

Exploring teachers' experiences of the eco-systemic factors creating fear in young South African children

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ABSTRACT

South African children are exposed to social ills such as crime, unemployment, poverty, violence, divorce and neglect, which cause high levels of fear and insecurity. The study used Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory to investigate teachers' perspectives of the eco-systemic factors creating fear in the foundation phase learners. Semi-structured interviews were used in this qualitative approach. Six teachers, two from each of a low, a middle, and a high socioeconomic status school in Pretoria, participated in the open-ended questions. The results highlighted that bullying, negligence, violence, and COVID-19 created fear in young children. The findings suggest that exposure to fearful situations interferes with the well-being of young children and their ability to learn effectively. Teachers' lack of competencies in supporting children to cope with fear adds to the low participation of learners in the classroom. Therefore, teachers need adequate training during pre- and in-service training to support learners. The study foregrounds teachers' voices from three different SES and highlights the importance of using a systematic approach to explore teachers' experiences of the ecological factors that create fear in young South African children.

Keywords: COVID-19, Eco-systemic Factors, Fear, Teachers, Young Children, Violence.

INTRODUCTION

The South African context in which young children grow up in a "risk society" that exposes them to social ills such as unemployment, poverty, a high crime rate, violence and divorce.¹ Research shows that more than 15 million children in South Africa live in circumstances that expose them to poverty.² Williams et al. postulate that young children exposed to poverty often live in informal settlements and unsafe housing with limited financial resources, including food, education, healthcare services, proper sanitation and clean running water.³

Moreover, the Department of Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) showed that the 2021 unemployment rate was almost 34.4%, illustrating that approximately 12 million people were without

¹ Miemsie Steyn and Melanie Moen, "Drawing Sadness: What Are Young Children Telling Us?," *Early Child Development and Care* 189, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 79–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1301936>.

² Jennifer W Kaminski et al., "Behavioral and Socioemotional Outcomes through Age 5 Years of the Legacy for Children Public Health Approach to Improving Developmental Outcomes among Children Born into Poverty," *American Journal of Public Health* 103, no. 6 (2013): 1058–66.

³ David Samuel Williams et al., "Vulnerability of Informal Settlements in the Context of Rapid Urbanization and Climate Change," *Environment and Urbanization* 31, no. 1 (April 28, 2019): 157–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247818819694>.

jobs.⁴ Additionally, approximately 46% of the adult population in this country lives below the poverty line, and nearly 25% of households experience food insecurity.⁵ In this regard, Rossouw maintains that more than 32 million South Africans are beneficiaries of social grants, of which young children are estimated at 12.5 million.⁶ Furthermore, 9 million children receive a nutritious meal once a day in schools supplied by the South African government, clearly illustrating that every fifth child in South Africa suffers from starvation and undernutrition.⁷ Sandstrom and Huerta argue that for “young children to develop to their full potential, they need safe and stable housing, adequate and nutritious food, access to medical care, secure relationships with adult caregivers, nurturing and responsive parenting, and high-quality learning opportunities at home, in childcare settings and in school”.⁸

Smith states that crime in South Africa is alarming, with an estimated 1.2 million individuals experiencing housebreaking during 2019-2020.⁹ On the other hand, home robbery accounts for 169,000 incidents.¹⁰ Moreover, the incidents of personal property theft are estimated at 1.1 million occurrences.¹¹ Darling-Churchill and Lippman argue that young children need a safe and secure environment to fully develop their potential.¹² Therefore, many young children in South Africa live in unsafe and insecure environments with limited privacy, exposing them to community violence that leads to experiences of intense and constant feelings of fear.¹³ Guerra and Dierkhising claim that “repeated exposure to community violence contributes to problems forming positive and trusting relationships necessary for children to explore their environment and develop a secure sense of self”.¹⁴

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that approximately one billion children below the age of 18 years are victims of violence, including child neglect and physical, sexual and emotional abuse.¹⁵ Young children of both genders are at equal risk of exposure to abuse, while Hillis et al. state that approximately 120 million girls worldwide have been victims of rape.¹⁶ Witnessing violence is detrimental to young children’s emotional well-being, regardless of the severity of pain and harm. It restricts their sense of self-worth and influences the experience of fearful emotion and insecurity.¹⁷ Dolan acknowledges that violence against young children is inevitable, as it occurs at the hands of parents/caregivers and familiar perpetrators close to young children. Dolan concludes that the home is the most threatening setting for children.¹⁸

Approximately 3.3 to 10 million South African children witness incidents of violence in their homes.¹⁹ Parents who are victims of violence spend a significant amount of time striving to survive violence to the extent that they struggle to meet the emotional needs of young children, manifested in inadequate care and protection and low warmth; therefore, children experience fear of neglect and harm.

⁴ Department of Statistics South Africa., *Unemployment Rate from in South Africa 2002 to 2021* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2021).

⁵ Department of Statistics South Africa., *Unemployment Rate from in South Africa 2002 to 2021*.

⁶ J. Rossouw, “Social Grants Matter: They Support 33% of South Africans” (University of Johannesburg, 2017).

⁷ Stephen Devereux et al., “School Feeding in South Africa: What We Know, What We Don’t Know,” *DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security*, [https://Foodsecurity. Ac. Za](https://Foodsecurity.Ac.Za), 2018.

⁸ Heather Sandstrom and Sandra Huerta, “The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development,” *Washington, DC: The Urban Institute*, 2013, 4.

⁹ Nicholas Rush Smith, *Contradictions of Democracy: Vigilantism and Rights in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Department of Statistics South Africa, *Housebreaking Still Number One Crime in SA*. (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2020).

¹¹ Department of Statistics South Africa, *Housebreaking Still Number One Crime in SA*. .

¹² Kristen E. Darling-Churchill and Laura Lippman, “Early Childhood Social and Emotional Development: Advancing the Field of Measurement,” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 45 (July 2016): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2016.02.002>.

¹³ G Eagle, “Crime, Fear and Continuous Traumatic Stress in South Africa: What Place Social Cohesion?,” *Psychology in Society* 49 (2015): 83–98, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-8708/2015/n49a7>.

¹⁴ Nancy G Guerra and Carly Dierkhising, “The Effects of Community Violence on Child Development,” *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*, 2011, 2.

¹⁵ World Health Organisation, *Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against Children 2020*. (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2020).

¹⁶ Susan Hillis et al., “Global Prevalence of Past-Year Violence against Children: A Systematic Review and Minimum Estimates,” *Pediatrics* 137, no. 3 (2016): e20154079.

¹⁷ UNICEF, “The Convention on the Rights of the Child: The Children’s Version| UNICEF,” 2020.

¹⁸ R. Dolan, *Home Is the Most Dangerous Place to Be* (New York: Bloomsbury , 2019).

