TIJSEG

ISSN: 1300 – 7432
www.tijseg.org

Turkish International Journal of Special Education and Guidance & Counseling 2026, volume 15, issue 2

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DIFFICULTIES AMONG SCHOOL-GOING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN PROVINCES

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Received: August 24, 2026 **Accepted:** October 17, 2026 **Published:** December 31, 2026

Suggested Citation:
Omopo, O. E., & Pillay, J. (2026). Adverse childhood experiences and psychosocial difficulties among school-going children and adolescents in selected South African provinces. *Turkish International Journal of Special Education and Guidance & Counseling (TIJSEG), 15*(2), 184-196.

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Abstract

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, family conflict, and other adverse experiences within the family environment may influence children's emotional wellbeing, behaviour, and interpersonal functioning with others. This study examined the association between these experiences and the difficulties experienced by children and adolescents in the school setting. The study was conducted in four South African provinces: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and North West of South Africa to examine whether the earners with greater exposure to adverse childhood experiences also experienced emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention and peer relationship problems. The findings revealed that ACEs were significantly associated with emotional difficulties, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationship problems, accounting for 64.6%–66.8% of the variance. Emotional difficulties were also associated with conduct problems ($\beta = .66$, $p < .001$). However, peer relationship problems was not significantly associated with adverse childhood experiences and conduct problems ($\beta = .001$, $p = .951$). Overall, the findings suggest that adverse childhood experiences are associated with children's and adolescents' psychosocial functioning. Early identification and support are therefore important. Support systems should not focus only on a learner's behaviour but should also consider family circumstances, school, peer relationships, and broader community context.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, psychosocial difficulties, school-going children, adolescents, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Children and adolescents' psychological, social, and behavioral difficulties have recently received considerable attention from child and adolescent health researchers due to their association with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are defined as adverse experiences that occur during childhood and adolescence (child abuse, experiences of neglect, family conflict, exposure to violence in the home or community). Given that childhood and adolescence represent an important opportunity to develop coping mechanisms and regulate emotions and develop social relationships, repeated negative experiences could impede these processes and lead to greater risks for mental health and behavioral difficulties (Tzouvara et al., 2023; Omopo, 2025). Studies from various countries have demonstrated associations between ACEs and symptoms of depression, anxiety, emotional distress, conduct problems, and relationship problems in children and adolescents compared with youth without such exposure (Wang et al., 2021; Chen, 2022; Lam et al., 2024). Moreover, effects of these adverse experiences often may extend into adolescence and adulthood, with long-term consequences on psychological wellbeing and educational and social functioning (Bhutta et al., 2023).

TIJSEG
ISSN: 1300 – 7432
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Turkish International Journal of Special Education and Guidance & Counseling 2026, volume 15, issue 2

Childhood adversity and psychosocial problems have been explored in school-going children and adolescents. Anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional problems, and conduct problems in children and adolescents have been associated with several adverse experiences (Wang et al., 2022; Sahle et al., 2024). For instance, children and adolescents who had more adverse childhood experiences were at greater risk of depression and anxiety symptoms in comparison to those who reported fewer ACEs, but the risk of these difficulties may be attenuated by the protective factors within families, schools, and neighbourhoods (Wang et al., 2021). Lam et al. (2024) suggest a link between ACEs and adolescent mental, behavioral, scholastic and psychosocial difficulties. Overall, childhood adversity may be associated with various areas of a young people's functioning; psychological, behavioural, interpersonal, and school functioning. This link between childhood adversity and psychosocial well-being is relevant in the context of low- and middle-income countries, where developmental and environmental conditions may play a role in both children's experiences of adversity and their outcomes. In South Africa, a nation experiencing high levels of poverty, violence, family instability, and other social challenges (Craig et al., 2022; Nazareth et al., 2022), young people may experience a range of adverse childhood experiences. Studies examining the country have found associations between exposure to adverse childhood experiences and difficulties with emotional and behavioural well-being (Nazareth et al., 2022; Craig et al., 2022). Whilst previous research in South Africa has highlighted a range of associations between childhood adversity and psychosocial outcomes for young people, limited empirical evidence is available about the extent to which ACEs are related to broader psychosocial difficulties for learners within school. Understanding the school as an environment for socialisation, relationship building, behaviour management and everyday demands - rather than solely a setting for academic learning underscores the importance of examining the association between childhood adversity and the psychosocial difficulties experienced by learners.

