EXPLORING ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AGGRESSION IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL CONTEXT

Quintin Ludick

MSc (Clinical Psychology)

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Supervisor:

Prof V Roos

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This article is dedicated to my mother and all other brave people fighting against cancer.

SUMMARY
EXPLORING ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AGGRESSION
IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL CONTEXT

Key words: Aggression, adolescents, secondary school, qualitative research

This article offers a perspective on adolescents' experiences of aggression in a secondary school, with a focus on the manifestation, contributing factors, consequences, and learners' opinions on aggression. An inductive qualitative research approach was chosen, where learners wrote about their experiences and participated in focused semi-structured interviews. Central themes were derived by means of thematic content analysis. The results revealed that a substantial number of learners experienced negative feelings about aggression at school and that aggression was related to individual characteristics, the adolescent's developmental stage, socialisation, status, competition, home environment, prior experiences, learnt behaviour and the effect of the media and music. Aggression was present among all genders, ages and cultures in school. It seemed to have a higher prevalence among boys, but was also significantly present among girls. Physical and emotional bullying had a high prevalence, which showed that bullying is problematic at schools. Passive aggression was mostly present in the form of oppositional behaviour towards authorities at school and educators are often verbally abused and ignored by learners, but their classrooms are also damaged. Individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, multicultural interaction and a lack of sufficient social skills contributed towards many acts of aggression. Aggression was prominent in the reciprocal relationships between adolescents and their social environment. Being part of a group and forming a social identity are very important. Confiding in groups may expose learners to peer pressure, which may lead to activities and behaviour that are aggressive in nature. There were reports of discrimination and it seemed that learners get along better with others who share an equal status. This may possibly explain why aggression seemed less between white English-speaking and black English-learners, while it was more common

between white Afrikaans and white/black English-speaking learners. Increased social contact between members of different social groups could reduce prejudice if these persons have an equal status. Exposure to aggression had emotional consequences, and some learners were prone to feelings of anger, fear, depression, being controlled and a loss of self-content. Behavioural responses included retaliation, pacifism, vandalism and suicide. Exposure to aggression (directly and indirectly) provoked several responses. These responses may be emotional or behavioural in nature. Emotions such as fear and anger and feeling overwhelmed, depressed and helpless may be elicited in response to aggression. Some learners may retaliate towards an aggressive incident through physical or verbal behaviour; others may withdraw and avoid social interactions. Learners may direct their aggression towards others (people and objects) or themselves. In the case of the latter, it may lead to depression, self-harm or even suicide. No single factor propels an adolescent to act aggressively. Instead, the causes of such behaviour are complex and multifaceted. Most participants in this research experienced aggression at school as unhealthy. Aggression may have emotional and behavioural consequences such as disruption, discomfort and disturbance of normal functioning. Although aggression seemed relatively under control at this particular school, there are signs of an increase in aggression and in the severity of some of the incidents, and of the possibility of desensitisation towards aggression, with the agonising possibility that aggression is serving as a form of entertainment for some learners. The need for learner involvement, school guidance programmes and life-skill training was prominent, accompanied by the need for school counsellors to assist in the management of aggression. Teachers must have better knowledge of the adolescent developmental phase so that they could understand and identify behavioural problems among learners.

OPSOMMING

'N ONDERSOEK NA ADOLESSENTE SE ERVARINGS VAN AGGRESSIE IN 'N HOËRSKOOLKONTEKS

Sleutelwoorde: Aggressie, adolessente, hoërskool, kwalitatiewe navorsing

Hierdie artikel bied 'n perspektief op adolessente se ervarings ten opsigte van aggressie in 'n sekondêre skool, met die fokus op die manifestering, bydraende faktore, gevolge, en leerders se opinies oor aggressie in skole. 'n Kwalitatiewe, induktiewe metode is gevolg, waarin leerders oor hul ervarings geskryf en aan semi-gestruktureerde fokusonderhoude deelgeneem het. Sentrale temas is geïdentifiseer deur middel van analise. Die resultate dui daarop dat 'n beduidende aantal leerders negatiewe gevoelens ervaar ten opsigte van aggressie by die skool. Aggressie hou verband met die karaktereienskappe van die individu, ontwikkelingsfase van die adolessent, sosialisering, status, mededinging, huislike omgewing, vorige ervarings, aangeleerde gedragspatrone, en die effek van die media en musiek. Aggressie het voorgekom onder alle geslagte, ouderdomme en kulture in die skool. Alhoewel 'n hoër voorkoms onder seuns gerapporteer is, was dit ook beduidend teenwoordig onder die meisies. Fisieke en emosionele afknouery (boelie) het 'n hoë frekwensie getoon en kan moontlik aandui dat afknouery problematies by skole kan word. Passiewe aggressie was meestal teenwoordig in die vorm van opposisionele gedrag teenoor gesagsfigure by die skool en onderwysers word dikwels verbaal geteister en geïgnoreer, maar hul klaskamers word ook beskadig. Interpersoonlike verhoudings, multikulturele interaksie en die tekort aan voldoende sosiale vaardighede dra moontlik by tot aggressie in skole. Aggressie is ook prominent in die resiprokale verhouding tussen adolessente en hul sosiale omgewing. Om lid te wees van 'n groep en die vorming van 'n sosiale identiteit is 'n baie hoë prioriteit. Deelname aan groepsaktiwiteite stel leerders bloot aan groepsdruk, wat kan lei tot meer aggressiewe gedrag en aktiwiteite. Diskriminasie het ook baie voorgekom en dit blyk dat leerders beter oor die weg kom met ander wat dieselfde status het as die leerder. Dit kan moontlik as verduideliking dien vir

minder aggressiewe insidente tussen Engelssprekende swart en wit leerders, teenoor en 'n hoër voorkoms tussen wit Afrikaanssprekende en wit/swart Engelssprekende leerders. 'n Toename in sosiale kontak tussen verskillende groepe kan moontlik vooroordele verminder indien die persone dieselfde status beklee. Blootstelling aan aggressie kan lei tot verskeie emosionele en gedragsresponse, en sommige leerders ervaar gevoelens van woede, vrees, depressie, verlies van selfbehoud en die gevoel dat hulle beheer en oorweldig word. Sommige leerders se gedragsresponse sluit retaliasie in die vorm van verbale en fisieke gedrag in; ander kan onttrek aan die situasie en sosiale interaksies vermy. Leerders kan hul aggressie rig tot ander (ook voorwerpe) en hulself. In laasgenoemde geval kan dit lei tot depressie, selfmutulasie en selfmoord. Geen enkele faktor kan uitgesonder word as die oorsaak van aggressiewe gedrag by adolessente nie, maar sulke gedrag is kompleks en die resultaat van 'n aantal multifasette. Die meeste deelnemers het aggressie in die skool as ongesond ervaar. Aggressie kan gedrags- en emosionele gevolge hê wat normale daaglikse funksionering kan ontwrig en verontrief. Hoewel aggressie relatief onder beheer by die teikenskool is, is daar wel tekens van 'n toename in aggressie en in die intensiteit van sekere episodes, en die moontlikheid bestaan ook dat desensitisasie plaasvind ten opsigte van aggressie, met die kommerwekkende moontlikheid dat aggressie moontlik vir sommige leerders as bron van vermaak dien. Die behoefte vir leerderbetrokkenheid, skoolvoorligtingsprogramme en lewensvaardighede was prominent, tesame met die behoefte aan skoolberaders om te help met die hantering van aggressie. Onderwysers moet ook meer kennis bekom oor die adolessente-ontwikkelingsfase, sodat hulle gedragsprobleme kan identifiseer en hanteer.

PREFACE

The candidate opted to propose an article, with the support of his supervisor.

Prof V Roos

PERMISSION TO SUBMIT THIS ARTICLE FOR EXAMINATION PURPOSES

I, the supervisor, hereby declare that the input and effort of Q Ludick in writing this article reflect research done by him on this topic. I hereby grant permission that he may submit this article for examination purposes in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master Scientiae in Clinical Psychology.

Signed on this day .... at the North-West University.

....

Prof V Roos

Supervisor

INTENDED JOURNAL AND GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

This dissertation will be submitted to the journal *Education as Change* to be considered for publication. Attached please find a copy of the guidelines for prospective authors as set out by the journal.

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One hard copy of all submissions must be sent to The Editor, Education as Change, Curriculum Studies, University of Johannesburg, P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park, Johannesburg, 2006, South Africa; and an electronic version in *Word* e-mailed to journal@rau.ac.za or sent on disc with the hard copy. Authors are invited to submit papers between 7,000 and 12,000 words in which research is reported, or in which an educational issue is discussed. Submissions should contain an abstract of 150-200 words, three or four key words, and a list of references, presented in the style suggested by the American Psychological Association's publication manual. The use of the first person is encouraged in the author's texts. Narrative formats of research reports are also welcomed. Authors may contact the editorial office if they require more details.

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A minimum of four months is required for the reviewing and communication process. If your work is accepted, it will probably be published between 10 and 12 months after the initial submission. Authors are reminded that they should keep copies of their work in their possession, especially if the manuscripts are posted.

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Q Ludick

9 Pecan Park

Pecan Street

Meyringspark

2570

Email: quintin_ludick@yahoo.co.uk

Prof V Roos*

School of Psycho-social Behavioural Sciences

Psychology

North-West University

Potchefstroom

Email: psgvr@puk.ac.za

*To whom correspondence should be addressed

EXPLORING ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AGGRESSION IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL CONTEXT

Q Ludick and V Roos

North-West University

Potchefstroom

South Africa

MANUSCRIPT FOR EXAMINATION

EXPLORING ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AGGRESSION
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SUMMARY

This article offers a perspective on adolescents' experiences of aggression in a secondary school, with a focus on the manifestation, contributing factors, consequences, and learners' opinions on aggression at school. An inductive qualitative research approach was chosen where learners wrote about their experiences and participated in focused semi-structured interviews. Central themes were derived by means of analysis. The results revealed that a substantial number of learners experienced negative feelings about aggression at school and that aggression was related to individual characteristics, the adolescent developmental stage, socialization, status, competition, home environment, prior experiences, learnt behaviour and the effect of the media and music. With respect to individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, multicultural interaction and a lack of sufficient social skills contributed towards many acts of aggression. Exposure to aggression had emotional consequences, where some learners were prone to feelings of anger, fear, depression, being controlled and a loss of self-content. Behavioural responses included retaliation, pacifism, vandalism and suicide. The aspect of desensitization towards aggression seemed to be present among some learners with the agonizing idea of aggression serving as a form of entertainment. The findings emphasised the fact that learner involvement, conflict resolution skills and school guidance are necessary to manage aggression at school. Teachers must have better knowledge of the adolescent developmental phase so that they could understand and identify behavioural problems among learners. The need for a school counsellor was prominent in assisting with learner problems and conflict resolution.

BACKGROUND

Aggressive incidents such as the "Waterkloof-4"(Rossouw, 2005); a Durban school boy beaten to death by a friend (Mthethwa, 2006); learners being attacked with knives and scissors; video recordings of an assault in a school restroom (Smith, 2006) and animals being tortured by learners (Rademeyer, 2006), are becoming more and more

commonplace. Juvenile involvement in violent crimes increased from 9% in 2001 to 15% in 2003, and an estimated 60 000 of the 156 000 sentenced or trial awaiting offenders are between the ages of 14 and 25, with 2 200 offenders under 18 (Benghiat, 2006). Assault, sexual violence and offences related to firearms showed a dramatic increase in schools during the period 2001 to 2004 (Joubert, 2004). According to Vogel (2002), schools across the world are struggling with ways to prevent violence among learners, and it contaminates the school environment and jeopardises the educational process (Neser, 2005). As violence increases, so does the pressure to ensure safe and orderly schools. Exposure to aggression and violence may cause people to become aggressive or disrupt their normal functioning, thereby affecting their mental health (Baron & Byrne, 2000; Newman & Newman, 2003).

Aggression can be described as negative physical and verbal behaviour with harmful intentions (Barlow & Durand 1999, Bukatho & Daehler, 1992), which may result in personal injury, destruction of property or even exclusion (Guerin & Hennesey, 2002; Van Niekerk, 1996). Aggression develops during childhood and continues into adulthood, but is more prominent in high-risk behaviour during adolescence (Newman & Newman, 2003). Guerin and Hennesey (2002) argue that aggression during adolescence is more likely to result in injury and in extreme cases even in death.

A comprehensive literature study was conducted and very few studies explore the nature and meaning of aggression as perceived by adolescents. The aim of this research is to explore adolescents' experiences of aggression within a secondary school context.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The research design was qualitative, explorative and contextual (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2003; Seale, 1999; Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1997). An inductive approach was followed to better understand aggression experienced among learners in a secondary school context. The research was open and was not directed by any conceptual framework, preconceived notions or hypotheses. The participants were encountered in their environment (the school) in an attempt to obtain a total picture of their experiences and views.

Research context

Research was conducted in an English-Afrikaans dual medium secondary school, with pupils attending from rural and urban areas, ranging between needy and privileged in socio-economical status.

Participants

The research group was comprised of boys and girls of the ages 14-19, ranging from grades 8-12, and was constituted from all ethnic groups at the school (African, Caucasian, coloured and Indian) with English or Afrikaans as language medium. A total of 41 learners responded to the invitation and returned written data. Focused semi-structured interviews (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000) were conducted with learners who were willing to share their experiences. All learners participated voluntarily and consentingly.

Ethical considerations

Approval was obtained from the North West Educational Department and the school governing body. Parents and guardians were informed about the research project and were invited to give informed consent (Welfer, 2002). The research project was approved by the Research Committee of the North-West University; Project title: An exploration of enabling contexts (05K14). The aim of the research was explained to all participants and they participated voluntarily and consentingly and were able to withdraw from the study at any point if they chose to (Welfer, 2002). Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

Research process

Learners were informed about the research project during assembly and were invited to participate in the research. Because only a few responded to the invitation, the researcher had to visit learners in their register classes and invite them to participate in the study. Learners wrote about their experiences in their private time and returned the data to the researcher. These writings were based on an open-ended question, appropriately applicable to adolescents because it facilitated the spontaneous understanding of respondents in a non-threatening, non-leading environment. Focused semi-structured interviews were scheduled with voluntary learners who were recruited through invitation

(Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). These focused interviews provided the opportunity for the researcher to gather particular aspects of the participants through non-directive triggering into sharing their experiences and views on the topic. The advantages of focused interviews lie in the specificity, range and depth of responses obtained from participants (Merton & Kendall, 1946).

Data gathering

The research was conducted in two phases, the first being an exploration of learners' experiences of aggression by means of an open-ended research question which they answered in writing (Bryman, 2001). The question posed was formulated as follows:

> Describe as completely as possible how you directly or indirectly experienced aggression during your secondary school years.
>
> Beskryf so volledig as moontlik hoe jy aggressie direk of indirek tydens jou skoolloopbaan ervaar het.

This was followed by semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Kvale, 1983; Kvale, 1996; Krueger, 1994), allowing more in-depth exploration of the themes from the written data. The interviews were audio taped for analysis at a later stage. 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 through focusing on the data received from participants.

Data analysis process

Data was analyzed by means of Tesch's descriptive analysis (Creswell 2003). Data was analysed according to the following process:

Step 1: Data was divided in utilitarian categories trough the process of open coding.

