

Research Article

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Managing the Classroom with Heart: Role of Teacher Praise in Building Attachment among Progressed Learners in Underprivileged Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Background/purpose. The scientific basis for positive reinforcement is clear: when a behaviour is accompanied by a desirable outcome, such as attention, a tangible reward, or a sensory experience, the probability of that behaviour being repeated in the future is heightened. Praise is a motivating strategy to cultivate a robust relationship between teachers and learners while promoting inclusive classroom management. Nonetheless, there is a paucity of research about the precise application of praise in South African secondary schools. This article examined learners' experiences about teachers' use of praise.

Materials/methods. The study employed an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach and a phenomenological, multiple-case study design. Data was collected through focus group discussions from two secondary schools in quintiles 2 and 3, with 12 progressed learners selected using purposive sampling.

Results. The study revealed three primary themes: how learners respond to praise, the conditions prompting teachers to praise learners, and the emotions and behaviours associated with the absence of praise. The study indicated that learners experience encouragement and reinforcement towards commitment after receiving praise. Nonetheless, it also indicated that teachers predominantly praised learners for their academic achievements, resulting in progressed learners feeling marginalised due to their poor performance. The study also revealed that the absence of any kind of acknowledgement in the form of praise leads to the development of anger, deviant conduct, and a mixed-feeling attitude about attending school.

Conclusion. This research offers a novel viewpoint contesting other findings that progressed learners are disruptive and unmotivated due to their expectation of automatic progression to the next grade without exerting effort. The study introduces a novel idea that teachers' use of praise may lead to exclusions, causing progressed learners to feel somewhat excluded from the school community.



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1. Introduction

The educational goal can be defined as the commendable aim of facilitating an individual's progress to a more advanced stage of development beyond their current state (Lavanga & Sulla, 2024). Such progress is linked with Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG4), which seeks to guarantee that education is accessible to all, irrespective of their background, and that it is of high quality. SDG4 intends to encourage continuous learning opportunities throughout a person's life by acknowledging the necessity of delivering high-quality education to all individuals, particularly underprivileged children.

Because of the wide economic gap affecting school funding, infrastructure, and learners' achievement in South Africa, providing high-quality education is a hotly debated issue. The historical political trajectory of the country has resulted in economic inequality and the classification of schools. Underprivileged children attend quintile 1-3 schools (Van Dyk & White, 2019). These schools are tuition-free and provide learners with all necessary stationery and meals. They are in different areas, some in remote rural areas while others in townships. In 2019, non-fee schools accounted for 87% of the total schools in the country, and 79% of the learners were enrolled in these schools during that period (Heystek & Shula, 2024). In contrast, students from affluent communities attend schools classified in the quintile 4-5. In these schools, parents provide financial support for their children's education by purchasing materials and paying the tuition fee.

The delivery of high-quality education at schools, regardless of their classification as quintile 1-3 or 4-5, relies heavily on the teachers' capacity to maintain order successfully. This trait is intrinsically linked to their classroom management abilities. Researchers have observed that successful teaching depends on teachers' expertise and capacity to effectively manage the classroom, ensuring uninterrupted delivery of high-quality instruction (Skura & Wheeler, 2024). Expertise in this study refers to successfully establishing enduring connections with learners from various backgrounds, fostering their sense of belonging, unity, and love to create an atmosphere favourable to meaningful learning experiences. This implies that teachers' strategies to address misbehaviour are not the predominant elements in achieving good classroom management. However, the important factor in this context is the strategies teachers use to deter instances of misconduct proactively (Kounin's, 1970 cited in Johannesen et al., 2024). Thus, creating strong relationships between learners and teachers, individually and within a community, and integrating these ties into an academic context are proactive measures that create a favourable environment for accomplishing SDG4.

