



# Learners' experiences of teachers' aggression in a secondary school in Gauteng, South Africa

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**Background:** Research shows that one third of all persons in South Africa have been exposed to one or more types of aggression. It has been observed that learners frequently experience aggression from teachers in the secondary school environment, which has a negative effect on their experience of general wellbeing and mental health.

**Objectives:** The objectives set for this research were to explore and describe learners' experiences regarding teachers' aggression toward them and to formulate guidelines for learners and teachers to facilitate their mental health.

**Method:** The population consisted of school learners at a secondary school. Inclusion criteria for sampling were that participants should be grade 11 and 12 learners, between 16 and 18 years of age and should have experienced aggression from teachers in the school. A purposive sample was taken of learners who complied with the inclusion criteria. Data were collected by means of four in-depth phenomenological interviews, 88 naïve sketches, observation and field notes. One central question was posed to the secondary school learners: 'What are your experiences of teacher aggression toward you in your schooling environment?' Open coding was used for data analysis. Measures to ensure trustworthiness were applied to ensure the rigour of the research. Ethical principles were adhered to throughout the research process.

**Results:** The secondary school learners were belittled, as well as emotionally and verbally abused. They also experienced fear and anger. Guidelines were derived from these findings for learners and teachers.

**Conclusion:** This research found that learners experience aggression in their school environment and need support to facilitate their mental health.

**Agtergrond:** Navorsing toon dat een derde van alle mense in Suid-Afrika al aan een of ander vorm van geweld blootgestel is. Daar is waargeneem dat leerders dikwels aggressie by onderwysers in die sekondêre skool beleef, wat 'n negatiewe uitwerking op hul algemene welsyn en geestelike gesondheid het.

**Doelstellings:** Die doelstellings vir hierdie navorsing was om leerders se belewing van onderwysers se aggressie te verken en om riglyne te formuleer vir leerders en onderwysers om hulle geestesgesondheid te fasiliteer.

**Metode:** Die populasie het uit leerders by 'n sekondêre skool bestaan. Die kriteria vir insluiting by die steekproef was dat deelnemers in graad 11 of 12 moet wees, tussen 16 en 18 jaar oud, en moes aggressie by onderwysers aan die skool beleef het. 'n Doelgerigte steekproef van leerders wie aan die insluitingskriteria voldoen, is geneem. Data is ingesamel deur middel van vier diepgaande fenomenologiese onderhoude, 88 naïewe sketse, waarneming en veldnotas. Een sentrale vraag is aan die sekondêre skool leerders gestel: 'Wat is jou belewing van onderwysers se aggressie teenoor jou in jou skoolomgewing?'. Oop kodering is gebruik om die ingesamelde data te analiseer. Maatreëls om vertrouenswaardigheid te verseker is toegepas om die wetenskaplikheid van die navorsing te verseker. Etiese beginsels is dwarsdeur die navorsingsproses toegepas.

**Resultate:** Die sekondêre skool leerders beleef dat hulle verneder word, asook emosioneel en verbaal mishandel word. Hulle beleef ook vrees en woede. Riglyne vir leerders en onderwysers is uit hierdie bevindinge afgelei.

**Gevolgtrekkings:** Hierdie navorsing het bevind dat leerders aggressie in hul skoolomgewing beleef en ondersteuning benodig om hul geestesgesondheid te fasiliteer.

## Introduction

The destructive power of human aggression is one of the greatest social and political concerns of current times. The news media regularly confront audiences with reports and in-depth articles on aspects such as violence of war, deaths through faction fighting and gang conflict, genocide,



violent crime and family violence. Anger and aggression in schools are also a source of great concern to educationists and teachers, as well as psychologists and sociologists all over the world (Naicker 2009). Stress experienced by teachers sometimes results in anger and frustration and is released through frequent acts of harassment and criticism, physical violence (such as hitting, scolding, slapping, insulting and shaking) and lack of communication with learners (Myburgh & Poggenpoel 2009). These so-called 'hidden effects' of anger, violence and aggression can be seen and are experienced in many classrooms in schools across the world. Such forms of violence and aggression drive a learner further away from social cooperation (Epanchin & Paul 1987; Poggenpoel & Myburgh 2009). Challenges of violence and aggression, affecting the youth of South Africa, are of concern.

