

Loneliness and Psychosocial Outcomes among Left-Behind Learners in Child-Only Households in South Africa

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Abstract: Parental labour migration in South Africa has led to an increasing number of left-behind learners residing in child-only households. This separation disrupts familial structures and adversely affects children's psychosocial well-being and academic performance. This study aims to investigate how loneliness manifests among left-behind secondary school learners and influences their emotional, behavioural, and educational outcomes within both school and community contexts. A qualitative case study design was employed at one secondary school in South Africa. Fourteen left-behind learners and twelve community and educational informants were purposively selected to participate in focus group discussions and follow-up interviews. Data were analysed thematically. Findings indicate that loneliness has significant emotional repercussions, including heightened sadness, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Behaviourally, learners exhibit withdrawal, aggression, and risk-taking due to limited or absent parental supervision. Academic performance is negatively impacted by diminished motivation, concentration difficulties, and absenteeism. Furthermore, negative stereotypes within the community and school exacerbate learners' isolation and restrict access to supportive networks.

In conclusion, loneliness emerges as a critical psychosocial risk factor that undermines the holistic well-being and educational experiences of left-behind learners. The study recommends the implementation of school and community-based support initiatives to enhance emotional care, social inclusion, and academic participation.

Keywords: Parental migration, loneliness, left-behind learner, well-being, child-headed household.

1. Introduction

The separation of parents and their children through parental labour migration not only results in social distance but is also perceived to contribute to feelings of loneliness among left-behind learners (LBL). Loneliness is an outcome of a process in which an individual weighs existing personal relationships against desired relationships. If these relationships are inadequate in terms of quality or quantity, the person is regarded as lonely (Lasgaard et al., 2025; Peplau & Caldwell, 1978; van Tilburg, 2020). For LBL in child-only households, parental migration is perceived to result in deficiencies in both the quantity and quality of desired social relationships, as the parents who constitute the 'desired' social relationship would have migrated in pursuit of opportunities in urban localities.

This study seeks to build on the body of literature that has explored the effects of parental labour migration (Groarke et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2012; Muzingili, 2025; Pakdaman et al., 2016) by shifting focus to loneliness as a concept. There is a scarcity of studies that explore loneliness in the context of parental labour migration in Africa. The African context is of interest given the significance of family, interdependence, and interconnectedness built on Ubuntu philosophy and values (Jaure, Makura, & Tandi, 2025; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Steyn & Msweli, 2025). In Africa, children are socialised to value family over the individual; however, due to parental migration, LBL are forced to cope without significant members of their family.

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This study explores the effects of loneliness among left-behind learners at a South African secondary school based on the theoretical framework of social relationships and provisions theory (Weiss, 1975). This aims to provide insights for teachers, education and community stakeholders to better understand loneliness as a social construct and its impact on the psychosocial functioning and learning outcomes of left-behind learners. Such understanding is useful in offering relevant psychosocial support for improved educational outcomes and well-being. According to Drageset (2021), social support is a vital resource for mental health.

1.2 Problem statement

Increased parental labour migration in South Africa has resulted in a growing number of children living in child-only households. Prolonged separation from one or both parents leads to emotional and social disruptions that can engender profound feelings of loneliness. Despite the prevalence of this phenomenon, there is a limited in-depth understanding of how loneliness specifically impacts the educational engagement and overall well-being of these left-behind learners. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of left-behind learners in a South African secondary school context to elucidate the implications of loneliness. Specifically, this study seeks to investigate the implications of loneliness on left-behind learners in child-only households in terms of social well-being, emotional well-being, and educational outcomes. Ultimately, the study aims to determine the behavioural characteristics of left-behind learners affected by loneliness. The exploration is conducted from the perspective of the left-behind learners and those who interact with them. Based on this, the study answered the following questions:

- What are the perceived effects of loneliness on left-behind learners in child-only households at secondary schools in South Africa?
- What behavioural characteristics are exhibited by left-behind learners in relation to their experiences of loneliness?
- How do interactions with peers and teachers in the educational environment influence the loneliness experienced by left-behind learners?

