



Learner misconduct in South African schools: A psychosocial approach to causes and interventions

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ABSTRACT

Misconduct among learners remains a significant challenge in South African schools, impeding the learning process and hindering academic achievement. This study, situated within the interpretivist paradigm and employing a descriptive phenomenological strategy through the lens of Erikson’s psychosocial theory, investigates the underlying causes of learner misconduct. The research involved 46 participants—including learners, educators, and school management team members—from two secondary schools in the Ngaka Modiri-Molema District. Thematic analysis, guided by open and axial coding, revealed internal, external, and general sources of misconduct. Internal causes such as boredom and disengagement reflect psychosocial tensions related to autonomy and competence. External influences, including unstable home environments and peer affiliation, intersect with identity formation challenges. General causes, like peer pressure and policy misinterpretation, highlight systemic gaps in behavioural management. Findings emphasise the need for responsive pedagogical strategies, inclusive rulemaking, teacher psychosocial training, and multi-stakeholder interventions. The study advocates a developmental approach to learner conduct that integrates psychosocial insight with evidence-based discipline practices. By reframing misconduct through a psychosocial lens, this research offers a nuanced understanding of learner behaviour and contributes actionable insights for policy, practice, and future research aimed at cultivating safer and more supportive learning environments.

Keywords: Learner Misconduct, Psychosocial Development, Erikson’s Theory, Educational Practice, South African Schools

INTRODUCTION

Disrespect and misconduct among learners in classrooms are widespread issues faced by schools globally. This problem significantly hinders the success of the teaching and learning process. Failing to address learner misconduct appropriately poses a serious threat to the overall success of education.¹ Moreover, primary and

¹ Gayatri Devi Baruth and Sello Mokoena, “A Framework to Deal with Violence in South African Public Schools,” *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 12, no. 2 (2016): 96–105; Belle L. Jinot, “The Causes of a Lack of Discipline Among Secondary School Learners in Mauritius,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2018): 35–46; Olufemi Timothy Adigun et al., “‘I Dread to Enter Some Classrooms’: Perspectives Regarding Alternatives to Corporal Punishment in Secondary Schools,” *Interchange* 53, no. 3 (2022): 391–406.

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secondary education, overseen by the Department of Basic Education in South Africa (SA), holds the critical responsibility of equipping learners with values, knowledge, and skills while also serving as a catalyst for their transformation. This preparation is essential for the nation's social and economic development.² Basic education serves as a foundation before learners advance to higher education institutions (HEIs). In teaching contexts, it is equally crucial for teachers to address behavioral issues both inside and outside the classroom.³ Principals in developing nations, including SA, often grapple with managerial challenges stemming from learners' misbehavior.⁴

Research examining learner discipline in SA has been documented in scholarly publications, emphasizing its significance as a major concern due to its detrimental impact on school success. Challenges associated with this issue include teacher and learner absenteeism, instances of crime, and learner dropouts.⁵

According to Padayachee and Gcelu, discipline is explained from both reformation and progressive perspectives.⁶ The former characterizes discipline as an act of followership, while the latter defines it as activities that contribute to a learner's intrinsic motivation, self-management, and decision-making skills.⁷ This means that behavior can be learned through observation and subsequently replicated by learners, as outlined by social learning theorists such as Bandura and Walters.⁸ The framework for learner discipline adopted in this paper draws on Wolhuter and Steyn's definition, which describes it as the observable attributes of learners' conduct or behavior within the school.⁹ This is recognized as a significant issue that has the potential to impede the teaching and learning process.

The theme of "learner discipline or misconduct" has been explored in various ways. Some authors have focused on the causes, while others have offered recommendations for managing learner discipline in schools.¹⁰ This includes examining the alternatives available to educators following the abolition of corporal punishment in SA schools and evaluating the effectiveness of these options in the post-abolition era.¹¹ These authors recognize that no school is immune to encountering undesirable and disruptive behavior from its

² Amy Sarah Padayachee and Ntombizandile Gcelu, "Collaboration: The Key to Managing Discipline in South African Schools," *South African Journal of Education* 42, no. 4 (November 30, 2022): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n4a2139>.

³ Pamela A. Onyango, Peter J. Aloka, and Pamela Raburu, "Effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling in the Management of Student Behaviour in Public Secondary Schools in Kenya," *International Journal of Applied Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2018): 6–11; Sindiswa Zondo, Vusi S. Mncube, and Emmanuel O. Adu, "Strategies Teachers Use to Implement Positive Discipline in Schools," *Prizren Social Science Journal* 7, no. 1 (2023): 79–88.

⁴ Noorullah Shaikhmag, Thomas Assan, and Irene M. Loate, "A Psychoeducational Perspective of Discipline in Schools and the Abolishing of Corporal Punishment," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 14, no. 3 (2017): 275–83.

