Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to investigate the factors influencing academic performance among mainstream high school learners in rural areas. Learners in rural areas need more assistance due to a lack of resources than in urban areas, where resources are available. The language of teaching and learning was English. This qualitative study was conducted in the rural area of KwaZulu-Natal. Eleven learners were interviewed. Data collection was done using semi-structured face-to-face interviews and biographic questionnaires. The data generated were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of this study revealed that personal factors, such as understanding subject content, socialising with friends, and dedication to schoolwork, were significant. Social factors, such as teaching strategies, peer influence, and peer pressure, as well as environmental factors like travel distance, transportation, and household chores, influence learners' academic performance, either positively or negatively, and learners are aware of these factors. The study recommended that teachers incorporate study skills into the curriculum and offer supplementary classes on all subjects. The study further recommended that the Department of Education could build hostels for learners staying far from school.

Keywords:

Learning environment, learner support, academic performance, teacher support, parental involvement, community engagement, mainstream, peers, learners, schools

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANA	Annual National Assessment
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
DoE:	Department of Education
KZN:	Kwazulu-Natal
NSC	National Senior Certificate
POPIA:	Protection of Personal Information Act
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UNISA:	University of South Africa
SAIS:	Policy for Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support
SASSA	South Africa Social Security Agent
St.	Saint

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study, beginning with an introduction and background to the research. It then outlines the rationale for the study and presents a concise review of relevant literature. Following this, the chapter states the problem and formulates the research questions, subquestions, aims and objectives. A brief description of the methodology is provided, encompassing the research approach, design, and underlying paradigm. The chapter also highlights the population, sampling procedures, materials and data collection methods. Subsequent sections address data analysis techniques, measures to ensure trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Finally, Chapter 1 defines the key terms, discusses the study's limitations and delimitations, and provides a conclusion.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Education lays the foundation for shaping children and their futures, preparing them for their roles in society (Akiyi & Musani, 2015; Panday et al., 2009; Sriatun et al., 2024). Although the government attempts to provide education for all by offering food, academic support and other necessities at no cost, there is still a high rate of academic failure in the country (Kyei & Nemaorani, 2014; Mlachila & Moeletsi, 2019). Consequently, many learners do not reach the necessary levels to progress to the next grade, which ultimately affects their Grade 12 results (Mabena et al., 2021).

The most powerful investment a society can make is in education as a driver of social and economic development (Danielle, 2012; OECD, 2022). The environment in which a child is raised affects every aspect of their life, either directly or indirectly (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This may include their home context, school, peers, and even their community (Donald et al., 2014). For example, a low socio-economic background is a risk factor for learner performance (Ombay, 2018; Sinyoni, 2015). Parents from low socio-economic backgrounds often lack access to

educational resources, motivation and support (Yadav & Vashishtha, 2024; Mzobe & Chinaka, 2024). Poor-quality teaching and a lack of appropriate learner support materials also negatively impact learners' academic performance (Ahmed et al., 2024; Haung, 2024; Sinyoni, 2015). This study aimed to identify the factors contributing to learners' academic progress in a rural area of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and to propose strategies to enhance their academic performance.

1.3 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

I have been a volunteer teacher for 3 years at various rural schools. During that time, I noticed that the poor academic performance of learners is a common challenge. Rural areas are typically remote and undeveloped, characterised by limited physical resources, including basic infrastructures such as sanitation (Rajan, 2019). These challenges may negatively impact the quality of education provided to learners in rural areas (Lutz, 2022; Rajan, 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that children living in rural areas are often less motivated than their urban counterparts (Miranda & Rodriguez, 2022; Rajan, 2019).

Making matters even worse is the low pass requirement (30%), which does not equip learners with the necessary skills to succeed but instead deprives them of the opportunity to further their studies (Nortje, 2017). It is therefore anticipated that, through research, parents and teachers will be informed about possible risk factors at home and at school that may contribute to poor academic performance among learners in the selected rural area of KZN. It is further envisioned that the recommendations derived from the study will enable learners, parents, and teachers to be more prepared to address the identified risk factors.

The previous studies focused on the problems, while there is

1.4 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

Several factors in learners' lives can influence their academic performance. This could include school background, the learner's gender, age, ethnicity, poor school attendance, writing skills that do not meet the required expectations of the grade, poor reading comprehension skills that

prevent learners from passing content area assessment, bullying, teenage pregnancy, drugs, substance abuse and geographical belongingness (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2014; Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Ngcongo, 2016). Parents' marital status, socio-economic background (including income), profession, language and religious affiliation may also influence learners' academic performance (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2014; Munir et al., 2023). Teachers' capacity may also contribute to increased or reduced academic and social performance among learners (Madiana & Anwar, 2025). Some of the abovementioned factors are discussed in more detail below.

The learner's family background plays a significant role in their learning process and subsequent academic performance. Factors such as the financial status of the parents, household type (two-parent versus one-parent), households with divorced parents, family size, neighbourhood, and the educational levels of family members can impact learners' academic performance (Dhurumra, 2013). According to Bengesai and Nzimande (2020), divorce causes emotional stress among learners, negatively affecting their educational outcomes. This family structure disruption has a financial impact, which includes a lack of resources needed for school. The absence of fathers in learners' lives negatively impacts their education, as fathers are often absent to provide financial support and emotional guidance (Jacobs & Andrews, 2021). Furthermore, children who grow up in single-parent families may have a reduced chance of completing school or enrolling in post-secondary education (Bengesai & Nzimande, 2020).

Child-headed households are increasing in Sub-Saharan African countries (Magwa & Magwa, 2016). A child-headed household is one in which an older sibling cares for younger siblings in the absence of, or after, a parent (Jacobs & Andrews, 2021). These children experience physical, emotional, psychological, and social burdens and, as a result, do not enjoy the comforts of childhood (Magwa & Magwa, 2016). They also face a lack of financial support, which perpetuates poverty and leads to inadequate access to basic education, poor health, and unsafe living conditions (Shava et al., 2016). These circumstances contribute to increased school absenteeism and dropout rates as children are compelled to work, limited availability of resources and heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation of girls (Pillay, 2016).

Grandparent-headed families may also influence a learner's academic performance (Gasa & Plaatjies, 2013; Sladka, 2021). Booys et al. (2015) conducted a study on grandparents as primary caregivers in South Africa. The findings suggest that the home environment is another factor influencing learners' academic performance, encompassing both the home space and the number of family members, which can make it difficult for learners to complete their schoolwork (Booys et al., 2015; Akrofi, 2020). Children who are raised in a grandparent-headed household may have challenges at school because of experiencing ongoing grief, a sense of loss or abandonment, fear, anger, insecurity, and pain; they may also experiment with drugs or alcohol and engage in premarital sex (Booys et al., 2015). In addition, grandparents' socio-economic status, occupation and lack of education could be barriers to supporting their grandchildren with their schoolwork or when dealing with the school (Gasa & Plaatjies, 2013).

In schools and the community, pregnant learners are often treated as outcasts (Mabungela, 2025; Mutshaeni et al., 2015). Pregnant learners are often viewed as ill-mannered and frequently raised in single-parent families (Mutshaeni et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2025). These negative attitudes have a profound impact on pregnant learners' ability to engage actively in learning and, subsequently, on their scholastic performance (Mutshaeni et al., 2015). Parents may isolate their pregnant children because they feel disappointed and angry towards these girls. This may cause the learner to withdraw from their parents due to feelings of shame and guilt (Mutshaeni et al., 2015). These feelings have affected the school performance of pregnant learners (Maionchi, 2022; Mutshaeni et al., 2015). Furthermore, emotional distress, trips to clinics and doctors, pregnancy-related symptoms such as vomiting, dizziness, nausea and exhaustion all negatively influence these learners' school attendance, concentration and performance (Mokwena & Van Breda, 2021; Ngcongo, 2016).

Another barrier to girls' education is child marriage (where girls marry before the age of 18) and teenage childbirth. The girls often leave school early due to their new responsibilities of being a wife or raising a child, which results in them completing only rudimentary education (Girls 'Road Map, 2021).

Socio-economic status may also influence learners' academic performance. For example, children from low-income households may have fewer resources for learning in a less stimulating physical environment (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2014; Yadav & Vashishtha, 2024). Poor home environments affect children's physical well-being and their ability to learn (Chinyoka & Naidu, 2014). It was found that adolescents who grow up in low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be involved in substance use (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021). Ironically, adolescents from high socioeconomic backgrounds may also be at risk for substance use due to affordability (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021; Matar et al., 2023). Many learners start using substances in their early years due to their accessibility (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021). Communities and society play a substantial role in learners' engagement in substance use (Khoza & Shilubane,2021; Singwane & Ramoshaa, 2024). In the Bronfenbrenner theory, Donald et al. (2018) highlight four interacting dimensions at the centre of human development: process, person, context, and time. One of them is context, which includes local communities (Donald et al., 2018). Substance abuse has been related to difficulties in school discipline, classroom management challenges and violence in the school environment and academic context. These challenges hinder educational achievement, leading learners to perform poorly academically and subsequently drop out of school (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021). Peer influences in the social environment also contribute to adolescents' substance abuse (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021).

Apart from substance abuse, academic performance and achievement are negatively influenced by trauma, child abuse, victimisation, and distress (Pierre & Claire, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021). Unresolved issues related to abuse, victimisation and distress result not only in underachievement but also in subsequent dropout from school.

Although South Africa has invested in universal access to education since the end of apartheid, research suggests that most young people still do not complete their education (Bengesai & Nzimande, 2020). Nortje (2017) states that only 37% of pupils who start school go on to pass their matric exams. This crisis in the South African education system is further exacerbated by the country's school rankings. These rankings are based on the socio-economic status of the

community where the school is located, including literacy and employment rates (White & Van Dyk, 2019). For example, quintile 1 schools typically indicate schools with limited resources, while quintile 5 schools refer to wealthy or affluent schools (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019; White & Van Dyk, 2019; Zondo et al., 2020). Schools in quintiles 1 to 3 (referred to as non-paying schools) receive more funding per learner from the government than schools in quintiles 4 and 5 (referred to as paying schools) (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019). The study by Chzhen et al. (2018) found that learners attending quintile 1 and 2 schools are, on average, three years behind learners attending quintile 5 schools. Since the current study was conducted in a poor rural community in KZN with schools in quintile 1, it aimed to explore factors affecting the academic performance of learners from these schools.

1.5 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Learners in rural areas tend to perform poorly academically because rural schools often lack well-qualified teachers and have insufficient staff-to-learner ratios (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Nortje, 2017). Furthermore, according to Du Plessis and Mestry (2019), the government appears to be more concerned about teacher development in urban than in rural areas.

Typically, rural areas have poorly developed infrastructures and limited access to critical social services and technology, which can negatively impact learners' academic performance (Kumar et al., 2024; Reyes, 2025). Learners in rural areas also do not attend school regularly for various reasons (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Sikhwari & Mudau, 2024). For example, these learners often miss school due to poverty and other financial constraints, which prevent them from accessing transportation to attend classes. They may also be forced to work on local farms to generate an income, often as child labourers (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Suhaeb & Kaseng, 2024). Parents in rural areas are generally less educated, have lower socio-economic status, and are less involved in their children's education, which may, in turn, lead to higher dropout rates among learners (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). It is thus essential to investigate the risk factors that contribute to poor academic performance among Grade 8-12 learners in rural mainstream high schools in KZN.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1.6.1 Research Questions

The main research question for this study is: What are the factors affecting Grade 8 – 12 learners' academic performance in a mainstream high school in a rural area in KZN?

To answer the main research question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

(i) What personal (microsystem), social (mesosystem), and environmental factors (exosystem and macrosystem) may influence the academic performance of Grade 8 – 12 learners attending mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi rural area of KZN?

(ii) What do learners recommend to improve their academic performance?

1.6.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to explore the factors affecting the academic performance of Grade 8–12 learners attending a mainstream high school in the Umzinyathi rural area of KZN.

(i) To identify personal (microsystem), social (mesosystem), and environmental factors (exosystem and macrosystem) that may influence the academic performance of Grade 8 – 12 learners attending mainstream high schools in Umzinyathi in a rural area of KZN.

(ii) To identify recommendations by learners to improve their academic performance.

1.7 METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

1.7.1 Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological approach, aiming to understand participants' experiences from their own perspectives (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher explored the phenomenon, namely the contributing factors at home or at school that may affect learners' academic performance. The advantages of a qualitative research

method (the reason it was chosen for the study) are that it produces a detailed description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences, as well as their interpretations of these experiences (Rahman, 2017). It holistically seeks to understand human experiences in a specific setting (Rahman, 2017). The disadvantage is that, because sample sizes in qualitative research are small, it is impossible to generalise (Rahman, 2017). It leaves out contextual sensitivities and focuses more on meaning and experiences (Rahman, 2017). A phenomenological approach was chosen because it enabled the researcher to learn from the participants' lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). The philosophical assumptions that underpin a phenomenological approach are the following: (i) ontological (nature of reality –describes the nature of reality), (ii) epistemological (nature of knowledge – how we know what we know), (iii) axiological (ethical issues need to be considered when planning research) and (iv) methodological (process of the research - how it is conducted) (Neubauer et al., 2019).

1.7.2 Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in the Umzinyathi area, a rural region under tribal authority. The area falls under the jurisdiction of the eThekwini Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal. The population of this area is predominantly IsiZulu-speaking. The schools in the area fall under quintile 1. The participants were recruited for the study through the local church, as members of St. John Apostolic Mission, who also referred other participants who live in the Umzinyathi area and attend mainstream schools there. Since St. John Apostolic Mission is the local church, most learners who attend schools in the area are members of the church. The learners ranged in age from 13 to 18 years.

The study employed a non-probability snowball sampling method, as not all members of the population have an equal chance of being selected (Rahman, 2023). Specifically, snowball sampling helped the researcher to recruit more participants (Parker & Scott, 2019; Ting et al., 2025). The researcher lives in the study area, making it easy to access participants. Data collection started with participants who are members of St. John church. The researcher acknowledges that this may have limited the original recruitment; however, snowball sampling ensured that

participants who were not affiliated with the church could also be recruited. The researcher then developed a profile of traits and asked participants to suggest and refer potential participants who met the research criteria and were willing to participate in the study. In this process, one participant leads to another (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014)

1.7.4 Data Collection Procedures

Ethics approval (2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM ethics number; Appendix A) was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of South Africa, and permission was granted by the St. John Apostolic Church to conduct research at the church (Appendix B). Upon obtaining written permission from the church pastor, letters of informed consent were sent to parents, requesting their consent for their children to participate in the study. Upon obtaining parental consent, assent was also obtained from the children to participate in the study (Cohen et al., 2018). No data collection commenced before ethics approval had been granted and permission, consent or assent had been obtained from the relevant parties.

As the study employed a qualitative method, the information was collected directly from the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio-recorded with the consent of all the participants. Another isiZulu-speaking person acted as a research assistant and listened to the recordings to verify that the same procedures were followed during the interviews, thereby confirming procedural integrity. The researcher transcribed the recordings, and the research assistant checked the transcriptions in isiZulu for accuracy before they were translated into English. The researcher and research assistant then compared the translations, and any discrepancies were discussed until 100% agreement was reached. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were allocated to all transcriptions to protect the personal information of the participants. Furthermore, names were removed; only the student researcher knew the participants' names. The research assistant also completed and signed a confidentiality form (Appendix H) to ensure that all information obtained from the interviews, as well as participants' names, would remain confidential.

1.8 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data analysis was conducted by the researcher and co-supervisor on the transcribed and translated texts using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a method for analysing qualitative data (Caulfield, 2019).

The following steps were followed (Cohen et al.,2018)

1. Taking out the explanatory comments written on the data.

2. Grouping the data according to key headings or areas.

3. Recording topics within each key heading or area and tallying the frequencies in which the items are mentioned.

4. Searching the list generated in number 3 and organising the topics under each heading with sub-headings.

5. After organising the headings, embed them into the data.

1.9 CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

1.9.1 Credibility

The participants were the best judges of whether the research findings accurately reflected their opinions and feelings (Kumar, 2021). After the transcriptions were checked, the participants were given the opportunity to review them as part of member checking (Kumar, 2021). When participants cannot read, the researcher reads the transcriptions to them.

1.9.2 Transferability

To achieve transferability, the process adopted is described in a manner that allows others to follow and replicate it (Kumar, 2021). However, since the findings of qualitative projects are

specific to a limited number of participants within a specific environment, such as learners in a rural area in KZN, generalisation is not possible. (Shenton, 2004). As such, the findings from this study should be interpreted with caution, as they may not be applicable to other situations and populations.

1.7.3 Instruments

No data collection commenced before ethics approval and written permission were received from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA) (Appendix A). The following instruments were used in this study: Permission letter and feedback (Appendix B); letters of informed consent (Appendix C1, C2) and assent (Appendix D1, D2); a biographical questionnaire (Appendix E1, E2), an interview script (F1, F2) and a procedural checklist (G). Chapter 3, paragraph 10, gives more information on these instruments.

1.9.3 Dependability

The study procedure was reported in detail. This enables future researchers to replicate the study to obtain the same results. It also authorises the reader to assess the extent to which proper research practice has been followed (Shenton, 2004). The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview script to ensure that all the participants were asked the same questions.

1.9.4 Confirmability

The researcher analysed the results to ensure that the findings reflected the participants' experiences and ideas rather than the researcher's characteristics and preferences (Shenton, 2004).

1.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As researchers, it is essential to consider the impact of our research on participants, as we have a responsibility to preserve their dignity as human beings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Informed consent concerns autonomy and derives from participants' rights to freedom and self-determination. Participants have the right to weigh the risks and benefits of their involvement in a research study and may refuse to participate or withdraw without facing negative consequences once the research has begun (Cohen et al., 2018).

The following ethical considerations were adhered to:

1.10.1 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was adhered to. A person has the right to privacy and not to participate in research, including the right not to answer questions or be interviewed, and to participate without fear of being observed (Cohen et al., 2018). Since individual interviews were conducted, anonymity could not be ensured. However, participant numbers were assigned to ensure confidentiality. The biographical questionnaires (Appendices E1 and E2) did not include any identifiable information such as names and addresses. All means of identification were removed, and codes were used to identify people. Data files were password-protected on the computer (Cohen et al., 2018), and all hard-copy data documents will be stored for at least 5 years in a locked cabinet in the supervisor's office. To protect participants' privacy rights, the information provided was not disclosed in any way that might identify individuals or enable them to be traced. Confidentiality was also ensured through signed statements from the researcher, which prohibited the disclosure of the research and restricted access to data that identified participants (Cohen et al., 2018). Finally, the participants were protected in accordance with amended Section 16(1) of the Protection of Personal Information (POPI) Act, No. 4 of 2013, and the researcher ensured that no one had access to the participants' information (POPI Act, 2021). No identifiable information about the participants or their settings was shared in the dissertation or any publication derived from the study (Cohen et al., 2018).

1.10.2 Voluntary Participation

Participation was voluntary, and the participants were thoroughly informed about their rights (De Vos et al., 2011). They were also assured that they could choose to answer a question or not and withdraw from the study without any negative consequences.

1.10.3 Compensation

The participants did not receive any compensation, as that might have compromised the study (De Vos et al., 2011).

1.10.4 Protection from Harm

The participants were protected from harm, and the researcher took all reasonable measures to ensure this (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). No information was withheld, and no incorrect information was provided to ensure that participants agreed to participate, even though they could have refused (De Vos et al., 2011). Learners who may have had difficulty discussing their scholastic journey were offered the option to be referred to an educational psychologist without incurring any expenses (Appendix I).

1.10.5 Communication of Findings

The participants were provided with information about the study's findings and conclusions, as the study served as a learning experience for both participants and the researcher (De Vos et al., 2011).

1.11 LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Using the church for data collection could limit participation by potential participants who were not part of the church, thereby excluding them from the study. However, through snowball sampling, this limitation was addressed. Six participants were recruited from the church, and five were added through snowball sampling. The participants were only IsiZulu first-language

speakers; therefore, it was not possible to generalise the findings. Participants were cautious in their responses, and one participant withdrew from the study.

1.12 DEFINITION OF THE KEY CONCEPTS

The terms which are often used in this dissertation will be explained in detail:

1.12.1 Academic performance

Academic performance is broadly defined as the measurable outcomes of learner achievements in relation to curriculum standards; typically assessed through standardised tests, school-based assessments, and national examinations. Academic performance also refers to the extent to which learners demonstrate mastery of curriculum content, as measured by tools such as the Annual National Assessments (ANA) and the National Senior Certificate (NSC). These assessments are designed to evaluate learners' competencies in various subjects and to monitor the effectiveness of teaching and learning across schools. In this study, academic performance will refer to the progress of learners to the next grade.

1.12.2 Factors

In general, factors are the circumstances, facts, or influences that contribute to a result or an outcome (Hornby, 2000). In this study, factors refer to any influences that may positively or negatively affect a learner's academic performance. These factors could be internal (e.g., motivation and self-esteem) and external (e.g., socio-economic factors such as family income and access to resources, school-related factors such as school infrastructure and teacher quality, and environmental factors such as peer influences and home learning environments).

1.12.3 IsiZulu-speaking persons

IsiZulu is one of South Africa's 12 official languages. IsiZulu is a Nguni language and the native language of the Zulu culture. According to the South African Census (2022), isiZulu is the most spoken first language in South Africa, spoken by approximately 12.4% of the population and

understood by more than 50%. IsiZulu is mostly spoken in and around KwaZulu-Natal. In this study, participants reside in the rural Umzinyathi area of eThekwini Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal. All the recruited participants speak isiZulu as their first language. Consent and assent letters were thus written in isiZulu to invite the participants, and the semi-structured interviews were conducted in the same language.

1.12.4 Mainstream high school

Mainstream high schools are institutions that provide education to all learners, following the National Curriculum, and cater to learners with or without disabilities. (DOE, 2001). Mainstream education is characterised by diversity, as these schools have learners with different backgrounds, cultures, abilities, and varying needs. It allows teachers to use a variety of teaching and assessment methods tailored to individual needs. In the current study, all the recruited learners were attending mainstream high schools.

1.12.5 Parents

A parent is a person responsible for caring and supporting a learner (Act no. 84 of 1996). In this study, when referring to parents, it includes guardians (i.e., grandmothers or other family members) who are caring for the learners.

1.12.6 Quintile (1-5) school

The Quintile 1-5 categorisation is a government classification of public schools in South Africa, based on the socio-economic status of the community in which the school is located (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019). Quintile 1 schools are referred to as non-paying schools that receive government funding (White & Van Dyk, 2019). The participants in this study all attended schools in the lowest quintile, namely quintile 1.

1.13 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study. It provides the background, the research problem, and the study's purpose. The main objective, research questions and importance of the study are

explained. The chapter highlights the literature review and methodology. Lastly, it provides a brief overview of the study's structure.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to the research topic, focusing on the factors that affect learners' academic performance. It explains the theoretical framework underpinning the study, which bio-ecological system and the Ubuntu philosophy. These theories helped interpret the data.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology used in the study. It outlines the qualitative approach, research paradigm, and research design, all integral to a phenomenological study. It provides the setting in which the study was conducted and the sampling technique, namely, purposive and snowball sampling. The chapter further describes the participants, the instruments used, the data collection procedure, the data analysis and the ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 presents the study's findings, derived from interviews and the biographic questionnaire. Themes were created based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system. Graphs and tables were used to make the results easy to understand.

Chapter 5 presents the study's findings. It revisits the research questions and gives a summary of the findings, learners' reflections on improving academic performance, recommendations for teachers, parents, and learners, and recommendations for the Department of Education. Furthermore, there are recommendations for further research. Strengths and limitations are also given.

1.14 CONCLUSION

This chapter gave an introduction and background to the study, the research problem, the main research question, the sub-research questions, the objectives of and rationale for the study, the significance of the study, a literature review, the research methodology, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the research, the limitations of the study, and the definitions of key terms. It also gave an outline of the chapters.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the research question, aims, and context of this study were introduced. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the study and examines the literature on various factors that may impact learners' academic performance in countries with diverse economic backgrounds. The specific focus is on the academic performance of learners in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by two theoretical frameworks. The theories are Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological theory and the Ubuntu philosophy (Murove, 2009; Msila, 2015). Both approaches share common elements focused on human relationships and development. They both acknowledge the importance of the environment in shaping individual development and recognise the relationship and impact of culture on human development.

2.2.1 Bio-Ecological Systems Theory

This theory posits that a child is influenced by the environment in which they grow up (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), child development happens within five interrelated systems, namely the (i) microsystem, (ii) mesosystem, (iii) exosystem, (iv) macrosystem, and (v) chronosystem.

The microsystem refers to the environment in which a child lives and the individuals with whom they interact daily, such as family and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). A microsystem in which parents do not have employment may harm a child's development and academic success due to the limited availability of academic support resources (Kapur, 2018). Children raised in an affluent environment (microsystem) may have access to more resources and opportunities that could positively influence their development (Kunnel et al., 2020). Peer influence can also have an impact on learners' substance abuse behaviour (Umkoro, 2021)

In the mesosystem, the interaction between the child and the microsystem is evident. The mesosystem includes the child's siblings, teachers, peers at school, and parents. The mesosystem comprises systems that can affect the child and their interactions with others; this may include a negative influence from peers (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). As previously mentioned, schools in low-resourced communities often have teachers with limited skills, which can also contribute to learners' poor academic performance (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). According to South Africa's indicators report on the National Senior Certificate for 2008–2013, learners in quintile 1 schools performed poorly compared to their counterparts in middle- and high-quintile schools (Umalusi, 2015). These findings may be due to schools in quintile 1 employing lower-skilled teachers.

The exosystem has no direct link to the child but affects the people who have a proximal relationship with the child (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This may include parents' workplace experiences, which can directly affect the child. For example, when parents work overtime, it may affect their child because they will not have time to help with homework (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Financial challenges experienced by parents due to non-employment may also indirectly influence a child's academic performance. For example, parents may not have the financial means to pay school fees, resulting in the school having fewer finances to support learners (White & Van Dyk, 2019). Parents with higher employment profiles can enhance learners' self-esteem, which can, in turn, positively influence their academic performance (Drydakis, 2023).

