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Predisposing risk factors influencing the behaviour of suspended learners

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Abstract

With the study reported on here, we explored the predisposing risk factors that influence learners' challenging behaviour, which may result in them being suspended from school. Learners who have been suspended from school are more likely to display unacceptable challenging behaviour and are often misunderstood. Consequently, these learners do not benefit from academic success, social inclusion, or appropriate intervention that promotes health. In this article, we propose that the social context of suspended learners has a major impact on factors related to their behavioural challenges. The study was qualitative in nature, using an interpretive paradigm from a constructivist perspective. The study sample was 12 learners from previously underprivileged environments. A thematic analysis of data drawn from the participants' biographical details and their responses was done to categorise and interpret the data to develop themes. Identifying the risk factors behind behavioural issues is vital for shaping effective interventions and enhancing resilience-building theory and practice. The research was conducted within a limited geographical and demographic context, which may have affected the generalisability of the findings to broader populations or different educational systems. The findings of this study underscore that the resilience of suspended learners, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds, is not forged in isolation but is cultivated by the collective efforts of the ecosystems in which they find themselves.

Keywords: challenging behaviour; out-of-school suspension; resilience; risks; single parents; underprivileged

Introduction

Suspending learners from school because of unacceptable behavioural issues remains a widespread and continuous practice. This reality shows entrenched disciplinary norms and systemic challenges in addressing the root causes of learners' misconduct (Stephen, 2024). Research shows that both in-school and out-of-school suspensions are still commonly used across educational settings, often disproportionately affecting marginalised learner populations (Cohen, Lewis, Eddy, Henry, Hodgson, Huang, Reinke & Herman, 2023). Behaviour problems portrayed by some vulnerable learners raise questions to understand why exposure to adversity produces negative outcomes for some adolescents, even after the implementation of support strategies such as access to school counsellors, psychologists, mentorship and peer support. Reports on learner misconduct in schools have alerted politicians and policymakers about the issue of school disruption, which has elicited increased scrutiny and engagement with policy (Howlett, 2020; Shava & Mazenda, 2021). These reports have served as a catalyst for heightened political and administrative attention, prompting calls for more effective governance, ethical leadership, and systemic reform in the public sector, which includes education (Shava & Mazenda, 2021). Howlett (2020) indicates that the reports have resulted in education departments reviewing disciplinary frameworks.

The suspended learners in this study were adolescents in the developmental stage of identity versus role confusion (Erikson, 1963). Their most important life task was to consolidate different elements of childhood and form a clear personal identity for adulthood (Branje, De Moor, Spitzer & Becht, 2021). Blakemore (2019) argues that adolescence is a time of change: changes to hormones and the body, changes in the social environment, and changes to the brain and the mind. Successfully resolving this conflict leads to a clear and cohesive identity (Varga, 2021), while unresolved identity issues may result in confusion and role difficulties (Azunwena, Lilly & Osima, 2022).

Generally, behavioural problems of out-of-school suspended learners are regarded as a matter of discipline and classroom management. Little recognition is given to the fact that learners may have opinions that could significantly affect how they handle social and behavioural issues (Cohen et al., 2023). Research consistently shows that suspended learners are more likely to exhibit emotional distress, poor academic engagement, and strained relationships with teachers and peers (Pyne, 2019; Quin, 2019). These behavioural manifestations are not isolated incidents but are often rooted in systemic vulnerabilities such as family dysfunction, exposure to community violence, and inadequate mental health support (Belle, 2017; Pyne, 2019). Pyne (2019) indicates that suspension from school may exacerbate these issues by severing learners from protective school-based relationships and routines, thereby reinforcing cycles of alienation and antisocial behaviour.

