief op die adolessent wat dikwels 'n opposisie-tendens vertoon om uiting te gee aan sy frustrasies aangaande sy opgroeiproses en sy vestiging van 'n eie identiteit. In die literatuur word aggressiewe gedrag dikwels met laer sosio-ekonomiese status in verband gebring. Hierdie ondersoek wil vasstel hoe onderwysers die aggressiewe gedrag van leerders uit 'n bevoorregte omgewing op skool ervaar, asook riglyne daarstel vir die doeltreffende hantering van sulke gedrag. 'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering is gevolg. By wyse van die analisering van die getranskribeerde onderhoude kon sentrale temas geïdentifiseer en dienooreenkomstig aanbevelings gemaak word.

Prof M A J Olivier, Dept of Postgraduate Studies and Educational Research, Faculty of Education, University of Port Elizabeth, P O Box 1600, Port Elizabeth 6000; E-mail: ttamao@upe.ac.za

Aggression is an integral part of a human being's life and a widespread phenomenon (Behre *et al* 2001: 132; Craig *et al* 2000: 1). Shaffer (1994: 326) and Meyer *et al* (1997: 183) consider it a form of antisocial or destructive behaviour. It is widely reported in the media: we are overwhelmed by items on violence, rape, murder and other forms of brutality in newspapers and on television. The clinical picture of aggression manifests itself mostly on the physical level. However, aggression has a psychological foundation, thus also justifying a perspective on the matter from educational psychology.

Some research results clearly show that aggression peaks during adolescence (Loeber 1982). It is also claimed that arrests for destructive behaviour increase during this phase of life (Cairns & Cairns 1986), for example an increase in assaults involving firearms (Steuer 1994: 565). Cairns & Cairns (1986: 16-21) also refer to an increase in gossiping, exclusion, physical attacks, delinquent behaviour like stealing, and rape among adolescents. Some adolescents may become less overtly aggressive, but turn to more covert forms of anti-social behaviour to express their aggression, which even manifests itself as passive aggression (Shaffer 1994: 342; Medinnus & Johnson 1976: 380).

According to the literature, adolescents often feel as though they belong nowhere and are "floating" between childhood and adulthood. They need to adapt to "change and redefinition" as part of their development and they may have "somewhat more difficulty coping" with the everyday problems they are experiencing (Hamachek 1995: 102). They are also searching for their own self-concept and identity, since adolescence is known as the phase of "identity versus identity confusion" (McCown *et al* 1996; Slavin 1994: 84). With other contributing factors from their environment, adolescence can become fertile ground for tension and frustration, which can eventually be expressed in some form of aggression.

Most children engage in some aggressive behaviour at some stage of their lives (Slavin 1994: 414; Craig *et al* 1975: 78; Slavin 1994: 455). However, much of the variability in children's aggression is due to their experience of their surroundings and relates to the their socialisation (Steuer 1994: 567; Rice 1984: 70) as well as environmental factors (Barlow & Durand 1999: 389). According to Barlow & Durand (1999: 390) aggressive behaviour increases in cases of low

socio-economic status. This raises the question of the influence of an affluent community (high socio-economic status) on the manifestation of aggression by adolescents at school.

1. Problem statement and research aims

Taking into account the fact that adolescents spend most of the day at school, teachers may be considered expert sources of information on the aggressive behaviour of adolescents. Teachers have to cope with provoking behaviour, destructive behaviour, and disobedience (Slavin 1994: 414) and they often find it difficult to manage adolescent learners (Craig *et al* 1975: 78). According to Slavin (1994: 455) and Steuer (1994: 559) aggressive adolescents may pose a threat to the school, their peers and themselves, as some aggressive behaviour is intended to harm others (Steuer 1994: 563). Bullock & Gable (1995) claim that making schools safe has become increasingly challenging. What is more, aggressive children can develop emotional problems later in life (Slavin 1994: 414) and a vicious circle eventually tends to develop, obliging educators to address the matter.

The following research questions were accordingly formulated:

- What are the experiences of teachers concerning the aggressive behaviour by adolescents at a privileged school?
- What guidelines can be suggested to teachers for managing the school context in such a manner as to effectively prevent and/or deal with aggressive adolescent behaviour at school?

The research aims were therefore to explore aggressive adolescent behaviour at school and provide teachers with appropriate guidelines.

2. Clarification of concepts

2.1 Adolescent

The term "adolescent" derives from the Latin *adolescere*, literally "growing into" adulthood (Myers 1998: 571; Adams *et al* 1994; Gouws & Kruger 1994). For the purposes of this study the term "adolescent" refers to secondary-school learners aged 13-18 years.