⁵ Joyce P. Dhlamini, "Management of Learner Discipline in Secondary Schools: A Collaborative Effort," *International Journal of Education Science* 15, no. 3 (2016): 474–84; Raymond U. Emekako, "Discipline Measures for Learners in Secondary Schools: An Evaluation of a District in the North-West Province," *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 13, no. 5/6 (2016): 64–72; Raymond U. Emekako and Christo Van Wyk, "The Implementation of Effective Management Strategies for Learner Discipline in Secondary Schools: An Analysis of the North-West Province," *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 13, no. 5/6 (2016): 53–63; Raymond U. Emekako, "The Relationship Between Management Strategies for Learner Discipline and Learner Discipline Legal Framework: A South African Perspective," *PONTE: Multidisciplinary Journal of Sciences and Research* 73, no. 8 (2017): 373–96.

⁶ Padayachee and Gcelu, "Collaboration: The Key to Managing Discipline in South African Schools."

⁷ Nafisah Hanim, Irda Risna, and Auriza Satria Putri, "Discipline And Responsibilities Characters Of Senior High School(Sma) Students Through Problem Based Learning On Transport System Material," *BIOTIK: Jurnal Ilmiah Biologi Teknologi Dan Kependidikan* 10, no. 1 (April 28, 2022): 54, <https://doi.org/10.22373/biotik.v10i1.11794>.

⁸ Albert Bandura and Richard H Walters, *Social Learning Theory*, vol. 1 (Prentice hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1977).

⁹ C. C. Wolhuter and S. C. Steyn, "Learner Discipline at School: A Comparative Educational Perspective," *KOERS* 68, no. 4 (2003): 521–38.

¹⁰ Jannie P. Rossouw, "Learner Discipline in South African Public Schools: A Qualitative Study," *Koers* 68, no. 4 (2003): 413–35; Alison Miller and Nigel Lambert, "The Temporal Stability and Predictive Validity of Pupils' Attributions for Difficult Classroom Behaviour," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 80, no. 4 (2010): 599–622; Emma Fitzgerald, "The Impact of Attributions on the Understanding and Management of Challenging Behaviour in Schools" (University of Southampton, 2017).

¹¹ Shaikhmag, Assan, and Loate, "A Psychoeducational Perspective of Discipline in Schools and the Abolishing of Corporal Punishment"; Andre Leke-ateh Bechuke and Akpovire Oduaran, "Integrating Disciplinary Plans to Manage Learner Behaviour in the Pre-Instructional Phase of a Lesson in South African Schools," *International Journal of Learning and Change* 12, no. 1 (2020): 91–112; Ruth N. Dlamini, Moses O. Ede, and Chinedu I. Okeke, "Post-Corporal Punishment Challenges Facing Eswatini Primary School Educators When Disciplining Learners and the Necessary Counselling Services," *International Journal of Higher Education* 11, no. 3 (2022): 141–47; Ruth N. Dlamini, Moses O. Ede, and Chinedu I. Okeke, "Current Disciplinary Practices by Primary School Teachers in Eswatini: Implications for School Counselling," *International Journal of Higher Education* 11, no. 4 (2022): 1–11.

learners. Therefore, this paper presents an examination of the sources of learner misconduct, drawing from the lived experiences of both learners and educators. The aim is to achieve a psychosocial understanding of learner behavior within a typical SA school.

Scholarly articles reveal ongoing instances of various forms of learner misconduct, including aggressive and violent behaviors in South African secondary schools.¹² However, these issues are not confined solely to secondary schools. The impact of such misconduct has been substantial, posing a significant threat to learners' academic pursuits. The prevalence of aggressive and violent behaviors has become a serious concern for education managers. The geometric increase in various forms of misconduct complicates the role of the principal and affects overall school success. This complexity extends to managing instructional planning, school infrastructure, and teaching and learning resources.¹³

In a comprehensive discourse analysis conducted by De Wet, the focus was on the impact and severity of learner-on-teacher violence.¹⁴ This analysis provides further insights into the challenges faced by educators. Media reports, such as "Teachers at the Frontline of a Battle with Hostile Pupils" and "Pupils' Reign of Terror at School", underscore the widespread occurrence of violence directed not only towards learners but also towards teachers, who play a vital role in facilitating instructional activities.¹⁵ Therefore, the exhibition of misbehavior is not one-sided.

These forms of misconduct disrupt the teaching and learning process and compromise the safety and security of both learners and educators.¹⁶ Therefore, it is essential for school principals and School Management Teams (SMTs) to develop holistic management styles that address the psychosocial aspects of learner misconduct. Additionally, it is crucial to ensure that educators are adequately trained and equipped with the necessary skills to implement these holistic measures, fostering a safer and more conducive learning environment.

