

# The Role of Teacher's Attitudes Towards the Aggressive Behavior of Pupils

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## Abstract

*The present research aimed to ascertain if the teacher's profile is correlated to aggressive behavior exhibited by their pupils and it analyses key aspects such as prevention, intervention towards the aggression behavior, the teacher's role in its management plus their professional training. It's a correlative, descriptive and non-experimental study supported by qualitative and quantitative research methods. The sample was of 202 kindergarten and 1st grade teachers, in primary schools in Ponta Delgada, Azores, at 2012/2013. As a result statistically significant differences were recognized between the teacher's attitudes and the aggressive behavior of pupils displayed in the classroom, as well as between the preventive and punitive strategies and aggressive behavior of pupils. Furthermore we found statistically significant association between the formative needs of teachers and the aggressive behavior of their pupils as well as between the professional situation, level of education, years of service and the level of aggressive behavior of pupils*

## 1. Introduction

Aggressiveness is present in the human being from the earliest stages. It is one of the aspects involved in human development, structuring of human personality. Besides, aggressiveness is required to human's survival, adaptation and growth.

In recent years society has been witnessing with concern the increase of aggressive behavior in school, carry out by children and young people.

Even though aggressiveness is not a new phenomenon, the media attention and coverage allied with the complexity and the different forms that it assumes, have contributed to a strong increase of scientific interest on the subject of aggressiveness.

Prior research indicates that school has a significant role in the increase of aggressive behavior, not only as the main stage where it takes place but also as an enhancer [1], [2], [3], [4]

The same significant role is acknowledged to teachers. They may contribute to the increase or decrease of aggressive behavior according to the quality of their relationship with pupils [5], [6]. A healthy relationship is a good predictor of adjusted social behavior therefore inhibitor of disruptive behavior.

The present study aimed to increase and generate knowledge regarding the aggressive behavior displayed by pupils in the classroom.

## 2. Core Issue

This research project seeks to answer the following question:

- Do the attitudes of kindergarten and 1st grade teachers towards the aggressive behavior be correlated to aggressive behavior exhibited by their pupils in the classroom?

## 3. Conceptual Framework

The American Psychiatric Association defines aggressiveness in early childhood as a pattern of frequent, persistent and intense behaviors that violate the rights of others as well as the social standards, therefore it's an antisocial behavior and non-adaptive. To the World Health Organization, aggressiveness consists of the expression of dissociative disorders expressed by individuals at different stages of development.

Mielnik affirms the existents of two types of aggression [1]: normal aggressiveness, therefore natural in children and assumed as an adaptive behavior, subject to all the modifications that are characteristic of the development process, with variations in terms of form and goals; and abnormal aggressiveness compatible with children who show excessive and frequent aggression patterns, representing a deviance standard of the expected behavior for a specified age, sex and culture, resulting from a poor construction of the human personality, mainly in childhood.

The Ecological approach to human development of Bronfenbrenner claims that the individual, throughout his development is subjected to different states of ecological transition, which are understood as the process of adjusting to new situations, environments or social roles, which implies significant changes in the individual's life. The entrance to school implies for children the interiorization of a new social role and signifies, for itself, an ecological transition. In the beginning is quite normal that children feel misfit and gradually adjust their behavior and attitude to the new environment. Aggressiveness can indeed arise during these periods of ecological transition as adaptive behavior, which is not intended to cause damage, but to seek adaptation to a new environment and social role. Therefore, for the Ecological approach to human development aggressiveness is a strategy that children use to manage the process of readjustment [7].

It seems that the central question is to know when the aggression ceases to be a healthy and adaptive behavior to become the main way of resolving their daily problems.

Prior studies show that the lack of guilt, of compassion towards the victims and no regrets, emotional coldness, deficits in social skills, cognitive and of attention, poor judgment, low tolerance to frustration and anxiety are some of the aspects that defines the behavior of an aggressive child [3], [7], [8], [9].

Aggressiveness is a complex and multi-dimension phenomenon, to the extended that biological, environmental, cognitive, social and personality factors can define the appearance or maintenance of aggressive standard.

As regards to environmental factor some previous research has establish that variables like television violence, poverty, exposure to violence in the neighborhood, family dynamics, parental pathology, racial discrimination, association with juvenile and/or adult delinquents, the school environment and educational practices plays a prominent role in the geneses of aggressiveness [1], [2], [3], [4], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13].

