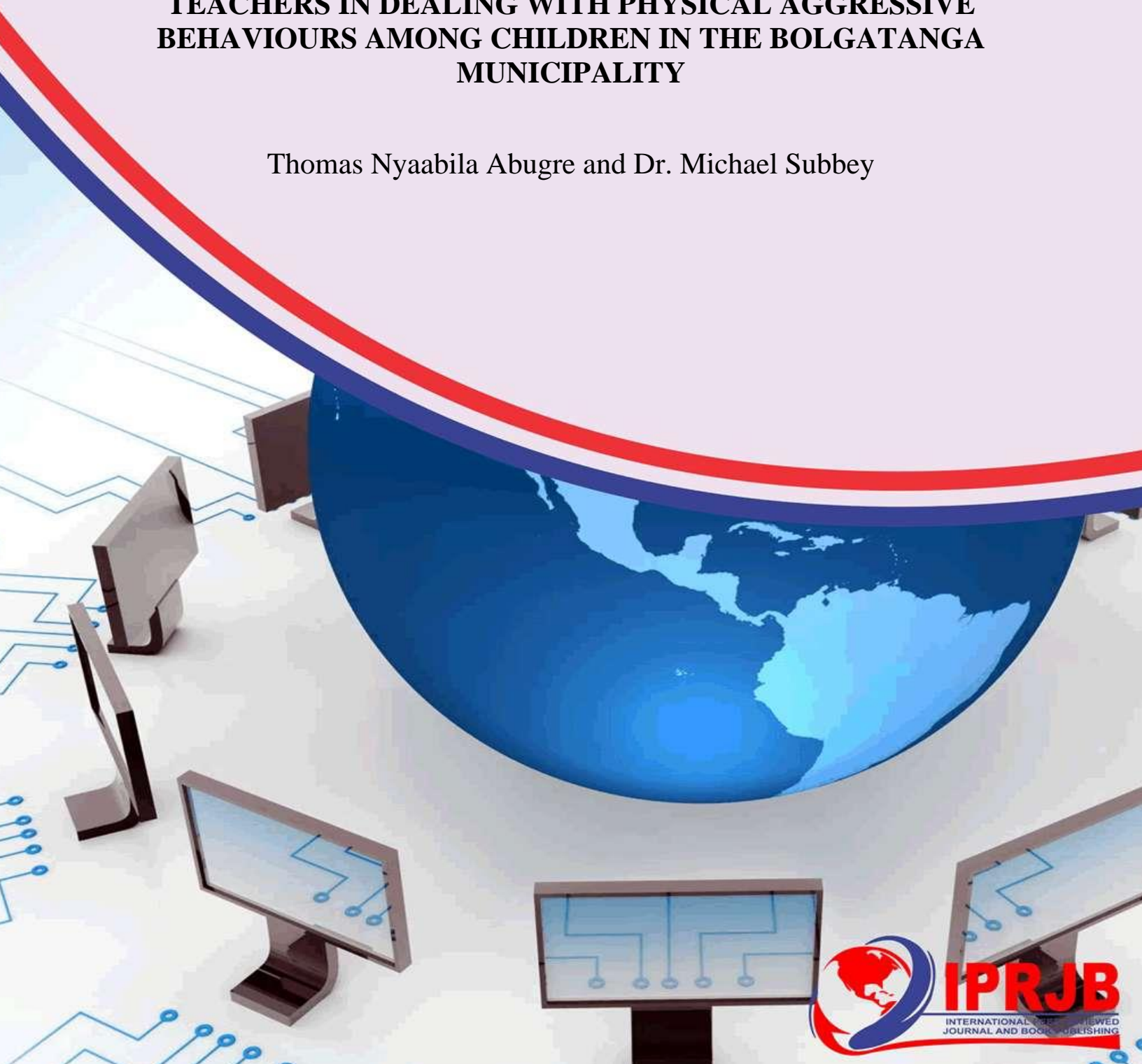


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## PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS IN DEALING WITH PHYSICAL AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS AMONG CHILDREN IN THE BOLGATANGA MUNICIPALITY

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**PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS IN DEALING WITH PHYSICAL AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS AMONG CHILDREN IN THE BOLGATANGA MUNICIPALITY**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate teacher perceptions and strategies in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours among children in early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga Municipality.

**Methodology:** A mixed-methods sequential exploratory design was chosen for this study. Data collection instruments included structured interview conducted for ten (10) headteachers from ten circuits and questionnaire for one hundred and twenty (120) for teachers, all purposively selected from sixty (60) early childhood centres.

**Findings:** The findings confirmed positive and supportive relationship between teacher and children and their families is essential for dealing with physically aggressive behaviours.

**Unique contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The researcher recommended that there is the need to work collaboratively with school authorities and families of children to minimize the occurrence and impact of physically aggressive behaviours in their centers. The study would expand teachers' understanding of the complexities of physical aggression and how critical it is to use proactive strategies to successfully manage it. It would help policy makers to formulate policy guidelines to addressing physical aggressive behaviours in early childhood centres. The researcher hopes that it will contribute significant insights as to ways in which teachers can be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with various outburst of physical aggression in ways that will yield positive outcomes. It will also contribute to the body of literature both locally and globally by offering awareness as to the strategies that can be used effectively in managing physical aggression among our preschoolers. The study was underpinned by the Social Learning Theory; the Constructivist model; the Behaviour Model, and, the Ecological Model.