2.2 Aggression and aggressive behaviour

Aggression relates to an unprovoked attack, without just cause. According to Medinnus & Johnson (1976: 380) and Myers (1998: 571), "Aggression refers to any physical or verbal behaviour intended to destroy or hurt, whether done out of hostility or as a calculated means to an end". Baron (1996: 347) writes: "Aggressive behaviour is directed at the goal of harming another being". These explanations are confirmed by Tesser (1995: 383-418) and Krüger *et al* (1993: 9).

2.3 Privileged background

A "privileged background" refers to an advantaged position, from which one may profit or which is likely to bring success; an environment which provides support, help, or profit. In this context it will refer to higher socio-economic circumstances, often referred to in the media as "affluent society, upwardly mobile and success-orientated" (Bruch 1978: 24), or the "capitalist cultural group" (Shefer 1986: 43).

3. Research design

The focus of the umbrella project is on the various dimensions of aggression. Here, however, an educational perspective on the topic is offered, with specific reference to educational psychology. Thus the focus will be on teachers' experiences of aggressive adolescent behaviour at a privileged school.

The research design was qualitative, explorative, descriptive, subjective and contextual (Mouton & Marais 1994; Mouton 1996: 103-69). An inductive approach was followed, gaining information from teachers, who were considered to be experts on the topic. The research was open and was not directed by any conceptual framework, preconceived notions or hypotheses. The participants were encountered in their own world (the school) in an attempt to obtain a total picture of the research problem to determine their experiences and views holistically.

4. Research method

The research was conducted in two phases, the first being an exploration of the teachers' experiences of aggressive adolescent behaviour at school, and the second an attempt to suggest guidelines for managing school contexts so as to prevent and/or deal with aggressive adolescent behaviour effectively at the school.

4.1 Phase 1: Determining teachers' experiences of aggressive adolescent behaviour at school

4.1.1 Sampling of participants

A sample containing the "most characteristic, representative or typical attributes" (Strydom & De Vos 1998: 198) of secondary school teachers at a specific privileged urban secondary school in Port Elizabeth was involved in the research.

Participants were included in the research by means of purposive sampling (Burns & Grove 2001; Brotherson 1994; Brink 1991; Doodley 1995; Morse 1991). Participants who could best answer the research question were selected by the principal of the school (Creswell 1994), in an attempt to ensure data "rich in description and informative" (Schurink 1998: 153). They were well balanced in terms of variables that could influence the research, namely race, age, gender and qualifications.

The researcher participated as the research instrument (Schurink 1998: 259) with no preconceived notions or expectations (Du Toit 1997). Two researchers were involved, referred to as the moderator and the observer, the former being the facilitator of the discussion and the latter taking field notes in order to accomplish triangulation (Krefting 1991; Vockell & Asher 1995; Schurink *et al* 1998: 319).

4.1.2 Data collection

Data collection was by means of in-depth personal phenomenological interviews (Kvale 1996; Folch-Lyon & Frost 1981; Kingry *et al* 1990; Krueger 1994). According to Shurink *et al* (1998: 314) an interview can be described as "a purposive discussion of a specific topic or related topics taking place between individuals with a similar background

and common interests". The interviews were audio- and videotaped for later analysis.

One open-ended research question was put to the participants, namely: What is your experience of aggressive adolescent behaviour at school?

By making use of techniques such as clarification, paraphrasing and summarizing, as well as minimal verbal and non-verbal responses, a context was created in which participants could speak freely and openly. During the interviews preconceived ideas were set aside. The research continued until definite patterns or themes became evident and the information became saturated (Schurink *et al* 1998: 317; Poggenpoel *et al* 1998).

Interviews were observed and reflective field notes were taken for the sake of triangulation (Wilson 1989). The videotapes were also used for this purpose. Furthermore, participants were requested to document their own observations and keep a diary of any aggressive behaviour they observed in the school.

4.1.3 Data analysis and description

After the audiotapes of the interviews had been transcribed, the information was analysed by means of Tesch's descriptive analysis (cf Creswell 1994: 153 for details). Coding by means of bracketing took place until prominent themes could be identified and described. Categories (sub-themes) and sub-categories within the major themes were also identified.

At the same time an independent qualitative researcher was requested to do an independent re-coding of the data in order to determine whether the same themes became evident and could be confirmed (Krefting 1991; Rubin & Babbie 2001). Consensus discussions between the researcher and the independent expert were held in order to determine the final results of the research.

4.1.4 Literature

A literature study was done to corroborate the findings and to compare the results with those of previous research studies, in order to

determine differences, similarities, gaps and unique contributions (Poggenpoel 1993).

4.1.5 Measures to ensure trustworthiness

Guba's model for qualitative research (Guba 1981; Lincoln & Guba 1985) was applied in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Attention was paid to the following principles:

- credibility (checking the truth value of the findings); transferability (ensuring the applicability of the findings); dependability (ensuring the consistency of the findings), and
- confirmability (which was accomplished by using the criterion of neutrality or freedom from bias).