The macrosystem encompasses dominant economic and social structures, including religion, cultural practices and beliefs, that can influence the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This may include cultural practices observed in the village or the distribution of government child grants. It may include a detailed plan outlining the specifications and essential elements of a particular culture (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Lastly, the chronosystem encompasses the ecological events and transitions that occur throughout life, as well as changes in socio-historical conditions and developmental time, which influence interactions between the systems and their impact on individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This may include transitioning from one area to another, forming new friendships, and embarking on a new life (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory has four interacting dimensions that form the centre of a child's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). These four primary components, namely (i) process, (ii) person, (iii) context, and (iv) time, influence human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). The process is defined by interactions between organisms and their environment, referred to as the proximal process, which involves interactions with objects or people (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This happens over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Additionally, the process differs from child to child, depending on the child's surroundings and characteristics, including personality, appearance, intelligence, and others (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Development occurs in a specific environment, referred to as context, which encompasses home, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

2.2.2 Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu, an African philosophy and way of life, has been sustained for many centuries in African communities, including South Africa (Maphalala & Nkosi, 2025). It is an internal state of being human (Murove, 2009). Ubuntu means selflessly protecting and caring for other people (Msila, 2015). Ubuntu acknowledges a person's position as a human being who deserves unlimited respect, self-respect, value, and acceptance from other community members (Diedrich, 2011). It encourages the attitude that one should live with others (Murove, 2009). Ubuntu is an inclusive philosophy as it is manifested in the community. Acts of kindness and compassion, caring and sharing that lead to positive outcomes for the community and the individuals, are the ultimate fulfilment of Ubuntu. In the spirit of Ubuntu, as mentioned earlier, parents and siblings can play a significant role in a child's education; for instance, collaboration among parents, teachers, and learners can enhance learners' success in education (Simwela & Serpell, 2020). A parent forgiving their pregnant child and providing her with support in continuing her studies is a form of Ubuntu (Mohr et al., 2019). Ubuntu's values of sharing, caring, tolerance, sympathy, forgiveness, and humanness contribute to a positive school environment, which can lead to improved school outcomes and a greater desire to learn (Baken, 2015). Ubuntu offers a framework for socially responsible and inclusive transformative teaching in education (Maphalala & Nkosi, 2025)

Ubuntu means, “I am because you are”. Ubuntu also means people are family living in unity with one another, and one should be able to rely on the support of others, who must play their part by contributing to individual needs and those of the community. Ubuntu does not want people to live in fear; rather, it is based on respect (Msila, 2015). An idiom that says a bird builds with another bird’s feathers shows that, as people, we need one another (Msila, 2015).

2.2.3 Bio-Ecological System and Ubuntu Philosophy Integrated as Applied to the Study

The influence of the environment is underlined in both the philosophy of Ubuntu (Msila, 2015) and Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory (2005). In both theories, the development of the child is influenced by his or her environment: In Bronfenbrenner’s theory (2005), the environment includes family members (parents, siblings), friends, neighbours, and everyone who is around the child at a specific time, whilst Ubuntu emphasises that the entire village (environment) raises the child (Msila, 2015; West, 2024). Ubuntu thus shares similarities with the bio-ecological system, as the individuals who play a role in the child’s education and nurturance (i.e., development) are members of the community who raise the child to be incorporated into society (Nsameng & Tchombe, 2011).

2.2.4 Microsystem and Ubuntu Principles

When parents support a child with educational needs, they emphasise the importance of mutual support in the microsystem of human life. This is promoted by the Ubuntu principle that says, “I am because you are”, which promotes that the welfare of the family (Msila, 2015) is more important than individual interest. Both principles may promote active family involvement in the child's school matters.

2.2.5 Mesosystem and Ubuntu Principles

The interconnectedness of various aspects of an individual's life (Msila, 2015), which promotes a spirit of solidarity in Ubuntu (Ngubane & Makua, 2021), may foster positive collaboration between different microsystems. This occurs in the interactions among learners’ microsystems, such as family and school. By fostering positive two-way influences, the mesosystem can create a unified and supportive environment that enhances learners’ academic performance.

2.2.6 Exosystem and Ubuntu Principle

The Department of Education at the district level can address the shortage of educational resources and infrastructure, such as libraries, computer labs, and classrooms, in schools, which may impact learners' academic performance, especially in underserved areas like rural areas. The government, guided by the principles of Ubuntu that emphasise communal well-being (Msila, 2015; Murove, 2009), may be inspired to prioritise educational resources and infrastructures within the exosystem, which includes the government itself.

2.2.7 Macrosystem and Ubuntu Principles

The creation of educational policies at the macrosystem level, motivated by Ubuntu principles, may result in a microsystem that is more inclusive and supportive and in educational settings that value diversity and build a sense of community among learners (Kyei-Nuamah & Peng, 2024; Mabingo, 2020; Mukuni & Tlou, 2018). This may also be guided by the Ubuntu philosophy that focuses on the importance of human dignity, compassion and collective responsibilities (Diedrich, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the theories mentioned above, which are used in the current study.

Figure 1: Integrating Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory and the Ubuntu philosophy

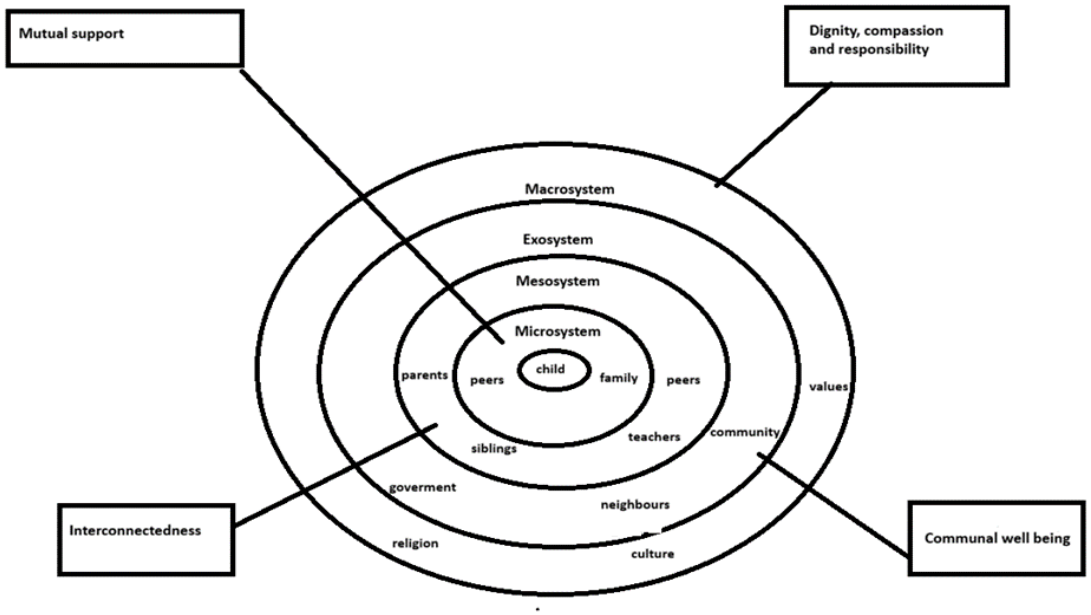


Figure 1 illustrates how Ubuntu encourages observing and understanding the connections between different parts of life. The bio-ecological system operates similarly, rather than examining them separately. Integrating Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system and Ubuntu philosophy may provide a deeper understanding of the impact of human relationships, particularly on children, in the context of education, especially in African countries (Okyere-Manu, 2021).

2.3 ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Academic performance encompasses various aspects that cannot be included in a single definition. Different authors provide different definitions, but all with the same meaning (Gregory Arief, 2019; Imid, 2020; Qocayeva, 2024). Learners' academic performance is the key goal of education, defined as the knowledge learners acquire through instruction and is assessed by teachers through grading (Kumar et al., 2021). Some goals include equipping learners with practical skills essential for their daily lives (Jana, 2022) and promoting economic growth and stability (Capel et al., 2019). Academic performance is a result of learners' cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Adams et al., 2018) and the socio-cultural context in which learning takes place (Gregory Arief, 2019). In other words, academic performance is a key indicator of learners' educational success and the process of educational development (Ansong et al., 2018). Furthermore, learners' academic performance is regarded as the outcome of education, measured by examinations or continuous assessment (Mahlangu, 2016). The purpose of measuring academic performance is to track learners' academic progress (Majola & Tshite, 2023).

Scholars submit that achievement within an educational establishment is gauged by academic success, which refers to how effectively a learner fulfils the criteria established by local governments and institutions (Mahlangu, 2016). Moreover, it reflects outcomes in the domains of learning in which learners have successfully attained the targeted objectives central to their educational journey at school, college, or university (Lamas, 2015; Steinmayr et al., 2015). Academic performance can be defined as the output produced by learners and conveyed through school grades (Lamas, 2015).

2.4. FACTORS INFLUENCING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The academic performance of learners plays a crucial role in fostering a country's economic and social development (Pal, 2023). Academic achievements solidify the prospects for developing the next generation, empowering them to play an active role in the country's overall growth and progress (Kumar et al., 2021).

A learner's academic performance, as already mentioned, can be influenced by learner factors (physiological, personal, and psychological factors), family and peer factors, socioeconomic and school factors (infrastructure and learning environment), and societal level factors (sociocultural norms) (Ansong et al., 2018; Korir, 2020). For instance, children from economically disadvantaged families may have fewer learning resources (Kapur, 2018). Personal factors include personal motivation, skills, study habits, intellectual level and self-esteem (Lamas, 2015). Furthermore, school factors include teacher-learner relationships (Lamas, 2015). Children residing in impoverished rural households often walk long distances to reach school (Chitondo, 2022). This situation could affect their focus and academic performance, leading to drowsiness during lessons (Marongedza et al., 2023). Some children are required to handle household responsibilities, such as collecting water, cooking, and washing, which can affect their scholastic achievements and even lead them to drop out of school (Kapur, 2018). Children are also often forced to perform household duties due to their families' economic struggles (Gutierrez-Guano et al., 2023). However, a disadvantaged economic background can sometimes act as a source of motivation, with family expectations pushing the learner to strive diligently (Sikhwari et al., 2019).

Quintile 1 schools can also be a contributing factor to learners' academic performance because these schools face challenges such as limited educational resources, language barriers and a shortage of qualified teachers, which may negatively affect learners' academic performance, especially in science subjects (Liu, 2024; Mzobe & Chinaka, 2024). In India, the government classifies the population into different socio-economic categories, namely the general class (a socially, economically, and educationally advanced group), the scheduled caste/tribe (a historically disadvantaged socio-economic group officially recognised by the Indian government

for targeted support), and the other backwards classes (a socially, educationally, and economically underdeveloped group) (Kunnel et al., 2020). Moreover, in the Indian context, it was discovered that learners from higher socio-economic classes exhibited superior academic performance compared to their peers from lower socio-economic strata. However, even within the same schools, learners displayed varying levels of academic achievement, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds or the school's geographical location. This discrepancy was attributed to the learners' socio-economic status (Kunnel et al., 2020). This proves that socio-economic status indeed influences learners' academic achievements.

In South Africa, there is a notable performance gap between learners from schools in quintiles 1 to 3 and those from schools in quintiles 4 to 5. Like the Indian scenario, learners from higher socioeconomic backgrounds outperform their counterparts from lower socioeconomic strata. In addition to socio-economic status, parental engagement also influences learners' academic performance.

Effective communication and collaboration among parents, learners, and the school are crucial to learners' education (Simwela & Serpell, 2020). The sharing of educational responsibilities between parents and teachers is important since Ubuntu promotes sharing responsibilities in educational settings (Mangwegape, 2023). Communication between parents and teachers is vital for addressing learners' concerns and enhancing their academic advancement. When parents are involved in overseeing school activities, learners tend to exhibit better behaviour in the school environment (Ntekane, 2018). However, excessive parental engagement can lead to issues in parent-learner relationships (Ntekane, 2018). For instance, excessive parental checking can foster distrust in the learner and may give the impression that the parent lacks confidence in the learner's ability to handle their responsibilities independently (Llama & Tauzon, 2016).

Furthermore, parental supervision of homework can yield both beneficial and detrimental outcomes for learners' advancement (Benchckwitz et al., 2023). Providing assistance when needed can positively contribute to the learning journey (Silinskas & Kisas, 2019). Yet, an overly controlling environment might impede learners' academic development (Voisin et al., 2023). In the affluent nation of Estonia, a study found that increased parental oversight was associated

with lower academic achievement due to interference, resulting in a counterproductive impact (Silinskas & Kisas, 2019). Wei et al. (2019) note that during the initial stages of adolescence, young people tend to place greater significance on their autonomy and may perceive homework aids as hindering their learning progress. It is essential to strike a balance between providing support and promoting independence during this phase. Autonomy assumes a pivotal role during this period. While offering help with homework might not yield academic advantages, it might clash with learners' long-term strategies for self-reliance. This implies that when parents step back from direct involvement and instead focus on discussing the significance and benefits of education during adolescence, learners generally exhibit enhanced academic performance.

Globally, parental engagement across various educational contexts, from interactions between schools and parents to communication with teachers and principals, is notably limited (Echeverria-Castro et al., 2020). Parental engagement includes volunteering, participating in decision-making and facilitating learning (Amposah et al., 2018). Several factors can contribute to limited parental participation in the school environment. These include the parents' limited educational background, insufficient awareness of the benefits of education, and a lack of understanding of the importance of their involvement in their children's learning (Zenda, 2020). At times, economic constraints and the need to take on additional employment to ensure financial stability can significantly limit parents' time and capacity to engage in their children's education. This circumstance may adversely affect learners' academic achievement, as they may not receive the essential support and guidance they need (Hamidum, 2019). This occurs in the exosystem of a child, where the impact has no direct link to the child but affects the parents, leading to a child being negatively affected by their circumstances (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

In Zambia, it was found that improvements in learners' academic performance hinge on the effectiveness of communication between parents (Simwella & Serpell, 2020). In the same vein, research conducted in Chile has shown that learners whose parents take an active role in their school engagement tend to exhibit superior academic performance (Lara & Saracostti, 2019). Engaging in their children's education offers advantages not only to learners but also to parents, who acquire new skills and enhance their own understanding of their children's educational

needs (Hill, 2022). The experience of being involved in their children's education further enhances parents' confidence in their ability to support their children's learning. Moreover, participating in school events enables parents to establish connections with fellow families, school personnel and teachers, fostering a sense of mutual support (Llamas & Tuazon, 2016; Papathanasiou, 2022).

A research study conducted in California, United States of America, proposed that schools should actively promote parental engagement in a range of school-related endeavours, as this can profoundly enhance learners' educational journeys (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Hamidum (2019) concurs with Berkowitz et al. (2017) that establishing varied activities has the potential to captivate parents' interest and involvement, cultivating a favourable learning atmosphere in which learners are motivated to excel. Additionally, parents are the first to notice changes in their children's behaviour, such as becoming withdrawn or anxious, which may be a sign of bullying (Raraswati et al., 2024).

2.4.1 Bullying

School violence and bullying are significant concerns (Mahabeer, 2020) that can profoundly affect the school atmosphere, learners' well-being, and their ability to learn effectively (Khasawneh, 2020). Bullying can take various forms, including physical, verbal and social actions, as well as cyberbullying (Rizzotto & Franca, 2021). Bullying is categorised into three types, namely (i) learner-on-learner bullying; (ii) teacher-on-learner bullying, and (iii) learner-on-teacher bullying (Sibisi, 2021).

Most of the bullying and violent occurrences typically take place within the school setting (Rizzotto & Franca, 2021). Learner-on-learner bullying refers to learners' engagement in harmful behaviours towards another learner, such as intimidation, victimisation, teasing, hitting, threatening or taunting (Letsholo et al., 2021; Rizzotto & Franca, 2021). The effects of bullying can be far-reaching and detrimental to learners' academic performance and well-being. Being subjected to bullying can lead to poor academic performance due to increased stress, anxiety, and fear of attending school. At times, it can take the form of social exclusion where a learner is

bullied indirectly, which can be equally damaging as it can make victims feel isolated and rejected by their peers (Letsholo et al., 2021).

Bullying directed from learners to teachers takes place within a specific educational context. In such cases, learners may exhibit disrespectful and detrimental conduct towards their teacher, including swearing, derogatory remarks, mocking their appearance, and even escalating to physical confrontations (Rabo, 2022). A study done in Estonia revealed that teachers encounter instances of bullying, threats, disrespect, being ignored, and cyberbullying from their learners in their school (Silinskas & Kisas, 2019). This has an adverse impact on the teaching and learning process (Koiv et al., 2021). Ubuntu promotes respect among teachers and learners; disrespecting teachers contradicts this principle in schools (Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

Sexual bullying in the school setting encompasses various types of unwanted sexual conduct such as improper physical contact, exhibition of private parts, explicit sexual remarks, and dissemination of rumours (Rabo, 2022). It can manifest between individuals occupying varying roles and positions, including instances in which a teacher targets a learner, or the reverse occurs (Khasawneh, 2020).

Learners with disabilities are more vulnerable to bullying compared to their peers without disabilities (Malecki et al., 2020). Learners diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face even greater risk due to the unique challenges they encounter in social communication interactions, which can make them more susceptible to being misunderstood or targeted by peers (Holfeld et al., 2019). This also contradicts the Ubuntu principle of “I am because you are” (Msila, 2015)

These challenges may cause learners with disabilities to be potential targets for bullying (Holfeld et al., 2019). In Germany, it was found that learners with visual impairment who were enrolled in regular schools (mainstream schools) encountered difficulties like being left out and facing instances of bullying (Giese et al., 2022). Consequently, these lead learners must change schools and enrol in specialised educational institutions (Giese et al., 2022). According to the findings by Ball et al. (2022), learners with visual impairment encounter instances of bullying in their

classroom environments, involving not only their peers but also their teachers and para-educators.

In South African schools, learners also undergo bullying in educational settings; a situation that can negatively affect their overall well-being and infringe upon their entitlement to secure and nurturing learning environments (Letsholo et al., 2021). Individuals who fall victim to bullying are also susceptible to experiencing mental health problems (Iyanda, 2021).

2.4.2 Mental Health

Mental health problems can affect learners' academic performance (Guo et al., 2020). Various factors, including parental mistreatment, family challenges like illness, death, and conflicts, as well as negative past academic encounters, can lead to conditions like depression, anxiety, and stress (Ji et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2024). The pressure arising from school exams, assignments, and homework can also contribute to depression and anxiety (Guo et al., 2020).

2.4.2.1 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can emerge following exposure to distressing occurrences (Verma et al., 2024). It can have diverse impacts on individuals' experiences, including their academic achievements. Traumatic incidents such as sexual assault, natural disasters, and acts of violence can initiate PTSD, hampering a learner's capacity to focus, manage, and participate effectively in the learning process (Zho et al., 2022).

2.4.2.2 Academic stress

Research conducted in China found that learners' elevated academic stress is often linked to the demands and expectations imposed by the Chinese college admissions system (Li, 2023). Excelling in the admission test generated heightened pressure on learners to achieve strong academic results. Consequently, certain learners encountered mental challenges stemming from parental expectations and pressure (Li, 2023). The impact of examinations on young learners is also a frequently observed phenomenon in Ghana (Bentil, 2020).

Similarly, South African learners in rural areas face mental health challenges due to abuse, low socio-economic status, social stigma and peer pressure (Nkosi, 2025). Mohlomi (2025) discovered that trauma, teacher behaviour, social violence, cultural discrimination, and substance abuse are the key contributing factors to mental challenges among learners in rural areas. These challenges are growing and can significantly affect learners' academic performance in the classroom (Skinner et al., 2019). Mental challenges can also stem from the misuse of drugs (Odeleye & Jeqede, 2023).

The escalating challenge of substance abuse among learners is causing a major concern for key actors, despite ongoing efforts by government programmes and non-governmental organisations to address the problem (Nzama& Ajani, 2021). Substance and drug abuse have the potential to impact learners at any point in their lifetime (Rono et al., 2019). Early access to drugs and substances is one of the major factors contributing to the rise in abuse (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021). Communities and societies play a crucial role in learners' engagement in substance abuse; as Bronfenbrenner (2005) mentions, a child is affected by their surroundings. Peer pressure and the perception that drugs can boost cognitive functions such as memory are elements that can prompt certain learners to try substances to enhance their academic performance (Idowu, 2018; Umokoro, 2021). However, substance abuse can have severe consequences in relation to school discipline, classroom management, and classroom control, and in more serious cases, even escalate to violence within the educational setting (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021). These issues can significantly impact learners' academic performance, resulting in poor achievement and potentially leading to school dropout (Mokwena & Setshego, 2021). Substance abuse can harm learners' behaviour, impairing their ability to pay attention and concentrate in class (Zemba, 2022). This, in turn, can hinder their ability to complete assignments or engage in productive learning (Zemba, 2022).

In Nigeria, a study found that learners influenced by Indian hemp exhibit disruptive conduct that violates school regulations, leading to disciplinary challenges and disturbances in the learning environment for peers (Soremekun et al., 2020). In Kenya, it was found that teachers are engaged in substance abuse alongside learners, impeding the endeavours to curtail substance misuse

among learners (Rono et al., 2019). This situation makes it difficult to enhance the academic performance of learners who are involved in substance abuse (Rono et al., 2019). Peer pressure, prevailing socio-economic circumstances (Idowu, 2018), and parents who fail to supervise their children's digital activities can all play a role in contributing to substance and drug problems among learners (Teixeira et al., 2021). Apart from drug and substance abuse, academic performance can be affected by pregnancy.

Pregnancy can have potentially negative impacts on the futures of female teenagers (Odiri & Anthonia, 2023). It presents a social and educational concern prevalent across underdeveloped, developed, and developing nations (Nkosi & Pretorius, 2019). Learners who become pregnant face various challenges that can significantly affect their educational achievement (Jochim et al, 2021). The challenges may include missing school, examinations, homework, school projects, and classroom lessons, experiencing emotional distress, having to make trips to doctors, and experiencing pregnancy-related symptoms such as vomiting, dizziness, nausea, and low self-esteem. (Cherotich et al., 2022; Mokwena & Van Breda, 2021; Ngcongo, 2016). However, parental encouragement can have a substantial positive impact on pregnant learners, enabling them to pursue their education and maintain strong academic performance (Mohr et al., 2019). A study conducted in Ethiopia revealed that pregnant girls frequently experience social stigma from their peers in the community (Radhakrishnan, 2022).

In Eswatini, it was found that young girls who become pregnant are notably more prevalent among learners in rural regions than in urban areas (Dlamini, 2019). This phenomenon predominantly occurs in April, August, and December, coinciding with school closures (Dlamini, 2019). School closure and reduced parental supervision during these months can be contributing factors to the issue (Dlamini, 2019). Pregnancy can impact learners' academic performance, and teachers' knowledge plays a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all learners.

2.4.3 Teachers

When teachers teach a subject outside their area of expertise, it can harm learners' academic performance, especially in complex disciplines such as mathematics and science (Mabena, 2021). For teachers, possessing effective educational management abilities, meticulously structured frameworks, and impactful teaching approaches are essential. These attributes contribute to maintaining classroom order and fostering productive communication, ultimately leading to improved academic achievement among learners (Chakraborty, 2020). The development of these vital characteristics is heavily influenced by teachers' experience, expertise, educational backgrounds, and qualifications (De Silva et al., 2018). Rural schools often face challenges with the availability of skilled, adequately trained teachers (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019).

In Ghana, teachers are often hesitant to accept teaching positions in rural schools due to factors such as scarce resources, isolated settings, and inadequate infrastructures (Opuku-Asare et al., 2022). The insufficient presence of competent teachers in rural schools can impede the academic progress and overall educational journeys of learners (Opuku-Asare et al., 2022). Moreover, Tachie (2020) noted that, due to a limited number of teachers, some are compelled to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise. School resources play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness and accessibility of learning and teaching.

2.4.4 Resources

The availability of educational material can influence learners' academic achievements (Arumuru & David, 2024). Educational institutions with improved amenities, such as laboratories, libraries, classrooms, and infrastructure, may afford learners greater opportunities to enrich their educational journeys (Fanani, 2023; Siregar & Azazi, 2021). Private schools are often better funded and may present significantly superior resources compared to public schools (Kutu et al., 2020). The discrepancy between government and private schools may stem from private school parents having greater financial means, stronger social connections, and higher educational backgrounds. Furthermore, parents in private schools are more involved in their children's education (Mohammed & Abera, 2022). Insufficient resources can impede teachers' capacity to

effectively involve learners and establish a favourable learning atmosphere (Omoniyi et al., 2019). However, establishing a cooperative alliance between educational institutions and the community can be a valuable approach to overcoming challenges, even in the face of constrained finances, resource scarcity, and staff limitations (Engelbrecht, 2020). When educational institutions and the community work together to overcome educational challenges, it means applying Ubuntu in practice, which promotes interconnectedness through collective support (Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Excessively populated classrooms can also adversely affect South African learners' scholastic achievement (West & Meier, 2020). The primary causes of overcrowding often include inadequate staffing, under-resourced educational institutions, and insufficient infrastructure, which compound the problem (West & Meier, 2020). Numerous difficulties arise from classrooms that are too crowded, including a negative attitude from teachers towards learners. This places immense pressure on teachers, leading to feelings of exasperation and exhaustion, as well as challenges in managing the behaviour of large numbers of learners in confined areas (West & Meier, 2020). Maintaining discipline becomes demanding for teachers (West & Meier, 2020).

2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the relevant literature on influences on learners' academic achievement. Additionally, it introduced bio-ecological theory and Ubuntu philosophy as guiding principles for the research.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the study's methodology and explores the factors affecting learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). It discusses the research approach, research design, research paradigm, population and sampling instruments, data analysis and interpretation, trustworthiness, and ethical consideration.

3.2 QUALITATIVE APPROACH

A qualitative approach was employed in this study to identify the factors affecting learners' academic performance in rural high schools in the Umzinyathi area of KZN. Qualitative research begins by identifying underlying assumptions, broad perspectives, and potential applications of theoretical frameworks, and by exploring research issues aimed at uncovering significance within virtual or social groups associated with human problems (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). This type of research enabled the researcher to explore learners' personal experiences, capturing their emotions, perceptions, and interactions in relation to their academic performance (Neubauer et al., 2019). Data collection was conducted in the Umzinyathi area, where the learners were situated, and information was obtained through direct conversations with learners and observations of their actions and behaviours within the specific context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The advantages of the qualitative method include producing detailed descriptions of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences, along with their interpretation (Rahman, 2017). This approach facilitated exploration and discovery without rigid constraints (Creswell, 2013), allowing for a deeper understanding of the factors affecting learners' academic performance (Rahman, 2017). However, there were disadvantages. Due to the small sample size, it was not possible to generalise the findings to a broader population (Creswell, 2013; Rahman, 2017). Furthermore, the data collection and analysis process were time-consuming for the researcher, as she visited each participant at their homes (Creswell, 2013).

