



## Learner Experiences of Labyrinth Walking as a Strategy to Address School Tensions in South Africa

Starlson Ruhini  
Stellenbosch University, South Africa  
ruhini.naik@gmail.com

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### Corresponding author:

Starlson, R.  
ruhini.naik@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

A culture of peace and tolerance provides a conducive atmosphere for harmony and learning within school environments. However, the culture of peace has been increasingly disturbed by socio-emotional tensions often involving violent expressions. Holistic education is a possibility for the development of agency in learners to manifest positive socio-emotional expressions. Within a holistic education approach, the use of labyrinths, a cultural symbol, is a potential strategy to provide opportunities for learners to compose and refocus thus contributing to the culture of peace in schools. This paper using a holistic education conceptual framework re-analyses data from a Master's dissertation on rituals and multiculturalism in schools. The focus is on student experiences of physical labyrinth walking, and simulated labyrinth walking used in a creative art intervention lesson on rituals. The study involved two schools, one private (with a physical labyrinth) and one public, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (without a physical labyrinth). Ten Grade eight learners from the public school and fifteen from the private school participated in interviews on a purposive, voluntary basis. The findings indicate overall positive experiences in the use of labyrinths to foster intrapersonal well-being through labyrinth walking or simulated walking. The study also highlights the potential value of including labyrinths as part of curriculum instruction to ultimately contribute to a positive socio-emotional school culture. Recommendations from this study include: further research in public schools which have constructed physical labyrinths or have implemented creative approaches within the instructional design, and to include labyrinths and other harmonious cultural symbols in teacher capacity building to foster socio-emotional development in learners.

*Key words:* Labyrinths, cultural symbolism, well-being, holistic education, peace

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) of Agenda 2030 alludes to more than just academic knowledge to achieve equitable and quality education for all (United Nations, 2015). Target 4.7 of SDG4 expands on the notion of inclusive and equitable education with reference to, amongst others, sustainable lifestyles, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence and appreciation of cultural diversity (United Nations 2015). SDG16 (Target 16.1) also categorically advocates for the "significant decrease of all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere" (United Nations, 2015). SDG4 has prompted various educational interventions globally and contextually such as the implementation of holistic education in India

(Nedungadi et al., 2024). School-going learners are citizens of the future generation of nations and of the world. However, schools in South Africa have been reportedly experiencing numerous tensions amongst learners in the form of negative behavior in social interactions underpinned by various causes (Lumadi, 2024; Masinga & Sibanda, 2025). The tensions, often violent, impacts on the overall school culture including on teacher morale and on teaching and learning (Chauke, 2024). More than just policy and monitoring is needed to address student well-being and quality education. In this regard, a holistic education approach which encompasses academic as well as the student as a social and emotional being, is crucial if social challenges and negative behavior are to be effectively addressed. Multi-disciplinary approaches which include integrated pedagogical instruction and cultural interventions could be possible responses to challenges within the school contexts (Chauke, 2024). The use of labyrinths is one such intervention and could be a useful antidote to counter the rising tensions against the culture of peace in schools. Labyrinths are cultural symbols, known for evoking positive emotions, self-reflection, and for restoring of inner calmness and composure (McGee et al., 2023; Davis, 2021). This paper, using a holistic education conceptual framework, re-analysed data from a parent study on rituals in schools. The parent study was conducted to satisfy the requirements for a Master's degree qualification. The two research questions which frame this paper are: (1) What are students' experiences in labyrinth walking in schools? (2) What potential value do labyrinths have for school contexts?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Labyrinths have ancient origins of over thousand years ago and have been part of many cultures across countries from the east and the west (Dudeja, 2018; McGee et al., 2023). While labyrinths may vary in size and form, typically they are described as unicursal and have a single unidirectional path to walk through (McGettigan, 2016; Davis, 2021). A labyrinth is different from a maze in that it has no dead ends, has one entrance and exit that directs to the centre, unlike a maze with entrances which connect with each other instead of to a centre (McGettigan, 2016; Davis, 2021). Figure 1 shows the difference between a labyrinth and a maze.

