

Social Incompetence of Learners with Insecure Attachment Styles: A Multiple Case Study of Three Secondary Schools in South Africa

Morefaith Naledi SIBANYONI¹ & Peter JO ALOKA^{1*} 

ABSTRACT. The study aimed to examine social incompetence of learners with insecure attachment styles in three secondary schools in South Africa. The study employed a multiple case-study research design. The sampling frame comprised 27 participants, including 6 life orientation teachers, 18 grade 10 learners, and 3 deputy principals from 3 specifically chosen secondary schools in the Sedibeng West district. Data collection for this study involved the utilization of open semi-structured interviews. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews was evaluated thematically, using research questions as a framework. The results indicated that learners with social incompetence exhibited low self-esteem, antisocial behaviours, aggressive behaviours, poor anger control, poor interpersonal skills, lack of emotional competence, and external locus of control. The study recommends that parents should be trained on best parenting programs and increase awareness in the community on secure homes.

Keywords: social incompetence, learners, insecure attachment styles, secondary schools, south Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of attachment is crucial in the development of humans, and its theory has been recognized and validated as a diagnostic tool for persons of all ages, from infancy to adulthood. Attachment explores the initial emotional

¹ Wits School of Education, University of Witwatersrand, Private Bag, 3, Wits, Johannesburg, South Africa

* Corresponding author: peter.aloka@wits.ac.za



connections between children and their caregivers, which have a significant and lasting impact on their lives. This study presented many categories of attachment styles, demonstrating how attachment develops over time and how children's positive and bad experiences impact them psychologically. The initial classification or kind is referred to as secure attachment, which was the intended representation or ultimate objective of this study. Karakose and Ledermann (2026) reiterate that anxious attachment explained more variance in anxiety than in depression, whereas avoidant attachment explained more variance in depression. Secure attachment refers to the emotional bond that children have with their caregivers, where they depend on their caregivers to display signs of distress when separated and happiness when reunited. Sekowski and Gambin (2025) argues that generalized insecure profile had higher levels of depressive symptoms than all other groups and a higher level of suicidality than the secure group.

Despite the child's distress, they have confidence that the caregiver will come back. Securely linked youngsters, when experiencing fear, feel at ease seeking comfort and reassurance from their caregivers. These children mature into individuals who possess self-assurance and self-reliance. The insecure attachments patterns can be categorized as disorganized, ambivalent, and avoidant attachment. Mirarchi, et al., (2026) argues that attachment avoidance played a more important role than attachment anxiety in explaining the degree of psychopathic traits. Children with disorganized attachment exhibit a perplexing combination of behaviours, appearing bewildered, distressed, or perplexed. Sagone, et al., (2023) argues that attachment styles are associated with discomfort with closeness, relationships as secondary, and avoidance. In such instances, parents might function as both a source of solace and anxiety, resulting in disordered conduct. These children develop lower self-confidence as they mature. This dimension pertains to worry and measures the extent to which an individual is concerned that a person they are attached to will not be accessible or sufficiently responsive during times of necessity (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Mandell (2024) emphasised the importance of interventions, ongoing monitoring, and building connections between quiet students and their school community to enhance and promote academic success.

The ambivalent attachment pertains to youngsters who experience significant discomfort when a parent departs. The ambivalent attachment type is linked to parents or guardians who are inaccessible. Momeñe, et al., (2024) provides preliminary evidence that rejection of negative emotional experiences may play an important role in the relationship between insecure dismissing attachment style and emotional dependence on an individual's partner. Due to the lack of stable parental availability, these children are unable to rely on their primary caregiver for support when they require it. Lastly, individuals with an

avoidant attachment style tend to exhibit indifference towards both their parents or caregivers and strangers, displaying no discernible preference between them. Srivastava, et al., (2026) showed that secure attachment style increased sociocultural adaptation, whereas insecure attachment styles decreased it among international students in the host country. The development of this attachment type may be attributed to caregivers who have exhibited abusive or negligent behaviours (Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998). Sancho, et al., (2025) reinforce the link established between secure attachment and superior cognitive performance, aligning with previous research on emotional regulation and cognitive development in adolescence. Moreover, individuals with avoidant attachment tend to exhibit avoidance behaviour towards their parents or caregivers, displaying no discernible preference between a caregiver and a stranger. The avoidant attachment style may arise because of caregivers who have been abusive or neglectful. Children who get punishment for depending on a caregiver will develop a tendency to refrain from seeking assistance in subsequent situations. The component of avoidance refers to the level at which the kid lacks faith in the caregiver's intentions and makes efforts to retain independence and emotional detachment from them (Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid & Avihou-Kanza, 2009). Cecen and Ündar (2026) showed that childhood emotional abuse was positively associated with both attachment anxiety and avoidance and negatively associated with self-satisfaction.

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for Life Orientation states that the topic focuses on developing the skills, information, and values necessary for the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, and physical growth of learners. The topic leads and prepares learners for life, its possibilities, and educates them for meaningful and effective living in a dynamic and evolving society. It fosters self-motivation and instructs learners in the use of goal planning, problem-solving, and decision-making processes, so preparing them for the Fourth Industrial Revolution and developing their 21st Century abilities. These help to promote personal development as part of an endeavour to establish a democratic society and enhance the overall quality of life. The Department of Basic Education (2011) states that learners are given guidance to reach their maximum capabilities and are given chances to make well-informed decisions about their personal and environmental health, educational prospects, and future vocations. In addition, Life Orientation includes a 10% component of physical activity, which is advantageous in this context since it allows teachers to assess students' interactive and social abilities. Furthermore, the Life Orientation learning area provides learners with essential life skills, such as psychosocial and interpersonal skills, to empower them in making well-informed decisions, self-management, and improved communication. The objective is to exert a good impact on learners and their surroundings, enabling them to live a fruitful and

efficient life (Mampane 2010). Lewis, et al., (2025) reported that higher levels of insecure attachment confer vulnerability for depression following conflict, whereas more secure romantic attachment attenuates the effects of violence exposure.