Step 2: The coded responses were then arranged according to categories that illustrated the central themes of the data.

Step 3: Categories were integrated, defined and illustrated with quotes during selective coding.

Verification and Trustworthiness

Guba's model for qualitative research (Guba 1981; Lincoln & Guba 1985) was applied 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), confirmability (which was accomplished by using the criterion of neutrality or freedom from bias) and reflexivity (Willig, 2001) (an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meaning throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining "outside" one's subject matter while conducting research). Data was triangulated according to existing literature (Flick, 1992). Themes derived from the data were compared to the results of previous research studies, in order to determine differences, similarities and unique contributions (Poggenpoel 1993).

RESULTS

An example of how the data was analyzed is represented in the table below, followed by an integrated description of what participants reported:

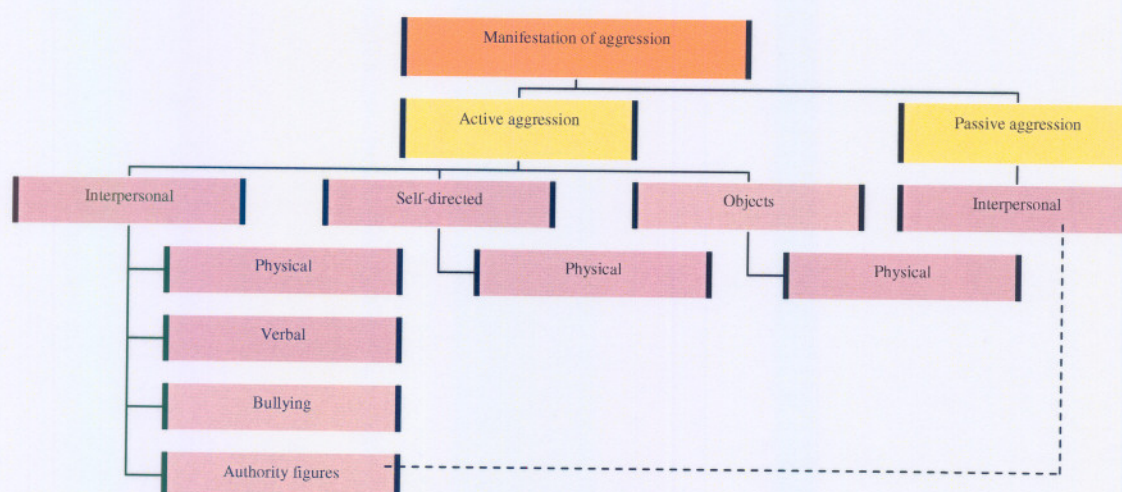| Quotation (primary source of data)	Open coding (step 1)
The youth of today are very sinful by nature. We have a tendency to react too quickly and cause trouble.	Change in the way youths are, increase in transgressions. Less tolerance, quick to respond.
One of the biggest problems in school is learners that emotionally break others down and physically bullying them. They do this so that they can look and feel better.	Bullying (emotional and physical) is a big problem. Aggressive to project an "image" and feel better about themselves.
I have experienced a lot of cattiness amongst girls and fist fighting amongst the boys.	Girls are more verbally aggressive and boys more physically.
Learners vandalise school property when they are angry.	Vandalism can be a product of anger.
Many learners may feel like they are failures due to the many negative remarks	Exposure to negative remarks may provoke negative feelings.

they receive. They develop negative thoughts that can sometimes lead to suicide tendencies.	Negative thoughts may lead to suicide.
We must learn to handle conflict and our emotions.	Learners don't know how to handle conflict or their emotions They need to receive guidance and get taught.

Table 1: Example of data handling

MANIFESTATION OF AGGRESSION

All participants experienced some form of aggression during their secondary school career. 14 (34%) indicated that they directly experienced aggression, 41(100%) responded that they vicariously experienced aggression by being a witness to it, and 5 (12%) of the participants reflected on themselves as being the aggressor. Aggressive behaviour was experienced by all genders, races and grades. Aggressive acts were directed interpersonally (actively and passively), towards the individual self, and towards objects (school property).

The following flowchart indicates the different forms in which aggression manifested. This is followed by a discussion of these forms:

Active aggression was viewed as hostile attitude or behaviour; threatening behaviour or actions that were overtly aimed at people or objects, and it could either be physical and/or verbal aggression. Physical aggression was regarded as all actions that were directed towards physically injuring, inflicting pain or causing discomfort for others or themselves. These actions included acts of violence such as fighting, use of weapons, bullying, playing aggressive games, self-mutilation, and suicide. Verbal aggression entailed all hostile words directed at people, including threats, teasing, belittling, discriminating remarks, name-calling and swearing. Passive aggression involves the manipulation of others indirectly and resisting their demands rather than confronting or opposing them directly. Bullying occurred frequently and included both physical and verbal behaviour and was regarded as a type of social aggression, where a group or individuals deliberately and repeatedly picked on, belittled, threatened or hurt another individual.

1. Active aggression

1.1 Interpersonal aggression

All aggressive incidents that took place between people were noted as interpersonal acts of aggression. These incidents were physical and verbal in nature. Bullying was included as a form of interpersonal aggression.

1.1.1 Physical aggression

Fighting occurred among all genders but it seemed to have a higher prevalence among boys and among learners in grades 8-10. The prevalence and perceived increase in physical aggression among the girls were also significant:

> *"Sometimes even the girls can beat up a guy. It seems unreal, but it is happening more and more."*

Many fights were minor in nature, but some were amplified and intensified in extremity:

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"... she threw him against the wall and stuck her nails into his throat and she really hit him and he started crying because she beat him so much."

"... she completely lost it and she said she completely went half blank. She threw a chair at me. I was sitting in class and one of my guy friends was petrified, he was hiding behind me, and she picked up a table and threw it across the room. She tried to hit me with a chair but then another guy grabbed it. I just sat there and didn't know what to do."

Some learners may revert to using weapons in fights to threaten or hurt other learners. Learners that grow up in a dangerous neighbourhood and witness people fighting with weapons may revert to weapons when threatened, especially if they are outnumbered or smaller:

> *"They told him if he didn't stop they were going to stab him and took out their knives. But then he saw their knives were clean and shiny and he was used to seeing knives bloody and dirty. He sees all this stuff where he comes from. He wasn't afraid of them because their knives were clean and they couldn't stab anybody. Then he said he wanted to fight against one of those guys who was always out there."*

1.1.2 Verbal aggression

Verbal aggression was frequently indicated in the responses and seemed to be common among all genders. Learners that engaged in verbal aggression would curse and swear at each other, teachers, or generally as part of their normal talking pattern. Racial remarks were significant and it seemed that verbal aggression had a higher occurrence among boys and that the content of their aggressive words were more profound:

> *"Girls not really that bad, just the usual words, but guys can really swear badly especially if you make them mad."*

> *"Children curse a lot and they don't even notice how much they do. They would for some reason like swear each other's mothers. Children would sometimes*

swear at the teachers, but usually so that the teacher just can't hear them. I have also been called racial names."

Learners would sometimes blackmail or spread malicious rumours about people they dislike in an attempt to discredit them socially:

"She would become aggressive to me both by telling me that I'm not allowed to be friends with other people and telling me like. she would tell other people I said things about them."

"And they spread very nasty rumours about each other, very nasty. Like how this girl did this with that guy and weird things. Like if you do something that they don't agree with they will make a big thing about it and they will put all the negative limelight on you."

1.1.3 Bullying

Bullying can be associated with individuals or a group of individuals that physically or verbally mistreat and intimidate weaker or younger individuals. This type of behaviour was more common among bigger against smaller boys but is seemed present amongst older learners as well:

"It's not mainly an age thing because I know of grade 8 and 12's that are being bullied. The younger ones might be a bit more because the younger ones can bully them and the older ones."

"It is usually the bigger guys that bully the smaller ones. They try and dominate the small ones and sometimes do things to impress their friends. There was a recent incident where two matrics grabbed a little grade 8 and pulled a condom over his head."

Learners would be insulted, belittled and made fun of in front of others in class. The recipient would usually be someone that does not fight back, is not part of a group and is not seen as "cool":

"It's usually the quiet people that don't really mingle with other people, they are like loners. They usually keep to themselves. They won't do anything to hurt someone else but they usually are the ones that are bullied."

"Everyday they will mock her; they will throw things in her hair and call her names. Like in primary school a boy mixed cheese curls and water and threw it on her head. She had blonde hair and it made her hair real orange. At the time it was funny, but it stuck with her through high school. They kept calling her names like cheese curls."

A possible reason for bullying is that the people that are doing the bullying were bullied as well. When they grow bigger they do the same to smaller people who are now in their prior situation. Thus, this behaviour can be learnt:

"I think it is also that the bigger guys do that because it was also done to them. I know my friends were also bullied when we were in grade 8, so they started doing the same thing when they were in grade 10."

1.1.4 Aggression towards authority figures

Some learners show little respect towards authority and many teachers experience verbal aggression in the form of back-chatting and swearing by learners. There seems to be a higher occurrence of this in the lower grades:

"Learners like treating teachers like their parents. Some of them have no respect and give some teachers a very hard time. They don't actually understand that they are there to teach you. They won't do their work and back-chat the teacher. Some learners would curse at teachers, but like in an under-tone so that it mostly sounds like a murmur where you can only catch a word or two."

Some learners may deliberately go out of their way to frustrate a teacher. A group of learners can easily target a teacher and disrupt the class, making them angry, cry or even leave the teaching profession. When a teacher addresses inappropriate behaviour, it may

cause the learners to become more aggressive and rebellious towards authority figures that oppose their will:

> *"There is always the person that wants to make trouble for the teacher and make the teacher angry or even cry. It has happened before. I know when my brother was in matric their class was very naughty. They would say things in front of the teacher that would make her cry."*

> *"The one class they set on fire. They took deodorant and sprayed it on all the desks as the teacher walked out and as she walked back in they lit it and the tables went on fire. She left quite soon after that."*

> *"They made her cry the one day and she refused to teach them until they apologised. That made them more rebellious even though it was their fault. You will rebel against a teacher that doesn't like or favour you, or from what you have heard from other people."*

As a result of behaving badly a learner may be sent out of class. Some learners may do this deliberately because of the favoured outcome of leaving a class they dislike. Some learners' credibility within their social group increases if they misbehave in class:

> *"So that we don't have class, then we would get chased out onto the quad for a week. It seems quite stupid if you think back, but at that stage it seemed quite fun. It also pushed up guys' credibility amongst other guys. We hear all the time how guys say how one did this and one did that, and telling each other it was so cool. They had this whole little inner working. Guys do, and the naughtier you are, the cooler you are."*

Teachers may physically and verbally discharge their frustration on learners, picking on certain individuals or even discriminating against some. Consequently, learners may become aggressive in response:

> *"A teacher may get angry from other classes and then that teacher will take all her frustration out on our class."*

"This one teacher picked on the black guys a lot. And then the black guys became very aggressive. What would happen is that once we kept on talking, he would like tell us to keep quite. We didn't, because at that stage we just didn't care and then the black kids would like say one word and they will be chased out of class. When they come back in they become very aggressive towards the teacher and they loose all respect for him. It becomes a tough situation then."

1.2 Self-directed aggression

Some learners direct their anger towards themselves, reverting to behaviour where they physically hurt or mutilate themselves. These incidents may occur in front of fellow-learners, and if it does it may overwhelm them, as they will not know how to respond to such an event. Fellow-learners may misinterpret these incidents as attention seeking behaviour. An incident where a scholar took her own life changed the way in which some of the learners viewed this type of behaviour:

"... she used to break her own arm. She would take it on the table like this and just hit it until the bone broke. It was crazy, she just didn't think she would take the door and just slam her arm in it or take a knife and just sit and make her name on her arm, but cut it and she said she just never felt the pain. She said it doesn't feel like pain to her, it feels different. It was crazy."

"She used to try and slit her wrists but never ever deep, she just cut it. So everyone just ignored it because everyone just thought it was for attention. But now after a girl committed suicide, it is a different story."

Learners may internalise their experiences of anger due to feelings of helplessness, or by being overwhelmed by their school, social and home environments. These learners may develop feelings of dejection, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and attempt suicide:

"I had insomnia for three months. It was a bad experience and it started just after my best friend hit me for the first time I think. It was the craziest experience, I

don't know what happened, but something just happened. I felt normal but I didn't sleep. And all of a sudden my body started wearing down, but I didn't tell my mom because I pretended to go to sleep every night."

"Many learners feel like failures sometimes because of all the negative remarks they receive. These negative thoughts can sometimes lead to suicidal tendencies."

"I am depressed and unprivileged. I've tried running across the road to get ... but the car pressed brakes."

Learners may confide in their friends when they feel depressed or suicidal. These situations may not be handled correctly in such discussions and this behaviour may aggravate the situation:

> *"She had told me before that she wanted to kill herself and I then went and told a teacher. That teacher called her dad in and he ended up freaking out at her and it made thing worse."*

1.3   Aggression towards objects (Vandalism)

Vandalism was described as aggressive behaviour toward objects, leading to the damage or destruction thereof. In the school scenario these objects were school property, such as windows, doors, desks, restrooms etc. Learners also wrote offensive phrases on school buildings and walls. Vandalism can be seen as a deliberate action where an individual would discharge his or her anger towards an object. A learner may try to make a statement regarding his or her feelings by destroying something at school:

> *"There are a lot of things that learners would break deliberately at school to try and make a statement. I know. One of my friends who finished matric last year, he was actually corrupt. He wrote very nasty things on the walls of some of the school buildings with paint. He would just not care because the school was not his home."*

> *"I think people want to make a statement through it."*

Vandalism may be a way through which learners express negative feelings such as anger towards an individual at school or about the way they perceive school in general. The individual may feel that by vandalizing the school property, he can get back at the person he "associates" with his experience of school. The individual might see vandalism as a way to discharge some of his aggression, because the objects being destroyed or defiled hold no threat for him/her and cannot fight back. This type of behaviour may be seen as an aggressive act with fewer consequences to be faced, because the learner would not necessarily be caught during the act. Peer influences may also play a part in vandalism:

> *"Maybe something happened at school that they didn't like and now they are trying to get the school back by maybe cutting down a tree or burning down a bush. They won't know it was you. If a teacher was going to shout at you and you shout back at her, they are going to know it was you. If you go and write something nasty about the teacher on the wall they are not going to know it was you."*

> *"A learner can take his frustration out on something at school without being caught. They may break things because they want to get back at the bad experiences they had at school. Some of them might do that to impress their friends."*

> *"I do again think that it might be the peer thing, but a lot of the time people do that without telling anyone. I think that may be the inner aggression you have maybe to your situation in life. You don't like where you're at and you don't see a way out and then you take it out on something that can't fight back or do anything. Some people just have that."*

2. Passive aggression at an interpersonal level

Passive aggression mostly occurs in the classrooms, where learner would oppose authority, ignore teachers and disregard rules. However, it also manifested in certain relationships among learners:

"They take their aggression out on teachers by ignoring them."

"She didn't tell me one thing she just ignored me. It was so bad because we went from so close to her just ignoring me. It was just dead; there was no fight but that friendship still is a very sore spot for me."

