EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

by

JEANNE-MARIE LOTTER

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Declaration

I, *Jeanne-Marie Lotter*, declare that this thesis, entitled *"Exploring the Relationship between Socio-Economic Status and Academic Achievement"* is my own original work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that this work has not been submitted previously, in its entirety or in part, for the award of any degree at any other higher education institution.

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Supervisor's Declaration

As the candidate's supervisor, I agree with the submission of this thesis.

Prof. L.M. Luvalo (Supervisor)

Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my husband, Pieter, and my daughter, Tarja.

Pieter, thank you for your unwavering support, patience, and encouragement throughout this journey. Your belief in me gave me strength during the most challenging moments.

Tarja, you are my constant inspiration and the reason I strive to grow, learn, and persevere. May this achievement remind you that with dedication and courage, anything is possible.

With all my love and gratitude.

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With sincere appreciation.

Abstract

Despite significant educational reforms since the end of apartheid, South Africa continues to experience profound socio-economic inequalities that result in unequal educational opportunities and academic achievement among learners. Although numerous studies have established a relationship between socio-economic status and educational outcomes, there remains limited understanding of how multiple socio-economic factors interact to influence academic achievement within diverse South African schooling contexts. This study addresses this gap by investigating the most significant socio-economic factors influencing academic achievement and examining how knowledge of these factors can be used to promote more equitable educational opportunities for South African learners.

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design, situated within a post-positivist paradigm, was employed to investigate the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement in schools across Gauteng Province. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires completed by learners, parents, and teachers from mainstream and Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) schools representing affluent, middle-income, township, and specialised educational contexts. These data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The quantitative findings were complemented by qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses, which were analysed using thematic analysis to provide a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences.

The study was informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, providing a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the interaction between socio-economic, environmental, social, and cognitive factors influencing academic achievement. The findings revealed that parental education, household income, the value placed on education within the home, access to educational resources, and supportive home and school environments were the most significant socio-economic factors associated with learners' academic achievement. The findings further demonstrated that socio-economic disadvantage affects academic performance through interconnected structural, environmental, psychological, and relational mechanisms, while also highlighting the protective role of parental support, teacher intervention, learner resilience, and positive educational aspirations.

This study advances existing scholarship by developing an integrated explanation of how multiple socio-economic factors interact to influence academic achievement within the South African schooling context, rather than examining these factors in isolation. By combining quantitative evidence with the lived experiences of learners, parents, and educators across diverse socio-economic contexts, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which socio-economic inequality shapes educational outcomes. The research makes an original contribution by identifying the key interacting pathways through which socio-economic status influences academic achievement and by proposing an evidence-based framework of policy, school, and community interventions aimed at reducing educational inequality and promoting more equitable educational opportunities for all South African learners.

Keywords

Keywords: Socio-economic status; academic achievement; educational inequality; South African education; mixed-methods research; educational resources; parental involvement; educational equity.

Opsomming

Ten spyte van aansienlike opvoedkundige hervormings sedert die einde van apartheid, ondervind Suid-Afrika steeds diepgaande sosio-ekonomiese ongelykhede wat tot ongelyke opvoedkundige geleenthede en akademiese prestasie onder leerders lei. Alhoewel talle studies ’n verwantskap tussen sosio-ekonomiese status en opvoedkundige uitkomste vasstel, bly daar ’n beperkte begrip van hoe verskeie sosio-ekonomiese faktore in wisselwerking tree om akademiese prestasie binne diverse Suid-Afrikaanse skoolkontekste te beïnvloed. Hierdie studie spreek hierdie leemte aan deur die belangrikste sosio-ekonomiese faktore wat akademiese prestasie beïnvloed te ondersoek, asook om te ondersoek hoe kennis van hierdie faktore gebruik kan word om meer regverdige opvoedkundige geleenthede vir Suid-Afrikaanse leerders te bevorder.

’n Opeenvolgende verduidelikende gemengdemetode-navorsingsontwerp, geplaas binne ’n post-positivistiese paradigma, is gebruik om die verwantskap tussen sosio-ekonomiese status en akademiese prestasie in skole regoor die Gauteng-provinsie te ondersoek. Kwantitatiewe data is deur middel van gestruktureerde vraelyste ingesamel wat ingevul is deur leerders,

ouers en onderwysers van hoofstroomskole en skole vir Leerders met Spesiale Onderwysbehoeftes (LSOB), wat welgestelde, middelinkomste-, lokasie- en gespesialiseerde opvoedkundige kontekste verteenwoordig. Hierdie data is met behulp van beskrywende statistiek en korrelasie-analise ontleed. Die kwantitatiewe bevindinge is aangevul deur kwalitatiewe data wat deur semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude en oop-einde-vraelyste verkry is, wat aan die hand van tematiese analise ontleed is om ’n dieper begrip van deelnemers se geleefde ervarings te bied.

Die studie is deur Bronfenbrenner se Ekologiese Sisteemteorie, Bandura se Sosiale Kognitiewe Teorie, en Vygotsky se Teorie oor Sosiale Ontwikkeling ingelig, wat ’n omvattende teoretiese raamwerk bied om die wisselwerking tussen sosio-ekonomiese, omgewings-, sosiale en kognitiewe faktore wat akademiese prestasie beïnvloed, te verstaan. Die bevindinge het aan die lig gebring dat oueropvoeding, huishoudelike inkomste, die waarde wat tuis aan onderwys heg, toegang tot opvoedkundige hulpbronne, en ondersteunende tuis- en skoolomgewings die belangrikste sosio-ekonomiese faktore is wat met leerders se akademiese prestasie geassosieer word. Die bevindinge het verder aangedui dat sosio-ekonomiese tekortkome akademiese prestasie deur onderling verweefde strukturele, omgewings-, sielkundige en verwantskaplike meganismes beïnvloed, terwyl dit ook die beskermende rol van ouerlike ondersteuning, onderwysersintervensie, leerderveerkragtigheid en positiewe opvoedkundige aspirasies beklemtoon.

Hierdie studie bevorder bestaande navorsing deur ’n geïntegreerde verduideliking te ontwikkel van hoe verskeie sosio-ekonomiese faktore in wisselwerking tree om akademiese prestasie binne die Suid-Afrikaanse skoolkonteks te beïnvloed, eerder as om hierdie faktore in isolasie te ondersoek. Deur kwantitatiewe bewyse met die geleefde ervarings van leerders, ouers en opvoeders regoor diverse sosio-ekonomiese kontekste te kombineer, bied die studie ’n meer omvattende begrip van die meganismes waardeur sosio-ekonomiese ongelykheid opvoedkundige uitkomste vorm. Die navorsing lewer ’n oorspronklike bydrae deur die deurslaggewende interaktiewe roetes te identifiseer waardeur sosio-ekonomiese status akademiese prestasie beïnvloed, en deur ’n bewysgebaseerde raamwerk van beleids-, skool- en gemeenskapsintervensies voor te stel wat daarop gemik is om opvoedkundige ongelykheid te verminder en meer regverdige opvoedkundige geleenthede vir alle Suid-Afrikaanse leerders te bevorder.

Sleutelwoorde

Sleutelwoorde: Akademiese prestasie; gemengdemetodes-navorsing; onderwysgelykheid; opvoedkundige hulpbronne; opvoedkundige ongelykheid; ouerbetrokkenheid; sosio-ekonomiese status; Suid-Afrikaanse onderwys

Igoqa

Ngale kwezinguquko ezinkulu ezenziwe emfundweni kusukela ekupheleni kwesikhathi sobandlululo, iNingizimu Afrika isaqhubeka nokubhekana nokungalingani okukhulu kwezomnotho womphakathi, okuholela ekutheni abafundi bangabi namathuba alinganayo emfundo kanye nasekuphumeleleni ngokwezemfundo. Nakuba ucwaningo oluningi seluveze ukuthi kunobudlelwano phakathi kwesimo mnotho womphakathi kanye nemiphumela yezemfundo, kusekhona ukuqonda okunomkhawulo mayelana nokuthi izici eziningi zezomnotho womphakathi zisebenzisana kanjani ekuthonyeni ukuphumelela kwezemfundo ezimweni ezahlukene zezikole zaseNingizimu Afrika. Lolu cwaningo lubhekana naleli gebe ngokuphenya izici zomnotho womphakathi ezibaluleke kakhulu ezithonya ukuphumelela kwezemfundo, kanye nokuhlola ukuthi ulwazi ngalezi zici lungasetshenziswa kanjani ukukhuthaza amathuba emfundo alinganayo kubafundi baseNingizimu Afrika. Kusetshenziswe uhlelo locwaningo lwezindlela ezixubile oluchazayo nolulandelanayo, olwakhelwe ngaphansi uhlelomqondo lwefilosofi yocwaningo, ukuze kuphenywe ubudlelwano phakathi kwesimo senhlalo nezomnotho kanye nokuphumelela kwezemfundo ezikoleni Esifundazweni saseGauteng. Imininingo yocwaningo zinombolo yaqoqwa kusetshenziswa uhlu lwemibuzo oluhlelekile eyagcwaliswa ngabafundi, abazali kanye nothisha abavela ezikoleni ezijwayelekile kanye nasezikoleni zabafundi abanezidingo ezikhethekile zemfundo (Abafundi Abanezidingo Eziyikhethelo Zezemfundo – i-LSEN) izikole zazimele izimo zemfundo ezahlukene, okuhlanganisa izindawo ezicebile, ezinemali ephakathi, amalokishi kanye nezimo zemfundo ezikhethekile. Le minininingo yahlaziywa kusetshenziswa izibalo ezichazayo kanye nokuhlaziywa kokuhlangana kobudlelwano. Imiphumela etholakale kucwaningo zinombolo yaqiniswa yimininingo yekhwalithethivu, eyatholakala ngezinhlolokhono ezinohlaka kodwa ziyakwazi ukushintshwa, kanye nezimpendulo zohlu lwemibuzo evulekile, le miningo yahlaziywa kusetshenziswa ukuhlaziywa kwezindikimba, ngenhloso yokuthola ukuqonda okujulile kwababambiqhaza abahlangabezana nakho empilweni yabo yansukuzonke abayiphilayo.