Recent research conducted in South Africa has revealed that attachment types exert a substantial influence on several elements of learners' life, both within and outside of the school environment. Zaidman-Mograbi et al., (2020) conducted a study in South Africa that highlighted the need of taking local settings into account when examining attachment and maternal sensitivity. Similarly, a study conducted by Thandiswa et al., (2022) in South Africa found a substantial positive link between love types and attachment behaviour. In a study conducted in South Africa, Ebere et al., (2022) proposed that there is a positive correlation between parent-child attachment and both self-efficacy and social skills. A recent study conducted by Schuitmaker et al., (2023) in South Africa emphasized the significance of considering the potential influence of insecure attachment styles on post-traumatic growth. Dugan, et al., (2026) suggest that early experiences with caregivers play a foundational and enduring role in people's attachment-related functioning. This understanding could be valuable in guiding the treatment of individuals who have experienced trauma. Although there have been new efforts to study attachment, there is a lack of literature on social competency and how schools might serve as solid grounds for students with unfavourable attachments.

Attachment Theory

Higgenbotham (2016) suggests that attachment theory serves as a unifying framework for integrating many psychological theories that contribute to study and practice in the field of psychology. The theory provides a complete explanation for cognitive processes, relationship dynamics, and systemic circumstances that influence human behaviour. It aids in comprehending many phenomena such as behaviour, dealing with interpersonal stressors, resolving conflicts, and overall psychological adaptation. Attachment theory was primarily formulated by John Bowlby (1969), who provided the framework for the theory. This framework comprises various attachment styles that illustrate the development of attachment over time and the impact of positive and negative experiences on children's psychological well-being. Children with anxious attachment show a lot of different behaviours that make them look like they are lost, having trouble, or not sure what to do. Caregivers likely act in different ways at different times because there isn't a clear pattern of connections. Parents may be both a source of comfort and fear for this child, which can make

them act crazily. People worry a lot that an attachment figure won't be there for them or help them when they need it (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). In the disorganized attachment style, children exhibit chaos, resulting in heightened distress when a parent departs. The disordered attachment style, although not widely favoured, is frequently associated with parents or guardians who are inaccessible. Due to the inconsistent availability of their parents, these children cannot rely on their primary caregiver to be present when they require assistance. Lastly, the avoidant attachment style posits that children with this form of attachment actively evade or steer clear of their parents or caregivers, and do not display any discernible preference between a caregiver and an unfamiliar individual. The component of avoidance demonstrates the child's lack of confidence in the caregiver and desire to maintain independence and emotional distance from them (Mikulincer, Shaver, Sapir-Lavid & Avihou-Kanza, 2009).

Literature Review

According to Park and Schepp (2015), vulnerability is the condition of being prone to stress and anxiety, which can negatively impact a person's physical, mental, and social health. Therefore, many previous studies have focused on children from families where parents experience both depression and drinking. These research consistently show a connection between parental alcohol misuse and negative social outcomes in these children. Studies have shown that children of adults with alcoholism have a higher likelihood of experiencing externalizing problems, such as hyperactivity and aggressiveness, as well as internalizing difficulties, such as low self-esteem and increased feelings of despair (Park & Schepp, 2015). According to Libusi's (2020) research conducted in Kenya, families with alcohol dependency often create a harmful and chaotic home environment. This environment is characterized by unhappy parents, increased levels of antisocial behaviour, and occurrences of domestic violence. The traits can directly or indirectly lead to the development of externalizing tendencies in children from households with alcoholic family members. Parentification is a common phenomenon in South African townships, when children take on adult responsibilities due to their parents' insufficient functioning, such as in cases of parental alcoholism (Masiran, et al., 2023). The concept refers to the shift of responsibilities within a family, namely among young individuals who take on parental tasks such as domestic chores and looking after younger siblings. Offspring of individuals with alcohol dependency bear the responsibility of completing parental duties within their houses (Libusi, 2020). The obligations include taking care of parents and siblings who have alcohol addiction, which can have negative impacts on their emotional and social development, such as reduced self-esteem, isolation from social activities, and emotional turmoil (Park & Schepp, 2015).