FACTORS ELICITING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

There are several factors that may contribute to aggressive behaviour in the school context. The relationship which an individual has with the social environment, peers, parents and teachers (reciprocal relationships) were quite dominant. The interaction among learners (interpersonally) contributed to various aggressive incidents and contributing factors could be identified as: the characteristics of the individual (including physiological changes, personality development, emotional arousal, and interpersonal skills,) and the effect of the social environment (being liked, projecting a certain image, belonging to a group, peer pressure, relationships and learnt behaviour).

3.1   Characteristics of the individual which affect aggressive behaviour

Certain individual factors and traits may attribute to aggressive behaviour. These traits were noted as the physiological changes that occur during puberty, the temperament of learners and the process of developing their own identities.

3.1.1   Physiological changes

Hormone-induced physical changes occur at this time and learners' bodies change in size and shape. These hormones may influence their mood. A boy's level of confidence my rise as he becomes more muscular and physically stronger, leading to increased conflict with other learners because of more challenging behaviour:

> *"You become built and you become strong and it influences your ego and self-esteem. You think now you are big and strong and you can take anybody down."*

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3.1.2 Temperament

The temperament of a learner and level of emotional arousal may affect they way he/she responds towards stimuli which provoke aggression. Some learners may have a "short fuse" or a lack of appropriate and mature coping skills. The way a learner deals with frustration may result in aggressive responses towards stressors and interactions:

"A lot of people are just very aggressive by nature."

"It's the way a person is. It doesn't really have to do with other people; it has to do with yourself."

"I think it's a matter again of who you are."

"... many of my friends do fight. Like because their personalities are very different and ..."

3.1.3 Developmental stage

Rebelliousness, the need to experiment and the urge to test boundaries seemed prominent among some adolescents. They will rebel against the norms and deliberately do the opposite because they are growing into mature people that have to establish their own self-concept and identity, even sometimes through the demonstration of opposition or strength:

"It's almost like all the LO and stuff you learn is too ... they try and make it such a big thing that a lot of people purposely rebel against it. Because they make it into such a say no, say no ... and people say yes just for that. It happened a lot at that stage. There were so many people that I thought were good people that ended up going in the wrong direction because it was almost like some of they said don't do it and then they just felt they have to."

"Teenagers always tend to ignore what they are told, which my lead to them being beaten up or hurt by others."

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3.1.4   Developing identities

Many participants reflected on learners not knowing who they are or where they fit in. They are in the process of seeking their own independent identities. It seems that while learners are dealing with this developmental issue, they have a need to belong to a social group, where a social identity may be of uttermost importance:

> *"It feels like in grade 9 when no one knows where they stand and in high school no one exactly knows who they are. Everyone is unsure of how to fit in."*

> *"That happened a lot again in grade 8 and 9 mainly. At that point you don't know who you really are."*

> *"I don't actually know, but I think its maybe because you are learning to know yourself and you're changing. Like your personality has to change as you get older. And then you bump into other personalities that are like yours as well."*

Aggressive behaviour decreases as the learners mature and get to know themselves better. They start focussing on the future and take school work more seriously:

> *"You start to grow up and at school they start to bombard you with lots of work. You have less time to float around with your friends, so you start to think about life and what you want to do when you leave school. You start leaving the negative things, remember my friend I told you about, the one with the knives. He changed in grade 10; he wanted to leave his tsotsi ways and stuff. He told me that. I think you start to think about life when you are there."*

3.2   Interpersonal relationships

3.2.1   The need for a group and social identity

Learners join groups, and participate in group activities. Through cohesiveness the learner may attain the feeling of belonging, security and establishing a social identity. These groups play a significant part in how learners perceive themselves and others. Some learners are prepared to do anything to be part of a group:

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"In primary school you don't really have groups but in high school your actual groups like start. If you are not in the group, then people don't like you. So you would do anything to get into that group."

A learner may even endure aggression and protect the aggressor, just to remain part of a friendship:

"I knew that if I had at that stage said something, my school career would have been hell. Because it was hell already, but it was bearable in the way that I didn't have to sit alone. That was the big thing. At the stage I was more worried about the thoughts of having to sit by myself."

A learner who receives less social attention than a friend may become jealous of hostile towards that friend. It may also result in an unhealthy competition for attention:

"And when I came to high school all of a sudden I got a lot of attention and then she didn't handle it well, and then she would become aggressive to me both by telling me that I'm not allowed to be friends with other people and telling me like, she would tell other people I said things about them."

Social groups and peer pressure may contribute to negative and aggressive behaviour due to the tendency learners have to conform to group demands and norms:

"A group can influence people to do the wrong thing, such as smoking or drugs or stuff like that. Sometimes one group can fight against another group because one of the guys has got a problem with a guy in another group. I think people find safety in groups and you have people that can back you when you have trouble."

"I am more aggressive because of the friends I have and the games I play."

The need for group acceptance and group influences start to subside as learners become older. They would have fewer but more intimate friendships. Learners start relying more on their own decision making and relocate their locus of control towards themselves and not externally in their groups:

"There are always groups at school. At first you always want to be part of a group no matter what, but later the groups become much smaller and you would have fewer people that you hang out with. You start doing your own thing."

"I'm very happy with the way it is. It's been like this from about the middle of grade 10. But before that you had to be a certain way to be in, only if you smoked you had the smoking friends. Only if you swore and were rough you were in this group, and only if you had above 80 and worked hard could you be in this group. I guess everyone had their own little way of getting into a group."

3.2.2   Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution, coping skills and communication play a crucial part in how learners will react when they are confronted with an aggrieving situation:

> *"They mostly struggle to get along. Not because of the language but because of the way they communicate."*

Because there is a shift towards the importance of being socially accepted, it would then be necessary for a learner to be able to get along with those that share the social context. Inadequate interpersonal skills and inappropriate behaviour may lead to social conflict:

> *"I've seen people deal well with terrible situations and then I've seen other people deal with very minor situations terribly."*

> *"My friends became so confused and aggressive during exam times. They swore at each other and became aggressive for no reason."*

It can be problematic if a learner does not possess sufficient conflict resolution skills. If these skills are lacking a learner can easily overreact or fight over minor things:

> *"People have a tendency to react too quickly."*

"This person accidentally bumped me at a show. I pulled him over and assaulted him."

These skills improve as learners become older and harvest more appropriate interpersonal skills:

> *"Well some of them they became softer. They started understanding more about life. First they were just thinking of themselves but here in grade 10 you start realizing that there are other people in the world beside you, and that changes your view. Before that you are very aggressive, even towards your parents. After that, even though you have fights, they get sorted out faster and they aren't that messy."*

3.2.3 Social acceptance and social image

Socialization of boys and girls are related to the nature of social interactions they most frequently have. It is of importance for learners to be accepted by their peers and portray a social image. Learners may revert to certain behaviour or actions to attain or maintain their "image":

> *"The image is like how you are and how people see you. In high school it is a very big thing if you have an image and you're in and people like you and people talk to you and you get recognised easily. As where you're not known in the school, you are nobody, but when you have a name then everyone knows you. And it is good to have an image cause then you get recognition. It is like status."*

The quest for an image or the support of people that have an "image" may lead to forms of aggressive behaviour. Learners may do certain things to try and maintain an image. This image may boost their self value and it may be enforced by hurting or dominating others:

> *"I think the whole image thing. Because if you can say you beat up this guy, then you are stronger than them, which will mean that you are better than them. I think that's why people become aggressive."*

"I think maybe to say that they also saw what happened and that the cool guy and the not so cool guy, and they obviously want the one with the bigger image to win. And then they can say they were part of it, they were there, they saw what happened."

3.2.4 Peer pressure

Being part of a group may entail many challenges for the individual. An individual may have the tendency to follow behavioural patterns or activities sported within a group. When an influential member of the group bears negative behaviour, the rest of the group may pursue the same pattern of negative deeds or aggressive behaviour:

"Sometimes a person in a group can start making fun of someone and then the rest of the guys in the group also has to do it otherwise the rest would shift the focus of negative attention to them. They can gang up against people. Peer pressure caused me to smoke. All my friends smoked, so I didn't want to be out. If you do not do what the rest of the people in the group do, they can make it very difficult for you. I know about stuff like drugs and people putting pressure on the other people in the group. It was the same with loosing your virginity. If you hadn't lost your virginity, you had to lie about it because the guys would mock and belittle you."

"I am more aggressive because of the friends I have and the games I play."

3.2.5 Learnt behaviour

The way in which an individual reacts may be influenced by previous experiences and exposure to events. A learner may exhibit behaviour that was learnt in their domestic and social relationships. Negative and positive behaviour can be replicated at school, depending on the type of prior exposure the learner would have had:

"You can see it from some of the guys that live in the locations. They have to fend for themselves from a lot of bad things and they know how to fight."

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"Some people see aggression as the only way to deal with their problems."

"If you were brought up in a loving family that always motivates and cares for you, you will always have that as background of good influences. You won't say bad things about people or do bad things to them. Where if your father used to drink and hit you, say bad things about you, put you down and make you feel like you are nothing. Then you are going to treat other people like that because it's the only way you have ever known how to do it."

Bullying can be learnt from peers and older learners at school:

"I know my friends were also bullied when we were in grade 8, so they started doing the same thing when they were in grade 10."

3.3 Societal factors contributing to aggression

3.3.1 The domestic environment

A learner's domestic environment has an effect on his/her mood, behaviour and functioning. It may contribute to the way in which he or she will interact with people:

"If you were brought up in a loving family that always motivates and care for you, you will always have that as background of good influences. You won't say bad things about people or do bad things to them. Where if your father used to drink and hit you, say bad things about you, put you down and make you feel like you are nothing. Then you are going to treat other people like that because it's the only way you have ever known how to do it."

"You get used to worse things where you live and then at school you can project those worse feelings on other people. Because you feel these people know nothing, you know everything. So you can become more bullyful than normal bullies that only take your food and things."

3.3.2 Availability of parental support and supervision

The lack of sufficient parental support and availability may lead to learners not receiving an appropriate pillar and guidance:

> *"She is alone at home most of the time. She had too much leeway and then she would start acting out at school. Her friend's father almost smokes dagga Everyday and stuff like that. She started loosing it and in grade 9 she was on drugs and even had an abortion."*

> *"At that stage my parents were having a lot of work problems. Their work was becoming bigger, then they were working hard and I didn't want to be an extra stress."*

3.3.3 Lack of discipline and boundaries

Children may not receive sufficient and effective forms of discipline. The lack of discipline and good behavioural modelling may allow learners to act as they please, leading to the portrayal of problematic behaviour and disregard for boundaries:

> *"Children also don't get disciplined any more, they are allowed to do as they please and then they will push the boundaries of what they are allowed to do."*

A lack of boundaries and control in the classrooms may lead to fighting amongst learners.

> *"They get so aggressive and especially with this new teacher that has got no control. The Afrikaans and black guys would end up fighting and the new teacher won't have any control over it."*

3.3.4 Interaction with different cultures

Many cultures are represented in school and there are gender, age, language and ethnical differences among learners. Prejudice towards language and ethnical differences (racism) were reported by learners. Interracial aggression was more frequent among the lower grades and between groups with different primary languages. Incidents of physical and verbal aggression were noted. Learners associated strong feelings such as hatred with this

topic, but also indicated that it was not the case for all learners. Some try to bridge the cultural gap and to be more accepting:

"I remember these two grade 9 boys, one was coloured and the other one white. They were at first just swearing [at] each other in the passage between the labs and then the white guy pushed the coloured boy. The coloured boy then pushed him back, but much harder and that guy fell down that four or five stairs that is there. When he tried to get up, the coloured boy kicked him straight in the face and his face was just full of blood."

"There's a lot of hatred between the two racial groups. But at the same time, some of us are not into racial fights. We really try hard to be friendly towards everybody and then you come across people who push you around and throw things at you."

Aggression seems to be less among learners with something in common (such as language or socioeconomic status) and more among learners who do not share anything regarding culture:

"99% of the blacks in my class don't come from the townships and that I think makes a big difference. The other class has a lot of blacks from the townships. Like this one boy that is with me in the centre and he is gross. He lets gas off while he is sitting there and he just keeps on doing it the whole time. He irritates you because he can't speak normally to you. Other blacks in my class rip him off as well, they mock him. There are different classes of blacks, but I guess it is the same for the whites. You fight more with those blacks because you cannot have a conversation with them. They think on a different level than you, but in my class it is not the case. We all work hard and have the same things in common. I think it is not about race, it is about different mindsets."

"In my class there is nothing like that, but in my Centre it is another story. That's bad. Then the Afrikaans people call the black people names straight to their faces, like the K-word and terrible Afrikaans words."

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It was also mentioned that the cause of this type of aggression may be learnt at home:

> "*Mainly it's Afrikaans against the black's. I don't know what the reason is because apartheid is long gone, but maybe it is because their parents are like that.*"

Aggression in the form of discrimination seems to diminish as learners mature in age and grow more tolerant. Learners may develop better interpersonal skills and move away from strong social influences that may cause them to discriminate:

> "*At first there was a lot when I was younger, but it has changed since grade 11. Some of it is still there. you can feel it, but people say nothing much about it. You just let it slide these days. I think as you start growing up you start looking at people differently. You realise that there is actually nothing wrong with that guy, and you can start to get along without stepping on each others toes.*"

3.3.5 Dealing with competition

Competition seems to be an integrated part of living. As competition increases. so does the individual's tendency to compete. This may cause some to react more aggressively:

> "*You have to be competitive to get somewhere in life, you need that competitive spirit to get anywhere.*"

3.3.5.1 Social competitiveness

Learners may compete socially among each other because they rate their social image as very important:

> "*Because if you can say you beat this guy, then you are stronger than them, which will mean that you are better than them.*"

> "*I beat her in the contest and she turned on me when we came back to school.*"

3.3.5.2 Rising interest and competing for the opposite gender

Learners become aware of the opposite genders and start romantic relationships. Because there may be competition for the desired partner, aggressive behaviour may develop between competitors even if they are friends:

> *"I was in this situation where this girl was so jealous of me and scared that I was going to steal her boyfriend away. She screamed at me and embarrassed herself."*

> *"The guys are fighting over stupid things like for example over a girl that was only messing around with their feelings."*

3.3.5.3 Competitiveness in sport

Sport at schools have become very competitive, and it was found that aggressive incidents occur more in contact sport or when confrontations occur in other sport types.

> *"In sports there's definitely a lot of aggression. Like if you go to a competition you obviously want your team to win. If all the teams think that way, there is obviously going to be fights."*

> *"During a rugby game I become so angry and inconsiderate, that it feels as if the aggression takes control of my body and all I can see before me turns black. A feeling of hate exists towards opponents who try [to] oppose me.*

> *"Even girls on the netball field. I once saw a girl take a ball and throw a girl in the face because the girl pulled a fowl and the referee didn't call it."*

Learners may work themselves up and become more aggressive even before they start playing a game:

> *"... pump themselves up before they did sport. And they were much more aggressive there."*

Learners who are pushed too hard to be competitive may become more aggressive:

"Competition in sport is so serious especially with the principal pushing coaches, which then push students, almost to hold the name up of the school. Then students end up having their parents and other students pushing them, and then when the slightest thing happens you can crack."

"When you don't perform like you would want to perform, you react badly to that."