Lolu cwaningo lwasekelwe yi-Thiyori Yohlelo lwe-Ikholoji ye-Bronfenbrenner, I-thiyori ye-Bandura's Social Cognitive, kanye ne-Thiyori Yokuthuthukisa i-Vygotsky's Social, enikeza uhlaka oluphelele lwethiyori lokuqonda ukusebenzisana phakathi kwezici zomnotho-wezomphakathi, ezemvelo, ezenhlalo, kanye nezokuqonda ezithonya impumelelo yezemfundo. Okutholakele kuvelile ukuthi imfundo yabazali, imali engenayo yemindeni, inani elibekwa emfundweni ekhaya, ukufinyelela kwizinsiza zemfundo, kanye nezindawo ezisekelayo zasekhaya nezesikole kwakuyizici ezibaluleke kakhulu umnotho-wezomphakathi ezihlobene nempumelelo yezemfundo yabafundi. Okutholakele kwabonisa futhi ukuthi ukungakwazi komnotho-wezomphakathi kuthinta ukusebenza kwezemfundo ngokusebenzisa izindlela ezixhumene zesakhiwo, ezemvelo, ezengqondo, kanye nobudlelwano, kuyilapho kugqanyiswa nendima yokuvikela yokusekelwa kwabazali, ukungenelela kothisha, ukuqina kwabafundi, kanye nezifiso ezinhle zemfundo.

Lolu cwaningo luthuthukisa imifundazwe ekhona ngokuthuthukisa incazelo ehlanganisiwe yokuthi izici eziningi zomnotho-womphakathi zihlangana kanjani ukuze zithonye impumelelo yezemfundo kumongo wezikole zaseNingizimu Afrika, kunokuba zihlole lezi zici zodwa. Ngokuhlanganisa ubufakazi ngocwaningo zinombolo nasebehlangabezene nakho abafundi empilweni abayiphilayo, abazali, kanye nabafundisi kuzozonke izimo zezomnotho-womphakathi ngokuhlukana kwawo, lolu cwaningo lunikeza ukuqonda okubanzi kakhulu ukungalingani kwezomnotho-womphakathi okwakha ngazo imiphumela yezemfundo. Ucwaningo lwenza umnikelo wokuqala ngokuhlonza izindlela ezimseqoka zokuxhumana lapho isimo sezomnotho-womphakathi sithonya khona impumelelo yezemfundo kanye nokwenza uhlaka olusekelwe ebufakazini lokungenelela kwenqubomgomo, izikole, kanye nomphakathi okuhloswe ukunciphisa ukungalingani kwezemfundo nokukhuthaza amathuba emfundo alinganayo kubobonke abafundi baseNingizimu Afrika.

Amagama asemqoka

Amagama asemqoka: Isimo Sezomnotho-womphakathi; ukuphumelela kwezemfundo; ukulingani kwezemfundo; imfundo yaseNingizimu Afrika; izindlela ezixubile zocwaningo; izinsiza zemfundo; ukungenelela kwabazali; ukulingana ngokwemfundo

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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction and Background

Inequality in South Africa can perhaps be best understood through analogy, such as for example, a situation in which the richest people of Belgium lived in the same country as the poorest people of Burundi. Global inequality is clearly reflected in South African society, where the richest 1% if South Africans own approximately 67% of the entire country's wealth and the richest 10% own approximately 93% of the country's entire wealth. The tragic reality for the remaining 90% of South Africans is that they only own approximately 7% of the country's wealth (Orthofer 2016:4). These statistics indicate vast socio-economic inequities amongst South African citizens. I argue that these socio-economic statuses further influence the opportunities provided to citizens, with educational opportunities and achievement as the focus of this study.

The significance of the Belgium–Burundi analogy lies in its ability to illustrate the extent of socio-economic inequality within a single society. The analogy is not intended to suggest that South Africa is directly comparable to either Belgium or Burundi, but rather to provide a conceptual illustration of how individuals within the same national context may experience vastly different socio-economic realities. This is particularly significant for the present study because such differences may extend beyond income and material wealth to influence access to educational resources, learning opportunities, parental support and other conditions that may shape academic achievement. The analogy therefore provides a contextual starting point for examining how pronounced socio-economic differences within South African society may translate into unequal educational opportunities and outcomes.

Due to disparities in wealth distribution, South Africa is seen as one of the most unequal countries in the world. South Africa's Gini coefficient stands between 0.63 – 0.67 and is frequently the highest in the world (African Development Bank 2023; World Bank 2022). This is a clear indication that wealth distribution in South Africa is extremely unequal, where the richest 10% of South Africans own between 85% to 86% of the total wealth of the country. The top 0.1% own approximately one third of the national wealth (Chatterjee, Czajka and Gethin 2022). The largest population group face persistent poverty and limited economic opportunities (World Bank 2022).

With the fall of apartheid and the start of democracy in 1994, South Africa could have a new beginning with the hope of a united "rainbow" nation and equal opportunities for all. Unfortunately, although a new era of equal rights has arisen, inequality is still evident across race and ethnic groups regarding wealth distribution (Hino et al. 2018:2;8). A further discussion of inequality in South Africa based on racial distribution is included in section 1.1 and will be explained in depth in Chapter 2.

To understand the economic levels of South African society, one must first define the different categories of financial and economic status. Schotte, Zizzamia and Leibbrandt (2017:6) classify society into three main classes: "Poor or lower class, middle class and elite or upper class". They define the poor as those who are not economically able to satisfy their basic needs (p.6). A middle-class person is defined as having a level of financial and economic security that enables one to be free from poverty, able to afford the basic necessities for life for today as well as the future (p.2); while the elite in society are those who are able to enjoy a standard of living that is well above the national average (p.6). Research indicates that socio-economic status is multidimensional, and is measured through the combination of income, education and occupation. These three facets reflect a person's social- and economic position in society (OECD 2024; Hasanović 2025; Miranda-Vicente 2026). However, in the South African context, these indicators should not be interpreted in isolation or assumed to reflect socio-economic position uniformly across all population groups. South Africa's history of apartheid, persistent income inequality, unequal access to quality education and substantial differences in employment opportunities mean that the relationship between income, education and occupation and an individual's socio-economic position is particularly complex. Consequently, although income, education and occupation provide important indicators of socio-economic status, the present study considers socio-economic circumstances more broadly, including access to resources, educational opportunities, living conditions and family circumstances. This broader understanding is particularly relevant when examining how socio-economic status influences academic achievement within South Africa's unequal schooling system.

According to Hurlbut (2018:3) South Africa's economy has shown some growth since the rise of democracy in 1994 with the creation of new job opportunities, but these opportunities are insufficient to a significant reduction in the unemployment figures of the country. Although there was an improvement in poverty reduction from 1996 onward, poverty levels rose from

36,4% in 2011 to 40% in 2015 at the national poverty line (p.6). Only a quarter of South Africans can be categorised as middle class or elite level, with the other three quarters classified as poor or on the verge of poverty, with 80% of those classified as poor, seen as chronically poor (p.35).

The primary means to escape poverty is employment. Income sharing (providing finance to other individuals) together with low-wage work in South Africa, causes people to struggle to escape poverty. This means that, even though people receive a wage-income, they are still not able to escape poverty. In South Africa, historically disadvantaged groups such as African, coloured, female, low educated, and rural people are more likely to suffer from poverty even though they receive a wage. The risk of falling into poverty is higher when people live in households where they must share their wages with others (Lilenstein, Woolard and Leibrandt 2018:416). I believe that employment figures may be improved through better education. If more members of a household are properly educated, the cycle of unemployment and income sharing may be reduced.