Nevertheless, literature also refers the existence of protective factors, deeply related to family and school. They protect the individual from risks situation, that might jeopardize its development process. Some examples of protective factors are the parental support, the establishment and development of social skills and the use of disciplinary practices grounded in dialogue instead of coercive and physical ones.

With different criteria is possible to classify the aggressive behavior as reactive, proactive, verbal and social.

The reactive aggressiveness is a poorly controlled anger expression, which is a defensive response to provocation, threat and blockage of goals or frustration [17].

The proactive aggressiveness defines itself as an aggression act that occurs in a premeditated way. The perpetrator assaults are driven by the belief that physical aggression can produce positive consequences and gains for him. So, the aggression happens in the absence of deliberate provocation and is the only strategy that the perpetrator uses to solve daily problems [17].

The verbal aggression is the use of offensive words or expressions addressed to another. Mooney affirms that call nasty names to the child's family is one of the forms of aggression that causes more pain and distress in children. Also is the type of aggression most often used by children to attack their peers [1].

According to several studies, social aggressiveness is focused on the relationship. It involves behaviors such as social exclusion, lying, spreading rumors, intimidate, mockery and give malicious nicknames [1], [17].

When it takes place in school, aggressive behavior creates insecurity, anxiety and apprehension within the educational community, absorbing the time and attention of teachers that should be invested in the teaching practice.

According to Blaya "The school is not neutral in the creation of situations of violence, whose emergence sometimes promotes" [13]. Prior investigations have established that depreciation and disregard for social and cultural characteristics of students, the promotion of classification methods of evaluation that leads to exclusion and accumulation of personal failures, the inability of school to avoid and cope conflicts plus the uniform way to treat students are some of the situations which are pointed out as causing aggressiveness.

Furthermore, in the daily work teachers are confronted with pupils, who, for multiple reason, feel a need to draw attention, attack, provoke and defy. In this perspective, the teacher's role is crucial. Above all he must be a manager of conflicts, emotions and interests [13], which requires that he has skills of persuasion, negotiation, combined with the willingness to listen and understand the pupils. In this way the teacher helps to discontinue aggressive pattern.

Former studies conducted by Santos refer some forms of aggression that occur in the

relationship between teacher/pupil, such as the imposition of unclear and unjustified rules, to do mockery about the pupil in front of classmates, to call insulting nicknames, punishing, ignoring and accusing him to his parents [14].

To cope with these situations, that cause fears, anxiety and frustration, pupils create strategies, which may diverge for simple distraction in the classroom or the expression of aggressive behavior towards peers and teacher.

Some previous research has also referred that insensitivity and unavailable of teachers to listen to their pupils, as well as poor relationship skills and the unskillfulness in dealing with the aggressiveness of their pupils are pointed out as instigators of aggressive behavior.

Nevertheless, there is the understanding that the school may discontinue aggressive cycle by an articulated and consistent intervention. This is done first and foremost investing in teacher's training, to enable them to deal successfully with aggression issues in schools. It is crucial to develop preventive intervention programs, carefully planned in order to discontinue the child's psychosocial risk trajectory.

In this research the concept of attitude is essential with the view to understand the relationship/action between the individual and object of the attitude.

It is consistent between several researchers that the attitudes consist in a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently way positively or negatively to a given object. They are not directly observable, which means that they are latent variables that show the relationship between the situation in which the individual finds himself and his behavior [18], [19], [20].

The concept of attitude comprehends three interactive components, namely cognitive, affective and behavioral. The cognitive boils down to a person's knowledge of a given object. The affective component is present when a person manifests positive or negative feelings towards a specific object of attitude. Lastly the behavioral component refers to the person's predisposition to action, that is, the willingness to react positively or negatively towards the object attitude [11], [18], [21].

Given the fact that the attitude is a predisposition rather unstable of the individual to act, think and feel positively or negatively towards an object, person, situation, concept or moral code, it is possible and essential to understand and perhaps to modify the teacher's attitude towards aggression [18]. Prior studies found out that those teachers who show an

aggressive attitude towards the aggressive behavior of their pupils encourage these similar behaviors. Then, after a period of acquaintanceship, pupils adopt as aggressive attitudes as those observed and expressed by the teacher or they may manifest behaviors of withdrawal, because of fear of punishment [15], [16]. This result is consistent with the Social Learning Theory of Bandura, according to which the learning of attitudes and behaviors results from a modeling process, fulfilled by the observation and imitation of a role model [22].

