

Drivers of Learner Aggression in Selected Schools in the Amathole District Municipality in South Africa

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Abstract

In the pursuit of an environment conducive to effective teaching and learning, schools are universally regarded as sanctuaries of nonviolence for all stakeholders. However, the South African education landscape has witnessed a distressing trend as schools have increasingly transformed into arenas of criminal activity and violence. Against this background, the present study sought to explore the drivers of learner aggression in selected schools situated in the Amathole District Municipality. The study followed a phenomenological research design that enabled the researchers to explore the lived experiences of the participants and unearth insights into learner aggression. Using a purposive sampling technique, twenty-five participants were purposively selected from five separate schools and data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that the overarching influence of violent communities and dysfunctional family structures and teacher favouritism, particularly directed towards academically proficient students, were drivers of aggressive behaviour. Among others, the study recommends the urgent need for teacher training programmes that focus on dealing with learner aggression. By equipping teachers with enhanced tools to discern, prevent, and effectively respond to instances of learner aggression, the education system can foster an atmosphere of safety and inclusivity.

Keywords: aggressive behaviour; teachers; learners; schools; school violence

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Introduction

Studies on violence reveal that “aggressive behaviour” is a term that refers to actions that are intended to cause harm, dominate, or intimidate others (Anderson and Bushman 2002; Chng, Li, Liau, and Khoo 2015; Kaur and Niwas 2017). As such, aggressive behaviour manifests in various ways, ranging from verbal aggression (such as yelling or insults) to physical aggression (such as hitting or fighting) (Bekithemba 2019; Grobler 2018; Mitchley 2022). Aggression can be driven by a combination of internal and external factors, including biological, psychological, and environmental influences (Arriaga et al. 2006; LaFontana and Cillessen 2010). Aggressive learner behaviour refers to aggression exhibited by a learner that is intended to intimidate, dominate, or harm others within an educational setting (Grobler 2018; Zhai et al. 2019). This study will refer to aggressive learner behaviour as displays of any actions, attitudes, and interactions that are intended to intimidate, dominate, or harm others within the school setting, leading to disruptions, hindrance of peers’ progress, and a hostile atmosphere.

Schools are fundamental community-based institutions that should be nonviolent for all stakeholders for teaching and learning to occur without disruption. However, in most schools across South Africa, peaceful school environments remain a pipe dream (Grobler 2018; Steyn and Singh 2018). It is reported that South African schools have become hotspots for criminal activities and violence (Makhasane and Khanare 2018; Tshikalange 2022). There are two types of learner aggression: acquired aggressiveness and instinctive aggression; both are acts intended to injure another person. Aggressive behaviour can take many forms, including verbal, physical, and psychological aggression (Steyn and Singh 2018). Numerous elements, like temperament, stress, and provocation contribute to how learners behave when they are around their peers on school grounds, creating difficulty in providing a safe environment, which is effective for teaching and learning (Cloete 2022). Thus, the violence committed by aggressive learners negatively impacts the ethos of schooling by compromising the security of learners and teachers, thus ultimately disturbing classroom functioning (Kgosimore 2018).

Over the past few years, the issue of school learners’ aggression towards fellow schoolmates and teachers has become a concern across South Africa (Bekithemba 2019; Mabunda and McKay 2021). This unacceptable behaviour has led to the deaths of learners and teachers alike as a result of stabbings, shootings, and physical assault (Malesele 2021; McCain 2022). In South Africa, school violence is usually ascribed to learners’ easy access to weapons and high violence rates in neighbourhoods near schools (Bekithemba 2019; Mayeza, Bhana, and Mulqueeny 2022). As such, South African schools are infamously renowned for more shocking acts of violence and aggression compared to schools globally (Cloete 2022; Mitchley 2022). Sadly, this violence appears to be increasing despite the interventions such as the employment of security guards at schools (Mitchley 2022; Tshikalange 2022). Reports reveal that in South

Africa, between April and June 2022 alone, fifty-eight rapes and fifteen murders had reportedly occurred at public schools, some at the hands of other learners (Cloete 2022).