**Key words:** *Perceptions, Strategies, Early Childhood Teachers, Physical Aggression, Behavior*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Background to the Study**

One form of conduct problems that have received serious attention worldwide, and in particular, to professionals in the field of education, is physical aggression among early childhood children (Rose & Gallup, 2005). Helmsen, Koglin and Petermann, (2012), agreed that aggression, whether physical or verbal, tend to have a serious impact on a child's overall development, particularly, socially and emotionally, interrupts the teaching and learning process and impedes the child's capacity to maximize their fullest capabilities.

Some definitions have been made about aggression (physical and verbal) and violence (Parrott & Giancola, 2006) with the distinction between the two terms largely based on the extent of physical harm that is inflicted. Mostly, if not all, teachers have encountered a child who hurts others and interrupts the normal classroom routine by various outburst of physical aggression such as hurting others, destroying learning materials, kicking over toys in the learning centres or simply cries whenever they cannot have their way.

Not only is childhood physical aggression a precursor to the physical and mental health problems that will be visited on victims, but also aggressive children themselves are at higher risk of alcohol and drug abuse, accidents, violent crimes, depression, suicide attempts, spouse abuse, and neglectful and abusive parenting. (Farrington, 1995; Stattin & Magnusson 1989). Furthermore, physical aggression commonly results in serious injuries to the perpetrators themselves, such as depression, accidents and attempt suicide. (Farrington, Richmond, Rivara & Shepherd 1995).

In ensuring that children develop holistically demands that any outburst of physical aggression should be carefully monitored and addressed or else it can result in greater problems in later years. Teachers of children in early childhood educational setting who display physical aggression must, therefore, have a heightened awareness of the impact of early recognition and intervention seeing that they are in an ideal position to intercept behaviour difficulties.

The frequent re-occurrences of physical aggression among children in early childhood educational settings have triggered great concern among teachers who handle these children. It is this concerns that have intensified the researcher's interest to conduct this study to engage teachers in reflecting on their perspectives and strategies of dealing with children who put up physical aggressive behaviours in early childhood educational centres.

### **1.2. Problem Statement**

The term physical aggressive behaviour has generated a number of definitions in a school context which allows educators to attach labels to children who demonstrate unacceptable behaviours (Emerson, 2001). Physical aggressive behaviours are any form of behaviours that interferes with children's learning or normal development; is harmful to the child, other children or adults around him; puts a child in a high-risk category for later social problems or academic failure (MacFarlane, 2007).

Physical aggression has long been a common and troubling problem for educators, with detrimental side effects both for pupils and teachers. In fact, physical aggression is cited as one of the greatest challenges faced by preschool teachers and childcare providers each year (Arnold, McWilliams & Arnold, (1998). Personal communication with a number of early childhood

teachers in the Bolgatanga Municipal of the Upper East Region prior to this research sparked an interest in researching into how teachers manage children with physical aggressive behaviours. Conversations with such teachers indicated that they felt frustrated by inadequacy of available resources and knowledge in this area and would like to be better equipped to support children with physical aggressive behaviours. The common aggressive behaviours prevalent among early childhood school include higher risk of alcohol and drug abuse, accidents, violent crimes, depression, suicide attempts, spouse abuse, and neglectful and abusive parenting. (Farrington, 1995; Stattin & Magnusson 1989).

Informal observations also indicate that most children in the Municipality attend school from as early as three years, hence the ideal setting for intervening with early aggressive behaviours is the early childhood centres. From the foregoing, it seem that most teachers at the early childhood centres are overwhelmed by the aggressive behaviours of children. There is therefore the need to interrogate the strategies that teachers use to manage such behaviours of children in their classrooms. This research therefore sought to hear from teachers' point of view, their perceptions and what they do to manage aggressive behaviours and what support is available to them in managing these behaviours.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions and strategies of early childhood education teachers in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours in the Bolgatanga Municipality of the Upper East Region, Ghana.

### **1.4. Objectives of the Study**

The study sought to find out about:

1. Perceptions of teachers in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours of children at early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga Municipality.
2. Strategies employed by teachers in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours at early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga Municipality.

### **1.5. Research Questions**

The study sought to obtain answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of teachers in dealing physical aggressive behaviours of children at early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga Municipality?
2. What strategies are employed by teachers in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours of children at early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga Municipality?

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

#### **2.1.1. Early Childhood Pedagogies**

The early childhood sector draws largely on constructivist theorists (Odom and Wolery, 2003). A constructivist approach views learning in the context of prior knowledge and sees the learner as playing an active, constructive role in the learning process. Piaget's (1969) stages of cognitive-

development and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural model have strongly influenced the early childhood sectors understanding of young children's normative behavioural development.

However, interventions for behavioural concerns often have their origins in a behaviourist approach, which sees behaviour as the product of external stimuli. This is a relatively unknown field for many early childhood educators and is likely to cause tensions as teachers attempt to reconcile manipulating a child's environment with a theoretical background which sees the child as responsible for constructing their own understandings as they learn (Blissett, et al., 2009; Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2012). Also contributing to research in the field of behaviour management is the influence of ecological theory, which considers development in the context of a complex system of social interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This section will examine some of the key theories which underpin thinking and decision making about children and their behaviour.

