

Challenges Teachers Face When Handling Children With Aggressive Tendencies: A Study In Mwingi Central Sub County, Kitui County, Kenya

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2.1 Abstract

Children with aggressive behaviours belong to the behaviourally disordered category of children with special needs. These children display negative behaviour tendencies that hurt others either verbally or physically. They manifest such characteristics as quarrelsomeness, vengefulness and destructiveness. It also includes spreading rumours, telling lies, giving dirty looks, insulting others and humiliating others. According to Botha (2014), such behaviour tendencies impedes negatively on learners' social and academic development of these children. They are also font of interrupting learning activities and lack focus on tasks in class leading to failure to follow instructions from the teacher. Handling these children can be challenging unless teachers are empowered. This article examines challenges teachers face when dealing with children with aggressive tendencies. The objectives of the study were: to find out the challenges teachers face when dealing with aggressive children; to find out the appropriate strategies for helping these children. The research design used in the study was a descriptive survey. Ten schools were sample in Mwingi central sub county, Kitui County, using stratified sampling. A sample size of 20 children with aggressive behaviour tendencies were purposively sampled. Class teachers from pri-primary one to class three (4 teachers in each school) were included in the study, a total of forty teachers. Data was collected through analysis of children's academic records by summarising them on tables. Questionnaires were used to gather data from teachers. Responses from teachers were analysed through themes with excerpts. Children with aggressive tendencies were found to show poor school attendance but rarely drop out of school. Poor school attendance is a predictor of poor academic performance and negative teacher-pupil attitude. It further established lack of sufficient training for teachers handling aggressive children. This leads to lack of necessary skills of handling these children. Most teachers expressed frustration and lack of adequate support from parents, community, education officers and school administration. It is important that all teachers for young children attends seminars and workshops on ways of handling aggressive children. There is also need to develop guidance and counselling programme in early childhood education. Parents and community should give adequate support teachers when dealing with children who show aggressive tendencies.

Key words: Aggressive behaviours, school attendance, task completion and class participation, school dropout rate.

2.2 Introduction

Aggressive behaviour is a behaviour directed toward causing harm to others either physically. Moeller (2001) in Gasa (2005) described the early warning of signs of potential future aggressive behaviour. These warnings include: social withdrawal; low school interest and poor academic performance; expression of violence in writings and drawings; uncontrolled anger; patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying; intolerance of differences and prejudicial attitudes; drug and alcohol abuse; affiliation with gangs; serious physical fighting with peer or family members; severe destruction of property; detailed threats of lethal violence; unauthorized possession of and/or use of firearms and other weapons and self-injurious behaviour or threats of suicide. Sajeda (2012) points out other signs especially in young children which include, grabbing objects, biting and kicking others, answering back to adults, challenging instructions, swearing, offensive comments and name calling. These children manifest such characteristics as overt or covert hostility, disobedience, physical and verbal aggressiveness, quarrelsomeness, vengefulness and destructiveness. It also includes spreading rumours, telling lie, giving dirty looks, gossiping, being insulting, and humiliation (Botha, 2014).

Research on aggressive adolescents in South Africa (Gasa, 2005) and in Ghana (Owusu-Banahene & Amedahe2000), shows that aggressive adolescents lack core abilities that make for satisfying social relationships. These include; developing and maintaining sound friendship, sharing laughter and jokes with peers, knowing how to join an activity; skilfully ending a conversation and interacting with a variety of peers and others in class and in the playground. They thus miss out on peer and group learning which are key methods of instruction. These studies were done in South Africa and Nigeria focusing adolescents and their relationship. The current study will be among 5-8 year olds focusing on how teachers are handling children with aggressive tendencies.

