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## Exploring educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood

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In the research reported on here we explored educators' experiences of learners' social functioning in middle childhood in a South African context. Educators are important socialisation agents for learners in middle childhood, and we reasoned that they could offer valuable information to identify those key social skills and competencies that learners in this life phase need to function optimally. A qualitative exploratory design was used. Twenty-nine educators were purposefully selected as participants from 4 school districts in a demarcated area in the North-West province. Data were collected via 4 focus group interviews, with each focus group interview including the educators of 1 school per district. Thematic analysis of the data revealed the embeddedness of learners' social functioning in the complex blend of South Africa's unequal contexts and diverse cultures; the demonstration of inappropriate and appropriate behaviour as indicators of learners' quality of social functioning in the learning environment; and the imperative to intentionally develop and strengthen the social skills and emotional competencies of learners in middle childhood. We recommend that learners in middle childhood be supported to acquire higher levels of social competence, in particular skills of communication and listening, conflict management, and problem-solving to improve innate social functioning.

**Keywords:** educators; learners; learning environment; middle childhood, positive psychology; social functioning; social skills, well-being

### Introduction

Social functioning can be viewed as processes of relating (Wissing, 2013). The accomplishment of suitable social functioning is of primary importance for learners in middle childhood (Zsolnai & Kasik, 2014) in the context of family, school and the wider community (Weiten, 2017) as it creates opportunities for well-being (Wissing, 2013). Since peers are relatively important in this life phase (Louw & Louw, 2014), the peer group has a powerful influence on a learner, which if negative, unfortunately might hinder (Donald, Lazarus & Moolla, 2014) social functioning. In addition, if learners in middle childhood are exposed to various environmental risks, such as, poverty, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), violence, familial conflict, and stressors regarding their education, inter alia a lack of resources and support services as well as poorly trained educators (Barbarin, 2003), their social functioning may be hampered (Geldenhuis & Van Schalkwyk, 2019). Furthermore, learner discipline is problematic in many South African schools (Kourkoutas & Wolhuter, 2013; Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2008) and includes, for example, theft, vandalism, as well as destructive and disrespectful behaviour towards educators and fellow learners (LeeFon, Jacobs, Le Roux & De Wet, 2013). In addition, aggressive behaviour is a common occurrence in South African schools (South African Council for Educators, 2011), with this being a manner of expressing frustrations and other negative emotions (Breet, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2010). All of the above may be associated with poor social functioning and lower levels of well-being.

Many South African schools are situated in environments of high risk, high need and scarce resources (Ebersöhn, 2015) where disciplinary problems occur (Kourkoutas & Wolhuter, 2013; Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2008) and the incidence of violence and aggression is common (South African Council for Educators, 2011). While the complexities of these issues in the South African context with its large socio-economic inequality (Katiyatiya, 2020) is acknowledged, the impact of healthy social interactions – or the lack thereof – is undeniable, and it cannot be accepted that social skills are automatically developed at home and that all learners possess the necessary social skills (Booyesen & Grosser, 2008).

In addition, the creation of enabling environments for children is central to their well-being; and, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 17 Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) have been identified outlining a world vision in which all children reach their potential and thrive (Bhardwaj, Sambu & Jamieson, 2017). Positive relationships and social competence are central to learners' development and well-being. Educators and researchers are increasingly aware of the importance of social and emotional competence in the classroom and beyond for health, education, and employment outcomes into adulthood (Martin, Collie & Frydenberg, 2017). An example of the above is that the acquisition of social skills enables learners to work effectively with others as members of a team or a group, such as, listening to others, asking clarifying questions, learning how to evaluate, managing conflict, reflecting on group work and allowing all group members to participate (Booyesen & Grosser, 2008). Evidently, competence and mastery of key developmental tasks in

middle childhood relate to both academic and social success. In this sense, effective schools advocate individual cognitive and social skills that encourage learning and positive development (Doll, Leclair & Kurien, 2009).