1.3 Contextual background

South Africa has witnessed a phenomenal rise in unaccompanied parental labour migration, resulting in parent-child separations (Bambeni, 2025; Bennet et al., 2015; Posel, 2010). The legacy of apartheid appears to persist, with some parents temporarily migrating to towns and leaving their children behind (Jaure & Makura, 2021a). This has given rise to the phenomenon of LBL, which is common in low and medium-economy countries (Antia et al., 2020). The emergence of this new household structure is attributed to the feminisation of migration and the breakdown of extended family networks, resulting in children who are considered old enough being left behind, sometimes in child-only households (Jaure & Makura, 2021b). LBL children are likely to be in child-only households due to high rates of non-marital childbearing in South Africa (Marteletto et al., 2016). Consequently, labour migration constitutes a significant proportion of the total number of children in child-only households in South Africa (Jaure & Makura, 2021a). This, in part, explains why South Africa ranks among the bottom ten countries with low rates of parental co-residence (Mugwendere, 2024; Marteletto et al., 2016). Among LBL children, loneliness is perceived as a common psychological and behavioural problem.

LBL refers to children raised in their habitual homes who have been left behind by the adults responsible for them as those adults pursue labour opportunities (UNICEF, 2020). Parental migration follows a circular pattern, with parents migrating, leaving their children behind, and periodically returning home after lengthy absences (Seepamore, 2015). In this context, parenting lacks the desired quality and becomes 'monetised' (Seepamore, 2015). Thus, while parental migration helps improve the family's material conditions through remittances, prolonged separation from parents deprives LBL children of parental love, care, and guidance (Jaure & Makura, 2021a). Young people of

secondary school age thrive in social and trusting peer relationships (Omodan, Makhasane & Tsotetsi, 2025) but are selective regarding their desired relationships, making them prone to loneliness in the absence of those connections (Lasgaard et al., 2025; Lasgaard et al., 2016). In this case, loneliness is not a product of social isolation but rather a deficiency in desired social relations.

Reference is made to 'distance parenting', 'cross-border parenting', and 'parenting from afar', all of which denote the parent-child separations that arise from parental migration (Holt-Lunstad, 2024; Jaure & Makura, 2021b; Seepamore, 2015). This separation from parents due to migration has implications for loneliness among LBL children and, by extension, affects their psychosocial functioning and educational well-being. Society has not helped matters, as the African practice of Ubuntu (Jaure & Makura, 2021b; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019) has gradually weakened under the pressures of modernisation and individualism.

1.4 Theoretical and contextual foundations of loneliness

Our understanding of loneliness owes much to Weiss's (1975) theory, which defines loneliness as a natural response to certain situations. It occurs "when a person's social relations are less numerous and less satisfying than the person's desires" (Peplau & Cladwell, 1978). This implies that a lonely person's network of social relations is deficient either qualitatively, quantitatively, or both (Mund & Neyer, 2019; van Tilburg, 2020). Social relationships entail companionship, connectedness, and intimacy (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). When parents migrate and separate themselves from their children over prolonged periods, the children, referred to as LBL, become vulnerable to loneliness (Chai et al., 2019). A quantitative study in the UK reveals that loneliness is more prevalent among young people separated from their parents (Groarke et al., 2020). In this regard, lonely individuals, or LBL, miss closeness and intimacy and may lack meaning in life, which increases their odds of feeling lonely (van Tilburg, 2020).

Feelings of loneliness are regarded as unpleasant and negative, characterised by "sadness, emptiness, or disappointment and regret" (Groarke et al., 2020; Pakdaman et al., 2016). Loneliness predicts negative emotions that disrupt behavioural and psychosocial functioning (Ren et al., 2017). Mund and Neyer (2019) further assert that lonely individuals are less likely to be selected as friends because they possess less social and emotional competence. Loneliness begets other negative and unrewarding outcomes that impact well-being. This, in part, justifies the need to determine the behavioural characteristics of lonely LBL so that relevant support can be provided.

The risk factors of loneliness are both individual and contextual (Chai et al., 2019). For individuals, risk factors include low self-esteem, low resilience, and low extroversion. Studies in China indicate that social anxiety is a key risk factor (Chai et al., 2019). Contextual factors include family functioning, the parent-child relationship, peer relationships, and social support (Chai et al., 2019). Two forms of loneliness associated with weak family connections are emotional and social loneliness (Weiss, 1975; Chai et al., 2019). Emotional and social loneliness arise when there is a "discrepancy between realised and desired interpersonal relationship[s]" (van Tilburg, 2020, p. 335). The desires of children regarding their psychosocial functioning may be at odds with what they actually experience. LBL are perceived to be deficient in terms of parental care, intimacy, and attachment, which exposes them to emotional and social loneliness (Jaure & Makura, 2021a; Marongwe & Mutesasira, 2024). Emotional loneliness begets social loneliness, resulting in suboptimal social relations.