Fernandes et al., (2020) found that early childhood insecure attachment can have wide-ranging effects on an individual's social competence, impacting various aspects of their social and emotional development. The findings indicated that insecurely attached learners exhibit social incompetence, which is characterized by several hurdles. These learners may struggle to trust others during social interactions. They may have experienced inconsistent caregiving, leading to difficulties in relying on others for help and forming meaningful relationships, and they may also have heightened anxiety in social situations. Finally, those who feel anxious about being rejected or abandoned may struggle to engage with their peers or form positive relationships (Sprenger, 2020). Individuals who have insecure attachment styles, particularly those with anxious-avoidant attachments, may exhibit a strong inclination to completely avoid social interactions. They may feel anxious about receiving negative responses or lack knowledge of effective ways to express their emotions. These challenges can impede their ability to form meaningful relationships with others (Maalouf, 2022). At times, individuals with insecure attachments may face challenges when it comes to showing empathy and understanding others' perspectives. Some individuals with insecure attachment styles may excessively seek reassurance and approval from others, relying on external sources to feel secure (Evraire, Dozois & Wilde, 2022). Insufficient establishment of a secure base during initial attachment experiences can have a detrimental effect on individuals' ability to navigate social demands (Girme, et al., 2021). In a study conducted by Alfred and Hillar (2021) in Ghana, youths displayed moderate levels of social competence in social contexts. Data collection was conducted only using a questionnaire, employing a descriptive survey design. In South Africa, Nwafor, Ibeagha, Anazonwu, and Obi-Nwosu (2020) found that the impact of family competence on bullying, mediated by callousness and lack of emotion, was significant.

Most recently, Sezer and Gürtepe (2025) study revealed a moderate negative correlation between attachment to mothers and risky behaviours, while a weaker negative correlation was observed between attachment to fathers and risky behaviours. Muñoz-Pradas, et al., (2025) study reported on the existence of a statistically significant relationship between the social skills variable and Attachment corresponding to subjects with good abilities to express feelings and comfort with relationships. Alexander, et al., (2024) indicated that children with disorders are significantly less likely to develop a secure attachment and significantly more likely to develop a disorganized attachment than children without disorders. Sezer and Gürtepe (2025) revealed a moderate negative correlation between attachment to mothers and risky behaviours, while a weaker negative correlation was observed between attachment to fathers and risky behaviours. Szeifert, et al., (2025) reported that higher levels of secure attachment style predicted a lower risk of suicide attempt, and that, secure attachment style significantly mediated

part of the total effect of early traumatization severity on suicidal behaviour. Brunssen and Kastrup (2026) reported that interactions are strained by perceptual discrepancies, one concerning what counts as just and the other whose reality is recognised.

The above reviewed studies solely utilized questionnaires and surveys for data collection, it lacked qualitative data. Thus, the current study employed semi-structured interviews to provide in-depth findings to address the research gaps identified in the earlier study.

Aim of the study

This study examined the social incompetence of learners with insecure attachment styles in three secondary schools in South Africa. The study hopes to provide recommendations for learners with insecure attachments in secondary schools.

2. METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a multiple case-study research design. According to Yin (2009), a multi-case study is a more effective approach for investigating a subject that involves multiple cases, components, or members. The utilization of a multiple case-study research design was pertinent to this investigation due to its capacity to enable the researcher to gather a greater amount of data that would be challenging to get through other designs. Utilizing multiple case studies enables the researcher to comprehensively understand concepts and generate information that may be utilized for future hypothesis development.

Sample Size & Sampling Procedure

The sampling frame comprised 27 participants, including 6 life orientation teachers, 18 grade 10 learners, and 3 deputy principals from 3 specifically chosen secondary schools in the Sedibeng West district. Six Life-Orientation teachers, two from each school, were chosen using purposive sampling technique. The criteria for selecting teachers required a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience, preferably within the same school or in general. The choice of the 6 teachers was made using purposive sampling technique, based on the belief that Life-Orientation teachers have a significant impact on the overall development of students. A purposive sample strategy was used to sample the participants from each school.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection for this study involved the utilization of open semi-structured interviews. Data from deputy principals and teachers were collected using semi-structured interviews. Walliman (2009) asserts that semi-structured interviews are a versatile instrument that can provide a more comprehensive and abundant dataset compared to other methods of data collection. Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to gain a perspective on the world through the participants' eyes and provide interviewers with an opportunity to express their perspectives (Cohen et al., 2011). According to McMillan (2012), semi-structured interviews are characterized by their flexibility and the use of clear questions to get insight into participants' perceptions and to examine themes in a thorough and detailed manner. The research commenced with receiving ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee, followed by obtaining authorization from the Gauteng Department of Education and the school principals. The duration of the interview sessions for each research participant ranged from 35 to 45 minutes. This allowed for thorough questioning and provided participants with the chance to ask clarifying questions when needed.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from semi-structured interviews was evaluated thematically, using research questions as a framework (Cohen et al., 2011). Thematic analysis involves the process of recognizing and evaluating patterns of significance derived from collected data. The process of thematic analysis consists of several stages, including becoming acquainted with the data, coding, generating and searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and producing the final report. Themes were derived from both emic and etic data, wherein phrases, comparable reactions, and noteworthy events were recognized and categorized into specific categories. Emic data analysis involves the examination and interpretation of information provided by individuals in their own language, actions, and explanations.

3. FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed several social incompetence of insecurely attached learners. The results indicated that the themes on social incompetence among learners include low self-esteem, antisocial behaviours, aggressive behaviours, poor anger control, poor interpersonal skills, lack of emotional competence, external locus of control and this theme discussed the above in depth.

Theme 1: Low self-esteem

The interview results from learner participants revealed that they fear rejection and being humiliated by others. Learner participant 7 and 9 revealed that they struggle to manage their feelings, and they fail to adapt well around others without feeling like they have lost who they are. The interview excerpts are reported below: *"I am always kind toward my schoolmates, but sometimes I keep silent to avoid being humiliated by other learners and I fear rejected by others."* (Learner participant, 7). *"I am friendly to my classmates but at the same time I tolerate them even though they say personal things about me. I tolerate their nasty words. I smile but sometimes it's hard. Fear rejection."* (Learner participant, 9).