Some learners may use sport as a method to release pent-up anger and frustration:

"When I'm very angry I try to do something physical to use up all my energy, like playing soccer."

3.3.6 Aggressive playing

Games learners play at school may sometimes be aggressive in nature. They may play silly games where the aim of the game is to dominate or bully each other in a playful manner. It seems as if it is more acceptable when they play these games containing "masked" aggression.

"... there is also sometimes, or it looks to me like some guys are playing during break, but not like normal playing, they would play aggressive games. It's like rugby, but more like they try to hurt each other, or sometimes they would hit each other on the shoulder repeatedly as a game. They also play stupid games where they would hit each other in the privates."

3.3.5 The effect of the media (television and music)

The content of media may influence learners. Aggressive contents may elevate aggression at school:

"Also the movies I watch are more aggressive (lots of action). My music is more aggressive, and all of this has made me more aggressive, arrogant and more confident. I would never back-chat a teacher, but since I was exposed to music like rock, I've gotten more aggressive and can back-chat a teacher."

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3.3.7.1 Violence as entertainment on television

Violence on television may be seen as entertainment to some learners. Aggressive entertainment may stimulate learners into replicating the behaviour they observe. They may seek the same type of entertainment at school or recreate such events:

> "They like watching wrestling and to them aggression can become a form of entertainment."

> "I've seen people recording things on their phones of people hitting other people. And people think it is funny. They buy these videos off the TV with one guy hitting another guy. Some people try to recreate these things, like Jack-ass. My one friend has him doing some of these things."

3.3.7.2 The effect of music on aggression

Learners report that music has a strong effect on a person's affect and emotional arousal. Different types of music can swing a person's mood from cheerfulness to morbidity or anger:

> "I like listen to hip-hop, and it is happy music. It does definitely lift my mood, so yes I believe that music can affect your mood. There are lots of guys that like listen to hard, heavy music. I get aggravated when I hear it, so it must have an effect on them. It is usually those guys that listen to heavy metal stuff that are rebellious and more aggressive."

> "... since I was exposed to music like rock, I've gotten more aggressive and can back-chat a teacher."

In high school many learners start listening to metal and rock music. Aggressive music may cause learners to become more aggressive, elevate emotional arousal and even cause them to become emotionally numbed towards others. The following examples are what some of the learners had to say about music:

> "My male friends listen to heavy stuff like System of the down and everything is just screaming. If you listen to the words I think you will go crazy. They were

listening to that music so much that they started to become hard. I don't know how it affects you, but something clicks in the back of your mind. They are very sombre people, and as soon as their music taste started to drift to other styles as well, they started to change. They started laughing more. You become happier to what you listen to."

"Music can change your mood and it can cause you to become aggressive. Music like hard rock, heavy music does change your mood. Like when you are sad or depressed and listen to music like that you start thinking about all the things people have done to you and you get mad at them again. It makes you aggressive definitely."

3.3.8 Aggression that serves as entertainment at schools

Learners may even run to watch other people fighting because it excites them or they see it as entertainment:

"I think sometimes you are inquisitive, but most of the time it is people who twist in the thought of it being entertainment half."

"I think violence is good in schools, because there is something to see after school."

"I don't exactly know what they say but you always hear of the fight and then everyone just runs to the fight and you see them hitting and kicking each other."

CONSEQUENCES OF EXPRESSED/PERCEIVED AGGRESSION

Being exposed to aggressive behaviour had different effects and reactions on the participants. These reactions included emotional and behavioural responses.

4.1 Emotional responses

The people who witnessed aggression or were the recipients of it, reported more negative feelings such as being scared, fearful, angry, threatened, controlled, losing their self-content and despondent or depressed feelings such as:

"Sometimes I see the older boys fighting and I get scared."

"There was this one girl in our class. I'm still scared of that girl, because I've seen her hit a girl, I've seen her hit a boy, she was just bigger than most boys. She was very powerful and I think that's the big thing. Like L, she would ram someone in the wall and even the boys would be scared."

Threatening encounters may lead to individuals developing a fear for their safety. Some learners may experience fear to the extent where they would rather stay away from school than face the situation that perpetuates the fear:

"I was too afraid to tell anybody because they said they would kill me."

"The smaller children can't fight back because they are afraid of the older boys."

Some learners felt that they were intimidated and controlled by peers, and that they were being emotionally bullied. Consequently, they felt as if they were being controlled and they experienced a loss of their self-worth:

"They try to control your life by forcing you to do things or by living life their way. You immediately feel that something has been taken away from you, like your identity or self-content."

"They will intimidate you. It's like when you are not with them then you can feel confident and you can feel yourself. And you are not scared of anyone, but as soon as they are in the same room as you, then you become shy and you don't want to be seen because you know they might say something about you or something like that. They might be talking about you. If they look at you then you will be thinking that they are talking about you."

Certain learners may develop depressive symptoms when they are exposed to continuous acts of aggression towards them:

"I had insomnia for three months. It was a bad experience and it started just after my friend hit me for the first time I think. I felt normal but I didn't sleep. And all of a sudden my body started wearing down, but I didn't tell my mom because I pretended to go to sleep every night."

"Many learners feel like failures sometimes because of all the negative remarks they receive."

"I am depressed and unprivileged."

4.2   Behavioural responses

Learners may have behavioural responses to aggressive events. Some may retaliate towards the aggressor with aggression, while other learners may become depressed, even to the point where they will attempt suicide. It was also mentioned that a learner may withdraw from making social contact if they are constantly at the receiving end of peer aggression.

Aggression may evoke feelings of anger in the recipient, who may become belligerent and retaliate with aggression:

"If you are more aggressive towards someone they will become more aggressive back to you."

"Someone hit me on my nose and it started bleeding. I became so angry and tried to hit him back, but I was too angry to actually do something. He had beaten me up for no reason."

"When I experience aggression I become aggressive and am very quick on swear words."

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Some incidents may overwhelm learners, so that they are actually pacified by the aggressive event:

> "...she pushed the table away and I just sat there, I froze and didn't do anything. I dropped my phone and my mom heard everything. I just sat there and couldn't do anything."

Learners may withdraw from other learners, become isolated and oppose attempts of other learners trying to befriend them. This may be the result of continues hostile responses from groups of people (including the majority of a learner's classmates). These learners may interpret any person approaching them as a possible aggressor, perceive malice in their actions, and become more aggressive towards others:

> "... that she was so hard towards me at that stage when I tried to help her. If I asked her if she was okay, she would say like, ah leave me alone. At that point I didn't know that she was building a wall and thought it was fine that she doesn't want my help and I just went on with my own mission. But it was a fact that she needed someone that kept on trying to help her out; instead she was just thinking that I was trying to mock her like all the other guys did."

Some learners develop depressive symptoms and direct their anger towards themselves. The may attempt suicide and succeed in taking their own lives:

> "It is terrible, she committed suicide but it wasn't like someone else was hurting her."

> "These negative thoughts can sometimes lead to suicidal tendencies."

> "I am depressed and unprivileged. I've tried running across the road to get ... but the car pressed brakes."

The suicide of a learner had a significant negative impact on her classmates. They struggled to concentrate in class and experienced a decline in the quality of their schoolwork. Some learners may have difficulty to find closure and may struggle to move on:

"And now with her suicide our whole class was knocked, everyone's marks dipped, no one could concentrate. It was just terrible and I know the principal tried to get that lady in and it did help a lot, but it was almost like he sent her to do this and then forget about it. It was like everyone said yes but now we have to move on. But there was really no end to it."

However, the suicide of a pupil also had a positive effect on her classmates in the way it brought them closer, made them more caring and made them look out for each other:

"I've never seen our class closer. If anything in our class happens we support each other."

Helper and "saviour"

Some learners may try to help people those who are at the receiving end of the aggression of others. These learners may attempt to serve as a saviour for those who cannot fend for themselves:

"I would be the one saying stop it, leave her. Even though I did not like her I told them just leave her."

"I tried to help her, but she wouldn't let me."

Desensitization towards aggression

Some learners indicated that viewing violence on television daily has made them feel that violence is part of normal everyday living. When learners constantly see violence, it becomes more acceptable after a while:

"On TV it is more acceptable to see violence. I know when I was younger and I saw someone hit someone on TV I would like go: Huh! Now if I see it, it doesn't even register. It's sad to say but it's almost normal to see."

"It is as if children get taught that aggression is nothing bad, because they get used to seeing it on TV everyday."

Exposure to persistent aggression may cause learners to overlook the seriousness of such events and internalise it as a normal part of daily functioning. This may happen where the learner lives, or in the classroom:

> *"The whole class at that stage got caught up in this thing and eventually you just stop telling people to stop it and it becomes so normal. Everyday they will mock her; they will throw things in her hair and call her names."*

> *"She used to try and slit her wrists but never ever deep, she just cut it. So everyone just ignored it because everyone just thought it was for attention."*

> *"You get used to worse things where you live and then at school you can project those worse feelings on other people."*

DEALING WITH AGGRESSION

Learners expressed a need for aggression to be managed at school. Some learners were concerned that if certain aggressive patterns or events at school were not controlled, someone could get seriously hurt. Such an event would have a bad impact on the school:

> *"Something has to be done about this or something really bad is going to happen. Someone is going to get hurt really bad and then there will be trouble."*

> *"It could be a downfall of a school, because if something is not done about it. If you can control the grade 8's and can get your buddies on your side, you can actually take over a school."*

Learners' opinions on how aggression can be reduced and controlled at school were based on changes that have to occur among learners themselves. Learners have to become more involved at their schools and be tolerant towards other people at school:

> *"People should become more involved at school and especially the fun side of school, sports, and so. Only now in matric do I now understand why I must tuck in*

*my shirt, why must I put on a tie and polish my shoes. When you behave in class
you get to do more work. People should respect one another and they must learn
to be tolerant, accepting and forgiving. "*

Some learners feel that appropriate behaviour should be learnt from superiors at school.
They deem it necessary that learners are taught appropriate skills and ways to interact
with others. Teachers must also have a better knowledge of the phases that children go
through, so they would understand and identify behavioural problems in learners:

*"I think people must be taught how to treat each other, by being shown how to
treat each other by the teachers and their superiors. They must be taught how to
become mature. It is going to take time; they must be exampled on how to be
civilized and how to be children at the same time. Like if a child makes a joke in
class and it's not that funny, you can smile because you understand, you're the
teacher and it is funny for the child and it makes sense to him. Except the child for
being a child, but make them mature at the same time. Treating individuals, as
individuals in their own way. I think that will help. "*

Certain learners feel the need for a counsellor or trustworthy teachers in whom they can
confide at school and who can help them with their problems. It is important that learners
who get involved in fights are assisted with solving their problem and that they are taught
how to deal with conflict. The need for school guidance in this respect was emphasised:

*"In our school you don't have anything to help you out. If you are having a bad
time you just go talk to Mrs ... she is not a counsellor but you know she is the only
person that won't go cause some problems and would actually do something. She
helps with everyone. It is very difficult to say, but there should be more people
like Mrs ... but that everyone can speak to, like a counsellor of some sort. "*

*If something happens and two people get hit, they should be forced to see a
counsellor at a school, because there is definitely something wrong. Writing
something out is not going to stop people from hitting others, it might make them*

angrier. If you are more aggressive towards someone they will become more aggressive back to you. It is important in the way it is managed."

"... like the time one of my friends told met that he doesn't want to live anymore I went and told Mrs ... that. And she so subtly without making me ever know I was involved; he didn't even know she knew. She had a conversation with him and found out he was starting to feel better."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Aggression manifested in acts of active and passive forms and was physical and verbal in nature. Physical aggression included pushing, hitting, fighting, and the occasional use of weapons. Some fights were severe. Verbal aggression had a high incidence and included swearing, name-calling, belittling and racial remarks. Physical and emotional bullying had a high prevalence and can be correlated with the findings of De Wet (2005), which showed that bullying is problematic at schools. Passive aggression was mostly present in the form of oppositional behaviour towards authorities at school, which was in line with research findings of De Wet and Jacobs (2006), who reported that educators are often verbally abused and ignored by learners and that classrooms are damaged. Vandalism seemed to be a problem at school as well.

Aggression was present among all genders, ages and cultures in school. It seemed to have a higher prevalence among boys, but was also significantly present among girls. According to Bjorkwist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992), males are more likely than females to aggress against a person when not provoked, but the difference shrinks in situations where provocation is present. This may serve as explanation for the high frequency of physical aggression noted among girls.

In the adolescent developmental stage there are many contributing factors towards aggression, such as opposition, aggressive conduct and energy: The child is growing into a mature person and must establish his own self-concept and identity. Social interactions

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become significant and according Erikson (1963) the most important psychosocial tasks of adolescents are the formation of a personal identity, developing healthy relationships and resolving the conflict between identity and role confusion. It became evident in the research that the learners were trying to establish their own identities and that their values oscillate between those of their parents and those of their peers: they would rebel against norms and deliberately do the opposite because they were maturing and establishing their own self-concepts and identities. Literature confirms the developmental pattern of aggression, which peaks during puberty and adolescence (Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; Louw, Van Ede & Louw. 1998). To appreciate the task that confronts the adolescent in developing an identity, consider the challenge of having to adjust simultaneously to a new body, a new mind, and a new social world.

As learners' bodies matured and became more muscular, so did their level of confidence. This may lead to an increase in their self-esteem and challenging behaviour, resulting in more physical and dominating interactions. Sdorow and Rickabaugh (2002) have also found that early-maturing boys are more confident, more sociable, and more popular with their peers.

Aggression was prominent in the reciprocal relationships between adolescents and their social environment. Being part of a group and forming a social identity becomes very important. Confiding in groups may expose learners to peer pressure, which may lead to activities and behaviour that are aggressive in nature. Adolescents' individual characteristics, such as their temperaments, moral development *"internal conflicts and not knowing what is right or wrong"* and social skills influenced their interactions and interpersonal relationships. Repeated aggressive encounters may be due to the lack of basic social skills. According to Sadock and Sadock (2002), learners that do not know how to communicate effectively may adopt an abrasive style of self-expression. Their ineptness in performing such basic tasks as making requests, engaging in negotiations, and lodging complaints often irritates friends and their social deficits seem to ensure that they experience repeated frustration and frequently anger those with whom they have direct contact.

At the researched school, the learners were representative of many different cultures. Daily interactions with people from various cultures may be problematic due to discriminative behaviour. Some learners may be well aware of their own prejudice; others might act in a prejudiced manner without even being aware that they are implicitly prejudiced. Racial discrimination manifested overtly and unconsciously in the form of aversive racism: consciously expressing that all people are equal, but unintentionally discriminating against some groups (Doviodo, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson & Howard, 1997). Learning plays an important role in prejudice. Parents, peers and the media all provide input, informing people of the supposed characteristics of a certain group. People also exhibit favouritism to their own kind and get along better with others who share equal status (Spangenberg & Nel, 1983). This may possibly explain why aggression seemed less between white English-speaking and black English-learners, while it was more common between white Afrikaans and white/black English-speaking learners. Increased social contact between members of different social groups could reduce prejudice if these persons have an equal status (Sdorow & Rickabaugh, 2002).