However, as indicated above, deficits in social functioning (as evidenced by lacking social skills) have many adverse consequences (January, Casey & Paulson, 2011), such as learners' increased vulnerability towards mental health challenges. Social anxiety and depression are typical examples of such mental health problems (Segrin & Flora, 2000). Given the above, it is important that sound social functioning should be developed, strengthened and protected as, according to Damasio (2006), it is not instinctive due to mere maturation. Furthermore, Luiselli, McCarthy, Coniglio, Zorilla-Ramirez and Putnam (2005) indicate that it is unlikely that learners will develop positive social skills without direction and assistance. According to Lewis, Brock and Lazarus (2002), social skills training may be beneficial in the sense that it prevents various problem behaviours and may also serve as an early intervention or programme for these.

Educators are in a good position to detect the social functioning of learners ascribed to the amount of time spent in class and are supposed to be informed about developmental phases and goals. Hence, the objectives directing this study was to explore educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood to determine whether these learners need social skills training, and if so, what social skills and competencies the educators viewed were needed in order to enhance the learners' social functioning. We could not find any study with the same or similar objectives that has been done in the South African or even the African context.

#### Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Social functioning is used as an umbrella term in this study, referring to a continuum of processes indicating positive social functioning directed by pro-social behaviour in contrast to negative social functioning indicating threats to social functioning. To determine whether the social functioning of learners is age-appropriate, developmental theories are valuable. Erikson's psychosocial theory was used to guide this study as it provides a broad framework from which to view human development and emphasises both the social nature of human beings and the important influence that social relationships have on development (Malone, Liu, Vaillant, Rentz & Waldinger, 2016). According to this theory, middle childhood is the phase of industry versus inferiority, meaning that learners develop the ability to cooperate and create, which may lead to either incompetence or mastery. The most recognised psychological developmental

task in middle childhood is the gaining of self-competence (Charlesworth, Wood & Viggiani, 2008). Furthermore, self-esteem and individuality are developed during this period by mentally comparing actual social experiences to the ideal self (Ripke, Huston, Eccles & Templeton, 2008), by comparing the self to others, by having friends with whom stable relationships can be developed, and by being accepted and liked by siblings and parents (Feldman, 2007). The formation of a strong sense of identity, based on competence that is separate from parents, should also be built during this phase (Hook, 2013). In addition, children during this stage identify strongly with their peer group and peer influences are of key importance to the personality and functioning of developing children. A high value is thus placed on not only being able to productively engage and communicate with peers but also on being recognised and positively acknowledged by them. If a child fails at the developmental tasks of middle childhood, it will most probably lead to ineptness and inferiority, as the roots of inability, inferiority complexes, low self-esteem, and feelings of unworthiness lie in this developmental stage (Hook, 2013).

Learners' competence in and mastery of social skills are also influenced by the context within which they grow up (Hall & Sambu, 2017). In this sense, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory was valued in this study, since it emphasises important contextual factors with reference to positive youth development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to this theory, the developing child is part of a sequence of complex as well as interactive systems including the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016). The microsystem, of which there may be more than one, consists of the individuals who are closest to the child (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016) and who are familiar to him or her (Donald et al., 2014). Furthermore, it includes patterns of daily activity, relationships, and roles that may shape various aspects of social, spiritual, cognitive, moral, and emotional development (Donald et al., 2014). Events in one microsystem may influence another microsystem (Louw, Louw & Kail, 2014); for example, the way in which a child responds at school may be influenced by what happens in the peer group or at home (Donald et al., 2014). Connections or interactions across microsystems lead to the development of the mesosystem (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016); for example, the developing child's experience or circumstances at home might affect the way in which the child interacts and relates with those at school. The exosystem represents those social settings that a child does not experience directly but that nevertheless still influence his or her development (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016), for