Against this background, it is clear that teachers' aggression toward learners in the school and classroom can have a detrimental influence on the mental health of those involved. Aggression is defined as 'an unprovoked act; the first attack in a quarrel; an assault' (South African Oxford Dictionary 1986). Felson and Tedeschi (1993:58) state that aggression is 'an act that injures or irritates another person'. Wundt (Louw 1997) further states that experience is defined through introspection. Introspection means 'looking inside'. In this article, teachers' aggression is viewed as any form of action that learners experience as harmful. Aggression takes many forms, such as emotional abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse and psychological abuse. Even teachers' subversive, underhanded behaviour, meant to annoy or pester learners, is viewed as aggression.

## Problem statement

Several studies conducted in different provinces in South Africa indicate that there is teacher aggression toward secondary school learners (Mosia 2003; Myburgh & Poggenpoel 2009; Poggenpoel & Myburgh 2006; Prins 2009). Mosia (2003) found in her research in a Highveld Ridge secondary school that learners experienced anger when confronted with aggression from teachers. Prins' (2009) research findings support this. Furthermore, learners feel offended by verbal aggression from educators, such as shouting, swearing, name-calling and coercion into sexual relationships with male teachers (Mosia 2003; Poggenpoel & Myburgh 2006). Learners also fear victimisation from teachers. Learners experience sadness, discouragement, worthlessness, suicidal ideation and loss of opportunities because of the aggression shown by their teachers. Learners also experience disrespect from teachers through one-way communication from teachers, beatings and teachers arriving drunk and late at school (Myburgh & Poggenpoel 2009; Prins 2009). The first author wondered about teacher aggression in a secondary school near her workplace. The following research questions guided the research:

- What are the learners' experiences regarding teachers' aggression toward them?

- What can be done to facilitate the mental health of learners and teachers concerning teacher aggression?

## Research objectives

The objectives were to:

- explore and describe learners' experiences of aggression from teachers toward learners in a secondary school in Gauteng
- formulate guidelines for learners and teachers concerning teacher aggression in order to facilitate the mental health of the involved persons.

## Research design and method

### Research design

A social constructivism philosophy of science was adhered to in this research. In this philosophy, individuals are viewed as seeking to understand the world they live and work in (Creswell 2007). A qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual research design was thus used to conduct this research as the researchers wanted to seek an understanding of learners' experiences of teacher aggression (Creswell 2007; Mouton 2001).

### Research method

A phenomenological, hermeneutic, interpretative and open inductive method (Creswell 2014) was followed during this research. Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of participants (Creswell 2014). It is not only a description of learners' lived experiences of teacher aggression but also an interpretation of the meaning of learners' lived experiences.

A description of the population and sample, data collection and data analysis are addressed in the sections that follow.

### Population and sample

There is a secondary school near to the first author's workplace, which was chosen because of colleagues, working there as teachers, who are concerned about possible teacher aggression in their school. The principal also invited the author to conduct this research in that school, the population of which were secondary school learners. Inclusion criteria were that participants should be grade 11 and 12 learners between the ages of 16 and 18 years who experienced teacher aggression in their classroom in a secondary school in Gauteng. A purposive sample (Silverman 2004) of learners adhering to the criteria was taken. The participants were purposively-selected (De Vos *et al.* 2011) learners based on compliance with the criteria. These criteria are that the learners themselves should have been subjected to or had experienced other learners being subjected to teacher aggression; that they should be willing and able to conduct an interview or write a naïve sketch; and that they were in grade 11 or 12 between the ages of 16 and 18 years, in a specific classroom in a secondary school in Johannesburg, Gauteng Province. Erikson (Sadock & Sadock



2007) views adolescents from 13 to 21 years as being in the development phase of identity and role confusion. Adolescents between 16 and 18 years were chosen because they were past their puberty but still young enough not to be challenged by the adult development phase. They had enough experience of being in a classroom in a secondary school and would be able to converse about their experiences of teacher aggression. These participants were chosen purposively because they had the lived experiences of teacher aggression.

## Data collection

The first author of this article conducted the fieldwork in 2008. The researchers used different methods to collect data from participants, such as interviews, naïve sketches, observations and field notes (De Vos *et al.* 2011; Giorgi 1985). Data collection consisted of audio-taped in-depth phenomenological interviews (Creswell 2007) and naïve sketches (Giorgi 1985) with participants. Naïve sketches are written responses to the question posed to participants. One open central question was asked of the participants during the interview or the writing of their naïve sketches, namely, 'What are your experiences of teacher aggression toward you in your schooling environment?'