To that end, this research investigates whether there is a correlation between poverty and educational achievement. This study explored whether it can be established that poverty has a negative impact on academic achievement, as well as the level of its impact. I believe that understanding the socio-economic impact on learners' academic achievement will provide benefits to schools, parents and learners. The understanding of the socio-economic impact on academic achievement, including the factors that have the greatest impact, will enable the different role players such as the Department of Education, individual schools, teachers, parents and learners to minimise factors that hinder higher levels of academic achievement.
This section provided a brief introduction and background to inequality in South Africa. A socio-political understanding of inequality in South African society, with reference to racial inequality, will be discussed in the next section.

1.1.1. A socio-political understanding of inequalities in South African society

As a result of decades of apartheid rule and segregation, socio-economic inequalities remain visible in South Africa. During the apartheid era there was purposeful marginalisation, particularly targeting the black African population. Non-white South Africans received less access to financial resources, quality education, political participation and economic

opportunities (Meiring, Kannemeyer and Potgieter 2018:5). Unfortunately, many of these inequalities remain unaltered despite a democratic governance framework.

Leibrandt et al. (2010:9), noting that South Africa has one of the highest inequality levels in the world, observe that there continues to be a racial undertone related to levels of poverty. Race-inequality is still a central issue as many Africans are still impoverished. Black South Africans are generally poorer than coloured South Africans. They are also poorer than Indian or Asian South Africans, who are in turn poorer than White South Africans (p.9). This is a strong indication that inequality in South Africa based on race is still an ongoing problem, even after the fall of apartheid.

As shown, racial disparities have a strong influence on socio-economic inequality in South Africa. Race continues to be one of the major factors influencing income, employment opportunities and wealth distribution (World Bank 2022; McKeever 2024). According to Statistics South Africa (2025), statistics indicate that the average reported white household income is nearly five times higher than reported black household incomes. Black South Africans statistically own only a small fraction of the wealth compared to white households (Chelwa, 2024). White South Africans hold the highest representation in leadership roles and high-income positions in the labour market (Commission for Employment Equity 2023). This is an indication of persistent socio-economic inequality based on race.

The persistence of socio-economic inequality has implications that extend beyond differences in income and material wealth, as unequal socio-economic circumstances can shape the opportunities available to learners before and during their schooling. Differences in household resources, parental educational backgrounds, employment conditions, access to technology, nutrition, transport and suitable learning environments may create substantially different conditions in which learners are expected to learn and achieve. Consequently, educational inequality cannot be understood solely in terms of whether learners have access to schooling but must also consider whether they have equitable opportunities to benefit from that schooling. In the South African context, this distinction is particularly important because learners may attend schools within the same national education system while experiencing markedly different educational conditions. The relationship between socio-economic circumstances and academic achievement therefore requires consideration of the mechanisms through which inequality is translated into differences in educational opportunities, learner experiences and

academic outcomes. It is within this context that the present study investigates the socio-economic factors that may influence academic achievement and considers how understanding these factors can contribute to creating more equal educational opportunities for South African learners.

WIDER and Oosthuizen (2019:1) state that there are persistent racial inequalities in South Africa. There are racial variations regarding the reliance on social grants, income sharing, access to job opportunities, etcetera. Reddy and Mncwango (2021:30) state that the economic- and social inequalities in South Africa has been persistent due to South Africa's segregated past. South Africa's income inequality is persistently high due to poor learning conditions and low educational attainment.

It was my intention with this research project to determine the effects of racial inequality on the academic achievement of South African school learners. Inequality in South Africa will be explained in-depth in Chapter 2. This section provided a brief discussion of racial inequality in South Africa and the importance of providing equal educational opportunities, regardless of socio-economic or racial background.

1.1.2. The importance of equal educational opportunities

The late President Nelson Mandela made a speech in Boston in 1990 in which he stated that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" (Ratcliffe 2017). Technological advances have created a platform where individuals are more inclined to see themselves as global citizens (Smith et al. 2017). Consequently, the importance of education in an increasingly globalised economy has become an important focus area for researchers. Smith et al. (2017) state that education is perhaps the most important factor in creating an individual's positive identity as a global citizen. It is of utmost importance that everyone be granted the respect and opportunity to stay true to his/her heritage and culture even though they form part of a globalised society. Each culture has its own important role to play in a globalised society and plays an important part in forming a society capable of changing the world through equal educational opportunities. If the world is truly to be changed through education, the importance of creating equal educational opportunities is crucial. As can be seen through South Africa's income statistics (as provided by Webster 2019), the likelihood of equal educational opportunities for all South African learners, is far from reality.

According to Taylor (2019), one of the reasons for weaker academic outcomes in children from lower socio-economic homes, is the inequitable distribution of content knowledge in teachers. If teachers across all socio-economic levels are not adequately equipped with the knowledge needed to teach learners in their schools, academic achievement in learners will not improve. Teachers need to be equipped with adequate subject expertise, pedagogical knowledge, resources and ongoing professional development so that they can provide proper instruction and support to learners. Teachers that are well prepared and trained are more capable of adapting teaching strategies to cater to diverse needs. This in turn will enhance academic success. Studies have shown teacher quality to be one of the most significant factors influencing academic achievement in learners. Properly trained teachers can provide more meaningful lessons and improve learner performance (Darling-Hammond 2017; OECD 2020). Efficient teacher training and adequate resources enable teachers to address learning barriers which are characterised by socio-economic disparities (UNESCO 2023). Quality education is thus dependent, in part, on properly equipping teachers with the knowledge, skills and resources needed to improve educational equity. This study investigates these differences in opportunities created by socio-economic statuses and developing a potential strategy to minimise the differences in educational achievement opportunities for learners across South Africa.

1.1.3. Inequality in educational opportunities

The unfortunate reality is that not all learners are exposed to equal educational opportunities. According to Berg (2016:2), there is a definite difference regarding access to higher education opportunities, retention, and the impact of a student's degree after studies, between students of higher- and lower socio-economic status. During the last decade, focus has shifted from educational quantity to educational quality. Learners whose parents can afford them to attend more selective schools, are exposed to a higher quality in education than their counterparts (Hoekstra 2020:65-73). Ogbannaya and Awuah (2019:8) did research to determine the differences in academic performance across schools with different Quintile levels. Quintile level 4 schools (fee-paying schools) achieved higher success rates across all cognitive levels than schools from Quintile levels 1 to 3 (non-fee-paying schools). They state that fee paying schools are able to afford additional resources and training that allows for better performance in cognitive testing.

This study further investigated this statement made by Hoekstra (2020), as public schools as well as private schools fall within scope. Schools from different Quintile levels were also included in the study. Considering the beforementioned research findings, as the researcher, I believe that, as a child's education has a significant impact on his/her future, the quality of education is an important factor that needs further attention. If a learner is provided with quality education, the likelihood that he/she will achieve greater academic success increases. It was thus an important part of this study to investigate the influence that learners' socio-economic statuses have on the quality of education that they receive.

1.1.4. The relationship between socio-economic background and academic achievement

Socio-economic status refers to a person's combined social- and economic status (Baker 2014). The term academic refers to the educational study in schools and university (Hornby 2005:7), and achievement is defined as something that is done successfully by using your own effort or skill (Hornby 2005:11). Academic achievement is thus the successful completion of academic study in school or university through employing one's skills and efforts. This study aimed at investigating the influence of a learner's socio-economic status on his/her academic achievement. Academic achievement refers to the extent to which learners demonstrate academic knowledge and skill, while successfully attaining educational goals. This can be measured through tests, examinations, grades and other forms of assessment. These assessment scores indicate whether the learners have mastered curriculum outcomes or not (Sideridis 2023; OECD 2024). Academic achievement is seen as an important indicator of learning outcomes. It reflects whether knowledge acquisition has taken place, whether cognitive skills have been developed, and whether learners are competent in the subject (Rice 2025). Academic achievement is used to evaluate student performance and educational progress within a formal education setting.

According to Thomson (2018), there is an ongoing and significant relationship between a student's socio-economic background and their academic achievement. Thomson (2018) further states that research has indicated that students from higher socio-economic status tend to achieve higher academic success than their counterparts. As mentioned above, the global inequality, referring to the differences in opportunities between the rich and the poor, is clearly reflected in South African society. I believe that all learners ought to have access to quality

education regardless of their socio-economic status. The question remains as to how to eliminate inequality when it relates to academic opportunities and quality education.

Jennifer (2018) states that education equips learners with the knowledge and skills that they need to achieve personal development in their economic circumstances. Different socio-economic factors that play a role in the quality and availability of learners' education include the family's income, educational levels and gender and race. These factors also play a significant role in the learners' ability to improve their life- and socio-economic circumstances. Equal quality education is thus of utmost importance in the change and development of a country's economic circumstances. If all learners are provided with the opportunity to receive quality education, their lives as well as the future of their descendants will be able to improve dramatically.

Papasideris et.al. (2020:3) state that academic performance is impacted by health behaviours such as physical activity, sleep, diet and substance abuse. Substance abuse lowers academic performance. Gerra et.al. (2020:14) considered the socio-economic impact on substance use amongst adolescents, finding that learners from lower socio-economic status homes with parents with lower levels of education, were more inclined to use different kinds of substances. Gerra et.al. observed the importance of higher levels of education on academic performance and the equipment of life skills needed to make healthier choices.