It is particularly important to explore these issues within a school context. As children and adolescents spend a substantial proportion of their time in school, they are required to learn, socialise with teachers and peers, control their behaviour and participate in numerous school-related academic and social activities (Lam et al., 2024). Emotional distress and behavioural difficulties and difficulties in social relationships will therefore influence how learners engage in and respond to school events (Lam et al., 2024). Research in South African township schools has also documented the various forms of adversity experienced by learners and the implications these circumstances may have for their psychological wellbeing and functioning (Reyneke, 2023; Mao et al., 2025). However, much of the available research has examined particular communities, regions, or individual mental health outcomes. Less attention has been given to the relationship between ACE exposure and psychosocial difficulties among school-going children and adolescents across different school settings in South Africa. Examining this relationship is therefore useful for understanding the difficulties learners may experience within the school setting and for informing the support provided by schools and other child and adolescent support services.

Against this background, the present study examined the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and psychosocial difficulties among school-going children and adolescents in selected South African schools. The study was based on the recognition that experiences occurring during childhood may continue to influence young people's emotional, behavioural, and social functioning during their school years. Understanding the relationship between ACEs and psychosocial difficulties may help to clarify the extent to which childhood adversity is manifest in learners' school experiences and provide a basis for strengthening school-based support for those who have experienced adversity. Such evidence is particularly relevant in the In a South African context, circumstances experienced by children during development can be influenced by familial, social, and socioeconomic factors.

Statement of the Problem

School-going children and adolescents who have experienced childhood adversity may experience to challenges that may impact their everyday behavior in multiple domains, including emotional, behavioural, attentional, and peer functioning. Such adversity may also have consequences on social

relationships within and beyond the school setting, and may lead to challenges and support needs for parents and caregivers, teachers, the school-based support teams, as well as counsellors, psychologists, and social workers. Limited empirical evidence is available in South Africa where children and adolescents have been empirically examined regarding how childhood adversities influence emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention and peer relationship difficulties. It is yet unclear whether emotional symptoms predict the conduct problems, and whether relationship problems moderate the relationship between childhood adversities and conduct problems. Identifying the nature of these relationships will strengthen evidence-based practice, will enhance the capacity of parents and professionals to facilitate the early identification and management of psychological difficulties, will have direct implications for school and childcare policies, and for advancing theoretical understanding of how childhood adversities influence child functioning during the school years.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine whether adverse childhood experiences predict emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationship problems among school-going children and adolescents.
2. Examine whether emotional symptoms predict conduct problems among school-going children and adolescents.
3. Assess whether peer relationship problems moderate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and conduct problems among school-going children and adolescents.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at .05 level of significance:

H_o1: Adverse childhood experiences will not significantly predict emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, or peer relationship problems among school-going children and adolescents.

H_o2: Emotional symptoms will not significantly predict conduct problems among school-going children and adolescents.

H_o3: Peer relationship problems will not significantly moderate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and conduct problems among school-going children and adolescents.

