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IDENTIFICATION OF PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIORS AMONG LEARNERS IN CLASSROOMS BY TEACHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract
The study explored the identification of problematic behaviors of learners in the classroom by teachers in Midrand in the Gauteng province of South Africa. This study was informed by Bandura's Social Cognitive theory. The multiple case study design was chosen for this study. The participants comprised fifteen teachers (15) who teach grade four in the three public primary schools in Midrand. This study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection. Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the qualitative data. The results of the study indicated that teachers identified the problem behaviors by observing learners in and out of class, observing disruptive behaviors, observing uncooperative learners, observing disobedience behaviors, and assessing learning difficulties. The study recommends that Life orientation teachers should teach learners to be aware of the practical skills that are required in times of crisis, when they are experiencing emotional stress, instead of acting out by displaying problem behavior.

Keywords: behaviors, learners, primary schools, South Africa, teachers

Introduction
In the teaching/learning process, learners' behavioral conduct in the classroom plays a significant role in achieving the overall aims of education and, depending on the nature of this behavior, may thwart these aims. To this end, Tiwari and Panwar (2014) identify various problematic behaviors experienced in the classroom such as stealing, bullying, teasing, fighting, truancy, lying, disobedience, cheating, inappropriate language, lateness, rudeness, and disruptiveness. All these problematic behaviors can affect the teaching/learning process and should therefore be addressed for effective learning to take place in the classroom. Parsonson (2012, p. 16) contends that "[b]ehavior problems in a classroom increase the stress levels for both the teacher and pupils, disrupt the flow of lessons, and conflict with both learning objectives and the process of learning". In South Africa, Nunan (2018, p. s1) states that "challenging behavior in primary schools is an ongoing problem that is cause for concern". In another South African study, Rossouw (2003, p. 413), shows that "a lack of learner discipline may seriously hamper the teaching and

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learning process, and, if disruptive behavior prevails, education cannot be successful". In support of Rossouw's contention Rubbi-Nunan and Ntombela (2019, p. 1), further show that learners' problem behavior has become a serious problem in South Africa.

Problem behaviors in schools are common throughout the world. However, they take on a very particular dimension in the South African context given general historical changes in the country. Mouton, Louw, and Strydom (2012, p. 1211) assert that "[t]he period 1994-20211 introduced a new historical era for school education in South Africa" and the reason for implementing Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) "was to move away from the apartheid curriculum and to address skills, knowledge and values", and to focus on a more teacher-centered philosophy. However, there were many shortcomings with this policy, and consequently, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) was introduced in 2012. This means that Education policy was revisited time and again. According to Adu and Ngibe (2014, p. 987), curriculum change "affects the lives, relationships and working patterns of teachers and the educational experience of learners" and "knowledge and skills for learners are goods which need to be serviced by teachers, and learners have to produce what they have learned and acquired from school to the outside world". Therefore, the continuous change in the curriculum may affect the teaching and learning due to the 'abilities and aptitudes' of the learners and the competence to use their skills in the outside world which impacts the conditions available in society (Adu & Ngibe, 2014, p. 987). There have been reports of problem behaviors among learners in schools in Gauteng province. For example, De Beer's (2012) study of more than 1,000 grade 10 learners' schools in Johannesburg indicated that learners engaged in violence, robbery, and mugging among others. Another research by Myburgh, Poggenpoel, and Nhlapo, (2015), among learners in Gauteng indicated that there are aggressive tendencies in the patterns of anger, bullying, challenges to moral values, and fighting. Despite the numerous problem behaviors among learners in South African schools, very little published literature is available that may explain how teachers identified the problem behaviors of learners in primary schools.

Theoretical framework

This study was informed by Bandura's Social Cognitive theory which adopts an agentic perspective on change, adaptation, and self-development (Bandura, 2005, p. 9). According to Bandura (2005, p. 10), the way individuals function is deeply rooted in social systems. "Therefore, personal agency operates within a broad network of socio-structural influences" (Bandura, 2005, p. 10). Bandura's (1989) article on Human agency in social cognitive theory, highlights the mechanisms of human agency through the way changes within an individual are recognized. The human agency functions in three different ways: autonomous agency, mechanical agency, and emergent interactive agency (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). Although human beings are independent agents and in control of their actions, various aspects of the environmental factors "invoke the view of autonomous agency in arguments designed to repudiate any role of self-influence in causal processes" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). Secondly, external influences operate using the mechanical agency which "external influences operate mechanistically on action, but it does not itself have any motivative, self-reflective,

self-reactive, creative, or self-directive properties" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). Lastly, the emergent agency places focus on the individual to make contributions to their actions and motivations "within a system of triadic reciprocal causation" (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175).