Similarly, learner 5 and 10 also showed that they are still working on their social incompetence and were aware of their short-coming:

"I would describe my social skills as a chameleon because I would adapt to how a person feels but a certain time it makes me feel like I am losing all sense of who I am, but I try to manage my anger through meditation but sometimes I feel like meditation is making it worse. I just fear rejection." (Learner participant, 5)

"I would say I am the type to get along with everyone, I always avoid conflict in any situation, but sometimes it is difficult to socialize with others because they just hate me for being me. I am not the kind of person to get angry at someone because I just feel like it is a waste of time and energy as it makes me anxious. But I desire to improve my attitude." (Learner participant, 10)

In addition, two deputy principals claimed that insecure learners fail to fully trust in themselves and lack confidence. They both concur that these learners are easily intimidated by others. The interview excerpts can be seen below: *"Lastly, anxious children cannot appreciate and compliment others for doing well, and they show high levels of low self-esteem as they are also easily intimidated by others"* (Deputy principal participant, 2). This is what deputy principal had to say:

"They cannot express themselves fluently in the language of teaching and learning. They are easily intimidated by their counter parts in private and former model C schools. This affect their self-esteem. At grade 10 they are prone to succumb to peer pressure. They are likely to smoke drugs due to friends. There's self-doubt and lack of confidence. They do not have a backbone to say no, for fear of being rejected or labelled as cowards." (Deputy principal participant, 1)

The findings from the interview excerpts above indicate the underlying issues of why insecure learners struggle with low self-esteem which is represented in fear of rejection and intimidation. They fail to be confident because of shame and they are afraid of not being liked, being abandoned and not fitting in. In conclusion, the feelings of shame and rejection contribute to learners having difficulties with self-esteem and how they view themselves.

Theme 2: Antisocial behaviours

The findings from research revealed that insecure learners experience antisocial behaviours such as excessive anger issues and violence. Two teacher participants believed that anxious learners are more likely to be involved in fights and show withdrawal symptoms. The interview excerpts from teacher 1 and 5 reported that and I quote, *“Anxious learners neglect taking place in social activities. And learners from struggling backgrounds are the ones who are fighting at school, performing badly and learners from money households perform better.”* (Teacher participant, 1). *“Insecure will have withdrawal symptoms from interactions and do not engage with schoolwork but fights. However, I do try to support any child that struggles academically despite their backgrounds.”* (Teacher participant, 5).

Furthermore, learner 13 claimed that they can be violent to others as a result of failing to resolve issues.

“My social skills are a bit fine. I can make friends, but I cannot build very good long-term relationships. My anger issues need some fixing as I can be violent sometimes but I am getting help to fix my issues as an introvert I would say that it is very difficult to make friends so hopefully the few friends I have are for life. Some people say I am insecure.” (Learner participant, 13)

From the interview excerpts above, antisocial behaviours are seen in insecure learners being involved in fights and harming others. The research findings revealed that learners do struggle with antisocial behaviours which have labelled them as social incompetent.

Theme 3: Aggressive behaviours

The interview results from one teacher revealed that aggressive behaviours are evident in insecure middle adolescents and these learners are very hard on themselves and others, rude and attack others with unkind words, targeting to hurt them. The interview excerpt is reported as follows:

"Insecure learners are usually shy, dismissive, aggressive and when they struggle with an activity, they would make noise, or be rude rather than asking for help. Learners who do not have faith in themselves tend to look down upon themselves and rejoice when confident people show weakness. And sometimes attack them with words. These are learners who are sometimes hard on themselves others as well. It is almost a work in progress as some learners are still shy to speak up and others do not want to work with others. Learners who are dismissive and anxious are usually rude, aggressive, violent and unkind." (Teacher participant, 6)

According to the conclusions that were derived from the excerpt from the interview that was shown earlier, certain teenagers who exhibit violent behaviours demonstrate a battle with their surroundings and project aggressiveness towards other people. Additionally, it is obvious that anger is frequently accompanied with aggressive action tendencies, such as the want to yell, the desire to hit someone, and the desire to damage someone. In conclusion, violent behaviour is a sign of a multitude of underlying issues, and it also indicates that the individual lacks confidence in themselves because of it. Therefore, it is possible to draw the conclusion that one of the factors that contributes to a learner's lack of social competence is its tendency to engage in aggressive behaviours, which are occasionally acquired from the learner's home environment.

Theme 4: Poor anger control

The interview findings revealed that some learners are affected by poor anger management that results to them being violent and dangerous towards others. Learner participant 11 claimed that they cannot control their anger, and it emerges from somewhere,

"When it comes to socializing with other children, I tend to be shy and be quite around people that I don't know or get along with. I don't know why this happens, but it has become normal to me. Yes, I have anger issues but I can't control it because I snap from somewhere. I just do things that are dangerous, and I can also put some people around me in danger. Sometimes when I feel like I'm about to snap I just keep quiet and walk away from the things that makes me mad or cause me to be anxious, but it is hard." (Learner participant, 11).