This question was piloted (De Vos *et al.* 2011) in the school during an in-depth interview with one learner who met the inclusion criteria in the secondary school where the research was conducted. It was ascertained that this question was understood by the learner, who was concerned about being identified by teachers as being part of the research. The researcher then gave the participants the choice of participating in the research through interviews or by writing down their experience in an essay at home and placing the naïve sketch, a written response to the question posed to the participants, in a sealed box outside the secretary's office. Interviews were conducted in a private office away from the teachers' office and tearoom and took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. Data saturation (Creswell 2008) was reached when repetitive patterns of themes and categories were observed in the data from learners from the interviews and naïve sketches on their experiences of aggression from teachers in the school. Field notes were written after each interview by the researcher.

## Data analysis

Tesch's (Creswell 2008) eight steps of the open descriptive method of data analysis were applied to analyse the data on the learners' experiences of teacher aggression in a Gauteng secondary school. The transcripts and naïve sketches were read one-by-one by the researcher. She chose the most interesting one and underlined units of meaning pertaining to learners' lived experience of teacher aggression. She then continued with the rest of the data identifying units of meaning. She grouped units of meaning together to form categories and finally grouped categories together to form themes. A clean set of data was e-mailed to an expert in qualitative research who analysed the data independently. The researcher and independent coder then met for a

consensus discussion on the results of the data analyses. These themes and categories are illustrated with direct quotes from the interviews and naïve sketches with the participants (Mouton 2001). The written field notes were also used in the interpretation of the data (Kvale 1996). Literature was used to support the research findings.

Guidelines were derived from the finding of the field study and described with the support of the literature. The guidelines were developed from the perspectives of the learners' experiences of teachers' aggressive actions towards learners.

## Ethical considerations

According to Babbie (2004), the participants in the research are human beings and should be accorded respect and gratitude for their partnership in the research. The aim of this aspect of the research process was to treat participants with dignity and to allow them to proceed in life with self-respect. The four principles of an ethical approach that were adhered to throughout the implementation of the research project are respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice (Dhai & McQuoid-Mason 2011). The anonymity and protection of the participants were treated as a priority. The participants were not identified by name during interviews and on the naïve sketches. They participated voluntarily in the research and were interviewed in English. Ethical clearance, number 032 18/08/05, was obtained from the University Faculty Ethics Committee, the Department of Education and the specific school. Parents gave consent for their children to participate and the learners gave assent before they participated in the interviews or wrote the naïve sketches. The learners that participated also gave their assent for the audio taping of the interviews. The audio tapes, naïve sketches and field notes were kept in a locked cupboard in the researcher's office. Only the researcher, independent coder and supervisors had access to the data. The data will be destroyed two years after publication of the research.

## Trustworthiness

Guba's model of trustworthiness (De Vos *et al.* 2011) was applied to ensure the trustworthiness of this research. The four criteria for trustworthiness are truth-value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. The first criterion of trustworthiness is truth-value, ensured by credibility (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Truth value was established through ensuring that the learners gave a true reflection (Babbie & Mouton 2001; Krefling 1991) of their experiences of teacher aggression. The researcher kept reflexive notes to bracket her own perceptions. She discussed her research process with her supervisors. She took her findings back to four of the participants who were interviewed to check if the findings were a true reflection of their experiences. Applicability in trustworthiness is ensured by transferability; it refers to the degree to which the findings can be applied to other contexts and settings, or with other similar groups. The presentation



of a dense description of the demographics and results with direct quotations from the participants could be used by other researchers in order to enable this transferability. In the qualitative perspective, applicability refers to how well the threats to external validity were managed. Consistency is ensured by dependability; a dense description of the research methodology is given, step-by-step replication of the same question to each participant and a code-recode procedure was followed with the data analysis. Neutrality is ensured by confirmability – a chain of evidence of the research process is provided, such as raw data, data reduction and analysis documents, process notes and reflexive notes.

## Results

The findings consisted of the demographics of the sample and the analysis data from the participating learners.

### Demographic information

The learners who participated in the in-depth interviews consisted of four adolescent boys who were between the ages of 16 and 18 years in grades 11 and 12. Learners who wrote naïve sketches consisted of a grade 11 class comprising 45 learners (21 males and 24 females) and a grade 12 class comprising 43 learners (22 males and 21 females). The naïve sketches provided rich descriptions of the participants' lived experience of teacher aggression and triangulated well with the data obtained from the in-depth interviews. In total, 92 learners participated in this research.