Literature Review

Literature on how teachers identify behavioral problems of learners is scanty but what is available has different results. For example, Potgieter-Groot, Visser, and Lubbe-de Beer (2012) in South Africa asserted that many teachers "in mainstream education lack training to deal with learners experiencing emotional and behavioral barriers, resistance towards inclusive education becomes evident" (Potgieter-Groot, Visser & Lubbe-de Beer, 2012, p. 1). According to Potgieter-Groot, Visser, and Lubbe-de Beer (2012), emotional and behavioral barriers of learners in South African schools are an immense concern that require immediate attention because these behavioral barriers negatively impact the teaching and learning processes in the classroom. They further asserted that emotional and behavioral barriers include schizophrenia, selective mutism, aggression, disregarding the rights of others, destruction, dishonesty, and depression (Potgieter-Groot, Visser & Lubbe-de Beer, 2012, p. 4). As suggested by Potgieter-Groot, Visser, and Lubbe-de Beer (2012, p. 5), "teachers are not equipped to use strategies that could support and accommodate learners with emotional and behavioral barriers".

Reyneke (2015) postulated that problematic behaviors are commonly experienced and as a consequence, children's academic results are affected. According to Reyneke (2015, p. 58), "[d]isciplinary problems could be experienced because many children have the perception that education is useless; they do not perform at school and experience exam failure". Many children lack hope due to their social factors such as a lack of a support system at home, and not getting attention from their family members. Reyneke (2015, p.58) asserted that there are various problem behaviors experienced which include school-based violence, bullying, verbal aggression, class disruption, teasing other learners, rudeness, lack of commitment to schoolwork, and arriving late at school. In another study, Obadire and Sinthumule (2021, p. 2) showed that problem behaviors are displayed in various ways which include: not attending lessons, frequently leaving the class to use the toilet, rudeness, unwarranted talking while the teacher is teaching, bullying, being abusive, and stealing. They contend that many learners do not abide by the school code of conduct and this becomes a major problem for teachers. In addition, Obadire and Sinthumule (2021, p. 2) argued that some problem behaviors are much more serious when learners have weapons, steal, gamble, destroy school property, and even engage in verbal and sexual assaults.

According to Nazareth, Kvalsvig, Mellins, Desmond, Kauchali, and Davidson (2021), adverse childhood experiences are associated with child behavior. They asserted that adverse childhood events

> …included experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse before the age of 18 years, domestic violence, parental substance abuse, mental illness, and crime/imprisonment of household members, more recent studies of ACEs have included factors such as child neglect (physical

> and emotional), parental separation/divorce or death, exposure to violence outside the home, bullying, living in unsafe neighborhoods, homelessness, racial/ethnic discrimination, and income insecurity…

which later affected the behavior of the child (Nazareth, Kvalsvig, Mellins, Desmond, Kauchali & Davidson, 2021, p. 495). In addition, Nazareth, Kvalsvig, Mellins, Desmond, Kauchali, and Davidson (2021, p. 495), postulated that children experiencing behavior difficulties affected not only the well-being of the child but also the child's academic performance in school. Nazareth, Kvalsvig, Mellins, Desmond, Kauchali, and Davidson (2021) concluded that there is a relationship between adverse childhood experiences and the subsequent behavior problems the child displays. In addition, they also identified that a disorganized household, a child with deceased parents, and food insecurity also contributed to the problem behavior of the child (Nazareth, Kvalsvig, Mellins, Desmond, Kauchali & Davidson, 2021).

In a South African study, Marais and Meier (2010) contend that disruptive behavior should be considered as behavior that interferes with the teaching and learning act (a learner who distracts other learners during lesson presentation, refuses to follow directions, or displays aggressive behavior) [and] behavior that interferes with the rights of other learners to learn (a learner who continually calls out while the teacher is explaining content) (p. 43-44). However, very limited research is available on how teachers identify learners' problematic behaviors in the South African school context.

Methods

Research design

The multiple case study design was chosen for this study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015, p. 3), in a "multiple case study, several cases are studied to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition". Guba and Lincoln (1981) assert that case studies are an appropriate way of evaluating data, and they further believe that a "case study is best because it provides thick description, is grounded, is holistic and lifelike, simplifies data to be considered by the reader, illuminates meanings, and can communicate tacit knowledge" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 49). By conducting a multiple case study design, this study involved collecting and analyzing data from several cases, in this case, three primary schools in Midrand, Gauteng Province in South Africa, on identifying problem behavior in classrooms.

