




# Managing challenging behaviours in Grade 3 learners post-COVID-19

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**Background:** The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic exacerbated a global learning crisis with teaching and learning losses, impacting children's well-being and the management of their behaviours.

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to explore how four Grade 3 educators managed the behaviours of learners in their classroom post- COVID-19.

**Setting:** The research was conducted in a quintile 5, full-service urban primary school in Cape Town, South Africa, with a educator -pupil ratio of 1:36. The majority of the learners spoke English, with the minority speaking Afrikaans, isiXhosa and French.

**Methods:** An interpretivist paradigm, qualitative approach and a case study were used as they allowed the researcher to gain an understanding about challenging behaviour management in Grade 3 post-COVID-19, by exploring multiple educators' subjective perceptions.

**Results:** To answer the research question, 'What types of challenging behaviours are Grade 3 learners exhibiting post-COVID-19 and how are educators managing these challenging behaviours in Grade 3 learners post-COVID-19?'. Three themes emerged: (1) the types of behaviours learners exhibited, (2) their views on proactive and reactive management styles and (3) the challenges experienced by the educators while managing the learners' behaviours.

**Conclusion:** The types of behaviours exhibited included: physical, verbal and academic behavioural challenges. Proactive strategies appeared to be the most preferred management strategy of choice with a higher success rate. External factors created difficulties for educators to maintain consistent standards of behaviour management.

**Contribution:** This research study contributes to the knowledge and field of behaviour management and inclusive education within the Foundation Phase of South African schools post-COVID-19.

**Keywords:** behaviours; case study; interpretivist; management styles; proactive; qualitative; reactive.

## Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has not only created one of the most severe disruptions in education worldwide, but it has exacerbated the global learning crisis (UNESCO 2021; World Bank 2020). From the 30th of January 2020 until the 5th of May 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared this rapid viral spread as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (WHO 2023). In order to mitigate the spread of the virus, many governments across the world enforced mandatory school shutdowns (Sun et al. 2022). At the peak of this global crisis, more than 1.6 billion children from approximately 190 countries were out of school (UNESCO 2021). These disruptions did not only lead to teaching and learning losses but also had an impact on children's well-being and the management of their behaviours. Significant declines in social interactions with increased cases of loneliness, worry, moodiness and anxiety in young children were reported (UNESCO 2021). In addition, lack of concentration, the inability to abide by routines and increased cases of defiant and disruptive physical and verbal behaviours were exhibited. These declines were reported as more prevalent in learners from poorer socio-economic backgrounds (Wijaya, Bunga & Kiling 2021).

Local research conducted in 2009 and 2019 both highlighted learner behaviour management as a significant challenge across South African schools, with the recommendation for improved educator training and support (Marais & Meier 2010; Rubbi-Nunan & Ntombela 2019). In a media

statement released on the 18th of May 2023 by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) 2023, it was reported that behaviour management in schools posed an even greater challenge post-COVID-19, after the return to full-time schooling (South African Government 2023). South African educators were struggling to respond to this challenge, and similarly the United Kingdom's (UK) educators' union the National Association of Schoolmaster's Union of Woman Educators (NASUWT 2023) reported that since the onset of the pandemic, behaviour management has contributed towards 24% of overall educator stress. In an attempt to address this gap in research and current literature, this small-scale study took place.

As a Grade 3 teacher and the School-Based Support Team (SBST) co-ordinator completing a post-graduate degree the researcher conducted a small-scale original research project. The purpose was to explore a school's management style of challenging behaviours of Grade 3 learners post-COVID-19, which is a necessary topic needed to stimulate the exchange of ideas on this provocative topic. In this innovative research, educators' challenges on behaviour management in one childhood education setting are contextualised and investigated, as well as providing relevant behavioural management strategies that may improve overall teaching and learning post-COVID-19 ultimately reducing the learning crisis.

## Research questions:

- What types of challenging behaviours are Grade 3 learners exhibiting, post-COVID-19?
- How do educators view challenging behaviours in Grade 3 learners post-COVID-19?
- What are the educators' challenges when managing their learners' behaviours?