Attachment theory provides insight into the dynamics of teacher-learner relationships. It emphasises the importance of forming a strong emotional bond with a primary caregiver, which, in turn, facilitates the development of lasting attachments with others (Cherry, 2023; Sarah, 2021). As a psychological framework, it seeks to explain the emotional connections and interactions between individuals (Young et al., 2019). According to this theory, individuals are inherently inclined to establish connections with their carers during childhood. The primary carer is the individual primarily responsible for ensuring the safety and security of the kid (Sarah, 2021). In the school environment, teachers are the main carers. Developing a strong bond with the primary carer is not only crucial for fostering optimal psychological health but also beneficial for laying the foundation for the capacity to react appropriately to others, handle situational stress, and be responsive to unforeseen circumstances (Sarah, 2021). The influence of these initial connections may persist and impact affiliations throughout one's lifespan (Young et al., 2019). Attachment styles are believed to impact a child's positive internal functioning model. According to Sarah (2021), a positive internal working model encompasses a collection of anticipations and convictions on one's own identity. This refers to a collection of anticipations and convictions regarding oneself, others, and the interconnection between oneself and others (Sarah, 2021)

To determine the existence of a connection between learners and teachers in schools, the study is grounded on four types of attachments described by Sarah (2021): secure, insecure (anxious-ambivalent), insecure (anxious-avoidant), and insecure (disorganised attachment). These attachments provide insight into the behavioural patterns that learners may exhibit.

Secure attachment type refers to a kind of attachment in which a child feels safe in the company of an older person and regards that person as a primary source of happiness and security. When such a person leaves, they cry. On the contrary, an insecure-avoidant attachment pattern is seen in the given case, namely when the primary carer departs from the room. Under these circumstances, the kid may not exhibit distress in a manner consistent with children who have established secure attachment patterns. Upon the return of the main carer, the child would spontaneously resume their interactions without necessarily noticing their presence. This phenomenon arises due to the restricted emotional availability shown by parents, which may manifest as unresponsiveness towards their children and, in some instances, even rejection towards interpersonal connections.

Insecure ambivalent attachment refers to a kind of attachment in which young individuals display alternating patterns of violent outbursts and peacefulness upon the return of their carer if the carer had been absent. Despite being physically there, the kid perceives the main caretaker as unable to provide comfort. When attempting to get a response from their provider, these youngsters display exaggerated emotions. A disorganised attachment is seen when the caretaker leaves, and upon returning, the child approaches them but then redirects their movement towards a corner of the room. Although the main caregiver's position is meant to provide solace, the kid has instead seen people as a potential cause of harm and peril.

Attachment mostly depends on favourable circumstances and the provision of high-quality care (Cherry, 2023). Thus, learners attending schools in poorer areas may need opportunities to establish strong connections with teachers or supportive school environments. The level of praise teachers use to foster a sense of connection and belonging among these learners determines whether the learners would exhibit a disordered or stable attachment. In this study, praising learners is crucial in determining the level and opportunity that attachment learners receive. Utilising attachment theory elucidates whether teachers' praise creates possibilities for them to develop emotional bonds and whether the quality of praise fosters a sense of belonging in the classroom and school environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Belongingness

Belongingness is a fundamental aspect of the human experience (Allen et al., 2018) and impacts learners' self-perception and perception of others in group environments (Kilday & Ryan, 2022). When learners experience a sense of being appreciated, included, and treated with esteem (Roffey et al., 2019; Yassine et al., 2020), they exhibit elevated levels of academic performance, enhanced contentment with their educational institution, and heightened involvement (Kilday & Ryan, 2022). On the other hand, if they are not linked to important school community members, such as teachers and peers, they may feel isolated, lose motivation, and withdraw from school (Roffey et al., 2019). This implies that an integral aspect of proactively managing the classroom to provide high-quality education is guaranteeing that all learners have a sense of belonging within the school environment.