Taking into account these findings from the literature, the main purpose of the present study was to analyze the influence between different variables such as teacher's attitudes, intervention, strategies, training and professional experience, towards aggressive behavior of pupils in the classroom. Moreover, in a qualitative point of view, this study aimed to identify the behaviors that kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher's qualify as being aggressive, how do they act towards the aggression in classroom, which causes they identify as being in the origin of aggressive behavior and what preventive and punitive strategies were adopted by them towards aggressive children behavior, as well as forms of control that they consider suitable.

## 4. Methodology

This study is a descriptive, correlative and non-experimental one, supported by qualitative and quantitative research methods. In order to gather the required and useful information, teachers had to answer a questionnaire survey and to the Attitudes Towards Aggression Scale, developed by Jansen [23], in the Portuguese version, adapted and validated for the Portuguese population by Rosa [11].

### 4.1. Sampling

We define as population of the study all (264) kindergarten and 1st grade teachers, in five public schools in Ponta Delgada, Azores, at 2012/2013. The sample was of 202 teachers that answered the questionnaire survey and to the Attitudes Towards Aggression Scale. The average age of the participants is 40,9 years old. The age range from 31-45 years is the most represented with 60,9% of the sample. In terms of gender the majority is female (88,6%), of which 61% are from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade and 38,6% are kindergarten teachers. Half of the sample (51,1%) has between 7 to 28 years of professional experience as

teachers. About 74,3% of the sample didn't attended specific training to deal with aggressive behavior in the classroom. Nevertheless 84,2% of teachers require specific training in management of aggressive behavior.

## 4.2. Procedures

The participants in this study were selected by convenience. The main criteria were being a kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher in the public schools in Ponta Delgada-Azores. In each case these teachers were asked about their conceptions, attitudes and practices as professionals, without gathering neither personal information nor about the schools where they teach. The questionnaires implemented in the online platform were anonymous. The participants received oral and written information on the purpose of the study and their rights as respondents. Participation in the study was voluntary and the respondent's anonymity was ensured in all phases of data collection and analysis. The collection of data took place throughout the months of November, December 2012 and January 2013.

## 4.3. Measures and Instruments

In order to gather the required and useful information, teachers had to answer a questionnaire survey and to the Attitudes Towards Aggression Scale (ATA), developed by Jansen [23], in the portuguese version, adapted and validated for the portuguese population by Rosa [11].

The questionnaire survey contained closed-end and open-end questions. It was organized in three different but interrelated parts. The first part was intended for the collection of profile and professional data. In the second part participants had to indicate how often they observed aggressive behavior in the classroom and to identify, in a descending order of priority, the preventive and punitive strategies implemented in their classrooms to answer the aggressive behavior. Lastly the third part of the questionnaire was intended to open-end questions; asking participants to share their views concerning the phenomenon of aggression in childhood and at the classroom.

The Attitudes Towards Aggression Scale was used to study individual attitudes of teachers towards aggression. This instrument is supported by three different theories that explain the attitudes namely Reflected Action Theory by

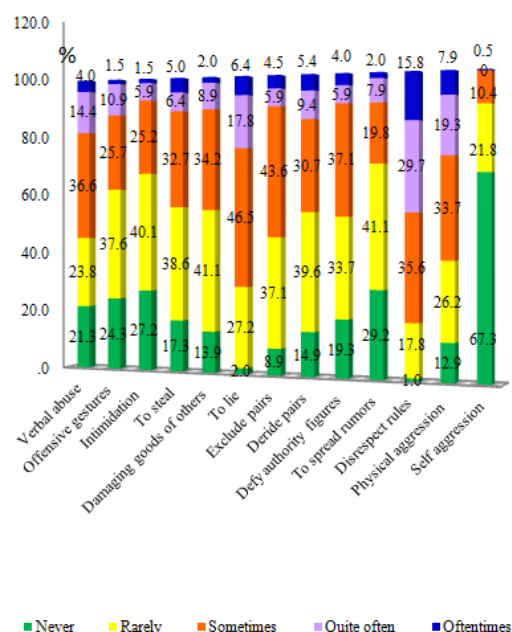
Fishbein and Ajzen [24], Planned Behavior Theory by Ajzen [25] and Social Learning Theory by Bandura [22] and checks the cognitive and affective components of the individual towards the object of the attitude.