Education can influence economic and societal change, while social changes necessarily influence the school environment (Kurt and Ozdemir 2015:1). If the socio-economic status of a learner is changed, the educational opportunities that he/she receives will likely change with it. This study argues that when a learner moves from an impoverished community with low resource schools to a higher socio-economic status area, the likelihood that he/she will attend a school with better resources increases. This study aims to investigate whether this in fact is true, and whether impoverished communities do have fewer educational resources than higher socio-economic communities.

Brown, Wohn and Ellison (2016) believe that potential college students who come from a low socio-economic background, tend to have less access to resources and information regarding colleges than students who come from high socio-economic backgrounds. The inequality in educational opportunities proves evident when examining the informational resources

available to students from different socio-economic backgrounds. I believe that, if learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds are educated and informed regarding the possible opportunities that they may have for further study, these learners will be further empowered to make better educational choices.

Burneo-Garcés et al. (2019) studied the effects of socio-economic status of learners' parents on the cognitive development of children aged 7, 9 and 11 in Ecuador. They found that there were significant differences between language, executive function and verbal memory between children from the medium- and low socio-economic groups. Figlio et al. (2018:4) studied identical and fraternal twins to determine the effects of socio-economic status and genetic influences on cognitive development, finding that cognitive achievement differs over socio-economic status.

Judd et al. (2020) did research by performing structural MRI scans on 551 adolescents at ages 14 and 19 to determine genetic and environmental associations with cognitive- and brain development. The results indicate that socio-economic inequalities, specifically the level of the parents' education, had a definite influence on brain development during the adolescent phase.

Studies such as the above mentioned, indicate that there is a strong correlation between a learner's socio-economic status and his/her cognitive development. Their cognitive development has an influence on their academic performance as well as their IQ (Bradley and Corwyn 2002). Through this study, I aimed to further investigate the socio-economic status of children living in South Africa and the influence thereof on their cognitive development and academic achievement in school.

Academic achievement extends beyond examination marks and grades and reflects the extent to which learners acquire knowledge, develop cognitive skills and attain educational outcomes (Van der Berg 2015; Spaull and Kotzé 2015). It is influenced by the interaction of learner, family, school and socio-economic factors. Motivation, self-confidence, parental support, regular attendance, effective teaching and access to learning resources may promote achievement, whereas poverty, food insecurity, inadequate resources, overcrowding and unequal school conditions may hinder it. Differences in academic achievement therefore have consequences beyond individual educational outcomes, as higher achievement may improve access to higher education, employment and socio-economic mobility, while persistent low

achievement may contribute to the reproduction of intergenerational poverty and inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). In South Africa, this is particularly significant because substantial differences in educational outcomes remain between schools serving affluent communities and those serving poorer communities (Spaull 2013; Van der Berg 2015). Academic achievement should consequently be understood not only as an educational outcome, but also as a mechanism through which socio-economic inequality may either be reproduced or challenged.

In response to these inequalities, South Africa has implemented several pro-poor education interventions, including the National Norms and Standards for School Funding, the no-fee school policy, quintile-based funding and the National School Nutrition Programme (Department of Education 1998; Mestry and Ndhlovu 2014). These policies aim to improve access, redistribute resources and reduce the financial barriers experienced by learners from disadvantaged communities. Evidence from recent National Senior Certificate results suggests progress in overall academic achievement, with the national pass rate increasing from 76.4% in 2021 to 80.1% in 2022, 82.9% in 2023 and 87.3% in 2024 (Department of Basic Education, 2022; 2023; 2024a; 2025a). Furthermore, approximately 67% of Bachelor passes in 2024 were achieved by learners from Quintile 1–3 schools, indicating improved achievement among learners in historically disadvantaged contexts (Department of Basic Education, 2025b). Nevertheless, the proportion of Bachelor passes remained higher in Quintile 5 schools than in Quintile 1–3 schools, demonstrating that socio-economic disparities in educational outcomes persist. Thus, while pro-poor policies appear to have contributed to improved access and achievement, they have not eliminated the structural and socio-economic factors influencing educational outcomes (Chanee 2020; Sayed and Motala 2012). This continuing disparity reinforces the need to identify the socio-economic factors that most significantly influence academic achievement and to consider how educational interventions can more effectively promote equal educational opportunities.

1.1.5. The impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have also brought the question of inequality in educational opportunities, due to socio-economic status, to light. According to Van der Berg (2020) studies have shown a remarkable increase in hunger amongst South African learners since the lockdown. Not only did the school closure impact learners' access to meals, but international studies have shown that there was an increase in abuse, violence, substance abuse,

financial stress, and a lasting psychological impact on learners due to them not being able to attend school. According to Baron, Goldstein and Wallace (2020), school personnel are the primary source of child maltreatment reports. Using data from Florida, United States, they were able to determine that the number of reported maltreatment cases were 27% lower than expected for March and April 2020. This indicates that during the COVID-19 school closures, not all cases of abuse/maltreatment were reported as school personnel were not able to identify and report cases of abuse.

Hoffman and Miller (2020:304) state that children who rely on school-based mental health-and health care, were most vulnerable to school closures caused by COVID-19. Homeless children, children who have health issues and children who are at risk of abuse and neglect at home, were more vulnerable, as schools could not meet the non-academic needs of these children. The role of schools is thus far more complex than just the impartation of academic information.

The result of school closures meant that the curriculum could not be completed in full and learners had lost close to sixty school days by early August 2020. Reddy, Soudien and Winnaar (2020) further state that school closures during the pandemic will have damaging economic and social effects, especially for learners from lower socio-economic statuses. Many schools made use of distance- and online learning, as an attempt to complete the curriculum requirements for the year. The inequality between access to the needed devices to continue with online learning, between learners from higher- and lower socio-economic statuses, was immense. Reddy, Soudien and Winnaar (2020) also believe that educational outcomes, because of the COVID-19 school closures, were especially worsened for the poor. They have conducted studies, which show that inequalities in society were amplified during the pandemic and that the recovery process will be greatly unequal for learners from different socio-economic statuses. This study investigates whether school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic has created even more inequality regarding educational resources.

Engzell, Frey and Verhagen (2021:1) did research in the Netherlands to determine the impact of the COVID-19 school closures on learners' academic performance. The Netherlands had a short lockdown (8 weeks) compared to other countries. According to their findings, learners showed an academic loss of one fifth of a school year (equal to the amount of time lost due to their lockdown). Learners from lower socio-economic homes with less educated parents

showed a loss that was 60% larger. They state that learners made little to no progress while having to learn at home. The impact in countries with a longer lockdown, may be much worse. Social inequalities had been aggravated by the school closures and access to quality online academic instruction.

The inequality between learners from high- and lower socio-economic statuses will be dramatically increased for the next decade due to the closure of schools during the pandemic. In South Africa, only 20% of learners have a computer at home and only 10% have Internet access (Spaull 2020). These figures show that only a small number of South African learners were able to continue with adequate online learning during the COVID-19 school closures. The impact of the lack of electronic resources during the pandemic on academic learning, will be investigated through this study.

According to Macupe (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic has caused even more exclusion in the unequal opportunities for learners at school. Approximately 40% of lower income countries have not provided sufficient support for learners who are at risk of exclusion. Global schooling had moved to online platforms during the pandemic. In the least developed countries, only 12% have Internet access which means that 88% of learners have no access to the Internet. This is an indication that inequality was evident in educational provision during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part of this study focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures on the educational opportunities for learners from different socio-economic status homes, investigating the historical background of different socio-economic statuses in South Africa and the impact thereof on academic achievement throughout history. A portion of the research focused on the availability of online resources in different socio-economic communities and the impact thereof on lost educational opportunities.

1.2. Rationale for the study

As a teacher with experience in both lower and higher socio-economic school contexts, the possibility of creating more equal academic opportunities is of professional importance to me. My professional experience has provided observations of differences in educational opportunities, resources and learning conditions between communities; however, these observations formed the motivation for the present investigation rather than constituting empirical findings. South African children in weaker schools often, and increasingly, fall below the required level of achievement (Van der Berg 2015; Spaull and Kotze 2015). Research by Van der Berg (2015) and Spaull and Kotze (2015) indicates that learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds generally achieve better academically than learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These findings provide an important basis for investigating which socio-economic factors are most strongly associated with academic achievement and how these factors may contribute to unequal educational opportunities in South Africa.

Li, Xu and Xia (2020) investigated how self-concept affects academic achievement in relation to socio-economic status among Chinese Junior High School learners. The authors note that although considerable research has examined the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement, the mechanisms by which socio-economic circumstances influence achievement remain insufficiently understood. Similarly, Coughlan (2016) highlights the influence of cultural attitudes towards education on academic success. In contrast, Amnesty International's investigation into South African education, reported in Broken and Unequal: The State of Education in South Africa (2020), highlighted ongoing inequalities affecting learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including inadequate basic facilities and poor infrastructure (Mthetwa 2020). These studies demonstrate the importance of examining the contextual factors that may influence academic achievement within the South African schooling system.