Many teachers and schools are unsure about the proper disciplinary action to take without violating learners' rights. Rubbi Nunan and Ntombela (2019) contend that teachers in South African schools struggle to uphold learner discipline. Zondo and Mncube (2022) highlight the necessity for the South African government to introduce constructive forms of learner discipline in the form of a code of conduct for learners. They further indicate that the effective implementation of positive discipline entails the prevention of indiscipline, and thrives on the use of proactive, empowering, and cooperative approaches in managing or curbing unwanted behaviour. Literature shows many important gaps, especially regarding the understanding of how interlocking risk variables

lead to behavioural escalation and disciplinary exclusion (Cole, McCluskey, Daniels, Thompson & Tawell, 2019; Quin, 2019). Given the limited understanding of the most effective ways for teachers to incorporate diversity in the classroom, we believe that this knowledge would be crucial for policymakers and teacher education institutions. The study is founded on the conceptual framework from Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2001, 2004), suggesting that fostering positive emotional experiences can help learners develop the internal resources needed to manage stress, regulate emotions, and make constructive behavioural choices. In addition, Belle (2017) suggests that the school principal should also teach socio-emotional values at regular morning assembly, and the teachers should do so in their classroom. Thus, to address learner behaviour in schools, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions offers a complementary and holistic framework that supports both prevention and the development of resilience. The main research question in this study was: What are the predisposing risk factors influencing the behaviour of suspended learners?

Literature Review

The behaviour of suspended learners has raised increasing global attention in educational research due to its implications for academic achievement, school climate, and long-term social outcomes (Bell & Puckett, 2023; Matsebele, 2020). With the literature review presented here we explored the predisposing risk factors that influence such behaviour, with a focus on individual, familial, and environmental determinants. Understanding these factors is essential for developing effective interventions aimed at reducing school suspensions and promoting positive behavioural outcomes.

School suspension is a disruption in the lives of many adolescents, and several factors, which coincide with adolescence, require or provide the support needed to recover from this disruption and attack against their sense of social connectedness. Social connectedness hinges on the quality of relationships that young people form in an environment and the degree to which those relationships elicit favourable attitudes and positive affect (Henderson, Baker, Goings & Gordon-Littréan, 2017). This topic is critically important, as some learners continue to display inappropriate behaviour despite the presence of formal disciplinary procedures (Erdem & Koçyiğit, 2019). A growing body of research suggests that punitive measures, such as suspension and expulsion, often fail to address the underlying causes of misconduct. Instead of resolving behavioural challenges, these approaches may intensify them by alienating learners and limiting their access to supportive educational environments.

Studies show that when a child grows up in a household with inadequate or inconsistent parenting, a single-parent family (Lut, Woodman, Armitage, Ingram Harron & Hardelid, 2021; Romm & Metzger, 2021), or parental abandonment (Marici, Clipa, Runcan & Pirghie, 2023), they might not have the resources and skills necessary to deal with difficult situations or successfully manage their emotions (Sanders, Turner & Metzler, 2019). Zhang (2020) argues that such learners may face disadvantages in terms of educational attainment, emotional stability, and long-term economic prospects. Abandonment refers to a situation where a child is intentionally left behind, openly or secretly, by a parent who has no intention of returning (Marici et al., 2023). This may lead to both physical and psychological damage, as the child may feel unloved and unwanted (Marici et al., 2023; Rees, Beeber, Sampson & Lietz, 2023), leading to problematic behaviour like impulsivity, violence, or defiance (Muhliawati & Purwadi, 2023).

The body of research underscores the critical role of stable, nurturing parenting in shaping children's emotional, behavioural, and developmental trajectories (Banaag, Sumodevilla & Potane, 2024; Quin, 2019). A lack of stable caregiving, whether due to inadequate parenting, the challenges of single-parent households, or abandonment, may significantly hinder a child's emotional and behavioural development. This calls for urgent systemic interventions and support mechanisms to reduce these risks and promote healthier developmental trajectories for vulnerable adolescents (Cuartas, Salazar, Backhaus, Little, McCoy, Yoshikawa, Bass, Metheny & Knaul, 2024). Research shows that when learners understand what is expected of them academically and behaviourally, they are more likely to engage positively in school environments, demonstrating improved motivation and participation (Smith, Reinke, Herman & Huang, 2019). However, when expectations are ambiguous or inconsistently enforced, they may feel uncertain or powerless, which may lead to frustration, disengagement, and acting out (Khanyile & Mpuangnan, 2023; Kianinezhad, 2024).