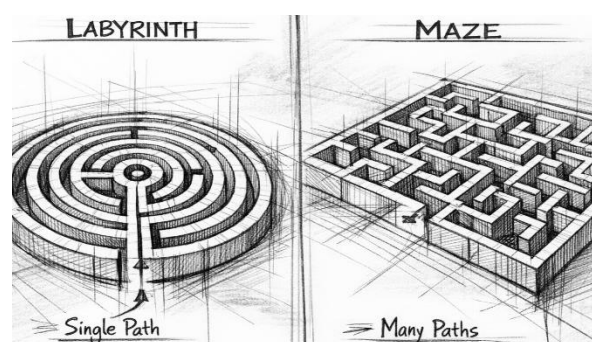


Figure 1. The difference between a labyrinth and a maze. (Source: Author generated using Microsoft 365)

Although labyrinths were ancient architectural constructions, today they can be creatively designed using objects such as rocks, tape, painted paths or plant-lined pathways (Davis, 2021). Labyrinths can be created indoors and outdoors. Labyrinths can be found in many locations which include home gardens, school yards, parks and outside hospitals (McGettigan, 2016). Labyrinths are known to have spiritual significance (McGettigan, 2016) but have also been associated with well-being (McGee et al., 2023; Davis, 2021) and education (Shaughnessy, 2022). Labyrinth walking is said to evoke reflection and inner contemplation (Davis, 2021; Shaughnessy, 2022; McGee et al., 2023) and could be an individual or social activity (McGee et al., 2023). In an online survey study involving 461 labyrinth practitioners from across the globe, it was reported that labyrinth walking evoked positive emotions, a sense of connectedness and self-healing

(McGee et al., 2023). In another study done in the United Kingdom within a special needs education context, it was found that labyrinths was a creative and effective pedagogical strategy to decrease distressed environments making them conducive for learning (Shaughnessy, 2022). There is a dearth of studies within the South African context of using labyrinths to support learning environments within the formal school context.

Holistic education was used as a theoretical framework with two foci to underpin discussions in this paper. One, a people well-being component and the other being instructional strategies in school lessons. The child is a whole body, mind, and spirit which functions synergistically (Datnow et al., 2022, Eugene & Priyanti, 2022). This understanding is not new but can be traced back to integral education systems operationalized by Jesuits, Buddhists, Quakers, and to holistic philosophies of Steiner, Montessori, and Malaguzzi (Datnow et al., 2022). The value of holistic education approaches lie in providing appropriate support to learners to actualise essential strengths (such as cognitive, emotional and social), to internalise knowledge and develop the necessary skills to live in society (Iskakova et al., 2023). Holistic education advocates active teaching and learning instructional strategies which includes a transformational approach where learners understand and internalize the world around them (Miseliunaite & Cibulskas, 2024). In India, the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for holistic and multidisciplinary education to develop human beings as a whole encompassing amongst others cognitive, social, physical, emotional, aesthetic and moral aspects in a synergetic manner (Roy, 2022).

Labyrinths are potential transformational instructional strategies which combine cognitive and emotional development. Waldorf schools' philosophy and non-traditional curriculum design exhibit principles of holistic education (Daskolia & Koukouzeli, 2023), and there are such Waldorf schools in South Africa where labyrinths have been included as part of the holistic approach. A study within a framework of holistic education involving 365 public primary school teachers in Lithuania, concluded that transformative educational approaches were more commonly implemented in schools following a non-traditional design (Miseliunaite & Cibulskas, 2024). A survey study in Latvia, involving 676 primary school teachers, concluded that critical tenets to foster holistic education include practical approaches which encourage inquisitiveness (prompting deeper inquiry) and interdisciplinary approaches which promote depth of knowledge development (Badjanova & Iliskoa, 2015). Case analysis reported that countries such as India, Chile, Ireland, Canada (British Columbia), the United States (State of Iowa) and Singapore have taken initiatives to adopt holistic education practices, although there are challenges in implementation (Datnow et al., 2022). The holistic approach adopted in Chile and India focused on the key domain of socio-emotional well-being, whereas in Ireland student agency was a greater focus in holistic education efforts (Datnow et al., 2022). In South Africa recommended strategies to reduce school tensions have included leadership support, inclusion of socio-emotional topics within the academic curriculum and stakeholder involvement (Ngidi, 2018). However, there is downplay on holistic education approaches and much appears to be compartmentalised. A holistic approach to personal transformation than a fragmented approach is more likely to reduce aggressive tensions in South African schools (Meyer & Chetty, 2017). Proactive rather than reactive interventions are more appropriate to curb tensions and to foster positive school cultures (Thu, 2025).

Student agency can be described as the ability of a student to exercise control over his/her own thought processes, actions and motivation (Brandt, 2024). In educational institutions learners exhibit engagement with their own social world, personal growth and develop their identities (Larey, 2023). Labyrinths provide opportunities for personal growth through making inner connection (Shaughnessy, 2022; McGee et al., 2023). Hence, labyrinths provide opportunities for learners to develop agency related to their well-being. How learners navigate their school life also impacts their resilience later in life, such as in further studies in higher education institutions (Larey, 2023). Affirmative positive environmental influences within school contexts includes pedagogy, emotional support and the influence of school culture (Brandt, 2024).