The family environment is another important consideration. Parents are regarded as the primary educators of children and play an important role in their early socialisation and learning opportunities (Pretorius 2011:39). Aitchison (2016:125) reports concerning literacy patterns among South African adults with no formal education or less than Grade Seven education, with the proportion unable to read increasing from 27% in 2009 to 30% in 2013, while those unable to write their own name increased from 19% to 22%. Such circumstances may affect the capacity of parents to provide academic support at home. Parental involvement, expectations and learner engagement are similarly identified by Poon (2020) as important factors that may

mediate the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement. These factors, together with access to resources and educational opportunities, therefore, provide an important basis for investigating the socio-economic influences on learner achievement.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures provide an additional context for considering socio-economic disparities in academic achievement. According to Schleicher (2020:4), school closures disrupted conventional schooling internationally and required learners to rely on resources such as the Internet, television and radio. Learners without access to these resources were consequently at greater risk of falling behind. In South Africa, only approximately 5–10% of learners had access to the Internet and computers at home for continued learning, while many parents were not equipped or trained to support home-based learning (Van der Berg and Spaull 2020:16). Approximately four million learners had missed half of the regularly scheduled school days by 7 August 2020, with poorer learners and disadvantaged schools experiencing greater difficulty in catching up with the curriculum (Das, Daniels and Andrabi 2020). Van der Berg and Spaull (2020:3) further indicate that the mental health and education of millions of South African children were compromised by the pandemic. Within this context, the study also considers COVID-19 and school closures as a contextual factor that may have intensified existing socio-economic inequalities in educational opportunities and academic achievement.

Overall, the literature indicates that academic achievement is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including socio-economic status, parental education and involvement, learner engagement, school resources, infrastructure and access to educational opportunities. The present study therefore seeks to identify the socio-economic factors that most significantly influence academic achievement in the South African context and to examine how knowledge of these factors can contribute to the development of strategies for reducing educational inequality. The study distinguishes between the researcher's professional observations, which provided the motivation for the investigation, and the empirical evidence generated through the quantitative and qualitative components of the research.

1.3. Statement of the problem

South Africa has long been ranked one of the most unequal countries in the world. Even with significant efforts to reduce inequality since democracy started in 1994, there is still little progress made (Maluleke 2019:2). O'Brien (2010:28) did a qualitative study regarding equality

in South African education. His findings state that apartheid divided South Africa into a nation of those that are wealthy, and those who are not. Even after the fall of apartheid, the country still struggles to replace old ideologies with new equitable infrastructure. South Africa's youth play a significant role in the transformation of the country, with education as one of the most pressing issues. A proper education is linked to the kind of employment opportunities available to young people in South Africa (p.29). The findings of O'Brien's study indicate that education has a role to play in opportunities further in life. Better career opportunities lead to a higher income. There is thus a correlation between proper education, career opportunities and income received. Receiving a proper education significantly improves an individual's career opportunities. If individuals are properly equipped with the skills, knowledge and qualifications required, their earning potential improves and they have better access to professional occupations (OECD 2024; UNESCO 2023).

Statistics SA investigated the education level of the household head in South African communities compared to their annual mean and median expenditures. The households headed by a person with higher education spent significantly more than those households with lower education levels (Maluleke 2019:27). Expenditures correlate with income. The figures compiled by Statistics SA indicate that people with a higher education level have higher expenditure levels, because they receive a higher income. As inequality in education and income is a significant problem in South Africa, it is important to address this issue at a young age so as to create equal educational opportunities for all.

McKeever (2017:115) states that there are extensive quantitative differences regarding educational inequality in South Africa, noting the qualitative differences, mostly based on racial background, in South African education, where there are differences in the quality of education received due to parental background. Socio-economic background plays a role in the quality of education received.

A variation in the quality of education received is correlated to performance inequalities. Even though there has been a large shift in resource distribution in the post-apartheid era, former qualitative inequalities in South Africa still influence the South African educational system (De Vos 2011:14). There are still differences in the quality of education received based on the former apartheid-era educational system, where members from different racial backgrounds received different levels of quality of education. According to Punti and Dingel (2021:13)

different academic outcomes can be a result of cultural challenges experienced by different racial groups.

1.3.1. Research question / hypothesis

In the context of investigating the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, the following main research question was formulated: What are the most significant socio-economic factors that influence academic achievement and how can the knowledge of these factors be used to create equal educational opportunities for all South African learners?

The main research question may be subdivided into the following sub-questions:

How is the socio-economic influence on academic achievement described in the relevant literature and how have other countries dealt with levelling the inequality in education? *This question is addressed through the literature review.*

What contextual socio-economic factors play the most significant role in the provision of quality educational opportunities?

This question is addressed through both the quantitative and qualitative approaches, using statistical analysis and thematic analysis respectively.

How may the identification of the most significant socio-economic factors in education be used as a foundation for developing a plan to reduce inequality in South African schools? *This question is addressed through the integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings.*

What recommendations may be made based on the literature and the empirical study on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement?
This question is addressed through the integration of the literature, quantitative findings and qualitative findings.

1.3.2. Purpose, aims and objectives of the study

The main aim of this research was to identify the most significant socio-economic factors that influence academic achievement and to determine how the knowledge of these factors can be used to create equal educational opportunities for all South African learners.

The main research aim may be subdivided into the following objectives:

- To define and describe the socio-economic influence on academic achievement and to describe how other countries have dealt with inequality in education.

- To explore the contextual socio-economic factors that play the most significant role in the provision of quality educational opportunities.

- To identify the most significant socio-economic factors in education and how knowledge of these factors can be used as a foundation for developing a plan to reduce inequality in South African schools.

- To make recommendations based on the literature and the empirical study on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement and the creation of a plan to minimise inequality in educational opportunities.

People who stand to benefit from this research were mostly learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, policy makers and the Department of Basic Education who influence decisions made regarding the South African education system, and teachers who have a direct influence on the quality of education given to learners across South Africa.

1.4. Theoretical framework

Vinz (2015) explains that a theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation for a research study by drawing on existing theories and models developed by previous researchers to explain and interpret a particular phenomenon. The selection of an appropriate theoretical framework requires the critical evaluation and comparison of relevant theories to identify those that best align with the purpose, objectives, and research questions of the study. Given the multidimensional nature of the socio-economic factors influencing academic achievement, this study adopted a complementary theoretical framework comprising Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory. Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive lens through which the complex interactions between learners, their home and school environments, social relationships, and broader socio-economic contexts can be understood. The theoretical framework therefore serves as the conceptual basis for interpreting the findings and guiding the literature review presented in the following chapters. A comprehensive discussion of each theory is provided in Chapters 2 and 3, while this section offers an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The subject in question for this study, the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, requires novel solutions to combat the differences in educational equality in a South African context, based on socio-economic influences. The key theories used in this study included Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the Ecological Systems Theory, which explains the different environmental systems that influence the individual. The microsystem refers to the most direct and immediate groups that impact a child's development, such as family, school, neighbourhood, etc. The mesosystem refers to the interconnections between the microsystems. The exosystem refers to the child's indirect environment, such as the parents' work experiences, that has an influence on him/her. The macrosystem refers to the social and cultural values that influence the child. Bronfenbrenner's theory is relevant to this research study in that it investigates the different influences that affect the child's experiences. This study focuses on socio-economic influences on academic achievement such as the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems explained in Bronfenbrenner's theory.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) states that a child's environment contributes to his/her behaviour and his/her way of thinking. This theory is relevant to this current study in

that the child's socio-economic environment influences his/her behaviour and cognitive development, which in turn may influence his/her academic achievement.

The Social Development Theory of Vygotsky (1978) states that social interaction has an influence on a person's cognitive development. This theory is relevant in this research study as the child's social interactions, dependent on the socio-economic environment, have an influence on his/her cognitive development and, in turn, his/her academic achievement. The fundamental assumptions of these theories state that a child's social environment has an influence on his/her cognitive development. Reference is made to these specific theories throughout the research study that investigated the socio-economic influence on learners' academic achievement.

1.5. Literature review

A literature review on the research topic is done to determine the socio-economic factors that influence academic achievement. A literature review is the study of literature regarding a certain topic and the interpretation thereof (Aveyard 2010). It is a survey of scholarly sources. A literature review gives insight into current knowledge regarding a topic and helps a researcher to identify gaps in the existing research, relevant theories and methods used during research (McCombes, 2019).

This study aimed to investigate important aspects regarding the research topic that were not addressed in the existing literature. The work of different authors, national and international, was consulted to develop a theoretical framework for this study. Published literature regarding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement is included in the literature review. Examples of the published literature include the findings of Bayat, Louw and Rena (2014), Taylor and Yu (2009), Li, Xu and Xia (2020), Thomson (2018), Rimfeld and Malanchini (2018) and Chandra (2013).