The reaction towards feeling left out is natural, as people have an innate impulse that compels them to establish enduring, intimate connections that foster favourable progress and advancement throughout their lives (Allen et al., 2018). Booker (2024) asserts that the connections young people form with their teachers and fellow learners can either promote or impede the sense of school belonging, a psychological feeling of being related to others in the school community. Roffey et al. (2019) documented the research conducted by Midgen, colleagues, and Cockerill. Midgen and

colleagues examined the perspectives of learners aged 3 to 16 with various special educational needs. They identified four key factors that influenced the sense of belonging in schools: the quality of interpersonal relationships, the availability of extracurricular activities, the school environment, and the curriculum. Regarding Cockerill's findings, Roffey et al. (2019) report that the study investigated the experiences of learners who had their education divided between a mainstream school and a specialised unit. The researchers sought to understand the significance of school belonging for these learners. Curiously, the contrast between feeling more appreciated in the off-site environment compared to the mainstream environment resulted in a decline in poor behaviour in the mainstream.

This implies that learners are motivated to establish intimate, enduring connections with teachers and other learners to facilitate favourable progress and growth. It also means that ensuring learners feel involved and connected to their educational environment is crucial for managing their behaviour, which is vital for achieving academic achievement. Therefore, it can be contended that teachers should alleviate the substantial weight on learners' shoulders when they arrive at school, especially those from poor communities, by cultivating positive relationships and offering acknowledgement, thereby inspiring them.

2.2. Learners in poor communities

Studies have noted that most learners from impoverished family backgrounds are already burdened with the anxiety of clothing, sustenance, future uncertainties and home conditions (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Naidoo, 2021). According to Bala (2023) and Larey (2024), schools and people who live in this area face daily struggles to access resources and services. Jabr and Cahan (2014) assert that learners' characteristics, family background, and living conditions are the main factors determining their ability to benefit from schooling. Shange and Sindane (2021) contend that poverty severely impacts people's behaviour by robbing them of their humanity and denying them the opportunity to have a meaningful and satisfying life. This implies that the behaviour of learners in impoverished settings may differ from those in prosperous societies due to the stresses induced by poverty. Poverty inherently creates vulnerability. Thus, teachers in these schools should approach the classroom with this understanding. In most cases where the education sector experiences avoidable circumstances, the learners who suffer the most are those in impoverished communities. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools were forced to adopt a different approach, transitioning from traditional in-person learning to either wholly remote instruction or a hybrid approach (Pérez et al., 2023). Learners in impoverished communities were disproportionately impacted, mainly because they lacked the essential means to support their educational pursuits (Moodley, 2020; Naidoo, 2021). Approaching learners in these schools to foster a link and a sense of belonging requires teachers to enhance praise to reinforce feelings of attachment.

2.3. Praise

Praise is a motivational technique to foster a strong connection between teachers and learners while encouraging inclusive classroom management. The scientific rationale for positive reinforcement is evident: when a behaviour is followed by something desirable, such as attention, a physical item, or a sensory experience, the likelihood of that behaviour being repeated in the future is increased (Cooper et al., 2020). According to (Rafi et al., 2020), a teacher's praise is a social reinforcement technique and a positive intervention to inspire learners and boost the confidence of struggling students, increasing their belief in their abilities. Researchers have examined how teachers provide praise and reprimands in educational settings to grasp better the dynamic between teachers and learners' behaviour (Caldarella et al., 2020). Praise has been acknowledged as the most straightforward classroom management method to apply. Furthermore, it has been observed that it strengthens learners' conduct and provides a chance to acknowledge their involvement.

Praise fosters learners' learning by providing encouragement, joy, and happiness (Lavanga & Sulla, 2024). Teachers' praise has been associated with favourable academic and social results and increased teacher self-confidence (Caldarella et al., 2021; Markelz et al., 2022; Sulla & Rollo, 2023). The theory of affectivity network explains how praising learners affects their emotions and cognitive processing. According to this theory, exhibiting mood congruence increases cognitive processing by influencing individual mood. Mood congruence pertains to the inclination for positive information to be more easily associated with happy emotions and negative information to be more readily associated with unpleasant emotions (Lavanga & Sulla, 2023). Therefore, the learner's success in the learning process is contingent upon the emotional impressions they experience and the subsequent cognitive evaluations they make while at school (Lavanga & Sulla, 2023). This indicates that positive emotions enhance cognitive processes, and praise facilitates these happy emotions. Therefore, the learners' cognitive functioning is at its best when they are happy (Sulla & Rollo, 2023). From an educational standpoint, Lavanga and Sulla (2023) argue that from an early age, children require social reinforcement, such as praise and approval, as a mechanism to cultivate the internal drive that can ultimately result in altruistic actions. This statement emphasises the importance of teachers utilising praise to encourage positive behaviour while managing their classroom.