Despite empirical and policy-driven strategies, learner discipline continues to threaten the teaching and learning process.¹⁷ This study examines the sources of learner misconduct by posing the following two questions: What are the causes of learner misconduct in classrooms and the broader school environment? And how do behavioural theories inform educators' practices in managing learner conduct?

Motivated by frequent reports of learner discipline issues, this study aims to explore the psychosocial factors contributing to the observed misconduct. Reported cases include physical and verbal confrontations, theft, substance abuse, viewing pornographic content, possession of dangerous weapons, and even murder on school premises. Noteworthy examples of these cases include:

- A teacher was wounded by gunshots at a Durban primary school on January 22, 2020, as reported by Sihle Mlambo on IOL.
- Cases of shootings and stabbings in Gauteng schools were reported by News24 (Ngqakamba, 2019).
- A total of 443 allegations were reported to SACE during the 2020/21 fiscal year, including sexual misconduct, verbal abuse, and corporal punishment, with 11 educators dismissed.

These alarming cases of violence and misconduct reflect systemic psychosocial challenges affecting school environments. The extent and intensity of these issues underline the need for a developmental

¹² Connie B. Zulu and Charl C. Wolhuter, "Preface to Special Edition on Learner Discipline Problems in Schools," *Koers* 78, no. 3 (2013): 1–2; Dhlamini, "Management of Learner Discipline in Secondary Schools: A Collaborative Effort"; Bechuke and Oduaran, "Integrating Disciplinary Plans to Manage Learner Behaviour in the Pre-Instructional Phase of a Lesson in South African Schools."

¹³ Olufunmilayo Tenidade Obadire and Dzivhonele Albert Sinthumule, "Learner Discipline in the Post-Corporal Punishment Era: What an Experience!," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 2 (May 31, 2021): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v41n2a1862>.

¹⁴ Corene De Wet, "South African English Newspapers' Depiction of Learner-on-Teacher Violence," *Communicare* 40, no. 2 (2021): 21–42.

¹⁵ Prega Govender, "Teachers at the Frontline of a Battle with Hostile Pupils," *Sunday Times*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/news/2018-04-07-teachers-at-the-frontline-of-a-battle-with-hostile-pupils/>; Tammy Petersen and Rodney Mpofo, "Pupils' Reign of Terror at Schools," IOL, September 23, 2018, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/pupils-reign-of-terror-at-schools-prompts-gde-to-step-up-security-17194803>.

¹⁶ Mdumiseni Biyela, "The Role of School Safety and Security Committees in the Welfare of Learners in Combined Schools" (Edgewood, 2018).

¹⁷ Baruth and Mokoena, "A Framework to Deal with Violence in South African Public Schools." 64-72.

framework—such as Erikson’s theory—to help understand learners' psychosocial conflicts, maladjustments, and misbehaviours within a broader educational and societal context.

Despite extensive research in the field of learner discipline, indiscipline continues to be a significant issue in contemporary SA schools. Section 8(2) of the South African Schools Act (SASA) raises an important question: To what extent is school management capable of “establishing and managing a disciplined and purposeful environment dedicated solely towards improving learning and a better society”?¹⁸

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theory is invaluable when it guides practice, suggesting innovative approaches to understanding proceedings and situations, particularly in the context of learner misconduct. The interrelationships among educational theories, past literature, and empirical research can inform a more effective approach to practice, bridging the theory-practice gap.¹⁹

Overview of the psychosocial perspective

The psychosocial perspective, primarily attributed to Erik Erikson, is a foundational theory in personality development.²⁰ Rooted in a blend of psychological and sociological principles, this perspective explores the complexities of individual personality and the social challenges faced during development, often resulting in learner maladjustment issues that significantly impact human behavior.²¹ Unlike Sigmund Freud's psychosexual stages, Erikson's psychosocial theory emphasises the importance of psychological and social experiences throughout life, beginning with the formation of an ego identity – a conscious self-concept shaped by interpersonal interactions in various environmental contexts.²²

At the core of the psychosocial perspective is the idea that each individual's ego identity is continually refined through experiences and social interactions.²³ Erikson's framework further suggests that a sense of achievement or competence drives behavioral patterns and actions within the stage-based developmental trajectory of individuals.²⁴ Articulating eight stages of human psychosocial development, Erikson argues that each stage includes bipolar personality traits, encompassing both positive and negative dimensions.²⁵ The negative dimensions affect an individual's behavior in their immediate surroundings.