¹⁹ UNICEF, “The Convention on the Rights of the Child: The Children’s Version| UNICEF.”

This article attempts to create awareness among education officials, teachers, principals, and higher educational institutions to ensure that they have adequate training programmes for pre-service and in-service teachers regarding how to support children experiencing fear in the classroom. If teachers are aware of various strategies needed to support children experiencing fear, the children will improve participation in learning activities and experience enhanced academic performance.

Although teachers may partially support young children experiencing fear in the classroom, many learners need socio-emotional support and interventions to learn effectively. This requirement illustrates that teachers need the necessary training to support young children experiencing fear. Although the research is based on a more extensive PhD study, the article focuses on teachers' voices and gives insight into teachers' experiences of children experiencing fearful emotions in the classroom. This study aims to gain a better understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions of the eco-systemic factors that create fear in young South African children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kalatzkaya investigated the fear of primary school children.²⁰ Researchers such as Moen determined the factors that contribute to childhood adversities.²¹ The dearth of literature concerning the eco-systemic factors creating fear in young children, as well as the enormous rate of unemployment, the high crime rate, and conflicts in all socioeconomic home environments, makes this research worthy of benefit.

The explanation of fear

Fear is a natural feeling that is part of human development. Fear is indispensable when confronted with a threatening situation.²² However, Broeren et al. regard fear as a response to a particular frightening stimulus, characterised by a high level of avoidance, making the reaction seem unreasonable.²³ Carrera, Muñoz and Caballero explain that fear is not a response but "the mediating psychobiological state that produces the observable responses".²⁴ The foundation of fear is rooted in mental processes, and observable behaviour becomes noticeable when triggered by ecological factors. Kozłowska et al. describe fear as a psychosomatic and socio-emotional response to actual or imaginary dangers.²⁵ Therefore, fear, as an emotional response to a situation, does not need to be based on a real threat; it can be imagined or expected. Thus, imaginary and real objects may add to fearful responses in young children. Steimer believes that fear is an internal, personal and subjective perception influenced by environmental factors.²⁶ This perception could imply an awareness that threats may strike without warning, leading to a perception of the environment as an insecure place.

Desai considers childhood to be the foundational period of development, socialisation and play, whereas Lerner believes that during this developmental phase, young children influence or are influenced by the immediate family and events that occur in their environment.²⁷ 'Young children' refers to a child, especially between infancy and youth. Furthermore, Granot and Mayseless assert that

²⁰ N.N. Kalatzkaya, "The Content of Childhood Fears of Primary School Children Living in Urban and Rural Areas," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 191 (June 2015): 2291–95, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.158>.

²¹ Melanie Moen, "Teachers' Perspectives on the Factors Contributing to Childhood Adversity," *Pastoral Care in Education* 40, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 25–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2020.1855671>.

²² Kasia Kozłowska et al., "Fear and the Defense Cascade: Clinical Implications and Management," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 23, no. 4 (2015): 263–87.

²³ Suzanne Broeren et al., "They Are Afraid of the Animal, so Therefore I Am Too: Influence of Peer Modeling on Fear Beliefs and Approach-Avoidance Behaviors towards Animals in Typically Developing Children," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 49, no. 1 (January 2011): 50–57, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2010.11.001>.

²⁴ Pilar Carrera, Dolores Muñoz, and Amparo Caballero, "Mixed Emotional Appeals in Emotional and Danger Control Processes," *Health Communication* 25, no. 8 (November 30, 2010): 726, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2010.521914>.

²⁵ Kozłowska et al., "Fear and the Defense Cascade: Clinical Implications and Management."

²⁶ Thierry Steimer, "The Biology of Fear- and Anxiety-Related Behaviors," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 4, no. 3 (September 30, 2002): 231–49, <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2002.4.3/tsteimer>.

²⁷ Murli Desai, *A Rights-Based Preventative Approach for Psychosocial Well-Being in Childhood* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2010); Richard M Lerner, "Promoting Positive Youth Development: Theoretical and Empirical Bases," in *White Paper Prepared for the Workshop on the Science of Adolescent Health and Development, National Research Council/Institute of Medicine. Washington, DC: National Academies of Science, 2005, 1–90.*

the middle of childhood is nine years of age.²⁸ The reference to young children in this study is to those between the ages of eight and nine years, in grade three, and experiencing fear. Young children are directly and indirectly affected by events, circumstances, and environmental influences in which they interact and participate, thus shaping their response to their social context.²⁹ In this regard, Guy-Evans noted that the influences from the social environment play a significant role in shaping the behaviour of young children, from an individual level to the larger context in which they find themselves.³⁰ Therefore, the behaviour of young children results from an ongoing interaction between environmental influences and inner motivations, which may impact how they experience fear. Eco-systemic factors refer to aspects influencing the interactions and experiences between young children aged eight and nine years and the particular environmental systems in which they find themselves in our article.

Factors creating fear in the home environment

Hall and Sambu report that 8.1 million South African children live in single-parent households with mothers only, while only 3% live in households with fathers only.³¹ When two parents go through the divorce process, they are faced with increased stress and continued conflict, wherein young children are often trapped.³² Moreover, the increased level of parental conflict can lead to emotional insecurity in young children.³³

They may be unsure whether their parents will be able and willing to continue to provide care for them, or they may believe that they cause conflict between their parents. Young children of divorced parents blame themselves and experience guilt that leaves them with negative expectations that parental conflict will lead to less parental support. The departure of one parent from the marriage influences “[the] worry of who will provide care and protection if one or both parents abandon them.”³⁴

Moreover, when one partner withdraws from the marriage, young children are often confronted with decreased daily contact with one parent, mostly fathers, and consequently lose parent-child attachment with their fathers.³⁵ In this regard, these children experience the intense pain of losing a parent and may often ask for the parent when they are not around.³⁶ Seemingly, when young children lose daily interactions and reassurance of care and protection from a parent, it is highly probable that they may experience fear of neglect.

Roth, Harkins and Eng stated that divorced parents themselves are exposed to increased levels of anxiety and depression that lead to a display of low warmth and unresponsiveness and adverse reactions towards their children.³⁷ These increased experiences of negative emotions could negatively affect parenting, and therefore, they could experience increased levels of parent-child conflict that contribute to insecurity in young children. Sorek holds the same view when maintaining that “high conflict damages young children’s trust in their parents while making them insecure and dependent on their parents for support and security”.³⁸ Cherry concurs with the previous author by maintaining that insecure children are more likely to interact with parents in such a way that they evoke parental responses that show protection and care.³⁹ From this perspective, it is clear that parent-

²⁸ David Granot and Ofra Mayseless, “Attachment Security and Adjustment to School in Middle Childhood,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 25, no. 6 (November 1, 2001): 530–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01650250042000366>.