example, religious institutions, social networks, and the availability of institutions for social welfare and health care (Louw et al., 2014). The macrosystem includes dominant economic and social structures as well as practices, beliefs, and values that influence all the other social systems, for example, a child who grows up in a culture in which older individuals are respected or authority is obeyed, will comply with this in his or her proximal interactions within the micro- and mesosystems (Donald et al., 2014). Nowadays, the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model is central to the aforementioned theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, in Donald et al., 2014; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This model views proximal processes (continuing interaction between the child and the immediate environment) as the primary mechanism for development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Studying children in multiple environments, also known as ecological systems, is complimented by models to understand their social well-being. Keyes' (1998) model of social well-being explains the interaction between an individual and his or her community by providing a perspective on the functioning of individuals in their social world and the way in which they judge the general functioning of the society. According to this model, social well-being is an integral part of an individual's mental health and encompasses social acceptance, social coherence, social actualisation, social contribution, and social integration (Du Toit, Wissing & Khumalo, 2014; Keyes, 1998). For learners to improve psychological functioning and social well-being and thus grow in the abovementioned domains, sound social skills are essential.

Beyond the family, learners spend most of their time within the school environment (Masten, 2015), that worldwide, offer opportunities for relationships with adults and peers. According to Samanci (2010), primary schools have the important role, among others, of assisting learners in adapting to a healthy social life. Furthermore, McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) indicate that except for its educational role, schools should also nurture learners' psychosocial development. Evidently, educators can be a source of support to learners and facilitate positive relational experiences. This is important in the sense that healthy social functioning is essential for both positive school performance and overall well-being (Geldenhuis & Van Schalkwyk, 2019). Furthermore, Ryff (2014) claims that relational health is embedded in those daily interactions and connections offering opportunities for well-being. This viewpoint is supported by Bornstein, Hahn and Haynes (2010) referring to the manifestation of social competence during middle childhood in emotional self-regulation, social cognition, positive

communication, and prosocial relationships with family members, peers, and teachers. Lawler, Newland, Giger and Brockevelt (2017) also indicate the significance of relational, school, and neighbourhood variables as the strongest predictors of well-being for 10-year-old children in their study conducted in the United States and 10 other countries, namely Algeria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Israel, Nepal, Romania, Rwanda, South Korea, and Uganda. The importance of positive social functioning during middle childhood resonates with South African researchers, as Kitching, Roos and Ferreira (2012) state the high probability of constructive daily interacting to ignite processes of positive development.

### Methodology

A qualitative exploratory design was employed.

#### Participants and Setting

Participating schools are situated in a city in the North-West province of South Africa known for its mining activities with a population of about 400,000. These schools included learners from a diversity of races and cultures, who spoke various languages, and had different socio-economic circumstances. Only schools with at least 400 learners (from diverse races, cultures, socio-economic circumstances and where various languages were spoken) were considered to ensure enough educators per school with reference to participation.

The final number of participating schools ( $n = 4$ ) was determined with cluster sampling, based on the number of public primary schools in the area as well as the sub-areas into which schools in the area were divided. Purposive sampling was applied for the selection of participants (educators;  $n = 29$ ) from the above-mentioned four schools.

The participating educators had to meet inclusion criteria, for example, 2 years of experience in presenting classes to learners aged 10 to 12 years (in Grades 5 and 6) in order to be able to provide valuable information; fluency in English or Afrikaans as these are the languages the researcher understand and speak.

Spaull (2013) notes that since 1994 there were mainly two educational systems in the South African context. One is a well-resourced, high-performing system, serving mainly the richest quarter of children, while the other is a low-performing system that is inefficient in converting resources into academic performance, and that serves the poor (Spaull, 2013). Most of the differences between these two systems can be traced back to socio-economic circumstances. Economic advantage or disadvantage determines not only in which schools learners end up, but also how prepared they are cognitively, socially and physically for school as well as their performance

as they progress through the school system. As economic advantage is still highly correlated with race, most black and coloured learners may enter the school system with a potential academic disadvantage relative to their white peers because they may have less educated parents with fewer resources (South African Human Rights Commission & United Nations Children's Fund, 2014).

Considering this situation, two of the participating schools were no-fee schools situated in informal settlements which could be categorised as low-resource schools representing low-performing systems; the other two schools were situated in more advantaged suburbs of the selected area representing more well-resourced and higher performing schools.