Teacher participant 4 argued that disorganised learners show lots of anger in the classroom and this is translated into fights and disrespect. The interview excerpt can be seen below:

“Disorganized learners in my class refuse to answer some questions during a lesson and show anger to other learners and fight a lot. Social incompetent learners have low social skills and are mostly involved in fights with other learners and they don’t do their work and assignments. Learners who come from broken families, show low social skills, self-awareness they can’t communicate well in a group. They show disrespect for others.” (Teacher participant, 4)

As a result of the data shown above, adolescents are required to acquire the ability to manage their anger from their parents because it is expected of them that they would demonstrate good social skills at school. Those students who have difficulty controlling their anger have inferior social skills, which has a negative impact on their social development. It is also clear that students who have difficulty controlling their anger are unable to get along with others, which makes it difficult for them to respect other people and to become involved in conflicts.

Theme 5: Poor interpersonal skills

The research findings from the interviews revealed that disorganised learners possess poor interpersonal skills. They fail to communicate to others and build friendships. Learner participant 15, claimed that they generally do not talk to other people as they find it hard to communicate effectively. And teacher participant 2 and 4 claimed that learners with poor interpersonal skills tend to not participate in group activities. The interview excerpts are reported below:

“My social skills such as speaking to others are not good at all it is not easy for me to make friends. I sometimes try to manage my anger, I try with all means to manage my cool and with socializing with people but not too much because it is hard for me to talk to people.” (Learner participant, 15)

“An anxious and disorganized learner hardly participates in group activities in class, and mostly isolates themselves. A social incompetent learner tends to have difficulties with being social and getting along with other learners, has problems adapting to situations and communicating.” (Teacher participant, 2)

“Insecure anxious learners are reserved and do not participate in anything happening in the classroom and also you can differentiate using their results. Results kill their moral because already they are insecure so when things do not go according to plan, anxious learners would not be able to function in a group, they are more reserved when you place them in the group.” (Teacher participant, 4)

It is clear from the three interview snippets that were presented above that learners who are insecure have not yet have established abilities in the area of excellent interpersonal communication. In most cases, this is observed when people are grouped together for a task. The inability to speak, communicate, or form friendships with other people is the first problem that has been discovered, and it has a direct impact on one's ability to interact with other people. It is possible to draw the conclusion that a lack of interpersonal skills is a contributing factor to social incompetence. These students have been socially excluded from speaking with others or participating in group activities, and they have isolated themselves.

Theme 6: Lack of emotional competence

Based on the outcomes of the interviews, it was discovered that learners who are insecure lack emotional competence. One of the participants, who was a deputy principal, stated that students are unable to effectively manage their feelings since they do not have the opportunity to practice this skill at home. *"Insecure learners lack respect since respect is never shown to them from home. Some cannot express the feelings of love and do not know how to deal with their emotions as this is none existence at home."* (Deputy principal participant, 2).

The issue that most learners who are insecure confront is brought to light in the excerpt from the interview that was just shown. The inability of children to communicate and interpret their feelings is a consequence of their lack of emotional competence. Even though they are in love, they have a negative reaction because they have not learned to comprehend what they are experiencing. It is possible to draw the conclusion that youngsters who are lacking in emotional competence would also be unable to comprehend the feelings of other people, which would lead to social incompetence as well.

Theme 7: External locus of control

The results provided a more in-depth analysis of the process of peer influence in the socialization and personal development of adolescents. It was stated by a deputy principal participant that students in the tenth grade do not make their own decisions or make efforts to develop themselves; rather, they largely rely on their friends, which hurts their grades. Following is a report of the excerpt from the interview:

"They listen more to their friends and peers more than they'd listen to their parents. They value the friends' opinions more than that of teachers and parents. There is mostly high failure rate in grade 10 than in other grades because of lack of social competencies. They are unable to adapt to the FET phase as they just came out of the senior phase. They are in the process of discovering who they are. They are expected to choose subjects which will affect their entire lives at a stage where they are unsure of themselves." (Deputy principal participant, 1)

In addition teacher participant 4, also believed that insecure learners fail to deal with peer pressure and blame others for their circumstance. The interview excerpts is reported below:

"Socially I wouldn't say insecure learners are competent because if they don't yet know how to deal with peer pressure and blame others for their failure, they are not yet socially competent because a socially competent learner would know where to draw the line. They are in competition with their friends and they are not mindful that they are from different backgrounds." (Teacher participant, 4)

According to the interview excerpts presented above, adolescents are subjected to the pressure of conforming their thoughts and actions to specific guidelines that have been prescribed by their peers. Furthermore, they are afflicted with the negative characteristics of freely giving control to others to receive assurance, acceptance, and validity, which in turn causes them to avoid taking responsibility for their actions.

4. DISCUSSION

The study findings revealed that learners with insecure attachment patterns exhibited social incompetence. The findings revealed that these individuals displayed social incompetence among learners include low self-esteem, antisocial behaviours, aggressive behaviours, poor anger control, poor interpersonal skills, lack of emotional competence, external locus of control. These findings align with the Rubin and Chronis-Tuscano, (2021), which identified various signs and factors associated with social incompetence. One of the primary factors identified in the study was a lack of self-confidence. The findings indicated that learners had a deficiency in self-assurance and were unable to have faith in their own abilities. These learners experienced feelings of guilt and fear due to concerns about social acceptance, abandonment, and

fitting in. The findings determined that the emotions of guilt and rejection are factors that contribute to learners experiencing challenges with their self-esteem. The findings corroborated those of Bergin and Bergin (2009), which suggested that those with insecure attachment styles are more prone to experiencing anxiety or terror in response to routine events or daily activities. Individuals with an anxious/ambivalent attachment type often feel nervous about being abandoned and have doubts about the reliability of their caregivers and others in their lives. Furthermore, Hong and Park (2012) contended that children with low self-esteem may experience apprehension about the reliable satisfaction of their needs, leading to an intensified emotional reaction due to their heightened sensitivity to perceived risks of being rejected or abandoned (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). Muñoz-Pradas, et al., (2025) study reported on the existence of a statistically significant relationship between the social skills variable and Attachment corresponding to subjects with good abilities to express feelings and comfort with relationships. This finding implies that schools should promote mental health assistance by offering access to counselling or therapy sessions and by educating staff on how to support children with low self-esteem.