4.1.5 Ethical measures

Care was taken to adhere to ethical measures during the research on this sensitive topic (Miles & Huberman 1996: 290). In order to ensure the safety and rights of participants, they were informed of the prevailing ethical considerations (Brink 1991), *eg* the informed consent of the school and the participants (teachers), voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality and feedback.

4.2 Phase 2: Providing guidelines for teachers on effectively preventing and/or dealing with aggressive adolescent behaviour at school

4.2.1 Data gathering and analysis

The findings obtained from the first phase of the research served as the data for this section (Copi 1996). Guidelines with regard to the prevention and handling of aggressive behaviour were inferred from these findings. The guidelines were discussed with appropriate professionals to ensure trustworthiness. A literature study was also undertaken to verify the practicability of the guidelines. This part of the research was also supported by ethical measures.

5. Discussion of the findings of Phase 1

From the transcriptions of the interviews four themes, with sub-themes (categories) and sub-categories, could be identified. These are discussed and supported by direct quotations from the teachers who participated in the research, as well as by references to the literature.

5.1 Theme 1: A threat to the learner's self-image and identity can result in aggression

The teachers were of the opinion that learners are inclined to retaliate against a threat to their image. This occurred especially in connection with their needs to be in control and to be accepted.

5.1.1 Adolescents want to be in control

In cases where learners were questioned about their conduct or ability, they prefer to put the blame on others (eg peers, teacher, team members), rather than accept the criticism. They also need their capabilities to be acknowledged (not doubted); otherwise they can become aggressive. Teachers are of the opinion that learners sometimes also react aggressively because they cannot conform to the policy of the school. The control issue also surfaces between different race groups. If learners experience a loss of control they can turn to drugs and alcohol, which can also promote aggressive behaviour.

> They [learners] perceive my criticism as being of them, rather than of what they are doing wrong.
>
> ... because they [learners] felt disadvantaged intellectually.
>
> He reacted very aggressively towards an umpire.
>
> ... or some-one who's upset with the system of the school.
>
> I saw two boys fighting. It was a White and a Black.

Adolescents have a need for autonomy and control (Gouws & Kruger 1994: 113). Erickson's theory of personality explains that adolescence is the time to establish a personal identity and self-concept (Gouws & Kruger 1994: 82). According to the literature, peer pressure and comparisons with others can cause more learners to join in aggressive behaviour (Pateraki 2001: 169).

The literature also confirms that teachers can "inadvertently contribute to the problem" (Craig *et al* 2000b: 33). Heimer (1997: 799) concludes that culture may also play an important role in causing aggression. Early sexual development, or experimenting with alcohol and drugs, or anti-social behaviour can also cause aggression (Berthold & Hoover 2000: 73).

5.1.2 Rejection by peers can result in aggression

Learners have a need to be accepted and fit in; otherwise they can become aggressive. Gouws & Kruger (1994: 124) confirm adolescents' need to fit in and that they therefore conform to their peer group during this developmental phase. Adolescents who feel rejected may develop a negative self-concept and as a result turn to deviant behaviour (Gouws & Kruger 1994: 140). Andreou (2001: 59) puts this in perspective by stating that aggression can be associated with self-evaluation and low levels of social acceptance.

5.2 Theme 2: Several variables influence aggression

Teachers expressed clear opinions regarding the fact that several variables have an influence on aggression. Learners' age, grade, gender, culture, developmental stage and personal life, as well as the new political dispensation and even the media or the weather can make a difference.

5.2.1 Age and grade

Teachers mentioned the fact that younger learners are more physical in their interaction with peers. Special mention was made of Grade 9s as a difficult group to handle:

> I think ... hm ... I have to maybe differentiate between the lower grades and the higher grades; it's only really in the lower grades.
>
> I found that Grade 9s mostly will probably take out most of their aggression on their fellow students.

According to research, aggression reaches its peak in the secondary school. Physical aggression reduces with age while verbal forms of aggression remain constant (Smith & Sharp 1994: 55). Pateraki (2001: 169) demonstrates the tendency to aggression to decrease with age as a more indirect approach to aggression develops.

5.2.2 Gender

It seems as if boys and girls differ in how they express aggression. Boys prefer to be more physical, while girls are more known for verbal aggression:

> Hm, the boys they are a bit different rowdy [*sic*] this boy likes to fight.
>
> To me it is a age [*sic*] when girls say very ugly things to each other.