### Central storyline and supporting themes

The central storyline in the data is that 'learners in a secondary school in Gauteng experience an overwhelmingly high level of aggression from teachers in the school'. Participants expressed experiences of being belittled, of being emotionally and verbally abused, of fear and insecurity and anger, as a result of teachers' disrespect. These findings are described and supported by direct quotations from participants from the transcripts of the interviews and naïve sketches.

#### First theme

**The learners experienced being belittled and emotionally and verbally abused as a result of teachers' aggression toward them:** Learners experienced being belittled as they were subjected to ridicule and sarcasm, degradation and humiliation. Teachers end up scolding and threatening learners, resulting in the learners having a negative perception of themselves and school. This results in learners experiencing distress. When teacher aggression occurs at school, learners struggle to prosper and achieve in their school environment. Eventually, these experiences have detrimental effects on their mental health. The following quotations from the learners' interviews and naïve sketches illustrate the learners' experiences of belittlement and emotional and verbal abuse, resulting in distress:

'They belittle you at times.' (Participant 4, Male, 16 years)

'He made me and the rest of the class feels stupid, he just concluded that we are not studying; I feel so demoralised

because I do study and make an effort to pass.' (Participant 26, Female, 16 years)

'Mostly emotional abuse. The teachers just say we are stupid without finding out the real cause of the problem.' (Participant 51, Male, 18 years)

'I don't feel like going to class, I know she's gonna pick on me for something or the other, my grades are slipping, I want to learn but I hate going there.' (Participant 2, Male, 16 years)

'He is the kind of teacher that makes you lose interest in school.' (Participant 57, Male, 17 years)

'She almost selects whom she's aggressive towards and who she doesn't like ... She'd turn to the other side of the classroom, the treatment makes you feel less important, and then you start hating the subject.' (Participant 40, Female, 16 years)

'... [W]ho hates our guts, just because we are ... and he is ... He does whatever there is in his power to make our lives at school a living hell.' (Participant 22, Male, 16 years)

'A school is supposed to be a place where you get educated, not where you get insulted and pushed around by teachers.' (Participant 75, Female, 18 years)

'Teachers swear at students, I think it has to stop and it also hurts the students' feelings ... a teacher who cannot finish a sentence without two to three "f" words.' (Participant 80, Female, 17 years)

Psychological maltreatment is referred to as emotional abuse, emotional maltreatment, mental cruelty, maternal emotional deprivation, maternal deprivation syndrome and mental injury. In accordance with this, Loring (1994) states that emotional abuse, such as belittlement, is an ongoing process in which one individual systematically diminishes and destroys the inner self of another person. Worst of all is the long-term effects of teacher aggression toward learners. Learners in this research experienced that emotional abuse took place as a result of teacher aggression in the classroom and school environment. Learners' experiences of teacher aggression in the classroom reveal violations of the integrity of the learners. Emotional abuse means that the teacher engaged in patterns of behaviour, such as belittlement, which are consistently destructive toward adolescents' emotional and psychological well-being (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana 1997). Learners stated that teachers were insensitive and unaware of the challenges to which the learners might be subjected. Experiencing teacher aggression contributed to the hurt and psychological pain experienced by adolescent learners (Malakalaka, Myburgh & Poggenpoel 2013). The experience of teacher aggression contributes to the failure to meet the learners' psychological and developmental needs, thus creating a non-facilitative and unhealthy school environment.

#### Second theme

**Learners' experience of fear and insecurity as a result of teachers' aggression toward them:** Learners experienced fear as a result of teacher aggression. Learners are afraid to approach teachers, for fear of failure and defeat. They expressed that they experienced being tense, afraid, fearful



and insecure as a result of teacher aggression toward them in the school and classroom. To speak to a teacher who was aggressive toward them is not an option for these learners. The following are quotes extracted from the interviews with and naïve sketches of the learners:

'I just cannot speak to my teacher. I begin to feel all tense and scared inside ... I mean you're supposed to speak to your teacher [a]bout anything ...' (Participant 35, Female, 16 years)

'I don't feel like going to class. I know she's gonna pick on me for something or the other, my grades are slipping, I want to learn but I just hate going there.' (Participant 43, Female, 16 years)

'Even though my answer might be right, I'm too insecure to raise my hand ... I feel like a fool, just unable to communicate or even look my teacher in the eye ...' (Participant 60, Male, 17 years)

'I could not understand why we were so scared to stand in front of this teacher. This one time I was shaking, being scared of a person is not a sign of respect.' (Participant 88, Female, 18 years)