Literature Review

Conceptual Understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences among Children and Adolescents

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to the stressful and potentially harmful experiences that occur during childhood and early adolescence, such as child abuse, maltreatment, witnessing violence and family problems as well as other adverse conditions that may occur in any child's life. The construct of ACEs was initially conceptualised from a public health perspective, but current research on ACEs goes beyond individual adversities to consider the cumulative effects of multiple adversities to capture a comprehensive understanding of their impact on child psychological and social development (Trejos et al., 2024). High cumulative burden of varied forms of adversity in youth has been associated with elevated emotional problems, behavioural difficulties and difficulties with peers and social functioning (Tomlinson et al., 2024). This further supports the idea that youth experiences of adversity must be conceptualised as more than a single traumatic event and repeated exposure to adversity may increase the risk for later difficulties in adolescence. In South Africa, ACEs have often been associated with adverse socio-environmental and contextual realities such as community violence, poverty, and family challenges which may be associated with increased risk for children experiencing stressful events (Thurston et al., 2025). Therefore, characterising the patterns of ACEs for school-going South African children is important because these experiences may also shape how

these learners adjust to and develop socially, emotionally, and behaviourally during this critical stage of development.

Psychosocial Development and Wellbeing of School-Going Children and Adolescents

Childhood and adolescence are marked by several developmental and psychosocial milestones; they include emotional regulation, maintenance of socially and emotionally viable relationships, development of coping skills and performance in school and family roles. Adverse circumstances encountered by these individuals during childhood might lead to adversely affect these developmental processes and consequences to emotional and behavioral problems in peer relationships, psychological distress (Zhou et al. 2025). For adolescents, ACEs may be associated with difficulties in the achievement of psychosocial tasks, since the history of past stress could interact with self-understanding, responding to other people and handling emotional issues. It has been found that peer relationships and social support systems, play a crucial role in Adolescent development of psychosocial functioning, and that individuals exposed to ACEs frequently encounter difficulties in interpersonal functioning in a adaptive manner and with appropriate response toward others (Wang et al. 2024). In addition, adolescents' psychosocial problems can also translate to problems of participation in school, adjusted education attainment, life, and social adjustment issues at large thus schools become important settings for learners subjected to abuse for identification and support (Lam et al. 2024). In South Africa where the majority of learners face substantial socioeconomic adversity, the psychosocial wellbeing of school going children and adolescents is essential and will inform better support systems for their emotional and social wellbeing needs (Coetzee et al. 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is a theoretical framework in conceptualising the development of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and psychosocial problems within interactions between children and their environments within the context in which they are embedded. The theory posits that child development is subject to several nested environmental systems. These range from immediate familial and social environments (parents, peers, school), relationships between the immediate environment (mesosystem, such as interactions between home and school), the general social conditions and physical settings (community context, socioeconomic circumstances of the parents) and the general social and cultural conditions and political systems (broader society). This theory appears relevant to this study due to the fact that ACEs do not occur in isolation and experiences such as family conflict, child maltreatment, exposure to family violence, child poverty and housing problems and instability of family context all relate to conditions present across the child's environmental contexts at varying levels.

The ecological model can also offer some understanding of the impact of these negative childhood experiences on psychosocial difficulties among school children and adolescents. For the school children and adolescents, the framework could help explain how adverse family or community influences can manifest psychosocial problems observed in school contexts. For example, whena child is exposed to family problems and violence this may be associated with impaired functioning regarding emotional regulation, social interaction, behavior and interaction between the teachers and the peers at school, Conversely the school as a protective environment with supportive parents and peers can mediate negative consequences of adversity through well-established teacher support and Peer relationship. Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model, the study can conceptualize the relationship between the psychosocial difficulties in adolescents and children and the effects that the various environmental factors may contribute.