Equipping parents with effective parenting strategies plays a vital role in fostering positive parent-child relationships and promoting pro-social behaviour in children. Research suggests that when parents are supported through education and guidance, they are better positioned to nurture emotional well-being and behavioural development in their children (Balantekin, Anzman-Frasca, Francis, Ventura, Fisher & Johnson, 2020; Lumadi, 2019; Twum-Antwi, Jefferies & Ungar, 2020). Conversely, research conducted by Muhliawati and Purwadi (2023) demonstrates that while peer pressure has a major impact on the occurrence of disruptive behaviour, a permissive parenting style

only slightly influences disruptive behaviour. While permissive parenting is often linked to behavioural issues, research shows that peer pressure may have a stronger influence on adolescents' misconduct (Mkhize, Shangase & Cinini, 2023). This suggests that youths may adopt values at home but behave differently in peer-driven settings. As a result, interventions should not only focus on families but also address peer group dynamics and school environments, with resilience playing a key role in helping adolescents resist negative peer influences. This opens important avenues for exploring resilience as a protective factor that may help adolescents navigate peer pressure more effectively.

Suspended learners often face emotional dysregulation, social isolation, and academic disengagement. These challenges may be mitigated by intentionally cultivating positive emotional experiences that activate the broaden-and-build process. Using the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001, 2004) offers a powerful framework for fostering resilience among out-of-school suspended learners. This theory posits that positive emotions such as joy, interest, and gratitude broaden individuals' momentary thought-action repertoires, enabling them to build enduring personal resources, including psychological resilience, social connections, and cognitive flexibility (Fredrickson, 2004). According to Fredrickson's model of positive emotions (2001, 2004), these broadening and building processes are believed to help promote or even lead to increased experiences of well-being. When adolescents overcome setbacks and problems, it builds their confidence and helps them feel more capable the next time a problem arises (Anderson, Beach, Jacovidis & Chadwick, 2020). Resilience is about the process of becoming, which children understand once they develop a firm belief about their place in the world. Overall, resilience is important because it helps people, communities, and systems to thrive in the face of adversity, manage stress and uncertainty, and continue to develop and improve over time.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to obtain valid research findings by engaging with participants in their natural setting, to understand their definitions, meanings, perceptions, and recognising them as experts in their own lives (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). A qualitative approach was followed, within the interpretive paradigm, focusing on how they define and perceive emotional support, discipline, and care in the absence of stable parental figures. We explored their interpretations of abandonment, their coping mechanisms, and their views on the effectiveness of school and community interventions, as guided by the research question. The objective was to explore and understand the

complex nature of participants' experiences of the world in which they live (Creswell, 2013).

This article draws from a broader case study by Methi (2019), focusing specifically on the behavioural risks associated with suspended learners. The study was conducted in two high schools located in the Tshwane North and Tshwane South districts of the Gauteng province of South Africa. The schools were deliberately selected to reflect contextual and geographic diversity. School A is a former English-medium institution situated in a historically white, suburban community, while School B is in a different district. Despite these differences, most learners from both schools reside in the same marginalised township. This shared socio-economic background allowed us to isolate and examine the influence of school-specific factors such as institutional culture, resource availability, and disciplinary practices on learner behaviour. The contrasting school environments, combined with a common community context, provide a valuable lens for exploring how institutional settings shape adolescent experiences and conduct.

A total of 12 adolescents, aged 14 to 18, were purposefully selected from two secondary schools. The selection criteria included repeated suspensions and grade repetition (Grades 8 and 9), as identified from school disciplinary records. Participants were chosen based on their availability, willingness to participate, and proximity to the research site, aligning with purposive sampling principles (Obilor, 2023). While 10 learners consented to participate, two declined. Notably, only one female learner in School A, who declined to participate, had a history of multiple suspensions, and no female participants were identified in School B, suggesting a potential gap in gendered trends in disciplinary practices. Although parents and teachers were invited to a debriefing session, the data presented in this article are drawn solely from the learners' accounts.

Data were generated from learners' responses to the following research questions through semi-structured interviews:

- a) Describe your family circumstances.
- b) What are the offences that led to your suspension from school?
- c) What is your understanding of the concept of resilience?

Participatory observation to gain a deeper, contextual understanding of behaviour, relationships, and meanings, and field notes were also used to triangulate the collected data. All interviews were conducted in the participant's home language (i.e., Sepedi), audio-recorded, transcribed and translated for analysis. We reviewed data from verbatim transcripts of audio recordings inductively to identify themes and subthemes that emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The discussion of themes, subthemes and categories was supported with the aid

of quotations from the relevant reviewed literature as well as the theoretical history of the study.