Studies in Kenya also point out the educational effects of aggressive behaviour. For example Wawira (2008) says that children with aggressive behaviours interrupt learning activities and lack focus on activities in class. In a study to find out the effectiveness of child care centres in provision of support service, Ndeti (2004) found out that partnership between the community, parents, school, NGOs and the government helps children with behaviour problems develop resiliency. A psychosocial programme was successfully used to heal traumatised children in Kibera slums after the 2007/2008 post-election violence as noted by Njuguna (2012). Similar programmes like guidance and counselling, parent and community education and social skills training programmes could possibly help children with aggressive behaviour and those at risk of developing aggressive behaviours. The current study sought to find out if the teachers have psychosocial skills and counselling abilities for young children.

Strands have been made toward education for all including primary education launched in 2003. KSSP project by the government saw an increase in access in education (MOEST 2004). However there are quality issues and many children are not progressing well according to Uwezo report (2013) which indicated that some children in standard seven are not able to perform a standard one task. This could be due to poor quality of the education system right from preschool years especially if the special needs of various children like those with aggressive behaviours is not catered for. This indicates that there are challenges in early learning that have not been addressed. This may include behaviour problems like aggression which must be solved.

Substantial efforts have been made by different researchers to establish the influence of aggressive tendencies on children learning and development. The University of Quebec (2011) showed that children with aggressive behaviours have fewer play mates. Aggressive adolescents have been found to be poor in social skills and tend to perform poorly in education. As revealed in the background, extreme aggressive behaviours in children are an indicator of future behaviour problems that is in adolescence and adulthood (Banahene and Amadehe, 2005). The studies reviewed had focused more on adolescence, but there is little knowledge on how these behaviours affect young children. Thus the reason for the current study.

Furthermore children with aggressive behaviours are found to be less helpful less nurturing and responsive to others. However there is need to establish whether this can affect the children learning. Therefore there was a need to find out the strategies to tame the problem of aggression in children. While Hudley(2013) points out that aggressive behaviours affect development and learning. However little have been discussed on the challenges teachers face in handling children with aggressive behaviours. This is the second gap the study filled. The study investigated the challenges faced by teachers in handling children with aggressive behaviours in Mwingi Central sub-county, Kitui County. The study also sought to find out the appropriate strategies of handling children with aggressive behaviours

This study sought to find out a) the challenges encountered by teachers when dealing with children having aggressive behaviour, b) appropriate strategies teachers can use to assist children with aggressive behaviours. It is hoped that the findings of this study may form a foundation for understanding children with emotional and behaviour problems especially aggression in Kenya. The findings may prompt child specialists to reflect deeply about the programs for aggressive children in Mwingi Central sub-county and

beyond. Furthermore, it may also help other researchers to investigate and document more about children with emotional and behaviour problems especially the aggressive children. Teachers and other child specialists may find these findings useful. They may be informed of the importance of designing and implementing quality and comprehensive intervention programs for children with emotional and behaviour problems like aggression. Schools may plan for these children appropriately from an informed perspective. The findings of this study may also help parents improve their parenting styles. The improved parenting styles will enable children acquire good social skills and help them avoid aggressive behaviours in future.

2.3 Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey design. The study was carried out in Mwingi Central District, Kitui County Kenya. The District faces a challenge of lack of enough rainfall since it is among the arid and semi-arid areas in Kenya (M.D.A.O, 2013). This has resulted in inadequate food, poverty, and high rate of rural- urban migration in search of employment.

The study sampled primary schools using stratified sampling procedure so as to give chances to both public and private schools to participate in the study. The study sampled primary schools using stratified sampling so as to give chances to both public and private schools to be part of the study. Thus the schools were divided into private and public before randomly selecting schools from each stratum. The names of schools in each stratum were written on the papers, folded and mixed and five picked from each stratum. Through the class teacher, the researcher purposively selected aggressive children. However, the children were never separated from others. On the same note the researcher minimised direct interaction with the identified children. The researcher identified two most aggressive children using a checklist constructed from Teacher Observation of Classroom Adaptation- Revised (TOCA-R) as provided by Killiam (1991).