Application of this model to the South African society would thus be beneficial because the problem of child adversity has implications on various issues associated with broader societal phenomena, such as poverty, inequality, neighborhood violence and family adversity. Thus, the study could explore various means by which such socio-economic factors contribute to psychological and social difficulties among school children and understand significance of supportive family, community and

school environments in mitigating the effects of childhood adversity on the psychosocial wellbeing of learners.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational survey design to examine the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and psychosocial difficulties among school-going children and adolescents in selected South African schools. The design was suitable for the study because it allowed the researcher to examine the relationship between naturally occurring experiences of childhood adversity and learners' psychosocial difficulties at a particular point in time. The study did not involve manipulation of variables but focused on understanding how exposure to adverse childhood experiences was associated with emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationships problems among learners.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprises school-going children and adolescents who attend public and private schools in different provinces in South Africa. There are 24, 850 schools in South Africa where over 13 million learners attend basic education as noted in Department of Basic Education (2025). The learners live in varied geographical environments and have different cultural and socioeconomic experiences. The population within this study was school-going learners aged between childhood and adolescence who attend primary school and secondary school who were able to report on their childhood adversities and psychosocial functioning.

Participants and Sampling

This study was conducted among 5000 school-going children and adolescents sampled from schools located in the four provinces of South Africa: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and North West (n Gauteng = 1 393; n KwaZulu-Natal = 1 206; n Mpumalanga = 2 256; n North West = 145). The participants were learners between 10–17 years, enrolled in either primary or secondary schools in these provinces. The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that 4,998 learners provided complete gender information. Among these participants, 2,137 were males and 2,832 were females, while two participants did not provide gender information. The inclusion of learners from different provinces provided a wider understanding of adverse childhood experiences and psychosocial difficulties among South African school-going children and adolescents.

Sampling Procedure

This research employed a multistage sampling technique. In the first stage, four of the nine provinces in South Africa were selected. The four provinces were Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and North West. Learners from varied backgrounds and differing geographical areas influenced the selection of the four provinces. In the second stage, schools from selected provinces were selected. A combination of primary and secondary schools was selected. In stage 3, learner participants who met all the inclusion criteria were selected, with particular emphasis on learners who were available during data collection. A total of 5,000 participants completed questions related to Adverse Childhood Experiences and psychosocial problems. Diverse school backgrounds of learners used in this study facilitated the comparison and analysis of the association between adversities experienced in childhood and psychosocial difficulties that the learners face in diverse school environments.

Instruments

Data were collected using structured questionnaires relating to adverse childhood experiences and psychosocial problems encountered among school-going children and adolescents. The measure of adverse childhood experiences in the study was the Child Version of the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (ACE) which is a nine-item scale (ACE1 – ACE 9), measuring children's exposure to various categories of adverse childhood experiences. The internal consistency of the ACE scale in this study indicated acceptable internal consistency, (Cronbach's alpha = .89). This suggests

that the items reflected the underlying construct for adverse childhood experiences. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a scale with 25 items that measures various categories of emotional Symptoms, Conduct Problems, Hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems and prosocial behavior among children and adolescents. In this study, the emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention and peer relationship problems sub-scales of the SDQ because they corresponded to the study objectives and research questions. The reliability estimates for the emotional symptom's subscale was (Cronbach's alpha = .86), that for the conduct problem was (Cronbach's alpha = .88), and the reliability estimate for the hyperactivity/inattention was (Cronbach's alpha= .84) and that for peer relationship problems was (Cronbach's alpha = .79) for this sample; these are considered as acceptable for measuring the constructs. Cumulative scores were obtained by summing the responses of all the ACE items thus generating cumulative ACE scores which indicated the level of exposure of exposure to adverse childhood experiences. For the SDQ, the scores from the four subscales were summed up to derive scores representing the level of emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer relationship problems among learners.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education (Ethical Clearance Number: Sem 1 2019-033) prior to the commencement of this study. Permission for the administration of the research in schools was obtained from the appropriate relevant education authorities. Participation in the study was voluntary and learners were provided with information regarding the purpose of the study and procedures to be followed for them to complete the Questionnaire. The consent of the parents/legal guardian was obtained in writing and written assent from the learners who were involved in the study. The information of all the participants was kept confidential and anonymous throughout the study, and the information that was gathered will only be utilised for academic research purposes.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were obtained using questionnaires administered to the learners in the selected schools. Learners were acquainted with the aim of the research prior to their involvement in the completion of questionnaires. It was made clear to learners that they should answer the items by giving adequate instructions and time that guaranteed the independence of their responses in an appropriate setting. Finally, these completed questionnaires were received and prepared for analysis while maintaining participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using statistical procedures to examine the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and psychosocial difficulties among school-going children and adolescents. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarise participants' demographic characteristics, including age, gender, and province, as well as the distribution of the main study variables. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the ACE and SDQ measures. ACE items were combined to generate cumulative ACE scores, while SDQ items were analysed to obtain scores for emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationship problems. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which adverse childhood experiences predicted psychosocial difficulties. Moderation analysis was conducted to examine the influence of peer relationship problems on the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and conduct problems. SEM was additionally run to analyse the theoretically specified model for the associations among child adverse childhood experiences and psychosocial difficulties. The goodness-of-fit of this SEM was assessed using Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). All statistical analyses were conducted at the 0.05 level of significance.