Erikson's perspective suggests that at each developmental stage, individuals strive to achieve proficiency in specific domains. Successful navigation results in a sense of mastery, known as ego strength or ego quality, while mismanagement can lead to feelings of inadequacy, termed personal inadequacies.²⁶ The impact of these feelings can be profound. Psychologically, individuals may develop insecurity or low self-esteem, viewing themselves unfavorably compared to peers or societal norms. This can lead to persistent dissatisfaction with oneself and one's abilities, undermining overall psychological well-being. Additionally, feelings of inadequacy can significantly influence behavior and interpersonal relationships. Individuals may adopt defensive mechanisms or coping strategies to address perceived shortcomings, such as avoiding challenging situations or overcompensating through exaggerated behaviors. These coping mechanisms can hinder personal growth and the development of healthy social relationships. Furthermore, the effects of personal inadequacies extend beyond the individual to societal and community dynamics. Those struggling

¹⁸ Republic of South Africa, *The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996* (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1996).

¹⁹ Tony Bush, *Theories of Educational Management*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2003).

²⁰ Kendra Cherry, *The Everything Psychology Book: Exploring the Human Psychology to Understand Why* (New York: Adams Media, 2010).

²¹ Mei Yuan Law, “Review on Theories for Personal and Social Development in Educational Psychology,” *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)* 7, no. 6 (June 22, 2022): e001570, <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i6.1570>.

²² Urie Bronfenbrenner, “Toward an Experimental Ecology of Human Development.,” *American Psychologist* 32, no. 7 (1977): 513; Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950).

²³ Law, “Review on Theories for Personal and Social Development in Educational Psychology.”

²⁴ Poppy Nash, Annette Schlösser, and Tanya Scarr, “Teachers’ Perceptions of Disruptive Behaviour in Schools: A Psychological Perspective,” *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 21, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 167–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2015.1054670>.

²⁵ Yurii Kashpur et al., “Methodological Foundations of Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling,” *BRIAIN: Broad Research in Artificial Intelligence and Neuroscience* 14, no. 1 (2023): 11–1313.

²⁶ Cherry, *The Everything Psychology Book: Exploring the Human Psychology to Understand Why*.

with feelings of inadequacy may face barriers to full participation in social and professional spheres, limiting opportunities for personal fulfillment and contributing to broader societal inequalities.

Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory highlights the essential role of each stage in shaping learners' personality development.²⁷ A key aspect of this theory is the idea that learners face conflicts during their developmental stages, which act as critical turning points in their psychosocial growth.²⁸ Within Erikson's framework, these conflicts are viewed as focal points of tension related to the development of psychological qualities that promote adjustment, or, alternatively, the risk of maladjustment.²⁹

This perspective highlights the inherent duality within Erikson's theory. On one hand, it offers a solid framework for understanding the trajectory of normal personality development and growth. On the other hand, it acknowledges the potential for failure or maladjustment, recognizing the complexities and challenges individuals face throughout their developmental journey.³⁰ Erikson's theory outlines a series of psychosocial conflicts that individuals navigate throughout their lifespan, with each conflict corresponding to a specific developmental stage. These conflicts are crucial in shaping an individual's sense of self and their interactions with the social world.³¹

The Duality Within Erikson's Theory in an Educational Setting

As drawn from Erikson and Mutekwe and Mutekwe, the duality is explained below.

Infancy (from birth to 18 months): During infancy, individuals face the fundamental conflict of trust versus mistrust. The key event in this phase is feeding. Infants develop trust when caregivers consistently provide nurturing care and affection, fostering secure attachments. Conversely, a lack of responsive caregiving may lead to mistrust and insecurity.

Early childhood (from ages 2 to 3): In early childhood, the central conflict is autonomy versus shame and doubt. Toilet training is significant during this stage. Children strive to assert control over their physical abilities and develop independence. Success nurtures feelings of autonomy and self-assurance, while setbacks may lead to shame or doubt about their capabilities.

Preschool (from ages 3 to 5): The preschool years are marked by the conflict between initiative and guilt, with exploration as the focal event. Children begin to exert control over their surroundings, experimenting with new activities and concepts. Successfully navigating this stage fosters a sense of purpose and drive, while excessive control or criticism from authority figures may instill feelings of guilt and inhibition.

School age (from ages 6 to 11): During school age, individuals face the conflict of industry versus inferiority, with the school environment being significant. Children confront social and academic challenges, striving for proficiency across various domains. Success in this phase fosters feelings of competence and self-esteem, while difficulties may lead to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

Adolescence (ages 12 to 18): During adolescence, the primary conflict revolves around identity versus role confusion, with social relationships playing a crucial role. Adolescents embark on a quest to develop a coherent sense of self and personal identity, exploring various roles and identities. Successfully resolving this conflict fosters a strong sense of self-awareness and belonging, while failure may lead to confusion and ambivalence regarding one's identity and societal role.