#### Data Collection

Four focus group interviews, one per school in each sub-area, were conducted. Each focus group consisted of six to 10 participants. After an explanation of the concept of social functioning was provided, open-ended questions such as the following were asked: "How do you experience the social functioning of learners aged 10 to 12 years old in the classroom?"; "Tell me about any positive experiences that you have had with learners in middle childhood regarding their social functioning in your career to date"; "Tell me about any negative experiences that you have had with learners in middle childhood regarding their social functioning in your career to date"; and "How, do you think, can negative experiences be prevented or lessened, with specific reference to the social skills and competencies that learners in middle childhood need in order to manage social situations more effectively in future?"

The focus groups were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and supplemented by field and reflective notes.

#### Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the verbatim-transcribed data according to the steps indicated by Clarke and Braun (2013). To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, specific attention was paid to credibility and dependability. To ensure credibility, member checking was employed. This was done by having conversations on the findings of the research with participants to determine whether the researchers fully understood the messages that participants wanted to convey (Boeije, 2010). Furthermore, credibility was ensured by the thematic content analysis being done individually by both the main researcher and an independent person, whereafter the two analyses were compared, and the final themes and sub-themes were decided on. Dependability was ensured by the thorough documenting of the details

of all the activities conducted throughout the research (Boeije, 2010; Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011) to make it possible for the study to be replicated.

#### Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The research was approved by the scientific committee, Community Psychosocial Research, of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the North-West University (NWU), whereafter ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the NWU (Ethics Approval Number: NWU-00082-15-A1). Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the North-West province's Department of Education and Sport Development and the school principals of the participating schools. The written informed consent of participants was obtained prior to data collection, and the participants had the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality and partial anonymity were ensured by setting rules for focus groups to protect participants against harm.

#### Findings and Discussion

The findings entail four main themes and two sub-themes, under the first theme. These are discussed next.

##### Theme 1: Environment (Context) as a Determinant of Behaviour

Educators agreed that the environment of learners in middle childhood played an important role in their acquisition and use of social skills.

##### *Sub-theme 1.1: Socio-economic circumstances as a determinant of behaviour and motivation to achieve*

Educators spoke about the differences among learners in the same school or within the same sub-area who came from either rather privileged socio-economic circumstances or from economically deprived conditions. These socio-economic inequalities were expressed in the following way: "*We sit here with children whom we provide with food, you know, they are poor, and then we also have some of the richest children in town*" (Example 1: School 1 – fee-paying school).

Educators referred to learners' perceptions of hopelessness when coming from less privileged backgrounds and described it in terms of poor motivation to achieve at school and to obtain future success. This lack of commitment and responsibility was further qualified as learners' tendency towards external incentives for motivation, such as financial rewards. These learners thus valued material possessions, probably because they were more aware of their lower-order needs, for example food; in contrast to taking part in opportunities aimed at reaching their full potential and thus self-actualisation (Maslow, 1968,

in Weiten, 2016). This tendency is illustrated in the following quotes:

*If you can just say, 'Now, we are going to compete for this and then you are going to be awarded a medal', they will say, 'Agh, what can I do with a medal? ... It does not mean anything. Just a medal.' For them to compete for a medal, it's a disgrace ... They will, money will do, ..., it will do the thing.* (Example 2: School 4 – no-fee school)

*They don't dream ... maybe seeing that the others, who are through their Grade 12, né ... They are there at home sitting doing nothing ... Then it demotivates them* (Example 3: School 4 – no-fee school).