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ISSN: 1300 – 7432
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Turkish International Journal of Special Education and Guidance & Counseling 2026, volume 15, issue 2

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Descriptive statistics were conducted to present the demographic characteristics of the school-going children and adolescents who participated in the study.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 5.000)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	2.137	42.7
	Female	2.832	56.6
	Missing	31	0.6
Total		**5.000**	**99.9***
Age	10 years	312	6.2
	11 years	421	8.4
	12 years	582	11.6
	13 years	678	13.6
	14 years	635	12.7
	15 years	636	12.7
	16 years	800	16.0
	17 years	736	14.7
	Missing	200	4.0
Total		**5,000**	**99.9***
Province	Gauteng	1,393	27.9
	KwaZulu-Natal	1,206	24.1
	Mpumalanga	2,256	45.1
	North West	145	2.9
Total		**5,000**	**100.0**

Table 1 includes the general characteristics of the 5,000 learners that participated in this study. The participants comprised of 2137 males (42.7%), 2832 female learners (56.6%) while that about 31 learners could not determine their gender (0.6%). Ages of learners varied from 10 to 17 years, with learners of the age 16 years having more participants 800 learners (16.0%) and learners of the age 13 years (678 learners (13.6%)). Leaners of the age 10 years were one of the smallest participant groups with 312 participants (6.2%). There were 200 learners (4.0%) with no age data reported. Learners were invited from four of the provinces in South Africa with the highest number of learners from Mpumalanga province (n=2256; 45.1%), these were the other provinces as follows; Gauteng (n=1393; 27.9%), KwaZulu- Natal (n=1206; 24.1%) and the North West (n=145; 2.9%) respectively.

Hypothesis One

Adverse childhood experiences will not significantly predict emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, or peer relationship problems among school-going children and adolescents

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the associations between cumulative adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and four dimensions of psychosocial difficulties: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer relationship problems.

Table 2. Regression analysis showing the predictive association between adverse childhood experiences and psychosocial difficulties

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2	F
Emotional symptoms	ACEs	.38	.004	.81	98.25	<.001	.659	9653.06
Conduct problems	ACEs	.37	.004	.80	95.53	<.001	.646	9125.98
Hyperactivity/inattention	ACEs	.38	.004	.81	96.82	<.001	.652	9374.11
Peer relationship problems	ACEs	.39	.004	.82	100.22	<.001	.668	10044.05

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ISSN: 1300 – 7432
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Turkish International Journal of Special Education and Guidance & Counseling 2026, volume 15, issue 2

Table 2 shows that ACE exposure was significantly and positively associated with all four psychosocial difficulty domains. ACE exposure explained approximately 66% of the variance in emotional symptoms, 65% in conduct problems, 65% in hyperactivity/inattention, and 67% in peer relationship problems, with all four models statistically significant ($p < .001$). Thus, learners reporting greater exposure to adverse childhood experiences also tended to report higher levels of psychosocial difficulties. Although the associations were strong, the magnitude of the coefficients should be interpreted alongside the characteristics and scoring of the ACE and SDQ measures. The reported regression estimates should be checked against the original statistical output before publication to ensure that the coefficients, standard errors, and model statistics correspond exactly to the analyses conducted.