Bayat, Louw and Rena (2014:195) undertook research in underperforming Western Cape schools to determine the impact of socio-economic factors on high school learners' performance in school. They investigated factors such as the learners' household, parental involvement, access to basic services, neighbourhood conditions related to hunger, poverty,

security, material deprivation, etc. They found that there was a lack of adequate resources in the classroom because of socio-economic challenges, and that scale unemployment, high levels of HIV infections, violence, gangsterism and drug abuse play a role in poor academic performance at the researched schools. There was also a significant lack of parental involvement that influenced the learners' academic achievement. This research project investigated the same phenomena in Gauteng schools to determine the influence of socio-economic factors on Gauteng learners' academic achievement.

Taylor and Yu (2009:2) studied the scores from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006 to determine why South Africa scored the lowest out of the 40 participating countries. The authors found that students' socio-economic backgrounds explain the variety of reading scores amongst South African learners. The variance in the reading scores is particularly high across the different socio-economic status groups in South Africa. This indicates high levels of inequality in South African education (p. 49).

Chinese researchers, Li, Xu and Xia (2020), state that self-concept plays a significant role in academic achievement amidst negative socio-economic circumstances. Their research thus indicates that other factors, such as self-concept, are important factors in academic achievement. McLeod (2008) defines self-concept as the way in which a person thinks about, evaluates and perceives themselves. It is thus important to develop South African learners' self-concept when attempting to raise levels of academic achievement in learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Thomson (2018) states that research indicates that the genetic influence from parents also plays a significant role in academic achievement. Rimfeld and Malanchini (2018) conducted research using more than 6000 pairs of twins in the United Kingdom. They analysed the twins' primary school test scores and their scores at the end of their compulsory education. By using twins, they were able to determine the differences in academic achievement caused by genetic factors. Their findings indicate that approximately 70% of the stability in achievement between these twins' primary school and end-of-compulsory-education test scores can be attributed to genetic factors. The other 25% is attributed to environmental factors. They found that a drastic change in grades between the two tests can be explained by other environmental factors (such as socio-economic factors) and not by genetic factors.

The research done by Thomson (2018) and Rimfeld and Malanchini (2018) respectively indicates that genetic factors play a role in academic achievement. They also attribute environmental factors to changes in academic achievement. Through the above-mentioned studies, it is indicated that genetics play a role in academic achievement, but that it is not the only factor influencing academic achievement. As stated above, environmental factors, such as a child's socio-economic environment, have at least a 25% influence on his/her academic achievement. Since this study focused on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, a further investigation into the environmental factors that influence academic achievement was undertaken.

Chandra (2013) conducted a study in India to determine the different categories of socio-economic status on academic achievement. The results of her study indicate a significant relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement. The study of Carlisle and Murray (2015) investigated socio-economic factors that influence academic achievement. These factors include segregation, funding, and expectations from teachers. As South Africa is a nation plagued by a past of segregation, including unequal funding to schools, this research places focus on investigating which factors play the most significant role in the differences between academic achievement of learners from lower- and higher socio-economic status groups. These works and others are consulted and explained in depth in Chapter 3.

1.6. Research methodology and design

Rehman and Alharthi (2016:51) state that a research paradigm is a theoretical framework and belief system that involves ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods. They explain three different approaches to educational research, namely positivism, interpretivism and critical theory (p.52-58). The study was positioned within a post-positivist paradigm, as the investigation sought to identify measurable relationships between socio-economic factors and academic achievement while recognising the complexity and contextual nature of educational experiences. A post-positivist paradigm was considered appropriate because it accommodates the use of quantitative evidence alongside qualitative insights to develop a more comprehensive understanding of complex social phenomena (Gamlen and McIntyre 2018).

This was a large-scale research project, and as many schools as possible, from different socio-economic areas, were approached to participate. A single study's results rarely make a

significant contribution to existing knowledge about a specific subject, whereas a large-scale study could make a substantial contribution to the existing knowledge regarding a specific subject. The results of a large-scale study provide the researcher with the opportunity to detect subtle effects in the research and provide the opportunity for better precision in the results (Wagner and Ridgewell 2009).

1.6.1. Research approach

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed, with the quantitative component conducted and analysed first, followed by the qualitative component. This design was appropriate because the quantitative findings identified relationships and patterns, while the qualitative findings provided deeper explanations of participants' experiences and the contextual factors underlying these patterns.

Bhandari (2020) describes quantitative research as the collection and analysis of numerical data to find patterns, to test relationships and to simplify results. DeFranzo (2011) describes quantitative research as a research method to quantify a problem through generating numerical data and data that can be given in statistical format. The methods used in quantitative data collection are structured and involve the use of surveys, polls, etc. Bhandari (2020) defines qualitative research as the collection and analysis of non-numerical data to understand experiences, opinions and concepts. With qualitative research, the researcher seeks to interpret meaning from the collected data to understand social situations (Crossman 2018). A mixed-methods research approach is the integration or "mixing" of quantitative and qualitative data within a research project. This approach is used to obtain a more complete and synergistic view of the collected data (Wisdom and Creswell 2013:1).

For this research study, a mixed-methods approach provided the optimal results needed. The benefits of using a mixed-method approach include being able to compare qualitative and quantitative data, thereby accurately reflecting the view of the participants, providing flexibility regarding methodology, promoting interaction on an academic level, and collecting comprehensive data (Wisdom and Creswell 2013). Using a mixed-methods approach is beneficial because quantitative data is combined with qualitative insights, which provides statistical evidence as well as a deeper contextual understanding of complex phenomena. The

findings and results are thus more comprehensive and reliable (Costa 2024; Oranga 2025). As this was a large-scale study, data were obtained using questionnaires and interviews; statistics were calculated and compared to find patterns that arose from the data. The study therefore employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches**.** The quantitative approach was used to measure relationships between socio-economic variables and academic achievement, while the qualitative approach was used to explore participants' perceptions and experiences of how socio-economic circumstances influence educational opportunities and achievement. The combination was appropriate for addressing the research questions from both statistical and contextual perspectives.

1.6.2. Population and sampling.

Cluster sampling was employed, with schools serving as the clusters and schools from low-, medium- and high socio-economic contexts included. Mainstream and special educational needs schools, as well as government and private schools, were included. This strategy was appropriate because the study sought to examine socio-economic influences across diverse educational contexts rather than within a single school or socio-economic group.

Through this research, I involved community-based stakeholders. Mertens (2009) explains that a community-based participatory approach is the use of mixed methods to involve participants in the community in the research to bring about change. As this research focuses on finding solutions to provide equal educational opportunities to all South African learners, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, the involvement of community-based stakeholders proves crucial.

The population involves the group in its entirety about which conclusions are to be drawn, and the sample is the group of individuals from whom data will be collected (McCombes 2020). For this study, the population involved the role players (teachers, parents and learners) at different schools in Gauteng, South Africa. The sample group comprised teachers, parents and learners from schools in various socio-economic status areas. To get a more accurate understanding of the socio-economic influence on academic achievement in the general population of South African school learners, as many participants as possible were approached to partake in the research.

The sampling frame refers to the set of elements from which a sample is selected from a target population in research (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Liao 2004). The sampling frame in this research project involved key role players in Gauteng schools (teachers, parents and learners), including the entire population group of parents, teachers and learners in these schools who were willing to partake in the research. All the teachers, parents and learners in the participating schools were approached. The sample size in this research depended entirely on the number of parents, teachers, and learners in these Gauteng schools who were willing to participate. Ideally, the sample size would comprise many participants to obtain results that were more accurately applicable to the South African population. To get a more accurate representation of South African schools, schools from different socio-economic status areas, comprising different race, gender and ethnic groups, were approached to participate in the research. The chosen sample size depends on how precisely the researcher wants to represent the entire population (McCombes 2020). As the aim of this research was to represent all South African socio-economic status groups, many schools in Gauteng were approached.

Cluster sampling was used for this research project. Thomas (2020) explains that cluster sampling is often used to study large populations, where the population of each cluster should be as diverse as possible to represent the entire population. The entire sample in this research project involved the teachers, parents and learners at many schools, primary and high schools, in Gauteng Province. Teachers and parents of Grade 1 to 12 learners participated in the completion of the questionnaires and interviews. Only learners from Grades 7 to 12 (Senior- and FET phase) participated in the completion of the questionnaires and interviews, as younger learners may have struggled to complete the questionnaires and interviews on their own. The clusters comprised schools in low-, medium- and high socio-economic status areas. The clusters also involved mainstream schools as well as schools for learners with special educational needs. This allowed the results to indicate whether there was any correlation between socio-economic status and the learners enrolled in a specific type of schooling system. Government as well as private schools were approached to participate in the research.

1.6.3. Instrumentation and data collection techniques

Data were collected through Google Forms questionnaires, printed questionnaires and semi-structured interviews involving learners, parents and teachers. The questionnaires contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. These instruments were appropriate because closed-ended questions generated quantitative data, while open-ended questions and interviews enabled participants to provide detailed qualitative perspectives on socio-economic influences on academic achievement.

Google Forms is an effective tool for collecting data from a large group of participants and creating surveys, polls and quizzes, where the results are automatically calculated when they are received from participants. Google Forms comes with built-in analytics that calculate the results, and these results can easily be exported into Excel spreadsheets for easy analysis (support.microsoft.com).