## Aims and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to explore a school's management of challenging behaviours in Grade 3 learners post-COVID-19. The study identified the types of challenging behaviours that Grade 3 learners were exhibiting in the classroom and the types of strategies that educators were implementing to mitigate these challenging behaviours. Educators' challenges while attempting to manage their learners' behaviours were also explored.

## Literature review

The rise of challenging learner behaviour in schools is both a national and international concern (Dwarika 2019). According to Patnaik, Sharma and Subban (2022), challenging behaviour in an educational context can be defined as a set of behaviours that disrupt the teaching and learning process and hinder social interactions between staff, learners and peers. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has appeared to have magnified this concern.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many disruptions to teaching and learning. According to the World Bank (2020), disruptions resulted in significant curriculum learning losses, changes to teaching methodologies and routines, high learner and teacher absenteeism and increase in learner drop-out rates. These teaching and learning disruptions had a significant impact on learner well-being and behaviour. A national survey conducted in the United States (US) in May 2022 revealed that more than 80% of US schools reported increased rapid learner regressions in behavioural and socio-emotional development, with more cases in fighting, vandalism and general non-compliance being reported (National Center for Education Statistics 2022). Over 70% of educators in the United Kingdom (UK) agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic had heightened anxiety, poor mental health and loss of social skills in learners (Team Teach 2022). Research conducted in Turkey identified increased problems related to learner motivation, concentration and discipline after the transition back into full-time schooling (Gulmez & Ordu 2022). Within a local context, South Africa has also seen a trend in increasing challenging behaviours, with increased cases of physical violence, verbal abuse and threats from learners being reported (World Economic Forum 2022).

The types of challenging behaviours currently exhibited in young primary school learners around the world are diverse yet consistent in nature. According to Patnaik et al. (2022), challenging behaviours can be categorised into three groups: physical, verbal and academic disengagement. Physical behaviours can include: tantrums, kicking, pushing, running away and fighting. Verbal behaviours can include: screaming, swearing, lying and talking out of turn. Academic disengagement behaviours can include: poor time management, noncompliance, stubbornness, opposition, inattentiveness and daydreaming. These types of behaviours were observed in many countries across the world, including Turkey, Scotland, Canada and China (Patnaik et al. 2022).

Current local studies on challenging behaviours that focus on the early grades, post-COVID-19, are limited. Marais and Meier's (2010) study stated that the management of learner behaviours in the Foundation Phase found that disruptive classroom behaviours such as talking, laughing, fidgeting with stationery, walking around, inattentiveness and not following classroom rules were most commonly reported. This was followed by physical fighting, back-chatting, name-calling, swearing and stealing of other learners' food and belongings (Marais & Meier 2010). Local literature all supported the need for revised and upskilled pre-service and in-service training in order to strengthen educators' managerial responses (Mkhasibe & Mncube 2020; Rubbi-Nunan 2023; Rubbi-Nunan & Ntombela 2019).

Behavioural management strategies used by educators post-COVID-19 to manage and mitigate these current challenging behaviours can be categorised into reactive and proactive. According to Smith-Menzies (2023), reactive behaviour management strategies are punitive in nature. These types of strategies include verbal shaming, verbal warnings and

threats, exclusions in the form of time out, suspension or expulsion, detentions and physical corporal measures. The author further stated that these strategies are often ineffective as they promote social exclusion, poor academic performance and an increase in future defiant behaviour. Patnaik et al. (2022) stated that these strategies are unfavoured by educators globally and are reported to only being seldomly used in extreme cases of distress.

Proactive behaviour management strategies are preventative in nature (Smith-Menzies 2022). These strategies include: verbal praise, positive incentives, rewards, counselling, relationship building, collaborating with families and adapting teaching methods according to learners' interests (Patnaik, Sharma, & Subban 2021). Scott (2017) reported that proactive strategies are most effective in mitigating challenging behaviours. They are the most preferred category executed by educators worldwide (Alasmari & Althaqafi, 2021). South Africa is an example of a country that supports and mandatorily implements proactive behaviour management.

In April of 2000, the South African high court banned the use of corporal punishment in all schools and enforced positive and proactive discipline as an alternative to behaviour management (Obadire & Sinthumule 2021).