Research indicates that teachers' conduct can significantly impact learners' social and academic behaviours (Lavanga & Sulla, 2024; Rafi et al., 2020; Sulla & Rollo, 2023). These researchers also demonstrate that praising can be seen as a highly effective tool for teachers' classroom management instead of reprimanding learners. Sulla and Rollo (2023) conducted research. In the study, Italian primary school teachers participated in a 2-hour training session to improve praise for acceptable conduct. The event featured a feedback session on pre-test results and a PowerPoint presentation. Data on learners' time on task was gathered. A questionnaire assessed teachers' work satisfaction, self-efficacy, and perceived usage of various classroom management practices. Observations before and after training revealed that teachers' use of praise led to improved learners' performance. Ennis et al. (2020) conducted a study that analysed 57 school-based intervention studies. Their goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the specific circumstances and individuals for whom a particular style of praise, known as behaviour-specific praise, has proven to be helpful. Ennis and colleagues determined that teacher-specific praise has been employed in various school environments, such as the cafeteria and playground, for kids in general education, those at risk for behavioural issues, and those in special education. Among the 57 research, the authors consistently reported favourable results for teachers, including improved behaviour through specific praise and a favourable influence on student behaviour. Additionally, the study revealed that learners had enhanced involvement and a reduction in disruptive activity.

Research on teenage development asserts that the brain's response to incentives, particularly social rewards, is significant in driving adolescent social behaviours and emotional processing of social events (Cherewick et al., 2021). These findings indicate that when teachers intentionally emphasise praising learners for encouraging good behaviour, they may avoid using reprimands and punitive approaches (Markelz et al., 2022). Royer et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of six publications that explored the effects of Behaviour Specific Praise on learners' behaviour and/or academic performance in regular classrooms (K-12th grade). The articles were evaluated using the quality indicators and standards the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) put out. According to the authors' analysis, BSP may qualify as an evidence-based practice.

However, Cooper et al. (2020) contend that it is crucial to consider a learner's background, motivation, and constantly shifting surrounding variables while utilising praise to effectively reinforce behavioural changes. This is consistent with the study of Pérez et al. (2023) on Ana's case. Typically, Ana does not appreciate being the centre of attention among her classmates at school (although she does enjoy receiving personal attention from her grandparents at home). Therefore, a private

recognition from her teacher, such as a text message, email, or private conversation, would likely be more well-received and effective in reinforcing her behaviour. In other words, it would increase the likelihood of her repeating the specific behaviour being acknowledged. Regardless of the methods used to praise learners, providing commendation for good behaviour and efforts is a proactive behaviour management approach that can alter learners' mindsets, allowing them to view their intelligence as something that can be developed.

2.4. Types of Praise

Praise can be classified into general praise (GP) and behaviour-specific praise (BSP) (Neef et al., 2024; Pérez et al., 2023). GP refers to expressing appreciation in a non-specific or broad manner. At the same time, BSP involves stating precise behaviours and how they align with a teacher's expectations, and it is regarded as a potentially evidence-based strategy (Royer et al., 2019). The distinction between the two is that GP is broad in scope, whereas BSP focuses specifically on recognising and encouraging the continuation of certain behaviours. Nevertheless, there have been documented instances of relatively low frequencies of teacher praise, both general and behaviour-specific, in general, education environments during unobtrusive whole-class observations (Floress et al., 2017) as well as in observations of individual students exhibiting disruptive behaviours (Reinke et al., 2015). Studies indicate that praise is significantly underutilised in educational settings (Floress et al., 2017).