As this was a large-scale mixed-methods study, Google Forms was employed for data collection purposes. The creation of questionnaires was easy and effective, and the link to the questionnaire could be sent out via text message, WhatsApp message and email. Participants were able to complete the questionnaires directly from their mobile phones if desired, which made it an effective and time-saving method of collecting data.

Questionnaires were designed for teachers, parents and learners at the participating schools. Samples of the questionnaires for Google Forms as well as the interviews are included in Appendices A and B. Google Forms allowed the researcher to set up different questionnaires, while using an individual link for these questionnaires. The participants could choose the option that applied to them, whether they were teachers, parents or learners, and they were automatically redirected to the questionnaire that applied to them. The questionnaires comprised both open- and closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions grant participants the opportunity to answer with stories, sentences and lists and enable them to give new and deeper insights. Closed-ended questions limit the answers that participants give and enable the researcher to achieve better statistics (Farrel 2016). Open-ended questions were used in this research project to better obtain a qualitative understanding of participants' views and understanding of the socio-economic influence on academic achievement. The use of closed-ended questions enabled the researcher to gather quantitative data and statistics. According to McLeod (2018), questionnaires are a quick and effective way of gathering information from a

large sample. Questionnaires, in Google Forms format, were thus an effective method of gathering the information needed for this study.

In schools where participants did not have Internet access, the questionnaires were given to them in printed format, and the data were captured after their questionnaires had been completed. It was important in this research project to provide the participants who do not have Internet access with hard copies of the questions to get more accurate results.

To get a better understanding and more accurate representation of the entire population, interviews were held with teachers, parents and learners from the participating schools. Illiterate participants could not complete the Google Forms questionnaires, and interviews with these participants ensured that their views and opinions were captured in the data.

Due to the mixed-method approach used in this research, the questionnaires and interviews comprised closed questions as well as open-ended questions. The closed questions allowed participants to respond based on pre-decided answers, for example, “yes or no”, “male or female”, “agree or disagree”, etc. (McLeod, 2018). Fauvelle (2019) explains that open-ended questions allow respondents to express themselves freely by using their own terms and responses. There are no presumptions with open-ended questions. The use of closed-ended as well as open-ended questions allows for a variety of answers and a wider range of data to conclude the correct findings of the research.

1.6.4. Data analysis and interpretation

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify patterns and relationships between socio-economic variables and academic achievement. Qualitative data from open-ended questions and interviews were analysed thematically to identify recurring categories and themes. The quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently compared and integrated to provide a comprehensive answer to the research questions.

As mentioned above, when using Google Forms for data collection, the results are automatically calculated and generated into statistical form. Google Forms provides users with various methods of data analysis. The cross-tabulation analysis allows users to compare the

results gathered from different cluster groups of participants. Association rule analysis in Google Forms analyses patterns formed between answers provided to different questions. Correlation analysis indicates whether there are consistent patterns between different questions. The sentiment analysis function organises feedback into three different categories, namely negative, neutral, and positive (Meng 2018).

As Google Forms was one of the chosen data collection methods for this research project, all the given analysis functions were employed to secure the most effective, true reflection of the results. The different functions, as mentioned above, provided statistical analysis in various forms such as tables and graphs. All these methods were employed to gain a complete picture of what the data entails. These graphs were then analysed and interpreted to confirm whether the hypothesis that socio-economic circumstances have a definite effect on academic achievement was true.

The data were analysed to determine whether themes arose relating to the main research question and sub-questions. The answers of participants were compared and analysed to determine whether the research question was answered. The reviewed literature was integrated into the thematic analysis so as to establish whether the data collected concurs with what is written in relevant literature. The answers to interview questions were captured through recording and transcribing interview notes and were uploaded into Google Forms by the researcher.

1.7. Reliability and validity of data

Middleton (2019) states that reliability refers to the consistency of a method when measuring results. Reliability can be assured if the same result is achieved by employing the same methods and circumstances. There are different types of reliability, which include test-retest (getting the same results when the measurement is repeated), interrater (obtaining the same results from different people with the same measurement through objective criteria) and internal consistency (getting the same results from different parts of the test designed to measure the same things).

When designing the questionnaires in Google Forms and the interview questions, reliability was ensured through purposefully designing questions that test the same thing and placing them in different parts of the questionnaire (internal consistency). Reliability was also ensured through creating the questions in an objective way. If needed, the questionnaires could have been sent to participants for a second time to measure differences in responses (test-retest).

Reliability is ensured through consistently applying the same methods and through standardising the conditions of the research (Middleton 2019). All the participants, regardless of their school or socio-economic area, received the exact same questionnaire, which further ensured reliability of the data. The exact same questions were asked during each interview with participants.

When a method used in research measures what it was intended to measure, validity is ensured. If the results correspond to real characteristics, variations in the world and properties, it is valid. There are different types of validity: construct validity (there is a strong correlation between existing theory and the concept that is measured); content validity (the measure covers all the different aspects of the concept that is measured); and criterion validity (the results correspond to other measures of the same concept). Validity can further be ensured through choosing appropriate methods of research and through choosing appropriate sampling methods (Middleton 2019). Research validity is ensured through using appropriate research designs, systematic procedures and reliable measurement instruments. This helps to accurately measure concepts and minimise bias (Lim, 2024; Noble and Smith, 2025).

The validity of the results of this research project was ensured by comparing the results to those of existing research findings to see if they corresponded (construct validity). The questions in the questionnaire and interviews were purposefully constructed in a way that ensured that they covered all the different aspects of the socio-economic influence on academic achievement (content validity). By using Google Forms as a data collection method and through undertaking a large-scale study that involved different respondents, the validity of the results was further ensured, as the study involved participants from different socio-economic status groups, and not merely a specific group of the population.

1.8. Research ethics

Laerd (2012) outlines five different principles to ensure ethics in research. These include minimising the risk of harm; obtaining informed consent from participants; ensuring anonymity and confidentiality; avoiding deceptive practices; and giving participants the right to withdraw from the research.

Minimising the risk of harm:

As this research project involved participants completing the questionnaires in their own time and at a place of their choosing without physical contact with the researcher, there was no risk of physical harm or psychological distress or discomfort. The questions were also designed in a way that did not provide psychological stress or harm to participants. The interviews were held in a neutral place where participants felt comfortable.

Informed consent:

All the participants gave consent in Google Forms before completing the questionnaires. Should they have wished not to complete the questionnaire, they were welcome not to do so. Should they have wished to participate, they first had to indicate that they gave consent to be included in the research before the questions would appear. Written consent was given by participants who participated in the interviews.

Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality:

As the participants remained anonymous upon completion of the questionnaires, there was no risk involved for those who chose to participate in the research. There were no identifiable factors or traits by which participants could be identified, even when conducting interviews.

Avoiding deceptive practices:

The purpose of the research was clearly stated at the beginning of the questionnaire and interviews so that participants knew exactly what the research entailed.

The right to withdraw:

Should participants have wished to withdraw from participating in the research at any time during the completion of the questionnaire or interview, they were able to close the questionnaire without any negative consequences or state that they did not want to participate further.

Ethical clearance to conduct the research was obtained from:

- the College of Education Ethics Committee;
- the principals of the participating schools; and
- the parent, teacher and learner participants.

1.9. Limitations and delimitations of the study

Limitations:

Because this was a large-scale research project, the possibility existed that not all the participants had Internet access required to complete the questionnaire in Google Forms. As it was an important part of the study to reach communities from lower socio-economic statuses, it was important to ensure that these participants were provided with the questionnaires in hard copy format. If participants without Internet access could not participate, the results of the study may have been flawed. Certain participants may have been illiterate, which made interviews a necessity.

Delimitations:

To keep the study controlled, it was necessary to set boundaries and limit the range of participants. This meant that only schools in the Gauteng Province were approached to participate in the research and not all of the schools in South Africa.

1.10. Definition of key concepts

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Baker (2014) defines socio-economic status as the measure of a person's combined economic and social status. Socio-economic refers to the "social and economic position of an individual or household within society", which is determined by educational attainment, income and occupational status. This in turn influences resource availability, opportunities and social advantages (Klimesch et al., 2024; Hasanović, 2025).

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

"Academic" is defined as studying in schools and universities (Hornby 2005:7).

"Achievement" is defined as the successful completion of something through a person's own effort or skill (Hornby 2005:11).

Academic achievement is the extent to which educational goals are attained and whether a learner successfully demonstrates knowledge and skills in an academic setting (Hailu 2024; Wang *et al.* 2024).

For this research, academic achievement is understood as the extent to which learners successfully attain educational goals through the acquisition and demonstration of knowledge, skills, competencies, and positive learning behaviours. Within the context of this study, academic achievement is interpreted as an outcome that is influenced by multiple socio-economic, environmental, psychological, and educational factors rather than solely by learners' innate ability or effort. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, academic achievement is viewed as the result of the interaction between the learner, the home environment, the school environment, parental involvement, educational resources, and broader socio-economic conditions.