²⁷ Kashpur et al., "Methodological Foundations of Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling."

²⁸ Nash, Schlösser, and Scarr, "Teachers' Perceptions of Disruptive Behaviour in Schools: A Psychological Perspective."

²⁹ Cherry, *The Everything Psychology Book: Exploring the Human Psychology to Understand Why*.

³⁰ Cherry, *The Everything Psychology Book: Exploring the Human Psychology to Understand Why*.

³¹ Erikson, *Childhood and Society*.

Young adulthood (ages 19 to 40): In young adulthood, the central conflict shifts to intimacy versus isolation, with relationships taking on paramount importance. Young adults strive to cultivate intimate and meaningful connections with others, seeking emotional fulfillment and companionship. Success in this endeavor results in robust and fulfilling relationships, whereas failure may lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

Middle adulthood (ages 40 to 65): In middle adulthood, individuals confront the conflict of generativity versus stagnation, with work and parenthood serving as pivotal events. Adults seek to create and nurture experiences that contribute positively to society, whether through professional accomplishments, parenting, or community engagement. Success in this pursuit fosters a sense of purpose and fulfillment, while stagnation may evoke feelings of unfulfilled potential and disengagement from meaningful activities.

Maturity (ages 65 and beyond): In maturity, the central conflict shifts to ego integrity versus despair, with reflection on life experiences serving as the critical event. Older adults engage in introspection, evaluating their life trajectory and accomplishments. Successfully resolving this conflict results in a sense of wisdom and acceptance of one's life journey, while unresolved regrets and unrealized aspirations may lead to feelings of despair and bitterness.³²

Consequences of Misconduct in 'School-Age' and 'Adolescent' Learning and Teaching Settings: A Snapshot of Secondary Education

In the context of school age (6 to 11 years) and adolescence (12 to 18 years), Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory offers valuable insights into the causes and effects of learner misconduct in educational settings. During the school-age period, individuals face the conflict of industry versus inferiority, navigating social and academic challenges while striving for competence and mastery. Success in this phase fosters self-esteem and a sense of competence, while failure can lead to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. Learners who repeatedly experience such inadequacy may engage in disruptive behaviors to gain attention or assert control over their environment. These behaviors can include defiance towards authority, academic underachievement, or engagement in delinquent activities, all of which disrupt the learning environment and hinder the educational process.

Similarly, during the adolescence phase, the primary conflict centers around identity versus role confusion. Adolescents embark on a quest to establish a coherent sense of self and personal identity, exploring diverse roles and identities. Successfully resolving this conflict cultivates a strong sense of self-awareness and belonging, while failure can lead to confusion and ambivalence about one's identity and societal role. In the context of learner misconduct, adolescents struggling with identity formation may engage in risky behaviors or adopt deviant identities as a means of asserting independence or seeking peer acceptance. Such behaviors can manifest as defiance towards school rules, substance abuse, or involvement in delinquent peer groups, all of which compromise the learning environment and jeopardize academic outcomes.

Advancing the Discourse on 'Learner Misconduct' and Quality Education

Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory enhances the discussion of 'learner misconduct' in quality education by providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological and social factors that contribute to such behaviors. By outlining the developmental stages and associated psychosocial conflicts, Erikson's theory emphasizes the complex interplay between individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, and environmental influences in shaping learner behavior. This holistic perspective highlights the need to address not only the visible manifestations of misconduct but also the underlying emotional and developmental needs that drive these behaviors.

³² Erikson, *Childhood and Society*; Edmore Mutekwe and Constance Mutekwe, "Teachers' Perceptions of Pupils' Maladjustment Problems: A Psycho-Social Perspective," *Journal of Social Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2013): 319–33.

Furthermore, Erikson's theory stresses the importance of fostering positive ego development and ego strength through the successful resolution of developmental conflicts. In an educational context, this involves creating supportive learning environments that promote autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging among learners. By addressing students' psychosocial needs and providing opportunities for identity exploration and skill development, educators can reduce the risk of learner misconduct and encourage positive behavioral outcomes. Additionally, Erikson's theory underscores the importance of early intervention and targeted support for individuals experiencing feelings of inadequacy or identity confusion, thus preventing the escalation of misconduct and promoting positive psychosocial adjustment.

Overall, Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory provides valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying learner misconduct and offers a framework for developing effective interventions within quality education. By integrating theoretical principles with practical strategies, educators can create nurturing learning environments that support holistic development and foster positive behavioral outcomes among learners.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which is relevant to the qualitative research approach.³³ Interpretivism is based on the philosophy that individuals seek to translate and interpret the world around them by forming independent meanings from their experiences. This paradigm emphasizes the participants' perspectives on the issue of learner misconduct, drawing from their lived experiences within their historical and cultural contexts, such as the classroom and school environment.