Yin (2011) suggests that multiple sources of evidence are required as a basis for trustworthiness and credibility. It involves combining different approaches or data collection techniques to enhance the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of findings. Multiple methods of data collection were used in this research, including open-ended semi-structured interviews, field notes, and analysis of relevant documents to gain an articulate, comprehensive view of the phenomenon and to reinforce the rigour of the study. Examining different data sets helped us to ensure that the findings were not based on only one source, thereby strengthening the credibility and robustness of the conclusions. It also helped us to mitigate the limitations of any single approach and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Ethics and Consent

This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa, Ref: 2017/09/13/04229509/17/MC. Ethical issues were considered to ensure that the research procedure did not harm the participants physically, emotionally, mentally, or psychologically. None of the learners were persuaded to participate against their will, and of the 12 learners identified, only 10 were willing to participate. All participants were given the opportunity to consent to the study as is required, and pseudonyms were used to safeguard participant's anonymity. Participants were assured, orally and in writing, of the confidentiality and their anonymity in the study. Data were gathered and stored in a secure environment.

Findings

In this section, we present the research findings regarding predisposed risks that influence challenging behaviour in the context of out-of-school suspension. We used quotations from the empirical data to highlight important concerns raised by suspended learners and interpret these in the context of enhancing their care and support. Out-of-school suspended learners responded to questions on their understanding of the concept of resilience and obstacles that prevented them from being resilient as learners. Suspended learners were also required to briefly describe their family circumstances and the offences that led to them being suspended from school. The following themes were identified from the data:

- family dynamics;
- socio-economic status;
- the nature of behavioural problems; and
- suspension as a disciplinary measure.

Family Dynamics

In the individual interviews, we asked the learners about their family history to understand their contextual circumstances. In telling their stories, the participants revealed their unique personalities and family histories. The findings indicate that half of the 12 participants who exhibited problematic behaviour were influenced by a range of challenging family circumstances, including experiences of abandonment, being raised by a single parent, or the loss of a parent. Others were living with grandparents or extended family members due to various personal or socio-economic reasons.

Thabo, Sam, Peter, and Tom commented about not staying with both parents.

I stay with my grandmother and uncles because my mother moved out to stay with her partner (boyfriend) (Thabo, School B).

Now I live with my stepfather, but he and my mother do not stay together, and they are not married (Sam, School B).

It hurts to live without your parents around you (Thabo, School B).

I am staying with my aunt, my sister and my five siblings. My mom's children are three and two and are not staying with us ... (Peter, School A).

I am from a single-parent family. There are six of us, and I am the second-born. My parents are not married. My mother is unemployed, and she supports us with the grant money (John, School B).

I live with my mother, but my father has passed away. I stay with my mother, my brother and my twin. So, there are four of us in the house. My brother is in Grade 12, and my twin brother is in Grade 9. My father passed away in 2009. My mother is unemployed, and when my father was alive, he gave us everything that we needed. We are now suffering at home. (Tom, School B)

I have anger because of the loss of my mother and my stepmother (Paul, School A).

These heartfelt stories reveal the deep emotional and practical challenges faced by children growing up in diverse and often difficult family circumstances. Whether it's the absence of parents, the pain of loss, or the struggle to make ends meet, each child carries a unique burden shaped by their environment. Despite these hardships, their voices echo a shared longing for stability, love, and support. Their experiences remind us of the importance of compassion, community, and the need to create nurturing spaces where every child feels seen, heard, and valued.

Socio-economic Status

A widely accepted definition of socio-economic status (SES) is described as the social standing or class of an individual or group, typically measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation (American Psychological Association, 2024). Families need some support in terms of

finances and access to health care and education to provide for their children; some families may benefit from more focused parenting support or child support grants (Department of Social Development, 2012). During the analysis of the data, we found that only five parents were employed. Peter, Tom, and Paul confirmed that their parents received child support grants.

My mother gets a child grant for me and my brother and gives it to my aunt to buy food for us; we do not go to sleep without eating (Peter, School A).

My mother gets money for a grant, but she does not buy anything for us, she buys alcohol with his [sic] boyfriend. My grandmother is the one who buys food for us with her pension money (Thabo, School B).