This study, therefore, aimed to explore the drivers of aggressive learner behaviour in selected schools in the Amathole District Municipality. By focusing on the Amathole District Municipality, the study uncovered specific dynamics that are not adequately represented in broader studies. This specificity has the potential to significantly enhance the knowledge base available to social workers in the district, enabling them to develop targeted interventions that directly address the local catalysts of aggressive behaviours among learners. The insights gained from this study are expected to empower social workers with an accurate and contextually relevant understanding of the underlying causes of aggression, equipping them to implement more effective prevention, intervention, and support strategies.

Literature Review

Studies have demonstrated that aggression stems from various aspects, such as peer influence, media influence, community and social issues, substance abuse, and depression due to familial neglect. The following subsections explore the factors shaping learner aggression in educational institutions.

Peer-Related Factors

Adolescents are highly susceptible to peer influence, especially in forming their identities and social networks (Chng et al. 2015; Kaur and Niwas 2017). Learners are impressionable and easily influenced, often due to the desire to attain entrance into a group of popular learners (Kaur and Niwas 2017). If a learner's peers exhibit aggressive behaviour or hold attitudes that condone or encourage aggression, they may adopt these behaviours and attitudes themselves in order to seek the social acceptance and validation of their peers (Andrews, Foulkes, and Blakemore 2020). It is argued that peer pressure sometimes exacerbates learner aggression by creating a competitive or confrontational atmosphere within schooling environments (Zhai et al. 2019). Studies have demonstrated that adolescents who grow up in functional families are less likely to participate in antisocial behaviour and are less influenced by their classmates (Andrews, Foulkes, and Blakemore 2020; Foshee et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2018). Positive family dynamics reduce the impact of peer influence and aggression, as emotional warmth and social control help to reduce negative behaviours (Reynolds and Crea 2015; Zhai et al. 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the complex dynamics of peer influence on violence and promote positive family environments to mitigate its impact.

Media-Related Factors

The media has been identified as a factor that can influence learner aggression. According to Prot et al. (2016), while the effects of media may not be immediate, they can accumulate over time and produce significant behavioural changes that impact both

learners and teachers. Exposure to media violence has been found to increase aggressive behaviours in school-aged adolescent learners (Cockrell and Moen 2021). Anderson et al. (2015) similarly found that media violence can increase aggressive perceptions, feelings, and behaviours while decreasing empathy. Burnay, Kepes, and Bushman (2022) found that exposure to violent and sexualised media can potentially increase aggression. This is consistent with earlier studies that suggest that repeated exposure to violent media can desensitise individuals to aggressive behaviours (Anderson and Bushman 2002; Anderson et al. 2003; Arriaga et al. 2006; LaFontana and Cillessen 2010). Devilly, O'Donohue, and Brown (2023) note that individuals who are more impulsive, emotionally reactive, and frustrated with media content are more likely to experience a higher state of aggression in response to media exposure. Parents and teachers can help mitigate the adverse effects of media by limiting learners' exposure to violent content, discussing the effects of media with learners, and promoting critical thinking about media messages.

Community-Related Factors

Studies have also demonstrated that community can significantly impact learner aggression as social and environmental factors can contribute to developing aggressive behaviours in learners (Arseneault et al. 2017; Schepers 2017). Learners who grow up in communities where violence is prevalent are noted to be more likely to develop aggressive behaviour than their peers in more stable communities (Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan 2009). This is because exposure to violence can desensitise learners and make them likelier to use violence themselves (Esposito et al. 2022; Mutongoza 2023). It has been argued that communities with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and social disorganisation sometimes contribute to the development of aggressive behaviour because, in such communities, learners may feel that they lack opportunities and resources, which leads to frustration and aggression (Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan 2009). Contrastingly, scholarship on violence has also revealed that communities with high levels of social support and positive role models can help mitigate the risk of learner aggression by providing learners with positive reinforcement and teaching them prosocial behaviours (Esposito et al. 2022; Lopoo and London 2016). One can thus argue that the community can play a significant role in shaping learner aggression, and interventions that address social and environmental factors may effectively prevent aggressive behaviour.