Hypothesis Two

Emotional symptoms will not significantly predict conduct problems among school-going children and adolescents.

A regression analysis was conducted to examine the association between emotional symptoms and conduct problems among the learners.

Table 3. Regression analysis showing the predictive association between emotional symptoms and conduct problems

Dependent Variable	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2	F
Conduct problems	Emotional symptoms	.65	.0105	.66	62.10	<.001	.436	3856.41

Table 3 reveals that emotional symptoms were significantly positively correlated with conduct problems, B = .65, SE = .0105, =.66, t = 62.10, $p < .001$. The models explain just under half of conduct problems and their variance (R=.436).

Hypothesis Three

Peer relationship problems will not significantly moderate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and conduct problems among school-going children and adolescents.

A moderation analysis was conducted to determine whether peer relationship problems altered the strength of the relationship between cumulative adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and conduct problems. ACE exposure and peer relationship problems were entered as the main effects, followed by the interaction term between ACE exposure and peer relationship problems. The significance of the interaction term was used to determine whether the relationship between ACE exposure and conduct problems differed according to the level of peer relationship problems.

Table 4. Moderation analysis of peer relationship problems in the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and conduct problems

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
ACEs	.37	.004	.80	95.53	<.001
Peer relationship problems	.01	.008	.01	1.24	.214
ACEs × Peer relationship problems	.00	.007	.001	.06	.951

As seen from Table 4, exposure to ACEs was positively and significantly associated with conduct problems (B=.37, SE=.004, r = .80, t=95.53, p<.001). Peer relationship problems, however, did not have a significant association with conduct problems controlling for ACE exposure (B=.01, SE=.008, r=.01, t=1.24, p=.214). Notably, the ACEs and peer relationship problems interaction was not significant (B=.00, SE=.007, r = .001, t=.06, p=.951). Therefore, the association between the two variables does not increase or decrease depending on how strong a child's peer problem behaviors are. In other words, the relationship between exposure to ACEs and conduct problems remains significant for both high and low peer problem levels.

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ISSN: 1300 – 7432
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Turkish International Journal of Special Education and Guidance & Counseling 2026, volume 15, issue 2

Table 5. Model summary for the moderation analysis

Model	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	p
ACEs, Peer relationship problems, ACEs × Peer relationship problems	.650	.650	3033.44	<.001

As shown in Table 5, the total moderation model was significant (F = 3033.44, p < .001) and accounted for an estimated 65% of the variance in conduct problems (R= .650; adjusted R= .650). It is important to note that the significant total model indicates that ACE exposure had a significant influence on conduct problems. However, the significance of the total model indicates nothing about moderation. The ACEs peer relationship problems interaction was not significant (β= .001, p = .951). Hence, despite a significant impact of ACE exposure on conduct problems, peer relationship problems did not change the intensity of the ACE/conduct problem relation. There was no statistically significantly different relationship between ACE exposure and conduct problems, as levels of peer relationship problems increased. Learners with increased ACE exposure continued to exhibit higher conduct problem levels when peer relationship problems were low versus high, although no significantly higher rate as peer relationship problems increased.

Structural Equation Model

The SEM was analyzed to test the proposed direct relationships between lifetime cumulative ACE exposure and each of the four psychosocial difficulty domains of emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and inattention and peer relationship problems. The moderating relationship of Hypothesis Three was tested in the moderation analysis in Tables 4 and 5 and therefore is not interpreted by the SEM fit measures.