The philosophical assumptions that underpinned this study included the ontological assumption, which posits that there are many different realities, shaped by people's experiences. Therefore, individual views on academic performance were gathered to understand each participant's unique experience. The epistemological assumption, namely that knowledge is shaped by interactions, was explored through face-to-face interviews conducted to investigate how social and personal factors influence academic performance (Creswell, 2013). In the axiology assumption, the researcher prioritised ethical considerations by treating the participants with respect, ensuring their well-being and maintaining honesty in the research process. The methodological assumption was that the researcher employed a qualitative methodological approach, conducting face-to-face individual interviews to explore factors affecting learners' academic performance. This methodological approach allowed the collection of detailed information directly from the participants (Creswell, 2013; Neubauer et al., 2019). These four philosophical frameworks, which are ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological assumptions embedded in qualitative research, influence how researchers approach and interpret research processes, the nature of knowledge, and the role of values and biases in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

3.3 RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

Researcher reflexivity involves critically examining one's own beliefs and biases to understand how they may affect a research study. It involves being self-aware, considering the study's context, and acting ethically. This approach helps to make qualitative research trustworthy and honest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher conducted a study in the Umzinyathi area, where they reside, providing an in-depth understanding of the local context. However, this came with some challenges. The participants in the study were not selected by the researcher but were recruited by a local gatekeeper. This ensured that the sample was not biased by including researchers' connections, such as relatives or neighbours. The researcher was not familiar with the participants prior to the study. Being familiar with the community was advantageous in many ways, but it also required the researcher to be careful to maintain boundaries and avoid conflicts of interest. The researcher tried to bracket her assumptions and

approach the research with an open and curious mindset (Creswell, 2013). By setting aside her assumptions before the interviews, she reflected on any potential bias and kept a journal to record her thoughts. During the interviews, the researcher used open-ended questions to allow participants to share their experiences freely, and she actively listened to their responses without interrupting or imposing her own views. The researcher created a respectful environment that encouraged honest communication.

3.4 RESEARCH PARADIGM

A research paradigm is a perspective through which one views the world, shaping one's approach to a research subject and guiding one's thoughts about it (Kamal, 2019). This perspective guides the researcher's entire investigation, encompassing data collection and analysis methods (Kamal, 2019), by promoting a reflexive, mindful approach to the various perspectives and realities present in the research setting (Creswell, 2013). In a qualitative paradigm, data is gathered descriptively and subjectively, often in textual form (Muzari et al., 2022). A paradigm consists of philosophical beliefs that steer one's thought processes towards specific actions (Railean et al., 2016). According to Kamal (2019), a research paradigm is a way of viewing the world that frames a research topic and shapes the researcher's perspective. Furthermore, the research paradigm guides the researchers' investigation, encompassing data collection and analysis procedures.

This study adopted a constructivist paradigm with an ontological perspective that views reality as socially constructed (Railen et al, 2016). A constructivist paradigm involves social inquiry that gathers and examines qualitative data to explore people's viewpoints. The researcher employed a constructivist approach, which suggests that individuals construct their understanding of the world through their experiences and interactions (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, a constructivist paradigm is associated with social research that collects and analyses qualitative data to explore people's perceptions.

In this study, a constructivist paradigm enabled the researcher to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences of the factors that affect their academic performance. This paradigm enabled the researcher to understand how participants make sense of the factors

influencing their academic performance. It also enabled researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing learners' academic outcomes. Qualitative research cannot be generalised to larger populations; however, this study nevertheless aimed to shed light on the identified factors that can help learners from rural areas improve their academic performance (Railean et al., 2016).

3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design offers guidance on the path to follow during the execution of a research investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design outlines the method by which a research study is carried out, specifying the timing, sources, and circumstances for acquiring data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Qualitative research encompasses five primary research designs, namely case study, ethnography, narrative, grounded theory, and phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher chose a phenomenological design for this study, as it involves bracketing biases to approach the data with an open mind and without predetermined assumptions (Creswell, 2009).

A phenomenological study explores how different individuals collectively understand and interpret their shared experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study employs a phenomenological research design, grounded in a constructivist paradigm and ontological perspective, to understand and interpret participants' personal experiences. This approach acknowledges that their experiences are influenced by context-specific realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological study aims to depict the shared aspects of participants' experiences when encountering a particular phenomenon. The fundamental goal of phenomenology is to distil individual experiences into their universal essence (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological research design enabled the researcher to explore the factors that affect the academic performance of Gr 8–12 learners attending mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi rural area in KZN and to describe the common meaning of the phenomenon for the participants. Phenomenology focuses on explaining what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). The basic purpose is to integrate individual experiences with a phenomenon to convey a universal essence (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Phenomenology also aims to capture the essence of a phenomenon by examining it through the eyes of those who have experienced it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This entails elucidating the significance of the experience in both what occurred and how it was felt (Neubauer et al., 2019).

3.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question is:

What are the factors affecting Grade 8 – 12 learners' academic performance in a mainstream high school in a rural area in KZN?

To answer the main research question, the following sub-questions were formalised:

(i) What personal, social and environmental factors may influence the academic performance of Gr 8 – 12 learners attending mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi rural area of KZN?

(ii) What do learners recommend to improve their academic performance?

3.7 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to explore the factors affecting the academic performance of Grade 8–12 learners attending mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi rural area of KZN.

To achieve the main aim of the study, the following sub-aims were proposed:

(i) To identify personal, social and environmental factors that may influence the academic performance of Gr 8 – 12 learners attending mainstream high schools in Umzinyathi rural area of KZN.

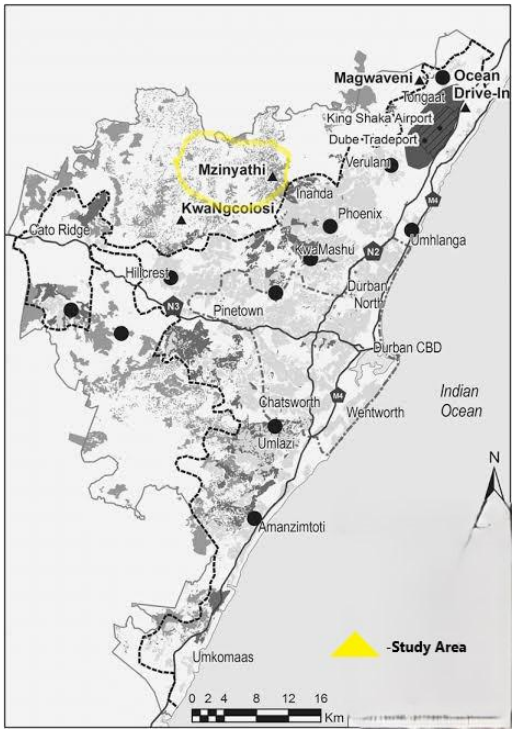
(ii) To identify recommendations by learners to improve their academic performance.

3.8 SETTING

The participants were recruited from the Umzinyathi area, a rural region in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) (See the yellow area marked in Figure 2). KZN is one of the nine provinces in South Africa where isiZulu is one of the main spoken languages (Census, 2022). The study was conducted in the Umzinyathi area, a rural area under the tribal authority. This area falls under the jurisdiction of

the EThekwini Municipality and is predominantly inhabited by isiZulu first-language speakers (Census, 2022).

Figure 2: KwaZulu-Natal - EThekwini Municipality Map (Sutherland et al., 2015)



Members (high school learners) of the Saint (St.) John Apostolic Mission was purposely selected to participate in the study, and they referred other participants who also lived in the Umzinyathi and attended mainstream schools in the area. The St. John Apostolic Mission was selected to recruit participants because it is the local church, and many of the community's high school learners attend it. The high school learners in the congregation attend different schools in the area, resulting in participants from diverse backgrounds. The learners were aged 13-18 and in Grades 8-12. They were selected regardless of perceived academic performance and whether they repeated a grade in school. They were required to meet the criteria outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Inclusion and exclusion criteria and rationale

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Participants should be between the ages of 13-18.	Participants who do not meet the age criteria of 13-18 years old.	This age range was selected because most high school learners fall within it (Kann et al., 2022).
Participants should attend a public, mainstream high school in the Umzinyathi area.	Participants should not be attending a public mainstream high school outside the Umzinyathi area.	The study aims to explore the factors that contribute to the academic performance of Grade 8–12 learners attending mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi rural area of KZN.
Participants should reside in the Umzinyathi area.	Participants who do not reside in the Umzinyathi area.	

3.9 PARTICIPANTS

This study followed a phenomenological research design utilising face-to-face semi-structured interviews with learners aged 13-18 years attending mainstream high schools in the selected rural area.

3.9.1 Sampling Strategies

Sampling is a method used to choose a subset from a large population or group of individuals for research purposes (Bhardwaj, 2019; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Two types of sampling strategies are mentioned in research, namely probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling refers to the selection of participants with whom the researcher may be familiar, whereas non-probability sampling involves the selection of participants who are unknown to the researcher (Cohen et al., 2018). The researcher opted to use non-probability purposive-convenience and snowball sampling, as they are valuable in exploratory research (Sarker & Al-Muaalemi, 2022).

Purposive sampling alludes to the researcher focusing on specific elements within the population (Sarker & Al-Muaalemi, 2022). These elements are listed in Table 1 and encompass both inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria ensured that all participants were aware of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Convenience sampling involved recruiting participants at a single data collection site, as at least one learner from each of the area's mainstream high schools attended St. John Apostolic Mission. This strategy enabled the researcher to obtain a diverse sample of participants through demographic convenience. Additionally, snowball sampling techniques were applied to the study. Snowball sampling is used for a participant group that is challenging to locate individually but can be identified through referrals from existing participants (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). At least one learner from each high school in the area was identified, and these learners requested friends in their schools to participate in the study. This means that learners from all four high schools in the area participated and equally benefited from the findings.

3.9.2 Participant Description

The combination of sampling techniques enabled the researcher to obtain 11 participants who could contribute to addressing the study's aims. Table 2 provides a summative description of the participants. A more detailed description of their biographical information is provided in Table 2 of this dissertation.

Table 2

Description of the participants

#	Age	Gender	Grade	Grade Repeated	Siblings	Siblings' age	Siblings attend the same school	Live with	Parent/Guardians' Employment Status	SASSA grant	Activities After School	Distance travelling	Mode of transport	Transport fee per day
P1	18	Female	12	Grade 10	Yes	21, 22	No-finished	Mother and Father	Full-Time	No	Cook, wash clothes	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P2	13	Male	8	No	Yes	20, 17, 16, 8	No	Grandmother	Unemployed	Yes	Play soccer	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P3	16	Female	8	Grade 8	Yes	21	No – finished	Grandmother	Unemployed	Yes	Cook, do schoolwork	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P4	17	Female	11	Grade 1	Yes	15	No	Mother and Father	Contract work	No	Wash dishes, wash clothes	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P5	18	Female	12	Grade 10	Yes	21, 22	No – finished	Mother and Father	Full-Time	No	Cook, wash clothes	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P6	13	Female	8	No	Yes	10	No	Mother	Unemployed	Yes	Wash clothes, do schoolwork	Long distance	Taxi, walking	R20.00
P7	17	Male	10	Grade 5	Yes	27, 29, 32, 21	No	Mother	Unemployed	Yes	Go to the soccer field, do schoolwork	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P8	17	Female	10	Grade 4	Yes	9, 8, 18, 20	Yes	Mother and Grandmother	Unemployed	Yes	Do schoolwork, watch television	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P9	18	Female	12	Grade 12	Yes	1	No	Grandmother	Full-Time	No	House chores, study	Long distance	Walking	R0.00
P10	14	Male	8	Grade 2	Yes	13, 26, 3	No	Mother and Grandmother	Full-Time	No	Do schoolwork, fetch water	Long distance	Taxi	R17.00
P11	13	Male	8	No	Yes	26, 3,14	No	Mother, Father, Grandmother	Full-Time	No	Clean the house, wash clothes	Long distance	Taxi	R40.00

Although not displayed in Table 2, it is worth noting that the 11 participants attended four different high schools in the area, indicating that the researcher successfully recruited participants from diverse schools. Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 attended the same school (School A), Participant 4 attended School B, Participants 8 and 9 attended School C, and Participants 10 and 11 attended School D. It is further highlighted in Table 2 that three participants (P2, P6 and P11 had not repeated a grade before. Three participants lived with both their parents (P1, P4, P5), while P11 lived with his parents and grandmother. Two participants lived with only their mothers (P6 and P7), three with only their grandmothers (P2, P3 and P9), and Participants 8 and 10 lived with their mother and grandmother. Five participants' parents/guardians worked fulltime (P1, P5, P9, P10 and P12), with one parent doing contract work (P4). The five parents/guardians who were unemployed (P2, P3, P6, P7 and P8) received SASSA grants, indicating their socio-economic background. The SASSA grant is designed to provide financial support to low-income households, especially unemployed parents.

3.10 INSTRUMENTS

All the instruments in this study were available in English or isiZulu. The instruments were initially developed in English to facilitate feedback from the supervisors. Thereafter, a back-translation process (Bornman & Louw, 2021) was employed to ensure that the translations accurately reflected the original English instruments. Two first-language isiZulu translators, not directly involved in the study, participated in the translation process. The English versions of the instruments were translated into isiZulu by one translator, and then the second translator translated the isiZulu back to English. After this, the researcher and research assistant compared the translations, and any discrepancies were discussed with the two translators until 100% agreement was reached.

3.10.1 Permission Letter

A permission letter (Appendix B) was sent to the church pastor requesting assistance in recruiting participants for the study from the church community. The permission letter outlined the study's aims and ethical considerations and requested the church's assistance with participant

recruitment through oral invitations at the church and by displaying a poster. The church provided written permission that participants could be invited from the church community (Appendix B).

3.10.2 Letters of Informed Consent and Assent

Upon obtaining written permission from the church, letters of informed consent (Appendices C1 and C2) were provided to parents in the church community who expressed interest in the study. These letters were designed to provide the participants and parents with detailed information. It included the purpose and aims of the study, the benefits and procedures of the study, what was expected of their children when participating, as well as ethical considerations, for example, the right to withdraw at any time (Manti & Licari, 2018). Parents who could not read or write were assisted by the researcher, who read the letter of informed consent to them. The consent forms (Appendices C1 and C2) were signed by the participants' parents to protect their rights. The consent form served as legal permission from the parent for the minor to participate in the research study (Manti & Licari, 2018), but the minor participants also had to sign a letter of informed assent. The learners thus received a letter of informed assent (Appendix D1, D2) sharing the same information as the letters of informed consent sent to their parents. Upon written assent (Appendix F), data collection commenced.

3.10.3 Biographical Questionnaire

The biographical questionnaire Appendices E1 and E2) was developed to collect participant information, including age, school, grade, and whether they had repeated any grade. This biographical questionnaire was completed by the learners who had agreed to participate in the study. This questionnaire was available in both isiZulu and English and was completed by the learners who participated in the study. Table 3 presents the questions used for developing the questionnaire.

Table 3

Development of Biographical Questionnaire

Number	Question	Type of Question	Aim of the Question	The Rationale for the Question
1	What is your age?	Closed-ended question	To identify whether the learner meets the inclusion criteria and is a candidate for the study.	According to Grootens-Wiegers et al. (2017), a child aged 12 or older is developmentally competent to participate in decision-making. These demographic questions are crucial for understanding the sample population and identifying potential age-related differences in academic performance.
2	What is your gender?	Close-ended question	To determine participants' gender.	
3	Do you have brothers and/ or sisters?	Close-ended question	To gather information about the family structure and how it may influence participants' development.	These questions relate to family factors. A learner's academic performance can be influenced by several factors, such as family factors including siblings (Ansong et al., 2018).
4	How old are they?	Close-ended question	To understand the age differences between siblings and how this might affect family dynamics.	
5	Are they in the same school as you?	Close-ended question	To gather information on whether having siblings in the same school provides social and emotional support for the learner.	
6	In what grade are you?	Close-ended question	To determine the learners' current grade.	This question helps establish the participant's academic level. Academic performance identifies learners' educational success and the process of developing academically (Ansong et al., 2018).
7	Did you repeat a grade?	Close-ended question	To understand participants' educational journey.	The question can indicate past academic struggles. Academic performance is a result of learners' cognitive and non-

Number	Question	Type of Question	Aim of the Question	The Rationale for the Question
				cognitive skills (Adams et al., 2018).
8	With whom do you live?	Close-ended question	To gather demographic information about the participants' living situation.	This question provides an insight into the participants' family structure. The home environment is another factor that influences learners' academic performance, including home space and the number of family members, making it difficult for learners to complete schoolwork (Booys et al., 2015).
9	What is your parents' employment status?	Close-ended question	To determine if parental employment status influences academic outcomes.	This question addresses socio-economic factors. The academic performance of the learners can be influenced by their family's socio-economic position (Korir, 2020).
10	What activities do you do after school? Please specify how much time you spend on the activity.	Mixed-type question	To understand how participants manage their time after school.	This question can reveal information about study habits, family responsibilities or extracurricular activities. Some children are required to handle household responsibilities, such as collecting water, cooking, and washing, which can potentially impact their scholastic achievements (Kapur, 2018).
11	How far do you need to travel from home to school?	Closed-ended questions	To determine the kilometres they travel to school.	These questions address issues of educational access and potential economic barriers. At times, children residing in these impoverished rural households frequently need to cover a considerable distance on foot to reach school. This situation could impact their focus and academic performance, leading to instances of drowsiness during lessons (Marangedza et al., 2023).
12	What transport do you use to get to school?	Closed-ended question	To determine the mode of transportation that learners use daily from home to school.	
13	How much do you spend on transport per day?	0pen-ended question	To gather information on the money spent by participants on	

Number	Question	Type of Question	Aim of the Question	The Rationale for the Question
			transportation to school.	

3.10.4 Interview Script and Procedural Checklist

An interview script (Appendices F1 and F2) was used to ensure the same questions were asked in all semi-structured interviews. A procedural checklist (Appendix G) was used to confirm that the same procedures were conducted in all the semi-structured interviews. Table 4 provides an outline for developing the interview schedule questions.

Table 4

Development of Interview Schedule Questions

Number	Question	Type of Question	Aim of the Question	Rationale for the Question
1	How would you describe your overall academic performance?	Open-ended question	To allow participants to provide detailed information about their academic achievement.	To directly address the core concept of academic performance. Academic performance is influenced by both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities of learners (Adams et al., 2018), thereby allowing participants to self-assess their academic performance.
2	What factors do you think impact your marks?	Open-ended question	To enable participants to express their thoughts on the various factors that influence their academic performance.	These questions align with the multifaceted nature of academic performance. Several factors can influence learners' academic performance, including learner-related factors, family background, peer influences, and socio-economic conditions (Ansong et al., 2018).
3	How do you think these factors influence your academic performance?	Open-ended question	To encourage the participants to provide a detailed response regarding the influence of various factors on their academic performance.	
4	How can you improve your academic performance?	Open-ended question	To allow participants to express their thoughts and suggestions on potential strategies that	These questions encourage participant to reflect on their academic goals and potential improvement. Academic performance reflects learners'

Number	Question	Type of Question	Aim of the Question	Rationale for the Question
			could enhance their academic performance.	educational achievement, academic progress, and the process of developing educationally (Ansong et al., 2018).
5	What are the goal marks you would like to get?	Open-ended question	To understand the specific grades that participants aim to achieve.	
6	What would help you to get those marks?	Open-ended question	To determine what support the participant believes they need to achieve their goal mark, or what resources they believe they need.	
7	What type of support do you think you need?	Open-ended question	To determine the type of support the participant needs.	These questions address the importance of parental engagement and support. Effective communication and collaboration between parents, learners, and the school play a crucial role in the education of learners (Simweleba & Serpell, 2020).
8	Can you tell me about the support you receive at home with school matters?	Open-ended question	To encourage the participants to provide detailed information about the support they receive at home regarding school-related issues.	
9	Tell me about the relationship between teachers and parents	Open-ended question	To encourage the participant to provide detailed information about the nature of the relationship between teachers and parents.	This question explores the teacher-parent relationship, which is important for academic success. Communication between parents and teachers is crucial for addressing learners' challenges and enhancing their academic advancement (Ntekane, 2018).
10	What can you say about the school environment?	Open-ended question	To encourage the participants to provide detailed information about their perceptions and experiences related to the school environment.	The question addresses the school factor, which can potentially reveal further information about the school environment, including school violence and bullying, critical concerns that significantly influence the school atmosphere, the well-being of learners, and their capacity to learn effectively (Khasawneh, 2020).
11	What can you say about the academic support you get from school?	Open-ended question	To encourage the participants to provide detailed information about their experiences related to the academic	The question relates to the school factors and the quality of education. It can provide insight into the differences between the schools. Schools in quintiles one to three receive more funding per

Number	Question	Type of Question	Aim of the Question	Rationale for the Question
			support they receive from the school.	learner from the government than schools in quintiles four and five (Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019).

3.10.5 Recording Equipment

Upon assent, the researcher used a phone to record the semi-structured interviews. Recordings were necessary to enable the researcher to transcribe the interviews to ensure a true reflection of the participants' responses.

3.11 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data collection occurred once ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa (Appendix I). Permission to recruit participants from the church was obtained from the pastor of St. John's Apostolic Mission (Appendix B). The pastor served as a gatekeeper; as a religious leader, she had established relationships and trust within the community, which gave her access to the community. The learners were willing to participate because the invitation came from a trusted member of the community, namely the pastor. She identified high school learners attending the local mainstream high school who were potentially eligible to participate in this study. A general meeting was organised by her to identify potential participants and their parents, to which the researcher was invited to introduce herself and explain the study's aims. The meeting was convened by the pastor, and potential participants were given a week to consider participation. Subsequently, those who were interested obtained the necessary informed consent (Appendix C) and letter of assent (Appendix D) from the pastor. Once the forms were completed, they were returned to the pastor, who, upon approval, shared the participants' information with the researcher. The face-to-face semi-structured interviews were then scheduled at a date, time, and place convenient for the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with high school learners from various mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi area in rural KZN. The learners did not have internet access or any electronic devices on which to conduct online interviews.

These semi-structured interviews were conducted at the participants' homes and lasted no longer than an hour. The interviews were conducted in the participants' first language, IsiZulu, as this made communication easier for them. The interviews were a dialogue between a researcher and a participant, discussing factors that affected the participant's academic performance. The aim was to reveal the significance of their experiences and explore their lived realities, which was achieved (Saepudin et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews provided learners with the freedom to express their views, which helped to understand them more effectively (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The interviews posed open-ended questions that were predetermined in a specific sequence, allowing for flexibility when a participant's answers required further deliberation (Appendix F). The environment was arranged to ensure that participants and the researcher could maintain direct eye contact.

At the start of the interview, the researcher introduced herself and outlined the purpose of the interview, namely, to investigate factors affecting learners' academic performance. The researcher also sought the participants' permission to record the interview using a voice recorder. A notebook was used to take field notes. Thereafter, the researcher reminded the participants of the ethical principles that would be upheld during the session. Each interview concluded with the researcher expressing appreciation for the learner's participation. The interviews lasted approximately an hour and did not interfere with the learners' school-related activities since they were conducted on Saturdays.

During the interviews, the researcher did the following (Seidman, 2006):

- Listened more and spoke less
- Asked follow-up questions to investigate more deeply into the participants' responses, for example: What do you think makes you disrespect the teacher?
- Only asked open-ended questions that encouraged the participants to share their thoughts and opinions without being influenced by the question, for example: Tell me about the relationship between your teachers and parents.

- Ensured that the participants stayed on the topic by giving them clear instructions about the topic to be covered, redirecting them if they went off the topic, and encouraging them to provide detailed responses. This assisted the researcher in maintaining the participants' concentration.
- Attempted to provide neutral responses to avoid biasing the participant's reflections.

3.12 DATA ANALYSIS

This research employed a qualitative approach, utilising thematic analysis to analyse the data. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to discover, examine, and communicate patterns and/or categories within the data (Braun & Clark, 2013).

The researcher used an inductive method. Inductive analysis is the method by which a qualitative researcher identifies and highlights important aspects, generating insights from data that begins with concrete data and concludes with the identification of categories and patterns (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher examined the data gathered from learners attending rural mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi district and aligned it with the research questions. The data was analysed by applying the following steps (Creswell & Poth, 2018):

3.12.1 Managing and Organising Data

First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and then checked for accuracy by an independent person who is an isiZulu first-language speaker and understands both isiZulu and English, with no prior knowledge of the study or its participants. All the participants had the opportunity to conduct member checking by reviewing the transcriptions to confirm that their interviews were accurately reflected. Since the interviews were conducted in isiZulu, the same blind-back-translation process (Bornman & Louw, 2021) used for the translation of the instruments was employed to assess the quality and correctness of the translations. The researcher sorted the transcribed data into individual files, naming them with letters, and stored them on the computer.

3.12.2 Reading and Memorising Emergent Ideas

The researcher and co-supervisor repeatedly reviewed the transcription, jotting brief notes to better understand the content.

3.12.3 Description and Classifying Codes into Themes

The initial phase involved detailing, categorising, and comprehending the data. The researcher and co-supervisor mutually grouped codes with similar properties into subcategories. These sub-categories were then further developed into themes. The themes that emerged were based on the research question. Coding refers to allocating categories or themes (Madondo, 2021).

3.12.4 Analysing the Results

In analysing the results, the researcher reflected on her personal experiences and compared them with the literature (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Furthermore, the researcher and her co-supervisor focused on addressing the research questions and evaluating whether the study's objectives were met, as outlined in the qualitative research method (Patton, 2015). This process aimed to deepen the understanding of how the findings responded to and reflected the research questions, offering a clear perspective on how effectively the study achieved its goal.

3.13 CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

3.12.1 Credibility

The participants were the best judges of whether the research findings accurately reflected their opinions and feelings (Kumar, 2011). After the transcriptions were completed and reviewed, the participants were given the opportunity to review the transcriptions. Then they were given the opportunity to review them as part of member checking (Kumar, 2011).

3.13.2 Transferability

To achieve transferability in this study, the process adopted was described in a manner that allows others to follow and replicate it (Kumar, 2011). However, since the findings of qualitative projects are specific to a limited number of participants within a specific environment, such as learners in a rural area in KZN, generalisation will not be possible. (Shenton, 2004). Bearing this

in mind, the findings from this study were interpreted with caution, as they may not be applicable to other situations and populations.