Psychosocial Factors

One can argue that mental health-related factors can facilitate learner aggression in schools. From the work of Mncube and Bekithemba (2019), there is a sense that unmitigated mental health issues are chief contributors to learner violence in schools. The reality is that many learners face significant challenges such as learning disorders, death of parents/guardians, mental health issues, and traumas, yet in South Africa, these challenges are seldom addressed (Marais et al. 2019; Zeanah and Humphreys 2018). It is not surprising that home-based stressors usually find expression in aggressive

behaviours at school. This is because the learners in disruptive environments are sometimes very limited regarding mechanisms that can be used to cope with stressors (Stewart et al. 2022; van Bruwaene et al. 2020). Some prominent mental health disorders associated with aggression include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, Tourette's disorder, mood disorders (such as bipolar disorder), substance-related disorders, mental retardation, pervasive developmental disorders, intermittent explosive disorder, and personality disorders, which often require medical treatment (Kaminski and Claussen 2017; Trejo et al. 2022).

Drug and Substance Abuse-Related Factors

Substance and drug abuse can also have a significant influence on learner aggression. When learners abuse drugs or substances, they may experience changes in their brain chemistry, leading to mood swings, anxiety, and irritability (Chester and DeWall 2018). These changes can make learners more prone to aggressive behaviour, especially when they are stressed or frustrated (Mutongoza 2023). In South Africa, drug and substance abuse among school learners remains a critical challenge (Hendricks 2018; Nzama and Ajini 2021). Studies reveal that drug and substance abuse can impair judgement and decision-making, making it more challenging for learners to control their impulses and make rational choices (Swadi 2017). Furthermore, the effects of drug or substance abuse can also increase paranoia or anxiety, leading to a heightened sense of threat or danger, thereby further exacerbating aggressive behaviour (Lu et al. 2021; Nzama and Ajini 2021). Overall, substance and drug abuse can profoundly impact learner aggression making it crucial for teachers and parents to promote drug-free environments and to provide resources and support to learners struggling with addiction or substance abuse. Promoting a drug-free school environment has become more complex with the decriminalisation of marijuana, which makes it significantly easier for learners to access it.

Studies on learner aggression have left a notable gap in understanding the specific causes of aggressive behaviours in the Amathole District Municipality. While existing studies have highlighted general factors contributing to learner aggression, they have failed to address the unique contextual nuances and localised factors that might be prevalent in this district. This necessitated an exploration of the drivers of aggressive learner behaviours in the Amathole District Municipality.

Theoretical Framework

Bandura's (1997) social learning theory (SLT) intimates that individuals acquire antagonistic reactions similar to other multifaceted forms of social behaviour, which can be learned through direct experience or observation. SLT elucidates the acquisition of antagonistic behaviours through observational learning methods and offers valuable conceptions for understanding and describing beliefs and expectations guiding social behaviour (Bandura 1997). This is corroborated by Hendricks and Tanga's (2019) study, which highlights SLT's insights into mechanisms underlying the acquisition,

reinforcement, and perpetuation of violent behaviours. The significant concepts of SLT are instrumental in explaining the development and change of expectations about the social world (Anderson et al. 2015). In South Africa, where violence is increasingly normalised, SLT is particularly relevant due to its emphasis on observational learning and reinforcement dynamics (Bandura 1997; Mutongoza 2023). SLT can be utilised to investigate how aggressive behaviours are modelled and transmitted within learners' social environment, encompassing peers, teachers, family members, and media influences (Hendricks 2018). Hendricks (2018) underscores the role of intimate relationships, like family and peers, in shaping learners' aggression within schools, with exposure to violence increasing the likelihood of replicating such behaviour. Consequently, the researchers found SLT an appropriate framework for elucidating the causative factors contributing to aggressive behaviour among scholars in selected schools within the Amathole District Municipality.