The social learning view of Bandura (1986) emphasises the role of learning and stressing the fact that human beings learn how to respond towards others through both direct and vicarious experiences. The expression of aggression can be the product of learnt behaviour, accumulated from peers, parents, and the media. Bullying was noted to be a product of social learning. Over time children learn how to perceive and construe events in their social environment and start to assemble a detailed set of rules of behaviour. These rules of behaviour are then reinforced or inhibited, based on the results they encounter in their own social interactions.

Manifestations of aggression among learners start to decrease as they develop more mature interpersonal skills and individualize, forming their own independent identities. According to Piaget's (1952) theory adolescents in the formal operational stage should possess better problem solving skills. This may be linked to adolescents developing more mature ways in dealing with conflict and understanding the consequences of their behaviour.

All learners bring with them a different history of aggression; different expectations about precursors of anger and the appropriateness and effectiveness of certain aggressive acts. A learner's domestic and living environment may contribute to aggression at school. It may be a symptom of a decline in the values, parents that set few rules, lack of boundaries and discipline (*"Children also don't get disciplined any more, they are allowed to do as they please."*), and insufficient supervision. Learners that do not receive enough parental guidance may act out at school: *"She is alone at home most of the time. She had too much leeway and then she would start acting out at school."* Forehand, Miller, Dutra and Chance (1997) have also found that many children are not being sufficiently chaperoned. Soaring divorce rates may have an influence on school aggression (Weekend Post, 2006) and life events may have a greater effect on adolescent's mood and behaviour (Brooks-Gun & Warren, 1989). Drive theories suggest that aggression stems from externally generated conditions and are triggered by the words or deeds of people with whom the aggressor interacts (Feshbach, 1984), as illustrated by one learner: *"I have noticed that aggression doesn't just occur, you have to do or say something to someone first."* Frustration can facilitate aggression due to the negative feelings it generates (Berkowitz, 1989). This may also be the case for reactive aggressive behaviour between learners.

Exposure to aggression (directly and indirectly) provoked several responses. These responses may be emotional or behavioural in nature. Emotions such as fear and anger, and feeling overwhelmed, depressed and helpless may be elicited in response to aggression. Some learners may retaliate towards an aggressive incident through physical or verbal behaviour; others may withdraw and avoid social interactions. Learners may direct their aggression towards others (people and objects) or themselves. In the case of the latter, it may lead to depression, self-harm or even suicide. Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton and Scheidt (2001) found that victims of peer aggression demonstrate poorer social adjustment, greater difficulty in making new friends and fewer relationships with peers. Ladd, Kochenderfer and Coleman (1997) indicate that learners who are victimised by peers at school reported a relatively small circle of friends, the absence of general peer acceptance and difficulty in making new friends. Victims of peer

abuse often suffer from reduced academic performance and loneliness and they feel unsafe in the school environment (Brockenbrough, Cornell & Loper, 2002). They may perceive malice in the actions of others, even if it does not exist, and become more aggressive to others (Dodge, Price, Bachorowski & Newman, 1990). Exposure to violence may disrupt children's cognitive functioning and mental health (Osofsky, 1995). According to Garbarino (2001) and Weist and Cooley-Quille (2001), the accumulation of exposure to violence across several settings, including community, school and home, coupled with low parental monitoring and the likelihood of being a victim of aggression, create a context in which children exhibit serious aggressive behaviours.

The long behavioural tradition of systematic desensitization suggests that repeated exposure to a stimulus may desensitise people and decrease anxiety towards it. Donnerstein, Slaby and Eron (1994) conclude that there are at least four effects of observing a great deal of violence: the *aggressor effect*, where people become meaner and more aggressive; the *victim effect*, where people become more scared and self-protective; the *appetite effect*, where people want to see more violent entertainment; and the *bystander effect*, where people become desensitised and less sympathetic towards victims of violence. Watching or taking part in violence may increase an individual's tendency to engage in it and some learners may see aggression as a form of entertainment. Media violence and aggressive music may stimulate or raise emotional responses of learners and can increase aggression (Gentile, 2003). Curcio and First (1993) argue that children are growing up in a culture where violence is being "normalised". Continued exposure to media violence may cause desensitization towards aggression, be physically and emotional numbing with less arousal, causing people to be less ready to intervene when a fight breaks out (Thomas & Drabman, 1975). This was also observed in this research, where respondents reported that learners ran to see fights and did not stop them.

CONCLUSION

No single factor propels an adolescent to act aggressively. Instead, the causes of such behaviour are complex and multifaceted. Most participants in this research experienced aggression at school as unhealthy. Aggression may have emotional and behavioural consequences such as disruption, discomfort and disturbance of normal functioning. Although aggression seemed relatively under control at this particular school, the awareness of the increase in aggression, the severity of some of the incidents, and the possibility of desensitization towards aggression may predict problematic consequences for the future. The need for school guidance programmes and life skill training was prominent, accompanied with the need for school counsellors to assist in the management of aggression.

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EXPLORING ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF AGGRESSION
IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL CONTEXT

SUMMARY

This article offers a perspective on adolescents' experiences of aggression in a secondary school, with a focus on the manifestation, contributing factors, consequences, and learners' opinions on aggression at school. An inductive qualitative research approach was chosen where learners wrote about their experiences and participated in focused semi-structured interviews. Central themes were derived by means of analysis. The results revealed that a substantial number of learners experienced negative feelings about aggression at school and that aggression was related to individual characteristics, the adolescent developmental stage, socialization, status, competition, home environment, prior experiences, learnt behaviour and the effect of the media and music. With respect to individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, multicultural interaction and a lack of sufficient social skills contributed towards many acts of aggression. Exposure to aggression had emotional consequences, where some learners were prone to feelings of anger, fear, depression, being controlled and a loss of self-content. Behavioural responses included retaliation, pacifism, vandalism and suicide. The aspect of desensitization towards aggression seemed to be present among some learners with the agonizing idea of aggression serving as a form of entertainment. The findings emphasised the fact that learner involvement, conflict resolution skills and school guidance are necessary to manage aggression at school. Teachers must have better knowledge of the adolescent developmental phase so that they could understand and identify behavioural problems among learners. The need for a school counsellor was prominent in assisting with learner problems and conflict resolution.

BACKGROUND

Aggressive incidents such as the "Waterkloof-4"(Rossouw, 2005); a Durban school boy beaten to death by a friend (Mthethwa, 2006); learners being attacked with knives and scissors; video recordings of an assault in a school restroom (Smith, 2006) and animals being tortured by learners (Rademeyer, 2006), are becoming more and more

commonplace. Juvenile involvement in violent crimes increased from 9% in 2001 to 15% in 2003, and an estimated 60 000 of the 156 000 sentenced or trial awaiting offenders are between the ages of 14 and 25, with 2 200 offenders under 18 (Benghiat, 2006). Assault, sexual violence and offences related to firearms showed a dramatic increase in schools during the period 2001 to 2004 (Joubert, 2004). According to Vogel (2002), schools across the world are struggling with ways to prevent violence among learners, and it contaminates the school environment and jeopardises the educational process (Neser, 2005). As violence increases, so does the pressure to ensure safe and orderly schools. Exposure to aggression and violence may cause people to become aggressive or disrupt their normal functioning, thereby affecting their mental health (Baron & Byrne, 2000; Newman & Newman, 2003).

Aggression can be described as negative physical and verbal behaviour with harmful intentions (Barlow & Durand 1999, Bukatho & Daehler, 1992), which may result in personal injury, destruction of property or even exclusion (Guerin & Hennesey, 2002; Van Niekerk, 1996). Aggression develops during childhood and continues into adulthood, but is more prominent in high-risk behaviour during adolescence (Newman & Newman, 2003). Guerin and Hennesey (2002) argue that aggression during adolescence is more likely to result in injury and in extreme cases even in death.

A comprehensive literature study was conducted and very few studies explore the nature and meaning of aggression as perceived by adolescents. The aim of this research is to explore adolescents' experiences of aggression within a secondary school context.

METHOD OF RESEARCH

The research design was qualitative, explorative and contextual (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Berg, 2001; Creswell, 2003; Seale, 1999; Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1997). An inductive approach was followed to better understand aggression experienced among learners in a secondary school context. The research was open and was not directed by any conceptual framework, preconceived notions or hypotheses. The participants were encountered in their environment (the school) in an attempt to obtain a total picture of their experiences and views.

Research context

Research was conducted in an English-Afrikaans dual medium secondary school, with pupils attending from rural and urban areas, ranging between needy and privileged in socio-economical status.

Participants

The research group was comprised of boys and girls of the ages 14-19, ranging from grades 8-12, and was constituted from all ethnic groups at the school (African, Caucasian, coloured and Indian) with English or Afrikaans as language medium. A total of 41 learners responded to the invitation and returned written data. Focused semi-structured interviews (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000) were conducted with learners who were willing to share their experiences. All learners participated voluntarily and consentingly.

Ethical considerations

Approval was obtained from the North West Educational Department and the school governing body. Parents and guardians were informed about the research project and were invited to give informed consent (Welfer, 2002). The research project was approved by the Research Committee of the North-West University; Project title: An exploration of enabling contexts (05K14). The aim of the research was explained to all participants and they participated voluntarily and consentingly and were able to withdraw from the study at any point if they chose to (Welfer, 2002). Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

Research process

Learners were informed about the research project during assembly and were invited to participate in the research. Because only a few responded to the invitation, the researcher had to visit learners in their register classes and invite them to participate in the study. Learners wrote about their experiences in their private time and returned the data to the researcher. These writings were based on an open-ended question, appropriately applicable to adolescents because it facilitated the spontaneous understanding of respondents in a non-threatening, non-leading environment. Focused semi-structured interviews were scheduled with voluntary learners who were recruited through invitation

(Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). These focused interviews provided the opportunity for the researcher to gather particular aspects of the participants through non-directive triggering into sharing their experiences and views on the topic. The advantages of focused interviews lie in the specificity, range and depth of responses obtained from participants (Merton & Kendall, 1946).

Data gathering

The research was conducted in two phases, the first being an exploration of learners' experiences of aggression by means of an open-ended research question which they answered in writing (Bryman, 2001). The question posed was formulated as follows:

Describe as completely as possible how you directly or indirectly experienced aggression during your secondary school years.

Beskryf so volledig as moontlik hoe jy aggressie direk of indirek tydens jou skoolloopbaan ervaar het.

This was followed by semi-structured phenomenological interviews (Kvale, 1983; Kvale, 1996; Krueger, 1994), allowing more in-depth exploration of the themes from the written data. The interviews were audio taped for analysis at a later stage. 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 through focusing on the data received from participants.

Data analysis process

Data was analyzed by means of Tesch's descriptive analysis (Creswell 2003). Data was analysed according to the following process:

Step 1: Data was divided in utilitarian categories trough the process of open coding.

Step 2: The coded responses were then arranged according to categories that illustrated the central themes of the data.

Step 3: Categories were integrated, defined and illustrated with quotes during selective coding.

Verification and Trustworthiness

Guba's model for qualitative research (Guba 1981; Lincoln & Guba 1985) was applied 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), confirmability (which was accomplished by using the criterion of neutrality or freedom from bias) and reflexivity (Willig, 2001) (an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meaning throughout the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining "outside" one's subject matter while conducting research). Data was triangulated according to existing literature (Flick, 1992). Themes derived from the data were compared to the results of previous research studies, in order to determine differences, similarities and unique contributions (Poggenpoel 1993).

RESULTS

An example of how the data was analyzed is represented in the table below, followed by an integrated description of what participants reported:

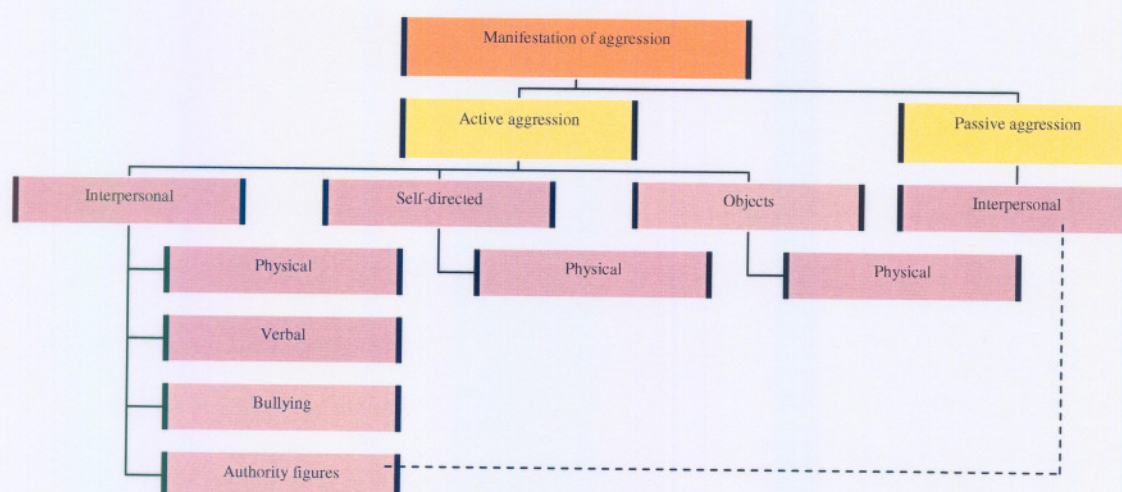| Quotation (primary source of data)	Open coding (step 1)
The youth of today are very sinful by nature. We have a tendency to react too quickly and cause trouble.	Change in the way youths are, increase in transgressions. Less tolerance, quick to respond.
One of the biggest problems in school is learners that emotionally break others down and physically bullying them. They do this so that they can look and feel better.	Bullying (emotional and physical) is a big problem. Aggressive to project an "image" and feel better about themselves.
I have experienced a lot of cattiness amongst girls and fist fighting amongst the boys.	Girls are more verbally aggressive and boys more physically.
Learners vandalise school property when they are angry.	Vandalism can be a product of anger.
Many learners may feel like they are failures due to the many negative remarks	Exposure to negative remarks may provoke negative feelings.

they receive. They develop negative thoughts that can sometimes lead to suicide tendencies.	Negative thoughts may lead to suicide.
We must learn to handle conflict and our emotions.	Learners don't know how to handle conflict or their emotions They need to receive guidance and get taught.

Table 1: Example of data handling

MANIFESTATION OF AGGRESSION

All participants experienced some form of aggression during their secondary school career. 14 (34%) indicated that they directly experienced aggression, 41(100%) responded that they vicariously experienced aggression by being a witness to it, and 5 (12%) of the participants reflected on themselves as being the aggressor. Aggressive behaviour was experienced by all genders, races and grades. Aggressive acts were directed interpersonally (actively and passively), towards the individual self, and towards objects (school property).

The following flowchart indicates the different forms in which aggression manifested. This is followed by a discussion of these forms:

Active aggression was viewed as hostile attitude or behaviour; threatening behaviour or actions that were overtly aimed at people or objects, and it could either be physical and/or verbal aggression. Physical aggression was regarded as all actions that were directed towards physically injuring, inflicting pain or causing discomfort for others or themselves. These actions included acts of violence such as fighting, use of weapons, bullying, playing aggressive games, self-mutilation, and suicide. Verbal aggression entailed all hostile words directed at people, including threats, teasing, belittling, discriminating remarks, name-calling and swearing. Passive aggression involves the manipulation of others indirectly and resisting their demands rather than confronting or opposing them directly. Bullying occurred frequently and included both physical and verbal behaviour and was regarded as a type of social aggression, where a group or individuals deliberately and repeatedly picked on, belittled, threatened or hurt another individual.