1.5 Understanding the impact of loneliness: A contextual perspective

Studies to date reveal different outcomes associated with children who are lonely. Loneliness is depicted as a negative and unrewarding experience that has the potential to threaten life. On a continuum, left-behind learners (LBL) in schools negatively impacted by parental migration either 'act out' or become 'withdrawn', suggesting an association with poor physical and mental health (UNICEF, 2020). According to Holt-Lunstad (2024) and Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015), loneliness is linked

to premature mortality. This observation correlates with findings by Fellmeth et al. (2018) and Knipe et al. (2019), who associate left-behind children in China and Sri Lanka, respectively, with negative emotions leading to suicidal ideation. In this context, suicidal ideation is attributed to the sadness, emptiness, and longing that develops due to loneliness (van Tilburg, 2020).

Loneliness is identified as a predictor of internet addiction (Peltzer & Pengpid, 2017; Pontes, Griffiths & Patrão, 2014). This addiction develops as individuals affected by loneliness seek the company of the internet using devices such as phones. Anxiety and loneliness are recognised as the two main predictors of internet addiction (Ajayi, Ogunnami, & Uye, 2024). A chain reaction ensues in which parental migration triggers loneliness, subsequently leading to negative behaviours and emotions such as internet addiction. The desire to substitute for the intimate interactions lost due to migration elicits this addiction. However, while internet addiction may be a notable effect in developed countries (Ajayi et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2023), this may not apply to LBL in Africa and other parts of the developing world.

Due to loneliness, some LBL are said to 'act out' and are associated with psychological problems such as alcoholism, delinquency, and academic failure (Holt-Lunstad, 2024; Pakdaman et al., 2016). Several studies have linked such behaviours with LBL in different countries, suggesting that the effects of loneliness could be the eliciting factor for these negative and unrewarding outcomes (Jaure & Makura, 2021b; UNICEF, 2020). This outcome further exposes LBL to vulnerability, as they often withdraw and disengage from their social partners due to fear of further rejection (Mund & Neyer, 2019). Most LBL are driven to withdraw because of their self-perception. However, a study by Xerxa et al. (2022) found no significant association between loneliness and alcohol or substance abuse in adult life.

The negative internalising and externalising behaviours associated with loneliness also affect the educational proficiency of LBL. A study conducted among university students in Turkey (Bek, 2018) reveals that feelings of loneliness negatively impact academic participation. Lonely students are said not to thrive in academic environments. Similarly, a study in Cambodia reveals that children of migrant parents complete fewer years in school compared to children living with their parents (Marchetta & Sim, 2021). Left-behind learners often do not complete their education due to adverse childhood experiences. The current study seeks to make similar assessments among adolescent learners at the secondary school level in the Xhariep district of the Free State, South Africa.

1.6 Social relationships and social provisions theory

The study used Weiss's Social Relationships and Social Provisions Theory as a theoretical framework. Weiss's theory underscores the significance of interacting with others to obtain what he termed 'adequate support'. LBL (left-behind children) in child-only households may feel inadequate because they lack primary support from their migrating parents. LBLs are also forced to cope without the desired interacting partners who have migrated (Van Tilburg, 2020). Weiss's theory distinguishes between primary and secondary relationships (Weiss, 1975). Primary relationships are those that are desired, close, warm, and frequent, typically provided by primary caregivers (family) (Drageset, 2021; Van Tilburg, 2020; Weiss, 1975). This type of relationship is often lacking for LBL following parental labour migration, as it is usually family or close friends who provide primary relationships (Drageset, 2021; Omodan et al., 2025).

Weiss (1975) identifies six social relationships and provisions needed for a person to feel adequate. Adequacy, in this context, implies receiving adequate social support defined by a sense of belonging, being valued, and obtaining help, information, and guidance (Drageset, 2021). The absence of parents due to migration contributes to this inadequacy, which is characterised as loneliness. According to Weiss's theory, primary relationships provide six provisions: attachment, social integration,

opportunity for nurturance, reassurance of worth, guidance, and reliable alliance (Drageset, 2021). Access to this kind of social support is defined as adequate and is the opposite of loneliness.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative study followed the social constructivist paradigm, wherein participants were expected to share their lived experiences. The epistemology of social constructivism was employed to gather the meaning attached to the circumstances of LBL. The study adopted a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implications of loneliness among LBL at a selected secondary rural school in the Free State Province of South Africa. Informants in the study included 14 LBL, 7 school functionaries, and 5 community informants. Purposive sampling was employed to select the LBL, school, and community informants, enabling the capture of diverse yet in-depth perspectives on the manifestations of loneliness in the context of the selected school in the Xhariep district of the Free State. The school was chosen based on the significant proportion of learners living in child-only households due to parental labour migration to urban areas. The sample was deemed knowledgeable about matters pertaining to LBL, particularly regarding their lived experiences with loneliness. Education informants included three teachers, the school principal, a school governing board representative, and a social worker. Community informants included a police representative, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) representative, and a pastor from a local church.