This 18-items' scale includes statements concerning different aspects of aggression. To measure every statement is given a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree (value 5), to strongly disagree (value 1). The ATAS consists of four aggression-related components: **offensive** (unpleasant and unacceptable behavior; statements: aggression 1. is an example of a non-cooperative attitude, 3. is unpleasant and repulsive behavior, 4. is an impulse to disturb and interfere with the objective of dominate or harm others, 5. cannot be tolerated, 7. is a verbal or physical act, powerful, wrong, not adaptive, carried out with no justification, 8. is a unnecessary and unacceptable behavior, 11. in any form is always negative and unacceptable, 14. is destructive behavior and therefore unwanted, 15. is expressed deliberately except when committed by children whit a prognosticate future psychotic behavior, 16. poisons the atmosphere on the ward and obstructs the learning process); **communicative** (in the sense of signals to enhance the pedagogical relationship; statements: aggression 2. is the start of a more positive relationship between teacher and pupil, 6. offers new possibilities in the learning process, 17. helps the teacher to see the pupil from another point of view); **destructive** (in the form of actual harmful acts; statements: aggression 9. is when a child has feelings that will result in physical harm to self or to others, 12. is violent behavior to others or self, 13. is threatening to damage others or objects) and **protective** (the defense of physical and emotional space; statements: aggression 10. is to protect oneself, 18. the protection of one's own territory and privacy). Their fidelity is between .554 and .869. The data were subjected to statistical analysis using the SPSS version 18 for Windows. For the open-end questions we applied coded analysis using the Microsoft Excel 2010.

## 5. Results

Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire, in terms of the frequency of observation of aggressive behavior in the classroom, show us [19] that teachers observed behaviors such as lying (46,5%), exclude pairs (43,6%), verbal abuse (36,6%), ignoring rules (35,6%), physical abuse (33,7%) and defy authority figures (32,1%). The social aggressiveness is the most

observed, followed by proactive and verbal aggressiveness. The graph below summarizes frequency of aggressive behavior observed by teachers in their classroom.



Graph 1. Relative values of the frequency of aggressive behavior observed in classroom

With regards to preventive strategies to aggressive behavior, the results show us that teachers frequently implemented in their classroom the following strategies: 1. clarify the rules and expectations towards children (Cv 81.00); 2. compliment the positive behaviors (Cv 54.07); 3. maintain with the child a safe and positive relationship (Cv 53.47); 4. encourage positive behavior in solving situations of conflict (Cv 49.49) and 5. to value capacities and skills of the child (Cv 47.08). In the other hand, the punitive strategies frequently implemented by teachers in their classroom are: 1. verbal warning (Cv 77.24); 2. elucidate the child about the feelings of another (victim) (Cv 61.40); 3. remind and reinforce classroom rules (Cv 61.08); 4. elucidate the child about the consequences of his behavior (Cv 55.29); 5. lose acquired privileges (Cv 41.89) and 6. reprimand the behavior and not the child (Cv 36.90).

As for the descriptive analysis of the Attitudes Towards Aggression Scale the results show us that prevails among teachers the identification with an offensive and destructive attitude towards aggression.

Thus they recognize the aggressiveness as a harmful, unpleasant and unacceptable behavior

and a threat, an act of violence or physical damage. Table 1 shows us the variation coefficient types of attitudes achieved with the submission of ATA.

Table 1. Variation coefficient of the aggression-related components

A.T.A. COMPONENTS					
ATA	Aggression-related components	N	$\chi$	S	CV
Results	Offensive	202	38,65	5,76	14,90
	Destructive	202	12,16	1,7	13,98
	Communicative	202	7,18	2,62	36,49
	Protective	202	6,19	1,95	31,50
					min max
					20-50
					7-15
					3-14
					2-10

To test the hypotheses the level of attitude towards aggressiveness of kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers is directly correlated with the level of aggressive behavior of children in the classroom it was applied the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis H test. We found statistically significant differences between the teacher's attitudes and the aggressive behavior of pupils displayed in the classroom. As a result is possible to conclude that the teacher's attitudes towards aggressiveness affect aggressive behavior of pupils. The attitude towards the attitudinal object is a strong predictor of behavior, in which aggressive child is the attitudinal object and how teachers act is the behavior to be predicted. This result is consistent with the Reflected Action Theory of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) [24].