1. Active aggression

1.1 Interpersonal aggression

All aggressive incidents that took place between people were noted as interpersonal acts of aggression. These incidents were physical and verbal in nature. Bullying was included as a form of interpersonal aggression.

1.1.1 Physical aggression

Fighting occurred among all genders but it seemed to have a higher prevalence among boys and among learners in grades 8-10. The prevalence and perceived increase in physical aggression among the girls were also significant:

> *"Sometimes even the girls can beat up a guy. It seems unreal, but it is happening more and more."*

Many fights were minor in nature, but some were amplified and intensified in extremity:

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"... she threw him against the wall and stuck her nails into his throat and she really hit him and he started crying because she beat him so much."

"... she completely lost it and she said she completely went half blank. She threw a chair at me. I was sitting in class and one of my guy friends was petrified, he was hiding behind me, and she picked up a table and threw it across the room. She tried to hit me with a chair but then another guy grabbed it. I just sat there and didn't know what to do."

Some learners may revert to using weapons in fights to threaten or hurt other learners. Learners that grow up in a dangerous neighbourhood and witness people fighting with weapons may revert to weapons when threatened, especially if they are outnumbered or smaller:

"They told him if he didn't stop they were going to stab him and took out their knives. But then he saw their knives were clean and shiny and he was used to seeing knives bloody and dirty. He sees all this stuff where he comes from. He wasn't afraid of them because their knives were clean and they couldn't stab anybody. Then he said he wanted to fight against one of those guys who was always out there."

1.1.2 Verbal aggression

Verbal aggression was frequently indicated in the responses and seemed to be common among all genders. Learners that engaged in verbal aggression would curse and swear at each other, teachers, or generally as part of their normal talking pattern. Racial remarks were significant and it seemed that verbal aggression had a higher occurrence among boys and that the content of their aggressive words were more profound:

"Girls not really that bad, just the usual words, but guys can really swear badly especially if you make them mad."

"Children curse a lot and they don't even notice how much they do. They would for some reason like swear each other's mothers. Children would sometimes

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swear at the teachers, but usually so that the teacher just can't hear them. I have also been called racial names."

Learners would sometimes blackmail or spread malicious rumours about people they dislike in an attempt to discredit them socially:

"She would become aggressive to me both by telling me that I'm not allowed to be friends with other people and telling me like. she would tell other people I said things about them. "

"And they spread very nasty rumours about each other, very nasty. Like how this girl did this with that guy and weird things. Like if you do something that they don't agree with they will make a big thing about it and they will put all the negative limelight on you. "

1.1.3 Bullying

Bullying can be associated with individuals or a group of individuals that physically or verbally mistreat and intimidate weaker or younger individuals. This type of behaviour was more common among bigger against smaller boys but is seemed present amongst older learners as well:

"It's not mainly an age thing because I know of grade 8 and 12's that are being bullied. The younger ones might be a bit more because the younger ones can bully them and the older ones. "

"It is usually the bigger guys that bully the smaller ones. They try and dominate the small ones and sometimes do things to impress their friends. There was a recent incident where two matrics grabbed a little grade 8 and pulled a condom over his head. "

Learners would be insulted, belittled and made fun of in front of others in class. The recipient would usually be someone that does not fight back, is not part of a group and is not seen as "cool":

"It's usually the quiet people that don't really mingle with other people, they are like loners. They usually keep to themselves. They won't do anything to hurt someone else but they usually are the ones that are bullied."

"Everyday they will mock her; they will throw things in her hair and call her names. Like in primary school a boy mixed cheese curls and water and threw it on her head. She had blonde hair and it made her hair real orange. At the time it was funny, but it stuck with her through high school. They kept calling her names like cheese curls."

A possible reason for bullying is that the people that are doing the bullying were bullied as well. When they grow bigger they do the same to smaller people who are now in their prior situation. Thus, this behaviour can be learnt:

"I think it is also that the bigger guys do that because it was also done to them. I know my friends were also bullied when we were in grade 8, so they started doing the same thing when they were in grade 10."

1.1.4 Aggression towards authority figures

Some learners show little respect towards authority and many teachers experience verbal aggression in the form of back-chatting and swearing by learners. There seems to be a higher occurrence of this in the lower grades:

"Learners like treating teachers like their parents. Some of them have no respect and give some teachers a very hard time. They don't actually understand that they are there to teach you. They won't do their work and back-chat the teacher. Some learners would curse at teachers, but like in an under-tone so that it mostly sounds like a murmur where you can only catch a word or two."

Some learners may deliberately go out of their way to frustrate a teacher. A group of learners can easily target a teacher and disrupt the class, making them angry, cry or even leave the teaching profession. When a teacher addresses inappropriate behaviour, it may

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cause the learners to become more aggressive and rebellious towards authority figures that oppose their will:

> *"There is always the person that wants to make trouble for the teacher and make the teacher angry or even cry. It has happened before. I know when my brother was in matric their class was very naughty. They would say things in front of the teacher that would make her cry."*

> *"The one class they set on fire. They took deodorant and sprayed it on all the desks as the teacher walked out and as she walked back in they lit it and the tables went on fire. She left quite soon after that."*

> *"They made her cry the one day and she refused to teach them until they apologised. That made them more rebellious even though it was their fault. You will rebel against a teacher that doesn't like or favour you, or from what you have heard from other people."*

As a result of behaving badly a learner may be sent out of class. Some learners may do this deliberately because of the favoured outcome of leaving a class they dislike. Some learners' credibility within their social group increases if they misbehave in class:

> *"So that we don't have class, then we would get chased out onto the quad for a week. It seems quite stupid if you think back, but at that stage it seemed quite fun. It also pushed up guys' credibility amongst other guys. We hear all the time how guys say how one did this and one did that, and telling each other it was so cool. They had this whole little inner working. Guys do, and the naughtier you are, the cooler you are."*

Teachers may physically and verbally discharge their frustration on learners, picking on certain individuals or even discriminating against some. Consequently, learners may become aggressive in response:

> *"A teacher may get angry from other classes and then that teacher will take all her frustration out on our class."*

"This one teacher picked on the black guys a lot. And then the black guys became very aggressive. What would happen is that once we kept on talking, he would like tell us to keep quite. We didn't, because at that stage we just didn't care and then the black kids would like say one word and they will be chased out of class. When they come back in they become very aggressive towards the teacher and they loose all respect for him. It becomes a tough situation then."

1.2 Self-directed aggression

Some learners direct their anger towards themselves, reverting to behaviour where they physically hurt or mutilate themselves. These incidents may occur in front of fellow-learners, and if it does it may overwhelm them, as they will not know how to respond to such an event. Fellow-learners may misinterpret these incidents as attention seeking behaviour. An incident where a scholar took her own life changed the way in which some of the learners viewed this type of behaviour:

"... she used to break her own arm. She would take it on the table like this and just hit it until the bone broke. It was crazy, she just didn't think she would take the door and just slam her arm in it or take a knife and just sit and make her name on her arm, but cut it and she said she just never felt the pain. She said it doesn't feel like pain to her, it feels different. It was crazy."

"She used to try and slit her wrists but never ever deep, she just cut it. So everyone just ignored it because everyone just thought it was for attention. But now after a girl committed suicide, it is a different story."

Learners may internalise their experiences of anger due to feelings of helplessness, or by being overwhelmed by their school, social and home environments. These learners may develop feelings of dejection, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and attempt suicide:

"I had insomnia for three months. It was a bad experience and it started just after my best friend hit me for the first time I think. It was the craziest experience, I

don't know what happened, but something just happened. I felt normal but I didn't sleep. And all of a sudden my body started wearing down, but I didn't tell my mom because I pretended to go to sleep every night."

"Many learners feel like failures sometimes because of all the negative remarks they receive. These negative thoughts can sometimes lead to suicidal tendencies."

"I am depressed and unprivileged. I've tried running across the road to get ... but the car pressed brakes."

Learners may confide in their friends when they feel depressed or suicidal. These situations may not be handled correctly in such discussions and this behaviour may aggravate the situation:

> *"She had told me before that she wanted to kill herself and I then went and told a teacher. That teacher called her dad in and he ended up freaking out at her and it made thing worse."*

1.3   Aggression towards objects (Vandalism)

Vandalism was described as aggressive behaviour toward objects, leading to the damage or destruction thereof. In the school scenario these objects were school property, such as windows, doors, desks, restrooms etc. Learners also wrote offensive phrases on school buildings and walls. Vandalism can be seen as a deliberate action where an individual would discharge his or her anger towards an object. A learner may try to make a statement regarding his or her feelings by destroying something at school:

> *"There are a lot of things that learners would break deliberately at school to try and make a statement. I know. One of my friends who finished matric last year, he was actually corrupt. He wrote very nasty things on the walls of some of the school buildings with paint. He would just not care because the school was not his home."*

> *"I think people want to make a statement through it."*

Vandalism may be a way through which learners express negative feelings such as anger towards an individual at school or about the way they perceive school in general. The individual may feel that by vandalizing the school property, he can get back at the person he "associates" with his experience of school. The individual might see vandalism as a way to discharge some of his aggression, because the objects being destroyed or defiled hold no threat for him/her and cannot fight back. This type of behaviour may be seen as an aggressive act with fewer consequences to be faced, because the learner would not necessarily be caught during the act. Peer influences may also play a part in vandalism:

"Maybe something happened at school that they didn't like and now they are trying to get the school back by maybe cutting down a tree or burning down a bush. They won't know it was you. If a teacher was going to shout at you and you shout back at her, they are going to know it was you. If you go and write something nasty about the teacher on the wall they are not going to know it was you."

"A learner can take his frustration out on something at school without being caught. They may break things because they want to get back at the bad experiences they had at school. Some of them might do that to impress their friends."

"I do again think that it might be the peer thing, but a lot of the time people do that without telling anyone. I think that may be the inner aggression you have maybe to your situation in life. You don't like where you're at and you don't see a way out and then you take it out on something that can't fight back or do anything. Some people just have that."

2. Passive aggression at an interpersonal level

Passive aggression mostly occurs in the classrooms, where learner would oppose authority, ignore teachers and disregard rules. However, it also manifested in certain relationships among learners:

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"They take their aggression out on teachers by ignoring them."

"She didn't tell me one thing she just ignored me. It was so bad because we went from so close to her just ignoring me. It was just dead; there was no fight but that friendship still is a very sore spot for me."

FACTORS ELICITING AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

There are several factors that may contribute to aggressive behaviour in the school context. The relationship which an individual has with the social environment, peers, parents and teachers (reciprocal relationships) were quite dominant. The interaction among learners (interpersonally) contributed to various aggressive incidents and contributing factors could be identified as: the characteristics of the individual (including physiological changes, personality development, emotional arousal, and interpersonal skills,) and the effect of the social environment (being liked, projecting a certain image, belonging to a group, peer pressure, relationships and learnt behaviour).

3.1 Characteristics of the individual which affect aggressive behaviour

Certain individual factors and traits may attribute to aggressive behaviour. These traits were noted as the physiological changes that occur during puberty, the temperament of learners and the process of developing their own identities.

3.1.1 Physiological changes

Hormone-induced physical changes occur at this time and learners' bodies change in size and shape. These hormones may influence their mood. A boy's level of confidence my rise as he becomes more muscular and physically stronger, leading to increased conflict with other learners because of more challenging behaviour:

> *"You become built and you become strong and it influences your ego and self-esteem. You think now you are big and strong and you can take anybody down."*

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3.1.2 Temperament

The temperament of a learner and level of emotional arousal may affect they way he/she responds towards stimuli which provoke aggression. Some learners may have a "short fuse" or a lack of appropriate and mature coping skills. The way a learner deals with frustration may result in aggressive responses towards stressors and interactions:

> *"A lot of people are just very aggressive by nature."*

> *"It's the way a person is. It doesn't really have to do with other people; it has to do with yourself."*

> *"I think it's a matter again of who you are."*

> *"... many of my friends do fight. Like because their personalities are very different and ..."*

3.1.3 Developmental stage

Rebelliousness, the need to experiment and the urge to test boundaries seemed prominent among some adolescents. They will rebel against the norms and deliberately do the opposite because they are growing into mature people that have to establish their own self-concept and identity, even sometimes through the demonstration of opposition or strength:

> *"It's almost like all the LO and stuff you learn is too ... they try and make it such a big thing that a lot of people purposely rebel against it. Because they make it into such a say no, say no ... and people say yes just for that. It happened a lot at that stage. There were so many people that I thought were good people that ended up going in the wrong direction because it was almost like some of they said don't do it and then they just felt they have to."*

> *"Teenagers always tend to ignore what they are told, which my lead to them being beaten up or hurt by others."*

3.1.4   Developing identities

Many participants reflected on learners not knowing who they are or where they fit in. They are in the process of seeking their own independent identities. It seems that while learners are dealing with this developmental issue, they have a need to belong to a social group, where a social identity may be of uttermost importance:

> "It feels like in grade 9 when no one knows where they stand and in high school no one exactly knows who they are. Everyone is unsure of how to fit in."

> "That happened a lot again in grade 8 and 9 mainly. At that point you don't know who you really are."

> "I don't actually know, but I think its maybe because you are learning to know yourself and you're changing. Like your personality has to change as you get older. And then you bump into other personalities that are like yours as well."

Aggressive behaviour decreases as the learners mature and get to know themselves better. They start focussing on the future and take school work more seriously:

> "You start to grow up and at school they start to bombard you with lots of work. You have less time to float around with your friends, so you start to think about life and what you want to do when you leave school. You start leaving the negative things, remember my friend I told you about, the one with the knives. He changed in grade 10; he wanted to leave his tsotsi ways and stuff. He told me that. I think you start to think about life when you are there."

3.2   Interpersonal relationships

3.2.1   The need for a group and social identity

Learners join groups, and participate in group activities. Through cohesiveness the learner may attain the feeling of belonging, security and establishing a social identity. These groups play a significant part in how learners perceive themselves and others. Some learners are prepared to do anything to be part of a group:

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"In primary school you don't really have groups but in high school your actual groups like start. If you are not in the group, then people don't like you. So you would do anything to get into that group."

A learner may even endure aggression and protect the aggressor, just to remain part of a friendship:

"I knew that if I had at that stage said something, my school career would have been hell. Because it was hell already, but it was bearable in the way that I didn't have to sit alone. That was the big thing. At the stage I was more worried about the thoughts of having to sit by myself."

A learner who receives less social attention than a friend may become jealous of hostile towards that friend. It may also result in an unhealthy competition for attention:

"And when I came to high school all of a sudden I got a lot of attention and then she didn't handle it well, and then she would become aggressive to me both by telling me that I'm not allowed to be friends with other people and telling me like, she would tell other people I said things about them."

Social groups and peer pressure may contribute to negative and aggressive behaviour due to the tendency learners have to conform to group demands and norms:

"A group can influence people to do the wrong thing, such as smoking or drugs or stuff like that. Sometimes one group can fight against another group because one of the guys has got a problem with a guy in another group. I think people find safety in groups and you have people that can back you when you have trouble."

"I am more aggressive because of the friends I have and the games I play."