2.5. Problem statement

Ahmed and Plessis's (2024) study sought to investigate the influence of classroom management in improving learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Johannesburg. The study discovered that teacher effectiveness, teacher readiness, teacher social and emotional competency, teacher-learner relationships, and learners' motivation, behaviour, and discipline are all key elements that significantly impact learners' achievement in secondary school. Considering the widespread occurrence of behavioural problems in South African schools, both in lower and higher socioeconomic quintiles, with recent incidences of teachers fighting learners with chairs (Mokoena, 2024), it is important to explore if teachers have employed praise as a behavioural management tool and examine their implementation methods. Various solutions have been examined to address learners' misbehaviour and lack of discipline. The scope of this study includes analysing the collaborative tactics used by stakeholders to tackle indiscipline (Gcelu et al., 2021), implementing a code of conduct for learners (Kubeka, 2023), and promoting positive behaviour strategies in elementary schools (Dwarika, 2019). There is limited research on how praise is specifically used to encourage learners' behaviour in South African secondary schools. To bridge this gap, this paper explored the learners' experiences of teachers' usage of praise.

The following question guided this paper?

What are secondary learners' experiences of teachers' usage of praise in the classroom?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research paradigm, approach and design

This study used an interpretative paradigm to investigate the breadth of students' life experiences and how teachers use praise in the classroom (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). The interpretative paradigm was well-suited to a qualitative approach since it allows for a thorough understanding of participants' experiences, behaviours, and perceptions by exploring real-world challenges in their natural setting (Tenny et al., 2022).

A qualitative research design with a phenomenological multiple-case study methodology was used. This design allowed for the collection of extensive, comprehensive data on students' lived

experiences across multiple schools, offering nuanced insights into the role of praise in influencing their educational path.

3.2. Participants

Twelve participants were chosen using a purposive sample from two schools, six from each school. Ames et al. (2019) define purposive sampling as a strategy of selecting primary studies for inclusion in a synthesis based on specified criteria, such as relevance to the research purpose and data richness. The chosen participants were only progressed learners in the Further Education and Training Phase (Grades 10-12).

In South African schools, progressed learners refer to learners who have been eligible to progress to the following grade but have not achieved the minimal passing criteria of the prior grade. Their classification as "progressed" is based on implementing the Progressed Policy by the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2017). This policy seeks to reduce the rate of learner repetition by requiring schools to advance students who have repeated a phase once, therefore making them not repeat any class in a phase. Since these learners have low academic abilities and have had some time at secondary school, their experiences were deemed vital. Because of this, it was presumed that they were the most qualified individuals to share their experience on teachers' praises.

3.3. Data collection

Qualitative interviews are known as deep interviews because they are distinguished by intimate involvement between the interviewer and participants, resulting in a discourse with a definite goal (Billups, 2022). This study utilised focus group interviews. This is a qualitative interview method wherein a meticulously selected group of participants convenes to deliberate on a topic and reach a consensus based on the researcher's questions (Boyle & Schemierbach, 2020). The rationale for selecting this interview format was the belief that a collective of individuals could produce a broader spectrum of ideas and perspectives on a subject than a solitary interview. Several students were likely to help one another recall certain points (Boyle & Schleiermacher, 2020) that might have been forgotten in a one-on-one interview. Audio- tape recorder was used to record the discussion with the participants.

3.4. Data analysis

An inductive content analysis method was employed to analyse the transcribed data. This strategy enabled the data to serve as the primary influence, with themes emerging from the data instead of being preordained by the author (Vears & Gillam, 2022). The researcher analysed the data to get an initial comprehension before employing open coding to break down the data into smaller, meaningful components. The codes were later categorised into broad themes or groupings based on their similarity and importance, regardless of pre-established categories. The researcher diligently refined these themes by continuous comparison with the data, ensuring their accurate portrayal of the subject matter. The researcher examined the topics via this iterative method to uncover patterns and insights. The last stage was presenting findings, emphasising key themes and their implications for the principles of attachment theory. To enhance the study's credibility, verbatim quotations offered concrete instances from participants and validated the researchers' interpretations and assertions. This guaranteed the outcomes were grounded on facts rather than the researchers' convictions or biases.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The Free State Department of Education and the University of Free State Ethics Committee approved the study's permission to conduct the study, with ethical number UFS-HSD2024/1075.