This finding indicates the complexity of socio-economic status, educational achievement, and social processes. Louw and Louw (2014) assert that socio-economic status may have an important impact on educational achievement as it influences the atmosphere in the family, the neighbourhood of the family, and the quality of the schooling. Learners' social skills are especially important when learners and educators are facing conditions such as overcrowded classrooms which hinder learners' participation and focus in classroom activities due to the disruptive behaviour of fellow learners (Marais, 2016). Furthermore, in a study at 12 secondary schools in four provinces of South Africa, Prinsloo (2007) found that many learners displayed irresponsible behaviour and carelessness towards others and themselves, and that they lacked long-term vision for their lives. Booysen and Grosser (2008) warn that all learners need to become socially competent, irrespective of their gender, culture or socio-economic environment. Sound social functioning is thus necessary to counteract the negative effects of adverse socio-economic circumstances, to achieve academically and to cultivate hope for the future.

**Sub-theme 1.2: The home environment as a determinant of behaviour and the need for non-educational support from educators**

According to the educators, many learners are not part of stable home environments and are raised by, for example, a grandparent, a single mother, or a sibling, as indicated by the following quote:

*The, the children in most instances are not staying in a very stable, form of family ... you will find it is either they are being raised by the grandmothers or maybe their mother without a father, or a sister.* (Example 4: School 4 – no-fee school)

Educators mentioned that some learners were emotionally deprived (experienced a lack of love and attention) and were exposed to unhealthy role-models. The consequences of these behaviours are then also displayed within the school context. For example, some learners find it challenging to accept instructions and discipline from educators at school as they seem to be in control at their homes; they tend to be easily angered, argumentative, manipulative, and blame others for their mistakes

as a result of a lack of discipline and/or the role models they are exposed to. In contrast, some learners have more suitable and positive circumstances at home. These learners tend to be well-mannered and educators perceive them as not posing any problems. The above can be illustrated by the following quotes:

*Ninety per cent depends on the circumstances at home. What happens at home, they apply at school, you know, if he is the, if he can play boss at home, then he will also play the boss here, you know.* (Example 5: School 1 – fee-paying school)

*There are kids who are having, you know, good manners, who are having a sound social, you know, upbringing* (Example 6: School 3 – no-fee school).

Educators emphasised the home environment as a key factor influencing the acquisition of social skills for learners in primary school. This particularly refers to the role of the family providing support, for example, parents modelling suitable behaviour, the use of positive communication at home, parents having democratic attitudes regarding discipline, and parents showing unconditional acceptance of their child(ren). This finding resonates with Samanci (2010) who found that educators perceived the social functioning (development of social skills) of learners in middle childhood as mainly influenced by their primary agents of socialisation, namely their parents. De Witt and Lessing (2013) concur that educators mainly attribute learners' problem behaviour to the parents. Louw and Louw (2014) refer specifically to the guidance of adults to direct children's behaviour toward appropriate responses.

All educators spoke about acting as parents for the learners mainly because i) many parents were uninvolved in their children's lives, and ii) there was an increasing number of primary school learners in South Africa who were the heads of their households. Educators also mentioned that they needed to teach learners good manners in many instances. The above can be evidenced by the following quotes:

*They sometimes see you as their, another mother or what, they will be so close to you. They will tell you almost everything. Mmm-hmm, and every time they would want to be next to you* (Example 7: School 4 – no-fee school).

*We must teach good manners more than the academic subject. That's the problem* (Example 8: School 1 – fee-paying school).

Schoeman (2015) states that it is expected from educators in South Africa, apart from their educational role, to also provide psycho-social support to learners, especially in terms of caring and nurturing. Furthermore, according to Jefferis and Theron (2017), learners associate caring educators with positive parenting.

In a South African study done by Prinsloo (2007), school principals pointed to some parents' lack of involvement regarding both their child's

learning process and other school activities. In a study done on primary school learners in the Free State province of South Africa, LeeFon et al. (2013) indicate parents' limited interest in learners' school performance. Prinsloo (2007) asserts that educators need to teach learners good manners – especially those learners who are easily angered, argumentative, manipulative, and blaming of others.

The influence of schools and especially the positive role of educators are thus vital for the development and nurturing of middle childhood learners' social functioning and ultimately their well-being. However, according to Geldenhuys and Van Schalkwyk (2019), the cohesive function of culture – especially in the South African context with its diversity of cultural practices and values – can never be dismissed.