According to Brandt (2024) research studies conducted over past three decades have shown that positive environmental conditions are influential in mediating agency. Rupnik & Avsec (2025) suggest that schools should prioritise the development of personal agency in learners as agency impacts the importance of human value and professional skills later on in life. However, agency is not always uniformly interpreted. In a study in Vietnam, it was found that agency in a private school was based on openness while in the public schools the focus was on compliance to rules (Dang, 2025). Learning environments are influential in developing student agency and is promoted through teacher support, appropriate participatory resources and by contextual factors (Dang, 2025). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognizes student agency as being important for enhancing educational achievement and personal well-being (Herden, 2023). Student agency can be conceptualised as multi-faceted and is experienced differently by learners in different contexts (Mameli et al., 2023). There is a link between holistic education and labyrinths as participatory resources to provide opportunities for the development of student agency.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study followed a case study design and applied a qualitative approach. As previously stated data from a parent study in a Masters dissertation was re-analysed in this paper. Although the overall focus of the parent study was on rituals and multiculturalism, the interviews included a subset of questions related to experiences in walking a physical labyrinth (private school) or a simulated experience through an art intervention lesson (public school). The schools were purposively and conveniently selected for the parent study. This reanalysis was intended to get an understanding of learner attitudes towards labyrinths using the face-to-face individual interview responses and hence the number of interviews conducted were sufficient.

The private school was selected based on the knowledge that the school had a labyrinth located within the school property. The school was located in a country-side environment which can be described as one of high economic status. In the private school, the exit year for learners was Grade 13. Grade 13 is not a standard designation in the South African schooling system. Grade 13 (private school) can be typically aligned to Grade 12 (public school) which involves a national written exit examination. Hence, the grades are presented according to the designations of the South African national schooling structure. Learners from across grades were invited to voluntarily participate in the interviews. Fifteen learners eventually participated. With one class per grade, the school had an average learner-teacher ratio of 10:1. Fifteen participant interviews were adequate to provide the necessary information for the qualitative parent study. The grade breakdown of the fifteen participants were: Grade 12: four learners (L1 - L4), Grade 11: three learners (L5 - L7), Grade 10: three learners (L8 - L10), Grade 9: three learners (L11 - L13) and Grade 8: Two learners (L14 and L15). All learners in the private school had access to the physical labyrinth at the school.

The public school was located in a densely populated residential area which can be described as having a medium to low economic status. Thirty-five Grade eight learners from one class participated in the art intervention lesson. The class was identified by the school based on the learners' behaviour and ability to provide information for the study. Ten learners from the class of thirty-five participated in the interviews. The public school had no constructed labyrinth. Hence, the art intervention was used to provide a simulated experience of walking the labyrinth patterns. In a drawing provided, all participants had to first trace through the labyrinth using their fingers and then with a paint brush held between their toes while imagining walking through. The learners also had to paint the inside of the labyrinth. The learners were interviewed post the art intervention of the labyrinth activity. According to ethical protocols, non-participation was respected unquestionably. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded for analysis. The coding involved identifying attitudes (positive or negative). Trustworthiness strategies included reading and rereading of the transcriptions and with reference to handwritten notes of the researcher during the interviews to ensure accurate transcriptions.

The study was given ethical clearance by Stellenbosch University as part of a Master's dissertation. Ethical protocols of anonymity and confidentiality were observed and participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time, if they wanted to.

## RESULTS/FINDINGS

The findings of the students' experiences are presented according to each school i.e. the public school (where an art intervention of a labyrinth was used) and the private school (which had a physical labyrinth on the property). Interview quotations are presented as evidence of the student experiences. PP is used for reference to the public school interview participants and PL – used for the participants from the private school.

Public school: Of the ten learners, two (PP5 and PP10) indicated that they had previously heard of labyrinths. However, PP5 had the idea of a maze rather than a labyrinth and PP10 had seen a labyrinth on television. This was an indication that the labyrinth experience (although through art) was novel for the learners. In the researcher's notes, during the intervention learners' initial responses to the drawing of the labyrinth presented to them varied from a maze, a brain, headphones, a place to walk, curved lines, a tree, a mandala, a road or a sort of pattern.

One student (PP3) expressed that the art intervention using the labyrinth contributed to her knowledge bank while another (PP4) expressed enjoyment in the creative part of the activity.