With regard to aggression, boys and girls do differ (Miller-Johnson *et al* 1999: 142). It is confirmed in the literature that boys are more inclined to physical aggression (Craig *et al* 2000a: 24; Sylwester 1997: 75). Sylwester (1999: 68) mentions that this could possibly be explained in terms of hormonal differences. Less aggression has generally been reported in girls (Kalliotis 2000: 456), but they are more guilty of social exclusion and use this type of aggression at a younger age than boys (Craig *et al* 2000a: 16).

5.2.3 Culture

Specific mention was made of the behaviour of Afrikaans-speaking children, who traditionally used to be more submissive than other language groups, but who have now also become more challenging. Heimer (1997: 799) concludes that culture may play an important role in causing aggression. Aggression will be more common among groups which favour the use of aggression to solve problems (Heimer 1997: 800).

5.2.4 The new political dispensation

Teachers noted that aggression had escalated and suggested that this could perhaps be attributed to the new South Africa, in which individuals have become more aware of their human rights:

> ... but I think the New South Africa has a very big role to play in that regard.
>
> People have been made so much more aware of one's [*sic*] rights.

5.2.5 Developmental stage

Adolescence is the developmental stage of opposition, aggressive conduct and energy:

> ... towards like ... um ... the purpose of being at school, I think there is quite a lot of resentment that builds up.
>
> ... someone who's opposed to the school system.

The child is growing into a mature person and must establish his own self-concept and identity, in some cases through his demonstration of opposition or strength. The literature confirms the developmental pattern of aggression, which peaks during puberty and adolescence (Craig *et al* 2000a: 16). This is also confirmed by Manciau (1993: 24).

5.2.6 Personal life

The personal life of children can cause them to behave in an aggressive manner, due to emotions, relationships, home background, pressures, competitive style, or inabilities:

> ... a boy who just broke up with his girlfriend, and he was extremely aggressive.
>
> I think if there's, if things are happening in their own home lives ... he was storming out, slamming doors.

It is agreed in the literature that peers can reinforce aggressive behaviour (Craig *et al* 2000b: 25), merely by serving as an audience, encouraging the perpetrator, or saluting his victory.

5.2.7 The media

Teachers also made reference to the children's exposure to the media, eg television and movies.

Salkind *et al* (2000: 106) agree that the media play a role in determining what people see as misbehaviour: "what is 'right' and 'wrong' in schools continues to be driven by what appears in the popular media". The danger is that it actually encourages the incidents of aggression (Sylwester 1999: 68).

5.2.8 The weather

Teachers also mentioned the influence of the weather in contributing to aggression.

5.3 Theme 3: Manifestations of aggression

With regard to the manifestation of aggression, teachers commented on the places where aggression occurs as well as on the various forms it takes.

5.3.1 Places

Teachers referred to various places in the school setting where aggression could occur. They mentioned the classroom, corridors, hall, playground and sports fields:

> It happened in the classroom, ja.
>
> There have been incidents of fighting on the playground.

If children are is occupied in their work, aggression is not likely to be rife. However, a considerable degree of aggression occurs in classrooms, because aggression can be very subtle, *eg* teasing. It also often happens if the teacher is absent from the class for a while (Rigby 2000: 171). When children leave their classroom to move to another venue they experience greater freedom and space for the expression of dormant aggression and it is therefore not strange that forms of aggression, *eg* barging into someone on purpose, take place in school corridors (Rigby 2000: 171). It is confirmed in the literature that aggression is most likely to occur outside the school building (Craig *et al* 2000: 22; Kalliotis 2000: 60), perhaps because supervision is less stringent during break times (Rigby 2000: 172). Behre *et al* (2001: 132) note that the space in which aggression occurs makes a difference to the way it is perceived, *eg* in the school hall *vs* on the sports field.

5.3.2 Forms

The various expressions of aggression mentioned by teachers can be broadly divided into physical, vocal and emotional:

- Physical aggression

Physical aggression includes hitting, pushing, kicking, banging, throwing, slamming, and even crying:

> ... that will sometimes lead to a quick physical snap here and there which can end up in a physical fight.
>
> He kicked another boy.

It was noted in the literature that name-calling, kicking and hitting were reported as the most common forms of physical aggression (Kalliotis 2000: 58). The literature also confirms that boys resort more often to physical aggression than girls (Pateraki 2001: 168).

- Vocal aggression

Forms of vocal aggression include name-calling, shouting, cursing and gossiping:

> They call each other names; it's cursing.
>
> I find they oftentimes write nasty letters and ... um ... say horrible things.
>
> I think girls tend to 'skinner' [gossip].

Verbal aggression seems to cause less distress than physical aggression. However, it occurs much more frequently and its consequences are often only fully realised in the long term (Soutter & McKenzie 2000: 97). School teasing is hard to deal with and can often turn nasty (*Resource Handbook on Children's Rights* 2000: 6).