The phenomenological design used in this study is grounded in philosophy and psychology.³⁴ It emphasizes the exploration of mindful lived experiences as a means to understand the truths around us.³⁵ Participants were recommended by school principals and educators responsible for managing learner misconduct, using purposeful sampling. The inclusion criteria required that both learners and educators had been at the school for over three years, and the learners should have been associated with previously reported incidents. These participants were chosen to provide valuable and comprehensive information essential for the study.

Two schools were selected in the Mafikeng area of the Ngaka Modiri-Molema District (NMMD) in the North-West province. A sample of 46 participants, including 10 learners, 10 educators, and three SMT members, was chosen from each school. Data were collected through focus group interviews and analyzed thematically using open and axial coding. The primary aim was to uncover patterns, themes, and relationships within the dataset, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to learner misconduct from a psychosocial perspective. This approach facilitated a systematic and in-depth exploration of the participants' perspectives.

The initial phase of open coding involved a line-by-line examination of the raw data.³⁶ The researcher systematically assigned codes to segments of the text, ensuring that preconceived categories did not constrain the coding process. This open approach facilitated the emergence of themes, capturing the richness and complexity of participants' narratives about learner misconduct. After open coding, axial coding was applied to establish connections and relationships between the identified codes. The researcher grouped related codes into higher-order categories and examined their interplay. Axial coding aimed to bring coherence to the dataset, revealing the underlying structures and processes that influence learner behavior.³⁷

Ethical considerations for social science research, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality, were upheld throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from North-West

³³ John Ward Creswell and John David Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018).

³⁴ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

³⁵ Anol Bhattacharjee, *Social Science Research: Principles, Methods, and Practices* (Zurich: Creative Commons Attribution, 2012).

³⁶ Andrew, Bryman et al., *Bryman's Social Research Methods*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

³⁷ Bryman et al., *Bryman's Social Research Methods*.

University and the Area Office overseeing the selected schools. Consent forms were distributed to school principals and participants. Strategies were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness of the study's findings. Member checking was employed, involving participants in validating the coded data and interpretations. This iterative process ensured that the researchers' interpretations aligned with the participants' intended meanings. Additionally, a meticulous audit trail was maintained, documenting the decision-making process at each stage of coding. This approach facilitated transparency and allowed for the traceability of analytical decisions.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following real-life incidents of misconduct further contextualise the study's relevance and align with the psychosocial focus of this paper:

- A teacher was wounded by gunshots at a Durban primary school on January 22, 2020, on Independent Online news (IOL).³⁸
- Reports of shootings and stabbings in Gauteng schools (News24, 2019).³⁹
- A spike in school violence in 2018, including stabbings and bullying that led to fatalities (News24).⁴⁰
- The South African Council of Educators (SACE) recorded 443 allegations in 2020/21, ranging from sexual and verbal abuse to corporal punishment, with 11 teacher dismissals (Solomons, 2021).⁴¹

These incidents underscore the widespread and escalating nature of misconduct in South African schools, reinforcing the need for a psychosocial analysis grounded in Erikson's developmental theory. The findings and discussion section offers a comprehensive analysis of the causes of learner misconduct both within and outside the school environment, drawing on a psychosocial perspective, particularly Erikson's developmental theory. The findings are presented thematically as internal, external, and general sources of misconduct, triangulated with relevant participant accounts, and situated within the theoretical and empirical literature. Pseudo names (L = learner; T = teacher; and SMT = School Management Team) to protect personal information of participants in the study.

Internal Causes of Learner Misconduct

Internal causes refer to factors originating within the classroom and school environment that negatively affect learner behaviour. One notable theme is boredom in lessons due to unengaging teaching strategies:

Sometimes I just lose focus because the lesson is boring. The teacher reads from the book, and there is nothing exciting (L1).

When the teacher just talks and there's no interaction, many of us switch off or start misbehaving (L3).

These accounts reflect Erikson's assertion that when learners in the school-age stage are not given opportunities to build industry and feel competent, they risk developing inferiority. As Cowley suggests, poor instructional practices directly contribute to behavioural disruptions in class.⁴² In line with Cherry's view, lack of autonomy and engagement can lead to withdrawal or rebellion.⁴³ The learners' dissatisfaction

³⁸ Sihle Mlambo, "Teacher Wounded After Shooting at Durban Primary School," IOL, January 22, 2020.

³⁹ Sesona Ngqakamba, "Shootings, Suicides, Stabbings, Tragedy: A Tough First Term for Gauteng Schools," News24, March 14, 2019, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/shootings-suicides-stabbings-tragedy-a-tough-first-term-for-gauteng-schools-20190314>.