The need for group acceptance and group influences start to subside as learners become older. They would have fewer but more intimate friendships. Learners start relying more on their own decision making and relocate their locus of control towards themselves and not externally in their groups:

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"There are always groups at school. At first you always want to be part of a group no matter what, but later the groups become much smaller and you would have fewer people that you hang out with. You start doing your own thing. "

"I'm very happy with the way it is. It's been like this from about the middle of grade 10. But before that you had to be a certain way to be in, only if you smoked you had the smoking friends. Only if you swore and were rough you were in this group, and only if you had above 80 and worked hard could you be in this group. I guess everyone had their own little way of getting into a group. "

3.2.2 Interpersonal skills

Interpersonal skills such as conflict resolution, coping skills and communication play a crucial part in how learners will react when they are confronted with an aggrieving situation:

> *"They mostly struggle to get along. Not because of the language but because of the way they communicate. "*

Because there is a shift towards the importance of being socially accepted, it would then be necessary for a learner to be able to get along with those that share the social context. Inadequate interpersonal skills and inappropriate behaviour may lead to social conflict:

> *"I've seen people deal well with terrible situations and then I've seen other people deal with very minor situations terribly. "*

> *"My friends became so confused and aggressive during exam times. They swore at each other and became aggressive for no reason. "*

It can be problematic if a learner does not possess sufficient conflict resolution skills. If these skills are lacking a learner can easily overreact or fight over minor things:

> *"People have a tendency to react too quickly. "*

"This person accidentally bumped me at a show. I pulled him over and assaulted him."

These skills improve as learners become older and harvest more appropriate interpersonal skills:

"Well some of them they became softer. They started understanding more about life. First they were just thinking of themselves but here in grade 10 you start realizing that there are other people in the world beside you, and that changes your view. Before that you are very aggressive, even towards your parents. After that, even though you have fights, they get sorted out faster and they aren't that messy."

3.2.3 Social acceptance and social image

Socialization of boys and girls are related to the nature of social interactions they most frequently have. It is of importance for learners to be accepted by their peers and portray a social image. Learners may revert to certain behaviour or actions to attain or maintain their "image":

"The image is like how you are and how people see you. In high school it is a very big thing if you have an image and you're in and people like you and people talk to you and you get recognised easily. As where you're not known in the school, you are nobody, but when you have a name then everyone knows you. And it is good to have an image cause then you get recognition. It is like status."

The quest for an image or the support of people that have an "image" may lead to forms of aggressive behaviour. Learners may do certain things to try and maintain an image. This image may boost their self value and it may be enforced by hurting or dominating others:

"I think the whole image thing. Because if you can say you beat up this guy, then you are stronger than them, which will mean that you are better than them. I think that's why people become aggressive."

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"I think maybe to say that they also saw what happened and that the cool guy and the not so cool guy, and they obviously want the one with the bigger image to win. And then they can say they were part of it, they were there, they saw what happened."

3.2.4 Peer pressure

Being part of a group may entail many challenges for the individual. An individual may have the tendency to follow behavioural patterns or activities sported within a group. When an influential member of the group bears negative behaviour, the rest of the group may pursue the same pattern of negative deeds or aggressive behaviour:

"Sometimes a person in a group can start making fun of someone and then the rest of the guys in the group also has to do it otherwise the rest would shift the focus of negative attention to them. They can gang up against people. Peer pressure caused me to smoke. All my friends smoked, so I didn't want to be out. If you do not do what the rest of the people in the group do, they can make it very difficult for you. I know about stuff like drugs and people putting pressure on the other people in the group. It was the same with loosing your virginity. If you hadn't lost your virginity, you had to lie about it because the guys would mock and belittle you."

"I am more aggressive because of the friends I have and the games I play."

3.2.5 Learnt behaviour

The way in which an individual reacts may be influenced by previous experiences and exposure to events. A learner may exhibit behaviour that was learnt in their domestic and social relationships. Negative and positive behaviour can be replicated at school, depending on the type of prior exposure the learner would have had:

"You can see it from some of the guys that live in the locations. They have to fend for themselves from a lot of bad things and they know how to fight."

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"Some people see aggression as the only way to deal with their problems."

"If you were brought up in a loving family that always motivates and cares for you, you will always have that as background of good influences. You won't say bad things about people or do bad things to them. Where if your father used to drink and hit you, say bad things about you, put you down and make you feel like you are nothing. Then you are going to treat other people like that because it's the only way you have ever known how to do it."

Bullying can be learnt from peers and older learners at school:

"I know my friends were also bullied when we were in grade 8, so they started doing the same thing when they were in grade 10."

3.3 Societal factors contributing to aggression

3.3.1 The domestic environment

A learner's domestic environment has an effect on his/her mood, behaviour and functioning. It may contribute to the way in which he or she will interact with people:

"If you were brought up in a loving family that always motivates and care for you, you will always have that as background of good influences. You won't say bad things about people or do bad things to them. Where if your father used to drink and hit you, say bad things about you, put you down and make you feel like you are nothing. Then you are going to treat other people like that because it's the only way you have ever known how to do it."

"You get used to worse things where you live and then at school you can project those worse feelings on other people. Because you feel these people know nothing, you know everything. So you can become more bullyful than normal bullies that only take your food and things."

3.3.2 Availability of parental support and supervision

The lack of sufficient parental support and availability may lead to learners not receiving an appropriate pillar and guidance:

"She is alone at home most of the time. She had too much leeway and then she would start acting out at school. Her friend's father almost smokes dagga Everyday and stuff like that. She started loosing it and in grade 9 she was on drugs and even had an abortion."

"At that stage my parents were having a lot of work problems. Their work was becoming bigger, then they were working hard and I didn't want to be an extra stress."

3.3.3 Lack of discipline and boundaries

Children may not receive sufficient and effective forms of discipline. The lack of discipline and good behavioural modelling may allow learners to act as they please, leading to the portrayal of problematic behaviour and disregard for boundaries:

"Children also don't get disciplined any more, they are allowed to do as they please and then they will push the boundaries of what they are allowed to do."

A lack of boundaries and control in the classrooms may lead to fighting amongst learners.

"They get so aggressive and especially with this new teacher that has got no control. The Afrikaans and black guys would end up fighting and the new teacher won't have any control over it."

3.3.4 Interaction with different cultures

Many cultures are represented in school and there are gender, age, language and ethnical differences among learners. Prejudice towards language and ethnical differences (racism) were reported by learners. Interracial aggression was more frequent among the lower grades and between groups with different primary languages. Incidents of physical and verbal aggression were noted. Learners associated strong feelings such as hatred with this

topic, but also indicated that it was not the case for all learners. Some try to bridge the cultural gap and to be more accepting:

> *"I remember these two grade 9 boys. one was coloured and the other one white. They were at first just swearing [at] each other in the passage between the labs and then the white guy pushed the coloured boy. The coloured boy then pushed him back, but much harder and that guy fell down that four or five stairs that is there. When he tried to get up, the coloured boy kicked him straight in the face and his face was just full of blood."*

> *"There's a lot of hatred between the two racial groups. But at the same time. some of us are not into racial fights. We really try hard to be friendly towards everybody and then you come across people who push you around and throw things at you."*

Aggression seems to be less among learners with something in common (such as language or socioeconomic status) and more among learners who do not share anything regarding culture:

> *"99% of the blacks in my class don't come from the townships and that I think makes a big difference. The other class has a lot of blacks from the townships. Like this one boy that is with me in the centre and he is gross. He lets gas off while he is sitting there and he just keeps on doing it the whole time. He irritates you because he can't speak normally to you. Other blacks in my class rip him off as well, they mock him. There are different classes of blacks, but I guess it is the same for the whites. You fight more with those blacks because you cannot have a conversation with them. They think on a different level than you, but in my class it is not the case. We all work hard and have the same things in common. I think it is not about race, it is about different mindsets."*

> *"In my class there is nothing like that, but in my Centre it is another story. That's bad. Then the Afrikaans people call the black people names straight to their faces. like the K-word and terrible Afrikaans words."*

It was also mentioned that the cause of this type of aggression may be learnt at home:

> *"Mainly it's Afrikaans against the black's. I don't know what the reason is because apartheid is long gone, but maybe it is because their parents are like that."*

Aggression in the form of discrimination seems to diminish as learners mature in age and grow more tolerant. Learners may develop better interpersonal skills and move away from strong social influences that may cause them to discriminate:

> *"At first there was a lot when I was younger, but it has changed since grade 11. Some of it is still there. you can feel it, but people say nothing much about it. You just let it slide these days. I think as you start growing up you start looking at people differently. You realise that there is actually nothing wrong with that guy, and you can start to get along without stepping on each others toes."*

3.3.5 Dealing with competition

Competition seems to be an integrated part of living. As competition increases. so does the individual's tendency to compete. This may cause some to react more aggressively:

> *"You have to be competitive to get somewhere in life, you need that competitive spirit to get anywhere."*

3.3.5.1 Social competitiveness

Learners may compete socially among each other because they rate their social image as very important:

> *"Because if you can say you beat this guy, then you are stronger than them, which will mean that you are better than them."*

> *"I beat her in the contest and she turned on me when we came back to school."*

3.3.5.2 Rising interest and competing for the opposite gender

Learners become aware of the opposite genders and start romantic relationships. Because there may be competition for the desired partner, aggressive behaviour may develop between competitors even if they are friends:

> *"I was in this situation where this girl was so jealous of me and scared that I was going to steal her boyfriend away. She screamed at me and embarrassed herself."*

> *"The guys are fighting over stupid things like for example over a girl that was only messing around with their feelings."*

3.3.5.3 Competitiveness in sport

Sport at schools have become very competitive, and it was found that aggressive incidents occur more in contact sport or when confrontations occur in other sport types.

> *"In sports there's definitely a lot of aggression. Like if you go to a competition you obviously want your team to win. If all the teams think that way, there is obviously going to be fights."*

> *"During a rugby game I become so angry and inconsiderate, that it feels as if the aggression takes control of my body and all I can see before me turns black. A feeling of hate exists towards opponents who try [to] oppose me.*

> *"Even girls on the netball field. I once saw a girl take a ball and throw a girl in the face because the girl pulled a fowl and the referee didn't call it."*

Learners may work themselves up and become more aggressive even before they start playing a game:

> *"... pump themselves up before they did sport. And they were much more aggressive there."*

Learners who are pushed too hard to be competitive may become more aggressive:

"Competition in sport is so serious especially with the principal pushing coaches, which then push students, almost to hold the name up of the school. Then students end up having their parents and other students pushing them, and then when the slightest thing happens you can crack."

"When you don't perform like you would want to perform, you react badly to that."

Some learners may use sport as a method to release pent-up anger and frustration:

"When I'm very angry I try to do something physical to use up all my energy, like playing soccer."

3.3.6   Aggressive playing

Games learners play at school may sometimes be aggressive in nature. They may play silly games where the aim of the game is to dominate or bully each other in a playful manner. It seems as if it is more acceptable when they play these games containing "masked" aggression.

"... there is also sometimes, or it looks to me like some guys are playing during break, but not like normal playing, they would play aggressive games. It's like rugby, but more like they try to hurt each other, or sometimes they would hit each other on the shoulder repeatedly as a game. They also play stupid games where they would hit each other in the privates."

3.3.5   The effect of the media (television and music)

The content of media may influence learners. Aggressive contents may elevate aggression at school:

"Also the movies I watch are more aggressive (lots of action). My music is more aggressive, and all of this has made me more aggressive, arrogant and more confident. I would never back-chat a teacher, but since I was exposed to music like rock, I've gotten more aggressive and can back-chat a teacher."

3.3.7.1 Violence as entertainment on television

Violence on television may be seen as entertainment to some learners. Aggressive entertainment may stimulate learners into replicating the behaviour they observe. They may seek the same type of entertainment at school or recreate such events:

> "*They like watching wrestling and to them aggression can become a form of entertainment.*"

> "*I've seen people recording things on their phones of people hitting other people. And people think it is funny. They buy these videos off the TV with one guy hitting another guy. Some people try to recreate these things, like Jack-ass. My one friend has him doing some of these things.*"

3.3.7.2 The effect of music on aggression

Learners report that music has a strong effect on a person's affect and emotional arousal. Different types of music can swing a person's mood from cheerfulness to morbidity or anger:

> "*I like listen to hip-hop, and it is happy music. It does definitely lift my mood, so yes I believe that music can affect your mood. There are lots of guys that like listen to hard, heavy music. I get aggravated when I hear it, so it must have an effect on them. It is usually those guys that listen to heavy metal stuff that are rebellious and more aggressive.*"

> "*... since I was exposed to music like rock. I've gotten more aggressive and can back-chat a teacher.*"

In high school many learners start listening to metal and rock music. Aggressive music may cause learners to become more aggressive, elevate emotional arousal and even cause them to become emotionally numbed towards others. The following examples are what some of the learners had to say about music:

> "*My male friends listen to heavy stuff like System of the down and everything is just screaming. If you listen to the words I think you will go crazy. They were*

listening to that music so much that they started to become hard. I don't know how it affects you, but something clicks in the back of your mind. They are very sombre people, and as soon as their music taste started to drift to other styles as well, they started to change. They started laughing more. You become happier to what you listen to."

"*Music can change your mood and it can cause you to become aggressive. Music like hard rock, heavy music does change your mood. Like when you are sad or depressed and listen to music like that you start thinking about all the things people have done to you and you get mad at them again. It makes you aggressive definitely.*"

3.3.8 Aggression that serves as entertainment at schools

Learners may even run to watch other people fighting because it excites them or they see it as entertainment:

"*I think sometimes you are inquisitive, but most of the time it is people who twist in the thought of it being entertainment half.*"

"*I think violence is good in schools, because there is something to see after school.*"

"*I don't exactly know what they say but you always hear of the fight and then everyone just runs to the fight and you see them hitting and kicking each other.*"

CONSEQUENCES OF EXPRESSED/PERCEIVED AGGRESSION

Being exposed to aggressive behaviour had different effects and reactions on the participants. These reactions included emotional and behavioural responses.

4.1   Emotional responses

The people who witnessed aggression or were the recipients of it, reported more negative feelings such as being scared, fearful, angry, threatened, controlled, losing their self-content and despondent or depressed feelings such as:

"Sometimes I see the older boys fighting and I get scared."

"There was this one girl in our class. I'm still scared of that girl, because I've seen her hit a girl, I've seen her hit a boy. she was just bigger than most boys. She was very powerful and I think that's the big thing. Like L, she would ram someone in the wall and even the boys would be scared."

Threatening encounters may lead to individuals developing a fear for their safety. Some learners may experience fear to the extent where they would rather stay away from school than face the situation that perpetuates the fear:

"I was too afraid to tell anybody because they said they would kill me."

"The smaller children can't fight back because they are afraid of the older boys."

Some learners felt that they were intimidated and controlled by peers, and that they were being emotionally bullied. Consequently, they felt as if they were being controlled and they experienced a loss of their self-worth:

"They try to control your life by forcing you to do things or by living life their way. You immediately feel that something has been taken away from you, like your identity or self-content."

"They will intimidate you. It's like when you are not with them then you can feel confident and you can feel yourself. And you are not scared of anyone, but as soon as they are in the same room as you, then you become shy and you don't want to be seen because you know they might say something about you or something like that. They might be talking about you. If they look at you then you will be thinking that they are talking about you."