The findings revealed instances of deviant behaviour, including physical altercations, emotional outbursts, defiance, theft, and dishonesty. These learners exhibit a high degree of self-criticism and are also prone to being disrespectful and verbally aggressive towards others, intentionally seeking to do harm. These findings align with Harber's (2001) assertion that schools in South Africa have been impacted by violence, leading to the upbringing of children in insecure circumstances and their subsequent engagement in aggressive behaviour towards others. Furthermore, Wray (2015) argued that external stressors, such as precarious housing or community violence, might have an impact on the strength of the bonds between parents and children, potentially resulting in insecure attachment. Furthermore, the third component identified in the study findings was poor anger control exhibited by learners with an insecure attachment style. The study findings indicated that anger frequently co-occurred with aggressive behavioural inclinations, such as a proclivity to vocally express anger, a desire to physically strike someone, and a wish to cause harm to someone. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Girme et al. (2021), which suggests that persons with insecure attachment styles may experience challenges in effectively managing disputes and may be more prone to expressing anger. Insecure youngsters may face challenges in effectively communicating their demands, engaging in productive negotiations, and finding mutually beneficial solutions in social situations (Wray, 2015). Sezer and Gürtepe (2025) revealed a moderate negative correlation between attachment to mothers and

risky behaviours, while a weaker negative correlation was observed between attachment to fathers and risky behaviours. Szeifert, et al., (2025) reported that higher levels of secure attachment style predicted a lower risk of suicide attempt, and that, secure attachment style significantly mediated part of the total effect of early traumatization severity on suicidal behaviour.

Based on the findings, it was seen that learners were unsuccessful in their ability to communicate with people and establish friendships. These findings were in line with other sources of information on insecure attachment types. In agreement, Park and Schepp (2015) found that insecure attachment patterns can have negative consequences on individuals' emotional and social development. These consequences include reduced self-perception, isolation from social interactions, and emotional turmoil. Likewise, those lacking interpersonal skills may feel anxious about being rejected or abandoned, making it challenging for them to engage comfortably with their peers or form positive relationships (Sprenger, 2020). Furthermore, Maalouf (2022) found that individuals who have insecure attachment styles, particularly those with anxious-avoidant attachments, tend to actively avoid social interactions out of fear of rejection or disappointment. This avoidance can hinder the development of their social skills. The implication of this finding is that Life- Orientation teachers should champion for peer mediation programs, which can provide learners with the skills to effectively resolve disagreements and navigate relationships. In addition, the findings uncovered a lack of emotional competence among learners with insecure attachment, because learners struggle to effectively manage negative emotions. According to Maalouf (2022), individuals with insecure attachment may face difficulties in effectively expressing their needs and emotions. Similarly, Evraire, Dozois and Wilde (2022) found that those with insecure attachments encounter challenges when it comes to displaying empathy and participating in perspective-taking. Brunssen and Kastrup (2026) reported that interactions are strained by perceptual discrepancies, one concerning what counts as just and the other whose reality is recognised.

The final component identified in the study findings was an external locus of control. The study findings elucidated the mechanism of peer influence on the socialization and personal growth of adolescents. Research findings suggest that individuals with an insecure attachment style face difficulties in making independent decisions and tend to excessively depend on their peers. Based on the findings, it was concluded that insecure learners struggle to handle peer pressure and tend to attribute their circumstances to others, rather than taking responsibility for their own actions. This finding is consistent with Spokas and Heimberg (2009), which concluded that having an external locus of control can have negative consequences. In a similar vein, Evraire, Dozois and Wilde (2022)

discovered that persons with insecure attachment styles may have a proclivity for seeking excessive reassurance and praise from others, relying on external sources to establish a sense of security. To put it simply, individuals who have insecure attachment may exhibit less social resilience, struggle to bounce back from social challenges or setbacks, and their lack of a strong foundation in early attachment experiences might affect their ability to cope with social pressures (Girme, et al., 2021). Sezer and Gürtepe (2025) study revealed a moderate negative correlation between attachment to mothers and risky behaviours, while a weaker negative correlation was observed between attachment to fathers and risky behaviours. The implication of this finding is that teachers have the potential to create parenting programs or raise awareness in the community. These initiatives can equip parents with good bonding practices, leading to improved development and emotional security in their children.

5. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

The study concludes that insecure attachment styles have a major impact on social ineptitude, because the findings revealed a deficiency in self-assurance among learners who had unstable attachments. Most learners exhibited a lack of self-assurance and were unable to trust in their own talents. The findings determined that the primary factors contributing to low self-esteem in insecure learners are their apprehension of rejection and intimidation, which are associated with their attachment styles. According to the research, these learners felt shame and dread because they were worried about being accepted by others, being abandoned, and fitting in. As a result, they were unsuccessful in developing their social skills. Moreover, the study revealed a robust link between antisocial behaviour and aggressive behaviour. The findings revealed that some learners resorted to violence in order to deal with their difficulties at school. The research findings indicate that learners who struggle with antisocial behaviours have a deficiency in social competency and display behaviour patterns acquired from their family environment. In addition, the study concludes that learners with an insecure attachment style displayed poor anger management, which was identified as the third component of social incompetence. The study findings indicated a strong correlation between rage and aggressive behavioural tendencies. Thus, it was determined that these learners displayed a substantial level of anger in the classroom, resulting in physical fights and a disregard for authority. According to the findings, a lack of control over anger was identified as the main cause of inadequate interpersonal skills, which negatively affects social development and hampers the learners' ability to form positive relationships with others.