### **2.1.2. Social Learning Theory**

Social Learning Theory is a mainstream school of psychological thought which states that violent behaviour is brought about through social learning. Supported by an enormous body of research data, Social Learning advocates that children learn to be violent chiefly through imitation of violent role models. This means that parents who rely on corporal punishment or physical aggressive attitude to "control" their kids are unwittingly acting as models for physical aggressive behaviours (Bandura, 1973; Baron, 1977).

Secondary sources of modelled physical aggression include older siblings, media, peers and even school teachers. Spatz-Widom (1989) conducted an exhaustive analysis of research addressing whether physical aggressive behaviour is trans-generational. She found substantial support for the notion that physical aggression is begotten by violence. Consequently the type of physical aggressive behaviour exerted by children would likely correspond with that of their "violent role model". This relationship holds true even for verbal violence, as was discovered by Vissing, Straus, Gelles and Harrop, (1991). Their study revealed that children who had experienced higher levels of physical aggression at home (being hitting or kicking) exhibited higher rates of delinquency and interpersonal aggression.

Additionally, McCord's study of 230 boys in 1979, accurately predict criminal behaviour based on physical aggressive upbringing in 3 out of 4 of cases examined. Sheline et al (1994) found that elementary school boys' "behaviour problems" were consistently traceable to lack of parental affection and to parental use of spanking for discipline. In a study of 570 German families, Muller et al (1995) found a direct path between harsh punishment and physical aggressive behaviour in children.

Such children with physical aggressive behaviours try to vent their spleen on children who are weaker to them. This is corroborated by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) theory on Reproduction and Structural Violence whereby older and bigger members of society (in this case school) carry societal perceptions of human rights violation and role socialization in their interactions with other children. The school can be viewed as a microcosm of the macrocosm. In other words, the school is a miniature representation of the bigger society. Interactions of children, bigger/senior children and junior/smaller children do not operate in a vacuum but within a social setting. Thus, human rights in the school are greatly influenced by the structure of the community.

From Bandura's social learning theory, it can be understood that, children who are physical aggressors learn these behaviours through imitation or copying from the media, their parents, teachers and peers. Connecting Bandura's theory to that of Bourdieu and Passeron's Reproduction of Structural Violence, it can be deduced that, physical aggressive behaviours does not happen in a social vacuum but occurs wherever there is social interaction for that matter socialization. These bullies therefore perpetuate their learned violent behaviour on the weaker and smaller members of the society. The bigger members of the society carry the tendency to violate the human rights of smaller members of the society by taking them through various physical aggressive experiences such as hitting, punching, teasing and kicking in their social interaction.

### **2.1.3. Constructivist model/Pedagogies**

Jean Piaget's (1969) cognitive-developmental theory proposes children pass through four distinct phases of cognitive development; sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete, formal. He suggested that children between the age of two and seven years are at a preoperational stage and have yet to reach a logical or abstract level of reasoning maturity (Gruber and Jacques Voneche, 1977). According to Piaget's theory of assimilation and accommodation, children learn as they adapt to their environment. Assimilation draws on current knowledge when faced with a new situation or stimulus, whereas accommodation is when existing knowledge is insufficient and needs to be modified to deal with a new situation. Piaget believed it was important for children to strike a balance between assimilation and accommodation as they progress through stages of development, a process Piaget called equilibration (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969).

According to Piaget, children at the preoperational stage are typically egocentric and unable to mentally represent the view point of another. If this is the case, the ability of young children to understand the perspective of their peers is likely to be significantly inhibited (Morris and Maisto, 2002). Based on this understanding, conflict is likely to be common-place as young children grapple with conflicting perspectives of ownership and fairness in their play environment. According to Piaget, cognitive conflict is necessary for stimulating development (1969) as it creates a gap in their understanding of the world.

A prominent developmental theorist, whose influence can be widely seen in early childhood education, is Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky is known for his sociocultural theory, which views learning within a social and cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed the interactions between children and their environment and others around them led them to develop new understandings of the world and this learning is mediated by tools and signs. He also believed this development was linked to genetic influences (Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory proposes children's development is progressed when their learning is supported with adult or peer guidance, providing they are within the zone of proximal development. Though the teacher is powerless to produce immediate effects in the child, he/she is all-powerful when it comes to producing indirect, mediated effects in him through the social environment (Vygotsky, 2004).

The zone of proximal development demonstrates how individual potential is realized by interacting with and being assisted in an activity by those who possess more knowledge. This process is interactive, collaborative and places the child in a constructive role in learning (Flavell et al 2002). According to Vygotsky, education occurs as children actively contribute and interact

with a more skilled peer or adult. Learning is viewed in the context of an active environment, where children, teachers and the interactions between them are working together to support development. Teaching from this theoretical stand point aims to move development forward, measuring a child's success not on past achievement, but on future potential when supported within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 2004).

#### **2.1.4. Behaviour Model/pedagogies**

Behaviourism was founded by John B. Watson in 1913 and was based on a belief that behaviours can be measured and changed (Watson, 1913). According to B.F. Skinner, a lead thinker in the field of behaviourism, behaviour can be changed by 'conditioning'. Skinner (1974) introduced the concept of Operant Conditioning; the altering of antecedents and consequences to modify behaviour. He proposed desirable behaviour could be increased if followed by positively reinforcing consequences or alternatively when followed by negative reinforcers, which remove undesirable stimuli from the environment (Kauffman and Landrum, 2009; Skinner, 1974).