PP3: "I enjoyed it very much... Actually, I'm happy that I had to meet you, because I've never seen this before, I've never even heard of it before [points to the drawing of the labyrinth on the board], so it's like new information to me."

PP4: "Mam, I really enjoyed doing the painting, [...] it was my first time doing something with my leg, but the pencil, I didn't like doing the pencil, it was like [inaudible]".

The learners were asked: If a labyrinth was built in your school, would you walk it and why? Nine learners categorically reported that they would definitely walk a labyrinth if built in their school. However, PP6 seemed unsure by indicating "probably" in the response. The responses to why they would walk the labyrinth varied: learning and concentration (PP3), for well-being (PP4 and PP8), cultural awareness (PP9) and improvement of the school social environment (PP10).

PP3: "because it really makes you focus and if you focus then you'd be able to concentrate in class"

PP4: "it makes you calm"

PP8: "it feels nice"

PP9: "learn it and be aware of other practices."

PP10: "the school will also become better".

The researcher followed up with the question: Do you think that learners would benefit from a labyrinth in school? All responses were affirmative. However, PP2 and PP6 expressed concern about how other learners might feel about the labyrinth. Other responses were directed to introspection (PP1), well-being (PP8), and knowledge and value (PP10).

PP1: "if we have a question when we walk around the labyrinth we can ask ourselves those questions and we can answer it."

PP8: "it would make them try to find a way out of something".

PP10: “every student should also get a better understanding of it”.

Private school: Since the private school had a labyrinth on the school property, the participants were asked: Can you tell me more about the labyrinth built in your school and do you think it adds value to the school and learners? Four participants (PL8, PL 9 PL10 and PL12) did not comment as they had not walked or made use of the labyrinth. One participant (PL4) shared that the labyrinth was created by a Grade 8 class as part of one of their main lessons which included gardening. The reference clearly indicates that creating labyrinths can be integrated into the curriculum and learning instruction. The responses to the value of labyrinths were linked to well-being with varied foci: calming the mind (PL1), to refocus (PL2, PL3 and PL7), to make inner-connection (PL5 and PL11).

PL1: “a very flowing movement [...] it is quite a calming thing when you walk through”

PL2: “it’s sort of a meditation [...]it just [...] it allows me to focus on one thing [...] so it’s a nice cool down and it’s a nice cool down and it’s a nice change of pace”.

PL3: “clears your mind”.

PL7: “you can just clear your mind”.

PL5: “realise and connect to that part of yourself without being embarrassed about it”.

PL11: “it’s just like a place that you know you can just be in and just think and reconnect.”

PL2 also indicated that she is unable to sit still for long and often walks about in the classroom. However, with permission she leaves the classroom and walks the labyrinth to refocus. PL3 also indicated that the teachers would take restless learners to the labyrinth to calm them. PL15 had a different view of the labyrinth. PL15 believed that walking could be a strategy to be with oneself but did not assign value to the pattern of walking in circles in the labyrinth.

PL15: “I don’t see so much of a benefit in the labyrinth, but I can understand the idea of just walking and being with yourself in (yourself) quiet with no one else to disturb you. In that sense, I can agree with that, but the idea of just walking in circles is a bit strange to me”.

A comparison of student experiences in Table 1 below shows that overall, in both the public and private schools, there was a positive attitude towards the value of labyrinths from a well-being perspective. Labyrinths can also be used as part of curriculum instruction in lessons using different approaches viz., as a creative art lesson in paper form or in an actual outdoor lesson entailing the construction of a labyrinth.

Table 1. Comparison of learner experiences between the public and private schools

<b>Holistic education focus</b>	<b>Public school</b>	<b>Private school</b>
1. Well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most learners had positive experiences and attitudes towards having labyrinths in schools.</li> <li>• Most learners believed that the labyrinth could contribute to their personal well-being and to others.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most learners had a positive attitude having walked the labyrinth at school.</li> <li>• Most learners believed that the labyrinth could contribute to their personal well-being in different ways</li> </ul>
2. Instructional strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art intervention (drawing of a labyrinth) was an instructional strategy overall positively received by learners.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labyrinth created by learners as part of curriculum instruction for a lesson on gardening.</li> </ul>