The study also concludes that a significant number of learners who have inadequate social skills tend to seclude themselves and encounter difficulties in communicating effectively. Furthermore, the qualitative inquiry revealed a deficiency in emotional competence among learners who have insecure attachment. Research indicates that learners encounter difficulties in properly regulating negative emotions. The study found that learners with emotional ineptitude exhibit a propensity to reject people and a lack of understanding of others' emotions.

In conclusion, the study argues that an external locus of control has a notable impact on social ineptitude. The study further concludes that persons who have an insecure attachment style have challenges when it comes to making autonomous decisions and have a tendency to too rely on their peers. The study found that there is an inverse relationship between peer pressure and social ineptitude in the chosen township schools. The study revealed that many learners had a tendency to explain their circumstances to external factors, rather than accepting responsibility for their own acts. The study recommends that train parents on best parenting programs and increase awareness in the community on secure homes. This would provide parents with effective bonding techniques that may improve development and emotional security in avoidant-dismissive children and rectify their unpleasant experiences.

REFERENCES

- Alfred, K., & Hillar, A. (2021). Analysis of adolescents social competence: A Ghanaian perspective. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 13(1), 9-19.
- Alexander, S. L., Frederico, M., Long, M., & Vicendese, D. (2024). Attachment security in children with disability or developmental delay: Systematic review of quality and interventions. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention*, 17(2), 228–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19411243.2023.2177237>
- Bergin, C., & Bergin, D. (2009). Attachment in the classroom. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21(2), 141-170.
- Bowlby, J. (1982). Attachment and loss: Retrospect and prospect. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 52(4), 664-673.
- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult attachment: An integrative overview. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46–76). The Guilford Press.
- Brunssen, L., & Kastrup, V. (2026). Negotiating (Mis-)Recognition in Physical Education: Interactions Between Teachers and Students with Special Educational Needs in the Area of Emotional and Social Development. *Behavioral Sciences*, 16(5), 793. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs16050793>
- Cecen, A.R., & Ündar, H. (2026). Attachment insecurity as an explanatory mechanism in the link between childhood emotional abuse and self-satisfaction. *Current Psychology* 45, 422 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-025-08518-z>

- Cohen, A. O., Breiner, K., Steinberg, L., Bonnie, R. J., Scott, E. S., Taylor-Thompson, K., & Casey, B. J. (2016). When is an adolescent an adult? Assessing cognitive control in emotional and non-emotional contexts. *Psychological Science*, 27(4), 549-562.
- Curriculum and assessment policy statement (CAPS): *Life Orientation Grades 7-9*. Retrieved July 23, 2011, from <http://www.thutong.doe.gov.za>.
- Dugan, K. A., Kunkel, J. J., Fraley, R. C., Simpson, J. A., McCormick, E. M., Bleil, M. E., Booth-LaForce, C., & Roisman, G. I. (2026). A prospective longitudinal study of the associations between childhood and adolescent interpersonal experiences and adult attachment orientations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 130(2), 260–290. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000502>
- Ebere, D., Dreyer, L.M., & Jacobs, C. (2022). Parent-child attachment as a correlate of social skills and academic self-efficacy. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 26(1), 248-262.
- Evraire, L. E., Dozois, D. J. A., & Wilde, J. L. (2022). The contribution of attachment styles and reassurance seeking to trust in romantic couples. *Europe's Journal of Psychology*, 18(1), 19-27.
- Fernandes, C., Monteiro, L., Santos, A. J., Fernandes, M., Antunes, M., Vaughn, B. E., & Veríssimo, M. (2020). Early father-child and mother-child attachment relationships: contributions to preschoolers' social competence. *Attachment & Human Development*, 22(6), 687-704.
- Girme, Y. U., Jones, R. E., Fleck, C., Simpson, J. A., & Overall, N. C. (2021). Infants' attachment insecurity predicts attachment-relevant emotion regulation strategies in adulthood. *Emotion*, 21(2), 260.
- Harber, C. (2001). Schooling and violence in South Africa: creating a safer school. *Intercultural Education*, 12(3), 261-271.
- Higgenbotham, E. L. (2016). *Attachment, coping style, and perceived stress in university students* [PhD Thesis, West Virginia University].
- Hong, Y. R., & Park, J. S. (2012). Impact of attachment, temperament and parenting on human development. *Korean Journal of Pediatrics*, 55(12), 449-456.
- Lewis, J., George, B., & Dike, J. (2025). Family-of-Origin of Violence, Insecure Attachment, and Depression Symptoms in Emerging Adults: A Brief Report. *Journal of Family Violence* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-025-00858-5>
- Libusi, E. N. (2020). *Parental alcoholism and its influence on psychosocial development among public primary school pupils in Bungoma County, Kenya* (Doctoral dissertation, Masinde Muliro University of Science & Technology, Kenya). <http://r-library.mmust.ac.ke/123456789/1404>.
- Maalouf, E., Salameh, P., Haddad, C., Sacre, H., Hallit, S., & Obeid, S. (2022). Attachment styles and their association with aggression, hostility, and anger in Lebanese adolescents: a national study. *BMC psychology*, 10(1), 104.
- Mampane, R., & Bouwer, C. (2011). The influence of township schools on the resilience of their learners. *South African Journal of Education*, 31(1), 55-62.
- Mandell, M. L. (2024). Attachment theory as a lens for examining quiet students to prevent school avoidance. *Education Inquiry*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2024.2433296>