3.13.3 Dependability

The study procedures were reported in detail. This was to enable future researchers to replicate the study to obtain the same results. This was also to authorise the reader to assess the extent to which proper research practice had been followed (Shenton, 2004). The semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview script to ensure that all the participants were asked the same questions. During data collection and analysis, the researcher employed reflexive journaling to assess how her own positionality and personal experiences might have influenced the research process and data interpretation. Furthermore, she requested feedback from the participants to confirm that her findings accurately represented their viewpoints and experiences.

3.13.4 Confirmability

The researcher ensured that the results were unbiased and objective by submitting the data to her supervisor and co-supervisor for confirmation and verification. This was done to ensure that the findings reflected the participants' experiences and ideas rather than the researcher's characteristics and preferences (Shenton, 2004).

3.14 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Researchers must consider the effects of their research on participants as they have a responsibility to preserve participants' dignity as human beings (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Informed consent concerns autonomy and stems from the participants' right to freedom and self-determination. Participants have the right to weigh the risks and benefits of their involvement in any research study and may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences (Cohen et al., 2018).

Ethics approval was obtained from the research ethics committee at the University of South Africa, after which permission was granted by the St. John Apostolic Church to conduct research

at the church. Upon obtaining written permission from the church pastor to conduct research in the church, letters of informed consent were sent to parents, requesting their consent for themselves or their children to participate in the study. Upon parental consent, assent was obtained from the children to participate in the study (Cohen et al., 2018). All data was collected after the ethics approval had been granted and permission, consent, or assent had been obtained from the relevant parties. The following ethical considerations were adhered to:

3.14.1 Confidentiality

Confidentiality was adhered to. A person has the right to privacy, the option not to participate in research, the right to decline to answer questions or be interviewed, and the right to participate without fear of being observed (Cohen et al., 2018). Since individual interviews were conducted, anonymity could not be ensured; however, participants were assigned numbers to ensure confidentiality. The biographical questionnaire did not include any identifiable information, such as names and addresses. Any means of identification were removed, and codes were used to identify people when the data was transferred to an electronic file. Data files were password-protected on a computer (Cohen et al., 2018), and all hard-copy data documents were stored in a locked cabinet in the supervisor's office, where they will remain for at least five years. To protect the participants' right to privacy, the information provided was not disclosed in any way that might identify individuals or enable them to be traced. Confidentiality was protected, as the researcher obtained signed statements indicating non-disclosure of research, restricting access to data that identifies participants (Cohen et al., 2018). The participants were protected in accordance with amended Section 16(1) of the Protection of Personal Information Act No. 4 of 2013, and the researcher ensured that no one had access to participants' information (POPI Act, 2021). No identifiable information about participants or settings was shared in this dissertation or will be in any publication derived from this study (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.14.2 Voluntary participation

Participation was voluntary, and the participants were thoroughly informed about their rights (De Vos et al., 2011). They were assured that they could choose whether to answer a question or not and could withdraw from the study without any negative consequences.

3.14.3 Compensation

The participants did not receive any compensation, as this would have compromised the study's validity (De Vos et al., 2011).

3.14.4 Protection from harm

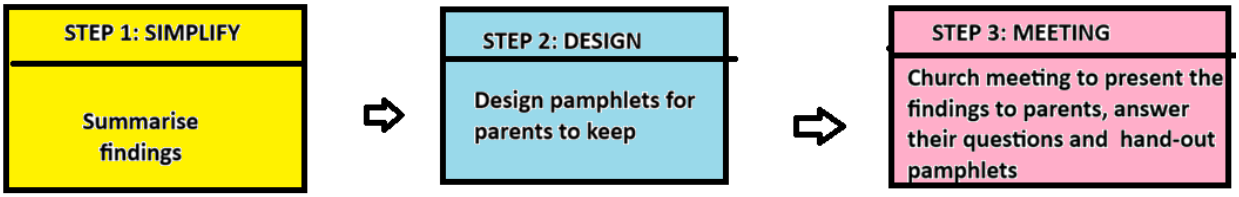
The participants were protected from harm, and the researcher took all reasonable measures to ensure this (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). No information was withheld, and no incorrect information was provided, to ensure that learners participated where they might have otherwise refused (De Vos et al., 2011).

3.14.5 Communication of findings

The participants were provided with information about the study's findings and conclusions, as the study served as a learning experience for both participants and the researcher (De Vos et al., 2011). The researcher had a session to present the findings to the church community. During this meeting at the church, the researcher provided them with pamphlets written in both isiZulu and English to ensure that the information is accessible to the community. See Figure 3 for the communication of findings.

FIGURE 3

Process of communicating the findings



3.15 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the qualitative approaches used to investigate the factors influencing learners' academic performance. Semi-structured interviews were employed to gain detailed insights, offering flexibility in responses that aligned with the research goals. The interviews were conducted using open-ended questions formulated in reference to the literature review. This approach was chosen to encourage open conversation, making participants feel at ease as they shared their experiences. This chapter explained the research methodology and the research design applied in the study. It also discussed the research paradigm, location, and population, sampling procedures, research approach, data collection, data analysis, and ethical issues.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

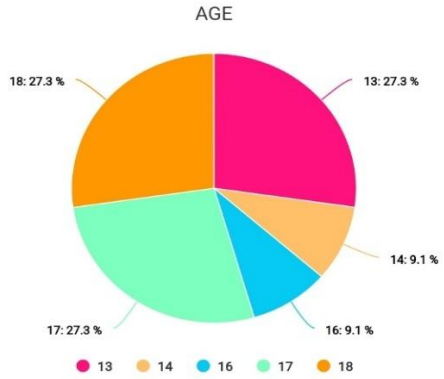
This chapter presents the research findings and their discussion. A detailed description of the 11 participants' perspectives on their academic performance as learners at mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi area is given. The findings were themed and categorised according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory with reference to the Ubuntu philosophy.

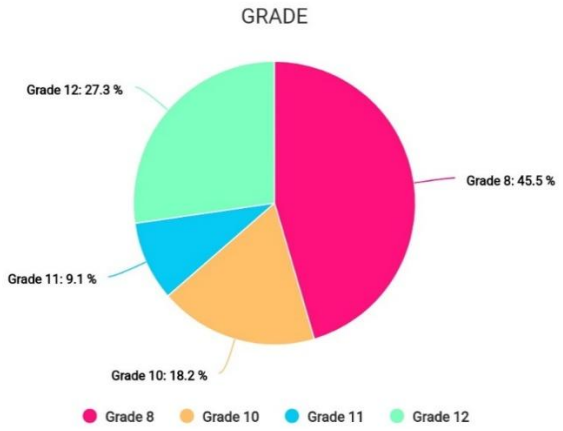
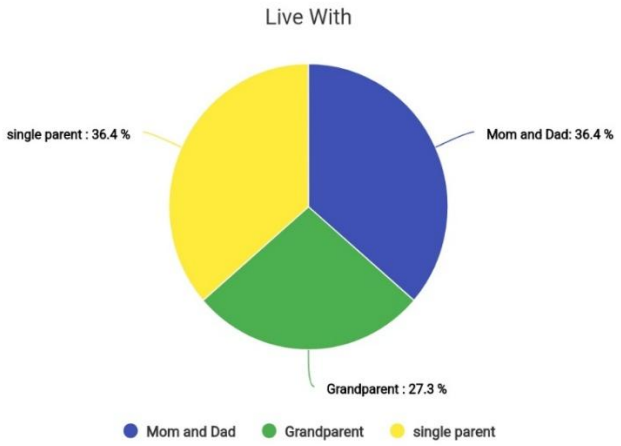
4.2 BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

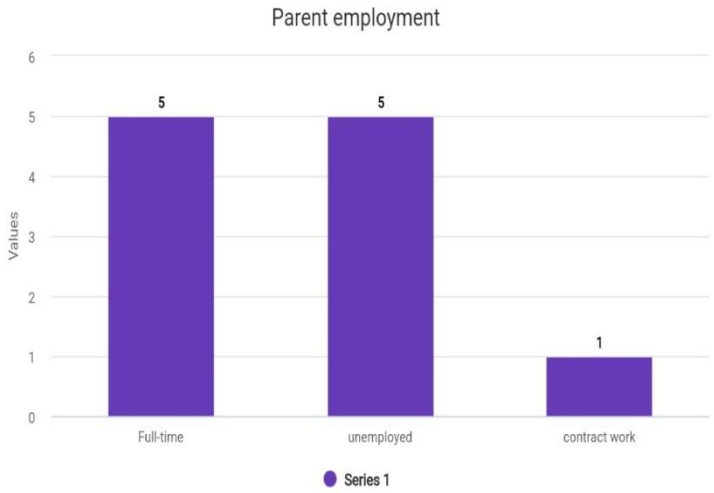
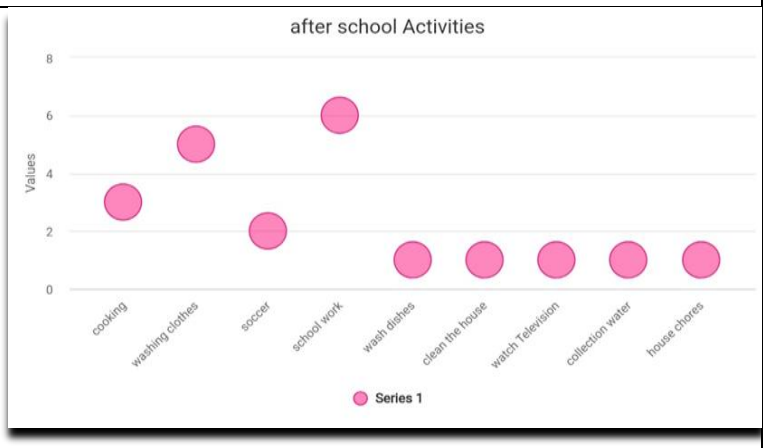
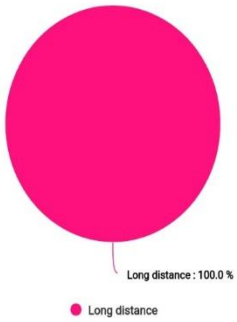
A total of 11 learner participants were recruited for the study. All participants met the inclusion criteria, including age, area of residence, and attendance at a mainstream high school in the rural Umzinyathi area. The biographical questionnaires (Appendix E) were used to provide an overview of the participants' backgrounds, including age, gender, grade, family structure, socio-economic status, and after-school activities. Table 5 provides a descriptive summary of the participants' biographical information.

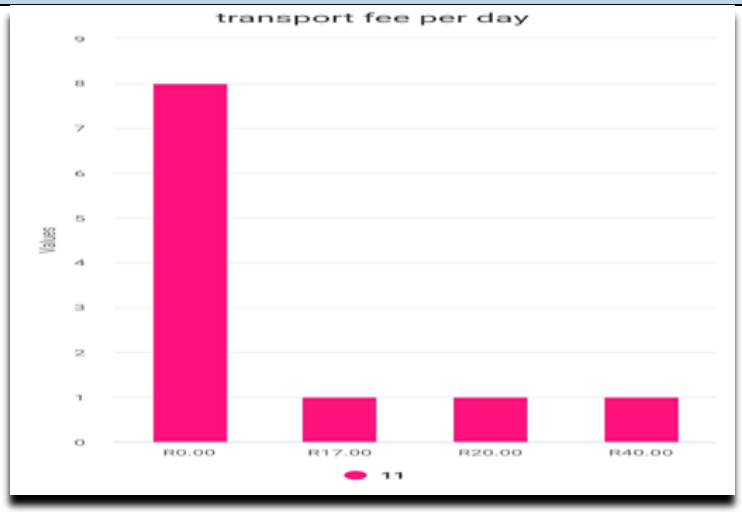
Table 5

Demographic Information of Participants

Category	Description	Results (N =11)
Age and gender	The participants had a mean age of 15.5 years with a range of 13-18 years. Three age groups, namely 13, 17, and 18 years, had the same number of participants (n = 3), while the 14- and 16-year-olds were represented by one participant each. Most participants were female (n = 7), and four were male.	

Category	Description	Results (N =11)
Education	Learners from four local schools participated. The participants were in Grades 8 - 12. Most participants (n = 5) were in the 8th grade. There were no participants in Grade 9, two in Grade 10, one in Grade 11, and three in Grade 12. Respectively, eight participants have repeated a grade, including Grade 1 (n = 1), Grade 2 (n = 1), Grade 4 (n = 1), Grade 5 (n = 1), Grade 8 (n = 1), Grade 10 (n = 2) and Grade 12 (n = 1), with two participants repeating Grade 1. Only three participants had never repeated a grade.	
Family Structure	All participants had siblings (n = 11). Sibling ages ranged from 1 to 32 years. Four participants (n = 4) lived with both their parents, whereas others lived with their grandparents (n = 3) or single mothers (n = 4). One participant (n = 1) attended the same school as their sibling; seven participants (n = 7) did not attend the same school as their siblings, and three participants (n = 3) had siblings who had already finished school.	

Category	Description	Results (N =11)
Socio-status	The participants' parents were employed full-time; five were unemployed, and one was on contract employment. The data collected indicated that six participants received social grants (SASSA), which may have been the only source of income for the families of the (n = 5) participants with unemployed parents.	
After-school Activities	The participants were engaged in different activities after school such as soccer (n = 2), house chores (n = 1) and schoolwork (n = 6), and six participants (n = 6) were doing homework, with five participants washing clothes, three cooking, two playing soccer and the least activities were washing dishes (n = 5), cleaning the house (n = 1), watching television (n = 1), collecting water (n = 1) and house chores (n = 1).	
Travelling distance and mode of transport	The 11 participants in the study all travelled long distances, approximately 3 kilometres to school. Eight participants walked from home to school, two used a taxi, and one used both walking and a taxi.	

Category	Description	Results (N =11)
Transport fee	The eight participants who were walking were not paying transport fees. The two participants who used transport were paying R17 (n = 1) and R40 (n = 1), and one participant who used both walking and taxis was paying R20 per day.	

4.3 THEMES

The themes were developed based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems and the study objectives. Bronfenbrenner's systems approach includes the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and exosystem. Since this study is cross-sectional, examining factors at a single point in time, rather than longitudinal, it did not capture temporal changes or developmental trajectories. Including the chronosystem as a theme would require longitudinal data or retrospective analysis of significant life events, which was not within the scope of this study. Table 6 and Figure 3 provide a summary of each theme with its subthemes.

Table 6

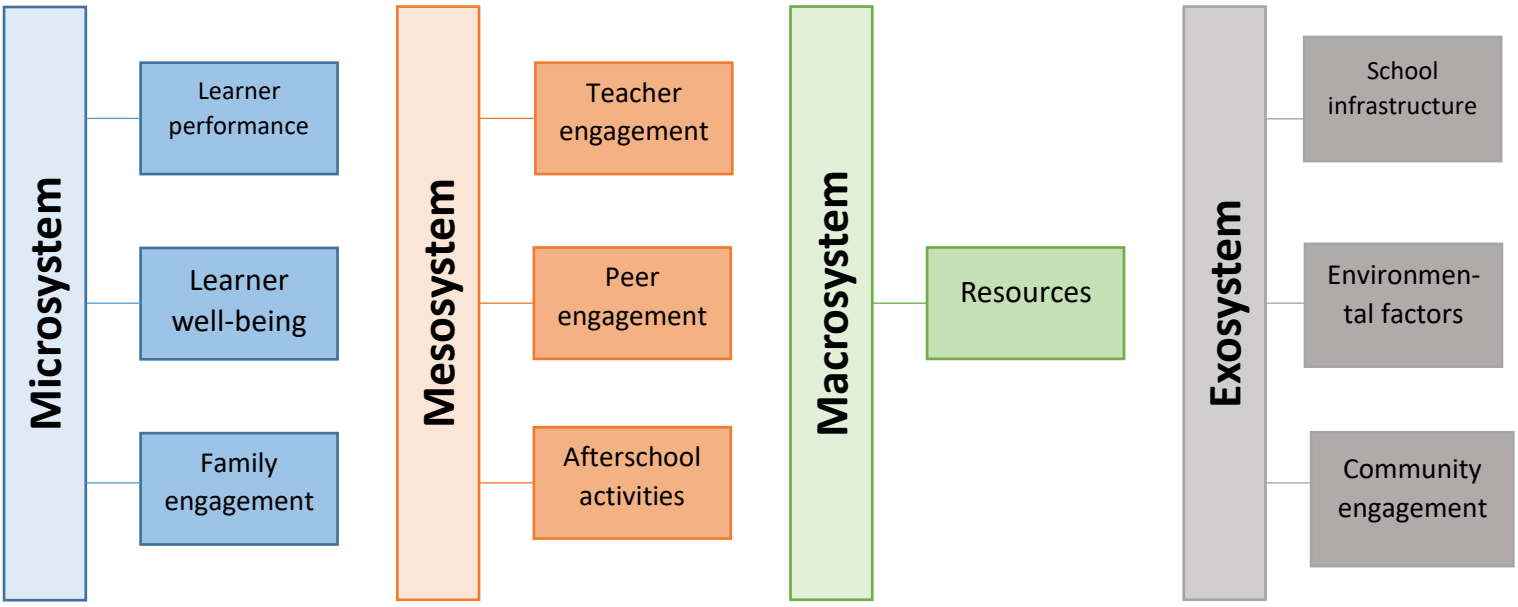
Main themes and Sub-themes

Main theme	Sub-theme
Theme 1: Microsystem *(refers to the immediate environment and relationships that directly influence a child, such as school and family)* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).	*(i) Learner performance (refers to personal motivators that affect a learner's academic performance).*
	(ii) Learner well-being (refers to learners' emotional state related to their academic performance).
	(iii) Family engagement (refers to aspects related to the role played by family members in the learner's education).

Main theme	Sub-theme
Theme 2: Mesosystem *(refers to the interconnectedness of various aspects of learners' lives, such as school and peer relationships)* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).	*(i)Teacher engagement (refers to aspects related to teachers' role during in-class learning.)*
	(ii) Peer engagement (refers to aspects related to a role played by peer-related aspects that influence academic performance).
	(iii)After-school activities (refers to activities learners engage in after school).
Theme 3: Macrosystem (*refers to how societal factors influence education, particularly in terms of resources)* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).	*(i) Resources (describe the support needs that learner require for academic performance and subject learning).*
Theme 4: Exosystem *(refers to the external factors that influence learners' education, such as environmental factors, school infrastructure and community engagement)* (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).	*(i)School infrastructure (refers to aspects related to the physical environment at the school)*
	(ii) Environmental factors (refer to aspects related to environmental aspects that may influence learner academic performance).
	(iii) Community engagement (refers to aspects related to the role played by community members in learner education).

Figure 3

Themes and sub-themes derived from the findings



The next section presents the findings and discussion according to the aforementioned themes. A link to Ubuntu philosophy is made in the discussion of each section of the findings.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Microsystem

The microsystem served as the foundational layer that helped us to understand how the participants' experiences and interactions in their immediate surroundings affected their academic performance. Three sub-themes, namely (i) learner performance, (ii) learner well-being, and (iii) family engagement, were identified. Learner well-being (n = 16) was mentioned most often by participants, followed by learner performance (n = 9) and family engagement (n = 7). The close relationships within the microsystem reflect the Ubuntu principles of care, interconnectedness, and shared responsibility in shaping learners' well-being and academic success (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

4.3.1.1 Learner performance

Learner performance refers to the personal factors that influence a learner's academic achievement. The category learner performance included nine specific codes: prioritising schoolwork (n = 26), distractions (n = 12), subject content understanding (n = 10), dedication to work (n = 7), time management (n = 5), learning style (n = 3), workload (n = 1), prioritising friends (n = 1), and performance recognition (n = 1). Table 7 presents the findings related to learner performance as a subtheme within the microsystem theme.

Table 7

Findings related to the learner performance sub-theme in the microsystem theme

Code	Participant quotes
Dedication to work	• "I focus on my studies." (P1) • "I always do my schoolwork even on weekends." (P3) • "I first study so that I can understand what I am going to write." (P5) • "We sometimes cross-night and study…. There was a time when other learners went to school to cross at night." (P9) • "You find that they go home and study, but you think they do not study, so you do not study either." (P11) • "Even after school, we study again." (P9)

Code	Participant quotes
Prioritising schoolwork	• "Ignore certain things." (P1) • "My schoolwork is always on my mind." (P3) • "I have stopped drawing." (P3) • "When I come home, I give my friends attention and ignore my schoolwork." (P4) • "I try to make my studies improve little by little." (P5) • "Working hard and focusing on my schoolwork. Staying away from friends and focusing on my studies." (P2) • "I should also do my schoolwork." (P8) • "I should focus on my books and concentrate on them." (P11) • "If I could focus on my schoolwork." (P1) • "Working hard and focusing on my schoolwork." (P2) • "Paying attention to my studies will help me." (P3) • "That I should work hard and study, I should stop wasting time with people." (P4) • "By focusing on school, and when given homework, I must do it carefully and take my time, and when I get home, I must study." (P6) • "[If] you skip the period; you do not learn anything." (P10)
Distractions	• "They make noise, bully others, and demand money." (P7) • "You cannot concentrate in class due to the noise." (P9) • "I usually make noise with my friends." (P11) • "Sometimes, you end up not listening to the teacher because the whole class is noisy, and you cannot concentrate." (P10) • "Disruption and noise in the classroom disturb me and cause me not to focus well." (P7) • "These things keep you thinking in class." (P3) • "When you talk to your friend during lessons, you do not hear the teacher." (P10) • "In class, some learners do not participate and make noise while we are studying. Sometimes we cannot hear the teacher well." (P7) • "They make noise in class while the teacher is teaching, and you end up losing concentration." (P10) • "Some make noise during lessons. Those who do not make noise end up being disturbed." (P9) • "We do not concentrate in class." (P11) • "When the teacher came in, I would do sketches and not focus on class." (P2)
Subject content understanding	• "There are some subjects I do not understand." (P1) • "All subjects that I failed in term one are no longer difficult to do, Subjects such as Math, English, IsiZulu, and LO." (P2) • "Math's is failing me." (P3) • "I first study so that I can understand what I am going to write." (P5) • "Math literacy and History are the subjects that give me problems, the other subjects are fine." (P7) • "In my schoolwork, I do well in some subjects and not so well in other subjects, especially Accounting." (P8) • "Geography is difficult, I do not understand some things." (P1) • "But my problem is understanding it." (P7) • "When the teacher explains, and I do not understand." (P8) • "Life science is a difficult subject for me." (P9)
Workload	• "Accounting has a lot of work." (P8)
Prioritising friends	• "Maybe they go home and study while I was wasting my time with them." (P4)
Performance recognition	• "When awards are given, you will see who the serious learners and top achievers are." (P7)

Code	Participant quotes
Learning style	• "I learn while teaching others." (P8) • "For subjects I spend less time on, I use my general knowledge." (P5) • "By studying daily and doing homework, practising what I do not understand." (P10)
Time management	• "When I spend the most time, studying it helps me pass because some of the things I have studied show up in the test. For subjects I spend less time on, I use my general knowledge." (P5) • "Maybe spend 3 hours or more in each subject." (P5)

Dedication to work

The participants demonstrated strong dedication to their studies, mentioning this theme seven times. For instance, Participant P1 specifically said, "I focus on my studies," and Participant P3 said, "I always do my schoolwork even on weekends ". These comments suggest that some participants take responsibility for their learning beyond classroom instruction and make an effort to achieve academic success. Jin (2023) emphasises that learners' efforts significantly influence academic success, especially among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, Surendar (2022) notes that motivated learners exhibit high task commitment through goal setting, self-confidence, and focused attention. Participant 9 illustrated this commitment by engaging in overnight study sessions, reinforcing the importance of dedication to schoolwork in achieving good grades. This commitment aligns with the Ubuntu principle, which emphasises interconnectedness and collective well-being. Ubuntu suggests that individual success contributes to the success of the community: "I am because we are." By dedicating themselves to academic excellence, learners not only improve their own prospects but also uplift their families and communities, reflecting the values of Ubuntu, which emphasise responsibility and reciprocity. As argued by Udah et al. (2025), Ubuntu promotes relationality and communal accountability, making personal effort a socially embedded practice that benefits the collective.

The participants were also influenced by their peers' study habits. For example, P11 explained that sometimes you assume your friends are not studying, so you also choose not to study, only to later realise your peers were. Peer influence can be positive or negative (Bhujbal & Verma, 2024), affecting academic performance, self-esteem, engagement and self-efficacy (Costa Junior et al., 2023). While some learners remain self-motivated (Putri et al., 2022), others struggle to

balance staying dedicated with the desire to fit in (Bhujbal & Verma, 2024). Lutz (2022) observe that positive peer relationships often lead to better academic outcomes. Further research could explore how peer dynamics shape academic success in rural contexts.

Prioritising schoolwork

Participants mentioned prioritising schoolwork 27 times. Participants P2 and P3 reported being aware of the importance of prioritising their schoolwork. They expressed dedication to focusing on their schoolwork, as evident in statements such as “my schoolwork is always in my mind “(P3) and “working hard and focusing on my schoolwork” (P2). Setting personal boundaries helps learners focus on their schoolwork and ignore distractions (Reskin et al., 2017). The participants described strategies to deal with distractions, such as P1, who mentioned ignoring certain things, and P2, who stated that he avoids friends to focus on his studies. Discipline and boundary-setting are essential for learners to remain focused, aligning with Rusnawati’s (2022) findings that discipline helps learners control impulses and maintain academic focus.

However, the participants struggled to maintain a balance between their social lives and academic responsibilities. For example, P1 acknowledged giving more attention to friends than to schoolwork after returning home, while P4 admitted the need to stop wasting time with others. These comments highlight the tension between social life and academic priorities. Some participants acknowledged the importance of continuous improvement, as evident in statements such as “Paying attention to my studies will help me” (P3) and “I should work hard and study” (P4). The participants also recognised that neglecting studies negatively impacts learning, as P10 noted, “You skip the period, you do not learn anything.” Keartney et al. (2022) confirm that skipping classes often leads to academic struggles, as learners miss critical instructions that are not found in textbooks. While the participants understood the need to prioritise schoolwork, balancing social life and studies remains challenging, consistent with Greico’s (2022) observation that learners often struggle to manage both.