In most cases the identified children were two in each class. Where they were more than two, the teachers selected two most aggressive using a checklist of aggressive behaviours. The class teachers of the classes selected (nursery to class three) were included purposively in the study. In order to find out the challenges teachers face when handling children with aggressive tendencies, a questionnaire was designed for teachers. Data was collected through analysis of children's academic records which were summarised on the tables as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Questionnaires were used to gather data from teachers. Both observations and Responses from teachers were analysed through themes with excerpts

2.4 Results

2.4.1 Challenges in handling children with aggressive behaviour tendencies

The teachers expressed concern about children with aggressive behaviours. One of the teachers in school W commented as follows: *'The children are very stubborn in class... when the child is given work, it takes a lot of time to complete...'*. Another teacher concurred in the following comment *'whenever the child is given tasks the child usually delays to complete it...'* Teachers felt that children with aggressive behaviours are very poor in participating in class activities. One teacher in school X said that *'The aggressive child is usually off the activities in class...when we are singing for example, he rarely sings with others....sometimes the child is seen beating and pinching others'*. Other teachers expressed their frustrations as seen from one of the teacher's comments *"The child's behaviour is very irritating...when you give instructions and the child does the opposite, it is very frustrating..."*

This comments imply that the behaviour of the children in class affect relationships in class. This may impact negatively on children's learning. Teachers may end up hating the child and thus rarely work closely with that child. That is why many teachers rate children's academic performance as average.

One teacher in school W said:- *'Whenever I give them test the child scores averagely (50%)...even the child seems to have a higher potential, they usually score below their potential'* Another teacher in school

S had this to say:- *This child is not serious in the performance....he has a lot of play... if he is serious, he can do well*’ Another one stated the following *‘I can say that the child’s performance is average...he is usually scoring in 50s whenever I give them a test...’*

Children with aggressive behaviours have issues with school attendance. The children tend to miss school regularly. One teacher commented as follows:- *“The child is irregular in coming to school...misses up to three days per week...sometimes he misses for the whole week...when asked why he missed school, he does not have a serious reason...and sometimes he does not respond.”* Another teacher in school Y commended as follows:- *“This child comes to school only twice per week.....”* Another one in school W said:- *“He comes to school only during examination time...they only do the exam and end up not doing well...”*

These comments agree with earlier comment of a parent that aggressive children often refuse to attend school. Absenteeism has a negative effect on the children’s academic progress. They miss out on many things taught and when a test is given they will then fail. Teachers also revealed that aggressive children are preoccupied with negative feelings which negatively influence their academic progress. The views and opinions of the teachers are summarised in table 1. The table shows that most teachers (65%) rated the performance of aggressive children as average. The teachers were also of opinion that these children had low class participation (45% of the teachers) and their task completion in class was also low (52.5% of the teachers). However, their opinion on the children’s school dropout rates was that it was mostly very low (40%). Three quarters of the teachers, had not observed the children fail to attend school in the past term.

Table 1: Teachers’ Opinions on Effects of Aggressive Behaviours among Children

Variable	Frequency (%)
Academic Performance of aggressive children	
Very good	2 (7.5)
Good	12 (30.0)
Average	22 (65.0)
Poor	5 (12.5)
Very poor	1 (2.5)
Class activity participation	
Very high	5 (12.5)
High	11 (27.5)
Low	18 (45.0)
Very low	2 (15.0)
Task completion in class	
Very high	4 (10.0)
High	6 (15.0)
Low	21 (52.5)
Very low	9 (22.5)
School drop out	
Very high	6 (15.0)
High	4 (10.0)
Low	14 (35.0)
Very low	16 (40.0)

These results agree with the findings in the literature. For instance, according to Hudley (2013) and McEvoy and Welker (2012), aggressive children are usually off tasks and fail to accomplish them in time within the class.

Teachers reported the frustrations they encounter when handling children with aggressive behaviour. One

of the teachers gave the following comments when asked about the challenges they face: *'I find it hard when dealing with these children.... Sometimes am unable to handle them especially when parents do not respond to invitation. When I call the parent to come to school and he fails... it is very demoralising.'* Another teacher from school W emphasised that: *'Some parents misunderstand our plea over their children... lack of parental support make my effort to help the child difficult.'* Lack of support from the school administration is also reported. Some of the quotes below demonstrate this fact.