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory is a 'multi-dimensional and contextualised model of human development' (Landsberg, Krüger & Swart 2019:11). According to this theory, a child's holistic development is influenced and supported by complex human and proximal interactions in overlapping environmental systems over time (Nel, Nel & Malindi 2022). Therefore, behaviour management needs to be approached through a systems lens as children's behaviours and developmental pathways are shaped by their social context.

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory can be separated into two fundamental components: biological and ecological. According to Donald et al. (2020), the biological component comprises the PPCT model: Process, Person, Context and Time. 'Process' refers to the patterns of interactions between the individual and others. 'Person' refers to the individual's internal personality, behavioural tendencies and intelligences. 'Context' refers to the different systems that the individual interacts with and 'Time' refers to the changes and maturation of both the individual and environment. The PPCT model results in continuous and causal human shaping over time, influencing human behaviour and development.

The ecological component provides the context in which the PPCT model is applied. There are five ecological systems: micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono. The microsystems are the environments closest of the child. The child directly interacts with these systems daily. Examples of microsystems include family, school and peers. Many microsystems overlap and interact with each other to form the mesosystem. An example of this would be the relationship between the child's parents and educator. The exosystem encompasses the child's broader context. The child does not have direct contact with

the exosystem, but these factors can still significantly influence development. Examples include community resources, the education system and the media. The macrosystem has the most distal influence on a child's development and refers to the dominant ideologies, attitudes, beliefs and values that are inherent in society. Lastly, the chronosystem refers to the passage of time and maturation of the child and the ecosystems (Landsberg et al. 2019). These five systems provide the context in which all learning occurs.

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate that learner behaviour and development cannot be separated from context (Landsberg et al. 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant disruptions to teaching and learning, inhibiting socio-emotional developments and increasing unmanageable behaviours in learners. Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory is an effective framework for educators in addressing such behaviours. The conceptualisation of context in learner development needs to be valued by educators in order to holistically understand and actively support learners in the teaching and learning process (Dwarika 2019).

## Research design and methodology

### Study design

An interpretivist paradigm was applied to the study as it allowed the researcher to gain an understanding about challenging behaviour management in Grade 3 post-COVID-19, by exploring multiple educators' subjective perceptions and views around this topic (Pham 2018). A qualitative approach was used to construct meaning and understanding by focusing on human interactions, thoughts and perceptions (Okeke 2015). A case study was conducted because the study focused on a particular group of Grade 3 educators and their real-life contexts and experiences (Van Wyk & Taole 2015).

### Setting

The research was conducted in a quintile 5, full-service public primary school in Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa. The quintile system is used in South Africa to provide equitable distribution of finance and resources based on the poverty level of a school, with quintile 1 experiencing the most poverty and quintile 5 the least (Ramulongo 2020). A full-service school is a 'mainstream school that has the capacity to accommodate and provide quality education to learners with a broad range of learning needs' (DoBE 2010:7). At the time of data collection, there were approximately 1140 learners in the school, with a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:36. The majority of the learners spoke English, with the minority speaking Afrikaans, isiXhosa as well as French. As a full-service school, there is one full-time learning support educator and learning support assistant who provided individualised and group support to learners two to three times a week. The school has a functional SBST that meets monthly and is further supported onsite by a multidisciplinary educational team, comprising an educational psychologist, speech and hearing therapist, occupational therapist and

learning support specialist, who were active at the school on a bi-weekly basis. The chosen site was rich in diversity and provided a suitable context for the study on behaviour management.

## Study population

The researcher used purposive sampling in order to select the most suitable educators for this study. Purposive sampling is non-probable in nature, and it is where she selected the sample based on the knowledge of the population and the aim of the study (Lumadi 2015). Four educators were selected to participate in the study based on the following criteria: Firstly, they were Grade 3 educators by profession at the site. Secondly, they taught before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in a Grade 3 class. Thirdly, they volunteered to participate and signed the informed consent letters.

**Data collection:** Face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data. An interview schedule consisting of 10 open-ended and probing questions was influenced by the current literature and used during the semi-structured interviews. These individual interviews consisted of a conversational dialogue between the interviewer and the educators using the same interview schedule (DeJonckheere & Vaughn 2019). The researcher conducted these interviews at the end of the school day with the educators. The interviews were approximately 35 min – 50 min long and took place in the educators classrooms after school so as not to disrupt their teaching and learning. Ten questions were asked with many probing questions. The interviews were audio recorded, using the interviewer's cell phone and later transcribed verbatim into a written format.