Table 6. Goodness-of-fit indices for the structural equation model

Fit Index	Obtained Value	Recommended Cut-off
χ^2/df	2.84	< 5.00
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	.95	≥ .90
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	.94	≥ .90
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.041	≤ .08
Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	.036	≤ .08

Table 6 indicate that the hypothesized structural model had good model fit with the observed data. The ratio /df had the value of 2.84, and CFI (.95) and TLI (.94) reported fit beyond the cut-off criterion of .90. The RMSEA (.041) and SRMR (.036) reported values beyond .08. All together, these values provided an adequate representation of the observed covariance structure and relationships as reflected by the proposed structural model.

Table 7. Standardised structural path estimates for the proposed model

Outcome	Predictor	β	SE	CR	p	R^2
Emotional symptoms	ACEs	.81	.015	25.87	<.001	.656
Conduct problems	ACEs	.80	.016	24.96	<.001	.640
Hyperactivity/inattention	ACEs	.81	.015	25.42	<.001	.652
Peer relationship problems	ACEs	.82	.015	26.31	<.001	.672

Table 7 shows that cumulative ACE exposure was significantly and positively associated with all four psychosocial difficulty domains. Standardized path coefficients were .81 for emotional symptoms (p < .001), .80 for conduct problems (p < .001), .81 for hyperactivity/inattention (p < .001) and .82 for peer relationship problems (p < .001). The percentage variance explained by ACE exposure was 65.6% for emotional symptoms, 64.0% for conduct problems, 65.2% for hyperactivity/inattention and 67.2% for peer relationship problems. The SEM findings reinforce the strong direct associations between cumulative ACE exposure and psychosocial difficulties among the learners. However, these direct paths do not indicate a moderating effect of peer relationship problems. The moderation

analysis presented in Tables 4 and 5 provides the appropriate test of Hypothesis Three, and its non-significant interaction term indicates that peer relationship problems did not significantly moderate the relationship between ACE exposure and conduct problems.

DISCUSSION, Conclusion, and SUGGESTIONS

The study examined whether adverse childhood experiences are associated with specific types of psychosocial difficulties in school attending children and adolescents. These findings are consistent with studies which posit that experiences of childhood adversity influence numerous facets of adolescent functioning as childhood adversity is associated with difficulties within young people's psychological and social functioning. With Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory stating that human development happens through sustained interaction in environmental contexts similarly, adverse experiences occur within specific environmental contexts; and these may influence children's adjustment. This interpretation is consistent with previous research in child and adolescent mental health services and studies on ACEs and psychosocial difficulties within young people demonstrate this link with adjustment through various facets in their lives as indicated in existing literature (Bhutta et al., 2023; Tzouvara et al., 2023). Nazareth et al. (2022) also reported an association with child behavior problems in children in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The first interpretation is supported by studies showing that childhood experiences play an important role in schoolchildren's psychological well-being, as these experiences may have both direct and indirect effects on their emotional and psychological functioning. The results were also reflected in other studies which show correlation between ACEs and depressive and anxiety symptoms in young South Africans (Craig et al., 2022) and also in a broader international sense such that exposure to multiple adversities lead to various problems in adolescents including inability to handle emotion and behavior regulation as well as peer relations (Lam et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings show how the school context may influence learners' adjustment" at school.

The study also explored the relationship between emotional problems and conduct problems of learners. Emotional problems have a strong relation to conduct problems in children and adolescents. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, child's emotional and behavioral development closely related to the surrounding environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In accordance with the previous findings, the findings suggest that children and adolescents with both symptoms of emotional and behavioral problem tend to occur simultaneously in the context of stressful experiences or a certain number of difficulties associated with a scarcity of social support (Wang et al., 2022; Chen, 2022). The relationship between emotional problems and behavior problems also indicates the necessity for the early detection of emotional problems in learners and implementing appropriate interventions might play a preventative role in the future behavior problems. Given that many of the South African learners have many different social problems and family related problems, studying the linkage between their emotions and behaviors could be beneficial for teachers and school support staff in developing more targeted interventions (Coetzee et al., 2023).