²⁹ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development* (sage, 2005).

³⁰ Olivia Guy-Evans, “Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory,” *Simply Psychology*, 2020, 10518–46.

³¹ Katharine Hall and Winnie Sambu, “Demography of South Africa’s Children,” *South African Child Gauge* 1 (2019): 216–20.

³² Moen, “Teachers’ Perspectives on the Factors Contributing to Childhood Adversity.”

³³ Sara McLanahan, Laura Tach, and Daniel Schneider, “The Causal Effects of Father Absence,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 39, no. 1 (July 30, 2013): 399–427, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145704>.

³⁴ Emine Erçin and Senay Cetinkaya, “Resim Çizdirme Çocuğun Hastane Deneyimlerini Ve Onu Nasıl Etkilediğini Anlamanın Yolu Mudur,” *Sakarya University Journal of Holistic Health* 2, no. 1 (2019): 61–75.

³⁵ Lauren Gaydosh, “Childhood Risk of Parental Absence in Tanzania,” *Demography* 52, no. 4 (August 1, 2015): 1121–46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-015-0411-4>.

³⁶ McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider, “The Causal Effects of Father Absence.”

³⁷ Katia E Roth, Debra A Harkins, and Lauren A Eng, “Parental Conflict during Divorce as an Indicator of Adjustment and Future Relationships: A Retrospective Sibling Study,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 55, no. 2 (2014): 117–38.

³⁸ Yoa Sorek, “Children of Divorce Evaluate Their Quality of Life: The Moderating Effect of Psychological Processes,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 107 (2019): 107.

³⁹ Kendra Cherry, “Parenting Styles,” *The Four Styles of Parenting*, 2012.

child interaction involving negative reactions, limited support and interaction time with (mostly) their fathers could increase the experience of high levels of fear in young children.⁴⁰

Domestic violence

The World Health Organisation describes domestic violence as any violent or aggressive behaviour within the home, typically involving the physical and/or verbal abuse of a spouse, a child or both.⁴¹ Young children may not be directly involved in all these violent acts, but they may witness violence, with one parent/caregiver victimising the other spouse. Artz et al. maintain that violent acts interfere with the emotional development of young children, whether children are directly or indirectly involved.⁴² Jenney and Alaggia (2018) postulate that the non-abusing parent spends a significant amount of time striving to survive the violence to the extent that they cannot provide quality parenting to the children.⁴³ The non-abusing parent displays a “decrease in parental warmth and caring in a household where violence takes place.”⁴⁴ The victimised parent is more likely to have trouble protecting and providing emotional support and encouragement to the young children. The relationship is often characterised by threats, insults, humiliation, accusations, disapproval, and mocking of the child.⁴⁵ Øverlien and Holt assert that young children exposed to violence do not trust their parents to provide care and protection; thus, they experience fear of neglect and physical harm.⁴⁶ Edwards concludes that young children are often victims of violence between parents and choose to isolate themselves from others, as they view their homes as the most dangerous place to be.⁴⁷ Therefore, young children exposed to violence at home may feel unwanted and blame themselves for the abuse. Young children exposed to domestic violence experience a lack of love, acceptance, and low self-confidence.

Factors that create fear in the school environment

Coplan and Rudasill stated that young children with the negative affectivity temperament “enter the school environment already prone to feelings of fear”.⁴⁸ Since young children with a negative affectivity temperament are predisposed to fearful feelings, there is a high probability that the school environment could worsen their fear when they are exposed to, for example, negative teacher-child relationships. Although the effect of temperament cannot be omitted, stressors such as classroom demands and negative teacher-child relationships could heighten the already-existing feelings of fear.⁴⁹ Young children are more likely to show fearful behaviour, difficulty adjusting to the school environment and poor academic performance when the teacher is unsupportive.⁵⁰ White found that teachers who lack warmth and support are less likely to form close teacher-child relationships, which could increase young children’s experience of fear.⁵¹ Creating a safe classroom environment predicts

⁴⁰ William V Fabricius et al., “Parenting Time, Parent Conflict, Parent–Child Relationships, and Children’s Physical Health,” in *Parenting Plan Evaluations* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 188–213, <https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780199754021.003.0007>.

⁴¹ World Health Organisation, “Understanding and Addressing Violence against Women: Overview,” 2012.

⁴² Artz L. et al., *Sexual Victimization of Children in South Africa. Final Report of the Optimus Foundation Study: South Africa.* (Cape Town: UBS Optimus Foundation., 2016).

⁴³ Angelique Jenney and Ramona Alaggia, “The Impact of Exposure to Domestic Violence on Children and Youth: Considering Strategies for Intervention and Cultivating Resilience,” in *The Routledge International Handbook of Violence Studies* (Routledge, 2018), 264–76.

⁴⁴ Nicky Stanley, *Children Experiencing Domestic Violence: A Research Review* (Research in practice Dartington, 2011), 76.

⁴⁵ Stanley, *Children Experiencing Domestic Violence: A Research Review*.

⁴⁶ Carolina Øverlien and Stephanie Holt, “Research on Children Experiencing Domestic Violence,” *Journal of Family Violence* 34, no. 1 (2019): 65–67.

⁴⁷ Frank Edwards, “Family Surveillance: Police and the Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect,” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (February 2019): 50–70, <https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2019.5.1.03>.

⁴⁸ Robert J Coplan and Kathleen Moritz Rudasill, *Quiet at School: An Educator’s Guide to Shy Children* (Teachers College Press, 2016), 54.

⁴⁹ Coplan and Rudasill, *Quiet at School: An Educator’s Guide to Shy Children*.

⁵⁰ Christine N. Lippard et al., “A Closer Look at Teacher–Child Relationships and Classroom Emotional Context in Preschool,” *Child & Youth Care Forum* 47, no. 1 (February 19, 2018): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-017-9414-1>.