Since the participants were underage, appropriate permission was sought and obtained from both the learners and their parents or guardians.

Table 1. Details of research sites

Name of school	Number of principals	Number of deputy principal	Number of progressed learners	Number of learners	Quintile ranking
School A	1	1	114	690	3
School B	1	1	102	607	2

Table 1 above indicates that each of the two schools from which data was collected has one principal and one deputy principal. The table also indicates that each school has between 600 and 700 learners, with the number of progressed learners ranging from 100 to 114 per school. One school is categorised as quintile 2, while the other is classified as quintile 3.

Table 2. Participants biographical details

Name	School	Gender	Grade
P1	A	M	11
P2	A	F	10
P3	A	F	12
P4	A	F	12
P5	A	F	10
P6	A	F	11
P7	B	M	10
P8	B	M	10
P9	B	F	10
P10	B	F	11
P11	B	F	11
P12	B	M	11

Table 2 above presents the pseudonyms assigned to participants and their respective schools. It provides information about the grades and genders of participants and the total number. It shows that the study comprised twelve participants, including eight females, with five from School A and three from School B. Only three males participated, one from School A and two from School B. The table further shows that all learners were in the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase and that the three grades (10-12) comprising the Phase were represented. Five were in grade 10, five in 11, and two in 12.

4. Results

The generated data revealed three major themes: The feeling when receiving praise, the teacher's discouraging words teachers use, circumstances under which praise is given, and the feeling and reaction of not receiving praise.

4.1. The feeling of receiving praise

Under this theme, the participants revealed that receiving praise evokes a special feeling and fosters a sense of being loved, cultivating a strong inclination towards schools and increasing motivation to apply more effort. P7 from School B shared as follows:

Praise makes one love school; if the teacher who praises me is absent, I become sad.

P11 from the same school added:

Praise gives me strength when someone does it; The feeling makes me push harder.

Other participants from School A shared the same attaching the feeling to the teachers who praise them. P3 had the following to share:

If you know it is the class of a certain teacher who praises you, you become happy.

P1 also added:

You enjoy it because he gives you that special feeling.

4.2. Circumstances under which teachers praise learners

The participants indicated that teachers praise learners, mostly in relation to their academic achievements and skills, which has led to them not receiving praise because they are, in most cases, performing at the lowest level. They also revealed that the words they receive from the teachers are derogative. P7 from School B explained:

They use praise only regarding our schoolwork.

Similarly, P8 stressed:

They use it on issues related to academic achievement. One day, the teacher found me talking in the class. I am not a learner who is problematic or causes chaos, but just that single moment was enough. He said, o so pasa? (Do you pass your subject?) You can imagine ntate! (Sir). Deep sighs. In front of other learners. ke ne ke utlwe eka ke tsotse (I felt as if I was naked).

Other participants from School A concurred. P3 emphasised:

Teachers praise us based on activities in the classes. They only thing they do well is to belittle us. Ha ba tswafe hore jwetsa hore wena wa tseba o felehiditse ba bang (they bodily tell us that we know we have already failed and are just here accompanying other learners).

P4 also added:

They do not praise us because we are not top learners, we are only clapping hands for those who perform well.

However, P2 from School A indicated that praise is sometimes based on one's behaviour. She shared:

Some teachers praised us based on our behaviour. I have received praise because of the way I behave.

4.3. Learners' feelings and reaction to not receiving praise

The participants stated that the absence of any kind of acknowledgement in the form of praise leads to the development of anger, deviant conduct, and a mixed-feeling attitude about not attending school. The subsequent decline in their academic performance was attributed to their inability to get affection through praise from their other teachers. The findings also indicated that participants experience joy when teachers who fail to appreciate them by verbally commending them are absent at school. They feel sadness when those who do are not at school. P7 From School B explained:

Sometimes, you feel like not going to school, especially when you have a written test; you already know your marks will be lower, and there will probably be someone with high marks to praise.