Albert Bandura (1978) also believed behaviour is learned and his Social Learning Theory asserts that observation plays a significant role in the learning of young children. People are not born with performed repertoires of aggressive behaviour; they must learn them (Bandura, 1978). This is highly relevant when considering the role of observational learning of physical aggression. Bandura proposes children are most likely to imitate behaviour when they see peers being rewarded for their behaviour. Thus, not only is it important for physical aggression to be addressed to protect the safety of children but behaviour management in early childhood settings is crucial to discourage other children from imitating physical aggressive acts and inhibit escalation of generalized aggression. Bandura's social learning theory shares a common belief with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, that children learn by watching, which adds more weight to the essential role of teachers in supporting young children struggling with social skills. Furthermore, Bandura's theory went some way to bridging the gap between behaviourism and constructivist models, viewing children not only as passive responders to their environment, but actively learning through interactions with those around them (Simon, 1999).

#### **2.1.5. Ecological Model/Pedagogies**

An ecological perspective considers the child within the context of a complex social system and takes into account how interactions between social systems impact on behaviour. Bronfenbrenner designed an ecological model to explain the dynamics of an individual's ecological environment and defined the ecology of human development as the;

.....scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social). Contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p.514)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model proposes the different layers of environment, such as the immediate home environment, school, neighbourhood, community, broader cultural norms and the interactions between these systems as importance influences on child development (1979). Both direct and indirect environmental factors have the ability to either support or hinder

development, thus physical aggression in childhood cannot be fully understood without considering the influences of a child's ecosystem.

Within an ecological context, interventions for physical aggressive behaviour consider multiple aspects of a child's environment. Drawing on ecological theory and sociocultural understandings, Jean Annan recently created a Situational Analysis framework for designing evidence-based and effective interventions. This model comes from a social interactionism perspective, utilizes evidence-based interventions builds interventions on current strengths in the child's environment (Annan, 2005), this is a practical example of drawing from a number of conceptual models to effectively improve outcomes for children with physical aggression.

### **2.1.6. How the Theories Fit Together**

There appears to be significant overlap between different theoretical perspectives on the understanding of physical aggression in early childhood. As demonstrated in Annan's (2005) Situational Analysis Model, it is often necessary to draw upon a number of theoretical models to understand physical aggressive behaviours of young children. In practice, an integrated model is necessary to adequately address the complexity of physical aggressive behaviours. As Bronfenbrenner suggests, "as scientists we must work from different perspectives in different ways. A variety of approaches are needed if we are to make progress toward the ultimate goal of understanding human development in context" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977. p.529)

Although appearing to be opposing paradigms, sociocultural theory and behaviourism meet when considering the social and cultural norms of a child's environment. What is considered problematic behaviour in one community or culture may be perceived as acceptable in another (Flavell, et al., 2002). Behavioural expectations and norms are strongly influenced not only by ethnicity, but by unique subcultural differences, which may even be found between individual educational facilities.

Ideally, a constructivist approach, promoting a supportive, interactive learning environment would be sufficient to nurture the healthy social development of young children, however, in reality children with severe behaviour problems require immediate solutions, which often results in the need to temporarily put measures in place to protect the child and others being affected by their behaviour. Although the early childhood sector has traditionally been influenced by constructivist theories, an amalgamation of theoretical viewpoints may well lead early childhood teachers to a more well-rounded understanding of early childhood physical aggression and contribute to a more inclusive, holistic approach to remediation (Odom and Wolery, 2003).

## **2.2. Teacher Perceptions of Physical Aggressive Behaviours**

Teachers' explanations of physical aggressive behaviours reflect, in part, real evidence about patterns of difficulty. But they also reflect a range of distortions or incomplete perspectives (Walker & Whittaker, 2004). Common teacher explanations for physical aggression often overheard in staffrooms locate the problem entirely with children or their home community, for example, they are not that sort of person, they are not very bright, it is just a few, it is normal for their age, it is the home life and their brother was like this as well.

According to Rogers (2000), and Watkins and Wagner (2000), judgments on the part of teachers generate negative and deficit thinking which can have adverse impact on children and teacher esteem, class environment, relationships and may change the school ethos regarding discipline.



Watkins and Wagner believed that it is a common practice for teachers to develop a negative focus on the unacceptable behaviour which leads to a ‘punishment that fits the crime’ approach, when dealing with physical aggressive behaviours in their classrooms.

There is much greater agreement among teachers about what behaviour is prohibited than what is demanded. That is, teachers find it easier to specify what they will not tolerate than to specify the appropriate behaviour that they demand. Perhaps this is a result of our culture’s focus on punishment as the primary means of behaviour control (Kauffman & Landrum, 2002).

The method promoted by Canter and Canter (1990) regarding punishment as the result of consequences has seen a number of schools develop a negative attitude towards physical aggression behaviours by using power and control. Power and control depend heavily on the importance of the teacher (and schools) to determine how children should behave and what should be done to encourage this. Nevertheless, there are a number of teachers in our schools who still propagate the use of the Canter and Canter model. This could be because of its inflexible but perceived “no nonsense” or “zero tolerance” approach. This approach concerns those who prefer to utilize other approaches such as those teachers who see the importance of using children’s voice supported by a behaviour recovery approach as suggested by Rogers (2000). Zero tolerance, it is feared, may lead to zero care and responsibility on the part of some teachers.