Research participants

The participants comprised fifteen teachers (15) who teach grade four in the three public primary schools in Midrand, thus 5 teachers from each school. This study employed the census sampling technique to obtain the 15 teachers for interviews. This sample size of 15 teachers was appropriate as recommended by Mason (2010, p.1), who argues that smaller sample sizes are employed because "qualitative research is very labor intensive, analyzing a large sample can be time-consuming and often simply impractical" (p.1). Mason, (2010) further recommends that for qualitative studies, a sample size of 10-50 participants would enhance saturation of interview data. Moreover, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006)

recommend that for qualitative studies, 15 participants were the smallest acceptable sample size that would lead to data saturation.

Research tools

This study employed semi-structured interviews for data collection. Specific information was required from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview, but the largest part of the interview was guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions was determined ahead of time. The format allowed the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and new ideas on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 90). According to Louise and While (1994, p. 330), "in this type of interview, validity, and reliability depend, not upon the repeated use of the same words in each question, but upon conveying equivalence of meaning. The data collected thoroughly describes the research context so that the behaviors and experiences become meaningful to an outsider (Kyngäs, Mikkonen & Kääriäinen, 2019).

Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Witwatersrand Ethics Research Committee and the Gauteng Department of Education. Thereafter, the researcher sought permission from principals to visit the selected schools, and appointments were made for data collection. The interviews were conducted virtually using online platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom as a COVID-19 precaution measure. Each of the interviews with participants lasted approximately between 45 minutes to one hour. The interviews were audio recorded, which was done using online platforms, with permission from the participants, and these interviews were then transcribed and analyzed.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyze the qualitative data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) "[t]hematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data" (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352). Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) outline the six phases of thematic analysis. This involved familiarization with data, generation of codes, search for themes, review of themes, and finally, defining and naming of themes.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The study explored how teachers identify problematic behaviors of learners in the classroom. From the thematic analysis of interview data, the themes that emerged related to teachers' identification of problem behaviors included observing learners in and out of class, observing disruptive behaviors, observing uncooperative learners, observing disobedience behaviors, and assessing learning difficulties. The themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: *Observing learners in and out of class*

Teachers identify the problem behavior in various ways. One of the ways include observation in and outside of class which is conducted during lessons (teaching time) and behavior during break and while rotating between classes. Participants stated:

> *"By observing teachers can identify if there is something that distracts the learner, by observing social factors (talking during lesson time, bullying, social economic problems at home, etc.), and the lack of discipline and motivation in which the learner will, for instance, not have any personal academic goals and he/she will then not see the value of putting forth their best effort in their work"* (Participant 4).
> *"Observing their interactions with teachers and peers is important. I have noticed that some learners 'feed' off each other. If the friends are not here, naughty ones, then the other learners are quiet. As soon as the disruptive friends are back, the other learners also become disruptive. If other teachers also complain about the same learner when it comes to being respectful or obedient you can tell who has terrible behavior and who doesn't. Having to ask multiple times to quiet down or do a task"* (Participant 8).
> *"By observing the learners in class, you notice that different learners portray different characteristics and show their frustration on struggles in different ways. With some learners, the teacher will be able to tell by their facial expressions that they are frustrated or struggling. Some learners will start to distract themselves from the task at hand and fidget, play with their stationery, or try to get the attention of other learners"* (Participant 9).

It is essential to record observations to keep track of certain behaviors that may cause a barrier in a learner's education. By observing, teachers can indicate problem behaviors, for example, does the specific learner always want to be the center of attention by not allowing other learners to talk, ignoring others' ideas, abusing others verbally, etc. Subsequently, teachers will also observe when learners are withdrawn, not connecting with their peers, not engaging in academic activities, and displaying a low/ lack of confidence.

Theme 2: *Observing disruptive behaviors*

Being disruptive is causing unwarranted trouble which results in preventing something from continuing as usual. According to the participants, changing the atmosphere of the classroom and disrupting the lesson was an immense problem faced. The respondents reported that by observing disruptive behaviors among learners, they were able to identify learners with behavior problems. According to excerpts from the interview transcripts the teachers stated the following:

> *"Problem behavior is continuous rather than occasional. It is consistent disregard/disrespect of the teacher, disregarding others, snide comments or learners having their conversations instead of*

> *paying attention to the lesson and not submitting work on time"* (Participant 3).
> *"Problem behavior is any sort of behavior that disrupts learning, such as being late, disregarding deadlines, side conversations happening when teaching is taking place, are some examples"* (Participant 6).
> *"Observing learners' behavior and discovering that a few learners exhibit problem behavior that is not normal such as them being disruptive"* (Participant 10).
> *"Problem behavior is learners who display behavior that disrupts the lesson and those who are not willing to/ open to conforming to the rules of the classroom. In addition, learners who always want to do their things other than their work are considered as demonstrating problem behavior"* (Participant 12).