There are both advantages and disadvantages of using semi-structured interviews. According to Dakwa (2015), semi-structured interviews provide rich, insightful and in-depth responses as the questions are open ended, and this allows for probing and extension of responses where necessary. Another advantage of semi-structured interviews is the level of flexibility that allows the interviewer to alter the direction of the conversation in order to meet specific aims and objectives of the study (Ruslin et al. 2022). However, there are drawbacks to using open-ended semi-structured interviews; they are open-ended in nature and can become time consuming and labour intensive. The researcher spent many hours transcribing and analysing the educators' responses. Semi-structured interviews require the interviewer to have quick thinking skills in order to effectively probe and extend the educators' responses to meet the needs of the study (Adams 2015). In addition, she discussed with the interviewees how they may reduce minimal distractions.

## Data analysis

Thematic inductive analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data as it is a flexible process of revealing significant, recurrent themes arising from the data (Feza 2015). This method is best suited to the explorative nature of

this qualitative study (Kiger & Varipo 2020). There are both advantages and disadvantages of using this method of data analysis. The method is relatively simple and easy to use, and this makes it particularly desirable for novice researchers. Another key advantage to this method is its great flexibility in terms of addressing various research problems, theoretical frameworks and data sources. However, this flexibility can often undermine the trustworthiness and rigour of the study (Kiger & Varipo 2020:847). To overcome this drawback, the researcher used member checking and debriefing with the educators and her supervisors.

Thematic analysis is a multi-step method (Feza 2015). Firstly, the researcher familiarised herself with the data by repetitive and active reading through the interview transcripts. Secondly, codes were generated by organising and grouping similar data together, which were generated from the literature review and readings on behaviour management during and post-COVID-19. Thirdly, themes were identified by combining and comparing the codes to find patterns and relationships. Fourthly, the themes were explained in the form of a written discussion report (Kiger & Varipo 2020).

In qualitative research, trustworthiness was achieved through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Morse 2015). Credibility refers to the level of congruency and agreement in the data findings of the research and was achieved through member checking (Stahl & King 2020). This was achieved through trust building where the educators were made aware of the nature of the study and were allocated sufficient time in the interview process for probing and extending responses (Korstjens & Moser 2018). Member checking allows the educators to check their initial responses to their desired behaviours (Birt et al. 2016). The researcher gave the written transcripts back to the educators to read and verify before further data analysis.

Transferability requires a degree of commonality and generalisability in research contexts. This was achieved by ensuring the research context was thoroughly described (Korstjens & Moser 2018). The criteria for sampling and site selection were clearly and descriptively defined in order for other research experts to familiarise the existing patterns in similar contextual conditions.

Dependability refers to the level of assurance and trust in the data findings. Conformability refers to the extent in which the research findings can be confirmed by other research experts (Korstjens & Moser 2018). Debriefing was used to achieve dependability and conformability. Debriefing is the process of liaising with members of the research team about the research procedures, findings and processes of the study (Stahl & King 2020). During the research process, the supervisors checked, edited and critiqued each step in the research cycle for the prevention of personal subjectivity and biases (Stahl & King 2020).

**The researcher's position:** At the time of conducting this research, the researcher was employed at the site of the study.

However, she did not work directly with the proposed educators and was employed in a different grade. As she was the SBST co-ordinator for the school, she was sensitive in the delimitation of any issues of power and biases and remained objective through clear communication about the nature and purpose of the research study.

### Informed consent

Verbal and written direct consent from the educators were obtained before the study. Direct consent is a binding agreement, which ensures the participant has the right to be informed and researched in the study (Sotuku & Duku 2015). The educators had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research cycle. The researcher ensured that the educators were fully aware of the research process and provided honest and clear communication during each stage of the research cycle.

### Beneficence and non-maleficence

Beneficence refers to the researcher's ability to obtain the maximum aims and objectives of the research study while minimising the risks (Bitter et al. 2020). Non-maleficence refers to the minimisation of risks and participatory harm (Sotuku & Duku 2015). This was obtained through honest communication and upholding the highest levels of confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher was cognisant of sensitivity as human behaviour was studied (Sotuku & Duku 2015). Issues of bias, subjectivity and power were addressed through deep reflexive practice, member checking and continuous debriefing with the supervisors (Gajjar 2013).