However, in contrast, Canter and Canter (1990) also argued that students have rights and that their rights are to have teachers who promote appropriate behaviour and limit inappropriate behaviour. To allow this to happen, teachers must learn to be assertive themselves. This is understood to mean that teachers clearly and firmly communicate their wants and needs to students and are prepared to enforce consequences for non-compliance of these actions. Rogers (2000) identified with this position but insists that the teacher needs to be fair, consistent and firm in their enforcement of consequences. A common teacher’s explanation for an incident is that it is the child’s fault and, therefore, the child needs to deal with consequences or be punished. On the other hand, confronting an aggressive in public who is attempting to deal, however imperfectly, with an incident they created, may merely serve to further damage their self-esteem and self-efficacy (MacFarlane, 2007). I agree with other researchers (Bishop & Richardson, 2003; Gadd, 2003; Kazol, 1991; Zeitlin & Refaat, 2000) that teachers cause harm to children’s self-esteem when they berate or intimidate them in front of others. I myself have been in a situation when sometimes I have confronted a child in front of other children and then reflecting back on it I have only regretted because I thought as an adult I would not like to be confronted in front of my colleagues so the same should be the case with any of my children.

According to Balson (1992) and Rogers (2000) teachers create injustices for all children when they concentrate on child behaviour rather than talking with children about what is important to them by building a good relationship with them. To concentrate on the exhibited physical behaviour alone is ineffectual in providing a safe working environment for all children. Concentrating on exhibited physical behaviour alone does not take into account those individuals who present withdrawn, depressed, anxious and docile behaviours (Prochnow & Bourke, 2001) who are often over looked by educators as they focus on dealing with the behavioural challenges of louder and more physical aggressive types of behaviours in nature. On the other hand, it is

possible that the behaviours that Prochnow and Bourke describe are not perceived as ‘challenging’ by many teachers, because they do not disrupt classroom activities.

When teachers continue to think that disruptive behaviour is “that which disrupts others’ learning”, they do not appear to acknowledge what the child may be trying to communicate and what the child understands about why the behaviours have occurred. Teachers as professionals are in a position to provide an “adult” view of classroom experience and it could be argued that this has been based on an unquestioned assumption that ‘the grown-ups know best’. (Prashning, 2001; Shields, Bishop & Masawi, 2005). It is the responsibility of teachers as professionals to be more able than children to maintain control of their own behaviour in physical aggressive situations, and to model more appropriate behaviours to their children.

There has been considerable research undertaken suggesting that how teachers conceptualize the causes of behaviour they see as worrying and disturbing, bears a strong relationship to their own emotional and cognitive response to the physical aggressive behaviour (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2002; Wearmouth, Glynn, & Berryman, 2005). This implies that teachers may be unaware that they are not focusing on the causes of the behaviour but purely on the behaviour itself. Brophy and Good (1974) also suggested that teachers’ actions toward students may be reactions to the children’s behaviour and this means that the teacher may often respond in a “knee jerk” reaction.

When teachers complain that they do not understand particular children, when they misbehave, what they may be saying is that they are not aware of the purpose or the goal of the child’s behaviour (Balson, 1992; Walker & Whittaker, 2004). So does this mean that teachers need to ensure that they have personalized their own codes of practice regarding responding to children’s learning and behaviour (Walker & Whittaker, 2004; Whitaker, 2004). A role for school management is to ensure that teachers are aware of cultural difference, are positive and do not engage in deficit thinking, and are receptive to other teachers’ perceptions as to how children learn and behave. Schools also need to be aware of how children respond to different learning environments, different learning contexts and different teaching styles. In summary, this part of the literature review shows that it is important, that teachers have a personal definition of physical aggressive behaviours and reflect on their own personal beliefs/ perceptions and the beliefs of others regarding the understanding of physical aggression behaviours.

### **2.3. Strategies in Dealing with Physical Aggressive Behaviours**

According to Hawk, Tumama-Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland (2002), there are some attributes that a teacher should work towards attaining in order to have strong positive relationships with the students. According to various researchers it is believed that teachers do not have to be of any particular age, gender, and ethnicity, type of teacher training or professional development, expertise in an area or have several years of experience to be able to develop and maintain positive and successful relationships with their students (Hawk, et al, 2002).

What really matters is the teachers’ attitudes, behaviour, values, efforts and skills that help in developing good positive relationships to be formed that would help a student learn (MacFarlane, 2007). Teachers not only should be thinking about their students positively but also their families in both positive and non-deficit ways (Bishop & Berryman, 2006). So it can be said that teachers

can make valuable contributions to the classroom and that they can make a difference for all their students.

### **2.3.1. Respect**

According to Wilson-Hill (2006) respect helps in forming an effective relationship between teacher and child. However, respect is not necessarily the same as liking (Hawk, et al, 2002). The respect that students give their teachers reflects the way teachers treat their students and speak to their students. Demonstration of respect can also be seen in the way that a teacher models appropriate attitudes and behaviour, in the energy and effort they put into their work, in their enthusiasm for learning, in their loyalty to school and in their genuine love and caring for each child as a person and as a learner. Robertson (1996) reports a conclusion by Tattum (1982) from a study of disruptive children that their behaviour was determined by whether they liked and respected the teacher and not by what consequences could be brought to bear on their actions. It is extremely unusual for serious confrontations to arise between students and teachers who share respect for each other and have healthy friendly relationships (Alton-Lee, 2003; Boyes, 2002; Rogers, 2000). Attending constructively to unacceptable child behaviour can be viewed as providing learning opportunities (not disruptions) for the child and teacher in order to repair and further build relationships (Rogers, 2000; Wilson-Hill, 2006).