Prioritising schoolwork resonates with the Ubuntu principle, which emphasises interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and mutual care. Recent research suggests that

learners who uphold Ubuntu values, such as respect, responsibility, and solidarity, tend to be more disciplined and focused, resulting in improved academic achievement (Dube & Higgs, 2024). Ubuntu-based education fosters cooperation, empathy, and shared success, encouraging learners to see their academic dedication as a communal contribution rather than an isolated effort (Mangwegape, 2023; Udah et al., 2025). Prioritising schoolwork thus reflects Ubuntu's ethos of collective progress and mutual accountability.

Distractions

Participants mentioned distractions 12 times, with several (P7, P9) noting that classroom noise negatively affected their ability to concentrate and perform academically. For example, participants explained that peers often disrupted lessons by talking, bullying others, or demanding money (P7), which made it difficult to focus (P9). P10 reported that persistent classroom noise prevented them from listening to the teacher and staying engaged. This is supported by a study by Massonnie et al. (2020), which found that noise can distract learners, affecting their ability to concentrate. P10 further reflected that chatting with friends during lessons caused him to miss important explanations, while P9 admitted that even learners who tried to remain quiet were disturbed by the noisy environment. This demonstrates that a disruptive environment prevents learners from concentrating during lessons. Some participants acknowledged intentionally ignoring lessons by sketching (P2) or engaging in conversations with friends (P11), further contributing to the disruption. These findings suggest that excessive noise and peer interactions create a learning environment that hinders concentration and academic progress. Previous research supports this, showing that classroom noise significantly impairs learners' ability to focus and learn effectively (Astolfi et al., 2019; Astolfi et al., 2019; Massonnié et al., 2020).

This challenge can be addressed by applying the Ubuntu principle, which emphasises respect, cooperation, and collective responsibility. Ubuntu promotes the idea that learners should consider how their actions affect others and the shared learning environment. By fostering Ubuntu values such as empathy, solidarity, and mutual accountability, classrooms can become spaces where learners support one another's success rather than disrupt it. Recent studies

highlight that Ubuntu-based education cultivates harmony, respect, and cooperation among learners, creating inclusive and conducive learning environments (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

Subject Content

Participants mentioned the subject content 10 times. Participants P3 and P7 specifically mentioned that they struggle with subjects such as Mathematics, History, and Accounting. Participants P5 and P8 noted that even when teachers explain concepts, they still struggle to understand them. Participant P8, however, mentioned that her academic performance differs from subject to subject: “In my schoolwork, I do well in some subjects and not so well in other subjects, especially Accounting” (P8). These challenges align with Habsy et al. (2023), who note that difficulties in literacy and numeracy often persist when teaching methods are ineffective. Similarly, Neol and Karagiannakis (2020) emphasise that structured and targeted teaching strategies, such as breaking down mathematical concepts into manageable steps, can help address persistent challenges. The analysis of subject content reveals that while some learners were improving in certain subjects, others were struggling, particularly in Mathematics, Life Science, History, and Geography. As suggested by Noel and Karagnnakis (2020), teachers may consider using different teaching methods. Identifying specific areas of struggle in subjects such as Mathematics or Life Science and addressing them with new strategies may enhance learners' overall understanding and performance.

Ubuntu suggests that learning should not be an isolated process but a communal effort where teachers and peers work together to overcome academic challenges. When learners struggling with subject content receive support from peers and educators, they experience the relational and cooperative values central to the Ubuntu philosophy. Recent studies affirm that Ubuntu-based approaches in education foster inclusive learning environments, encourage peer tutoring, and enhance academic achievement through collective engagement (Dube & Higgs, 2024; Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). By applying Ubuntu principles, schools can foster a culture where learners support one another in understanding challenging subjects, thereby reinforcing both academic success and social cohesion.

4.3.1.2 Learner well-being

Learner well-being refers to learners' emotional states related to their academic performance (Xie & Fan, 2025). It includes 12 codes namely: awareness of academic performance (n = 31), desire for improvement (n = 10), respecting the teacher (n = 6), self-improvement (n = 6), substance abuse (n = 3), confidence (n = 2), resilience (n = 2), tiredness (n = 1), isolation n=1), participation in class (n = 1), self-motivation (n = 1), learner emotions (n = 1), sense of belonging (n = 1), adjustment to a new grade (n = 1), improvement strategies (n = 1), and fear of teachers (n = 1). However, in the discussion, the researcher focused on the five that were most often mentioned by participants. Table 8 provides the codes and participant quotes for the sub-theme "Learner well-being" under the microsystem theme.

Table 8

Codes and participant quotes related to the learner well-being sub-theme within the microsystem theme

Code	Participant quotes
Awareness of academic performance	• "Not doing well in all subjects." (P1) • "All subjects that I failed in term one is no longer difficult to do, subjects such as Math, English, IsiZulu, and LO." (P2) • "I do not know if my marks are going up or down, I do not understand." (P4) • "In some subjects, I am getting low grades." (P6) • "If I had taken pure Math, I would have had a problem, which is why I am doing Math Literacy." (P7) • "I understand some subjects, and I pass with level five and level six, but not level 7." (P8) • "I sometimes lack because there is a difficult subject." (P9) • "I cannot say that my grades have dropped, and I cannot say that my grades are satisfying me, but there is a difference." (P10) • "My marks have dropped in the first term." (P11) • "In the subjects I am passing." (P1) • "The thing that makes my grades go down." (P5) • "Which makes our grades drop." (P6) • "The reason for the drop in marks." (P11) • "I get low marks." (P1) • "I am doing well with my schoolwork." (P2) • "You end up not succeeding in your studies." (P3) • "It lowers my grades." (P4) • "It has a positive effect" (P5) "I pass the test if I use my general knowledge." (P5) • "My grades improve." (P6)

Code	Participant quotes
	• "Which lowers my grades" (P7) • "I am thinking of changing my subjects next year." (P8) • "Negatively affects my grades." P9 • "Causes your grades to drop." P10 • "We would pass with good grades." (P11) • "It has a bad effect." (P4) • "My grades are too low." (P4) • "I get 40%." (P6) • "We can study and achieve 80% or more." (P9) • "For my grades to improve." (P11) • "I get 50/60 or 15/20, and I am doing well with it." (P11) • "The grades I desire are 50% to 100%." (P11)
Adjustment to a new grade	• "All subjects that I failed in term one are no longer difficult to do, subjects such as Math, English, IsiZulu, and LO." (P2)
Improvement strategies	• "The teacher uses a strategy to motivate us, where you write your target mark. If you write 80%, you should try to reach it or 90%." (P10)
Desire for improvement	• "I wish to get 90%." (P1) • "I wish to get 100% or 99%." (P2) • "I wish to get 100% in my studies." (P3) • "I also like to get a chance to go up on the stage and be noticed at school, maybe get something like 80, and get a chance to be noticed." (P4) • "In Accounting, I wish to get 90% because I got 30%." (P5) • "I wish to get 95% because getting 100% is not easy." (P7) • "I wish to get 90%." (P8) • "With Life Science, if I could get high marks around 80 per cent and pass other subjects as well." (P9) • "Maybe 90% or 80%." (P10) • "The grades I desire are 50% to 100%." (P11)
Tiredness	• "I then arrive late, very tired, and fall asleep on the sofa." (P10)
Isolated (independence)	• "I do not need any support." (P2) • "I do not ask for support here at home, you see, I just do things on my own." (P11)
Participation in class	• "I do not focus on Geography when the teacher is teaching, I talk." (P1)
Self-motivation (determination)	• "To continue trying to teach myself, even when I am alone and practice what we have learned." (P7)
Learner emotions	• "There are things that happen at school that affect us as learners, like fainting of learners at school." (P3)
Sense of belonging	• "Many are well-known, and I want to be in that position." (P11)
Respecting the teacher	• "I do not focus on Geography when the teacher is teaching, I talk." (P2) • "Some disturb us by making noise and disrespecting the teacher." (P7) • "Some make noise during lessons." (P9) • "We also disrespect the teacher with those girls when being taught." (P11) • "If we can respect the teacher and listen." (P11) • "We do not listen to the teacher, we just laugh." (P11)
Substance abuse (drug and smoking use)	• "I do not know what to say about these boys because they smoke and then disrespect the teacher." (P7) • "Smoking at school." (P3) • "People from outside enter the school and sell drugs." (P7)
Fear of teachers	• "We end up not going to the staffroom because we are afraid to go there." (P6)

Code	Participant quotes
Self-improvement (improvement strategies)	• "I try so that I can improve more." (P5) • "Even if I try to get help at school, it is the same." (P9) • "This term, I see that there is improvement, and it is getting better." (P10) • "I try to make my studies improve little by little." (P5) • "I should pull up my socks and find what was being written while I was outside." (P11) • "In term two, I have improved." (P11)
Confidence	• "As I was writing the exam, I saw that this term I would pass." (P2) • "I do not ask the teacher because I am afraid that other learners will laugh at me if I make a mistake." (P1)
Resilience	• "I try to grasp them." (P6)

Awareness of academic performance

Participants mentioned academic performance 31 times, reflecting a strong sense of self-monitoring and reflection. This also aligns with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness and collective responsibility; values that can extend to learners' accountability for their own progress.

The participants demonstrated a high level of awareness of their academic performance, acknowledging both successes and challenges. For instance, Participant 7 explained that he opted for Mathematics Literacy because he believed it better suited his abilities. Participant 8 further identified influences on her academic performance; she mentioned the impact of difficult subjects on her marks, while others attributed success to the general knowledge they have of a particular subject (P5). These responses illustrate proactive decision-making and adaptability in managing academic challenges.

The findings suggest that being aware of their academic performance enables learners to approach their studies more effectively. Learners who plan their schoolwork and reflect on their progress often receive better grades (Siddiqui et al., 2020). The learners were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, which is good for their progress, as it encourages them to seek help or focus on improving in challenging subjects. Understanding academic performance helps learners identify effective study methods, enhance their learning, and address challenges, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes (Lin & Gou, 2023). This approach embodies

Ubuntu, as learners' growth benefits not only themselves but also their communities through shared knowledge and mutual support.

Desire for improvement

The participants mentioned improvement 11 times, reflecting strong academic aspirations and self-driven motivation. This also aligns with Ubuntu, which emphasises collective growth and responsibility as values that encourage learners to strive for excellence not only for themselves but for the benefit of their community. For example, participants demonstrated high aspirations (P1, P2; P11), but they also understood the challenges they faced in reaching those goals (P7).

Such aspirations are significant because high academic goals are linked to improved performance and persistence, provided learners maintain a positive mindset and realistic expectations (Correa-Rojas et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). It is important for learners to understand the challenges and having a positive mindset might influence learners 'academic performance (Liu et al., 2023). The participants acknowledge that getting 100% is a challenge. One participant (P4) also expressed a desire for recognition from her peers, noting that being publicly acknowledged for academic success would boost her confidence. Research supports this, showing that recognition enhances self-esteem and motivates continued effort (Gardiner, 2020; Märtsin, 2019).

It is important to note that the desire for improvement was not limited to a single subject; the participants mentioned Accounting and Life Sciences. This suggests a broad commitment to academic growth, aligning with findings that goal setting across multiple domains fosters resilience and engagement (Walker et al., 2024). In the spirit of Ubuntu, these aspirations reflect not only personal ambition but also a sense of shared progress, as learners seek to contribute positively to their learning communities.

Respecting the teacher

Participants mentioned respecting the teacher six times, highlighting its perceived importance in maintaining a positive classroom environment. This principle aligns with the Ubuntu principles'

emphasis on interconnectedness, mutual respect, and collective responsibility in relationships (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Ubuntu-based pedagogy promotes harmony and cooperation, making respect for educators a cornerstone of effective learning environments.

The participants acknowledged that respecting the teacher involves paying attention and avoiding disruptive behaviours. Participants (P7 and P11) explained that focusing on lessons shows respect, while others admitted that talking during class or making noise undermines that respect. Another participant (P2) noted that some learners disturb others and disrespect the teacher, which negatively affects the learning process. These reflections suggest that learners are aware of how their actions, such as laughing, chatting, or ignoring instructions, can disrupt the teaching and learning process.

Research supports these observations, showing that respectful classroom interactions foster engagement and improve academic outcomes, while disrespectful behaviours lead to disruptions and reduced learning opportunities (Mokracek, 2021; Saco et al., 2020). Furthermore, respecting teachers and peers creates a welcoming classroom climate that enhances motivation and collaboration (Putri et al., 2023). In the spirit of Ubuntu, respect is not only an individual responsibility but a collective effort to maintain harmony and shared success in the classroom (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

Self-Improvement

Participants mentioned self-improvement six times. The participants recognised the need for initiatives such as seeking help in school, and trying different strategies to improve their performance, “Even if I try to get help at school, it is the same”. When learners ask for assistance, they can manage challenges that can improve their grades (Li et al., 2023). This finding resonates with the Ubuntu principle of interdependence, mutual support, and collective progress that encourages learners to seek help and collaborate for success (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

The participants understood that improving their academic performance requires consistent effort, as evidenced by their attempts to try hard and seek help, as exemplified by the following

statement: “I try so that I can improve more” (P5). The participants displayed a desire for self-improvement by actively seeking ways to improve their academic performance. Asking for academic help is a useful strategy to improve academic performance, as it indicates that the learner recognises challenges and seeks support to enhance their results (Duenas et al., 2021).

The findings indicate that the participants were committed to improving their academic performance, demonstrating resilience and determination. They realised that better academic performance requires effort, as indicated by their willingness to work hard and seek help. This is supported by Xuan et al. (2020), who note that learners who believe in their abilities and value their schoolwork are more likely to seek help, thereby enhancing their academic performance. This highlights learners’ dedication and resilience. According to Ubuntu, such behaviours reflect not only individual ambition but also a sense of shared responsibility, as learners contribute to a supportive learning environment that benefits everyone (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

4.3.1.3 Family Engagement

Family engagement refers to the role that family members play in the learner's education. This sub-theme includes seven codes, namely: parent support (n = 11), parent-teacher engagement (n = 7), parental involvement n = 4), parent socio-economic status (n = 2), sibling support (n = 2), family support (n = 2) and illiterate parent (n = 1). Two codes were common among the participants: parent support and parent-teacher engagement. This sub-theme emphasises interconnectedness, mutual care, and collective responsibility within the context of Ubuntu (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Ubuntu promotes the idea that “a person is a person through other people,” meaning that the success of learners is deeply influenced by the support and involvement of their families and communities. Table 9 summarises the codes and participant quotes related to family engagement as a sub-theme in the microsystem theme.

Table 9

Codes and participant quotes related to the family engagement sub-theme within the microsystem theme

Code	Participant Quotes
Parent support	• "To have someone, or my mother, to motivate and encourage me to study. I do not have anyone who motivates me." (P6) • "My father sometimes calls me and asks me how school is going." (P2) • "At home, they help me with everything for school." (P3) • "My mother helps me where she can." (P4) • "The support I get, I get it from my mother because she is the one who usually helps me with my school stuff." (P5) • "At home, when I need things like Pritt- glue stick for the project, they buy it for me. They support me with things I need." (P6) • "I get support at home because when school opens, they ask us to bring two reams of paper to get stationery, and my family buys them for me." (P7) • "Mom always checks if I have homework or not." (P10) • "I do not ask for support here at home, you see, I just do things on my own." (P11) • Sometimes my parents do not attend meetings." (P9) • My mother does not go when she is needed, and everyone here at home does not go to school when they are required." (P1)
Parent-teacher engagement	• "They communicate and maybe if there is something wrong, I am doing, the teacher can tell the parent." (P2) • "Parents and teachers communicate when the teacher needs to discuss something with the parent." (P3) • "There is no communication between my parents and my teachers." (P4) • "Most of the time my parents and teachers do not communicate." (P5) • "My mother and the teacher talk, the teacher tells my mother how I am doing in school, and they share information on how to help me." (P6) • "My mother went to school once." (P7) • "If I do something, they call a parent to school." (P8)
Illiterate parent	• "Since my mother is not educated." (P6)
Parent socio-economic status	• "If parents were supposed to buy us these books, some would not be able to afford the books and all the materials we receive." (P8) • "It is hard for us because our parents often do not have money." (P9)
Parental involvement	• "If there is a parent meeting at school, my mother goes to the meeting." (P8) • Sometimes my parents do not attend meetings." (P9) • "My mother does not go when she is needed, and everyone here at home does not go to school when they are needed." (P1) • "My mother went to school once." (P7)
Siblings' support	• "Get information from my brother's." (P1) • "When I have a problem, I tell my brother at school." (P1)
Family support	• "At home, they sometimes help me with the subjects they know." (9) • "Grandma also asks me about my homework." (P10)

Parental Support

Participants mentioned parental support 11 times. They received support from their parents, specifically their mothers, with school supplies and homework help. "My mother helps me where

she can." (P4). Learners with strong parental support are academically motivated (Ely, 2023). A lack of academic motivation from parents was noted, especially from fathers, who occasionally ask about school but do not engage in school matters, as Participant 2 specifically mentioned: "My father sometimes calls me and asks me how school is going" (P2). However, Panda et al. (2024) noted that when fathers are academically involved, they help their children perform better in school by communicating with them and encouraging them, thereby positively impacting learners and boosting their academic achievement.

The participants believed that no one at home motivated them to study. Participant 1 mentioned that the mother does not attend school meetings, even when asked to do so, indicating a gap in parental involvement in school matters. Edouard (2023) notes that minimal parental involvement in school activities may lead to low motivation among learners. Participant 11 further expressed a sense of independence when they said, "I do not ask for support here at home, you see, I just do things on my own" (P11). White Paper 6 mentioned the need to involve parents in the education process and to provide them with information on how to support their children's education. The lack of parental involvement in school meetings may lead learners to rely more on themselves in their education, potentially affecting their motivation and engagement. To support this statement, Edouard (2023) noted that limited parental involvement in school activities contributes to low motivation among learners; increased parental involvement could positively impact learners' motivation and academic performance. The lack of parental involvement contrasts with the principles of Ubuntu, which emphasise interconnectedness, mutual care, and shared responsibility in nurturing a child's education (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Ubuntu advocates collective engagement, where parents, families, and communities actively support learners.

Parent-teacher engagement

Participants mentioned parent-teacher engagement 7 times. There is limited communication between parents and teachers. Participant 2 specifically said, "They communicate and maybe if there is something wrong, I am doing, the teacher can tell the parent" (P2). Communication

occurs when the teacher needs to discuss an issue with the parent or when the participant has done something wrong.

The findings reveal minimal parental involvement, with some parents visiting the school only once. Participant 6 mentioned that teachers and parents communicate when sharing information on how to help the participant, which is a good example of parent-teacher engagement working hand in hand to support the learner academically. This is supported by Lei & Vibulphol (2024), who state that teachers can help parents by providing them with resources to support their children at home.

The findings indicate a lack of engagement between parents and teachers, which contrasts with the principles of Ubuntu, which emphasise interconnectedness, mutual care, and shared responsibility in nurturing a child's education (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Mnyende and Nhlumayo (2024) note that engaging rural parents in South Africa in their learners' education remains a challenge. Communication typically occurs only when a problem arises, which limits collaboration in supporting learners' academic progress. Participants whose mothers attend school only once indicate minimal parental involvement. However, Farde et al. (2024) state that limited communication between parents and teachers may be due to busy schedules and differing preferences.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Mesosystem

Bronfenbrenner's theory (2005) examines the mesosystem, which encompasses various aspects of learners' lives, such as school and peer relationships, and how these elements are interconnected. In this study, the theme mesosystem shows how these connections affect learners' experiences at school. Three sub-themes, namely (i) teacher engagement, (ii) peer engagement, and (iii) afterschool activities, were identified in Theme 2. The interconnectedness highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem reflects the principles of Ubuntu (i.e., relationships, mutual support, and collective responsibility) in shaping learners' experiences (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

4.3.2.1 Teacher engagement

This category encompasses aspects related to teachers during in-class learning. Nine codes were identified, namely (i) teacher support (n=8), (ii) discipline (n=7), (iii) teaching strategies (n=6), (iv) teacher-learner relationship (n=6), (v) teacher bias (n=3), (vi) teacher care (n=2), (vii) teacher well-being (n=1), (viii) teacher experience and qualifications (n=1), and (ix) teacher-teacher relationship (n=1). However, only the four categories that occurred at least 6 times will be discussed. Teacher engagement also reflects the Ubuntu principles of mutual respect, care, and interconnectedness, fostering supportive teacher-learner relationships that enhance learning outcomes (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Table 10 offers the findings related to the sub-theme, Teacher Engagement in Theme 2: Mesosystem.

Table 10

Codes and participant quotes related to the sub-theme, Teacher Engagement in Theme 2: Mesosystem

Code	Participant quotes
Teacher support	• "If I do not understand something in class, I can go to the teacher." (P1) • "I usually go to the teacher and ask for assistance." (P1) • "We get support from teachers because there are times when you see that you are lacking in your studies, then I would ask a teacher to please help me, then he helps me." (P4) • "If we cooperate with them, we can get the support we need." (P5) • "There was a teacher who supported me in subjects where I was getting low marks; she was helping me to pass." (P6) • "The teachers, when they see you have a problem with your studies, call you aside in another class and explain to you alone." (P9) • "Teachers always encourage us to do our homework and to study." (P10) • "The Math's teachers always encourage us." (P10)
Discipline	• I talk with my friends and ignore the teacher. Even when the teacher reprimands us." (P1) • "They tell us to come to the staffroom, or they scold us." (P6) • "The person teaching us is a woman and cannot scold us, and she does not punish us." (P6) • "The learner waits outside until the teacher is finished teaching, and then the teacher takes them to the staffroom. The teacher might expel the learners or call their parents." (P8) • "The student teacher does not beat all of us, he keeps on asking questions and does not move on to others." (P1) • "When he asked the question, he started at the front and hit us." (P1) • "I get kicked out of class often." (P11)

Code	Participant quotes
Teaching strategies	• "The teacher who teaches us Math, I do not understand him, he does not explain well." (P4) • "I do not understand when she has taught me, and I understand, it has a positive impact on my test results." (P6) • "I can write what the teacher explained." (P1) • "When the teacher explains, and I do not understand." (P6) • "Some teachers do not explain things in a way I can understand." (P6) • "When she has taught me, and I understand, it has a positive impact on my test results." (P8)
Teacher-learner relationship	• "It sometimes happens that a learner quarrels with the teacher." (P4) • "Teachers and learners sometimes have misunderstandings leading to frustration, and sometimes learners do not respect the teachers." (P5) • "We talk to teachers when we have issues." (P6) • "At school, some learners get along with the teachers while others do not. Conflicts occur between a teacher and learners, or a learner might provoke a teacher and even raise their voice." (P8) • "I do not get along with the teacher either." (P11) • "He writes the revision while I am outside, and the next day he asks me questions even though he knows I was outside the previous day." (P11)
Teacher bias	• "Teacher will end up focusing on those who want to learn." (P1) • "When we ask questions, the teacher will ignore us." (P6) • "The teacher does not kick all of us out." (P11)
Teacher care	• "If you are sick, the teacher will drive you home and call to tell a parent they are coming or to ask a parent to come and fetch you." (P1) • "Teachers help us, but when you are sick, they do not let you go home, but they are like parents to all of us. They also give us pills for headaches." (P2)
Teacher well-being	• "This teacher with the moods negatively affects my grades." (P9)
Teacher experience and qualifications	• "This one is leaving because he is a student teacher." (P1)
Teacher-teacher relationship	• "Even the teachers have their issues. There are conflicts over positions at school. Recently, they tried to dismiss a certain teacher, which disrupted the learners who did not want the teacher to leave, and the situation turned against those who tried to dismiss the teacher." (P8)

Teacher support

Teacher support was mentioned eight times by the participants, emphasising its critical role in academic success. Ubuntu promotes the idea that learning is a shared journey in which teachers and learners collaborate to overcome challenges.

The participants mentioned that when they struggled to understand concepts, teachers were approachable and willing to assist. One participant explained that they often seek help from

teachers when facing difficulties (P1), while another noted that teachers monitor progress and provide extra support when learners fall behind (P4). In some cases, teachers offered one-on-one explanations to ensure understanding. Mathematics teachers were specifically highlighted for their encouragement (P10), which motivated learners to complete their homework and study consistently. These actions demonstrate a nurturing environment in which teachers actively support learners' growth, reflecting the Ubuntu emphasis on mutual care and support.

Research supports these findings, showing that teacher involvement in addressing learning difficulties (through guidance, extra classes, and collaboration with parents) significantly improves academic outcomes (Mokracek & Mohammed, 2021; Safitri & Bakhtiar, 2022). Such practices embody Ubuntu by fostering relationships built on empathy and shared responsibility, ensuring that no learner is left behind.

Discipline

Discipline was mentioned seven times by the participants, highlighting its influence on classroom dynamics and learning outcomes. Ubuntu advocates for relationships built on mutual respect rather than punitive measures, promoting restorative approaches that strengthen community bonds.

The participants admitted to behaviours such as talking during lessons and ignoring teachers' instructions, even after being reprimanded. Participant 1 explained that she often chats with friends during class despite warnings, indicating a lack of respect for the teacher's authority. The participants mentioned various forms of discipline imposed by different teachers, including being scolded (P1) or kicked out of the class (P11). Recurring behavioural issues have an impact on the learning process. Research indicates that exclusionary practices, such as sending learners out of class, negatively affect academic engagement and create barriers to learning (Doulou & Drigas, 2022; Nese, 2024).

Alarmingly, some participants described instances of corporal punishment (P1), which remains illegal under South African law (Act 84 of 1996) but persists in certain schools (Mahlangu et al., 2021). This practice contradicts Ubuntu principles, which prioritise dignity and compassion in

resolving conflicts. Additionally, gender perceptions influenced discipline, as female teachers were viewed as less authoritative because they refrained from harsh punishment; a finding consistent with research on gendered authority in classrooms (Pietersen & Langeveldt, 2024). In the spirit of Ubuntu, discipline should focus on building respectful relationships and fostering accountability through dialogue and community support, rather than relying on punitive measures that can alienate learners.

Teaching strategies

The participants mentioned teaching strategies six times, highlighting their impact on understanding and academic performance. Ubuntu encourages teachers to adopt inclusive and supportive methods that ensure all learners feel valued and understood.