⁵¹ Kelley Mayer White, “‘My Teacher Helps Me’: Assessing Teacher-Child Relationships From the Child’s Perspective,” *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 30, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 29–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2015.1105333>.

good academic achievement, as it enables young children experiencing fear to feel more emotionally comfortable. Also, exposure to a safe classroom environment could encourage young children to participate more actively in learning activities. Children feel comfortable interacting with teachers who are kind, patient, and supportive. Young children often feel safe and secure with teachers who display “respect, listening to them, talking to them, and making eye contact with them during everyday communication.”⁵² Therefore, the positive effect of a warm and safe classroom with adequate support from a teacher is beneficial in reducing fearful emotions.⁵³

Factors that create fear in the community

Hartinger-Saunders et al. describe community violence as interpersonal violence that is not committed by a family member and is intended to hurt one or more people.⁵⁴ Community violence occurs differently, ranging from political violence to neighbourhood crime, street violence, gangs, and weapons to ongoing civil conflict or war.⁵⁵ Van Graan asserts that it is common for many children growing up in South Africa to witness various forms of violence, including sexual assault, robberies, weapon attacks, stabbing, murder, gunshots and kidnapping.⁵⁶ Young children become direct/indirect victims by hearing about events of violence or witnessing violent acts occurring to others. Margolin et al. argue that exposure to violence has the potential to cause fear that has a lasting impact on the development of young children.⁵⁷ Community violence may suddenly occur without warning. Young children living in communities that are driven by violent acts often experience intensified fear.⁵⁸ DeRose et al. declared that young children who are exposed to frequent violent activities in the community experience difficulties in building positive and trusting relationships with others.⁵⁹ Repeated exposure to acts of violence in the community results in insecurities and a lack of trust for others in these children.⁶⁰ Therefore, Guerra and Dierkhising reckon that young children struggling to form secure attachment relationships with others experience difficulties developing a basic sense of trust.⁶¹ Therefore, young children view the environment as an unsafe and dangerous place to live.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study used Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems theory to gain a better understanding of the research problem. Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory explains how one setting has the potential to influence another setting with a sequence of influences. He identified the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems, which were integral to the theoretical framework to explore teachers’ experiences of the eco-systemic factors creating fear in young children.

Microsystem

The microsystem is the first layer and immediate setting in which the child is significantly influenced and becomes influenced by the direct interactions and experiences of their family, peers and school.⁶² Parents/caregivers play a vital role in protecting children from social problems that create fearful

⁵² White, “‘My Teacher Helps Me’: Assessing Teacher-Child Relationships From the Child’s Perspective.”

⁵³ Rachel Wu et al., “Learning What to Attend to: From the Lab to the Classroom,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 30, no. 12 (2018): 1749–56.

⁵⁴ Robin M. Hartinger-Saunders et al., “Neighborhood Crime and Perception of Safety as Predictors of Victimization and Offending among Youth: A Call for Macro-Level Prevention and Intervention Models,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, no. 9 (September 2012): 1966–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilcyouth.2012.05.020>.

⁵⁵ Guerra and Dierkhising, “The Effects of Community Violence on Child Development.”

⁵⁶ Johan Van Graan, “Perspectives on the Violent Nature of Crime Victimization in South Africa,” in *Crime, Mental Health and the Criminal Justice System in Africa: A Psycho-Criminological Perspective* (Springer, 2021), 39–62.

⁵⁷ Gayla Margolin et al., “Violence Exposure in Multiple Interpersonal Domains: Cumulative and Differential Effects,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 47, no. 2 (August 2010): 198–205, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.01.020>.

⁵⁸ Guerra and Dierkhising, “The Effects of Community Violence on Child Development.”

⁵⁹ Laura M. DeRose et al., “Associations Between Menarcheal Timing and Behavioral Developmental Trajectories for Girls from Age 6 to Age 15,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 40, no. 10 (October 4, 2011): 1329–42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-010-9625-3>.

⁶⁰ DeRose et al., “Associations Between Menarcheal Timing and Behavioral Developmental Trajectories for Girls from Age 6 to Age 15.”

⁶¹ Guerra and Dierkhising, “The Effects of Community Violence on Child Development.”

⁶² Bronfenbrenner, *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*.

emotions. Fox et al. conceive the parents/caregivers as important role players as they need to create a conducive home environment in which young children are given love, emotional support and comfort.⁶³ Young children receiving love and support from their families feel safe, protected and secure and develop positive self-esteem.⁶⁴

Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the second layer and consists of the relationships between two or more microsystems, and the child's interactions with peers and family.⁶⁵ White maintains that positive and supportive teacher-child relationships are important predictors of the socio-emotional well-being of young children experiencing fear.⁶⁶ Teachers are responsible for understanding the emotions of young children and providing emotional support by listening, validating their feelings, and showing empathy and respect to them. Teachers can use a one-on-one, calm voice strategy and treat each child as unique, encouraging them to talk about their feelings. White believes that teachers can use play/drama and puppets to discuss fears.⁶⁷ Drawings can help the children communicate their feelings because they might not have words to express them verbally.

Furthermore, researchers such as Coplan et al. believe that teachers must implement social support strategies that involve structuring classroom activities to increase participation by encouraging small-group activities.⁶⁸ The use of social support strategies, including verbal encouragement, expression of warm approval, and positive reinforcement, allows young children experiencing fear to cope and develop problem-solving skills.⁶⁹

Exosystem

The exosystem is the third layer in the bio-ecological model, which encompasses the interactions that do not involve the child directly but can still affect the child even if it happens between the settings.⁷⁰ Crowley views the exosystem as the level consisting of various settings that are a distance from the child, such as unemployment, the local government and the parent's workplace.⁷¹ The Department of Education is struggling on its own to address the socio-emotional and behavioural problems of young learners experiencing fear. Thus, the education department must work collaboratively with the school social workers to support learners experiencing fearful emotions.⁷² The school social worker is essential to identify psychosocial barriers and provide appropriate intervention and support. In doing so, the school social worker must provide young learners experiencing fear with the opportunity to participate in academic activities, reach their optimal learning skills, and achieve good grades.⁷³ Professional nurses, police officers, drop-in centres, churches, and businesspeople found in the local community can support young children in coping with fear.

⁶³ Nathan A Fox et al., "The Effects of Severe Psychosocial Deprivation and Foster Care Intervention on Cognitive Development at 8 Years of Age: Findings from the Bucharest Early Intervention Project," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 52, no. 9 (2011): 919–28.

⁶⁴ Daisy R Singla, Elias Kumbakumba, and Frances E Aboud, "Effects of a Parenting Intervention to Address Maternal Psychological Wellbeing and Child Development and Growth in Rural Uganda: A Community-Based, Cluster-Randomised Trial," *The Lancet Global Health* 3, no. 8 (2015): e458–69.

⁶⁵ Bronfenbrenner, *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*.

⁶⁶ White, "'My Teacher Helps Me': Assessing Teacher-Child Relationships From the Child's Perspective."

⁶⁷ White, "'My Teacher Helps Me': Assessing Teacher-Child Relationships From the Child's Perspective."

⁶⁸ Robert J. Coplan et al., "Is Silence Golden? Elementary School Teachers' Strategies and Beliefs Regarding Hypothetical Shy/Quiet and Exuberant/Talkative Children," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 103, no. 4 (November 2011): 939–51, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024551>.

⁶⁹ Coplan et al., "Is Silence Golden? Elementary School Teachers' Strategies and Beliefs Regarding Hypothetical Shy/Quiet and Exuberant/Talkative Children."

⁷⁰ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Harvard university press, 1979), 25.

⁷¹ Kevin Crowley, "Child Development: A Practical Introduction," 2017.