### Respect for anonymity and privacy

All educators' identities were fully protected and confidential (Sotuku & Duku 2015). The site and the educators' names were given pseudonyms. Data collection in the form of voice recordings and written transcripts were safely kept on the researcher's laptop in a secure folder where only the researcher had access via the password.

### Honesty

The nature and intention of this study needed to be communicated as honestly as possible.

A key aspect of honesty in ethics is ensuring that data collection transcripts and analysis of these transcripts were correct and not falsified. Member checking and debriefing ensured this (Gajjar 2013).

### Ethical considerations

Ethical consideration involves the protection of research educators through the advising of morally safe research practice (Bitter et al. 2020). The researcher applied for ethical clearance from the university where she was registered as a student (Cape Peninsula University of Technology,

EFEC 281/8/2023) and the WCED (164E0FAF000000C-20230828). In addition, the four principles of ethics as described below were adhered to (Sotuku & Duku 2015).

## Findings and discussions

This section reports on the findings and discussion in relation to the research question: 'What types of challenging behaviours are Grade 3 learners exhibiting post-COVID-19, and how are educators managing these challenging behaviours in Grade 3 learners post-COVID-19?'. After inductively analysing the data from the four educators' interviews, it became apparent that three themes emerged:

1. The types of behaviours learners exhibited; with sub-themes of physical behavioural challenges, verbal behavioural challenges and academic disengagement
2. Educators' views on both proactive and reactive management styles
3. Educators' challenges of managing their learners' behaviours.

Each theme will be discussed in more detail linking the evidence to the literature and theory.

### Types of behaviours

The types of behaviour that learners exhibited were the most significant theme to emerge from the data and it provided the context for the study. Upon further analysis, three sub-themes emerged: physical behavioural challenges, verbal behavioural challenges and academic disengagements, and each one will be briefly discussed.

#### (i) Physical behavioural challenges

One educator reported an increase in challenging physical behaviours in learners from pre-COVID-19 to post-COVID-19. She reported an increase in bullying and fighting:

'I wouldn't say new behaviours but I would say increase of pre COVID behaviours ... they don't know how to play ... more physical with each other, like fighting, kicking, hitting ... we always found it before COVID but now it is more.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

This correlates with the World Economic Forum (2022) that stated that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in increasing cases of physical fighting and violence among learners. The reported increase in physical and challenging verbal behaviours suggests disruptions within the microsystems is possibly because of changes in routine, social isolation and heightened stress levels experienced by learners (Landsberg et al. 2019; Marais & Meier 2010). However, despite literature supporting this increase, most of the educators reported no change or increase.

#### (ii) Verbal behavioural challenges

Challenging verbal behaviours were reported by all four of the educators to have increased from pre-COVID-19 to post-COVID-19. Patnaik et al. (2022) reported that young learners

currently exhibit many challenging verbal behaviours. The educators provided the following examples:

'Swearing and also the way they would speak to the next person. More learners are not being able to converse appropriately with others.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Definitely more verbal! It's almost like they have a sense of entitlement. They question me a lot more. Inappropriate talking, inappropriate gestures. They are a lot more outspoken.' (T2, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'They demand, yes. Each one of them want to have their own say.' (T3, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Talking out of turn.' (T4, Grade 3 educator, Female)

The above-mentioned results suggest that the immediate environments (microsystem level) where learners interact, such as families, schools and peer groups, played a significant role in shaping their behaviour. Interactions within these microsystems contributed to the development and manifestation of challenging verbal behaviours among young learners.