The participants noted that when teachers explain content clearly, it positively influences their ability to grasp concepts and perform well on assessments. The participants further mentioned that some teachers do not explain the content in a way that help participants to understand the subject, especially Mathematics. Specifically, some participants reported struggling because certain teachers did not simplify complex topics, leading to confusion and disengagement (P4 and P6). However, when teachers explain concepts well, it improves participants' academic performance, and they are able to write and apply what was explained (P8). These experiences highlight the importance of effective teaching strategies in fostering equitable learning opportunities.

Research supports the view that clear explanations, contextual examples, and adaptive teaching methods significantly enhance comprehension and academic success (Ahammed, 2021; Moleko & Mosimege, 2020). White Paper 6 further emphasises flexibility in teaching to accommodate diverse learning needs, aligning with Ubuntu's principle of inclusivity and communal growth.

Teacher-learner relationship

The teacher-learner relationship was mentioned six times by participants, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of these interactions. Ubuntu advocates harmony and mutual understanding, which are essential for creating a supportive classroom environment (Mangwegape, 2023).

The participants noted that conflicts and misunderstandings exist between teachers and learners. They mentioned that learners do not respect teachers, which may contribute to these conflicts, often due to a lack of respect: “It sometimes happens that a learner quarrels with the teacher” (P4) and “Teachers and learners sometimes have misunderstandings leading to frustration, and sometimes learners do not respect the teachers” (P5). Although some learners reported positive interactions with teachers, others described challenges, such as being questioned about work missed while absent (P11), which they perceived as unfair. These experiences suggest that strained relationships can have negative impacts on the classroom atmosphere and learning outcomes.

The research supports this observation, indicating that respectful and professional teacher-learner relationships are critical for improving educational outcomes (Kuwema & Kanyati, 2023). In the spirit of Ubuntu, fostering mutual respect and open communication can help resolve conflicts and build trust, ensuring that both teachers and learners work collaboratively toward shared goals.

4.3.2.2 Peer engagement

This category includes peer-related aspects that influence academic performance. It has four codes, namely peer support (n=6), peer influence (n=7), peer pressure (n=1), and peer motivation (n=1); only two of the sub-themes that were mentioned more than once will be discussed, which are peer influence and peer support. Table 11 includes the codes and participant quotes related to the sub-theme, Peer Engagement in Theme 2: Mesosystem.

Table 11

Codes and quotes related to Peer Engagement in Theme 2: Mesosystem

Code	Participant quotes
Peer influence	• "Bad friends can be problematic; you find that a friend is troublesome at school, and you want to be like them. Bad influence is another cause, making you do things you do not like, talking to you in class, making you skip classes, and things like that." (P10) • "Hanging out with bad friends, going to girlfriends." (P11) • "Friends have a bad influence, and you end up not succeeding in your studies." (P3) • "I should stop listening to friends when they say I must change the subject." (P8) • "By stopping hanging out with bad friends and skipping classes." (P10) • "I do not do my homework or end up doing it, but we make a plan with friends at school to complete it." (P11) • "The older one's smoke, while the younger one plays soccer and sometimes focus on their books." (P11)
Peer support	• "The following day, I asked those who went to cross at night to explain to me." (P9) • "The person you are sitting with can concentrate and help you understand things, or you help each other." (P10) • "Have someone to study with, who also wants to get good grades." (P2) • "I want to find someone who does better than I do so we can teach each other." (P7) • "As learners, we help each other. You ask someone who understood the lesson better, and they will help you understand." (P4) • "The big number in class helps us because if you have a problem outside the classroom, we can help each other." (P10)
Peer pressure	• "I am afraid that other learners will laugh at me if I make a mistake." (P1)
Peer motivation	• "At school, I am encouraged to learn because there are many of us." (P4)

Peer support

Peer support was mentioned six times by the participants, highlighting the collaborative Ubuntu principle that learning is not an isolated process but a shared experience in which individuals help each other succeed.

The participants mentioned that they rely on peer support for assistance after missing study sessions or when struggling with difficult concepts. For example, one participant (P9) shared that they ask peers to explain lessons they missed, while another (P10) noted that sitting next to a focused classmate helps them understand better because they support each other.

Peer support helps learners perform well academically, as they benefit from their classmates' explanations, especially when they have missed a lesson. Relying on peers builds learners' confidence and enhances their academic performance (Wu & Kang, 2023). The participants expressed a desire to study with peers who perform better academically, believing that such

partnerships help them to improve their own results. Peer support boosts learners' confidence, reduces school stress, and helps them catch up on missed lessons, ultimately improving their academic performance (Firnanda & Ibrahim, 2020). In large classes, learners help each other with matters outside the classroom: "The big number in class helps us because if you have a problem outside the classroom, we can help each other" (P10). The latter is an example of Ubuntu's emphasis on solidarity and care.

Peer influence

Peer influence was mentioned seven times by the participants. They indicated that bad friends could negatively influence their academic performance. Specifically, Participant 10 noted that they were being tempted to follow troublesome friends, which led to them making poor decisions such as skipping classes and neglecting homework: "Bad friends can be problematic; you find that a friend is troublesome at school, and you want to be like them. Bad influence is another cause, making you do things you do not like, talking to you in class, making you skip classes, and things like that" (P10). This is supported by Jiang (2023), who states that when learners are around friends who misbehave, their academic performance declines, and they begin to emulate the behaviour of their peers, which may lead to poor academic outcomes. The participants felt compelled to engage in behaviours they did not like, such as talking in class or changing subjects, due to peer pressure. The participants express their intentions to distance themselves from negative peer influence by avoiding bad friends and attending classes regularly. This indicates that they understood the harmful impacts of their peers. A study conducted by Ahmed et al. (2023) showed that learners recognise that negative peer influence can harm them; however, they feel pressured to follow friends who make poor choices, like skipping classes and ignoring schoolwork. The influence of peers on learners' choices underscores the importance of Ubuntu, which promotes collective responsibility and positive relationships, encouraging learners to support each other in ways that foster growth rather than harm (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024)

4.3.2.3 Afterschool activities

This category describes the activities that learners engage in after school, which may impact their academic performance. It has two codes: house chores (n=3) and extracurricular activities (n=1). The findings will be discussed in two paragraphs. Table 12 gives the codes, and the participant quotes related to the sub-theme.

Table 12

Codes and quotes related to sub-theme, After-school activities as part of Theme 2: Mesosystem

Code	Participant quotes
House chores	• "I have to wash and study." (P6) • "Sometimes I do not study enough because I must do washing and cooking." (P6) • "I finish washing." (P7)
Extra-curricular	• "When I come back from the field where I exercise because I play soccer, I balance soccer and my studies because I need to do something with my body." (P7)

House chores and extracurricular activities were mentioned four times by the participants. House chores such as washing and cooking take time away from learners' studies. "Sometimes I do not study enough because I must do washing and cooking" (P6). They struggle to have enough time to focus on schoolwork due to the demands of these responsibilities. To support this, a study conducted by Mensah et al. (2024) found that household chores such as washing, cooking, and fetching water had a negative impact on high school learners.

Extracurricular activities like soccer were seen as positive benefits as learners recognise the benefit of physical activities for their health and understand that sports and studies are both important for success and their health, as Participant 7 said, "When I come back from the field where I exercise because I play soccer. I balance soccer and my studies because I need to do

something with my body" (P7). According to research by Fernandez-Lazaro and Fernandez-Lazaro (2023), learners involved in extracurricular activities such as sports tend to perform well academically. Balancing household responsibilities and extracurricular activities reflects the principle of shared responsibility, as outlined in Ubuntu, where family and community roles influence learners' opportunities for growth and well-being (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

4.3.3 Theme 3: Macrosystem

The macrosystem theme examined how societal factors, particularly resources, influence education. Resources describe the support that learners require for academic performance and subject learning. Understanding the role that resources play is crucial in enhancing overall educational outcomes. Table 13 includes the codes and participant quotes related to the Resources subtheme in Theme 3: Macrosystem.

Table 13

Codes and participant quotes related to the Resources subtheme in Theme 3: Macrosystem

Code	Participant quotes
Access to extra classes	• "It would be helpful if there were afternoon classes at school where we could meet and learn with the teacher to guide us." (P6) • "Some teachers offer extra classes, while others do not, thinking that we do not need them." (P7) • "We only get extra classes for Math." (P11) • "I always wish for extra classes. We do not have them for History, but we do for Math, and they make it easier to remember, and they help me." (P7) • "At school, there are extra classes." (P3) • "The thing that helps me at school is that after school, there are extra classes." (P4)
Support from an external individual	• "If I could find someone who can explain things I do not know." (P11) • "What can help me is to ask someone who knows the subject better, not the teacher who teaches it." (P5) • "If I can have someone who can always remind me to study, check my homework daily." (P10) • "I need teachers from outside, not the ones teaching us at school." (P9) • "If there is someone who can help me with this subject that is confusing me." (P4) • "Having someone to help me understand how things are done here and there and how to improve would be beneficial." (P1)
Study material	• "They provide us with stationery and books." (P3) • "At school, learners who studied before we lost the study guides, so the teachers do not buy or provide them anymore." (P6)

Code	Participant quotes
	• "The support we receive includes being provided with the books at school." (P8)
Study groups	• "I want to find someone who does better than I do so we can teach each other." (P7)
School support	• "If you need help with school matters, there is nothing you cannot get at school." (P3)

4.3.3.1 Resources

This category describes the support that learners need to enhance their academic performance and subject learning. The role of resources within the macrosystem reflects Ubuntu's principle of collective responsibility, emphasising that equitable access to educational support is a shared societal duty to ensure that every learner thrives (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). This sub-theme comprises five codes, namely (I) access to extra classes (n=6), (ii) support from an external individual (n=6), study groups (n=1), school support (n=1), and study material (n=3). Only the two codes that were most often mentioned by the participants are discussed.

Access to extra classes

Participants mentioned access to extra classes six times. They mentioned that extra classes were offered in Mathematics, while other subjects, such as History, did not. This may indicate that the importance of subjects varies, with Mathematics prioritised for extra classes. Srivastava and Dhankar (2024) suggest that extra classes should be offered as fair support in all subjects to help all learners learn more effectively.

Participants (P7 and P11) also mentioned that some teachers offer extra classes, while others do not, depending on whether learners require additional attention. For example, Participant 11 said, "We only get extra classes for Maths." Extra classes have a positive influence on learning outcomes; learners who attend them tend to perform better academically than those who do not (Abreh, 2023). The participants mentioned that the extra Mathematics classes are beneficial and that they would like additional classes in other subjects as well.

Support from an external individual

Participants mentioned support from an external individual 6 times. The participants expressed the need for additional help from individuals other than their schoolteachers, as Participant 9 said, "I need teachers from outside, not the ones teaching us at school." The participants preferred teachers who might offer different teaching methods (n=2). They further expressed the need for someone to monitor their progress, remind them to study, and check their homework (n=1). The learners find some subjects confusing and said that having someone who could explain challenging ideas to them would be helpful (P4). Learners also often require additional support outside the classroom because teachers cannot cover every topic. Tutoring helps learners understand the material more effectively and provides them with the extra support and guidance they need (Solikhah et al., 2022). Access to extra classes and external support reflects Ubuntu's principle of collective care and shared responsibility, emphasising that educational success is strengthened when teachers, families, and communities work together to provide equitable learning opportunities (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

4.3.4 Theme 4: Exosystem

The exosystem theme identified the external factor subthemes that influenced learners' education, namely (i) school infrastructure, (ii) environmental factors, and (iii) community engagement. These sub-themes once again reflect the Ubuntu principle of collective responsibility, highlighting shared education as a societal effort in which communities work together to create supportive learning environments (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Table 14 presents the three sub-themes related to Theme 3: Ecosystem, along with the codes and participant quotes.

Table 14

Sub-themes, codes and participant quotes related to Theme 4: Exosystem

Sub-themes	Code	Participant quotes
School Infrastructure – (relates to the physical environment at the school)	Safety concerns	• "The school environment is safe." (P2; P10) • "I can say the school environment is right." (P3) • "School environment is better." (P5) • "The school environment is good." (P11) • "Learners carry weapons at school, when you fight with them, they stab you." (P1)

Sub-themes	Code	Participant quotes
		• "The security is not right; the guards are old men who cannot protect us to keep us safe"….. "At our school, robbers came while teachers were in a meeting and took all the phones and laptops from the staffroom and the office.") ….I did not go because I feared that we would be robbed of our belongings." …"Thieves broke in and stole the schoolbooks." (P9)
	Overcrowding	• "But 45 learners in class are difficult to manage." (P10) • "There are more than 30 learners in our class." (P9) • "In class, we are 45, and in other classes, 50 learners." (P7) • "We are overcrowded with about 80 learners, sitting in three dilapidated classrooms, and a single teacher teaches all 80." (P8)
	School appearance	• "We are studying in shacks." (P9) • "Our school is not beautiful." (P9) • "Classrooms are not nice." (P9)
	Water shortage	• "We also have a water problem." (P1) • "We have water problems, which cause us to leave school early and stay at home." (P6)
	Fence	• "At school, we do not have a fence at the back." (P7) • "But the fence has not been fixed." (P7)
Environmental Factors (relate to environmental aspects that may impact learner performance.)	Travelling distance	• "Distance is a problem because sometimes I am late for a taxi and have to walk, and I arrive late at school, missing the beginning of lessons. When I arrive at school, I will be sweaty and tired. After school, it takes me hours to walk home, so I get home around 4:30 PM." (P6)
	Disruption of learning	• "But the fighting distracts us because teachers have to leave their classes to intervene, disrupting our learning." (P6) • "They come back to disrupt those of us who are serious about school." (P7)
	Transport	• "I use public transport and sometimes taxis are not available, I then arrive late, very tired, and fall asleep on the sofa, ending up not doing my homework." (P10)
Community Engagement (relates to aspects of roles played by community members in learner education.)	Community support	• "Here are some people who live around here who were doing the same subjects as me; if I can go to them and ask for help, maybe they can assist me." (P9) • "They would suggest that I ask people from outside the family." (P9) • "And from outside I do not mind who helps me." (P5)

4.3.4.1 School infrastructure

This subtheme covers codes related to the school's physical environment. Five codes were identified under the sub-theme, School infrastructure, namely (i) safety concerns (n = 5), (ii) overcrowding (n = 4), (iii) water shortage (n = 2), (iv) school appearance and (v) fence. The first three codes are discussed.

Safety concerns

Participants mentioned safety concerns five times. They had mixed feelings about their safety. Some participants felt the environment was safe, as Participant 3 said, “I can say the school environment is right” (P3), while others (P1 and P9) mentioned a crime that occurred at school. Participant 9 added that school security is inadequate, particularly in terms of the number of security guards present. The security guards were deemed unfit to handle potential threats or protect learners and teachers. “I did not go because I feared that we would be robbed of our belongings” (P9). Participant 9 also reported that thieves had broken into the school and, in another incident, phones and laptops were stolen from the staffroom and the office (P9). The policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) emphasises the importance of sufficient infrastructure, such as water and sanitation, safety and protection in schools to promote academic performance. Ensuring safety in schools reflects Ubuntu’s principle of collective care and responsibility, emphasising that a secure environment is essential to the well-being and success of every learner in the community (Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

Overcrowding

Overcrowding was mentioned four times by the participants as an issue that obstructs their learning environment, “In class, we are 45, and in other classes, 50 learners” (P7). This may indicate that many classes exceed the learner-to-teacher ratio. Overcrowding of classes by 33 learners per teacher causes a teaching gap (West & Meier, 2020). The overcrowding issue was further compounded by the poor conditions of classrooms and overburdened teachers: “We are overcrowded with about 80 learners, sitting in three dilapidated classrooms, and a single teacher teaches all 80” (P8). This is supported by Likuru and Mwila (2022), who note that overcrowding in classrooms makes teaching and learning difficult, hindering the implementation of a competence-based curriculum and effective classroom management, and this is exacerbated by poor classroom conditions. Addressing overcrowding in classrooms reflects Ubuntu’s principle of shared responsibility, emphasising that creating conducive learning environments requires collective action from schools, communities, and policymakers to ensure every learner’s dignity and success (Mangwegape, 2023).

4.3.4.2 Environmental factors

This category encompasses codes related to environmental aspects that may impact learner performance. Environmental factors include three codes, namely (i) travelling distance (n=1), (ii) disruption of learning (n=2), and transport (n=1).

Travelling distance and transport

Challenges related to travel and transport highlight Ubuntu's principle of collective care, in which communities and institutions share responsibility for ensuring equitable access to education and supporting learners' well-being (Mangwegape, 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024). Participants mentioned travelling distances (P6) and transport (P10) once. Participant 6 identified the travelling distance as a challenge, noting that frequent late arrivals at school were caused by transportation difficulties. This finding aligns with Chitondo (2022), who reports that learners covering long distances often arrive late due to transportation issues, such as missing taxis. Consequently, learners may miss an entire lesson, which can negatively impact their academic performance (Chitondo, 2022). Additionally, long walks to school physically fatigues learners, which can diminish their concentration and performance during lessons. As Participant 6 remarked, "When I arrive at school, I will be sweaty and tired" (P6). Supporting this, a study by Kaushik et al. (2023) found that extended travel time negatively affects academic performance by reducing students' focus and participation, ultimately influencing academic outcomes.

Disruption of learning

Participants mentioned learning disruption twice. The disruption of learning caused by physical conflicts among learners reflects a breakdown in communal harmony in the school environment. Ubuntu provides a lens through which to understand and address this issue. Ubuntu emphasises that an individual's well-being is tied to others' well-being; therefore, when learners engage in fights, they not only harm themselves but also negatively affect their peers and teachers (Ajitoni, 2019). Participants also noted that physical conflicts among learners disrupt the learning environment. These fights not only cause the teachers to pull out of classes to intervene but also affect the learners who remain in the classroom. Participant 6 said, "But the fighting distracts us

because teachers have to leave their classes to intervene, disrupting our learning". This disruption violates the spirit of Ubuntu, which emphasises cooperation and collective responsibility. Promoting Ubuntu in schools could foster empathy and promote peaceful conflict resolution, thereby reducing interruptions and creating a learning environment where everyone thrives (Gaspar et al., 2019).

4.3.4.3 Community Engagement

This sub-theme includes aspects related to the role played by community members in learner education. This category has one code: community support (n = 3). Community support was mentioned by participants three times. Participant 9 mentioned the need to seek help from the community for academic challenges, "Here are some people who live around here who were doing the same subjects as me, if I can go to them and ask for help, maybe they can assist me". This reflects how learners view their community as a source of academic support. Participant 9 further mentioned that the family encourages them to seek help even outside the family, "They would suggest that I ask people from outside the family". The participants were open to seeking assistance from various people. To support this, Li et al. (2023) found that learners view their community as a source of academic support. This resonates with Ubuntu, suggesting that education is not an individual endeavour but a shared responsibility (Chingombe & Major, 2024).

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on the findings and discussion. First, a detailed description of the 11 learners' perspectives on their academic performance in mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi area was provided. The findings and discussions were then themed and categorised according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, with reference to the philosophy of Ubuntu.

CHAPTER 5

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5 is the final chapter of the study. It provides a summary of the findings and recommendations based on the results. This chapter includes quotes from the literature to support the recommendations. The final section of this chapter presents the conclusion.

5.2 THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to explore the factors affecting the academic performance of Grade 8–12 learners attending mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi rural area of KZN.

The following sub-aim questions were used to achieve the aim of the study.

(i) To identify personal, social, and environmental factors that may influence the academic performance of Grade 8 – 12 learners attending mainstream high schools in Umzinyathi in a rural area of KZN.

(ii) To identify recommendations by learners to improve their academic performance

5.3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

5.3.1 Personal Factors, Social Factors and Environmental Factors

Personal, social, and environmental factors are interconnected, as they influence each other in a child's development (Nimante, 2023). The study found that the participants' surroundings, which are personal factors and mutual support from people around the learner, impact their academic performance. As mentioned in the literature, there is a relationship between Bronfenbrenner's theory (2005), which states that a child's life is influenced by their surroundings and the humanist philosophy of Ubuntu, which states, "It takes a village to raise a child" and "I am because you are" (Nsameng & Tchombe, 2011). The interconnectedness of the systems within the participants' microsystem, along with the social factors within it, fosters collaboration and solidarity, which are important in Ubuntu. Collective responsibility, collaboration, and communal

support are connected to the three Bronfenbrenner systems, namely the microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem, indicating that a person is a person through others.

5.3.1.1 Personal Factors

This section discusses the personal factors that affect learners' academic performance. Personal factors refer to individual characteristics that influence learning outcomes.

The participants reported being aware of their academic performance and the factors that may influence it, such as prioritising friends over schoolwork, understanding subject content, and dedication to schoolwork. These factors may positively or negatively influence learners' academic performance.

The learners spent time socialising with friends instead of focusing on their studies, which distracted them from their study time and led to neglect of their academic responsibilities, negatively influencing their academic performance. Dedication to schoolwork led to improved academic performance.

Learner well-being encompasses learners' academic performance, including awareness of their own academic progress, a desire for good grades, respect for teachers, and motivation for improvement. The learners were aware of their academic performance, which enabled them to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This knowledge enabled them to identify areas where they require support.

Parent-teacher engagement is important in supporting learners' academic performance. Good communication between parents and teachers allows parents to monitor their children's progress. When parents are not involved in their children's schooling, teachers do not have the opportunity to inform them about their child's academic progress and behaviour at school.

Not all parents can provide for their children's educational needs. Parents who were not educated were unable to assist their children with their schoolwork. To support learners, parents seek assistance from their neighbours. The presence of siblings had a positive impact, as younger

siblings can look up to them and they can provide help with schoolwork and offer emotional support.

5.3.1.2 Social Factors

The discussion below focuses on the social factors that influence learners' academic success. Social factors refer to the interactions and relationships learners have with others.

Disciplined learners who are well-behaved ensure a positive learning environment. It ensures the learning process is conducted in a setting free of disruptions. This allows learners to concentrate in class and for a teacher to conduct a lesson peacefully and uninterruptedly. However, poor discipline leads to disrespecting the teacher, interrupting the lesson and distracting other learners who are willing to learn, which may negatively affect their performance. Teachers use various forms of discipline, including sending learners to the staff room and physical punishment. Learners regarded female teachers as less authoritative.

Teaching strategies could significantly affect learners' academic success. When instructional content is delivered clearly and comprehensively, student academic performance tends to improve. Conversely, when teachers present subject matter in a complex or unclear manner, it can adversely affect learners' academic achievement.

When learners formed study groups and helped one another with challenging subjects, their academic performance improved. Positive peer pressure encouraged learners to work hard as they competed with one another and motivated each other to do better. Negative peer pressure led to bad behaviour, disrespect of teachers, class bunking and even not doing schoolwork.

The study findings indicate that the activities learners engage in after school may influence their academic performance; these activities include household chores and extracurricular activities. House chores, such as cleaning the house, fetching water, washing clothes, and doing dishes, may leave learners with little time to study, which can lead to poor academic performance.

5.3.1.3 Environmental Factors

This section discusses the environmental factors that influence learners' academic success. Environmental factors refer to the surroundings in which learners live, including their home, community, and school.

The participants' responses showed that environmental factors, such as travel distance, transportation, lesson disruptions, and classroom overcrowding, influence learners' academic performance. Travelling distance impacts academic performance, especially for learners who walk long distances to school. If learners must travel long distances from home to school, they may become fatigued and experience poor concentration in class. Late arrival at school after lessons have commenced, as well as returning home late, reduces the time available to complete academic tasks and rest, thereby contributing to diminished academic performance.

Transport challenges may be caused by unreliable taxi services. Due to inconsistent pick-up times, learners who arrive late may miss the first lesson of the day. They may also arrive home late due to long queues at taxi ranks. Late arrival may lead to increased fatigue among learners and prevent them from completing homework. This highlights how interconnectedness, mutual care, and collective responsibility are embedded in the broader philosophical framework of Ubuntu. Such values shape how communities understand and respond to shared challenges, fostering an ethos in which individual actions are viewed through the lens of communal wellbeing. A recent event of learner transport tragedies, Mabasa's (2026) and Jacob's (2026), further underscores the urgent need for systems that reflect these communal values by ensuring the safety and protection of all learners. Importantly, the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC, 2026) findings on systemic shortcomings in scholar transport across provinces reaffirm that addressing these failures is essential for realising an education system grounded in dignity, safety, and collective responsibility. The SAHRC (2026) called for immediate reforms, including stronger governance, compliance enforcement, and joint departmental accountability to ensure safe transport.

Disruption of lessons caused by physical fights between learners outside the classroom can negatively affect learners' academic performance. Teaching and learning is interrupted by fighting learners because the teacher is expected to attend to the fights outside the classroom. Other learners are negatively influenced as they miss out on teaching content.

Overcrowding in the classroom may also cause teachers to provide limited individual attention to learners and reduce the duration of interactions between teachers and learners. This results in learners not paying attention or talking during the lessons. Teachers struggle to maintain discipline in overcrowded classrooms, as noise and distractions disrupt concentration. In contrast, learners may benefit from in-group settings in overcrowded classrooms.

Participants indicated that when learners seek help from peers who have taken the same subjects, this may improve their performance and make up for the attention they do not receive in the classroom. Having a supportive community helps learners find people to whom they can turn for support when facing challenges in their studies. A supportive community underscores the Ubuntu truth that states, "It takes a village to raise a child".

5.3.2 Learners' reflections on improving their academic performance

The participants reflected on how to improve their academic performance and suggested the following categories: (i) Support, (ii) Socialisation, (iii) Behaviour, (iv) Peer influence, (v) Transportation and study time accessibility, and (vi) Afterschool activities. These suggestions are reflected in Table 15.

Table 15

Reflections and suggestions by learners to improve their academic performance

Category	Learners' Reflection to Improve Academic Performance
Support	• Learners indicated that getting assistance from teachers from other schools would benefit them. • Learners mention that they need support or motivation from parents. • Learners recommended that they would appreciate academic support from the community and teachers from other schools. • Learners indicated that they need extra classes in all subjects, not just in Mathematics.
Socialisation	• Learners recommended that they should limit socialising with friends and focus on studies. • Learners suggested that they should stop hanging out with bad friends.
Behaviour	• Learners suggested that they should listen to and respect their teachers in class.

Category	Learners' Reflection to Improve Academic Performance
Peer influence	• Learners mentioned that they must ignore peer pressure, stay away from bad friends and stop bunking classes.
Transportation & Study Time Accessibility	• Learners mentioned that getting an opportunity to study daily would boost their academic achievement, because they come home late due to unreliable transport and cannot study daily.
Activities	• Learners recommended that they must study instead of doing house chores and watching television.
Resources	• Learners mentioned that 45 learners in class are too many for one teacher to handle.