### **2.3.2. Communication**

Communication is a two way process. Teachers who show and model respectful communication are more likely to receive the same. Respectful communication provides strong opportunities for reciprocal dialogue between the child and teacher (Hawk et al, 2002).

McNaughton (2002) discussed “community styles of discourse” which requires the teacher to be familiar with the language patterns of the students in order to assist with understanding and promoting effective communication. McNaughton suggested that, the teacher’s use of a known style of community discourse establishes that he or she is authoritative through actions rather than through an ascribed role.

Gill (2006) however, argued that this is not to suggest that teachers abandon their own speech and adopt the interpretive dialect that the children often present in their conversations but to be aware that words, such as “sweet as”, “cool” and “choice” all mean that everything is okay. However, if we are concerned with improving literacy, then these words should feature prominently in texts and discussion as a common language base to build upon. Similarly, for effective learning to happen, children must feel safe enough to learn without fear; and not be afraid to take risks. This sense of safety comes from genuine interpersonal relationships in the classroom and beyond. Relationships are fundamental to learning. Teachers cannot be aloof, detached or apolitical (Gill, 2006). So, therefore, communication needs to be mutual and respectful. As mentioned earlier it is a two-way process, if teachers expect children to respect them and communicate with them respectfully then teachers need to respect children and communicate with them without a need for ‘put downs.’

### **2.3.3. Connectedness**

Hawk et al (2002) suggested that there needs to be a sense of connectedness between teacher and child which are equally shared and which develop through mutual respect. Such connectedness

allows the children to develop an understanding of their own responsibility for controlling their own actions. Teachers should only have to remind children of their responsibility to maintain effective discipline in the classroom. Many teachers develop signals that direct child behaviour. These are effective because they are quiet, confrontational and often directed at individual students without others being aware (Hawk, et al, 2002).

The use of private hand signals to allow children to identify when behaviours need attention can be a good example of a non-discriminating and non-threatening approach to curbing the action before the behaviour escalates (Rogers, 2000). Also in reciprocation, teachers need to be aware that they can also receive ‘signals’ from children that they may be overstepping the boundaries (MacFarlane, 1997).

An effective teacher establishes a learning environment that is needs-based, positive and inclusive (Arthur, Gordon, & Butterfield, 2003). Teachers who have expertise and passion for a particular subject area and demonstrate to the children who will also come to share their passion. It is often observed in schools that a teacher who shares a passion for literacy for example, will have children sharing this passion also and may bring culturally relevant ideas, preferences and experiences to the curriculum.

#### **2.3.4. Praise**

There appears to be a growing concern among teachers that they seem to be praising their children for just about everything they do. This may have resulted from teachers following ‘expert’ advice that children will respond more favourably to praise rather than punishment (Doidge, 2005; Kohn, 1993; Robertson, 1996). The use of rewarding appropriate behaviour with positive outcomes such as certificates, free time and prizes appears to be a regular happening in most schools. Often the response from the teacher is that by rewarding the good behaviour allows the bad behaviour to diminish. However, the use of praise needs to be more nuanced than this. Praise only makes complete sense in a social context where both giver and receiver understand its meaning and are already in a relationship of mutual respect and trust. Furthermore, “being positive” is not just about praising students, it is also about maintaining a positive outlook during your time with them.

#### **2.3.5. Empathy**

According to Alton-Lee (2003) and MacFarlane (2004) it is very important for the teachers to be empathetic towards valuing culture and should have the capability to include relevant experiences into daily activities, encourage children to use first language and enjoy learning from children about their culture. From my personal experience when a teacher places a high value of importance to a child’s culture or some personal experience the child really appreciates that and feels happy.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

For the purpose of this study, a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design was chosen for this study, which meant that interview data was collected one (1) month after the quantitative data was gathered. The interview data was first collected, analyzed and then followed up by the questionnaire data, in order to articulate or establish coherence with responses given in the

questionnaire data. The structured format of interviews allowed flexibility for early childhood teachers to share their experiences of working with children with aggressive behaviour while the questionnaire data allowed for more objective data analysis and provided the opportunity for results across methods to be compared in a systematic way. The questionnaire also allowed access to a greater number of early childhood teachers with a range of teaching experience, providing a sample more representative of the population.

### **3.2. Population and Sampling Techniques**

The population of this study consisted of all teachers in early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga Municipality of the Upper East Region of Ghana. The total number of estimated respondents was four hundred and fifty (450) from ninety (90) early childhood centres. The accessible population was however, made up of one hundred and twenty (120) respondents drawn from sixty (60) centres, using the purposive sampling technique based on their qualifications and experiences as obtained from the Municipal Directorate.

Purpose sampling was chosen because a small group of individuals were used seeing that they may have experienced the phenomenon or may likely encounter physical aggressive behaviours in one way or the other (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005). All respondents were considered effective practitioners by their headteachers/ headmistresses and through the attestation process at their centres, and all the respondents were classroom teachers. In each school, the respondents consisted of two (2) teachers who the researcher administered structured questionnaires to and one (1) headteacher selected for interview using the structured interview.