Certain learners may develop depressive symptoms when they are exposed to continuous acts of aggression towards them:

"I had insomnia for three months. It was a bad experience and it started just after my friend hit me for the first time I think. I felt normal but I didn't sleep. And all of a sudden my body started wearing down, but I didn't tell my mom because I pretended to go to sleep every night."

"Many learners feel like failures sometimes because of all the negative remarks they receive."

"I am depressed and unprivileged."

4.2   Behavioural responses

Learners may have behavioural responses to aggressive events. Some may retaliate towards the aggressor with aggression, while other learners may become depressed, even to the point where they will attempt suicide. It was also mentioned that a learner may withdraw from making social contact if they are constantly at the receiving end of peer aggression.

Aggression may evoke feelings of anger in the recipient, who may become belligerent and retaliate with aggression:

"If you are more aggressive towards someone they will become more aggressive back to you."

"Someone hit me on my nose and it started bleeding. I became so angry and tried to hit him back, but I was too angry to actually do something. He had beaten me up for no reason."

"When I experience aggression I become aggressive and am very quick on swear words."

Some incidents may overwhelm learners, so that they are actually pacified by the aggressive event:

> "...she pushed the table away and I just sat there, I froze and didn't do anything. I dropped my phone and my mom heard everything. I just sat there and couldn't do anything."

Learners may withdraw from other learners, become isolated and oppose attempts of other learners trying to befriend them. This may be the result of continues hostile responses from groups of people (including the majority of a learner's classmates). These learners may interpret any person approaching them as a possible aggressor, perceive malice in their actions, and become more aggressive towards others:

> "... that she was so hard towards me at that stage when I tried to help her. If I asked her if she was okay, she would say like, ah leave me alone. At that point I didn't know that she was building a wall and thought it was fine that she doesn't want my help and I just went on with my own mission. But it was a fact that she needed someone that kept on trying to help her out; instead she was just thinking that I was trying to mock her like all the other guys did."

Some learners develop depressive symptoms and direct their anger towards themselves. The may attempt suicide and succeed in taking their own lives:

> "It is terrible, she committed suicide but it wasn't like someone else was hurting her."

> "These negative thoughts can sometimes lead to suicidal tendencies."

> "I am depressed and unprivileged. I've tried running across the road to get ... but the car pressed brakes."

The suicide of a learner had a significant negative impact on her classmates. They struggled to concentrate in class and experienced a decline in the quality of their schoolwork. Some learners may have difficulty to find closure and may struggle to move on:

"And now with her suicide our whole class was knocked, everyone's marks dipped, no one could concentrate. It was just terrible and I know the principal tried to get that lady in and it did help a lot, but it was almost like he sent her to do this and then forget about it. It was like everyone said yes but now we have to move on. But there was really no end to it."

However, the suicide of a pupil also had a positive effect on her classmates in the way it brought them closer, made them more caring and made them look out for each other:

"I've never seen our class closer. If anything in our class happens we support each other."

Helper and "saviour"

Some learners may try to help people those who are at the receiving end of the aggression of others. These learners may attempt to serve as a saviour for those who cannot fend for themselves:

"I would be the one saying stop it, leave her. Even though I did not like her I told them just leave her."

"I tried to help her, but she wouldn't let me."

Desensitization towards aggression

Some learners indicated that viewing violence on television daily has made them feel that violence is part of normal everyday living. When learners constantly see violence, it becomes more acceptable after a while:

"On TV it is more acceptable to see violence. I know when I was younger and I saw someone hit someone on TV I would like go: Huh! Now if I see it, it doesn't even register. It's sad to say but it's almost normal to see."

"It is as if children get taught that aggression is nothing bad, because they get used to seeing it on TV everyday."

Exposure to persistent aggression may cause learners to overlook the seriousness of such events and internalise it as a normal part of daily functioning. This may happen where the learner lives, or in the classroom:

> *"The whole class at that stage got caught up in this thing and eventually you just stop telling people to stop it and it becomes so normal. Everyday they will mock her; they will throw things in her hair and call her names."*

> *"She used to try and slit her wrists but never ever deep, she just cut it. So everyone just ignored it because everyone just thought it was for attention."*

> *"You get used to worse things where you live and then at school you can project those worse feelings on other people."*

DEALING WITH AGGRESSION

Learners expressed a need for aggression to be managed at school. Some learners were concerned that if certain aggressive patterns or events at school were not controlled, someone could get seriously hurt. Such an event would have a bad impact on the school:

> *"Something has to be done about this or something really bad is going to happen. Someone is going to get hurt really bad and then there will be trouble."*

> *"It could be a downfall of a school, because if something is not done about it. If you can control the grade 8's and can get your buddies on your side, you can actually take over a school."*

Learners' opinions on how aggression can be reduced and controlled at school were based on changes that have to occur among learners themselves. Learners have to become more involved at their schools and be tolerant towards other people at school:

> *"People should become more involved at school and especially the fun side of school, sports, and so. Only now in matric do I now understand why I must tuck in*

my shirt, why must I put on a tie and polish my shoes. When you behave in class you get to do more work. People should respect one another and they must learn to be tolerant, accepting and forgiving."

Some learners feel that appropriate behaviour should be learnt from superiors at school. They deem it necessary that learners are taught appropriate skills and ways to interact with others. Teachers must also have a better knowledge of the phases that children go through, so they would understand and identify behavioural problems in learners:

"I think people must be taught how to treat each other, by being shown how to treat each other by the teachers and their superiors. They must be taught how to become mature. It is going to take time; they must be exampled on how to be civilized and how to be children at the same time. Like if a child makes a joke in class and it's not that funny, you can smile because you understand, you're the teacher and it is funny for the child and it makes sense to him. Except the child for being a child, but make them mature at the same time. Treating individuals, as individuals in their own way. I think that will help."

Certain learners feel the need for a counsellor or trustworthy teachers in whom they can confide at school and who can help them with their problems. It is important that learners who get involved in fights are assisted with solving their problem and that they are taught how to deal with conflict. The need for school guidance in this respect was emphasised:

"In our school you don't have anything to help you out. If you are having a bad time you just go talk to Mrs ... she is not a counsellor but you know she is the only person that won't go cause some problems and would actually do something. She helps with everyone. It is very difficult to say, but there should be more people like Mrs ... but that everyone can speak to, like a counsellor of some sort."

If something happens and two people get hit, they should be forced to see a counsellor at a school, because there is definitely something wrong. Writing something out is not going to stop people from hitting others, it might make them

angrier. If you are more aggressive towards someone they will become more aggressive back to you. It is important in the way it is managed."

"... like the time one of my friends told met that he doesn't want to live anymore I went and told Mrs ... that. And she so subtly without making me ever know I was involved; he didn't even know she knew. She had a conversation with him and found out he was starting to feel better."

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Aggression manifested in acts of active and passive forms and was physical and verbal in nature. Physical aggression included pushing, hitting, fighting, and the occasional use of weapons. Some fights were severe. Verbal aggression had a high incidence and included swearing, name-calling, belittling and racial remarks. Physical and emotional bullying had a high prevalence and can be correlated with the findings of De Wet (2005), which showed that bullying is problematic at schools. Passive aggression was mostly present in the form of oppositional behaviour towards authorities at school, which was in line with research findings of De Wet and Jacobs (2006), who reported that educators are often verbally abused and ignored by learners and that classrooms are damaged. Vandalism seemed to be a problem at school as well.

Aggression was present among all genders, ages and cultures in school. It seemed to have a higher prevalence among boys, but was also significantly present among girls. According to Bjorkwist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen (1992), males are more likely than females to aggress against a person when not provoked, but the difference shrinks in situations where provocation is present. This may serve as explanation for the high frequency of physical aggression noted among girls.

In the adolescent developmental stage there are many contributing factors towards aggression, such as opposition, aggressive conduct and energy: The child is growing into a mature person and must establish his own self-concept and identity. Social interactions

become significant and according Erikson (1963) the most important psychosocial tasks of adolescents are the formation of a personal identity, developing healthy relationships and resolving the conflict between identity and role confusion. It became evident in the research that the learners were trying to establish their own identities and that their values oscillate between those of their parents and those of their peers: they would rebel against norms and deliberately do the opposite because they were maturing and establishing their own self-concepts and identities. Literature confirms the developmental pattern of aggression, which peaks during puberty and adolescence (Craig, Pepler & Atlas, 2000; Louw, Van Ede & Louw. 1998). To appreciate the task that confronts the adolescent in developing an identity, consider the challenge of having to adjust simultaneously to a new body, a new mind, and a new social world.

As learners' bodies matured and became more muscular, so did their level of confidence. This may lead to an increase in their self-esteem and challenging behaviour, resulting in more physical and dominating interactions. Sdorow and Rickabaugh (2002) have also found that early-maturing boys are more confident, more sociable, and more popular with their peers.

Aggression was prominent in the reciprocal relationships between adolescents and their social environment. Being part of a group and forming a social identity becomes very important. Confiding in groups may expose learners to peer pressure, which may lead to activities and behaviour that are aggressive in nature. Adolescents' individual characteristics, such as their temperaments, moral development *"internal conflicts and not knowing what is right or wrong"* and social skills influenced their interactions and interpersonal relationships. Repeated aggressive encounters may be due to the lack of basic social skills. According to Sadock and Sadock (2002), learners that do not know how to communicate effectively may adopt an abrasive style of self-expression. Their ineptness in performing such basic tasks as making requests, engaging in negotiations, and lodging complaints often irritates friends and their social deficits seem to ensure that they experience repeated frustration and frequently anger those with whom they have direct contact.

At the researched school, the learners were representative of many different cultures. Daily interactions with people from various cultures may be problematic due to discriminative behaviour. Some learners may be well aware of their own prejudice; others might act in a prejudiced manner without even being aware that they are implicitly prejudiced. Racial discrimination manifested overtly and unconsciously in the form of aversive racism: consciously expressing that all people are equal, but unintentionally discriminating against some groups (Doviodo, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson & Howard, 1997). Learning plays an important role in prejudice. Parents, peers and the media all provide input, informing people of the supposed characteristics of a certain group. People also exhibit favouritism to their own kind and get along better with others who share equal status (Spangenberg & Nel, 1983). This may possibly explain why aggression seemed less between white English-speaking and black English-learners, while it was more common between white Afrikaans and white/black English-speaking learners. Increased social contact between members of different social groups could reduce prejudice if these persons have an equal status (Sdorow & Rickabaugh, 2002).

The social learning view of Bandura (1986) emphasises the role of learning and stressing the fact that human beings learn how to respond towards others through both direct and vicarious experiences. The expression of aggression can be the product of learnt behaviour, accumulated from peers, parents, and the media. Bullying was noted to be a product of social learning. Over time children learn how to perceive and construe events in their social environment and start to assemble a detailed set of rules of behaviour. These rules of behaviour are then reinforced or inhibited, based on the results they encounter in their own social interactions.

Manifestations of aggression among learners start to decrease as they develop more mature interpersonal skills and individualize, forming their own independent identities. According to Piaget's (1952) theory adolescents in the formal operational stage should possess better problem solving skills. This may be linked to adolescents developing more mature ways in dealing with conflict and understanding the consequences of their behaviour.

All learners bring with them a different history of aggression; different expectations about precursors of anger and the appropriateness and effectiveness of certain aggressive acts. A learner's domestic and living environment may contribute to aggression at school. It may be a symptom of a decline in the values, parents that set few rules, lack of boundaries and discipline (*"Children also don't get disciplined any more, they are allowed to do as they please."*), and insufficient supervision. Learners that do not receive enough parental guidance may act out at school: *"She is alone at home most of the time. She had too much leeway and then she would start acting out at school."* Forehand, Miller, Dutra and Chance (1997) have also found that many children are not being sufficiently chaperoned. Soaring divorce rates may have an influence on school aggression (Weekend Post, 2006) and life events may have a greater effect on adolescent's mood and behaviour (Brooks-Gun & Warren, 1989). Drive theories suggest that aggression stems from externally generated conditions and are triggered by the words or deeds of people with whom the aggressor interacts (Feshbach, 1984), as illustrated by one learner: *"I have noticed that aggression doesn't just occur, you have to do or say something to someone first."* Frustration can facilitate aggression due to the negative feelings it generates (Berkowitz, 1989). This may also be the case for reactive aggressive behaviour between learners.

Exposure to aggression (directly and indirectly) provoked several responses. These responses may be emotional or behavioural in nature. Emotions such as fear and anger, and feeling overwhelmed, depressed and helpless may be elicited in response to aggression. Some learners may retaliate towards an aggressive incident through physical or verbal behaviour; others may withdraw and avoid social interactions. Learners may direct their aggression towards others (people and objects) or themselves. In the case of the latter, it may lead to depression, self-harm or even suicide. Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton and Scheidt (2001) found that victims of peer aggression demonstrate poorer social adjustment, greater difficulty in making new friends and fewer relationships with peers. Ladd, Kochenderfer and Coleman (1997) indicate that learners who are victimised by peers at school reported a relatively small circle of friends, the absence of general peer acceptance and difficulty in making new friends. Victims of peer

abuse often suffer from reduced academic performance and loneliness and they feel unsafe in the school environment (Brockenbrough, Cornell & Loper, 2002). They may perceive malice in the actions of others, even if it does not exist, and become more aggressive to others (Dodge, Price, Bachorowski & Newman, 1990). Exposure to violence may disrupt children's cognitive functioning and mental health (Osofsky, 1995). According to Garbarino (2001) and Weist and Cooley-Quille (2001), the accumulation of exposure to violence across several settings, including community, school and home, coupled with low parental monitoring and the likelihood of being a victim of aggression, create a context in which children exhibit serious aggressive behaviours.

The long behavioural tradition of systematic desensitization suggests that repeated exposure to a stimulus may desensitise people and decrease anxiety towards it. Donnerstein, Slaby and Eron (1994) conclude that there are at least four effects of observing a great deal of violence: the *aggressor effect*, where people become meaner and more aggressive; the *victim effect*, where people become more scared and self-protective; the *appetite effect*, where people want to see more violent entertainment; and the *bystander effect*, where people become desensitised and less sympathetic towards victims of violence. Watching or taking part in violence may increase an individual's tendency to engage in it and some learners may see aggression as a form of entertainment. Media violence and aggressive music may stimulate or raise emotional responses of learners and can increase aggression (Gentile, 2003). Curcio and First (1993) argue that children are growing up in a culture where violence is being "normalised". Continued exposure to media violence may cause desensitization towards aggression, be physically and emotional numbing with less arousal, causing people to be less ready to intervene when a fight breaks out (Thomas & Drabman, 1975). This was also observed in this research, where respondents reported that learners ran to see fights and did not stop them.

CONCLUSION

No single factor propels an adolescent to act aggressively. Instead, the causes of such behaviour are complex and multifaceted. Most participants in this research experienced aggression at school as unhealthy. Aggression may have emotional and behavioural consequences such as disruption, discomfort and disturbance of normal functioning. Although aggression seemed relatively under control at this particular school, the awareness of the increase in aggression, the severity of some of the incidents, and the possibility of desensitization towards aggression may predict problematic consequences for the future. The need for school guidance programmes and life skill training was prominent, accompanied with the need for school counsellors to assist in the management of aggression.

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