One teacher said: *"Sometimes I report to the head teacher about the children's behaviour but he just keeps quiet...he just assumes me...this is demoralising....."* While another said: *"I once talked to the head teacher about the child...but he told me that I should just understand the child..."* Another teacher in school Y further commented the following in relation to the support from DICECE officers: *"The DICECE officers do not help in relations to children with aggressive behaviours...any time they come around, they just harass us and go away...."* While another teacher insisted as follows: *"DICECE officers are not of help...they rarely visit us hear...and even you go to the office they are usually not there..."*

Teachers reported that fellow teachers gave them the highest support at 87.5%. The lowest sources of support were the community (40%) and DICECE officers (30%). It is evident from these finding that teachers did not receive adequate support from the community and the DICECE office. This makes the efforts of the teachers futile and they may be overwhelmed and end up losing hope and motivation to help these children. Lack of adequate support from the community makes it worse. This is because according to Gasa (2005), the community contributes a lot to children's aggressive behaviour. Community support includes having good role models, and avoiding violent and risky neighbourhoods.

From the findings, it can be seen that about one-fifth (20%) of the teachers had attended training on aggressive children. This implies that majority of the teachers did not have adequate skills and knowledge about aggressive children. This situation handicaps teachers' competency to deal with aggressive children. Without proper understanding of such children, it is hard to deal with them. Thus most of the aggressive behaviours may be misinterpreted by the teachers leading to a poor relationship with the children.

2.4.2 Strategies for handling children with aggressive tendencies

According to table 2 below most of the teachers (72.5%) had a strategy to help these children. The strategies mentioned were as follows: giving the children a seat in front and giving them responsibilities; correcting children when they had done a mistake; being close to the children and monitoring their behaviour; giving them enough work to keep them busy; loving and caring for the children; being friendly to the child; praying for the child; provision of play and learning materials and discussing with the parents on how to help the children.

Teachers highlighted the following strategies: *Teacher 3: 'I try to ensure that there are no behavioural issues, like fighting, in classes; Teacher 2: '.... I keep repeating something to them'....I encourage pupils are to be well disciplined in order to excel in life and have the right character. This is in terms of talking, playing and handling school property.'* *Teacher 8: "I like giving these children responsibilities and being close to them..."*

In addition to these strategies, teachers gave suggestions on how to help aggressive children. The comments are highlighted below. *Teacher 20: 'It is good for me to train further on how to deal with these children'; Teacher 30: It is good to be patient with these children and counsel them"* Another teacher said this: *"Avoid discriminating such children give them opportunity to express themselves and it is important to consult specialist"*

The other suggestions were as follows: developing a counselling programme for aggressive children; providing basic needs like food to children; using good discipline techniques; caregivers should be close to the children; understanding children's background and their needs; being role models to these children; use of rewards to enhance positive behaviours in these children; giving children an opportunity to express themselves; avoid situations that can increase aggression and these children should not be discriminated.

Other suggestions are: teachers should be equipped with knowledge and skills on how to handle these children; teachers and child specialists should do more research in this area of aggression in children; aggressive children should be involved in a lot of group activities.

These strategies are in line with those suggested by other researchers. For example, a research by the University of Quebec (2011) found out that a good relationship between the teacher and the children reduces aggression levels in children. Quality care for children comprises of an environment that has healthy child care, is safe, respectful, supportive and challenging. On the same note, children should be helped to improve on their social skills. These skills can be developed through pairing aggressive and non-aggressive children; involving them in cooperative instead of competitive learning exercises; and identifying and acknowledging the strengths of the children.