Data were collected from focus group discussions (FGDs) involving the LBL, school functionaries, and community informants, along with follow-up personal interviews with some of the informants. The focus group discussions and follow-up interviews were conducted at the selected school, scheduled after school hours over a two-day period. Follow-up interviews targeted informants who provided data that required further clarification or elaboration, ensuring data saturation. These two methods (FGDs and interviews) were used for triangulation. Saturation in the study was reached when no new themes emerged from the data collection. The English language was predominantly used in the discussions; however, participants were permitted to code-switch between English and the local Sesotho language as they provided their responses. The main researcher was assisted by a colleague in translating the responses.

Direct questions influenced by the Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Assessment (CAPA) instrument (Angold & Costello, 2000) were adapted for this study. Examples of questions posed in this context included: Do you sometimes feel lonely? Do you think left-behind learners are lonely? Do you have people to share your challenges with? Does the community have a support system for left-behind learners? These direct questions were supported by follow-up questions that allowed respondents to explore the effects of loneliness associated with left-behind learners. Direct questions were preferred in this study because they are easier to administer and allowed respondents to describe their feelings in their own words. The variations and relative nature of loneliness were accommodated by such direct questions, bolstered by follow-up inquiries. However, the use of direct questions also presents challenges, such as differences in understanding the concept of loneliness. Moreover, questions on sensitive topics could make participants uncomfortable. The researcher also informally observed the left-behind learner environment during the focus group discussions and follow-up face-to-face interviews.

The focus group discussions and follow-up interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The data were transcribed verbatim by the researchers, who removed identifiers to maintain anonymity. Non-verbal cues observed during data collection were captured in brackets. Data analysis followed a thematic approach (Omodan et al., 2025). The researchers read through the transcribed data from the focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews to gain familiarity. Codes were assigned from the collected data, which were used to identify themes. The researchers then grouped and defined the identified themes from the data, allowing for the generation of common themes. The findings were presented thematically with excerpts from the verbatim data,

giving left-behind learners a voice to articulate the implications of loneliness associated with parental labour migration. By combining face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, the researchers mitigated the limitations associated with a single method, thereby facilitating triangulation of the data. Member checking was used to validate the collected data. The write-up was synthesised and discussed in relation to the literature on the effects of loneliness and the social relations and social provisions theory by Weiss (1975).

2.1 Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study was granted following ethical clearance from the Central University of Technology (FRIC 21/18/2). We complied with the university's policy on research ethics. Additionally, permission to collect data from the school was obtained from the Department of Education, Free State Province. Pseudonyms (codes) were allocated to participants to protect their identities (LR, TR, SW, and LBL). Informed consent and assent were sought in writing from the participants or their guardians. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study, considering that it is a sensitive topic that may cause participants' discomfort.

As researchers, we acknowledge and remain aware of our own perspectives and biases regarding the experiences of LBL, ensuring that they do not unduly influence the data collection process and findings.

3. Presentation of Results

The results below are presented chronologically in line with the three research questions outlined in Section 1.2 (focusing on: perceived effects of loneliness; behavioural characteristics of left-behind learners; and the interactive influence of peers and teachers). We began by exploring the effects of loneliness among the left-behind learners (LBL) through direct questions posed to the participants (LBL, education and community informants). This approach allowed participants to share their understanding of loneliness as a construct and their experiences of separation. Verbatim participant utterances were incorporated into the findings to enhance authenticity and trustworthiness.

3.1 Perceived effects of loneliness

Emotional outcomes appeared to dominate the narratives of the left-behind learners. Several learners revealed that loneliness has significant emotional consequences, as they indeed sometimes felt lonely. For example, participant LR3 remarked,

I definitely feel lonely and bored, especially at night when everyone else is in their homes. She went on to reveal that the home environment changes, as it is now characterised by loneliness:

It's not the same with parents away; the home becomes a lonely place (LR2 girl).