- Masiran, R., Ibrahim, N., Awang, H., & Lim, P. Y. (2023). The positive and negative aspects of parentification: An integrated review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 144, 106709.
- McMillan, S. S., Kelly, F., Sav, A., Kendall, E., King, M. A., Whitty, J. A., & Wheeler, A. J. (2014). Using the nominal group technique: how to analyse across multiple groups. *Health Services and Outcomes Research Methodology*, 14, 92-108.
- Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., Sapir-Lavid, Y., & Avihou-Kanza, N. (2009). What's inside the minds of securely and insecurely attached people? The secure-base script and its associations with attachment-style dimensions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97(4), 615-622.
- Mirarchi, M. S., Kuban, T., Etzler, S., Briken, P., & Rettenberger, M. (2026). The Role of Insecure Attachment Styles in the Relationship Between Childhood Trauma and Psychopathy in Adulthood. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 306624X261422469. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X261422469>
- Momeñe, J., Estévez, A., Griffiths, M. D., Macía, P., Herrero, M., Olave, L., & Iruarizaga, I. (2024). The impact of insecure attachment on emotional dependence on a partner: The mediating role of negative emotional rejection. *Behavioral sciences (Basel, Switzerland)*, 14(10), 909. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14100909>
- Muñoz-Pradas, R., de la Fuente Benítez, M., Palacios-Rodríguez, A., & Fernández Scagliusi, M. V. (2025). Relationship between attachment and social skills in adulthood education in the digital society. *Societies*, 15(1), 8. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc15010008>
- Nwafor, C. E., Ibeagha, P. N., Anazonwu, C. O., & Obi-Nwosu, H. (2020). Do callous-unemotional traits mediate the effect of family competence on bullying?. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 50(2), 239-249.
- Park, S., & Schepp, K. G. (2015). A systematic review of research on children of alcoholics: Their inherent resilience and vulnerability. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(5), 1222-1231.
- Rubin, K. H., & Chronis-Tuscano, A. (2021). Perspectives on social withdrawal in childhood: Past, present, and prospects. *Child Development Perspectives*, 15(3), 160-167.
- Sagone, E., Commodari, E., Indiana, M. L., & La Rosa, V. L. (2023). Exploring the association between attachment style, psychological well-being, and relationship status in young adults and adults—A cross-sectional study. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 13(3), 525-539. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13030040>
- Sancho, M., Luque-Rojas, M. J., & Pitillas, C. (2025). From Bonds to Brains: Understanding the Impact of Attachment on Executive Functions in Adolescents. *Psicología Educativa*, 31(2), 75 - 81. <https://doi.org/10.5093/psed2025a11>
- Schuitmaker, N., Basson, P., & Kruger, G. (2023). Insecure attachment styles as predictors of posttraumatic growth in a South African student sample. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 53(1) 82–91.

- Sekowski, M. M., & Gambin, M. (2025). Attachment anxiety, avoidance, and disorganization: Latent profiles of attachment and their associations with hypomentalization, depressive symptoms, and suicidality. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 81(11), 1081–1094. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.70019>
- Sezer, F., & Gürtepe, A. (2025). Investigation of attachment social exclusion and risky behaviors in adolescents. *BMC psychology*, 13(1), 487. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-025-02822-w>
- Spokas, M., & Heimberg, R. G. (2009). Overprotective parenting, social anxiety, and external locus of control: Cross-sectional and longitudinal relationships. *Cognitive therapy and research*, 33, 543–551.
- Sprenger, M. (2020). *Social-emotional learning and the brain: Strategies to help your students thrive*. Amazon Publishers.
- Srivastava, N., Awasthi, P., Mukherjee, M., Pandey, R. P., & Zaidi, S. Z. H. (2026). Navigating new culture: The role of attachment styles in the adaptation of international students in India. *Annals of neurosciences*, 09727531261425823. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09727531261425823>
- Szeifert, N.M., Oláh, B. & Gonda, X. (2025). The mediating role of adult attachment styles between early traumas and suicidal behaviour. *Sci Rep* 15, 15855 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-00831-8>
- Thandiswa, P., Tyolo, P., Erasmus, Vicki, Koen, Wandile, F., & Tsabedze. (2022). Attachment style, love style, and attachment behaviour in university students' intimate relationships, South Africa – A brief study. *The Open Psychology Journal*, 15(1), 1-10. doi: 10.2174/18743501-v15-e2208190
- Walliman, N., & Appleton, J. V. (2009). What types of dissertations are there. *Your Undergraduate Dissertation in Health and Social Care: The Essential Guide for Success*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Wray, W. (2015). Parenting in poverty: Inequity through the lens of attachment and resilience. *American International Journal of Social Science*, 4(2), 223-232.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). sage.
- Zaidman-Mograbi, R., le Roux, L. M., & Hall, H. (2020). The influence of culture on maternal attachment behaviours: a South African case study. *Children Australia*, 45(1), 30-39.