Methodology

Using a phenomenological approach, the researchers explored the phenomenon of learner aggression because the approach prepared crucial groundwork for future explorations. As Mayer (2015) proposes, the phenomenological research approach operates on the premise that the answers to research inquiries lie intricately woven within interconnected behavioural concerns. By the researchers immersing themselves in the world of the learners, the approach facilitated an exploration into the origins of such behaviours, shedding light on the personal experiences, perceptions, and reasons that contribute to the manifestation of aggression among students.

Sample and Sampling Strategies

Five high schools in the Amathole District where cases of learner aggression were reported as high were purposively selected. At each school, the researchers purposively sampled learners based on a documented history of aggressive behaviour and teachers based on self-reported encounters with aggressive learners. At each school, the sample was thus composed of four learners and one teacher; this meant that there were twenty learners and five teachers, making a cumulative total of twenty-five participants. The teachers were all aged between 30 and 40 years and were holders of Bachelor of Education degrees. Three of the teachers were female and two were male. The learner sample comprised learners aged 16 to 19 years, including ten males and ten females. Eleven learners were in Grade 11; the remaining nine were in Grade 12.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from learners and teachers because they allowed the researchers more flexibility to ask follow-up questions, giving more depth of information and experiences (Babbie and Mouton 2015). The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participants. The central question asked by the researchers was about the participants' perspectives on

factors shaping and influencing aggressive learner behaviour. Semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to probe and elicit more details about such perceptions and experiences based on their responses.

The researchers used thematic analysis to analyse the data (Creswell 2014), which involves classifying and analysing recurring concepts or themes within the data. First, the researchers familiarised themselves with the collected data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and notes. This was followed by coding, which entailed the identification of patterns and interesting sections in the data that could lead to potential themes. After that came the identification of themes, whereby the codes were reviewed to identify potential themes in the already coded data. The fourth step was reviewing the themes—here, the researchers critically reflected on the thematic map that had been constructed. This was followed by naming and defining themes, where each theme was given a short description that described the scope of information presented in the theme. The final step consisted of writing the manuscript to present the research findings in text format.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained ethical clearance from their university's ethics committee before initiating data collection procedures (HEN011SGW101 ethical clearance number obtained March 23, 2023). Upon receiving the clearance, the researchers applied for gatekeeper permission from the Department of Basic Education, which was approved on May 16, 2023, and sought permission from school principals before entering the schools. Having been granted permission, the researchers approached participants seeking informed consent to participate in the study. For minors, the researchers first sought the consent of these learners' legal guardians, followed by the assent of the learners themselves, while consent was sought from adult participants as advised by Mayer (2015). The participants were assured of their privacy and confidentiality—the researchers ensured that participants' identities, or any identifying information of both the participants and their schools, were concealed, as proposed by Creswell (2014). During the data collection process, the participants were not exposed to maltreatment and were informed that they could terminate the interview whenever they felt uncomfortable. A professional counsellor was on hand to conduct a debriefing with participants after completing the interviews.

Data Trustworthiness

The researchers upheld the four elements of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researchers used member checks, which involved taking the findings and the themes back to the participants and soliciting their opinions. To enhance transferability, the researchers have provided sufficient background information to contextualise the study in a way that allows for comparisons. To enhance dependability, the researcher provided in-depth descriptions of the study's methods, allowing the study to be replicated. Lastly,

the researchers checked for intercoder agreement (also referred to as cross-checking), which involved finding another person to check codes for agreement (Creswell 2014).

Findings and Discussion

When asked about the factors shaping learner aggression, the participants' responses revealed four main themes: disruptive family circumstances, peer pressure and influence, teacher-related factors, and community influence. The following subsections will discuss these themes in greater detail.