To test the hypotheses the type of intervention of kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers is associated with the level of aggressive behavior of children in the classroom it was applied the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis H test. In fact, statistically significant differences were recognized between preventive and punitive strategies and aggressive behavior of pupils in the classroom, confirming that the type of intervention is statistically associated with the level of aggressive behavior of children in the classroom.

In order to test the hypotheses the level of training of kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers is inversely correlated with the level of aggressive behavior of children in the classroom it was applied the Chi-Squared test. The collected data established that there is no statistically significant association between the academic level of

teachers and the level of aggressive behavior of children in classroom context. Moreover, although we found a statistically significant association between the academic curriculum of initial teacher training, including disciplines about the management of aggressive behavior and the level of aggressive behavior, this only occurs for two behaviors, which lays some restrictions to the generalization of the results obtained.

Also arises from this research, the fact that teachers who didn't invest in training related to the management of aggressive behavior in the classroom are those who observe more often aggressive behaviors in their classrooms. And we establish statistically significant association between the teaching needs expressed by teachers and the aggressive behavior of their pupils in the classroom.

As for the hypotheses the level of experience of kindergarten is and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers is inversely correlated with the level of aggressive behavior of pupils in the classroom to test the different variables it was applied the Chi-Squared test as well as the ANOVA parametric test only to the variable age. It appears that the age, the gender and the functions performed are not relevant to the level of aggressive behavior of pupils. There was a statistically significant association between professional situation, degree of education taught, years of service and the level of aggressive behavior of pupils.

Although this hypotheses was partly confirm, the results allows us to state that variables such as professional situation, degree of education taught, years of service have an significant effect on the aggressive behavior of pupils.

As for the results of contents analyses of answers to the open-end questions of the questionnaire, the main outcomes are the confirmation of the presence of aggressive behavior in the classroom, which in terms of classification is mostly verbal and proactive, followed by reactive and social aggression. The majority of teachers define the aggression as an non adaptive behavior.

As regards to their causes teachers pointed out mainly environmental factors to explain the origin of aggressive behaviour, such as parental dynamics, privation of a caring relationship between mother and son, exposure to violence in the neighborhood and television programs and discontentment towards school.

In what concerns to the preventive strategies, the results show an increased investment on strategies focused on teacher/student relationship.

On the other hand, as regards to the punitive strategies, the results achieved provide evidences that the investment is largely made on strategies focused in the classroom dynamics.

Therefore there is an evidently disinvestment on strategies focused on cooperation with other educational partners.

Additionally, with regard to the way teachers deal with aggressive behavior of their pupils, the majority of them self-assess as having a positive impact on the social relationships of their pupils, because they encourage the respect for the other and enhance positive behaviors. They strive to be role models and to moderate the learning process of social skills.

Nonetheless, only a small number of teachers observed improvements as regard to the pupil's behaviors. Those improvements are deeply connected to the investment in preventive strategies. On the other hand, this indicates that the improvements in students' social behavior occurs with less incidence when teachers apply punitive strategies to manage aggressive behaviors.

Teachers pointed out the lack of communication and collaboration between family and school, to justify the absence of success with regard to changing the behavior of their students. They feel alone in the struggle against aggression and point out the dysfunctional family dynamics as an obstacle to the changing behavior.

## 6. Discussion

In this study the concept of attitude is defined as a set of beliefs, opinions and feelings of kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade teachers regarding the problem of aggression in schools. It was confirmed that the way teachers feel, think and react against the aggression influences aggressive behavior in children. This indicates that the attitude of teachers towards aggression is a potential predictor of their behavior towards the attitudinal object, which in the present case is the child's aggressive behavior. The identification of teachers with an offensive and destructive attitude towards aggressive behavior led us to say that the way the teachers deals with the aggression in their classrooms is strongly influenced by their attitude towards aggression as well as there is a strong probability of teachers be aggressive towards the aggressive behavior of their pupils, according to Reflected Action Theory and Planned Behavior Theory. It was found that prevails among teachers an adverse opinion about aggressiveness. In their point of view, aggression is an abnormal

behavior, so non adaptive and misfit that aims to cause damage to another deliberately.