From these responses, the following theme/s related to disruption in the classroom can be discerned. First, problematic learners and disciplinary issues are part of all teachers' experience of teaching. Secondly, the participants identified disruptive behavior as a significant problem in the classroom. Thirdly, the participants saw the problem behavior as continuous, and the repetition of disruptive behavior disrupted learning and had an impact on teaching time, distracted classmates, and affected the learners' academic performance.

Theme 3: *Observing uncooperative learners*

Being uncooperative highlights the lack of effort to engage in any form of activity and the unwillingness to complete work or follow instructions. Most teacher participants reported that the learner's unwillingness and inability to work was one of the ways to identify problem behaviors. Here are some of the participant's responses in this regard:

> *"Problem behavior would be when the learner does not cooperate in terms of the lesson content as well as not abiding by the classroom rules. If the tasks are not completed timelessly, not delivering their targets of the lesson, this could also be disruptive"* (Participant 1).
> *"Problem behavior is not a problem child; it is something that is a problem within the child which causes the child to behave unpleasantly"* (Participant 5).
> *"Having to repeat instructions multiple times takes up a lot of teaching time because a problematic learner does not want to cooperate"* (Participant 8).
> *"Problem behavior is when learners distract other learners and the teacher in class and ignore the classroom rules, as well as the instructions from the teacher"* (Participant 13).

From the interview results, the participants established that problem behavior was understood as a learner being uncooperative, a learner who disregards instructions given by the teacher and displays no interest in completing work, which results in an ineffective learning environment. Classmates of the problematic learner tend to get distracted thus impacting their learning experience as well. When

learners become uncooperative and unruly, they lose focus on school and become learner who continuously disrupts the class which can affect their academics, and teachers suggested that this leads to problem behavior.

Theme 4: *Observing disobedient behaviors*

Disobedience defines the failure or the unwillingness to obey rules or the person of authority. Participants found that the refusal to comply with classroom rules and instructions was a form of problem behavior. The respondents indicated learners with problem behaviors were identified by observing their disobedience behaviors. The lack of obedience from learners was a concern for teachers as their power of authority was overlooked by learners who displayed problem behavior. Below are excerpts from the transcribed interviews:

> *"Problem behavior is when the learner does not want to listen to the teacher and backchat, incomplete work after several warnings and when learners disrespect and disregard the teacher"* (Participant 2).
> *"Problem behavior is when a learner does not conduct themselves in a proper manner of a classroom environment and thus disrupting education for themselves or any other learner is problematic"* (Participant 7).
> *"Displaying defiance towards authority and having to focus on an individual rather than the whole class"* (Participant 8).

From the interview results, the participants asserted that learners who display problem behavior would have no respect for authority and did not respect the role of the teacher. The refusal to listen to the teachers and follow instructions was a great concern for teachers. The problem behavior of disobedience caused class disruption which not only affected the learning impact of the problematic learner but for their classmates as well. Teachers would tend to spend a lot of focus on the problem behavior of the learner which disadvantages the other classmates as they weren't given enough attention to focus on the teaching and learning process.

Theme 5: *Assessing learning difficulties*

Learning difficulties entail the various challenges in acquiring knowledge and skills to the standard level expected of those of the same age, especially because of mental disability or cognitive disorder. Most participants reported that a child with learning difficulties may be described as having specific problems processing certain forms of information. Teachers identified learners with learning difficulties in terms of having little or no speech, finding it difficult to learn new skills, needing daily one-on-one support with activities, and having difficulties with social skills. Participants responded as follows:

> *"When you get to know the learners, you get to know how they behave and as a teacher, you will have an understanding of their characteristics/ behavioral patterns. Problem behavior is when they start behaving out of character/ differently from how they would behave on a normal day. You tend to pick up that something is wrong and this could result in learning disabilities in certain aspects. This may be*

> *visible in various subjects. For example, a learner may be good at Maths and also perform poorly in English being they have a learning barrier"* (Participant 11).
> *"Problem behavior in the classroom would range from academic issues to social behavior. In addition, problem behavior could include learning barriers, physical restrictions or being disruptive, anti-social, withdrawn, or physically inappropriate"* (Participant 14).
> *"Problem behavior is when behavior is hindering a learner from effectively learning and making progress in a specific grade, for example, be it ADHD, disciplinary problems, or any other syndrome or problem that was not adequately addressed in the formative years of the individual"* (Participant 15).