Loneliness was largely expressed by participants in terms of how they miss the company of their parents. Participant LR11, in response to the direct question, said,

I feel lonely a lot. I do miss and think of my parents a lot. [...] Yes, I talk with them on WhatsApp and on the phone, but it is not the same as having them here.

This suggests that virtual support using information and communication technology tools was found to be inadequate. Learners continued to feel lonely even if they maintained contact with the migrating parent(s). The Social Worker representative (SW) reiterated,

It is not easy to maintain a relationship with parents who are away. You will notice that over time the children and the parents end up having less and less to discuss, resulting in both parties being affected by loneliness.

The prolonged period of separation between children and their parents increases social distance between the two parties. Various emotional dispositions associated with LBL show the loneliness effect. Teacher participant TR4 remarked,

Some left-behind learners in my class tend to be moody and withdrawn.

Teacher participant TR1 also added sadness and being absent-minded as some of the character traits associated with LBL. Female learner participant LR6 (17 years) shared the following as a complaint:

It's really boring, and I always feel bored. No one can really take the place of my parents; I guess I will always feel lonely when they are not here.

Lack of confidence and lack of self-esteem are also some of the outcomes that teacher participants associated with LBL.

3.2 Behavioural characteristics of left-behind learners

Research question 2 sought to expatiate on the behavioural characteristics of LBL. Consequently, due to loneliness, LBL end up spending a considerable amount of time watching television or on the internet. In this regard, Participant SW remarked,

Loneliness make[s] some of the left-behind children watch television for too long; some become addicted to their phones (cell phones) playing games. They find company in such gadgets, which is not good.

Learner LR3 also affirmed this viewpoint and said,

The good thing is I have my phone and games for entertainment. Whenever I feel lonely, I play games or watch TikTok.

During the interviews, the researcher observed that several of the learners, without much effort, constantly checked their smartphones, showing an attachment to the device.

Even within groups, some of the LBL revealed that they sometimes feel lonely. The extra home responsibilities have the potential to disrupt their outgoing behaviours. Participant LR3, who is a girl living with two younger brothers, shared,

Sometimes my friends want us to hang out together, but I always have to be home for house chores and to prepare food for my younger siblings.

This suggests that even when some LBL would want to be part of a group, they have extra home responsibilities that force them to withdraw from their peers. It is such behaviour that makes them unlikely to be chosen as friends, leading to social loneliness. A similar view was shared by participant SH2, a female teacher,

It is true that sometimes LBL find it difficult to be part of a group, especially the girls. They have so many responsibilities at home, and so they often withdraw from social groups of friends.

A representative of a local NGO, SH4, also added,

You need to understand that they [girls] bear all the household responsibilities, especially when parents are away. This deprives them of playtime, resulting in them being withdrawn and not being chosen as friends.

3.3 The interaction influence of peers and teachers

Through their interactions with peers and teachers, Left Behind Learners were exposed to multiple forms of vulnerability. This development tended to impact negatively on their learning.

3.3.1 Negative outcomes

Loneliness in the context of the school was associated with several negative outcomes among the LBL. Participants revealed that when children are left alone and feel lonely over prolonged periods, they end up being vulnerable to various forms of abuse. TR2 (teacher) stated,

"Children who are withdrawn and lonely easily fall prey to abusers. Abusers take advantage of children who live without parents and are withdrawn."

Participant SH4 added,

"If you look closely at those learners who fell pregnant this year, most of them were withdrawn and were living alone as their parents are away." And SW remarked,

"Vulnerability starts from the mind; when a child feels lonely, they find it difficult to fit within groups; they end up being sad and withdrawn, and such situations expose them to various forms of abuse. Boys in such situations are vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse, while the girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse."

This suggests that children could be saved from potentially harmful situations through obtaining social support from others, such as peers.

3.3.2 Educational impact

Maltreatment and abuse play out in the education arena, wherein learning is negatively affected. According to Participant SH3,

"What would you expect of such learners? They will not be prepared to learn and usually don't do well at school; their minds would be far away."

Teacher participant TR3 said,

"[...] the parent will be missing their left-behind children, while the children will miss the parents. The mistake that they often make is that the parents try to make up for their absence by spoiling the children with expensive gadgets such as iPhones. The children get distracted and addicted to such gadgets, neglecting their schoolwork."

3.3.3 Community dynamics

LBL participants also bemoaned negative typecasting from their teachers, peers, and community members. The negative typecasting contributes to loneliness among the LBL, as some end up being withdrawn.

"Some teachers don't even know me, but as soon as they know that I am a LBL, they think I am trouble" (LR1).