⁴⁰ Riaan Grobler, "Violence and Killing in SA Schools: These Stories Shocked Us in 2018," News24, November 22, 2018, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/violence-and-killing-at-sa-schools-these-stories-shocked-us-in-20181122>.

⁴¹ Taryn-Leigh Solomons, "SACE Reveals 11 Teachers Fired over Misconduct Charges, Including Sexual Offences Against Learners," IOL, November 23, 2021, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/sace-reveals-11-teachers-fired-over-misconduct-charges-including-sexual-offences-against-learners-2b801b83-cc75-48b3-a507-d87ba2dda6c4>.

⁴² Sue Cowley, *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

⁴³ Cherry, *The Everything Psychology Book: Exploring the Human Psychology to Understand Why*.

with conventional, rigid teaching methods necessitates pedagogical reform, especially through participatory and experiential learning.

Another internal issue identified was the lack of learner involvement in rulemaking:

We are just told the rules and punished when we break them. We don't even know who makes them (L5).

If we are part of the decision-making, I think more learners will respect the rules (L2).

This supports Erikson's theory that learners need to develop a sense of purpose during the initiative versus guilt stage. When they are excluded from participatory processes, they may feel disregarded and act out to assert independence.

In addition, educators noted that gender dynamics influenced how learners responded to authority:

Sometimes the boys don't respect us because we are women. They think they can do as they please (T1).

It's not that we can't discipline, but they see male teachers as more commanding (T2).

This observation introduces a psychosocial lens on identity and role perceptions. Learners may associate authority with stereotypical gender roles, which have implications for how discipline is enforced and received. The finding aligns with Bechuke and Oduaran, who emphasise the importance of aligning classroom management strategies with learners' psychosocial contexts.⁴⁴

External Causes of Learner Misconduct

External causes point to out-of-school influences such as family background, community norms, and media exposure. Learners from unstable or unsupportive homes often carry emotional burdens into the classroom:

My father is always drunk and shouts at everyone. I come to school angry (L4).

No one checks if I do homework. At home, it's just chaos with almost no care (L6).

Such psychosocial stressors can trigger identity confusion, as per Erikson's adolescence stage. Without stable models for emotional regulation, learners may turn to disruptive behaviours. Participants corroborated this:

We often deal with learners who are products of broken homes. You can see it in their anger (T1).

Community violence and peer group affiliations, such as gangs, also play a significant role. Most boys in our area are in gangs. You feel left out if you don't belong (L8).

There are learners who threaten others or bring knives. They are copying what happens around them (SMT1).

These findings echo Baruth and Mokoena and De Wet, who stress the role of sociocultural context in shaping learner behaviour.⁴⁵ In Erikson's terms, these learners struggle with belonging versus alienation, prompting them to seek validation from deviant groups.

Early sexual exposure and substance abuse also emerged as prominent themes.

Some girls become pregnant because their parents don't guide them. They grow up fast (T3).

Dagga is easy to get. Some boys even smoke before class (L9).

⁴⁴ Bechuke and Oduaran, "Integrating Disciplinary Plans to Manage Learner Behaviour in the Pre-Instructional Phase of a Lesson in South African Schools."

⁴⁵ Baruth and Mokoena, "A Framework to Deal with Violence in South African Public Schools"; De Wet, "South African English Newspapers' Depiction of Learner-on-Teacher Violence."

These behaviours reflect the conflicted identity formation characteristic of adolescence, as per Erikson, and the absence of proper role models and coping frameworks. Bandura's social learning theory is reinforced in his work that learners imitate behaviours that are rewarded or normalised in their environment.

General Causes of Learner Misconduct

Beyond internal and external distinctions, learners and teachers pointed to broader systemic issues like peer pressure, overemphasis on learner rights, and lack of accountability.

Even if I don't want to misbehave, my friends will say I'm soft. So, I just follow (L7).

We are scared to discipline them. They say they will report us for abuse and the South African Schools Act protects them (T2).

Some learners even threaten teachers with their phones. They say they will record us (SMT2).

This aligns with Jinot's observation that overprotective rights-based policies, when not balanced with discipline structures, undermine authority.⁴⁶ Erikson's framework would see this as an erosion of responsibility and role definition, critical to identity development.

The school culture was also found to be reactive rather than proactive.

We only talk about behaviour when there is a crisis. There is no continuous programme (SMT3).

This points to the need for consistent, embedded social-emotional learning frameworks, not crisis-driven interventions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Based on the theoretical understanding and data shared in the discussion, several implications for education practice and management are identified. Based on the psychosocial and empirical findings presented, several implications for educational practice and school management are evident. These recommendations aim to address both the symptoms and root causes of learner misconduct through holistic, theory-informed interventions.