### (iii) Academic disengagements

Academic disengagement behaviours were reported to have shown the most change from pre-COVID-19 to post-COVID-19. Examples are reported as follows:

'They don't know how to abide by rules, routine and structure.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'A lot of daydreaming. Definitely regression in focus and concentration. They've lost their independence ... They almost need me to guide them with everything that they do. It's almost like with COVID, when they were at home, the parents uhm, coddled them.' (T2, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Kids want individual attention ... you must look at them and call them to attention all the time.' (T3, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Responsibility has been taken away from them. Parents spoon-feed ... I don't think they are doing their part the way they used. Parenting the way they used to for, to prepare their children for school. It's just a lack of parent involvement. Children don't do their homework and high absenteeism.' 'I remember before COVID, you would have children that would listen to you when you give instructions. Now, post-COVID, you will have children doing other things while you are trying to get them to listen to you. So, there's a lack of concentration and listening skills. Definitely.' (T4, Grade 3 educator, Female)

The educators reported that these behaviours were significantly influenced by social and emotional regressions in learner development because of the COVID-19 disruptions. This correlates with a study by Wijaya's et al. (2021), which reported social-emotional delays from COVID-19 restrictions as a contributing factor to lowered teaching and learning motivation in young children. The following social and emotional regressions were reported by the educators:

'Social development, definitely a regression. They prefer being in their own company. They find it difficult to converse with their peers.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'I have learners in my class that exhibit extreme anxiety. It's the first time I have experienced children at nine years old, that have anxiety.' (T2, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'The children don't feel independent enough or secure enough.' (T3, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Children are definitely more sensitive. Very introverted.' (T4, Grade 3 educator, Female)

These findings suggest that the disruptions within the microsystem have spill-over effects on other contexts, such as the interaction between home and school environments. The reported increase in academic disengagement behaviours may reflect challenges in maintaining consistency and support across multiple settings.

## Educators' views on both proactive and reactive management styles

According to Alasmari and Althaqafi (2021), *proactive* strategies are the most preferred choice by educators around the world. In this research study, most educators reported using these strategies as their primary means of preventing, managing and mitigating challenging learner behaviours. The educators' views on proactive management styles include:

'I would say I prefer proactive but both, its unique to the situation. So, proactive, I would try to speak to them and just have that one-on-one with them outside or during interval when we are alone. Speak to them and not in front of other learners or in front of other educators, just that one-on-one basis.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Praise and rewards. Also, like competitions in the class ... like competitive so I use that to my advantage.' (T2, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Encouraging independence. You can use something like life skills lessons also. We can have general talks about good behavior. I don't really like the other one, the reactive, uhm because sometimes you need to figure out why are you behaving like that. So that would take more time and more investigation.' (T3, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Also having that relationship with the parents is good. So that they know that your intentions are good.' (T4, Grade 3 educator, Female)

The proactive strategies implemented by educators, as highlighted above, can be viewed as responses influenced by their immediate environment (microsystem), interactions with colleagues and administrators (mesosystem) and broader cultural and systemic factors (macrosystem). These strategies are designed by educators to prevent and address challenging behaviours, considering the diverse needs of learners within the classroom environment. Bronfenbrenner's theory underscores the importance of considering the complex interplay between different systems when implementing proactive behaviour management strategies to support learners effectively:

In this study, educators reported using *reactive* management strategies by stating the following:

'[When] they are just not listening to you ... they are not abiding by rules. I would go to the extent of sending them to either another teacher or to higher management. As far as expelling the child, I don't believe that that is necessary. But in terms of having them out of the space of your classroom sometimes, could help them and the other learners as well.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'I think I am more of the reactive. Ja, so I do the whole verbal warnings and timeouts in the sense of excluding from like breaktimes, and detention. I don't do the corporal.' (T2, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'It depends on the child ... because sometimes you don't want to be too hard on the child, but they also need to understand what they did was wrong. So you try different things to see what will work ... like time out. At school, you cannot go to the computer because they love going to the computer room. Take away, things that they like.' (T4, Grade 3 educator, Female)

The use of time-outs and exclusions were the most popular reactive strategies reported by the educators. This links with Patnaik et al. (2022) who reported that educators relied on the use of reactive measures when faced with severely challenging behaviour. Reactive forms of school-based support were also observed by the educators in the school's code of conduct.

Reactive forms of school-based support were also noticed by the educators in the school's code of conduct. The reliance on reactive strategies such as time-outs and exclusions reflect the influence of multiple systems within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework. At the microsystem level, educators resorted to these reactive measures in response to immediate behavioural challenges within the classroom environment. This reflects the bidirectional nature of influences within Bronfenbrenner's theory, as educators' practices are both shaped by and influence the dynamics of the classroom setting. The findings regarding the use of reactive measures align with the broader systemic factors as highlighted by Patnaik et al. (2022) and the school's code of conduct. These external influences, situated within the exosystem and macrosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's framework, contributed to the normalisation and reinforcement of reactive behaviour management practices within the educational context.