⁷² Tendani S Ramukumba, Richard M Rasesemola, and Gert P Matshoge, "Compliance to the Integrated School Health Policy: Intersectoral and Multisectoral Collaboration," *Curationis* 42, no. 1 (2019): 1–8.

⁷³ Edmarie Pretorius, "A Collaborative Partnership between School Social Workers and Educators: A Vehicle to Address the Social Contexts of Learners and Quality of Education in South Africa," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 56 (January 1, 2020): 139–56, <https://doi.org/10.15270/52-2-817>.

Macrosystem

Bronfenbrenner describes the macrosystem as the fourth and largest layer consisting of the laws, beliefs, customs, values, ideologies, political systems and cultures.⁷⁴ The developing child has no direct relationship or interactions within the macrosystem, but the events occurring in this system influence them.⁷⁵ The South African constitution of 1996, in section 28, guarantees all children the right to shelter, nutrition, family care, health care and social services.⁷⁶ The South African constitution further confers the right to be protected against any abuse, maltreatment and neglect of young children. Lack of care and protection may cause fear and insecurity in young children, thus interfering with their optimal development and well-being. The effective implementation of the Curriculum Assessment and Policy Statement (CAPS) and the policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) can support young children to cope with fear.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem represents the last layer of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory. The chronosystem involves the changes in time and how the child is affected in their environment. Young children in the South African context experience numerous abnormal fears during their development. These fears occur because young children in South Africa face social problems such as unemployment, poverty, crime, violence, divorce, and child abuse.⁷⁷ Therefore, teachers are responsible for giving the children comfort, knowledge and reassurance to cope with fear.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aimed to determine the teachers' experiences of the eco-systemic factors creating fear in young children. An interpretative paradigm was used as it allowed the Grade 3 teachers to narrate their lived experiences and understand the fear among Grade 3 learners and the support provided.⁷⁸ Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and field notes during the observations. Six Grade 3 teachers with degrees or diplomas in the teaching profession were purposefully selected.⁷⁹ Purposive sampling was employed based on the specific characteristics that the teachers had and that they would provide the most suitable data about the study. Inclusion criteria included, for example, Grade 3 teachers who have taught in the Foundation Phase for more than four years at a low, middle and high-status economic status (SES) school.

The four-year period is important for the knowledge and experience teachers would gain from working with learners.⁸⁰ The Grade 3 teachers from three different schools from the three different SES groups in Pretoria, Gauteng, were interviewed and observed in their natural setting.⁸¹ Different socioeconomic backgrounds were selected to compare and investigate the eco-systemic factors influencing fear in young children. The teachers were selected using convenience sampling as they were readily available at the school and easy to access.⁸² Although the data came from a relatively small population of six Grade 3 teachers, it was advantageous for the researcher to identify the participants' values and beliefs that underlie the focus of this research.⁸³

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⁷⁴ Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*.

⁷⁵ Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*.

⁷⁶ Republic of South Africa, "Constitution of the Republic of South Africa," *Government Gazette* 378, no. 17678 (1996).

⁷⁷ Shanaaz Mathews, Rachel Jewkes, and Naeemah Abrahams, "'I Had a Hard Life' Exploring Childhood Adversity in the Shaping of Masculinities among Men Who Killed an Intimate Partner in South Africa," *The British Journal of Criminology* 51, no. 6 (2011): 960–77.

⁷⁸ Kees Maree, *First Steps in Research*, 2nd ed. (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2016).

⁷⁹ John W Creswell, "30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher," (*No Title*), 2016.

⁸⁰ Creswell, "30 Essential Skills for the Qualitative Researcher."

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teachers (T1-T6), which were in line with the code of ethics approved by the university. Although data was collected from parents and children from the three schools, this article focused on the voices of the six teachers and their experiences drawn from a 1-hour semi-structured, in-depth interview. The researchers also wrote field notes as they observed the teachers interacting with the chosen learners identified in the larger study.

Data analysis was coded through thematic analysis. This method of analysing data emphasises that the researcher should focus on organising and making a rich description of the data set, meaning that the analysis plan goes beyond the word count in a text and moves on to categorising implicit and explicit ideas within the data. In this study, six phases of thematic analysis identified by Clarke and Braun were followed. In the initial phase, the researchers familiarised themselves with the written data.⁸⁴ This phase required reading and re-reading the participants' responses about their perception of the causal factors of fear in young children, and they wrote down meaningful ideas. During the second phase, the data were coded using emerging themes.⁸⁵ In the third phase, researchers searched for patterns that helped them to identify emerging themes through the data.

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PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Teachers T1 and T2 teach in a public school in a township in Pretoria, Gauteng Province, South Africa. The learners in this school are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, living mostly in shacks situated in informal settlements. Most learners in this township school come from poor backgrounds, and their parents/caregivers are unemployed. Many learners in this geographical area were part of feeding schemes (school nutrition) and walked a long distance to reach the school. Teachers T3 and T4 were teaching in a middle-income school in an inner-city school in Pretoria. The learners enrolled in this school were from formerly disadvantaged communities. These learners, mostly black African children, were exposed to diversity in terms of language, socioeconomic status and cultural beliefs. The children in this school came from a family background in which their parents/caregivers were employed as full-time workers and occupied their time doing business for a living. Teachers T5 and T6 were teaching in a private school situated in an urban area in Pretoria. Learners in private schools come from affluent backgrounds. The learners in private schools are more likely to have access to quality education and training, good healthcare and other services such as clean water, electricity and sanitation. The study explored the teachers' perspectives on the eco-systemic factors creating fear in Grade 3 learners. Thematic analysis was used, and four themes emerged, revealing that the learners were scared of bullying, negligence, violence and COVID-19.

This section presents real-life social problems that create fear in young children. In the semi-structured interviews, T1 and T2 indicated that "*child abuse, gender-based violence, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, crime, bullying, and drug and alcohol abuse were social ills*" creating fear in young children living in low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Negligence

Teachers felt that young children fear abandonment. They indicated that young children felt unsafe and unprotected when left alone at school. Young children who were left alone and whose parents/caregivers collected them late from school were found to be fearful. The learners were scared

⁸⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners," 2013.

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T1 and T2 commented: *"They don't feel safe and protected"*.

T3 noted: *"They fear being left alone"*.

T4 added: *"They often get upset if a parent is late to collect them and fear being left alone forever"*.

T5 and T6 indicated that: *"They fear taxis not arriving after school"*.

The teachers' comments showed that the children were unhappy and insecure about being left alone in the schools. The children seemed not to trust the environment without their parents/caregivers. The children felt safe and protected in the presence of their parents/caregivers.