The learners proposed several strategies to enhance their academic success. They emphasised the need for support systems, including teacher support (even from other schools), parental motivation, community involvement, and extra classes across all subjects. Social factors were highlighted, with learners suggesting limiting socialisation with friends, avoiding negative peer influence, and focusing on studies rather than distractions. Behavioural improvements, such as listening to and respecting teachers, were considered essential. The learners also identified logistical challenges, particularly unreliable transport that limits daily study time, and recommended solutions to ensure consistent earning opportunities. Additionally, they suggested reducing household chores and television time to prioritise learning. Finally, they expressed concerns about resource constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, which hinder effective teaching and learning. Based on learners' reflections and other findings, the study's implications are discussed.

5.4 EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

This section presents the recommendations based on the study's findings.

5.4.1 Recommendation for Schools to Address Factors Affecting Learners' Academic Performance

- Establish after-school study centres or homework clubs at the school where learners can stay and study before travelling home. This may reduce the impact of learners' late arrivals. Alternatively, schools could help create small, community-based study spaces equipped with basic resources (e.g., in churches, community halls, or libraries) closer to learners' homes.

Schools should advocate for reliable learner transport services in collaboration with local government structures or NGOs, ensuring that learners can be collected from designated pick-up points. To support these efforts, schools may undertake fundraising activities to secure subsidised or organised transport options, thereby significantly reducing learners' travel time. When feasible, a caregiver with access to a vehicle may be approached to establish a lift club. The caregivers of the learners in the lift club can contribute to petrol costs. Importantly, the responsibility for ensuring that school transport service providers meet all regulatory and safety requirements rests with both schools and the DoE (SAHRC, 2026). In line with this mandate, the SAHRC (2026) calls for comprehensive reforms that strengthen governance, enhance compliance monitoring, and promote coordinated accountability across departments to ensure that learner transport services are safe and reliable.

- If learners miss classes due to unforeseen circumstances, the teacher could help them with the missed lessons. This is recommended as learners who miss classes may face challenges in their studies. Catch-up lessons may reduce the likelihood that such learners will fall behind and motivate them (Warne et al., 2020).
- Schools should conduct awareness campaigns to prevent substance abuse and bullying. Additionally, there should be systems in place to report bullying, allowing victims to receive support.
- Regular inspections from the police could also be arranged to reduce weapons being brought to school and to monitor substance use. This may help prevent learners from carrying weapons and drugs.
- Schools could consider employing social workers to assist with identifying learners who need extra support, for example, learners from low socio-economic status families who could need food parcels and school uniforms. Schools also need to support learners who are involved in gangs, suffer from negative peer pressure and influence, and provide counselling for learners who need it. This is recommended because when learners and teachers feel safe, teaching and learning can proceed without fear, resulting in academic success for learners.

This could also assist in addressing bullying and violence and preventing learners from carrying weapons and drugs.

- Schools could adopt discipline policies and codes of conduct that promote respect between teachers and learners, good behaviour, discipline and commitment. Teachers and learners should create a class code of conduct that they both agree on. These codes and policies should be enforced to help teachers and learners respect each other (Mashaba et al., 2024). Schools could adopt up-to-date codes of conduct to encourage positive discipline among learners (Zondo & Mncube, 2024), such as the Bela Act 32 of 2024, which restricts teachers from using corporal punishment. Codes of conduct and discipline policies promote respect in the school environment, may help reduce conflict, and teach learners to respect their teachers and refrain from interrupting lessons. When learners understand that they must obey school policies and codes of conduct, they will become responsible and respectful adults in the future.
- Parent engagement and communication could build respectful relationships between teachers and learners, and they can help to maintain discipline (Zondo & Mncube, 2024).

5.4.2 Recommendation for Teachers to Address Factors Affecting Learners' Academic Performance

- Teachers could communicate with parents regularly and hold quarterly parent evenings to allow parents to communicate with teachers and monitor the progress of their children.
- Teachers could create online platforms that notify parents once homework has been uploaded and send messages regarding important notices from the school. Moreover, this will educate parents on how to create supportive home environments that balance learners' education and home chores. For this to be successful, parents must be committed, attend scheduled parent meetings, join school governing bodies, and participate in school events. Communication between parents and teachers, including attending school meetings, is important for enhancing learners' academic progress and fostering teamwork (Ramadhani & Nisa, 2024). By effectively incorporating study skills into the curriculum, teachers can help learners identify their specific learning styles and recommend strategies tailored to their

individual needs. Teachers could provide additional support by reviewing and assisting learners in planning their study schedules after-school. They could also create a study group at school where learners and their friends study together for specific exams. Parents could assist by setting specific boundaries: during examination times, learners should not see their friends, but after exams they can visit again.

- Teachers could offer extra classes in all subjects, not only subjects that are regarded as important, such as Mathematics and Physical Science. Subjects such as History and Languages should be included in extra classes for struggling learners. Additionally, learners can ask their peers for explanations or utilise online resources, such as educational YouTube videos. Extra classes can help learners understand better, be more engaged, and be more motivated, which may result in improved academic performance and positive learning outcomes (Ahmad, 2023).
- Teachers and learners could have one-on-one meetings to resolve conflicts by taking turns to express their feelings. A social worker or a learner support teacher should be present. Communication and interaction between teachers and learners are crucial for enhancing teacher-learner relationships (Lv, 2024). This may help address conflicts and create comfortable and supportive learning and teaching environments for both teachers and learners (Basith, 2024).

5.4.3 Recommendation for the Department of Education to Address Factors Affecting Learners' Academic Performance

- The DBE could hire more teachers and build more schools to solve issues of overcrowding. If there are not enough funds for the government to build or hire teachers, school principals could limit the enrollment of learners, and could refer learners who were not admitted to other schools, use community halls for teaching and learning, or divide learners into two groups: one group could attend in the morning, and the second group could attend in the afternoon. The DBE could build accommodation, such as hostels, at schools for learners who live far away and must walk to school, and for learners who use unreliable public transportation to school. Olowoyo (2021) highlights the need to address transportation that

causes learners to arrive at school late, in line with the recent recommendations on school transport proposed by the SAHRC (2026). The DBE could purchase water tanks for schools; a lack of water affects the learning process, as learners must be dismissed early due to water shortages. Ensuring a reliable water supply may improve learning and prevent lessons from being missed.

5.4.4 Recommendation for the Community to Address Factors Affecting Learners' Academic Performance

- Community members could be volunteers, running after-school and Saturday classes. Graduates, former learners, and professionals in the community can create mentorship programmes and provide educational support to learners, focusing on the subject they specialise in, thereby enhancing learners' academic performance. Collaborative efforts could help to provide adequate support and create healthier environments for learners (Hove & Phasha, 2024). Community schools can involve local businesses and non-government organisations to assist with school resources.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research could focus on:

- The perspectives of key actors on implementing the recommendations proposed by learners generated from this study. Key actors may include school management boards, teachers from rural schools, district officials, and provincial department of education officials. The final phase of this study could be done using the Delphi technique.
- The perspectives of district officials on infrastructure resource allocations for different schools based on needs. This topic could be explored through individual interviews as a data-collection method.
- Community engagement to prevent adolescent substance abuse and provide social support. Data collection can be conducted through focus groups and interviews.

- Perspectives of caregivers and community members about the impact of academic achievement on perceived quality of life in adolescents, using focus groups as the method of data collection
- Long-term effects of academic performance on career choices post-school. Data could be collected using individual interviews. The participants could be learners who have completed matric.
- The impact of home environments on learners' study habits and academic outcomes.

5.6 STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

5.6.1 Strengths

Recruiting participants via the church ensured that participation was voluntary, without pressure from the school. However, one acknowledges that some potential participants may not have been included because they were not attending the specific church community.

The study used a qualitative approach, and individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted at participants' homes to ensure their comfort. This increased participants' willingness to share their experiences in the study. Observing participants' living conditions provided valuable context for the data, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings. The face-to-face interviews ensured rich, detailed responses from the participants with no influence from other participants. This contrasts with focus groups, where individual responses may be influenced by others' responses. This approach allowed flexibility, as follow-up questions were used to gain deeper insight into participants' perspectives and experiences. The qualitative approach also enabled the researcher to gain deeper insight into the participants' daily lives. Conducting the study in rural areas as a community project ensured it was grounded in the issues affecting the community.

5.6.2 Limitations

The research was limited to one rural area. The sample size was small, with only 11 participants. This means that the findings could not be generalised to larger populations. The study-imposed time and financial constraints on the researcher, as it required visits to the participants' homes.

The study was delayed because the researcher had to travel long distances to interview the participants, and some of them refused to participate at the last minute. Since the interviews were conducted at the participants' homes, rather than in schools, the findings may not accurately reflect all school-related challenges. The interviews had to be conducted on Saturdays as the participants were attending school during the week. Despite the limitations encountered, the research has met its research aims and objectives.

5.7 CONCLUSION

From the collected data, it can be concluded that various factors affect learners' academic performance, both positively and negatively. This was based on the findings from the first sub-aim, which revealed that personal, social, and environmental factors influence learners' academic performance. Results from the second sub-aim reflected learners' recommendations for improving their academic performance. Several factors identified in the literature review did not emerge in the findings, and these factors influence learners' academic performance. This may be influenced by the fact that the existing literature was based on urban settings. This may be influenced by the fact that the existing literature was based on urban settings. The findings of this study reflect the context of the rural area in which the study was conducted. More studies should be conducted on factors affecting academic performance in rural areas of KZN.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICS APPROVAL FORM

UNISA university of south africa

UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 2024/03/13

Ref: **2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM**
Name: Ms WS Mnikathi
Student No.:49208594

Dear Ms WS Mnikathi

Decision: Ethics Approval from 2024/03/13 to 2027/03/13

Researcher(s): Name: Ms WS Mnikathi
E-mail address: 49208594@mylife.unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 0745620972

Supervisor(s): Name: Prof. E. Johnson
E-mail address: johnse@unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 0124812959

Name: Dr. A. Kuyler
E-mail address: kuylea@unisa.ac.za
Telephone: N/A

Title of research:

Exploring factors affecting learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu Natal

Qualification: MEd Inclusive Education

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period 2024/03/13 to 2027/03/13.

*The **medium risk** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on 2024/03/13 in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.

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2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2027/03/13**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:
*The reference number **2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Kind regards,

Prof AT Motlhabane
CHAIRPERSON: CEDU RERC
motlhat@unisa.ac.za

Prof Mpine Makoe
EXECUTIVE DEAN
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Approved - decision template – updated 16 Feb 2017

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APPENDIX B1: PERMISSION LETTER

Dear Pastor

Request for permission to conduct research at St. John Apostolic Church

My name is Winnie Mnikathi, and I am a master's student in Inclusive Education at UNISA. In partial fulfilment of the requirements of this degree, I am requested to conduct a research project under the supervision of Prof. Ensa Johnson, a lecturer at the Department of Inclusive Education. Herewith, I would like to request your permission to conduct a study in your organisation.

Title*: Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice*

Rationale for this study: Learners residing in rural areas tend to experience unsatisfactory academic results. Consequently, I opted to conduct a research study to investigate potential factors contributing to learners' underperformance and to propose recommendations to schools and the Department of Education on how to support these learners.

Objectives of this study: Identify factors affecting learners' academic performance and propose recommendations based on the findings.

Your organisation has been selected due to its location and because some members of your church are learners attending mainstream high schools in the Umzinyathi area.

The study will utilise a qualitative approach, comprising a biographical questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with participants.

Ethical principles that will be upheld in this study: Participation in the study will be voluntary, and no learner will take part without parental approval. The identities of the participants will be safeguarded, with only the researcher aware of them. No data collection will commence without ethics approval from the research ethics committee at the University of South Africa and without permission from the St. John Apostolic Church to conduct research at their church. Letters of informed consent will be sent to parents asking for their consent for their children to take part in the study. I will supply them with the hard copies of both the consent and assent forms. Participants will have a week to complete them and return the hard copies to the pastor. The researcher will place a box in the pastor's office where the participants can hand in the forms**.**

The benefits of this study may include improved learners' self-awareness: Findings may help learners understand their strengths and weaknesses.

Interventions: identifying factors that impact academic performance may enable learners to focus on strategies and resources that address their unique needs.

Academic success: Addressing those factors may lead to better grades and overall academic performance.

Personal growth: It may foster personal growth and resilience as the learner learns to overcome challenges, and it may empower them to take control of their academic journey.

Professional help: If it is found that you experience any challenges with your scholastic journey you will be referred to, you will be referred to an Educational Psychologist pro bono (you will pay nothing).

There are no known potential risks from participating in this study. There will be no compensation for participation in the research study. The feedback procedure will be conducted in writing.

There will be no reimbursement or any incentives for participation in the research.

Yours sincerely

Signature_____

Winnie Slindile Mnikathi

(Researcher)

Signature_____

Prof Ensa Johnson

(supervisor)

johnse@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B2: ISIZULU –PERMISSION LETTER

Mfundisi

Isicelo sokuqhuba ucwaningi ebandleni i- St. John Apostolic

Igama lami ngingu Winnie Mnikathi, ngingimfundi wase-UNISA ngeza izifundo ze- Masters in Inclusive Education. Ukuze ngikwazi ukuphothula lezifundo kumele ngiqhube iphrojekthi yocwaningo ngaphansi kwesandla sikaSolwazi Ensa Johnson, ongumfundisi esikhungweni semfundo ephakeme i-UNISA Emnyangweni wezemfundo. Lapha ngithanda ukucela imvume yakho yokuqhuba ucwaningo ebandleni lakho

Isihloko: *Izinto ezithinta ukusebenza kwabafundi ezifundweni ezikolweni ezijwayelekile zamabanga aphezulu endaweni yasemakhaya KwaZulu Natali: Izincomo ezingasetshenziswa*

Inhloso yocwaningo: Ucwaningo luhlose ukukhlonza izinto ezithinta ukusebenza kwabafundi ezifundwenin zabo Kanye nokuphakamisa izincomo ezisuselwe kokutholakele.

Isizathu salolu cwaningo. Abafundi abahlala ezindaweni ezisemakhaya bavama ukuthola imiphumela engagculisi ezifundweni ngenxa yalokho ngibe sengikhetha ukwenza ucwaningo ukuze ngiphenye ngezinto ezingaba nomthelela ekungenzini kahle kwabafundi futhi ngiphakamise izincomo mayelana nendlela yokweseka abafundi.

Ibandla lakho likhethwe ngenxa yendawo elikuyo nokuthi amanye amalungu ebandla lakho angabafundi abafunda ezikolweni ezijwayelekile zamabanga aphezulu endaweni yaseMzinyathi.

Ucwaningo luzosebenzisa indlela ye khwalithethivu ezobe ihambelana nohlu lwemibuzo lwempilo yabantu Kanye nenhlolokhono yabazobamba iqhaza kucwaningo.

Izimo zokuziphatha ezizogcinwa kulolu cwaningo: Ukubanba iqaza ocwaningweni kuzoba ukuzithandela futhi akekho umfundi ozobamba iqhaza ngaphandle kwemvume yomzali. Abazobamba iqhaza kulolucwaningo bazovikeleka akhekho ozokwazi ukuthi bangobani ngaphandle komcwaningi. Akukho ukuqoqwa kwedatha okuzoqala ngaphandle kwemvume yokuziphatha evela ekomitini lezimo zocwaningo enyuvesi yaseNingizimu Afrikha futhi ngemumva kokutholakala kwemvume ebandleni I Saint John Apostolic ukuze kwenziwe ucwaningo ebandleni labo. Izincwadi zesicelo zizothunyelwa kubazali babantwana zicela imvume yabo ukuze izingane zabo zibambe iqhaza ocwaningweni. Umcwaningi uzobahlinzeka ngamakhophi akho kokubili incwadi yemvume eya kumzali nencwadi yesiqiniseko yomfundi. Abanesifiso sokubamba iqhaza kucwaningo bazonikezwa iviki elilodwa

ukugcwalisa amafomu bese beyawabuyisa bawanike umfundisi. Umcwaningi uzobeka ibhokisi ehhovisi likamfundisi lapho abanesifiso sokubamba iqhaza bezowafaka khona amafomu.

Izinzunzo zocwaningo kungenzeka zithuthukise ukuzazi kumfundi: Okuzotholakala ocwaningweni kungase kusize abafundi ukuba baqonde amandla kanye nobuthakathaka babo. **Ukungenelela:** ukuhlonzwa kwezici ezinomthelela ekusebenzeni kahle kwezemfundo kungase kusize umfundi ukuba agxile emaswini nasezinsizeni ezingase zibhekane nezidingo zakhe ezihlukile**. Impumelelo ezifundweni:** uma umfundi ekwazi ukubhekana nalezizici kungase kuholele ekubeni athole imiphumela egculisayo Kanye nokukhula komuntu siqu sakhe nokuthi angase aqine ukuze akwazi ukunqoba izinselele futhi kungase kumgqugquzele futhi kungase kumnikeze amandla okulawula uhambo lwakhe lwemfundo**. Usizo Oluphrofeshinali:** Uma kutholakala ukuthi kunezinqinamba ohlangabezana nazo kwezemfundo uzothunyelwa kusazi sokusebenza kenqgondo ngokwemfundo ngaphandle kokukha.

Azikho izingozi ezaziwawo ezingaba khona ngokubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni. Ngeke kubekhona inzuzo etholakalayo ngokubamba iqhaza kungcwaningo. Indlela yokuphendula sizoyenza ngokubhala kumafomu.

Akukho okuwumukomelo noma okokukhuthaza okuzotholakala ngokubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni.

Ozithobayo

Isayini_____

Winnie Slindile Mnikathi

(Umncwaningi)

Isayini_____

Prof Ensa Johnson

(Umphathi)

johnse@unisa.ac.za

Appendix B3: WRITTEN PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

ST JOHN'S APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION
050778 MZINYATHI, INANDA, 4310
EMAIL: mzinyathi.stjohns@gmail.com
CELL NUMBER: 0746313141/0827118386
NPO: 234-291

DATE: 15/08/2022

Dear Mrs. W.Mnikathi

Permission to conduct study at the above mentioned Organization

We wish to inform you that your request to conduct the study at our church has been accepted

Therefore we trust that as the researcher, you will comply with the conditions that are contained in the UNISA policy on Ethics which includes confidentiality and privacy of all participants involved in the study.

Wishing you a good lucky and success to you study.

Kind regards

Miss N.A.Msimanga (Secretory)

Secretory ..... Date 15/08/2022

ST JOHN'S APOSTOLIC FAITH MISSION
N.P.O No: 234-291
050 778 Umzinyathi Area
Inanda 4310
E: mzinyathi.stjohns@gmail.com
Cell: 074 631 3141 / 082 711 8386

APPENDIX C1: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Title: *Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice*

DEAR ELDER/GUARDIAN

My name is Winnie Mnikathi, and I am a master's student in Inclusive Education at UNISA. In partial fulfilment of the requirements of this degree, I am requested to conduct a research project under the supervision of Prof. Ensa Johnson, a lecturer at the Department of Inclusive Education. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled**: Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The study aims to identify factors affecting learners' academic performance and to propose recommendations based on the findings.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited due to the location you live in and that you are a learner at a mainstream high school.

Describe the participant's actual role in the study.

You are expected to participate in a face-to-face interview, where you will be asked questions regarding factors that affect your academic performance. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will take approximately 1 hour to complete and will be conducted at your home.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you decide to participate, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign an assent form. You are free to withdraw at any time, without providing a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The benefits of this study may improve learners' self-awareness. Findings from the study may help learners understand their strengths and weaknesses. Interventions: identifying factors that impact academic performance may enable learners to focus on strategies and resources that may address their individual, unique needs. Academic success: Addressing those factors may lead to better grades and overall academic performance. Personal growth: It may foster resilience as learners learn to overcome challenges and empower them to take control of their academic journey. Professional help: If it is found that you experience any challenges with your scholastic journey, you will be referred to an Educational Psychologist pro bono (you will pay nothing).

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

There are no foreseen risks in participating in this study, apart from the possibility that it may be inconvenient.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your name will not be recorded anywhere; only the researcher will know your name. No one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a code number or a pseudonym, and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods, such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher will have access to the data obtained.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Hard copies of your responses will be stored by the researcher for five years in a locked cupboard or filing cabinet for future research or academic purposes. Electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Hard copies will be shredded, and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the computer's hard drive using a relevant software programme.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

No payment will be provided for participating in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

This study has received written approval from the College of Education Research Ethics Review Committee at the University of South Africa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher upon request.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Winnie Mnikathi on 0745620972or email winniekhumalo90@gmail.com

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact 0745620972 or email winniekhumalo90@gmail.com

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Prof. Ensa Johnson at email johnsone@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

_____

Winnie Slindile Mnikathi

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY (Return slip)

I, _____ (Parent name) confirm that the person asking my consent for my child to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

- I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions, and my child is prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that she or he is free to withdraw at any time.
- I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.
- I agree to the recording of the interview.
- I have received a signed copy of the informed assent agreement.

Parent Name & Surname (please print) _____

_____ _____

Participant Signature Date

Researcher's Name & Surname (please print) _____

_____ _____

Researcher's signature Date

APPENDIX C2: ISIZULU – LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

Incwadi yolwazi

Isihloko: Izinto ezithinta ukusebenza kwabafundi ezifundweni ezikolweni ezijwayelekile zamabanga aphezulu endaweni yasemakhaya KwaZulu: Izincomo ezingasetshenziswa

Sawubona

Igama lami ngingu Winnie Mnikathi, ngingumfundi wase-UNISA ngeza izifundo ze- Masters in Inclusive Education. Ukuze ngikwazi ukuphothula lezifundo kumele ngiqhube iphrojekthi yocwaningo ngaphansi kwesandla sikaSolwazi Ensa Johnson, ongumfundisi esikhungweni semfundo ephakeme i-UNISA Emnyangweni wezemfundo. Siyakumema ukuba ubambe iqhaza kulolu cwaningo olusihloko sithi: **Izinto ezithinta ukusebenza kwabafundi ezifundweni ezikolweni ezijwayelekile zamabanga aphezulu endaweni yasemakhaya KwaZulu Natali**: Izincomo ezingasetshenziswa.

YINI INHLOSO YALOLUCWANINGO?

Ucwaningo luhlose ukuhlonza izinto ezithinta imiphumela yabafundi ezifundweni zabo Kanye nokuphakamisa izincomo ezisuselwe kokutholakele.

KUNGANI NGIMENYWA UKUBA NGIBE INGXENYE YOCWANINGO?

Umenywe ngenxa yendawo ohlala kuyo nokuthi ungumfundi wasesikoleni esijwayelekile samabanga aphezizulu.

Chaza ngeqhaza labazoba yingxenye yocwaningo.

Kulindeleke ukuba ubambe iqhaza kwinhlolokhono yobuso nobuso lapho uzobuzwa imibuzo mayelana nezinto ezithinta imiphumela yakho ezifundweni. Inhlolokhono izoqoshwa ngesiqopha mazwi. Iyothatha cishe ihora eli-1 futhi iyokwenzelwa ekhaya kini.

NGINGAHOXA YINI OCWANINGWENI NGISHO NANGEMUVA KOKUVUMA UKUBAMBA IQHAZA?

Ukubamba iqhaza kulolu cwaningo kusuka othandweni lakho futhi awuphoqelekile ukuthi uvume ukuba yingxenye yalolu cwaningo. Uma unquma ukubamba iqhaza uzonikezwa iphepha eliqukethe ulwazi ukuba uligcine futhi ucelwe ukuba usayine ifomu lokuvuma ukubamba iqhaza. Ukhululekile ukuba ungahoxa noma inini ngaphandle kokunikeza isizathu**.**

YIZIPHI IZINZUNZO OKUNGENZEKA ZIBE KHONA NGOKUBA INGXENYE YOCWANINGO

Izinzunzo zocwaningo kungenzeka zithuthukise ukuzazi kumfundi: Okuzotholakala ocwaningweni kungase kusize abafundi ukuba baqonde amandla Kanye nobuthakathaka babo**.**

Ukungenelela: ukuhlonzwa kwezici ezinomthelela ekusebenzeni kahle kwezemfundo kungase kusize umfundi ukuba agxile emaswini nasezinsizeni ezingase zibhekane nezidingo zakhe ezihlukile**.**

Impumelelo ezifunndweni: uma umfundi ekwazi ukubhekana nalezizici kungase kuholele ekubeni athole imiphumela egculisayo Kanye nokukhula komuntu siqu sakhe nokuthi angase aqine ukuze akwazi ukunqoba izinselele futhi kungase kumgqugquzele futhi kungase kumnikeze amandla okulawula uhambo lwakhe lwemfundo.

Usizo Oluphrofeshinali: *Uma kutholakala ukuthi kunezinqinamba ohlangabezana nazo kwezemfundo uzothunyelwa kusazi sokusebenza kenqgondo ngokwemfundo ngaphandle kokukha*.

NGABE IKHONA IMIPHUMELA ENGEMIHLE UMA NGIBAMBA IQHAZA KULEPHROJETHI?

Abukho ubungozi ekubambeni iqhaza kulolucwaningo ngaphandle kokuthi kungenzeka kube nokuphazamiseka.

INGABE ULWAZI ENGLILUNDLULISELA KULOLUCWANINGO NEMININGWANE YAMI KUZOGCINWA KUYIMFIHLO?

Igama lakho ngeke libhalwe noma ikuphi, umncwaningi kuphela ozokwazi igama lakho futhi angekho ozokwazi ukuxhumanisa izimpendulo ozinikezayo nawe, Izimpendulo, zakho zizonikwezwa ikhodi futhi uyobizwa ngaleyokhod. Olwazini oluzoqoqwa noma ezindleleni zokubika ucwaningo, izinqubo zezinqunquthela noma iyiphi indlela yokushicilela, Umcwaningi kuphela ozobe ekwazi ukufinyelela olwazini oluqoqiwe**.**

UMCWANINGI UZOLUVIKELA KANJANI ULWAZI ALUQOQILE?