Table 2: Teachers' Experience in Handling Aggressive Children

Variable	Frequency (%)
Any aggressive children in class	
Yes	39 (97.5)
No	1 (2.5)
Strategy to help aggressive children	
Yes	29 (72.5)
No	11 (27.5)
Sources of support when handling aggressive children	
Fellow teachers	35 (87.5)
Other children in class	28 (70.0)
School administration	33 (82.5)
Parents	30 (75.0)
Community	16 (40.0)
DICECE officers	12 (30.0)
Teacher attended training about aggressive children	
Yes	8 (20.0)
No	32 (80.0)

2.5 Conclusions

Aggressive behaviours in children do not directly cause low academic performance; the average score performances indicate that these children still have potential to perform well in school. Although there was an insignificant correlation between aggressive behaviours and academic performance, aggressive children face challenges in their education. Their class participation and task completion level is low. This causes them not to reach their maximum potential.

The teachers face several challenges as they try to interact with these children for example: Teachers handling aggressive children are not well prepared to handle these children. Very few teachers have attended training on children with aggressive behaviours. Furthermore, the syllabi for training preschool and primary school teachers are not comprehensive enough to meet the needs of aggressive children. On the same note, these teachers do not receive enough support from the community and the DICECE officers. This makes their work more difficult and most of them are overwhelmed.

Teachers and caregivers possess a lot of information on how to handle aggressive children but need to be guided on how to use the information they possess to help these children. This is evident in the way they proposed many strategies to help aggressive children. Some of these strategies include: guidance and counselling children, love and care, providing adequate basic needs like food, shelter and clothing; teacher parent's collaborations and cooperation.

2.6 Recommendations

Teachers should go for further training on how to handle children with aggressive behaviours. This will help them know how to identify and handle such children. They will not be in a state of confusion when encountering such children. This can be done through attending seminars, workshops and conferences that discuss about children with aggressive behaviours. Even if there is no formal organisation by the relevant authorities, teachers could take an initiative of organising for training either at an intra-school or interschool level. Teachers should further be sensitized to the nature, causes and effects of aggression in schools. The staff member responsible for discipline at school or psychologists can talk to the teachers about aggression in order to give them an understanding of phenomenon and how it manifests (Botha, 2014)

Teachers should treat children with aggressive behaviours with care and love even if they are sometimes annoying. Teachers need to exercise patience and always love these children unconditionally. This may reduce the aggression in these children since they will feel loved and accepted. It is important to cater for the needs of the children through individual instruction as opposed to group instruction. The teacher should assess the intelligent levels of children and work with them according to their level. For example children who tend to be gifted should be given adequate and more challenging tasks. This reduces boredom and disruptive behaviours in such children. Parents should be willing to work with teachers to improve the behaviours of their children. Parents should respond positively when called by teachers so to discuss the way forward for the children. They should be ready to accept they have aggressive children and agree to look for solutions. Parents should get involved fully in the children's schooling process so as to guide them where necessary.

They should be role models to their children, showing them how to go about things and situations as well as motivating them to continue with school and always attend school. Family guidance and counselling programs should be initiated and implemented in the country, it should be included in policies that touch on family and parenting.

Parents are supposed to use all means possible to provide adequate basic needs for their children. These include shelter, food and clothing. They should provide a safe and caring environment at home instead of violence, child abuse or drugs and substance abuse. They should also use alternative methods for punishment for instance instead of caning, they can use withdrawal of privileges. Parents are also encouraged to read articles, newspapers, magazines and journals about children so as to gain an insight on how to improve their parenting skills.

The government, both national and county governments should consider enough budgetary allocation to children's programmes. The Ministry of Education in conjunction with the Ministry of Finance should work together. Apart from budgetary consideration, it is important for the government to develop a comprehensive policy framework on children with emotional problems part of which will address children with aggressive behaviours in detail. This will include identification of these children and the programmes for them. One of the proposed programmes is guidance and counselling for young children. Teachers will be trained on how to counsel young children through techniques like play therapy.

The government through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) should review the syllabus for training preschool and primary school teachers. This should be done to include comprehensive information on children with emotional problems and especially aggressive children.

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