This research has confirmed the presence of aggressive behaviors in classrooms. It is an disturbing outcome, because prior studies stated that the presence of aggressive behavior non adaptive in such an early age is a strong predictor of social and emotional maladjustment in adulthood, besides several longitudinal studies had shown that aggressive behavior is relatively stable during childhood and adolescence, revealing to be more constant when compared to other behavioral patterns.

There is an understanding among teachers that the phenomenon of aggression in schools is increasing. It is important to enhance that sometimes teachers agree to the fact that school plays a role on the intensification of aggressive behavior, mostly because it doesn't know how to manage it properly. These results are similar to the ones' achieved in prior studies.

In fact, aggression is a product of internal and external factors to school. In order to explain and justify the aggressive behavior that took place in their classrooms, teachers mostly pointed out exogenous causes to the school and to themselves.

This reveals that teachers admit the existence of the aggression problem, but do not consider themselves part of the problem as well as do not recognize that their attitude towards aggression also contributes to the growth of child's aggressive behavior along with other factors.

Early childhood is the perfect period to prevent aggressive behavior. The study has shown us that teachers do implement strategies to prevent aggression, mostly the clarification of the rules and expectations towards the child, the preservation of a safe and positive relationship with the child, to compliment positive behaviors and to encourage positive behavior in solving conflict situations.

In cases in which the aggressive behavioral patterns are established, teachers implement punitive strategies such as verbal warning, elucidate the child about the feelings of others (victim), remember and enhance classroom rules, gradually eliminate privileges, elucidate the child about the consequences of his behavior and apply the loose of playground time, replaced it with school work.

Nevertheless the efficiency of punitive strategies is questionable, because its nature is based on coercive, punitive and inconsistent measures, whose effect is the maintenance of aggressive behavior. By applying punitive

strategies teachers are intensifying the aggressive behavior rather than decrease it. On the other hand, the fact that the majority of teachers identify themselves with an offensive and destructive attitude towards aggression is relevant in the implementation of punitive strategies.

In order to overcome the aggressive pattern, it is important that there is a systemic and ecological intervention focused on the family and the school.

However, as we already stated this study show us a lower number of teachers that invest in strategies focused on cooperation with other educational partners, which includes the family. From this fact we can infer that teachers diminish this aspect of intervention. This outcome goes against those surveyed in prior studies, which highlight that a healthy relationship between school and family is important in the prevention of aggressive behavior.

The constant changes in society require that, as part of their initial training, teachers acquire and develop skills in order to enable them to prevent and manage aggressive behavior in classrooms. Likewise, throughout their carrier, they must invest in training in order to reactivate teaching and practices expertise, focused on change and innovation.

Our study reveals that teachers who haven't attended training sessions to manage and deal with aggressive behavior, have higher values in terms of the frequency with which they observed these behaviors. They acknowledged that the lack of training sessions is a serious limitation on his performance. The recognition of their training frailties suggests that teachers show interest in attend specific training in order to improve their capacity to manage pupils' aggressive behavior in an effective way.

We found out that the frequency of observation of aggressive behavior in the classroom was lower in kindergarten, when compared to the frequency of observation that occurred in the 1st grade.

Previous studies reviewed at literature point out the Inverted U Theory to explain and justify the result achieved. According to this theory highest peak of aggression occurs in early adolescence, following a period in which the aggression will increase in childhood, followed by a stage of adolescence where aggression decreases [17].

It also demonstrates that teachers with 7 to 18 years of professional experience are the ones who observed less frequently aggressive behavior by

their pupils, followed by teachers with 19 to 30 years professional experience.

## 7. Conclusion

The present research aimed to ascertain if the teacher's profile is correlated to aggressive behavior exhibited by their pupils. We found significant differences between the teacher's attitudes and the aggressive behavior of pupils displayed in the classroom, plus between the preventive and punitive strategies and aggressive behavior of pupils and significant association between the formative needs of teachers and the aggressive behavior of their pupils as well as between the professional situation, level of education, years of service and the level of aggressive behavior of pupils.

These outcomes aim to contribute to the analysis, discussion and reflection around the problem of aggression in school, with the purpose of aiding teachers in the management of aggressive behaviors in their classroom. Also, leads to the need for further research on aggressive behavior in schools. Therefore, in what concerns to teachers we suggest a line of research that studies the influence of work stress, job instability, increase in the teaching component, excessive bureaucracy in the teaching process, job satisfaction and motivation, constant curricular changes towards the student's aggressive behavior.

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