She does get SASSA [South African Social Security Agency] money for us ... I personally do not see what she does with it (Tom, School B).

The participants' opinions on the function of social grants in their homes were diverse. In his positive narrative, Peter highlighted the critical role of the child support grant in providing food security, claiming that it keeps his family from going to bed hungry. Paul and Tom, on the other hand, expressed worry about the improper use of this cash. According to Tom, his grandma is left to care for him while his mother spends the grant money on drinking with her companion. Paul also expressed doubt about the effectiveness of the grant, stating that he did not see any real advantage from it. These accounts highlight the potential of social assistance programmes as well as their shortcomings in meeting the needs of at-risk children.

The Nature of Behaviour Problems

We observed learners smoking publicly on the school premises during our field visits. The lack of classroom supervision was also noted as learners roamed around the schoolyard aimlessly. Bunking classes, gambling and smoking in the restrooms seemed to be the norm. When asked to describe the behaviour for which they were charged, the respondents responded as follows.

We gamble in the classroom whenever there is no teacher (Sipho, School B).

I bunk classes most of the time, I go to the toilet, and we gamble. I do that every day because we want to get money to buy lunch. Teachers do not come to our toilets (Thomas, School A).

I took other children's money because I was desperate for money. If they refuse to give me, I threaten to bite them. I am naughty at school; I hit other children. Sometimes we would fight at school. Sometimes, we as school children would swear at schoolteachers. (Sipho, School B)

Sometimes I get into trouble because a lot of people trouble me, so I retaliate, I fight with them and then when we go to the discipline teacher's office, he wants to make a joke of me and talk about my father. (Simon, School A)

Based on our data analysis, the learners' accounts reveal a troubling pattern of behavioural issues at school, especially when unsupervised.

Unfortunately, some peer groups take on anti-social behaviour that reinforce delinquent behaviour. The findings thus highlight disciplinary issues at school, emotional distress, and behavioural challenges among the learners. The learners' actions reflect a cry for help and a need for structured support systems at school and at home.

Suspension as a Disciplinary Measure

Exclusionary discipline, such as suspension, expulsion, or public shaming, can damage a young person's self-esteem and sense of belonging. Adolescents are in a critical stage of identity formation, and being excluded can lead to feelings of rejection, worthlessness, and alienation. Job and Simon commented on how they felt about being suspended from school.

It makes me feel like I don't have dignity and I don't listen. I think sweeping classes will be a better punishment (Job, School A).

It is not nice to stay at home when other children are at school. The only thing you do is sleep, eat, and watch TV [television] the whole day (Simon, School A).

Job's and Simon's voices highlighted the emotional toll and perceived ineffectiveness of exclusionary disciplinary practices such as suspension. Job expressed a loss of dignity and suggested that constructive tasks like sweeping classrooms would be more meaningful. Simon, on the other hand, described the isolation and lack of purpose which resulted from being suspended from school. These insights suggest that punitive measures may not only fail to correct behaviour but also deepen feelings of disconnection and low self-worth.

Discussion

The participants' responses provided holistic information regarding the lived experiences of out-of-school suspended learners, how they were being misunderstood, and the way they were treated at home, school, and in their communities. For adolescents to navigate contextual circumstances, they need social support from their family, the school, and the community.

The study revealed that six of the suspended learner participants were affected by abandonment and single parenthood, three were raised by their grandmothers, and only one was from a nuclear family; the other two refused to participate in the study. Rees et al. (2023) allude that stress-inducing elements in a single-parenting environment include an abundance of parental responsibilities and tasks or a lack of family support. For single parents, this can be devastating because they must constantly be accessible to meet their children's emotional needs without sacrificing their own needs and emotions (Chanda & Pujar, 2019; Dean, Churchill & Ruppner, 2022). The study revealed a range of emotional, psychological, and physical challenges due to the absence of consistent parental care and

support (Chauke & Mudau, 2019; Mwinzi, 2022; Rees et al., 2023). These challenges may manifest as behavioural issues, reduced motivation, difficulty concentrating and a negative impact on academic performance (Davis, 2023).