P8 Stressed:

When I think of the fact that I will be clapping my hands to praise others, Jooh Sir! but not receiving the same from them, it is like I can disappear.

P2 added:

There are teachers I become happy when they are absent, but for others, particularly those who make me feel valued, I become sad.

Participants shared different reactions to the reaction influenced by the absence of praise. P4 indicated:

Sometimes, you develop anger, so I become disobedient and disruptive when I have anger.

P1 also added:

In the class of teachers who do not make me feel valued, I sleep, not because the subject is difficult, but because I know nothing positive will come from their mouths.

P6 stressed:

We end up misbehaving in the class because they make us feel out.

P4 emphasised:

I think we end up dropping out of our work because we do not receive love from our teachers; the way they treat us makes us feel bad, Not all the teachers. For those who treat us equally, even if you struggle with their subject, you try to pass.

In support P12 added:

Honestly, you develop an attitude towards the teachers who do not value you. I do not even greet them when I meet them in town, but I make sure they see me so that they see I do not greet them intentionally.

P3 had the following to share:

I have adapted; I felt the pain and adapted to the situation because I found it of no use to stress. Ho thusang ho kwata kannete? (What is the use of being angry?) The situation has made me a strong person. I think I am used.

Although others see the absence of praise as a factor for feeling left out and misbehaviour, P9 from School B considers it a negative motivation for him. He explained:

I am a competitive person; even though I feel sad, it drives me. I must work hard and be like others. I make sure the following becomes my turn.

5. Discussion

This study's findings showed that praise enhances learners' feelings of being valued, increases happiness, and fosters a sense of love, thereby motivating them to exert greater effort. According to Lavanga and Sulla, (2023) praise enhances learners' educational experiences by offering encouragement, joy, and happiness. The learner's success in the educational process depends on the emotional impressions they encounter and the cognitive evaluations they subsequently undertake while in school (Lavanga & Sulla, 2024). This suggests that positive emotions improve cognitive processes, while praise promotes these favourable emotions. Research on adolescent development shows that the brain's reaction to incentives, especially social rewards, is crucial in influencing social behaviours and the emotional processing of social events during this developmental stage (Cherewick

et al., 2021). According to the attachment theory that guided this research, praise strengthens emotional ties between people (Cherry, 2023). As a result, learners develop strong bonds with their teachers, classmates, the school itself, and their coursework. Given that secondary school learners are in their adolescent stage, it is beneficial for teachers to enhance the use of praise. This approach can lead to most learners, particularly progressed learners, feel valued and motivated to exert greater effort in their academic studies.

The findings also revealed that teachers mostly employ praise depending on learners' performance in the subjects. These findings indicated that those who perform poorly are consistently not praised throughout the year. Instead of getting words of encouragement, the results revealed that teachers use derogatory terms and phrases towards these learners. The South African Council for Educators, the governing professional organisation for teachers, mandates that all teachers comply with the following specific behaviours towards learners: Exhibit respect for the dignity, beliefs, and constitutional rights of learners, particularly children, encompassing the right to privacy and confidentiality; acknowledge the uniqueness, individuality, and specific needs of each learner, guiding and inspiring them to reach their potential, seeks to enable learners to develop values consistent with the fundamental rights established in the Constitution of South Africa, demonstrates authority with empathy, refrains from any form of degradation. However, the findings of this study, particularly regarding the use of derogatory language towards advanced learners, suggest non-compliance.

Research demonstrates that teachers' behaviour can profoundly influence learners' social and academic behaviours (Rafi et al., 2020; Sulla & Rollo, 2023). This shows that teachers' actions can influence learners' feelings of belonging or non-belonging within the school community. Belongingness constitutes a fundamental element of the human experience (Allen et al., 2018). When learners feel appreciated, included, and respected (Roffey et al., 2019; Yassine et al., 2020), they are more likely to engage positively. Conversely, a lack of connection to key school community members, such as teachers and peers, can lead to feelings of isolation, decreased motivation, and withdrawal from school (Roffey et al., 2019). This research has found a link between teachers' use of derogatory language and the degree of help they provide to progressed learners. This finding is consistent with other studies that have examined the level of support for such learners in schools. For instance, Nyathi (2021) found that progressed learners do not get enough educational assistance. Furthermore, Mogale and Malatji (2022) discovered that teachers seldom consider the progressed learners' perspectives while formulating intervention strategies. Given these factors, it may be argued that progressed learners do not have a sense of belonging in schools.