### Educators' challenges of managing their learners' behaviours

It was observed that the educators' stress levels, emotional state and high administration loads also had a significant influence on their decision-making when managing their learners' behaviours post-COVID-19. The educators reported that their choice of strategy, proactive or reactive, was based on the individual child's needs:

'I think the difficulty I find is being consistent. So, putting a rule in place and being consistent with that rule. It is very difficult because you work in such a pressure cooker.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'If I'm not in the correct mind frame or mindset to deal with this child right now, I would rather send them to another teacher. And maybe that teacher would be able to get through to that child and once we have gotten to a point, where I can get to a proactive part of me with that specific child.' (T1, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'I have so many things to do. so many other things to do that I can't always a hundred percent be with my class ... sometimes I would lose my grip on the behaviour.' (T2, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'Too much admin. Which doesn't give you a chance, really, if something occurs, to deal with it in a proper way.' (T3, Grade 3 educator, Female)

'But then also you feel guilty sometimes. If I take an interval away from a child ... but by second interval, I will tell the child ... go out.' (T4, Grade 3 educator, Female)

The inconsistent and ineffective use of reactive strategies may be attributed to the complex interplay of factors within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework. At the microsystem level, educators' decisions regarding behaviour management are influenced by individual factors such as the specific needs of each child. However, the findings suggest that external factors, including educators' stress levels, emotional states and administrative burdens played a significant role in decision-making. These external influences are situated within the exosystem and macrosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's framework, highlighting the broader systemic factors that impact educators' behaviour management practices. For example, high levels of stress and administrative demands limited the educators' capacity to effectively implement behaviour management strategies, leading to inconsistencies in their approach. Furthermore, the findings align with those of Smith-Menzies (2023), who reported that reactive strategies were perceived as the least effective by educators in managing behaviour. This suggests that the mismatch between educators' practices and the effectiveness of reactive strategies may be influenced by systemic factors beyond the microsystem level.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Post-COVID-19 South African teachers have been struggling to manage the behaviours of their learners; hence this study set out to understand these challenging behaviours and what teachers could do to create a more harmonious classroom environment. Literature and findings from the study suggested that, because of the impact of the pandemic, learners experienced significant social and emotional regressions in their well-being and holistic development. These regressions appeared to have resulted in an increase in the exhibition of challenging physical, verbal and academic disengagement behaviours.

In response to these challenging behaviours, two types of management strategies were explored: proactive and reactive management styles. Both proactive and reactive styles were utilised by educators in the management of challenging behaviours post-COVID-19. Yet, the most striking finding was that proactive strategies, which were relational in nature and more empathetic, appeared to be the preferred strategy of choice and had a positive impact with the learners. These proactive strategies appeared to have a higher success rate than the reactive strategies not only in the prevention but also in the mitigation and management of challenging learning behaviours.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework was key to understanding the complex interplay between the different systems; the immediate environment of the classroom where

the four Grade 3 educators were attempting to manage their learners challenging behaviours (microsystem), the interactions with staff members (mesosystem) and the broader cultural and systemic environment (macrosystem). External factors, such as educators' stress levels, emotional states and administrative burdens, played significant roles in their decision-making. These factors are situated within the exosystem and macrosystem levels of Bronfenbrenner's framework, highlighting the broader systemic factors that impacted these four educators' behavioural management practices.

This research experienced a few limitations. Data collection was limited to four Grade 3 educators during the month of August, and all interviews were conducted in English. It is important to notice that these findings may not be generalised to a broader community. One recommendation is for more pre-service and in-service training for educators in proactive strategy implementation, which appears to be an effective strategy to mitigate challenging learner behaviours. Further research could be conducted on a broader scale, which may include Intermediate and Senior-phase educators, on learner behaviour management, post-COVID-19.

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## Authors' contributions

M.v.R. is the original author; J.C. and P.N. were her supervisors.

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## Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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