Disruptive Family Circumstances

Most participants believed that family circumstances influenced aggressive learner behaviour. Participants alleged that ruptured family units were responsible for many of the aggressive learner behaviours in school. A case in point can be drawn from a learner who, when asked about their aggressive conduct, contended:

I feel like when there is no love, care, and family time, it makes me feel neglected, as if I am not loved. My parents like to constantly shout at me for no reason, and that makes me angry. (Learner 11)

This was corroborated by other learners who opined that their aggressive behaviour was rooted in family violence and that aggression was merely an attempt to reduce their susceptibility to bullying. In this regard, a learner reasoned:

Parents who always fight create an uncondusive environment for children to concentrate on anything, let alone schoolwork. I am always tired and angry because of the constant fighting at home, and I sometimes snap at my classmates because of that. (Learner 7)

Teachers also added that some of the aggression manifesting at their schools was rooted in how learners had been socialised at home (family violence) into being violent. One can consider the perspective of a teacher who stated:

The cause of aggression may be because learners endure physical and emotional abuse at home, and they retaliate by becoming aggressive as a way of trying to protect themselves. The results of neglect and receiving no love from parents make them feel unwanted and therefore lead them to become angry learners. (Teacher 2)

Another learner also added:

Some learners come from abusive homes where parents fight in front of learners. They perceive this as acceptable and model that very behaviour when faced with a challenge in the school environment. (Learner 15)

Participants agreed that a destructive family environment often leads to aggressive behaviour among learners. These findings can be read in the light of Bandura's (2003)

SLT proposition that learners learn behaviour through observing the behaviour portrayed by their parents, modelling the unorthodox behaviour, and replicating it. Thus, it is unsurprising that learners who grow up in destructive environments at home tend to be influenced by what they see at home and become violent themselves (Roberts, Pullig, and David 2019). As with other studies on learner aggression in different contexts, the findings of this study point out that learners experiencing violence tend to replicate aggressive behaviours that they were exposed to in their homes (Cockrell and Moen 2021; Esposito et al. 2022; Khumalo 2019). The findings also corroborate previous studies that have shown that learners from disruptive family environments are sometimes very limited when it comes to mechanisms that can be used to cope with stressors, and aggression is usually their only known response to stressors (Stewart et al. 2022; van Bruwaene et al. 2020). Thus, stakeholders such as parents, community members, social workers, and the Department of Basic Education must work together to help learners cope with stressors.

Peer Pressure and Influence

Learners were also very vocal about how peer pressure and influence played a significant role in their aggressive behaviours at school. They argued that the pressure to fit into peer groups, the need for peer validation, and the desire to scale up the ladder in their respective peer groups led them to become violent and aggressive. One can point to a learner who argued:

We always like to copy what other learners do [the violent conduct and bouts of aggression] because we don't want to seem uncool in front of our peers. (Learner 3)

Competition between peers was also reported to produce group dynamics that were often violent. An appropriate example can be drawn from a learner who confessed:

In my class, there are various groups of friends who compete with one another in terms of fashion, and sometimes they fight because one group upstages the other. (Learner 15)

The responses given by the learners revealed that bonds of friendships appeared to be prevalent in dictating the course of action taken by members of a given group. This was concisely presented by a learner who revealed:

When we go out as friends, we always make sure that we do things together. So even if you do not want to do something, you have to do it because the rest of the group is doing it. (Learner 20)

In some instances, peers were instrumental in the violent aggression of some learners as they encouraged each other to respond to stressors violently. The need for peer validation was adequately expressed by another learner who posited:

Sometimes classmates laugh and make fun of you when you fail, and that makes a person ... angry; the friends encourage the victim to respond violently and stamp their

authority, which, in turn, the learner may act aggressively and cause physical harm to others. (Learner 18)

The findings are consistent with studies that show that in the adolescence stage, peer influence is powerful because learners' identities are still in their formative stages (Chng et al. 2015; Kaur and Niwas 2017). These findings coincide with the circle of courage of which belonging is the central pillar, and the desire to fit into peer groups influences learners to succumb to peer pressure and influence. As such, studies reveal that when a learner's peers exhibit aggressive behaviour or hold attitudes that condone or encourage aggression, they may adopt these behaviours and attitudes themselves, seeking social acceptance and validation from their peers (Andrews et al. 2020). This is consistent with SLT in which Bandura (2003) argues that through social modelling, children learn and replicate behaviours that are presented as acceptable in their environments. As with the findings of this study, researchers on learner aggression reveal that peer pressure sometimes exacerbates learner aggression by creating a competitive or confrontational atmosphere within schooling environments (Zhai et al. 2019). One can thus argue that peer pressure and influence contribute significantly to the production of aggression and violence.