According to the attachment theory, it may be argued that this approach used by teachers cultivates a sense of insecurity in the relationship between teachers and progressed learners, as well as among other learners, particularly those who consistently get praise from the teachers. The theory posits that establishing a robust connection with the primary carer is essential for promoting ideal psychological well-being and for establishing the basis for the ability to respond suitably to others, manage situational stress, and be receptive to unexpected events (Sarah, 2021).

The research revealed that learners develop feelings of sadness when they are not praised, which subsequently alters their attitude towards the school and teachers who fail to provide praise. The participants highlighted that, at times, they deviate from the school rules and experience feelings of hatred, which compels them to dislike teachers who fail to praise them and like those who do.

Our study, *Attribution to Classroom Disruptive Behaviour: Insights from Secondary Teachers*, revealed that progressed learners conceal their academic abilities by engaging in disruptive behaviour. Nevertheless, this research's findings illuminate other factors that might contribute to the habit. The participants noted that teachers fail to affirm their worth by offering praise, affecting their

conduct as they see themselves as excluded and different from fellow learners. The widespread sense of disconnection might perhaps be attributed to the high incidence of learner dropout despite the introduction of the Progressed Policy aimed at reducing dropouts and improving throughput. According to Roffey et al. (2019), the absence of strong relationships with important individuals in the school community, such as teachers and classmates, may result in learners experiencing feelings of isolation, reduced motivation, and withdrawal from school.

At the Lekgotla Conference in March 2024, which took place at the Birchwood Conference Centre in Boksburg, President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke on the inauguration of the 2024 Basic Education Sector. The lecture was on "Providing learners with the necessary knowledge and skills to adapt to a dynamic world." Ramaphosa reiterated his concern about the consistently elevated levels of learner dropout and urged stakeholders in the education industry to intensify their efforts to tackle the issue. According to attachment theory, learners who do not get praise develop an insecure, ambivalent and disorganised attachment, marked by exaggerated emotions such as violent outbursts. Teachers, the main caretakers of learners in schools, are seen by the learners as the cause of harm and cannot offer them appropriate care and emotional comfort.

6. Conclusion

The research investigated the experiences of progressed learners on the teachers' use of praise in the classroom. This research provides insights into the emotional responses of learners when they get praise, the circumstances in which praise is given in the classroom, and the impact of the lack of praise on their feelings and behaviours. These findings suggest that praise influences learners' conduct and dedication. This research presents a new perspective by challenging the notion that progressed learners are disruptive and demotivated because they know they will progress to the next grade. It presents novelty thought that teacher usage of praise may result in exclusions, making progressed learners feel somehow disconnected from the school community.

6.1. Limitations and further research

The results of this study do not apply to a broader context due to its limitations, including the focus on only quintile 2 and 3 schools, the use of progressed learners in FET as participants, and the research being confined to a single province and district with just two schools involved. Additional studies may be carried out to explore the experiences of high-achieving learners and teachers. A comparative study could explore the experiences of both progressed and high-performing learners concerning teachers' use of praise. Quantitative study may also be carried out for a broader scope. Another study with a similar approach may focus exclusively on learners' experiences in grades 8-9

7. Suggestion

The study proposes that teachers should embrace a comprehensive approach to using praise. This approach should encompass performance and other aspects of school life, such as regular attendance, cleanliness, quietness, attentiveness, willingness to assist or clean the board and many others. By doing so, every learner can receive praise and feel appreciated and connected to the school, the teacher, and the subject. The study also recommends ongoing training of teachers on the code of professional ethics to ensure they remember how to interact and communicate with learners.

Declarations

Author Contributions. This is a single-authored manuscript.

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