#### Theme 2: Cultural Values as a Determinant of Behaviour

This sub-theme shows that the cultural values of the four participating schools differed. Some schools had a Western (individualistic) culture with a focus on autonomy (independence), while others had a collectivistic (interdependent) culture with the principle of *Ubuntu* featuring strongly. The principle of *Ubuntu* is evidenced in the following quote:

*Now you realise that now in the group of this learners, they will realise that this one, he's better than the rest of us. ... And then every time they will give that particular learner a support and even assist. They can even take their boots or their clothes for that particular learner. (Example 9: School 4 – no-fee school)*

Sometimes, when learners from various cultures are in the same school, all of these cultures may feature to an extent. According to Gresham (2016), schools are challenged to teach learners from various language and ethnic backgrounds with different behaviour styles, beliefs, and attitudes.

Even though some values that determine social functioning are universal across cultures, acceptable social functioning may also be culturally bound. Learners enrolled in schools with various cultures may thus become confused as to what is expected of them in terms of acceptable social behaviour, especially when they are taught by educators from a different culture, which impacts negatively on their acquisition of appropriate social skills. This finding is vital to the South African learning context and shows how learners' social skills are indeed challenged and shaped in a variety of ways at school, such as during interactions with peers and teachers (Sørliie, Hagen & Nordahl, 2021).

While social skills can indeed be viewed as life skills to be refined with practice during interactions (Ogden & Hagen, 2018), learners hold different experiences from social interactions with

parents and others, which influence how they interact with teachers and peers. Furthermore, Sørliie et al. (2021) indicate that ongoing transactional processes contribute to differences in children's social skills development. Differences in these processes with regard to the school and home contexts, such as disciplinary practices are integral to the different paths that learners follow in attaining social skills.

#### Theme 3: "Quality of Connecting" in Terms of Behaviour

"Quality of connecting" refers to the nature of learners' relationships and how these relationships influence their behaviour. All educators indicated that learners displayed both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Educators referred to appropriate behaviour as being kind, helpful, and respectful towards others, commenting nicely, and accepting discipline. The following verbatim quote provides an example of appropriate behaviour: "*And if they do well in their things, they, there are some of them who will comment nicely*" (Example 14: School 2 – fee-paying school).

Inappropriate behaviour includes being nasty, being disruptive, being argumentative and displaying aggressive behaviour, stealing, and lying. The following verbatim quotes provide examples of inappropriate behaviour:

*Yes, and I think that specific children can't accept a 'no' ... They will carry on and on and on. ... And they will argue with you about small things, for example, too much homework and will just carry on and on until you lose your temper. ... Then they will get so angry. (Example 15: School 1 – fee-paying school)*

*Because sometimes they steal cell phones or they open teacher's bags and take something (Example 16: School 3 – no-fee school).*

Social competence entails engaging in appropriate social behaviour in ways that do not harm others (Zsolnai & Kasik, 2014). The manifestation of inappropriate learner behaviour is a big challenge in South African schools (De Witt & Lessing, 2013; Van Rooyen, 2014). An increase in violent behaviour within this country's public schools is linked to overcrowded classrooms, problems with discipline, bullying, fighting, screaming, and vandalism (Marais, 2016; Van Rooyen, 2014). An educator who participated in Marais' (2016) study referred to learners' disrespectful behaviour as evidenced by them laughing at her when she tried to discipline them. LeeFon et al. (2013) state that although most South African schools employ a code of conduct, the desired effect is not a given. LeeFon et al. (2013) mentioned learners' destructive behaviour towards both fellow learners and educators who were often the victims of theft and vandalism. LeeFon (2012) found that other undesirable behaviour displayed by learners included talking non-stop in class and not

completing schoolwork, fighting, displaying aggressive and arrogant behaviour, lying, using foul language, and backchatting when reprimanded.