- Emotional aggression

Some forms of aggression are considered to be of a psychological nature, *eg* being spiteful, spreading rumours, being apathetic and displaying negative body language:

> It's the boys ... um ... who just lose their temper with each other, like a flare up.
>
> They can say spiteful, hurtful things about each other.
>
> ... you know gossiping or spreading rumours.

It is more difficult to identify psychological aggression, *eg* social exclusion (Craig *et al* 2000: 15), because it is less visible or audible than physical or verbal aggression. Girls are more involved in forms of psychological aggression (Pateraki 2001: 168).

5.4 Theme 4: Aggression is less likely to occur under healthy discipline

With regard to this theme the teachers reflected on the important role of the school's ethos, as well as the social environment, in controlling aggression.

5.4.1 Ethos of the school

Teachers mentioned that the ethos of this specific school includes factors such as a policy on discipline and a code of conduct (set rules), that result in tolerance towards others and relatively few problems with aggressive behaviour:

> They do have some level of discipline ... um ... maybe they know that there's certain structures in the school and certain expectations of them; they try to contain it.

The school atmosphere is known to be important for the handling of aggression (Behre *et al* 2001: 132).

5.4.2 The social environmental

Teachers agreed that the social environment and family background play a determining role in limiting aggression. In this regard they mentioned the educational and economic status of a certain class of pupil, characterised by parental support, involvement of parents in school activities, and disapproval of unacceptable aggressive behaviour at home:

> I mean he is the top of being educated. It has a lot to do with being educated, to channel aggression — first-world people who really know how to handle situations.

Heimer (1997: 832) confirms that aggressive behaviour can be interpreted in terms of the socio-economic status of learners, and sees economic inequality as a good predictor of aggression (Heimer 1997: 800).

6. Guidelines for teachers on effective prevention and/or handling of aggressive adolescent behaviour at school

According to the literature it is possible to reduce serious forms of aggressive behaviour through intervention (Smith & Sharp 1994: 53). Rigby (2000: 70), whose research focused on privileged schools, contends that aggression is more likely to occur under certain conditions than others. He upholds our conviction that the school and its environment play an important role in this regard, distinguishing between forces external to the school, such as family background and socio-cultural environment, and internal forces, such as the school's ethos, the educational climate and school policy. This was also confirmed by our research results (see Theme 4).

An integrated approach to aggression, taking the child, the school and the environment into consideration, promises to be most effective. This is confirmed by Craig *et al* (2000b: 22), who support a systemic model of intervention, and by Lipsitt (1994: 8), who refers to the role of societal, economic and familial conditions. Based on the findings of the research, as well as the theoretical insights of Rigby (2000: 195), Donald *et al* (2002: 122), and Papatheodorou (2000: 422), the following practical guidelines are presented for teachers.

6.1 School ethos and educational climate

A distinct school ethos must be created in which a learner-friendly atmosphere is accompanied by a clear, fair policy regarding discipline as well as a code of conduct and interpersonal communication (*Resource Handbook on Children's Rights* 2000: 7; Sylwester 1999: 71) compiled by all stakeholders in order to ensure their support (Soutter & McKenzie 2000: 97).

Support, tolerance for others, and the safety of learners should remain high priorities, leaving room for appropriate intervention and sanction of unacceptable behaviour.

A democratic management style, firmyl and fairly applied, along with an open-door policy on the part of the principal will contribute to a positive school climate.

6.2 Role of the teacher

Teachers must be well trained, not only with regard to their instructional function, but also with regard to their insight and understanding of adolescence. Research on how teachers see themselves as agents of aggression reduction is not abundant (Behre *et al* 2001: 132).

Teachers have to develop empathy and know about the diversity of aggressive behaviour, its identification, and effective intervention methods (Craig *et al* 2000a: 15). Teacher awareness of aggressive behaviour is also emphasised by Houndoumadi & Pateraki (2001: 19).

Furthermore, teachers should be sensitised in terms of the variables that influence aggressive behaviour, *eg* age, grade, gender, culture, the new political dispensation, the developmental stage of the learner, the media and the weather. They should know how to counteract these influences and be able to direct learners' positive energy into acceptable channels, *eg* sport and creative activities.

In terms of handling aggression, teachers should know that they must remain fair, impartial and caring. Incidents of aggression should be capitalised on as opportunities for education in life skills. Formal lectures on topics such as aggression do not have the expected positive effect. Teachers should reduce stereotyping and ridicule in everyday contact with learners (Sylwester 1999: 71). They should include co-operative learning in planning activities to enhance social skills (Sylwester 1999: 72).

Classroom management should be a high priority for teachers. Appropriate placing of learners who tend to form negative pairs or groups can be considered (Craig *et al* 2000b: 24) in the hope of avoiding aggressive behaviour. Factors that cause aggression should be considered and serious attempts should be made to reduce them (*eg* emotions such as anger, irritation, frustration, unhappiness and resentment).