1. **Pedagogical Innovation for Engagement:** Given the significant role of boredom as an internal cause of misconduct, educators must adopt dynamic teaching strategies that resonate with Generation Z learners. Participants expressed frustration with passive learning environments, noting a lack of excitement and interaction in lessons (L1, L3). This highlights the need for instructional practices that foster industry and initiative, as emphasised by Erikson. Educational institutions should invest in professional development programmes focused on project-based learning, digital tools integration, and multimodal teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning styles. These approaches will not only enhance academic engagement but also reduce attention-seeking misbehaviours.
2. **Learner Participation in Rulemaking:** The findings strongly support the incorporation of learners' voices in school governance. As learners like L2 and L5 noted, exclusion from rule-making fosters defiance and detachment. Incorporating student councils and classroom-based democratic processes can support learners' psychosocial need for autonomy and purpose. Schools should implement platforms where learners can co-create behavioural codes of conduct. This aligns with Erikson's stage of initiative versus guilt and builds a culture of accountability rather than authoritarian compliance.

⁴⁶ Jinot, "The Causes of a Lack of Discipline Among Secondary School Learners in Mauritius."

3. **Teacher Training in Psycho-Social Competency:** The impact of educator gender dynamics and lack of trauma-informed approaches calls for more than generic classroom management training. Educators (T1, T2) expressed concern about power imbalances and their limited authority. Addressing this requires systemic training in emotional intelligence, learner psychology, and psychosocial theory. Teacher empowerment should include modules on managing defiant behaviour, building respectful relationships, and resolving identity-based conflicts. Ongoing mentoring and communities of practice can support sustainable change.
4. **Strengthened School–Family–Community Linkages:** External sources of misconduct, such as unstable homes, gang culture, and substance abuse, highlight the urgent need for cross-sector collaboration. Participants (T3, SMT1, L4) described the emotional and behavioural burdens learners carry into school. Without coordinated support, disciplinary measures alone will fall short. Schools should partner with social workers, child psychologists, and local organisations to provide wraparound services, e.g., parenting workshops, counselling, and substance abuse education.
5. **Balancing Rights with Responsibility:** The overemphasis on learner rights without reinforcing responsibility has created a disciplinary vacuum in some schools. Teachers (T2, SMT2) reported feeling constrained by fear of backlash and legal ambiguity. To address this, policy interpretation and application training are needed for staff, clarifying what is allowed and what constitutes misconduct. Simultaneously, schools must embed character education, social-emotional learning (SEL), and restorative justice practices to cultivate empathy, respect, and accountability.
6. **Proactive Behavioural Culture and Systems:** Finally, disciplinary measures must evolve from reactive crisis management to proactive, data-informed support. As SMT3 noted, behavioural discussions often arise only during emergencies. To prevent this, schools should institute continuous behavioural monitoring systems, regular wellness check-ins, and early-warning mechanisms for at-risk learners. Whole-school programmes that promote positive reinforcement, peer mentoring, and group problem-solving can serve as scaffolds for both psychosocial development and behavioural self-regulation.

Together, these implications call for a fundamental shift from control-based to developmentally responsive discipline practices. When schools centre psychosocial development in both curriculum and culture, they create safe, engaging environments where learners can thrive.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the understanding of learner misconduct in South African secondary schools by framing it as a multifaceted psychosocial phenomenon. The integration of Erikson’s developmental theory has provided a nuanced lens for examining how internal, external, and systemic influences converge to shape learner behaviour. Rather than treating misconduct as a standalone disciplinary issue, this perspective reveals its embeddedness within learners’ developmental trajectories, social environments, and institutional structures.

The findings underscore the limitations of punitive and reactive disciplinary models in addressing the root causes of misconduct. Instead, there is a need for proactive, developmentally responsive approaches that nurture autonomy, competence, and identity formation. Educational strategies must prioritise engagement, relevance, and relationship-building in the classroom, while disciplinary practices must be reframed to promote accountability and emotional growth.

Equally critical is the role of school leadership in fostering inclusive and safe learning environments. This involves not only empowering educators with psychosocial competencies but also aligning school policies

with national legal frameworks in ways that preserve both rights and responsibilities. The engagement of external stakeholders—families, social workers, and community partners—is essential for constructing holistic support systems that mitigate environmental risk factors and reinforce prosocial behaviour.

In conclusion, sustainable improvement in learner conduct will require an integrated paradigm that balances structure with empathy and authority with development. By anchoring discipline strategies in psychosocial theory and empirical evidence, South African schools can move toward a culture of care, resilience, and mutual respect where every learner is supported to succeed, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally.

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