'I wanted to defend myself but that would have been seen as rude. I felt really heart sore ... I couldn't cry simply because I'm in grade 11 and 16 years old and everybody would laugh at me.' (Participant 32, Female, 16 years)

Teachers' vengeful actions often hurt learners' feelings (Malakalaka *et al.* 2013). Johnson (2006) stresses the importance of a trusting relationship between individuals. When learners experience teacher aggression in the school environment, the teacher-learner relationship may be harmed. If aggression is present in such relationships, the relationships are distorted and trust may even be absent. This can easily result in detrimental and distorted effects on learners' development towards adulthood, as interaction between learners and teachers will be limited because of a lack of nuanced communication in the school. Under such circumstances, teachers talk *down at* rather than *to* the learners (Paul & Smith 2000). According to Donald *et al.* (1997), teachers have the responsibility to create a safe environment for the learner and to play a supportive role in the learning domain. If a facilitative relationship between teachers and learners is absent, it will have a detrimental impact on the mental health of the learners.

### Third theme

**Learners' experiences of anger as a result of disrespect from teachers:** Learners expressed anger at teachers' aggression toward them in the school and classroom. Learners are infuriated at the way they are mistreated and violated. When a teacher displays aggression toward learners, learners in turn become angry with the teacher. Learners expressed their concerns regarding teachers constantly becoming angry and frustrated in the classroom. This experience is evident in the following quotes:

'It makes us feel ignored and angry, because her attention is directed towards other people. So it's almost as [if] we [are] worthless.' (Participant 12, Male, 16 years)

'I hate teachers, they don't care about me. Why should I care about them?' (Participant 72, Female, 17 years)

'... He kept telling me that he would make sure that I failed and that he would nail me ... and that to me as an individual is unacceptable.' (Participant 54, Male, 18 years)

'We were kicked out of the classroom and she asked us to take our desks outside ... She took the dictionary and threw it on the desk, frightening me. I was so mad...' (Participant 10, Male, 16 years)

'Teachers should respect their students ... they must stop judging us with our subject and not discourage us.' (Participant 83, Female, 17 years)

In this research, anger is perceived as an emotion and aggression as a response intended to inflict pain or discomfort on another, as a result of frustration (Averill 1982). Learners experience anger toward teachers because of their aggressive acts toward the learners (Malakalaka *et al.* 2013). Loring (1994) believes that adolescents cope better in a warm, stimulating environment. Purkey and Schmidt (1996) identified a strong relationship between self-concept and scholastic achievement. If the relationship between teachers and learners causes the learners to be angry at a teacher, one can expect that the scholastic achievements of the learners might be influenced negatively by the negative effects of teachers' behaviour on the learners' self-concepts. As a result of teacher aggression in the classroom, learners often lack the element of flexibility, originality and enthusiasm. Madubye (1997) states that teachers sometimes use anger to release pent-up emotions, particularly when they experience that they are powerless to effect change and when a situation seems hopeless. They are at the end of their emotional endurance. There is a sense of release, as they feel better for releasing pent-up emotions inside. However, such an approach and behaviour toward learners are not facilitative toward teaching and learning, or to the mental health of learners. Aggressive communication with another person often leaves that person dissatisfied, stirring up their own aggressive behaviours and the effects of such behaviour toward yet another person.

### Implications and guidelines

From the findings of this research, it is clear that the relationship between teachers and learners is distorted and non-facilitative toward learning and teaching and, eventually, toward the mental health of the involved learners and teachers. The identified central story and supporting themes reflect a spiralling picture of communication breakdown between teachers and learners. The order of the themes explicitly presents a picture that reflects an intensifying disrespect for the mental health of the partners involved in communication with each other in the school. The themes, as presented, indicate that the learners experienced being belittled, as well as emotionally and verbally abused, as a result of the aggression they experienced from teachers. This can subsequently give rise to learners experiencing fear and insecurity as a result of teachers' aggression towards them. Seemingly, this perceived disrespect from teachers eventually results in the experience of anger.