Teachers should also consider their own contribution to learners' aggression and try to become peace-makers rather than instigators of aggression. Finally, teachers must serve as role models, demonstrating respect and healthy interpersonal relationships (Soutter & McKenzie 2000: 96).

6.3 Counsellors

Staff members responsible for the support and guidance of learners should take their job seriously. Although the emphasis on the school counsellor has been reduced in the new dispensation, "JOT"-teachers (Jesus-our-teacher) can render a wonderful service to learners in this regard.

Counsellors can also try to alleviate the pressure under which teachers have to function in the new dispensation (*eg* large classes) by taking care of the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of learners. Morin (2001: 62) refers to the value of "positive behaviour support programs". Counsellors can also help teachers to sensitise learners to the code of conduct and the policy of the school. All reports of acts of aggression should be taken seriously and acted upon by counsellors.

Counsellors can also initiate adequate life orientation programmes, including appropriate life-skills training and covering the cognitive, behavioural, social and moral skills required to reduce aggression. The focus should be on learners' self-concept, self-acceptance, assertiveness, coping strategies, problem solving, conflict resolution, social skills and acceptable behaviour (Andreou 2001: 59; Behre *et al* 2001: 132; Richardson 2000: 248; Sharp *et al* 2000: 45; Sylwester 1999: 71).

6.4 Learners

The school must provide for the needs of its learners in terms of acceptance, understanding, support and safety. Rejection can lead to anti-social behaviour, such as aggression (Miller-Johnson *et al* 142). The system of peer helpers or "buddies" can do much to assist learners experiencing personal problems. Soutter & McKenzie (2000: 98) also recommend a peer mediation programme. Peer supporters, also called peer-protectors or mentors (*Resource Handbook on Children's Rights* 2000: 7), need to be carefully selected, trained and supported (Cowie & Olafsson 2000: 79). They can help victims and perpetrators of aggression. In general, learners need social skills training, self-knowledge, concern for others and for things, as well as personal responsibility.

Learner involvement is essential in counteracting aggression, not only to keep them actively and creatively busy, but also to keep their interest and attention, and to involve them responsively in helping to address problems such as aggression. They should also assist in finding appropriate solutions to unacceptable conduct. The role of the Student Council and class leaders should not be underestimated.

Learners also need opportunities to discharge some of their pent-up energy and frustration; the school should therefore plan a suitable extramural programme, *eg* sport, to provide such opportunities.

6.5 Parents

Parents remain co-responsible for their children's welfare during school hours. They should be involved in school matters, *eg* determining the school policy and code of conduct.

Support and co-operation from families are non-negotiable and contribute to the effective functioning of the school (Soutter & McKenzie 2000: 99). Parents also need to be aware of the serious problems the school has to deal with from time to time (Houndoumadi *et al* 2001: 19). In this regard, circular letters serve a positive purpose.

Parent education on relevant topics, such as aggression, can form part of parent-teacher association meetings.

6.6 School environment

The school must attempt to improve its environment. Ensuring that activity areas are open, accessible, and not so distant as to be hidden from sight can accomplish this. Problem arise due to high levels of activity on the playground, large spaces, and diverse unstructured activities (Craig *et al* 2000b: 25). Over-crowding should be avoided, *eg* at the tuck shop, in toilets or on narrow corridors.

Supervision and surveillance also help to reduce unacceptable behaviour. The mere presence of a teacher can be considered an intervention (Rigby 2000: 177).

Boredom is often cited as an explanation for acts of aggression. Stimulation, *eg* class awards for behaviour during breaks, could help to solve the problem. Learners can also suggest games they would like to play during break times and suggest practical improvements

to the playground. An attractive and stimulating environment depends on resources and learners or parents can be involved in an attempt to improve these.

6.7 Intervention

Intervention in the case of serious misconduct is never simple. Depending on the nature of the offence, the principal should consult with appropriate staff members, with the learners involved and with the parents and the governing body. In less serious cases the learners involved should know that the teacher is aware of what has happened, and they should be reprimanded and called in for a meeting if necessary. This can be done individually or *en masse*, depending on the act of aggression, the specific learners involved and the purpose of the meeting.

Three levels of intervention can be required, involving the whole school, the class group, or the individual learner (Sharp *et al* 2000: 43; Soutter & McKenzie 2000: 96). Sharp *et al* (2000: 43) prefer the whole school approach to aggression, in terms of which learners are taught how to manage their lives and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

The school must take ownership of intervention and not rely on outside experts to solve its problems (Cowie & Olafsson 2000: 93). This includes identifying aggressive learners (eg those who display poor social skills) (Carney 2000: 215), learners at risk as targets, and areas of frequent aggression, as well as implementing effective strategies. Actions which will reduce the effect of the factors causing aggression (as shown in the findings of this reseach) are indispensable.