We found that the adolescents in question were predominantly raised by grandparents and extended family members. Grandparents often provide a familiar and emotionally supportive environment, which plays a crucial role in preserving the child's sense of identity and continuity (Nwanmuoh, Dibua & Friday, 2024). Such familial involvement can serve as a stabilising force, particularly for children who have endured trauma or neglect (Balantekin et al., 2020). However, children who experience abandonment or emotional neglect frequently carry unresolved feelings of rejection into adolescence and early adulthood. These emotional wounds may hinder the development of effective coping mechanisms and emotional regulation skills (Marici et al., 2023; Sanders et al., 2019). This aligns with existing research suggesting that unresolved emotional distress can adversely affect mental health and overall well-being, potentially manifesting in problematic behaviour such as impulsivity, aggression, or defiance (Cohen et al., 2023; Muhliawati & Purwadi, 2023).

Circumstances beyond their control force many parents to raise children alone. A single-parent family is an asymmetrical family structure consisting of a single parent and his/her child/children, because of either the death of the other parent, divorce, one of the parents leaving the family, or the parents' decision not to get married (Varga, 2021). The results reveal that adolescents from single-parent families are more prone to behavioural problems. This aligns with research that shows that children living in single-parent households have more mental and physical health problems than those living in two-parent households (Lut et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that not all single mothers can provide emotional and social support for their children. Contrary to the challenges of single parenthood highlighted by Lut et al. (2021), Beasley, Jespersen, Morris, Farra and Hays-Grudo (2022) indicate that many single mothers can provide a nurturing and supportive environment for their children, despite the challenges they may face.

The data make it clear that the risk factors faced by out-of-school suspended learners were more severe than anticipated. Thus, the challenges that learners face regarding basic needs and their parents' unemployment may all be attributed to poverty (Noltemeyer, James, Bush, Bergen, Barrios & Patton, 2021). From our field notes it was clear that some learners received food from the government feeding scheme, and some received child support grants (CSG). Additionally, research underscores the significance of accessible support

systems, including government assistance programmes, community organisations, and family networks, in alleviating these challenges (Rees et al., 2023). This aligns with the feeling of belonging of individuals and having relationships that elicit favourable attitudes and positive affect (Henderson et al., 2017).

The findings also show that, in efforts to manage financial hardship, many single mothers cohabitated with long-term partners. Kuppens and Ceulemans (2019) argue that such decisions are often shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including economic constraints, limited access to social support networks, and challenges in securing affordable and safe housing. However, Foran, Mueller, Schulz and Hahlweg (2022) posit that it is important to acknowledge that not all cohabiting relationships involving single mothers are detrimental; many such partnerships contribute positively to the well-being and development of children. For example, in most European countries, non-marital cohabitation has developed into a socially accepted alternative for individuals in close relationships (Foran et al., 2022). Similarly, in the United States of America (USA), non-marital cohabitation is often viewed as a stepping stone to marriage (Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

The study revealed that emotional instability within the families of out-of-school suspended learners, coupled with a lack of effective coping mechanisms, was a significant underlying factor contributing to the behavioural violation that led to their suspension. These learners often struggled with emotional regulation, possessed limited coping strategies, faced academic challenges, and experienced difficulties in forming and maintaining social relationships (Mouatsou & Koutra, 2023). Resilience emerges as a critical factor in how single parents and their children navigate and recover from adversity. The development of resilience is closely linked to the cultivation of emotional regulation skills, problem-solving abilities, positive parenting practices, and the availability of social support systems (Cherian, 2024; Fredrickson, 2004). Research consistently shows that individuals who effectively regulate their emotions are better equipped to adapt to stress and are more likely to exhibit resilient behaviour (Mouatsou & Koutra, 2023). While emotional, physical, and mental stress are symptomatic of chronic and unresolved traumatic stress and can significantly impair psychological growth and disrupt normal functioning, fostering resilience through targeted emotional regulation strategies is essential for promoting well-being and reducing the risk of maladaptive behaviour among out-of-school suspended learners (Fredrickson, 2004; Gomez-Baya & Gillham, 2019).