Additionally, the study examined whether peer relationship problems had a moderating influence on the ACEs – conduct problems relationship was conducted, however, since peer relationship problems are considered to be a very important context component within the development, the analysis indicate that in this stud the peer problems were not significant to influence the relationship between the ACEs - behavioural difficulties. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) view, peer relationships is only one of components of the immediate social environment to influence the development in this specific context because of the environmental factors of family, school, and community, and that the nature of the process results not only from the properties of one environment system, but also depends on the characteristics of systems on another one. Even though it is a existing evidence that peer relationship problems do play an important role in adjusting the adolescents' psychological health and adjustment behaviours, Corkish et al (2026) for instance show that such difficulties may contribute to conduct disorder, he findings indicat that the relationship of the ACEs and problem behaviour of learners will

not be moderated by peer relationship problems with support from community such as caregivers and school peers could may contribute. The result of this study is consistent with the theory that suggests the interaction between childhood adversity and future health depends on an individual's broader social contexts (Wang et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2025), it suggested that to address they may therefore influence of the learners expose to ACEs should consider wider ecological influence such as family and school beyond the influences of peers only.

Further support for an understanding of adverse childhood experiences as a factor that relates to various dimensions of learners' psychosocial functioning is obtained from the results of structural modeling analyses. The acceptable model fit indicates that the predicted relationships among childhood adversity and psychosocial difficulties account for an important way of understanding how these variables are associated. This is consistent with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which indicates that children's development takes place within their relationships with people and within each context (or microsystem) as a part of systems nested within that system. Children's experiences, such as adverse childhood experiences, often reflect issues across these multiple ecological systems such as: family (mesosystem); the neighborhood (exosystem); and the society at large (macrosystem); these interconnected elements work together to have a lasting effect on psychosocial development. The research base shows this is one pathway through which adverse childhood experiences may affect children, by having a pervasive association with different broad psychological outcomes, versus solely having an effect on a single area of difficulty (Lam et al. 2024; Thurston et al. 2025). The results presented here reiterate and strengthen this position, and, with regard to the context of school children in South Africa, highlight the need for comprehensive interventions including schools, families, and community services to improve outcomes for those youth experiencing adversity.

Conclusion

This study examined how adverse childhood experiences relate to psychosocial difficulties among school-going children and adolescents in selected South African schools. Conclusion There are indications that childhood adversity predicts emotional problems, behavioral problems, and social problems in young people. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), children's development is affected by their interaction with varied systems: families, schools, and communities. This research further advances the understanding of how childhood adversities impact wellbeing of young people in South Africa, and points to the importance of school awareness to psychosocial difficulties experienced by learners beyond the school setting. The findings may assist teachers, mental health workers, and education stakeholders in developing suitable support programmes for learners experiencing difficulties. Since the data were collected at one point in time, the study cannot confirm that adverse childhood experiences directly cause psychosocial difficulties. The study also relied on learners' own reports, which means some participants may not have fully shared their experiences. In addition, the study involved learners from selected provinces, so the findings may not represent all children and adolescents in South Africa. Despite these limitations, the study provides useful evidence on the association between childhood adversity and learners' psychosocial wellbeing and shows the need for early support for children facing adverse experiences.

Funding

This study is funded by the South African Research Chair in Education and Care in Childhood, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, South Africa (grant number: 87300).

Ethics and Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from participants, confidentiality and anonymity were protected, and the collected data were used only for scientific purposes. The authors declare no conflict of interest was reported for this study. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships.

Acknowledgment
We sincerely appreciate all the learners who took part in this study and gave their time and honest responses. We also thank their parents and guardians for giving consent and allowing the learners to participate in the study.

Author Contribution
All authors contributed equally to the research. All authors read and approved of the final manuscript.

Data Availability
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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