7. Conclusion

The research indicated that this specific school did not suffer from exceptional or severe cases of aggression. According to Smith & Sharp (1994: 54) this can be attributed to the social environment of the school and its educational climate. Four themes could be identified regarding aggression, and practical guidelines to help teachers prevent aggression and intervene where necessary, in order to enrich the lives of children, were presented in line with these themes.

Bibliography

ANDREOU E
2001. Bully/Victim problems and their association with coping behaviour in conflictual peer interactions among school-age children. *Educational Psychology* 21(1): 59-67.

ADAMS G O, T P GULOTTA & C MARKSTROM-ADAMS
1994. *Adolescent life experiences*. Pacific Grove, Calif: Brooks/Cole.

BARLOW D H & V M DURAND
1999. *Abnormal psychology: an integrative approach*. Pacific Grove, Calif: Brooks/Cole.

BARON R A
1996. *Essentials of psychology*. Boston, Mass: Allyn and Bacon.

BEHRE W J, R A ASTOR & H A MEYER
2001. Elementary- and middle-school teachers' reasoning about intervening in school violence. *Journal of Moral Education* 30(2): 131-54.

BERTHOLD K A & J H HOOVER
2000. Correlates of bullying and victimisation among intermediate students in the Midwestern USA. *School Psychology International* 21(1): 65-78.

BRINK H
1991. Quantitative vs qualitative research. *Nursing RSA Verpleging* 6(1): 14-6.

BROTHERSON M J
1994. Interactive focus group interviewing: a qualitative research method in early intervention. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 14(1): 101-18.

BRUCH H
1978. *The golden cage*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

BULLOCK L M & R A GABLE
1995. *Perspectives on school aggression and violence. Working forum on children and youth with aggressive and violent behaviours*. Reston, Virg: Council for Children with Behavioural Disorders.

BURNS N & S K GROVE
2001. *The practice of nursing research*. Philadelphia: WB Saunders.

CARNEY J V
2000. Bullied to death. *School Psychology International* 21(2): 213-20.

COPI I M
1996. *Informal logic*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

COWIE H & R OLAFSSON
2000. The role of peer support in helping the victims of bullying in a school with high levels of aggression. *School Psychology International* 21(1): 79-95.

CAIRNS & CAIRNS
1986. Predicting aggression in girls and boys. *Social Science* 71(1): 16-21.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS CENTRE, DURBAN
2000. When teasing turns nasty. *Children First* 4(30): 6-8. [excerpt from *A resource handbook on children's rights*].

CRAIG W M, K HENDERSON & J M MURPHY
2000a. Prospective teachers' attitudes toward bullying and victimisation. *School Psychology International* 21(1): 5-21.

CRAIG R, W MEHRENS & H CLARINZIO
1975. *Contemporary educational psychology: concepts, issues, applications*. New York: Wiley.

CRAIG W M, D PEPLER & R ATLAS
2000b. Observations of bullying in the playground and in the classroom. *School Psychology International* 21(1): 22-36.

CRESWELL J W
1994. *Research design: qualitative & quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.

DE VOS A S (ed)
1998. *Research at grassroots*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

DONALD D, S LAZARUS & P LOLWANA
2002. *Educational psychology in social context*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

DOODLEY D
1995. *Social research methods*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

DU TOIT A S
1997. 'n Filosofies-opvoedkundige perspektief op omgewingsopvoeding met spesiale verwysing na omgewingsgesonde gedrag en volhoubare ontwikkeling. Ongepubl D Ed proefskrif. Pretoria: UNISA.

DU TOIT S J & N KRUGER N
1991. *The child. An educational perspective*. Durban: Butterworths.

FOLCH-LYON E & J F TROST
1981. Conducting focus group sessions. *Studies in Family Planning* 12(2): 443-9.

GOUWS E & N KRUGER
1994. *The adolescent: an educational perspective*. Pretoria: Butterworths.

GUBA E G
1981. Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Resources Information Centre Annual Review Paper* 29: 75-91.

HEIMER K
1997. Socio-economic status, subcultural definitions and violent delinquency. *Social Forces* 75(3): 799-834.

HOUNDOUMADI A & L PATERAKI
2001. Bullying and bullies in Greek elementary schools: pupils' attitudes and teachers' awareness. *Educational Review* 53(1): 19-27.

HAMACHEK D
1995. *Psychology in teaching, learning and growth*. London: Allyn & Bacon.

KALLIOTIS P
2000. Bullying as a special case of aggression: procedures for cross-cultural assessment. *School Psychology International* 21(1): 47-64.