Several labels are attached to the LBL, and the labels come with negative expectations.

"Here at school, we have several kids staying alone; they lack parental control and are usually spoilt; we usually expect the worst behaviour" (Teacher, TR2).

The police representative (PL)

said, "[...] true, some of the LBL live up to expectations because they host wild parties, abuse drugs, and alcohol."

The consequences of such social gatherings were cited by a participant who declared that

"several of the LBL drop out of school after falling pregnant" (SW).

Participants agreed that the misbehaviour of some of the LBL becomes a label for all the other LBL, a development that makes them lonely within a group.

4. Discussion of Findings

This study explored the manifestations of loneliness among left-behind learners. Guided by the three research questions, the results revealed profound emotional, social, and behavioural impacts. Key findings indicate that loneliness is a pervasive issue that impacts LBL in terms of key relational provisions highlighted by Weiss's social relations and social provision theory (Weiss, 1975), thereby

manifesting in LBL through emotions, behaviour, and social outcomes, which in turn exacerbate vulnerability.

4.1 Understanding the paradox of loneliness within peer groups

A much broader understanding of loneliness has been obtained from this study. Loneliness is revealed to be more than just a deficiency in interpersonal relationships (van Tilburg, 2020); it also brings into perspective the significance of parties in the relationship. Weiss (1975) distinguishes between primary and secondary relationships. Left-behind children (LBL) may find themselves within groups but may feel inadequate because they are left to cope without primary relationships. Social loneliness implies a deficiency in terms of a broader group of contacts, such as friends (Drageset, 2021; Omodan et al., 2025). This suggests that while left-behind children may have several people present in their environment with whom they could relate, they continue to be vulnerable to loneliness. Loneliness is more of a subjective experience that the affected can define. It is not easy for outsiders to define loneliness; rather, it is the affected individuals who weigh their existing relationships against what they desire.

In this case, loneliness is attributed to the absence of parents, who constitute the ‘desired’ party in the relationship. According to Weiss (1975), attachment to caregivers provides a sense of emotional security, but this is affected when the primary caregiver has migrated. This view resonates with a later finding from Muzingili (2025), who revealed that parental absence mediates loneliness. Parental migration deprives children of three key requirements that define loneliness. Left-behind children must cope without companionship, connectedness, and intimacy from their parents (Holt-Lunstad, 2024; Lasgaard et al., 2025). For both Weiss (1975) and Drageset (2021), parents provide close, warm, and frequent relationships. The LBL miss the closeness and intimacy with their parents, which increases the odds of feeling lonely (van Tilburg, 2020) and explains why they repeatedly express intense feelings of sadness, boredom, and emotional emptiness.

The likelihood of feeling lonely within a group increases due to household responsibilities. Participants revealed that additional household duties, such as cooking and cleaning, deprive LBL of interaction and playtime with their peers. This outcome is largely attributed to the patriarchy associated with some African communities, which is predominantly paternalistic, resulting in even younger girls assuming household duties in the absence of parents (Jaure & Makura, 2021b). Thus, LBL, especially girls, have less time to interact and play with peers, increasing their chances of feeling lonely. This also aligns with a key provision of social support, as outlined by Weiss’s theory of social relationships and social provisions regarding social attachment. LBL may feel inadequate in this regard, as the primary support from parents is expected to facilitate social attachment.

4.2 Loneliness predicting mental health challenges

Loneliness among LBL (Learners Being Left Behind) has been noted as a predictor of negative emotions affecting their mental health. Social support, largely derived from primary relationships, serves as a vital resource for mental well-being (Drageset, 2021). Learners at the secondary school level may not be emotionally prepared for separation from their parents. Some of the LBL participants in this study had been in child-only households for up to five years. Common words used to describe their emotions included “miss,” “sad,” and “bored.” In this context, “miss” implies that LBL long for their parents, who may have migrated for work. This longing generates feelings of sadness as they yearn for their parents. Participants also described their emotional state as being “bored,” suggesting they were fed up with this experience. This may indicate that the learners were able to tolerate the situation for some time, but after prolonged separation, they began to feel boredom and regret (Pakdaman et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2012). These findings mirror those from university students in Ethiopia, where loneliness was identified as a predictor of risky behaviours,

including alcohol use, suicidality, and drug use, particularly among male students (Elemo & Temtime, 2024).