Teacher-Related Factors

Some learners also complained that their aggression was merely a response to the negative attitudes and conduct they experienced at the hands of teachers. Some learners alleged that the teachers were maligning them and magnifying their failures, and this led to their aggressive response because aggression was what they perceived to be a logical response. This is exemplified in the words of a learner who explained their aggressive behaviour by arguing:

I do not like when teachers favour well-performing learners more than others; that means we do not get equal treatment from that teacher. (Learner 8)

Other learners also added how the failure of teachers to understand the diversity of home environments was fuelling aggression as a response from learners. A learner revealed:

Some homes are poor, and maybe they do not have parental care, so the learners do not bother to do homework and focus on their studies because there is little to no supervision at their homes. This results in many learners performing poorly academically and being labelled for poor performance. (Learner 2)

Another learner corroborated these experiences by adding:

When a teacher calls me dumb in front of the class, I become disinterested in any type of schoolwork, and the insult triggers my anger. (Learner 10)

Learners' experiences also revealed that academic performance was closely linked to their frustrations, which eventually found expression in aggression. A learner argued:

I come from a poor household and do not have access to some of the resources my peers have ... I sometimes do not perform well and get scolded in front of the entire class for it. (Learner 20)

A teacher suggested:

Students from [dangerous] communities tend to make noise, [and] disrupt other learners during class. Often, [they] do not pay attention during class time and hardly do their work. (Teacher 3)

The study's findings revealed that part of the reasons behind learner aggression was ascribed to teacher-related factors prevailing at their schools. As with Engelbrecht (2020), participants disclosed that the teachers' consistent criticism and ridicule sometimes made learners frustrated and angry, which sometimes found expression in aggressive behaviour. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that the lack of positive teacher treatment can contribute to aggressive learner behaviours (Schäfer and Eerola 2017; Zhang et al. 2019). This also finds further support from Petrides, Furnham, and Frederickson (2004), whose meta-analysis found that supportive teacher-learner relationships reduced student aggression, while negative teacher-student relationships increased aggression in learners. Portraying judgement by teachers toward learners should be strictly prohibited by the South African Schools Act of 1997, yet very little support is offered by the relevant departments with regard to dealing with disciplinary issues (Mncube and 2019). It is thus unsurprising that students were linking aggression to teacher-related stressors—for substantiation, one can look to Zhang et al. (2019), who argue that positive teacher treatment can help reduce aggressive learner behaviours. Using SLT, one can opine that through modelling, learners discover that it is normalised to treat others by observing how their teachers and peers treat them (Bandura 1997). As with the findings of this study, Whale et al. (2022) found that when teachers criticise students and do not offer emotional support, learners tend to be more aggressive. Thus, teachers must create positive and supportive learning environments. It is also essential for teachers to use positive reinforcement, emotional regulation, anger management strategies, and restorative circles, among other strategies, to manage learner aggression.