The observational and interview data collected during field visits to Schools A and B revealed a

deeply concerning pattern of behavioural disruption and emotional distress among learners. Substance abuse, gambling and smoking were found to be rife in school B, while challenging family dynamics were identified in both schools. Studies show that adolescents may use substances as a form of self-medication to cope with unresolved emotional pain or identity-related stress (Azunwena et al., 2022), and such behaviours put them at risk of being suspended or expelled from school (Quin, 2019). This behaviour is not isolated and appears to be normalised within peer groups, suggesting the development of informal subcultures that reinforce deviant norms. The findings point to a school environment where supervisory gaps and a lack of structured engagement have created space for anti-social behaviour to flourish.

Out-of-school suspension as a disciplinary measure for challenging behaviour has been shown to negatively affect adolescents' development. Even though minor misbehaviour is common during adolescence, it is still punishable in schools throughout the world. Alternative disciplinary measures that include a verbal warning, a time out, letter writing, an oral apology, the child's name being recorded in the discipline register, withdrawal of privileges, detention, signing of a disciplinary or behavioural contract, were democratically introduced (Zondo & Mncube, 2022). Some teachers issued official infractions to learners for minor transgressions as part of a punitive disciplinary strategy, which is a minor punishment probably intended to deter future problem behaviour (Tiwari, 2019). Zondo and Mncube (2022) strongly emphasise that to effectively address the suspension of learners, schools and districts need to work together with experts who can assist learners with behavioural concerns and take responsibility for more than just administering tests and filing reports that focus on minimum proficiency levels. They maintain and recommend that schools should ensure that a democratically agreed-upon code of conduct is drawn up to help teachers address indiscipline amongst learners. Interestingly, this correlation is related to the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, which states that schools must prioritise motivating learners to act responsibly rather than dismissing them from the classroom when they misbehave, unless all other measures have been tried and proven unsuccessful (Republic of South Africa, 1996). To achieve this goal, the school system must sustain a culture and atmosphere where all children feel secure, supported, and respected and where decorum and order are expected standards of behaviour (Tiwari, 2019).

Limitations

While this study provides meaningful insight into the behavioural challenges faced by suspended learners, several limitations must be acknowledged

to contextualise the findings. Firstly, the research was conducted within a specific geographic and demographic setting, which may limit the extent to which the results can be generalised to broader or more diverse educational environments. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from learners introduced potential biases, including memory inaccuracies and the influence of social desirability. The study also reflects a single point in time, offering limited insight into long-term behavioural patterns or the sustained impact of interventions. Moreover, learner behaviour is shaped by a complex web of interrelated factors, individual, familial, and systemic, that may not be fully captured within the scope of this research. Finally, while the findings advocate for collaborative and resource-driven support systems, such approaches may not be feasible in under-resourced or fragmented contexts, which could affect the practical application of the recommendations made.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study we explored the predisposed risks that influence behaviour in the context of out-of-school suspended learners. Out-of-school suspended learners who participated in this study were observed to have cognitive, emotional, and social needs, which manifested in behaviour problems. We found scant research on single-parenting challenges of learners in under-resourced township schools. Single parenting may have devastating psychological effects, as the single parent must always be available to meet their children's and their own emotional and other needs. We contend that addressing predisposed risks that influence challenging behaviour holds a moral value and aligns with a preventive approach to behaviour management. By addressing risk factors early on, interventions can be implemented proactively, reducing the likelihood and severity of challenging behaviour. This may lead to improved overall well-being, better social integration, and enhanced quality of life for individuals involved.

In conclusion, we posit that by advancing care and support in addressing predisposed risks influencing the challenging behaviour of out-of-school suspended learners, educational institutions may create a supportive and inclusive environment that facilitates growth, resilience, and positive outcomes for all learners. Teachers should possess the necessary skills to help identify predisposed risks early, before they develop into troublesome behaviour, and to proactively plan appropriate intervention. To educate teachers, capacity-building sessions with the Department of Education, the Department of Social Development, and school social workers at district offices should be a top priority. Furthermore, we recommend that learners who are suspended should take part in a

behaviour management programme to analyse their behaviour, identify their problems, and receive any further help they might need to become resilient. Their families could be included in the process to create and strengthen strategies for behaviour control and support at home and school. Lastly, it is recommended that, in addition to providing resources, the community, family, and school collaborate. We propose a survey of the experiences of single parenthood in the larger community to gain a baseline understanding of the challenges experienced and to inform planning for the future.

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Authors' Contributions

LMM collected data and wrote the first draft of the article. LDNT assisted with critical reading and the literature review. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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