The study confirmed earlier findings from UNICEF (2020), which highlight that prolonged separation fosters feelings of abandonment. The combination of negative feelings, such as regret, boredom, and abandonment, negatively affects the mental health of LBL. These emotional outcomes are described as unrewarding, negative, and unpleasant (Pakdaman et al., 2016; Groake et al., 2020). Furthermore, the negative effects are pronounced for adolescents, as they are said to thrive on social and peer relationships (Laasgaard et al., 2016). Participants in this study were secondary school learners and, therefore, adolescents. Similarly, Elemo and Temtime (2024) reported that risky behaviours peak in young adulthood, potentially endangering mental health. Such outcomes, according to Weiss (1975), are characteristics of emotional loneliness attributed to a lack of emotional support from primary caregivers.

The use of virtual communication tools such as cellular phones, social media, and internet communication appears inadequate to counter the negative and unrewarding feelings of loneliness. Most of the learner participants confirmed that they are in constant touch with their migrating parents over social media platforms such as WhatsApp®. Short video platforms and YouTube® channels also appeared to be popular. Addiction arises when individuals enjoy the experience and tend to repeat it (Pontes et al., 2014). However, these platforms are insufficient to replace the presence of migrating parents. Weiss's theory helps explain why virtual contact is inadequate; mediated communication cannot replace the emotional security and immediacy of physical attachment bonds. As the social worker highlighted, conversations diminish over time, indicating weakening attachment ties. Learners continued to feel sad, withdrawn, and lonely even while in constant touch with their parents. These outcomes are consistent with Weiss's conceptualisation of emotional loneliness.

Furthermore, loneliness has been identified as a predictor of internet addiction (Ajayi et al., 2024; Pontes et al., 2014). The physical distance often disrupts social topics for discussion, suggesting that learners and their migrating parents have fewer issues to discuss on social media platforms. The social distance between the two parties continues to foster negative feelings of sadness, emptiness, and abandonment, thereby bringing forth attachment issues (Mund & Neyer, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; van Tilburg, 2020).

This study also affirmed earlier findings that associate loneliness with several forms of addiction (Pontes et al., 2014). Most learner participants confirmed that they relied heavily on their communication devices for company, leading to increased screen time. The attachment to smartphones was not primarily as a communication device; it was largely used for entertainment. The intention was to counter negative feelings of abandonment, boredom, and regret. The continual use of smartphones for games or short videos develops into an addiction due to the mood-altering effects of these games (Ajayi et al., 2024). This further creates a gap between the migrating parent and the learner, leading to what Weiss (1975) refers to as attachment and social integration issues.

The lack of emotional support from primary relationships affects the mental health of learners in child-only households. This situation leads to low self-esteem and boredom, which are defining characteristics of loneliness. According to Weiss (1975), for an individual to feel adequate, they need the reassurance of worth, one of the six social relationships and provisions that define relationships with others. In the absence of the migrating parents, the interacting partners located within the school have the potential to step in and provide the reassurance of worth needed to facilitate self-esteem.

Alcoholism and drug use among the LBL have been confirmed as a prevalent challenge, also attributed to boredom. Several LBL adolescents (both boys and girls) affirmed that they have used and some are still using drugs and alcohol, with the major reason identified being their feelings of

boredom. This finding contrasts with earlier research by Xerxa et al. (2022), which did not find a correlation between alcohol consumption and loneliness. This suggests that alcohol and drug use are primarily for mood alteration, which may later develop into addiction. Loneliness disrupts both behavioural and social functioning (Elemo & Temtime, 2024). This outcome underscores the significance of guidance, which is one of Weiss's social relationships and provisions that define interpersonal connections (Weiss, 1975). The absence of parents, who constitute the primary relationship, creates a gap in terms of guidance. LBLs are left to manage without this guidance, leading to adverse behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse.

4.3 Understanding vulnerability through the lens of loneliness

Lonely learners were also noted to be vulnerable to various forms of abuse. The negative feelings associated with loneliness, such as sadness, emptiness, and longing (van Tilburg, 2020), can expose left-behind learners (LBL), particularly girl children, to abuse. The lack of guidance, nurturance, and reassurance of worth articulated by Weiss (1975) means that LBL cannot effectively regulate risks, make healthy decisions, or resist exploitation. The study revealed that a lack of parental guidance and support exposes the left-behind girl child to risks that may result in early child pregnancy and school dropouts. Participants noted that early child pregnancy and learner dropouts were key problems associated with LBL in child-only households. The absence of parents to regulate the behaviour of adolescent children and offer guidance tends to expose them to abuse and neglect (Jaure & Makura, 2021a,b). The idea that children would be alone in the home exposes them to abuse, which, in turn, affects their social relationships with peers due to negative typecasting. According to some researchers (Steyn & Msweli, 2025), this indicates the erosion of social values and a weakened commitment to Ubuntu.