KINGRY M J, L B TIEDJE & L L FRIEDMAN
1990. Focus groups: a research technique for nursing. *Nursing Research* 39(2): 124-5.

KREFTING L
1991. Rigour in qualitative research: the assessment of trustworthiness. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 45(3): 214-22.

KRUEGER R A
1994. *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.

KRÜGER C, C W RECH & C W VAN STADEN
1993. Aggressie in adolessensie. *Geneeskunde* 35(6): 9-15.

KVALE S
1983. The qualitative research interview. A phenomenological and hermeneutical mode of understanding. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 14(2): 171-96.

LINCOLN Y S & E A GUBA
1985. *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverley Hills, Calif: Sage.

LIPSITT L P
1994. Violence is behaviour and should be treated as such. *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behaviour Letter* 10(2): 8-11.

LOEBER R
1982. The stability of antisocial and delinquent behaviour. *Child Development* 53(6): 1431-46.

MANCIAUX M
1993. Violent youth. *World Health* 46(1): 24-6.

MEDINNUS G R & R C JOHNSON
1976 *Child and adolescent psychology*. Oxford: John Wiley.

MEYER W F, C MOORE & H G VILJOEN
1997. *Personology: from individual to ecosystem*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

MILES M B & A M HUBERMAN
1996. *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.

MILLER-JOHNSON S, J D COIE, A MAUMARY-GREMAUD, J LOCHMAN & T ROBERT
1999. Relationship between childhood peer rejection and aggression and adolescent delinquency severity and type among African-American youth. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioural Disorders* 7(3): 137-47.

MORIN J E
2001. Winning over the resistant teacher. *Journal of Positive Behaviour Interventions* 3(1): 62.

MORSE J M (ed)
1994. *Critical issues in qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.

1991. *Qualitative nursing research*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage.

MOUTON J M (ed)
1996. *Understanding social research*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.

MOUTON J & H C MARAIS
1994. *Basiese begrippe: metodologie van die geesteswetenskappe*. Pretoria: RGN.

MYERS D G
1998. *Psychology*. New York: Worth Publishers.

PATERAKI L
2001. Bullying among primary school children in Athens, Greece. *Educational Psychology* 21(2): 167-76.

PAPATHEODOROU T
2000. Management approaches employed by teachers to deal with children's behaviour problems in nursery classes. *School Psychology International* 21(4): 415-36.

POGGENPOEL M
1993. *Phenomenological research: summary*. Johannesburg: Rand Afrikaans University.

POGGENPOEL M, C P H MYBURGH & A GMEINER
1998. One voice regarding the legalisation of abortion: nurses who experience discomfort. *Curationis* 21(3): 2.

RICE F P
1984. *The adolescent: development, relationships and culture*. Boston, Mass: Allyn and Bacon.

RICHARDSON R C
2000. Teaching social and emotional competence. *Children and Schools* 22(4): 246-52.

RIGBY K
2000. *Bullying in schools and what to do about it.* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

RUBIN A & E BABBIE
2001. *Research methods for social work*. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth.

SALKIND N, D ADAMS, C DERMER, J HEINERIKSON, B JONES & E NASH
2000. Name of article *School psychology International* 21(1): 106-12.

SCHAFER W
1998. *Stress management for wellness*. London: Harcourt College Publishers.

SCHURINK E M
1998. Designing qualitative research. De Vos (ed) 1998: 313-33.

SCHURINK W J, E M SCHURINK & M POGGENPOEL
1998. Focus group interviewing and audio-visual methodology in qualitative research. De Vos (ed) 1998: 313-33.

SHAFFER D R
1994. *Social and personality development*. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth.

SHARP S, D THOMPSON & T ARORA
2000. How long before it hurts? *School Psychology International* 21(1): 37-46.

SHEFER T
1986. A social-psychological study of eating and body problems among women. Unpubl MA dissertation. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

SLAVIN R E
1994. *Educational psychology. Theory and practice*. Boston, Mass: Allyn & Bacon.

SMITH P K & S E SHARP
1994. *School bullying: insights and perspectives*. London: Routledge.

SOUTTER A & A MCKENZIE
2000. The use and effects of anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies in Australian schools. *School Psychology International* 21(1): 96-105.

STEUER F B
1994. *The psychological development of children*. Pacific Grove, Calif: Brooks/Cole.

STRYDOM H & A S DE VOS
1998. Sampling and sampling methods. De Vos (ed) 1998: 198.

SYLWESTER R
1999. In search of the roots of adolescent aggression. *Educational Leadership* 57(1): 65-70.

1997. The neurobiology of self-esteem and aggression. *Educational Leadership* 54(5): 75-9.

TESSER A
1995. *Advanced social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

VOCKELL E L & J W ASHER
1995. *Educational research*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.