The participants postulated that many types of learning disabilities can impact the process in which a child learns, such as dyslexia, attention deficit- hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, and many more. A child can have one or a combination, which plays an immense role in the learning difficulties that they experience. This results in learners having difficulty in processing certain forms of information and subsequently, learners tend to become frustrated and lash out or display problematic behavior because they feel overwhelmed. Participants suggested that the problem behavior illustrated the emotions they felt because they had difficulty in engaging with the learning materials.

Discussion

The findings indicated that teachers identify problematic behaviors of learners in the following ways: observing learners in and out of class, observing disruptive behaviors, observing uncooperative learners, observing disobedience behaviors, and assessing learning difficulties. The findings suggested that teachers can identify problem behaviors, however, not all teachers had the theoretical knowledge to engage with 'problem behavior'. Teachers need to acquire a theoretical framework to be able to understand what constitutes problem behavior. Also, the problem behavior in the classroom cannot be seen as isolated from the broader societal context within the school environment and even beyond, as many contributing factors lead to problem behavior in the classroom. From the literature reviewed in the study, problem behaviors in schools are common throughout the world. In agreement with Merrett and Wheldall (1984), the concept of 'disruptive classroom behavior' is recognized as an interference with a child's learning as well as other classmates' learning. They further identified various problem behaviors such as disruptive behavior, talking out of turn, aggressiveness, and disobedience. Similarly, in agreement, Beaman, Wheldall, and Kemp (2007) also identified idleness, hindering others, interrupting, inappropriate classroom talks, out of seat and bullying as forms of problematic behavior.

In addition, researchers also asserted that problem behavior has an immense impact on the teaching and learning process. In agreement with a South African study by Marais and Meier (2010), problem behavior should be considered as any disruptive behavior that interferes with the teaching and learning process. Due to many teachers' experiences of being in a classroom with diverse learners, they have encountered various problem behaviors. As previously mentioned, teachers'

understanding of problem behavior is any inappropriate behavior that causes disruptions in the classroom. The findings tend to agree with the South African study by Potgieter-Groot, Visser, and Lubbe-de Beer (2012), which showed that behavioral barriers are an immense concern that requires immediate attention seeing that they greatly impact the teaching and learning processes in schools. Learners display aggression disregard the rights of other learners, are destructive, dishonest, and display depression (Potgieter-Groot, Visser & Lubbe-de Beer, 2012, p. 4). The findings also agree with Potgieter-Groot, Visser, and Lubbe-de Beer (2012) who showed that teachers are not trained and are not equipped to manage these behavioral barriers effectively. Although teachers implement various strategies, these strategies are only temporary and do not deal with managing problem behaviors long term. Therefore, as mentioned by Potgieter-Groot, Visser, and Lubbe-de Beer (2012), teachers need to be empowered by receiving adequate training to accommodate the problem behaviors that are experienced in the classrooms. In another South African study, Obadire and Sinthumule (2021, p. 2) asserted that problem behaviors are displayed in various ways which include not attending lessons, rudeness, unwarranted talking while the teacher is teaching, bullying, being abusive, and stealing.

Conclusion

The study concludes that problem behavior remains a constant concern for teachers because of its effects on teaching and learning within the classroom. For effective teaching and learning to occur, teachers need to manage the problem behavior in their classrooms. Teachers were able to identify problem behaviors, they were also aware of some of the causes of problem behavior. Learners' behavior should therefore always be assessed within the context in which it occurred. The study findings have implications for teachers, in that they should consider if the problem behavior is continuous or a one-off occurrence. Moreover, there is a great need for teachers to find a solution to problem behavior. The study recommends that, in addition to the curriculum of Life Orientation, in which learners are taught about life skills, they need to be taught about crucial life events (bullying, rape, death, divorce, illnesses, learning disabilities) and how that affects a child and how they would need to deal emotionally with the situation. This is because the study reported that children are not exposed to the reality of certain situations and cannot talk about them freely. The curriculum needs to accommodate for children to be able to talk about various situations. Children need to learn about the importance of school and how it would affect their future. Learners need to be aware of the practical skills that are required in times of crisis, when they are experiencing emotional stress, instead of acting out by displaying problem behavior.

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