Community Influence

The participants also revealed that the community in which they live has an impact and a direct influence on how learners behave at schools and in classrooms. The place of socialisation from society was especially emphasised by participants who reckoned that the communities strongly influenced the eventual behaviour witnessed in schools. An example can be drawn from a teacher who asserted:

Students are influenced by what they see; it could be because they were exposed to violence in their communities. Alternatively, it could also be because they want to seem cool, untouchable, and feared by peers. It could also be that they endure physical and

emotional abuse at home or in their communities, so they retaliate by being aggressive to peers as a way of trying to protect themselves. (Teacher 4)

Another teacher added:

Some of the students who came from haphazard communities [violent communities that are riddled with violence] tend to be problematic. (Teacher 1)

These teachers' observations were corroborated by a learner who conceded:

My neighbourhood is too corrupt; there is a culture of violence, substance abuse, and gangsterism; basically, there is no future for youths. This is what we are constantly exposed to, and it is real to us. I do not feel safe in my community, so I try to act tough to protect myself. (Learner 1)

Societal influences were also emphasised by another teacher who argued:

Students idolise violent role models in their communities because they are respected and come to school modelling violent behaviour to enforce respect. (Teacher 5)

This was more apparent in the sentiments offered by a student who reasoned:

I feel like I always have to be tough and defend myself because of the violence in my community. I have seen a lot of violence and aggression around me growing up, so I guess I just learned [that behaviour]. Sometimes I get really angry and frustrated because of the things that happen in my community, and I do not know how else to express those feelings. (Learner 16)

The findings reveal that community environments significantly contribute to the onset of violence and aggression in the school. This is in line with previous studies that demonstrate that community can significantly impact learner aggression, as social and environmental factors can contribute to the development of aggressive behaviours in learners (Arseneault et al. 2017; Schepers 2017). Bandura (2003) explains this in SLT by arguing that when children see people getting rewards for a behaviour (positive or negative), they more often than not replicate the same behaviours or what appears to be close to that particular behaviour. As with the findings presented above, studies have also demonstrated that communities with high levels of poverty, unemployment, and social strife contribute to the development of aggressive behaviour because, in such communities, learners feel that they lack opportunities and resources, which leads to frustration and aggression (Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan 2009; Owens et al. 2019). It thus becomes critical for school social workers to impart skills to learners such as self-awareness, self-regulation, relationship building, and social awareness, among others, to help them cope with the schooling environment.

Limitations

Before delving into the findings, it is essential to note that this study was limited to only five schools in the Amathole District Municipality; thus, although the findings can be used to inform more in-depth projects on the issue, it is difficult to generalise these findings to the rest of the district.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The researchers explored the factors shaping aggressive behaviour among learners in selected schools in the Amathole District Municipality. While we concede that the causes of learner aggression are complex and interwoven, our findings suggest four major sub-themes: disruptive family circumstances, peer pressure and influence, teacher-related factors, and community influence. We are persuaded that addressing these complex person-in-environment factors contributing to learner aggression requires a comprehensive approach involving multiple stakeholders, including social workers, parents, teachers, community members, and policymakers. We conclude that there is an urgent need to provide parents, teachers, and communities with workshops about the negative impact of disruptive home environments, community influence, and peer pressure on learners in order to create a safer and more supportive environment for learners.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that teacher training programmes (both in-service and pre-service) be revamped to help teachers better identify, prevent, and respond to learner aggression and psychosocial stressors in learners' environments. This can include training on classroom management techniques, conflict resolution strategies, and identifying and supporting learners at risk of aggression. It is also recommended to promote positive peer relationships and foster a sense of community within schools to help fight peer pressure among learners, and activities for improving teamwork, collaboration, and mutual respect may be helpful in this regard. It will also be essential to strengthen community support programmes, such as after-school mentorship and community outreach, to help learners learn from positive role models and support networks outside the home and school. Finally, it is recommended that responsible agencies such as the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Social Development work together to provide families with counselling, family therapy, and parent education to help address the negative impact of violent homes. This could help strengthen family relationships and promote safer home environments.

Some recommendations for further study:

1. Longitudinal studies tracking the development of learner aggression over time to provide insights into the long-term effects of various factors and interventions and how aggression manifests and changes as learners progress through different educational stages.

2. Research in other districts to explore whether the identified factors hold in different contexts to help identify context-specific variations and refine intervention strategies accordingly.
3. Exploring whether restorative approaches, such as conflict mediation and victim-offender dialogues, can contribute to a more peaceful school environment.

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