According to the participants, inappropriate behaviour also occurred due to the influences of negative peer pressure, exposure to unsuitable or age-inappropriate media as well as popular role models, and moral confusion, as illustrated by the following:

*And the children are really very stuck in group pressure ... they as individuals they are actually wonderful children and almost everyone. ... But together (Example 17: School 2 – fee-paying school).*

*The social media have got the negative and positive impact on how the children behave (Example 18: School 3 – no-fee school).*

*Also reading magazines or their role models. So they like to be like them (Example 19: School 4 – no-fee school).*

*The, they will think that, 'why is this one loved by the teacher so much?' It means they have a relationship, that's how their minds talk. It means the principal cannot send Elizabeth. If the principal sends Elizabeth, it means the principal has got an affair. ... Even the teachers, if I've been close to the principal, then the principal is ... my boyfriend. (Example 20: School 3 – no-fee school)*

Educators in this study mentioned that bullying was frequently an imitation of the behaviour of role models, for example, parents or family members from dysfunctional homes. Apart from the immediate family setting, Van Rooyen (2014) describes bullying by the display of power by excluding, for example, a learner from a peer group on social media. Also, the negative impact of the media on children's social behaviour and beliefs cannot be denied, when they are exposed to many hours of watching the ridiculing of authority structures (Louw & Louw, 2014).

According to the educators, positive behaviour of learners in middle childhood does not occur as frequently as negative behaviour. However, some learners do display sound behaviour that serves as an example for their fellow learners.

The third theme revealed that inappropriate and appropriate behaviour displayed by the learners in middle childhood affected the quality of their social functioning in the learning environment. In line with this, learners' inappropriate behaviour was apparently influenced by various external factors and development-related challenges. Inappropriate behaviour displayed at school in daily activities was associated with poor social functioning and a lack of emotional competence (Bornstein et al., 2010). Conversely, appropriate behaviour was strengthened by being exposed to positive role models ranging from adults to fellow learners and was viewed as an indicator of sound social functioning and emotional competence (cf. Sørliie et al., 2021; Zsolnai & Kasik, 2014).

The achievement of significant social developmental tasks establishes those standards by which children are judged in society, by others, and by themselves (Bornstein et al., 2010). If learners in middle childhood fail to attain these tasks, then the (negative) consequences inferring the lack of socio-emotional competence could lead to increased externalising or internalising symptoms over time. Cicchetti and Schneider-Rosen (1986) theorise that failure to master social and emotional (and cognitive) tasks creates vulnerabilities for future failures and depression. However, the strengthening of learner-learner relationships seems especially important in order to restrict decline and to encourage development of social skills in learners in middle childhood over time (Sørliie et al., 2021).

#### Theme 4: Social Skills to be Strengthened

Educators suggested that the following social skills needed to be strengthened and developed among learners in middle childhood in order to protect and improve their social functioning: self-regulation, problem-solving, conflict management, assertiveness, resilient coping, and communication and listening. Educators also underlined psychological competence regarding self-esteem, values, positive relationships, healthy boundaries, and responsibility. Some prominent responses were:

*The other skill that I think it is important and could help a lot, is that skill, in terms of conflict situation ... trying to bring peace without judging the other one, but just to calm the situation (Example 21: School 3 – no-fee school).*

*Yes, I think as teachers as well, we should teach them to be resilient and have self-worth (Example 22: School 3 – no-fee school).*

*We should be able to lead them in order for them to know what is correct (Example 23: School 1 – fee-paying school).*

*There's the boundaries. Stick to it (Example 24: School 1 – fee-paying school).*

The above findings are congruent with various international research showing the advantages of improving children's social skills (January et al., 2011; Sørliie et al., 2021). The aim of such programmes is typically to teach the effective management of conflict, problem-solving, emotional regulation, an awareness of the emotions of others, and the enhancement of positive peer relationships (January et al., 2011). Craig, Brown, Upright and DeRosier (2016) indicate that social skills training programmes should include problem-solving, decision-making, communication, self-regulation, and the making and keeping of friends. Concurrently, the Stop and Think social skills programme, developed by Knoff in 2001 for younger primary school learners, includes various skills, namely listening, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and conflict-resolution skills (McDaniel, Bruhn & Troughton, 2016).