## DISCUSSION

Negative learner behavior and its impact on the school culture of peace is a growing concern in schools in South Africa (Lumadi, 2024; Masinga & Sibanda, 2025; Chauke, 2024) as well as in other parts of the world such as Vietnam (Thu, 2025). Schools constantly seek interventions to address negative student behaviours. This study has reported on the use of labyrinths as a holistic education strategy which has the potential to recompose learners and contribute as a proactive strategy to address likely tensions affecting the school's peace culture. Redesigning or adapting holistic education systems should encompass well-being (inclusive of socio-emotional skills) as well as socio-cultural responsibility (including cultural understanding, empathy and social responsibility) (Datnow et al., 2022). Grounded learners are more likely to reduce expressions of their inner tensions on others. In this study, learners in the private school expressed that labyrinth walking made them feel grounded during and outside of class lessons. Some learners expressed labyrinth walking as calming, provides an opportunity to change the pace of the day, provide opportunity for inner connections. One student expressed that labyrinth walking helped her to refocus as she was often unable to sit still during lessons. Labyrinth walking can also be used as a classroom behavioural management strategy. One student expressed that teachers used labyrinth walking to calm restless learners. Labyrinth walking in the private school demonstrated intrapersonal value. In the private schools student agency manifested in the use of the labyrinth for intrapersonal well-being. This confirms the literature supporting the intrapersonal value of labyrinth walking to promote well-being, self-healing and to evoke positive emotions (Davis, 2021; Shaughnessy, 2022; McGee et al., 2023). Labyrinths then have the potential value to contribute to schools' culture of non-violence through providing opportunities for student agency development i.e. to control and compose themselves.

The art intervention of the labyrinth on paper in the public schools also evoked positive responses to walking the labyrinth albeit in a simulated (imaginary) form and not a physical one. The art intervention as expressed by the learners contributed to knowledge development as well as provided an opportunity for creative expression. Student' agency was developed through a transformative experience using the art intervention rather than through direct instruction of knowledge transmission. Development and integration of new knowledge into value systems (in this study a culture of peace and calm) and reflection on behaviours are transformative educational experiences (Miseliunaite & Cibulskas, 2024).

Both the public and private school experiences show that labyrinths can be integrated in lesson design and planning. In the private school, a student had indicated that the physical labyrinth was created as part of a curriculum lesson on gardening, and in the public school, through an intervention lesson. Holistic education also encompasses and integrates academic development balanced with socio-emotional development (Datnow et al., 2022) with practical approaches being one of the critical tenets (Badjanova & Iliskoa, 2015).

The implementation of holistic education is not without its challenges (Miseliunaite et al., 2022). In case studies involving several countries reported by Datnow et al. (2022) challenges varied with some being contextual. In Singapore parents continue to place academic performance as a priority with similar tensions arising in India, in Chile there is a need to revisit assessment to create the balance between the academic and socio-emotional components and in British Columbia there are variations in the revision and enactment of the curriculum (Datnow et al., 2022). South Africa, given its history and impact of apartheid, still experiences various inequities within school contexts, resources being one of them, which also contribute to tensions in school peace culture amongst others (Lumadi, 2024; Masinga & Sibanda, 2025; Ngidi, 2018). While it may be argued that these inequities exist, this study has demonstrated that labyrinths can be used creatively in instructional strategies to provide opportunities for student agency development to foster positive socio-emotional expression. Positive socio-emotional expression is likely to contribute to a more harmonious school peace culture. In a study in Eswatini involving two secondary schools, it was reported

that learners blamed banning of corporal punishment as a contributing factor causing escalation in school tensions and that psychological support and anger management programmes for both learners and teachers were much needed for composure of emotions (Sibisi et al., 2024). Reintroducing corporal punishment is constitutionally unacceptable in South Africa. A holistic education approach with creative curricular design and cultural interventions such as labyrinths is more likely to support other interventions to reduce school tensions.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper aimed to understand learners' experiences towards labyrinths in schools and its potential value for school contexts. The findings conclude that overall, learners have a positive attitude towards labyrinths as a physical construction or a creative paper-based task. Labyrinths are cultural symbols which align with a holistic education approach to develop student agency to foster positive socio-emotions. Labyrinths are not a top-down approach to peace but provides a holistic opportunity through cultural understanding, knowledge building and instructional design to seek proactive and creative ways for learners to compose themselves and re-channel negative emotions. The use of labyrinths together with other holistic education interventions has the potential to reduce tensions opposing a school's peace culture. However, in interpreting the findings in the re-analysis the data was limited to the parent study of comparing only two schools (one private and one public school). The findings could have been different if more schools within each category were compared.

Recommendations from this study include: that schools consider constructing labyrinths within the school property with the help of community stakeholders, educate learners on the value of labyrinths for their well-being, conduct further research in public schools which have constructed physical labyrinths or have implemented creative approaches within the classroom, use of labyrinths as co-strategy to support other tension reducing interventions, and to include labyrinths and other harmonious cultural symbols in teacher capacity building and creative instructional strategy programs to foster socio-emotional development in learners.

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