Violence

Teachers from a low socioeconomic status background commented on the violence and foul language young children are exposed to in the community. These teachers stated that the people living in low socioeconomic circumstances are violent towards children and each other. They noted that young children in low socioeconomic areas witness adults victimising each other and using foul language. The use of offensive language, including rude words, caused children's fear. It seems that young children from low socioeconomic backgrounds live in a context lacking morals and respect. The rights of young children were not respected, and they were degraded.

T1 commented: *"By being violent to children and each other"*.

T2 added: *"They are using foul language"*.

The teachers who taught in middle- and high-income socioeconomic status environments strongly believed that violence resulted in fearful emotions in young children. They indicated that young children witnessed lots of violence, which terrified them. As mentioned above, South Africa has one of the highest levels of violence. The young children in South Africa live in a context that exposes them to ongoing violence and danger, leaving them with a lack of safety and security. The violent childhood of these children results in high levels of fear rather than joy and happiness. The children seem to know that danger may occur at any time without warning.

T4 responded that: *"They fear getting kidnapped and murdered"*. T5 noted that *"there are so many bad things happening, and they witness a lot of these things."*

Furthermore, the teachers in the high-income class commented on the fear of strangers. The children seem to be aware of the danger that the unknown person might present. They did not trust strangers and unfamiliar people. The children felt that strangers could forcefully kidnap them. It seems that the children living in the high-income class received a greater amount of protection and care from their parents/caregivers. The children in the high-income SES groups seemed uncomfortable in the absence of their parents/caregivers.

T6 indicated that: *"They fear that they can be abducted if they get into an unknown person's car"*.

So, it is surprising that all children in all SES groups have instilled fear in them.

COVID-19

The teachers from the middle and high-income classes commented that young children experienced fear of COVID-19 and death. It seems that the children were more cautious of their health and living a healthy lifestyle.

T3 commented:

"They are scared of getting sick and dying. Seeing all the screening tools, thermometers, etc. fills them with fear".

T4 added: *"COVID-19 has affected our community. People are scared of catching the virus."*

T5 noted:

"COVID-19 is also not making things easier for them".

T1 and T2 did not indicate that children of low socioeconomic background feared the COVID-19 virus. Young children living in a community with a low socioeconomic background seemed unafraid of the coronavirus and were playing in the streets during the COVID-19 lockdown. This could have been because of misinformation in newspapers that stated African people did not get COVID-19 due to

their skin pigmentation.

Bullying by teachers and peers

Although the teachers did not mention this, researchers noted that the middle-income teachers tended to yell at the children when they got their work wrong or were misbehaving in class. The children seemed scared of their teachers and stopped their naughty behaviour. It also seems as if the middle and high SES schools have strict routines and tend to be more academically focused than learning through play and fun. The learners in the middle and high-status groups were more disciplined. The findings revealed that they feared being bullied by their peers when they performed poorly on tests. Their friends tended to tease them on the playfields as they went on breaks. From observations, it was also noticed that teachers in middle and high SES schools did not practice positive discipline but rather took on a stricter way of disciplining learners. Completing the curriculum on time and having high achievement scores seemed high on their agenda. For example, in the middle-income school, children were spotted being detained for low marks and yelled at by teachers and principals for misbehaving. Children were also threatened that their parents would be called in to discuss their poor learning ability. T6 commented: *"They fear telling their parents if they did something wrong"*.

This affects children's emotions and leads to fear.

Negative effect of fear on learning abilities

Teachers from all SES groups in this study commented on the negative effect of fear on the learning ability of young children. They noted that young children experiencing fear often lacked attention in the classroom. The teachers indicated that fear interferes with the potential of young children to learn. They stated that the children who experienced fear were tired and sleepy in the classroom.

T1 commented: *"They lack attention"*.

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Teachers noted that the children were easily distracted and did not respond well to instruction. The children experiencing fear isolate themselves and lack participation in the classroom.

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DISCUSSION

From the findings, it is evident that all six teachers commented on the typical attributes of young children experiencing fear in the classroom. Fear interferes with the health and well-being of young children. The researchers attempted to use Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory to analyse the eco-systemic factors which led to fearful experiences in young children in different socioeconomic groups. Figures 1, 2 and 3 below illustrate the unique contributions of this study according to the three SES groups. These are colour-coded (using the colours of the traffic lights, red signifying danger, yellow indicating mediocre danger and green to show all good to go) to show the differences among the ecological layers according to Bronfenbrenner's model. When you look at the low SES group, most of the layers in their circle are red. Bullying from peers and teachers seems to be the dangerous red layer in the middle SES. The other circles are yellow. The higher-income environment shows primarily orange and green layers, as these children and parents receive much more support. They have medical aids that would afford them the privilege of therapists when they are fearful and thus will be able to heal and become less fearful.

This highlights that the need for equality between the different socioeconomic groups is still very prevalent, although our South African democracy is 30 years old. The gap between the haves and

have-nots seems to be widening rather than becoming closer. The study has contributed to the reality that support systems such as social care from the Department of Social Development, police services (SAPS) and psychologists/therapists from the Department of Health have not invested adequate attention to the lower socioeconomic groups. This has contributed to the literature on the theoretical understanding of childhood as a structural category and shows the widened gap in the constitutional rights of equality, social justice and the need to redress the results of past discriminatory laws.

The four-year period is important for the knowledge and experience teachers would gain from working with learners.⁸⁶ The Grade 3 teachers from three different schools from the three different SES groups in Pretoria, Gauteng, were interviewed and observed in their natural setting.⁸⁷ Different socioeconomic backgrounds were selected to compare and investigate the eco-systemic factors influencing fear in young children. The teachers were selected using convenience sampling as they were readily available at the school and easy to access.⁸⁸ Although the data came from a relatively small population of six Grade 3 teachers, it was advantageous for the researcher to identify the participants' values and beliefs that underlie the focus of this research.⁸⁹