In comparison to numerous international studies on social skills programmes for learners, there is a scarcity of evidence-based South African studies. However, De Villiers and Van den Berg (2012) developed a positive psychology programme with the goal of increasing resilience and well-being in 12-year-olds in South Africa. The programme included, for example, the development and maintenance of self-esteem; the identification, expression, and management of emotions in the self and others; conflict management (including assertiveness); and communication.

The fourth theme revealed the social skills and competencies to be strengthened among learners in middle childhood in the particular South African community to enhance their social functioning. This finding is supported by international research, such as Giger, Newland, Roh and Lawler (2013) indicating that relational variables are the strongest predictors of child well-being (Grade 7 learners).

The findings of this qualitative study, presented as four main themes, revealed the embeddedness of learners' social functioning in the complex blend of South Africa's unequal contexts and diverse cultures; the demonstration of inappropriate and appropriate behaviour as indicators of the quality of their social functioning in the learning environment; and the imperative to intentionally enhance social skills and emotional competence.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood in a particular South African community. Unfortunately, the experiences shared were mostly negative and it was found that adverse socio-economic circumstances, instability of the home environment, emotional deprivation, confusion because of cultural differences, and poor relationship quality because of inappropriate behaviour, influenced learners' social functioning adversely. Within the South African context, sound social functioning should be promoted to prevent negative outcomes and to create hope. Schools and educators are in an ideal position to guide learners towards positive social functioning as learners spend a lot of time at school in the presence of educators. Being exposed to different cultures in the home and learning environments should be clarified for learners in middle childhood, since social (interactional) expectations are not necessarily similar in various cultures. Furthermore, the nurturing of social competence in the South African context requires a culturally sensitive approach as it may contribute to personal, relational and collective well-being, which may in turn decrease behavioural problems.

For educators, healthy social functioning of learners in middle childhood is associated with a clear distinction between appropriate and inappropriate interaction. To nurture the social functioning of these learners, appropriate behaviour should be enhanced, and inappropriate behaviour should be amended. This can be accomplished by developing and implementing a school-based social skills programme for learners in middle childhood. This programme should include the skills of communication and listening, conflict management, problem-solving and assertiveness. Psychological competence regarding self-esteem, values, positive relationships, healthy boundaries and resilience are also of importance and should be included in the programme. This study was the first of its kind to be done in South Africa and may thus pave the way for other similar studies.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

Despite positive focus group interviews and data saturation being reached, the limitations of the study were that some educators in the focus group interviews did not participate as actively as was hoped. Additionally, the focus group interviews were conducted after school which might have led to staff being tired and in a hurry. It is thus recommended that a preparation sheet or a written questionnaire including all the main questions to be asked during the focus group interviews be distributed to participants about a week beforehand with a request to complete and submit it after the completion of the focus group interviews. This additional *modus operandi* is suggested for future research to accommodate possible power imbalances between educators, differences in educators' social skills as well as other circumstances or challenges that educators may face.

Furthermore, as educators are not experts on social functioning and it also appears that they may be prejudiced towards parents and learners living in disadvantaged circumstances, it is recommended that information on the social functioning of learners in middle childhood should also be obtained from other sources, for example, educational psychologists

It is also recommended that a programme that is applicable to the South African context be designed and developed to intentionally strengthen the social functioning of learners in middle childhood. This programme should not be viewed as a nice-to-have, but rather as a necessity, because it cannot be assumed that learners are socially competent. Such a programme will be important since learners in middle childhood are part of those representing the future of South Africa and mastering social skills and competencies is integral to a prosperous future. This programme should then be implemented in public schools and be

tested for efficiency to determine its value in improving the social functioning of learners in middle childhood and whether adaptations to the programme are needed.

### Authors' Contributions

The article emanated from the PhD dissertation of Dr S Beets under supervision of Dr I Van Schalkwyk and Dr D Kirsten as a co-supervisor.

### Notes

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