The situation is further exacerbated by the use of alcohol and drugs, as confirmed by the research participants. Similar findings were reported in a study conducted among university students in Ethiopia, which showed loneliness as a predictor of risky behaviours, particularly among male students (Elemo & Temtime, 2024). The use of alcohol and drugs has the potential to expose LBL to further abuse, including sexual exploitation (Jaure & Makura, 2021b). When intoxicated with drugs or alcohol, children become vulnerable to abuse that may lead to unwanted pregnancies. Early child or teenage pregnancy and abuse are often met with negative societal perceptions.

This study noted that several negative behaviours associated with LBL in child-only households resulted in negative typecasting. Research participants from education and community groups shared largely negative comments. LBL were described as 'trouble causers', 'alcoholics', 'promiscuous', and 'drug addicts'. Such negative community perceptions continue to expose LBL to loneliness, which may explain their sadness, emptiness, and withdrawal (van Tilburg, 2020). Although a social circle may exist, it is less satisfying (Weiss, 1975) and contributes to further alienation and loneliness. Weiss's (1975) social provisions theory highlights the significance of social networks expected from certain relationships, especially from parents who are primary caregivers. The absence of parents creates a gap in attachment, social integration, opportunities for nurturance, reassurance of worth, guidance, and reliable alliances (Drageset, 2021). This deficiency regarding the six provisions leads to loneliness among LBL in child-only households. Loneliness, in turn, disrupts behavioural and psychosocial functioning. Some LBL, as a result of their loneliness, may act out through alcoholism, drug use, and/or delinquency (Pakdaman et al., 2016).

4.4 From typecasting to isolation: Implications on educational outcomes

In terms of educational outcomes, participants concurred with earlier observations that loneliness is a predictor of poor educational outcomes for learners who feel lonely (Pakdaman et al., 2016). The environment at home and at school following parental labour migration was described as unfavourable to learning, thereby affecting educational outcomes. The emotional disposition of left-

behind learners (LBL) associated with loneliness affects their academic proficiency. Left-behind learners were linked to mental health challenges such as distress, anxiety, and sadness. Such emotional states tend to affect their concentration in academic learning. This explains why participants argued that the educational outcomes of LBL are negatively impacted by parental absence.

Furthermore, the negative behaviours associated with loneliness also take a toll on the academic experiences of left-behind learners. Similar findings were reported in Cambodia, where LBL were associated with worse educational outcomes. The children also completed fewer years of schooling (Marchetta & Sim, 2021). The idea that learners experimented with sex and abused drugs and alcohol affected their concentration in academic learning, thereby hindering their educational outcomes. Participants held low expectations for positive educational outcomes from left-behind learners. These low expectations of success, together with the negative typecasting of left-behind children, contribute to their loneliness, making it difficult for them to succeed academically.

5. Conclusion, Recommendations and Limitations

Children in child-only households are identified as socially isolated and lonely, even when they are within groups. Parental absence due to migration creates a gap in social support. The LBL are left to cope without the six provisions of care, which include attachment, social integration, opportunities for nurturance, reassurance of worth, guidance, and reliable alliances. The children experience feelings of sadness, emptiness, longing, boredom, and withdrawal. Such negative outcomes are associated with loneliness and predict adverse educational results. The feelings of loneliness disrupt the behavioural and psychosocial functioning of the LBL. In this paper, we argue that the continual typecasting of left-behind learners, as observed with key informants in South Africa, exacerbates the plight of these learners, contributing to more behavioural problems. Although the children have devised ingenious survival methods, they still require adult support, given their level of development. In light of this, this study recommends the development of psychosocial support schemes for left-behind learners, grounded in the social and cultural environment, to enable them to reach their potential. This support for LBL is envisioned within the context of the school. Utilising school resources to provide social support has the potential to mitigate the effects of loneliness among LBL. Future quantitative analyses of the effects of loneliness are also recommended to provide comprehensive support for lonely learners in child-only household settings. The experiences and insights shared in this case study must be interpreted as relating to a limited number of individuals and may not be representative of the entire communities involved in the study. As a qualitative case study, the findings have limited generalisability.

6. Declarations

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Data Availability: The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access will be granted to researchers who meet the criteria for data sharing established by the institutional review board or ethics committee.

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