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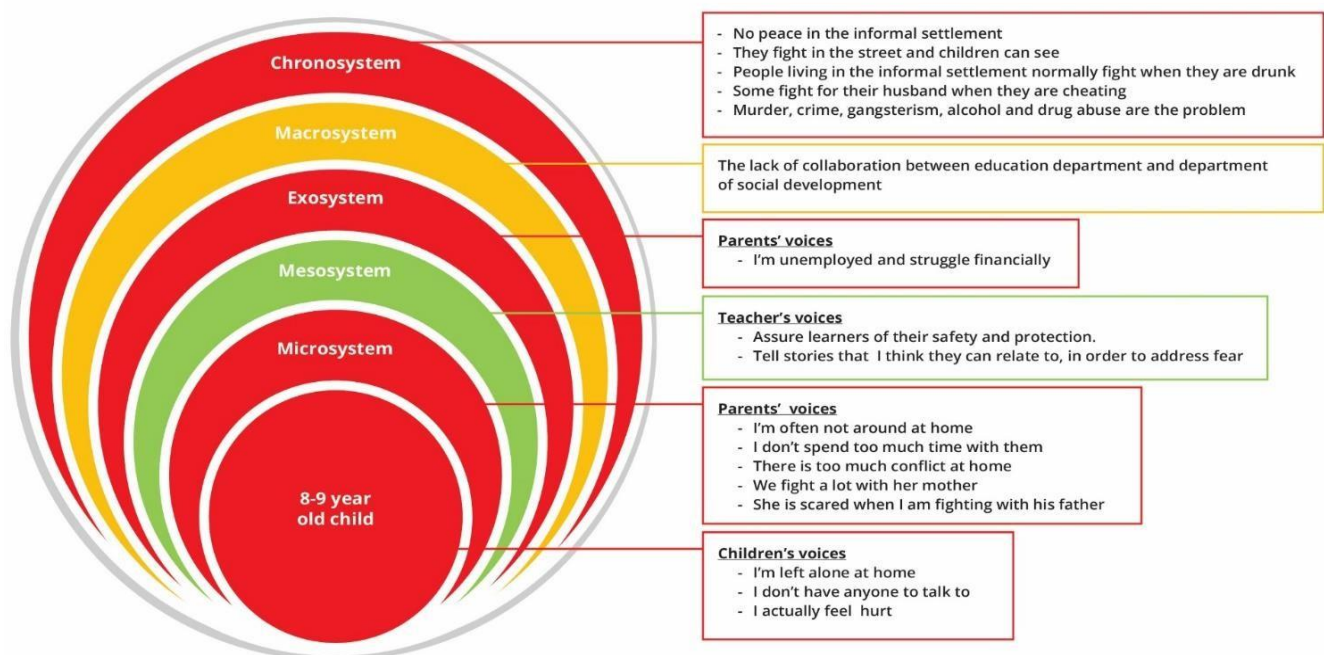


Figure 1: Fear experiences of low-income class children, adapted from

Bronfenbrenner (1979)

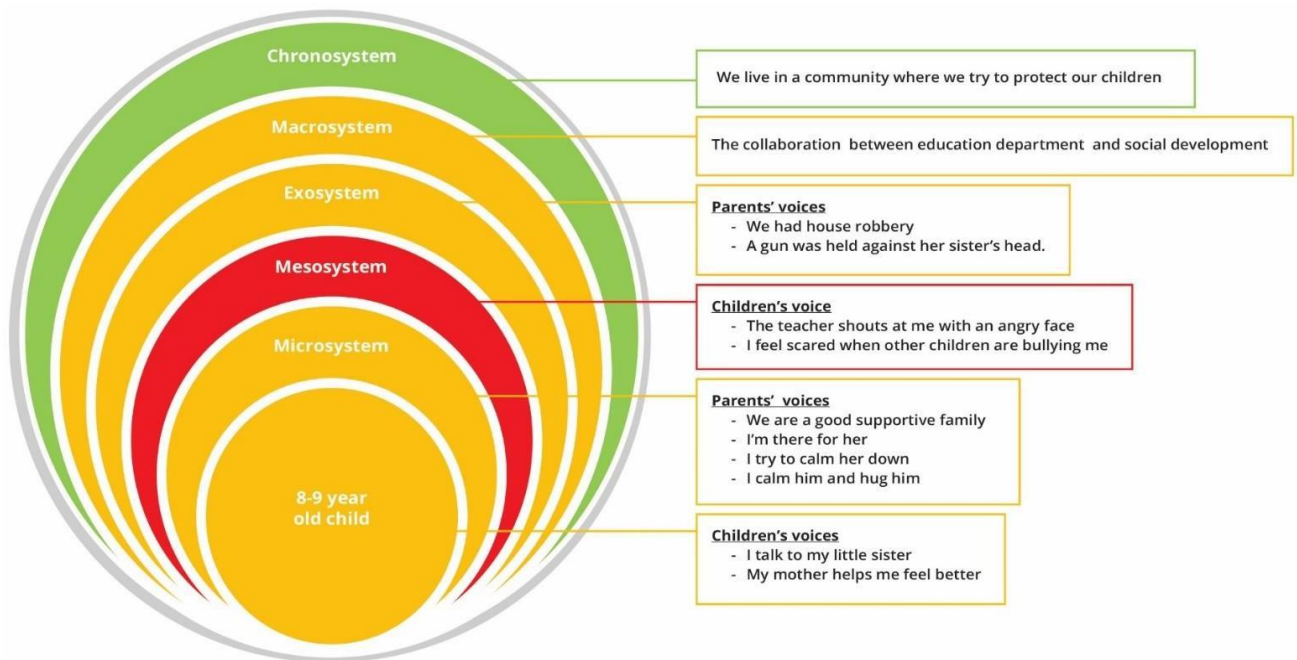


Figure 2: Fear experiences of middle-income class children, adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979)

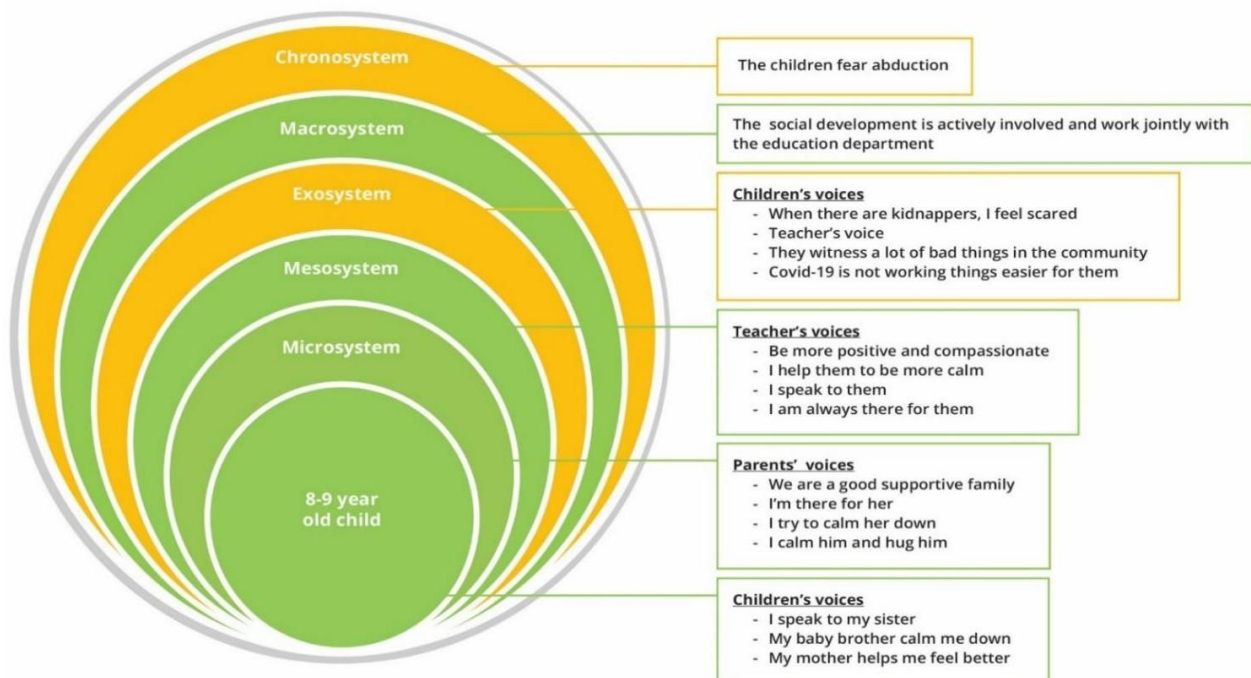


Figure 3: Fear experiences of high-income class children, adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Figures 1, 2 and 3 above clearly show the differences regarding the danger zones in the low SES societies compared to the green zones in the high SES societies.