### **3.3. Instrumentation**

The data gathering instruments used included semi-structured interviews for ten (10) headteachers and structured questionnaires for one hundred and twenty (120) teacher respondents not excluding the headteachers were all purposively selected. The purpose of conducting interview is to explore the responses of respondents to gather more and deeper information. The interview method is preferred by researchers for a couple of advantages. This is because, unlike administering questionnaires, people are more likely to readily answer questions about a subject. Open-ended questions are more tolerated through interviews due to the fact that participants would be more convenient at expressing their long answers orally than in writing (Creswell, 2008).

## **4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **4.1. Discussions**

Data presentation, analysis and discussions of the findings from structured interviews with ten (10) headteachers and likert scale questionnaire administrated to one hundred and twenty (120) teacher respondents including the ten (10) headteachers/mistress. All the headteachers and teacher respondents were selected across the Bolgatanga Municipality in the Upper East Region of Ghana. All the participating centres were located in different geographical areas within the municipality.

#### 4.2. Research Question 1:

##### What are the perceptions of teachers in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours of children at early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga Municipality?

The main focus of research question one was to investigate the perceptions of teachers in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours among children in early childhood educational centres. Interviewees had various experiences with regard to children who display physical aggression in their classrooms. Interviewee H5 explained this by saying,

*Hitting is normally displayed among the children on a daily basis and most times when asked why, the guilty one would respond by saying, "aunty, I tell him/her sorry". I have to spend extra time dealing with these outbursts.*

An interviewee expressed that waiting in line or taking turns is a problem for their children. This was clearly articulated by H6. She said;

*...Well taking turns as well or line up time ...any form of line... To go outside or even wash hands. Children do not like to line up. Everyone wants to be in front...then the fight start.*

Interviewees were of the view that, they needed to be proactive in encouraging children who were affected by the physical aggressive behaviours put up by other children and not be complacent with these behaviours. Children should instead continue to model appropriate positive behaviour in the hope that their peers will change their own behaviours and present acceptable behaviours consistently.

Regarding the quantitative phase, a number of statements thus one to five (1-5) statements were put before the respondents. Details of the responses are captured in table 1 as follows;

**Table 1: Perceptions of Teachers in dealing with Physical Aggression among Children**

S/N	Statement	Scale	
		Disagree	Agree
1.	Physical aggressive behaviours are considered as normal growing up process of the child	3(2.5%)	117(97.5%)
2.	Lack of space is considered as a major cause of physical aggressive behaviours	2(1.7%)	118(98.3%)
3.	Physical aggressive behaviour is a disruption to normal classroom lessons	1(0.8%)	119(99.2%)
4.	Pushing/hitting/punching others is considered as physical aggressive behaviours	5(4.2%)	115(95.8%)
5.	Restlessness/refusal to work in class or destroying other children's properties/centre properties is as a result of physical aggressive behaviours of children	9(7.5%)	111(92.5%)

**Source: Filed Data, 2018**

In response to statement 1: physical aggressive behaviours were considered as normal growing up process for the child. Three (3) respondents representing 2.5% disagreed, while 117

representing 97.5% agreed to the statement. With regards to statement 2: lack of space is considered as a majority cause of physical aggressive behaviours; 2(1.7%) disagreed to the statement and 118 (98.3%) agreed to it. Respondents in response to statement 3: physical aggressive behaviour is a disruption to normal classroom lessons; 1(0.8%) disagreed, while 1119(99.2%) agreed to the statement. The fourth statement: pushing/hitting/punching others is considered as physical aggressive behaviours; 5(4.2%) disagreed and 115 (95.8%) agreed in their response to statement 4. Statement 5: In seeking responses from teacher respondents about teacher perceptions in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours among children, the fifth statement was: restlessness/refusal to work in class or destroying other children's properties/center properties is as a result of physical aggressive behaviours of children; 9(7.5%) disagreed, while 111(92.5%) of the respondents agreed to the fifth statement.

#### 4.3. Research Question 2:

##### **What strategies are employed by teachers in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours of children at early childhood centres in the Bolgatanga municipality?**

Research question two (2) was to investigate the strategies used for managing physical aggressive behaviours among children in early childhood education centres where respondents teach. Although interviewees agreed on the use of rewards to encourage positive behaviours, interviewee, H4 also added that verbal reassurances were critical. She posited:

*...I would use verbal praise, to reaffirm the positive behaviour displayed. Sometimes I would say, "I am so proud of you, or, Wow! That's great, or even, yes! I knew you could have done it".*

It was agreed by the interviewees that verbal reprimand is used to interrupt physical aggression among children in their centres.

Interviewees also agreed unanimously on dealing with physical aggressive behaviours the moment they occur. Interviewee, H5 declared:

*I deal with physical aggressive the moment it occurs, because if not attended to at once the child may think that the behaviour is acceptable and may continue behaving in an unacceptable manner.....at once... one time!*

However, they shared mixed concerns on the use of whole class or individual strategies.

Interviewee, H1 stated:

*I use individual strategies to redirect the physical aggressive behaviour of the particular child or children.....sometimes I use whole class strategies when other children are affected.*

Interviewees spoke of the centres or home support. Few respondents made mention of how lonely and stressed they got in one of their jobs a long time back. They were expected to manage these physical aggressive behaviours on their own and that was difficult for them without any help from the centres or homes of children. Therefore, what affected the ability of the teachers to

manage physical aggressive behaviours was about school management and the teachers themselves.