Amakhophi ezimpendulo zakho azogcinwa umcwaningi isikhathi esiyiminyaka emihlanu enndaweni ekhiyiwe noma ekhabetheni lokufayela. Ulwazi lwe elekthronikhi luzogcinwa kukhompyutha evikelwe iphasiwedi. Ukusetshenziswa kolwazi oluqoqiwe olugciniwe esikhathini esizayo kuzoba ngaphansi kombono wesimo socwaningo kanye nokugunywazwa. Amakhophi angamaphepha azodatshulwa bese amakhophi a- elethronikhi ayosulwa unomphela kukhompyutha kusetshenziswa uhlelo lwesofthiwe ehlobene nokwenza lowomsebenzi.

NGABE NGIZOTHOLA INKOKHELO NOMA ISIKHUTHAZO SOKUBAMBA IQHAZA OCWANINGWENI?

Akukho nkokhelo ezonikezwa ngokubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni.

NGABE UCWANINGO SELUGUNYAZIWE YINI NGOKUZIPHATHA?

Ucwaningo seluyitholile imvume eshicilelwe evela ekomodini lokubuyekeza izimo zokuziphatha lwe-UNISA, ikhophi yalencwadi ungayithola kumcwaningi uma uyicela kuye.

NGIYOKWAZISWA KANJANI NGOKUTHOLWE OCWANINGWENI

Uma ufisa ukwaziswa ngokutholwe ocwaningweni ungathintana no- Winnie Mnikathi kulenombolo 0745620972 noma ku imeyili ethi – winniekhumalo90@gmail.com

Uma unokukhathazeka mayela nendllela ucwaningo olwenziwe ngayo ungaxhumana noSolwazi Ensa Johnson ku imeyili ethi - johnsone@unisa.ac.za.

Ngiyabonga ngokuthatha isikhathi ufunda leli phepha lolwazi Kanye nokucabanga ngalesi sicelo. Ngibheke ngabomvu ukuzwa kuwe.

Ozithobayo

_____

Winnie Slindile Mnikathi

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

IMVUME YOKUBAMBA IQHAZA KULOLU CWANINGO (Uyalibuyisa) ELOMZALI

Mina, _____ (igama lomzali) ngiyakuqinisekisa ukuthi lomuntu ocela imvume kumina ukuba ingane yami ibe yingxenye yocwaningo ungichazele ubunjalo boncvwaningo, inqubo, izinzuzo ezingaba khona Kanye nokuphazamiseka okungalindeleka e ngokubamba iqhaza kulolu cwaningo.

- Ngifundile (noma ungichazele) futhi ngaluqonda ucwaningo njengoba kuchazwe ephepheni lolwazi.
- Ngibe nethuba elanele lokubuza imimbuzo futhi nengane yami ikulungele ukubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni.
- Ngiyaqonga ukuthi ukubamba iqhaza akusiyona impoqo futhi ukhululekile ukuhoxa inoma inini.
- Ngiyazi okuzotholakala kulolu cwaningo kuzocutshungulwa kube umbiko, kushicilelwe ngokwejenali, Kanye/noma ngokwenqumo yenqgungquthela, kodwa ukuba yingxenye yocwaningo kuzogcinwa kuyimfihlo ngaphandle uma kukhona okunye okuchaziwe.
- Ngiyavumelana nokurekhodwa kwenhlolokhono.
- Ngiyitholile ikhophi esayiniwe yesivumelwano

Igama nesibongo komzali (bhala)

_____

_____ _____

Isayini yomzali Usuku

Igama nesibongo komncwaningi (bhala) _____

_____ _____

Isayini yocwaningo Usuku

APPENDIX D1: LETTER OF INFORMED ASSENT

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Title: Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice

DEAR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANT

My name is Winnie Mnikathi, and I am a master's student in Inclusive Education at UNISA. In partial fulfilment of the requirements of this degree, I am requested to conduct a research project under the supervision of Prof. Ensa Johnson, a lecturer at the Department of Inclusive Education. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled: **Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The study aims to identify factors affecting learners' academic performance and to propose recommendations based on the findings.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are invited due to the location you live in, and because you are a learner at a mainstream high school.

Describe the participant's actual role in the study.

You are expected to participate in a face-to-face interview, where you will be asked questions regarding factors that affect your academic performance. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will take approximately one hour to complete and will be conducted at your home.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you decide to participate, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign an assent form. You are free to withdraw at any time, without providing a reason.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The benefits of this study may improve learners' self-awareness: Findings from the study may assist learners to understand his or her strengths and weaknesses. Interventions: identifying of factors that impact academic performance may enable learner to focus on strategies and resources that may address their individual unique needs. Academic success: Addressing those factors may lead to better grades and overall academic performance. Personal growth: It may foster resilience as learners learn to overcome

challenges and empower them to take control of their academic journey. Professional help: If it is found that you experience any challenges with your scholastic journey, you will be referred to an Educational Psychologist pro bono (you will pay nothing).

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

There are no foreseen risks in participating in this study, apart from the possibility that it may be inconvenient.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Your name will not be recorded anywhere; only the researcher will know your name. No one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. Your answers will be given a code number or a pseudonym, and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods, such as conference proceedings. Only the researcher will have access to the data obtained.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Hard copies of your responses will be stored by the researcher for five years in a locked cupboard or filing cabinet for future research or academic purposes. Electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. Hard copies will be shredded, and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the computer's hard drive using a relevant software programme.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

No payment will be provided for participating in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa (UNISA). A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher upon request.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Winnie Mnikathi on 0745620972or email winniekhumalo90@gmail.com

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact 0745620972 or email winniekhumalo90@gmail.com

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Prof. Ensa Johnson at email johnsone@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

_____

Winnie Slindile Mnikathi

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY (Return slip)

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my assent

Those who have taken part in this research have informed me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconveniences of participation.

- I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time
- I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.
- agree to the recording of the interview.
- I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname (please print) _____

_____ _____

Participant Signature Date

Researcher's Name & Surname (please print) _____

_____ _____

Researcher's signature Date

APPENDIX D2: ISIZULU – LETTER OF INFORMED ASSENT

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

Iphepha eliqukethe ulwazi

Isihloko: Izinto ezithinta ukusebenza kwabafundi ezifundweni ezikolweni ezijwayelekile zamabanga aphezulu endaweni yasemakhaya KwaZulu: Izincomo ezingasetshenziswa.

Sawubona

Igama lami ngingu Winnie Mnikathi, ngingimfundi wase-UNISA ngeza izifundo ze- Masters in Inclusive Education. Ukuze ngikwazi ukuphothula lezifundo kumele ngiqhube iphrojekthi yocwaningo ngaphansi kwesandla sikaSolwazi Ensa Johnson, ongumfundisi esikhungweni semfundo ephakeme i-UNISA, Emnyangweni wezemfundo. Siyakumema ukuba ubambe iqhaza kulolu cwaningo olusihloko sithi: **Izinto ezithinta ukusebenza kwabafundi ezifundweni ezikolweni ezijwayelekile zamabanga aphezulu endaweni yasemakhaya KwaZulu Natali: Izincomo ezingasetshenziswa.**

YINI INHLOSO YALOLU CWANINGO?

Ucwaningo luhlose ukuhlonza izinto ezithinta imiphumela yabafundi ezifundweni zabo Kanye nokuphakamisa izincomo ezisuselwe kokutholakele.

KUNGANI NGIMENYWA UKUBA NGIBE INGXENYE YOCWANINGO?

Umenywe ngenxa yendawo ohlala kuyo nokuthi ungumfundi wasesikoleni esijwayelekile samabanga aphezulu.

Chaza ngeqhaza labazoba yingxenye yocwaningo.

Kulindeleke ukuba ubambe iqhaza kwinhlolokhono yobuso nobuso lapho uzobuzwa imibuzo mayelana nezinto ezithinta imiphumela yakho ezifundweni. Inhlolokhono izoqoshwa ngesiqopha mazwi. Iyothatha cishe ihora eli-1 futhi iyokwenzelwa ekhaya kini.

NGINGAHOXA YINI OCWANINGWENI NGISHO NANGEMUVA KOKUVUMA UKUBAMBA IQHAZA?

Ukubamba iqhaza kulolucwaningo kusuka othandweni lakho futhi awuphoqelekile ukuthi uvume ukuba yingxenye yalolucwaningo. Uma unquma ukubamba iqhaza uzonikezwa iphepha eliqukethe ulwazi ukuba uligcine futhi ucelwe ukuba usayine ifomu lokuvuma ukubamba iqhaza. Ukhululekile ukuba ungahoxa noma inini ngaphandle kokunikeza isizathu**.**

YIZIPHI IZINZUNZO OKUNGENZEKA ZIBE KHONA NGOKUBA INGXENYE YOCWANINGO?

Izinzunzo zocwaningo kungenzeka zithuthukise ukuzazi kumfundi: Okuzotholakala ocwaningweni kungase kusize abafundi ukuba baqonde amandla kanye nobuthakathaka babo**. Ukungenelela:**

ukuhlonzwa kwezici ezinomthelela ekusebenzeni kahle kwezemfundo kungase kusize umfundi ukuba agxile emaswini nasezinsizeni ezingase zibhekane nezidingo zakhe ezihlukile**. Impumelelo ezifundweni:** uma umfundi ekwazi ukubhekana nalezizici kungase kuholele ekubeni athole imiphumela egculisayo Kanye nokukhula komuntu siqu sakhe nokuthi angase aqine ukuze akwazi ukunqoba izinselele futhi kungase kumgqugquzele futhi kungase kumnikeze amandla okulawula uhambo lwakhe lwemfundo. **Usizo Oluphrofeshinali:** *Uma kutholakala ukuthi kunezinqinamba ohlangabezana nazo kwezemfundo uzothunyelwa kusazi sokusebenza kwenqgondo ngokwemfundo ngaphandle kokukha*.

NGABE IKHONA IMIPHUMELA ENGEMIHLE UMA NGIBAMBA IQHAZA KULEPHROJETHI?

Abukho ubungozi ekubambeni iqhaza kulolucwaningo ngaphandle kokuthi kungenzeka kube nokuphazamiseka.

INGABE ULWAZI ENGLILUNDLULISELA KULOLUCWANINGO NEMININGWANE YAMI KUZOGCINWA KUYIMFIHLO?

Igama lakho ngeke libhalwe noma ikuphi, umncwaningi kuphela ozokwazi igama lakho futhi akhekho ozokwazi ukuxhumanisa izimpendulo ozinikezayo nawe, Izimpendulo, zakho zizonikwezwa ikhodi futhi uyobizwa ngaleyokhodi olwazini oluzoqoqwa noma ezindleleni zokubika ucwaningo, izinqubo zezinqunquthela noma iyiphi indlela yokushicilela, Umcwaningi kuphela ozobe ekwazi ukufinyelela olwazini oluqoqiwe**.**

UMCWANINGI UZOLUVIKELA KANJANI ULWAZI ALUQOQILE

Amakhophi ezimpendulo zakho azogcinwa umcwaningi isikhathi esiyiminyaka emihlanu enndaweni ekhiyiwe noma ekhabetheni lokufayela. Ulwazi lwe elekthronikhi luzogcinwa kukhompyutha evikelwe iphasiwedi. Ukusetshenziswaa kolwazi oluqoqiwe olugciniwe esikhathini esizayo kuzoba ngaphansi kombono wesimo socwaningo Kanye nokugunywazwa. Amakhophi angamaphepha azodatshulwa bese amakhophi a- elethronikhi ayosulwa unomphela kukhompyutha kusetshenziswa uhlelo lwesisofthiwe ehlobene nokwenza lowomsebenzi.

NGABE NGIZOTHOLA INKOKHELO NOMA ISIKHUTHAZO SOKUBAMBA IQHAZA OCWANINGWENI?

Akukho nkokhelo ezonikezwa ngokubamba iqhaza ocwaningweni.

NGABE UCWANINGO SELUGUNYAZIWE YINI NGENDLELA YOKUZIPHATHA?

Ucwaningo seluyitholile imvume eshicilelwe evela ekomodini lokubuyekezwa izimo zokuziphatha lwe UNISA, ikhophi yalencwadi ungayithola kumcwaningi uma uyicela kuye.

NGIYOKWAZISWA KANJANI NGOKUTHOLWE OCWANINGWENI

Uma ufisa ukwaziswa ngokutholwe ocwaningweni ungathintana no- Winnie Mnikathi kulenombolo 0745620972 noma ku imeyili ethi – winniekhumalo90@gmail.com

Uma unokukhathazeka mayela nendllela ucwaningo olwenziwe ngayo ungaxhumana noSolwazi Ensa Johnson ku imeyili ethi - johnsone@unisa.ac.za.

Ngiyabonga ngokuthatha isikhathi ufunda leli phepha lolwazi Kanye nokucabanga ngalesi sicelo. Ngibeke ngabomvu ukuzwa kuwe.

Ozithobayo

_____

Isayini)

_____

Winnie Slindile Mnikathi

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

IGUNYA LOKUBAMBA IQHAZA KULOLU CWANINGO (SIYABUYA) ELOMFUNDI

Mina, _____ (igama Lobamba iqhaza), ngiyaqiniseka ukuthi umuntu ongicela ukuba ngibambe iqhaza kulolu cwaningo ungichazela ubunjalo bocwaningo, inqubo, izinzuzo ezingaba khona Kanye nokuphazamiseka okulindelekile uma ngibamba iqhaza kulolu cwaningo

- Ngifundile (noma ungichazele) futhi ngaluqonda lolu cwaningo njengoba kuchaziwe ephepheni lolwazi
- Ngibe nalo ithuba elanele lokubuza imibuzo futhi ngikulungele ukubamba iqhaza kulolucwaningo
- Ngiyakuqonda ukuthi ukumba iqhaza akuyona impoqo futhi ngikhululekile ukuba ngingahoxa noma inini
- Ngiyazi okuzotholakala kulolu cwaningo kuzocutshungulwa kube umbiko, kushicilelwe ngokwejenali, Kanye/noma ngokwenqubo yengqungquthela, kodwa ukuba yingxenye yocwaningo kuzogcinwa kuyimfihlo ngaphandle uma kukhona okunye okuchaziwe.
- Ngiyavumelana nokurekhodwa kwenhlolokhono.

Ngiyitholile ikhophi esayiniwe yesivumelwano

Igama nesibongo lozobamba iqhaza (bhala) _____

_____ _____

Isayini yozobamba iqhaza Usuku

Igama nesibongo komncwaningi (bhala) _____

_____ _____

Isayini yomcwaningi Usuku

APPENDIX E1: BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Participant's name:
Date of interview:
Participation code:
Name of school attending:

1. **What is your age? _____**
2. **What is your gender? _____**
3. **Do you have brothers and/or sisters? _____**
4. **How old are they? _____**
5. **Are they in the same school as you? _____**
6. **In what grade are you? _____**
7. **Did you repeat a grade? _____If so, please specify which grade_____**
8. **With whom do you live? _____**
9. **What is your parents' employment status?**

Full-time	Part time	Contract employment	Unemployed

If they are unemployed, do your parents receive a SASSA Grant? _____

10. **What activities do you do after school? Please specify how much time you spend on the activity and describe what it entails. _____**
11. **How far do you need to travel from home to get to school? _____**
12. **What transport do you use to get to school? _____**
13. **How much do you spend on transport per day? _____**

Thank you for completing the form

APPENDIX E2: ISIZULU BIOGRAPHICAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Igama:
Usuku lwenhlolokhono:
Ikhodi abizwa ngayo:
Igama lesikole ofunda kulo:

1. **Uneminyaka emingaki? _____**
2. **Ubulili bakho? _____**
3. **Unabo abafowenu Kanye/noma odadewenu? _____**
4. **Baneminyaka emingaki? _____**
5. **Bafunda esikoleni esifanayo nawe? _____**
6. **Ukuliphi ibanga? _____**
7. **Uke waliphinda ibanga? Uma kunjalo ngicela usho ukuthi yiliphi_____**
8. **Uhlala nobani? _____**
9. **Ngabe sinjani isimo somsebenzi sabazali bakho?**

Sasebenza ngokugcwele	Umsebenzi wesikhashana	Umsebenzi wenkontileka	Abasebenzi

Uma bengasebenzi ngabe bayasithola isibonelolo sakwa SASSA_____

10. **Imiphi imisebenzi oyenza ngemva kokuphuma kwesikole? Ngicela ucacise inani lesikhathi osichitha kulowo emsebenzini nokuthi uyini lowomsebenzi.**
11. **Ngabe uhamba ibanga elingakanani usuka ekhaya uya esikoleni?**
12. **Yiziphi izithuthi ozisebenzisayo ukuya esikoleni?**
13. **Uchitha malini ukugibela uya esikoleni ngosuku?**

Ngiyabonga ngokugwalisa leli fomi.

APPENDIX F1: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview script

Function	Purpose	Script
Welcome	Set the participant at ease.	Thank you that you are willing to talk to me.
	The researcher introduces herself to the participant.	My name is Winnie. What is your name?
	Explains to the participant what he/she will do during the session, explains that there are no right or wrong answers, and answers questions that the participant may have.	Thank you for your willingness to talk to me today. I appreciate it. I will ask you a few questions about the factors that affect your academic performance. There are no right or wrong answers, as you will be giving me your experiences. I will audio-record the interview – Is that okay? Did you complete the biographical questionnaire? (If not, have the participant complete it before the interview.) Remember, if you want to stop at any time, please let me know so that I can stop the recorder and we can end the interview.
	Obtain informed assent from the child (using the Assent Form).	Do you understand everything I explained to you? Do you understand that it is your choice to help me today? Do you understand that you can stop at any time you want? Do you understand that I will be audio-recording us today? Do you have any questions? (If yes, answer questions) Are you happy with the way your questions were answered? Do you want to work with me today?
Discussion	Introducing the interview questions	Are you ready for the first question? 1. How would you describe your overall academic performance? 2. What factors do you think impact your marks?

		3. How do you think these factors influence your academic performance? 4. How can you improve your academic performance? 5. What are the goal marks that you would like to get? 6. What would help you to get those marks? 7. What type of support do you think you need? 8. Tell me about the support you get at home with school matters. 9. Tell me about the relationship between your teachers and parents. 10. What can you say about the school environment? 11. What can you say about the academic support you get from school?
End	Closing the session	Thank you! You're a star! That was the last question. I appreciate your help with my studies. When I complete my dissertation, I will send you a pamphlet with the results of my studies.

APPENDIX F2: ISIZULU INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Isitripthi senhlolokhono

okuzokwenzeka	Inhloso	IsiKripthi
Ukwamukela	Wenza obambe iqhaza akhululeke	Ngiyabonga ukuthi uzimisele ukukhuluma nami.
	Umncwaningi uzethula kobambe iqhaza	Igama lami ngingu- Winnie, Ubani egama lakho?
	Chazela obambe iqhaza ukuthi uzokwenzani phakathi neseshini chaza ukuthi azikho izimpendulo ezilungile nesingalungile futhi phendula imibuzo angaba nayo	Ngiyabonga ngokuthanda ukukhuluma name namuhla. Kusho lukhulu kimina. Ngizokubuza imibuzo embalwa mayelana nezinto ezithinta ukwenza kwakho ezifundweni. Azikho izimpendulo ezilungile nezingalungile njengoba uzobe unginika ulwazi lwakho. Ngizoyiqopha ngesikhopha nazwi lwenhlolokhono – ngabe uyakuvuma lokho? Ngabe uligwalisile ifomu elinemibuzo ngempilo yakho? (Uma engakaligwalisi, munike ithuba lokulugwalisa ngaphambi kokuba inhlolo khono iqale. Khumbula, uma usufisa ukungaqhubeki noma inini, cela ungazise ngimise ukuqopha siqede nenhlolokhono.
	Thola imvume enganeni (Ifomu lemvume)	Uyakuqonda konke engikuchazele khona namuhla? Uyaqonda ukuthi uzikhelele wena ukungisiza namuhla? Uyaqonda ukuthi ungayeka noma ingasiphi isikhathi? Uyaqonda ukuthi ngizobe ngizobe ngiqopha ngesiqopha mazwi namuhla? Ingabe ikhona imibuzo onayu? (uma ikhona yiphendule) Uyajabula ngendlela ngendlela imibuzo yakho iphendulwe ngayo? Uyafuna ukusebenza name namuhla?
Ingxoxo	Ukwethula imibuzo yenhlolokhono	Usuwulungele umbuzo wokuqala? 1. Ungachaza uthi wenza kanjani emsebenzini wakho wesikole usuwonke? 2. Iziphi izinto ocabanga ukuthi zinomthelela emamakini akho?

okuzokwenzeka	Inhloso	IsiKripthi
		3. Ucabanga ukuthi lezizinto zinomthelela kanjani emiphumeleni yakho yemfundo? 4. Ungayithuthukisa kanjani imiphulela yakho? 5. Yimaphi amamakhi onesifiso sokuwathola? 6. Yini engakusiza ukuba uthole lawo mamaki 7. Yiluphi uhlobo lokwesekwa oludingayo? 8. Awungitshela ngoxhaso oluthola ekhaya ngezindaba zesikole? 9. Ngitshele ngobudlelwano phakathi kothisha nabazali bakho? 10. Ungathini ngesimo sasesikoleni? 11. Ungathini ngoxhaso lwezemfundo oluthola esikoleni?
Isiphetho	Ukuvala	Ngiyabonga. Lowo bekuwumubuzo wami wokugcina. Ngiyabonga ngokungisiza ezifundweni zami. Uma sengiqedile ukubhala. Ngizokuthumela iphesha eliqukethe engikutholile kulezi zifundo zami.

APPENDIX G: PROCEDURAL CHECKLIST

Procedural Checklist

1. Greet the participant, introduce myself and thank the participant for being part of the study.

2. Explain the purpose of the study and how the interview will be conducted

3. Give assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Double-check that the participants have signed the consent form.

5. Give the participants the biographic questionnaire to fill out, and give participants 10 minutes to fill out the biographic questionnaire.

6. Ask for permission for the interview to be recorded.

7. Start the interview, ask participants open-ended questions, and ask follow-up questions for clarity.

8. Ask open-ended

9. End of the interview.

10. Explain to the participants what will happen next

11. Thank the participants for their time

APPENDIX H: CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT WITH RESEARCH THIRD PARTIES

Hereby, I Bhekisisa Mnikathi, in my personal capacity as a translator collaborating with Winnie Slindile Mnikathi on a research study entitled: Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice. I acknowledge that I am aware of and familiar with the stipulations and conditions of ethical clearance specific to this study. I shall conform to and abide by these conditions. Furthermore, I am aware of the sensitivity of the information collected and the need for strict controls to ensure compliance with the study's confidentiality obligations.

- I agree to the privacy and confidentiality of the information that I am granted access to in my duties as a translator. I will not disclose or sell the information that I have been granted permission to gain access to in good faith to anyone.

- I also confirm that I have been briefed by the research team on the protocols and expectations of my behaviour and involvement in the research as a translator.

SIGNED: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX I: REFERRAL REQUEST TO EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST

2024/03/13/49208594/22/AM

Dear Principal

Department of Education: KwaZulu-Natal

27 January 2024

Dear Sir/Madam

PERMISSION TO REFER LEARNERS TO DABEKA HIGH SCHOOL

My name is Winnie Mnikathi, and I am a master's student in the Department of Inclusive Education at the University of South Africa. In partial fulfilment of the requirements of this degree, I am requested to conduct a research project under the supervision of Prof. Ensa Johnson from the Department of Inclusive Education. As part of this research, learners will be interviewed about factors that may affect their academic performance.

The title of the study: Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice

Rationale for this study: Learners residing in rural areas tend to experience unsatisfactory academic results. Consequently, I opted to conduct a research study to investigate potential factors contributing to learners' underperformance and to propose recommendations to schools and the Department of Education on how to support these learners.

Objectives of this study: The study aims to identify factors affecting learners' academic performance and to propose recommendations based on the findings.

Procedures for this study and your expected role: Participants in this study will be learners aged 13-18 years. The researcher will conduct interviews with learners to identify potential factors that affect their academic performance. If any learners experience emotional challenges during their scholastic journey, I would like to request your permission to refer them to your school, specifically Dabeka High School. These learners will require pro bono services from an educational psychologist, as they do not have the means to access them privately. Services they may require include support and intervention facilitation based on individual needs, general assessment, and counselling. I hereby request your permission to refer learners who have challenges to your school's Educational Psychologist.

Ethical principles that will be upheld in this study: Participation in this study will be voluntary, and no learner will take part without parental approval. The identities of the participants will remain confidential,

with only the researcher aware of them. Data collection will not commence until an ethics approval certificate is obtained from the research ethics committee at the University of South Africa and permission is granted by the St. John Apostolic Church, where the research will be conducted. Letters of informed consent will be sent to parents asking for their consent for their children to participate in the study. Upon parental consent, assent will be obtained from the children to participate in the study. During interviews, no audio recording will take place without the participants' approval.

It would be greatly appreciated if you would consider this request favourably. If you agree to assist in this matter or require any further information, please contact me at 0745620972 or email me at winniekhumalo90@gmail.com. Additionally, you can contact my supervisor at johnse@unisa.ac.za.

Kind regards

_____

Winnie Slindile Mnikathi

(Principal researcher)

_____

Prof. Ensa Johnson

(Supervisor)

APPENDIX J: WRITTEN APPROVAL FOR REFERRAL TO EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST

DABEKA SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

DABEKA
FIRST THINGS FIRST

PRIVATE BAG X047
INANDA
4310

TEL/FAX: 0724304613

EMAIL: tmtshali@eol.com

29 January 2024

To whom it may concern

A CONFIRMATION THAT THE SCHOOL WILL REFER PARTICIPANTS(LEARNERS) TO AN EDUCATIONAL PSYCOLOGIST

Dabeka secondary school hereby confirm that they will refer the participants who may find it difficult when discussing their scholastic journey to an educational psychologist for the research study entitled:

Exploring factors affecting learner's academic performance in mainstream high school in a rural area in KwaZulu Natal.

DABEKA SECONDARY SCHOOL
PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE
P/BAG X047, INANDA 4309
SCHOOL STAMP
IMAFUKUZELA GANDHI CIRCUIT

Yours faithfully

MR T.J Mtshali

APPENDIX K: LETTER FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR

Fran Saunders

academic and business writing solutions

+27(0)844400711 | saunders.fran@gmail.com | 9 du Toit, Stanford, Western Cape, 7210 South Africa

To whom it may concern

This is to certify that the following thesis by Winnie Slindile Mnikathi has been language edited by me

Factors affecting Grade 8 - 12 learners' academic performance in mainstream high schools in a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal: Recommendations for practice

Fran Saunders

23 December 2025

APPENDIX L: TURNITIN REPORT

Similarity Report

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