T1 and T2 stated that child abuse, gender-based violence, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, crime, bullying, and drug and alcohol abuse were the social ills creating fear in young children. These teachers were from a low socioeconomic school context slightly different from the context of middle and high-income classes, as townships were exposed to more dangers that led to fear in young children.

The context of T3 and T4 (Middle socioeconomic status group) identified COVID-19, kidnapping, murder, and being left alone as the causes of fear in young children. Meanwhile, T5 and T6 were from a class with learners from a high-income community. Teacher T3 indicated that young children fear COVID-19, strangers and abduction. Teacher T1 did not state that COVID-19 was creating fear in young children of low socioeconomic status backgrounds. It was clear that the context of T1 contained various challenges, that created fear in young children, other than COVID-19. The children in low socioeconomic status communities faced many more serious micro, macro, exo, and chronological dangers that created fearful emotions, and COVID-19 was not a concern. It seems that the teachers in the low SES schools were able to understand their fears and tried to show sensitivity, love and warmth to children. The researchers assumed that this was because these teachers might have also grown up with fear in the very same communities; thus, they were able to hug, care for, and notice the child's behavioural and learning problems.

Fearful emotions interfere with young children's learning abilities, limiting their ability to learn effectively in the classroom.⁹² Bosacki, Rose-Krasnor, and Coplan report that young children experiencing fear struggle to concentrate in the classroom and do not participate in classroom learning activities.⁹³ The findings of the groups of learners from the three different socioeconomic (SES) groups show that fear as a negative emotion interferes with effective learning in the classroom. Teachers' lack of skills to assist young children in coping with fear in the classroom worsens the ability of young children to obtain good results in school. Young children spend a lot of time in school, and their teachers' inadequate competencies to help them cope with fear force them to cope with various social ills. The teachers lack the competencies to support the young children experiencing fear. The findings demonstrated that more interventions are needed to help young children cope with fear. Therefore, teachers need adequate training to be equipped with competencies to support young children experiencing fear. Young children need to be developed holistically.

Bosacki et al. believe that teachers must adapt their teaching strategies to suit the needs of young children experiencing fear in the classroom.⁹⁴ Teachers may use posters, drawings, and drama to teach young children how to identify and cope with fear. Teachers must create a safe classroom environment where young children experiencing fear are emotionally comfortable. White agrees that a conducive and safe learning environment increases learner participation in the learning activity and improves academic performance. Therefore, young children need support to cope with fear from the family with whom they interact directly daily.⁹⁵ Peer support is of utmost significance as the children experiencing fear may need the assistance of their peers. Schools can raise awareness for the parents to help children in cope with fear. The local community, such as churches and police stations, can provide support to young children who experience fear. It is essential that the Education Department appoints appropriate school social workers and counsellors to support young children experiencing fear.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends collaboration between the Department of Basic Education, the health department, the Department of Social Development and the South African Police Service (SAPS) to use the eco-systemic approach to reduce fearful feelings in young children. This collaboration is necessary to address social ills (such as neglect, bullying, violence and COVID-19) prevalent across South African

⁹² Lippard et al., "A Closer Look at Teacher-Child Relationships and Classroom Emotional Context in Preschool."

⁹³ Sandra Bosacki, Linda Rose-Krasnor, and Robert J Coplan, "Children's Talking and Listening within the Classroom: Teachers' Insights," *Early Child Development and Care* 184, no. 2 (2014): 247-65.

⁹⁴ Bosacki, Rose-Krasnor, and Coplan, "Children's Talking and Listening within the Classroom: Teachers' Insights."

⁹⁵ White, "'My Teacher Helps Me': Assessing Teacher-Child Relationships From the Child's Perspective."

schools. The adoption of an eco-systemic approach in developing the National School Safety Framework and Child Protection Protocol transcends single-intervention policies to an integrated multi-leveled framework. The district level should provide Foundation Phase teachers with specialised in-service training that moves beyond punishing learners for bullying to understanding contextual factors influencing learners' behaviour. Trauma-informed training for teachers should focus on building resilience in young children, peer mediation and fostering emotionally safe learning environments.

Moreover, the study recommends that teachers should introduce well-being screening tool per term in the classroom. Teachers can use paper-based polls to identify and support learners presenting signs of fear, neglect and aggression. It is also recommended that teachers host parental engagement sessions at schools to assist parents in recognising fearful symptoms in young children and encouraging non-punitive discipline. These sessions may take place on weekends, and WhatsApp can be used to reach working parents. Further research may focus on peer-led interventions to reduce fear in young children.

CONCLUSION

The study's purpose was to explore teachers' perceptions of the factors creating fear in young children to address the scarcity of literature on the eco-systemic issues in the South African context. The study indicated that fear in young children interfered with their ability to participate in the classroom, as they showed tiredness and sleepiness in the classroom. The findings revealed that factors that induce fear in young children originate within Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory that places community violence and COVID-19 in the exosystem and bullying in the mesosystem. The contribution of this study extends the ecological systems theory into early childhood education in South Africa by foregrounding teachers' voices located in diverse SES to understand their perceptions of the factors influencing fear in young children. The findings suggest that Foundation Phase teachers need training to equip them with knowledge and skills to identify and support young children experiencing fearful emotions and strengthen the collaboration amongst the Department of Basic Education, the health department, the Department of Social Development and the SAPS.

This study was carried out in a single district in Gauteng Province. The involvement of six teachers from various SES limits the transferability of findings across primary schools in South Africa or even Provincial schools in Gauteng. A similar study can be extended to other circuits within the district. Further studies may explore the effectiveness of peer-led interventions to reduce fear in young children. The study highlights that childhood fear is influenced by broader ecological factors. Therefore, effective support should move beyond child-only interventions to multi-level interventions including schools, families, communities and policy makers.

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