In seeking responses from respondents, a number of statements, numbering from one to five (1-5) posed to the respondents. Table 2 shows a summary of the teacher respondents responses concerning the strategies used for managing physical aggressive behaviours among children;

**Table 2: Strategies used in Dealing with Physical Aggressive Behaviours**

S/N	Statement	Scale	
		Disagree	Agree
1.	Setting rules and routines for children to following is a strategy for intervention of physical aggressive behaviours	5(4.2%)	115(95.8%)
2.	Building positive working relationships with children who put up physical aggressive behaviours is a strategy for intervention	2(1.7%)	118(98.3%)
3.	Sending children who put up physical aggressive behaviours out from the class is a strategy for intervention	110(91.7%)	10(8.3%)
4.	Involvement of parents whose children put up physical aggressive behaviours in the classroom is a strategy for intervention	25(20.8%)	95(79.2%)
5.	Verbal reprimand/motivations/gifts given to children who put up physical aggressive behaviours in class is a strategy for intervention	5(4.2%)	115(95.8%)

**Source: Filed Data, 2018**

In responding to Statement one (1); setting rules and routines for children to follow is a strategy for intervention of physical aggressive behaviours; it is clear from the data in Table 2 that 5(4.2%) of the teacher respondents disagreed while 115(95.8%) of the teacher respondents agreed to the statement. The second statement was: building positive working relationships with children who put up physical aggressive behaviours is a strategy for intervention; 2(1.7%) of the teacher respondents disagreed while 118(98.3%) agreed with the statement. 110(91.7%) of the teacher respondents disagreed and 10(8.3%) teacher respondents agreed to statement three (3): sending children who put up physical aggressive behaviours out from the class is a strategy for intervention.

Respondents' responses to statement four (4): "involvement of parents whose children put up physical aggressive behaviours in the classroom is a strategy for intervention" indicated that; 25(20.8%) teacher respondents disagreed and 95(79.2%) of them agreed to the statement. The final statement: verbal reprimand/motivations/gifts given to children who put up physical



aggressive behaviours in class is a strategy for intervention indicated that; while 115(95.8%) of teacher respondents agreed and 5(4.2%) of the teacher respondents disagreed to the statement.

One of the strategies used by teachers in their classrooms to manage physical aggressive behaviours during the interview session was engaging and motivating children in learning by building a personal relationship with the children who display such behaviours. This was perceived as necessary and most important for many reasons. All the ten (10) interviewees believed that if children are engaged and motivated towards learning then incidences of physical aggressive behaviour minimizes and interviewees also expressed that this can be achieved mostly by building a strong positive working relationship with children and that this was a constructive way of approaching the problem of physical aggressive behaviours. Six interviewees completely condemned the idea of exclusion from the class (sending the child out of the class or school) as they were of the opinion that there are children who present physical aggressive behaviours regularly or very often and one cannot afford to send such a child out of the classroom environment over and over again. A child will start getting comfortable to this kind of consequence and it no longer has any positive effect on the child. In such situations, what works most is the relationship that is between the teacher and the child, and also the family of the child.

#### **4.4. Key Findings of the Study**

The outcome of this study confirmed findings in the literature review that children's physical aggressive behaviour is a problem faced by many teachers. Interviewees were of the view that by identifying physical aggressive behaviours and strategies, they can be managed by using the appropriate approach and support from early childhood education centres and homes of children through the process; teachers would be able to manage physical aggressive behaviours without major challenges. Teachers' stress, home influences of children and support for teachers at centres both from centres authorities and parents are issues associate with physical aggressive behaviours.

Respondents were also of the opinion that managing physical aggressive behaviour is not an easy thing to do but if supported by their centres physical aggressive behaviours could be well handled. Building and maintaining positive working relationship with children who present physical aggressive behaviours and their family, the expected outcomes can be achieved or physical aggressive behaviours can be better managed.

#### **4.5. Conclusions**

To effectively manage physical aggressive behaviours, teachers must have knowledge of children development and the factors that cause or trigger physical aggressive behaviours among children. Most of the strategies employed by teachers have been preventive strategies and an example of one such strategy is positive reinforcement. It is highlighted within the literature that teacher perceptions are critical to successfully manage physical aggressive behaviours in the Bolgatanga Municipality of the Upper East Region, Ghana and can be adopted by other early childhood education centres within the region and Ghana at large facing similar situations.

The researcher is of the view that strategies to engage all stakeholders at the level of the school, specifically parents, teachers and headteachers, will assist in effectively managing aggression. It can be concluded that from the findings and the discussions emanating from the study, planned

and careful focus should be placed on the formulation of policies and procedures to dealing with physical aggressive behaviours, and training of teachers seeing that they directly influence the effective management of aggression in the Bolgatanga Municipality of Upper East Region, Ghana.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the perceptions shared by teachers in the study it seemed that training and professional development is not paid particular attention too. In realizing this possibility, it is recommended that headteachers/mistresses organize on-going training and professional development in child psychology and alternative behaviour management techniques and classroom management skills be operationalized and identified on the centres' calendar of events. This can be conducted at the level of the early childhood centre. On-going training and professional development should be sought by headteachers/mistresses to gain newer insights, to share strategies/interventions as to trends in physical aggressive behaviours management so that this information can be disseminated to teachers thus empowering them to be more effective in managing the outburst among children in their centres. It is recommended that various stakeholders spearhead by Ghana Education Service meet to put in place a discipline or behaviour management plan which will outline various strategies/interventions or chain of events in dealing with physical aggressive behaviours as they may occur.

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