When interpreting the learners' experience of teacher aggression, it becomes clear that learners face challenges to their mental health. Kreigh and Perko (1983) view mental health as consisting of healthy relationships with the self,

**TABLE 1:** Guidelines to facilitate the mental health of learners and teachers.

Guidelines	Aim	Identified mental health challenges of learners as result of their experiences of aggression by teachers
Intrapersonal and Interpersonal	Facilitating healthy intrapersonal relationships of learners and teachers and interpersonal relationships between teachers and learners	Experiences of; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fear</li> <li>• insecurity</li> <li>• anger</li> <li>• and belittlement</li> </ul>

others and the environment. Thus, learners experiencing teacher aggression also experience mental health challenges, both intra- and interpersonally. Not only should attention be given to facilitating learners' mental health, but also to facilitating the teachers' mental health because of their aggressive behaviour in interaction with learners. Guidelines are formulated in order to assist learners and teachers to manage teacher aggression. See Table 1.

These guidelines can be implemented in experiential learning workshops by mental health professionals. The following guidelines are based on Table 1.

**Guideline 1:** Facilitation of healthy intrapersonal relationships of learners and teachers can be achieved by self-knowledge and self-disclosure in both learners and teachers (Johnson 2006). Their self-awareness needs to be facilitated by challenging them to answer questions regarding who they are, where they come from and where they are going (Poggenpoel & Myburgh 2006; 2009). Self-knowledge and self-disclosure can further be achieved by facilitating mindfulness on the part of both learners and teachers. Mindfulness will help the learners and teachers get in touch with the present moment as well as the extent that they feel controlled by unpleasant experiences (Tull 2009). Learners and teachers should be facilitated to master the skills of mindfulness: awareness, being non-judgemental in their observations, being in the present moment and being open to new experiences (Tull 2009).

**Guideline 2:** Facilitation of healthy interpersonal relationships of learners and teachers can be achieved by both learners and teachers mastering interpersonal skills (Poggenpoel & Myburgh 2006; 2009). These interpersonal skills include constructive communication, expressing feelings both verbally and non-verbally, as well as listening and responding and addressing interpersonal conflict (Johnson 2006). Learners and teachers should be facilitated to behave assertively by describing their perceptions and feelings directly to each other in an honest and appropriate manner that respects both the self and others.

Learners and educators need to implement tips on survival in stressful situations. These tips include having clear goals and commitments in life, sharing their distress with trusted others, having a glass-half-full mentality, exercising physically and maintaining friends and love relationships (Poggenpoel & Myburgh 2006).

## Limitations of the study

Because learners expressed discomfort with being interviewed, they preferred writing anonymous naïve

sketches. Only four in-depth interviews were conducted with learners whilst 88 learners wrote naïve sketches. The limitation is that the researcher could not clarify any unclear written experiences of teacher aggression by learners. The triangulation of interviews, naïve sketches and field notes assisted in triangulation (Creswell 2005) and provided rich data in which repeating themes were identified that led to data saturation (Creswell 2008).

## Recommendations

It is recommended that learners' experiences of teachers' aggression should be acknowledged as a reality and as such explicitly addressed. Mindfulness of teachers and learners should be facilitated to foster mutual respect towards each other.

## Conclusion

This research aimed at exploring learners' experiences of teacher aggression toward them in the school environment. The learners expressed their relief and gratitude that this issue in the school environment was being addressed. Learners also expressed concern over the crisis in the educational system brought about by the employment of teachers acting aggressively and peers who model this behaviour as being acceptable. Learners viewed expectations concerning the need for effective guidelines to be put in place to deal with aggression in the school, as they were in their final years of formal schooling and wished to experience the formation and maintenance of constructive relationships. To these learners, it is important that they should be assisted in developing a positive self-esteem before venturing into the big wide world where they will be confronted with new perspectives and challenges. With effective guidelines in place, cooperation between teachers and learners can result in a change from teachers acting aggressively to teachers acting assertive and proactive, and understanding learners. This should foster the development of well-rounded individuals who have a positive outlook on themselves and the future. With ongoing facilitation and workshops that address aggression in the school environment, learners and teachers should learn to manage situations both effectively and constructively. It is clear from the learners' comments, the observations and the field notes, that guidelines should be acquired and put in place to eradicate a negative, hostile, unsafe environment, in favour of one that is conducive to teaching and learning. This research addressed the learners' experiences of teacher aggression towards learners in the school environment. It became evident during the research that the atmosphere in which teaching and learning is taking place, often dictates the outcome of personal adequacy or inadequacy, especially for the adolescent learner who is a becoming young adult.



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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

A.N. (University of Johannesburg) did the fieldwork for her MEd dissertation; and C.M. (University of Johannesburg) and M.P. (University of Johannesburg) were the supervisors who both conceptualised and refined the article.

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