For the purpose of this research, academic achievement was operationalised through participants' perceptions of learners' academic performance, academic confidence, educational aspirations, and the barriers and support systems that influence learning. Data were collected through questionnaires completed by learners, parents, and teachers, as well as semi-structured

interviews that explored participants' experiences of the factors affecting learners' academic achievement.

MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING

"Mainstream" is defined as the ideas and opinions that are viewed by most people and are therefore regarded as normal (Hornby 2005:891).

"Schooling" is defined as the education that a person receives at school (Hornby 2005:1306).

Mainstream schooling can therefore be defined as education provided to learners whose physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural development enables them to participate in the general education curriculum without requiring specialised educational support or placement.

For this study, mainstream schooling is understood as ordinary public or independent schools that implement the national curriculum and cater primarily for learners without identified special educational needs. It is interpreted as one of the educational contexts within which socio-economic factors influence learners' educational experiences and academic achievement.

Within this research, mainstream schooling was operationalised by including participants from mainstream schools representing different socio-economic contexts, including affluent, middle-income, and disadvantaged communities in Gauteng Province. This enabled comparisons to be made regarding how socio-economic conditions influence learners' educational opportunities and academic achievement across different school contexts.

LSEN SCHOOLING

LSEN schools are defined as schools for learners with special educational needs (TheFreeDictionary.com).

For this study, LSEN schooling is understood as specialised education provided to learners whose learning needs cannot be adequately addressed within mainstream educational settings due to cognitive, physical, behavioural, emotional, developmental, or multiple learning barriers. These schools provide adapted curricula, specialised teaching strategies, therapeutic interventions, and additional educational support to enable learners to achieve their educational potential.

Within the context of this research, LSEN schooling is interpreted as an important educational context in which socio-economic factors may influence academic achievement differently from mainstream schooling. Learners attending LSEN schools may experience the same socio-economic challenges as learners in mainstream schools, but these challenges may be compounded by additional learning barriers and specialised educational needs.

For this research, LSEN schooling was operationalised through the inclusion of educators, parents, and learners from LSEN schools in Gauteng Province as part of the study sample. Their participation provided valuable insight into how socio-economic status influences academic achievement within specialised educational settings and allowed comparisons with findings from mainstream schools.

1.11. Chapter outline

This study is divided into seven chapters.

CHAPTER 1: Presents an introduction and background to the study, rationale for the study, problem statement, research question, aim and objectives of the study, research methodology and design used in the study, reliability/validity of the data, research ethics, limitations and delimitations of the study and a definition of key concepts.

CHAPTER 2: Review of relevant literature that provides an overview of the theory of inequality in South Africa with reference to inequality in educational opportunities.

CHAPTER 3: Presents a theoretical framework that supports the research study with relevant literature and supportive theories.

CHAPTER 4: A comprehensive explanation of the research design and methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 5: A comprehensive presentation, analysis and description of the findings of the research.

CHAPTER 6: An in-depth discussion of the research findings according to the thematic analysis.

CHAPTER 7: A summary, conclusion and recommendations applicable to the study.

1.12. Chapter summary

Chapter one has provided a comprehensive introduction to the study by situating the research within the broader context of persistent socio-economic inequality in South Africa and its influence on educational outcomes. It has highlighted the central research problem, namely the unequal distribution of educational opportunities and the extent to which socio-economic status shapes learners' academic achievement. The chapter has demonstrated why this issue requires further investigation, emphasising that despite the advent of democracy, deep-rooted inequalities linked to poverty, race, and access to resources continue to limit the academic success and prospects of many learners. The background to the problem has been explored through a discussion of historical inequalities, current socio-economic conditions, and the impact of factors such as school resources, parental involvement, and the COVID-19 pandemic on learning outcomes. Furthermore, the chapter has outlined the research methodology, indicating that a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews is used to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The study is guided by key theoretical perspectives, namely Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, all of which emphasise the role of environmental and social factors in shaping cognitive development and academic achievement. In conclusion, this chapter has laid the foundation for the study by clarifying its purpose, significance, and approach. The following chapter will build on this foundation by presenting a detailed review of relevant literature, focusing on inequality in South Africa and its implications for educational opportunities and academic performance.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory of inequality in South Africa: Inequality in educational opportunities

2.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, an introduction and background to this study were given. This chapter explores relevant literature regarding the state of inequality in South Africa. The primary focus of this study is to investigate the socio-economic influence on the academic achievement of learners, specifically in the Senior (Grades 7 – 9) and the FET (Grades 10 -12) phases. Focus has been placed on finding out whether a learner from a lower socio-economic status has fewer educational opportunities and opportunities towards achieving academic success than a learner from a higher socio-economic status.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature review in this chapter are implicitly guided by the study's aim of investigating the socio-economic influence on academic achievement in South Africa. Literature was included if it was directly relevant to socio-economic inequality, educational access, and academic performance within the South African context, drawing on empirical, theoretical, and policy-based sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This included studies on general socio-economic inequality, the historical impact of apartheid on education, the effects of poverty on schooling, and factors such as school attendance and resource availability, all of which are closely linked to learner achievement. Preference was given to credible, research-based sources such as peer-reviewed articles, official reports, and established authors to ensure academic rigour. Conversely, literature was excluded if it was not relevant to the South African context, did not establish a clear link between socio-economic factors and education, or fell outside the scope of the study, such as topics unrelated to schooling or academic performance. Additionally, non-scholarly sources and outdated discussions without relevance to current inequalities were omitted to maintain focus and ensure that the review remained aligned with the research problem and objectives.

Academic achievement is central to this study because it represents more than the attainment of examination marks or progression through the schooling system. It encompasses the extent to which learners acquire knowledge, develop academic competencies and successfully meet

the expected educational outcomes of their phase of schooling. Academic achievement is influenced by multiple and interconnected factors, including learner characteristics, family circumstances, school resources, teaching quality and the broader socio-economic environment. The literature therefore presents academic achievement neither as a purely individual outcome nor as a direct consequence of socio-economic status, but as an outcome produced through the interaction of individual, relational, institutional and structural conditions. This distinction is important because learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may achieve highly despite adverse circumstances, while learners from more advantaged backgrounds may not necessarily achieve at the highest levels. Socio-economic status should therefore be understood as an influential contextual factor rather than a deterministic explanation of academic achievement.

This chapter consequently considers the literature thematically in relation to the research questions of the study. Attention is given to the socio-economic context of South Africa, the historical influence of apartheid on educational inequality, poverty and access to educational opportunities, and school attendance and academic performance. Across these themes, the review considers not only whether socio-economic inequalities exist, but also the mechanisms through which they may influence academic achievement. This approach provides the basis for identifying the contextual factors that require further investigation through the quantitative and qualitative components of the present study.

To understand the diverse educational provision situation in South Africa in particular, it is important to first have an in-depth knowledge of the socio-economic inequalities that are prevalent in South African society. This chapter references literature specifically focused on the theory of inequality in South Africa. Once the general inequalities in the economic situation in South Africa are investigated, it is possible to take a further in-depth look at the diverse situations in educational provision that may have an influence on a learner's academic opportunities and success.

The first section of this chapter focuses on socio-economic inequality in South Africa in general. Literature from different authors and publications are investigated to determine the nature of the socio-economic situation in South Africa. The section to follow then takes a further look at the effects of apartheid on the South African schooling system. Inequalities in South Africa cannot be investigated in isolation from its historic injustices brought about

through the system of apartheid. To gain a better understanding of the effects of apartheid on the South African schooling system, even in the years after the advent of formal democracy, literature from authors such as Muller and Hoadley (2019), Spaull (2019), Pearson and Reddy (2021) and more are included.

Once a general understanding of the effects of apartheid on the South African schooling system is grasped, further consideration is given to the effects of poverty on the South African schooling system. Understanding the effects of poverty on education is of utmost importance for this specific research study, as the influence of a learner's socio-economic situation on his/her educational achievement is the primary focus. Works from Wolhuter (2020), Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019), Brown (2022), Beegle et al. (2016) and more are consulted to gain a better understanding of the effects of poverty on education in South African schools.

The final section of this chapter focuses on school attendance and performance in the South African schooling system. This section aimed to investigate what the reasons for a high rate of absenteeism statistics are and the influence thereof on the academic achievement of South African learners, compared to those of other countries. Different researchers have investigated the phenomena of high absenteeism statistics, and their findings are briefly mentioned in this chapter. Works from Hall (2019), Mafa (2018), Mboweni (2014), Khan (2019) and more are briefly discussed to understand the reasons why learners do not attend school on a regular basis, and the influence thereof on their academic performance.

2.2. Socio-economic inequality in South Africa

Davids (2021) states that South Africa is the country in the world with the highest Gini coefficient (measurement of income distribution), which indicates an extreme level of inequality. Even though numerous policies to combat inequality in South Africa has been developed over the years, it is still a persistent problem today. Inequality includes gender inequality, education inequality, racial inequality, and urban-rural dweller inequalities. For this study, it was important to note that inequality is rampant in South Africa. As this study focused on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, it was important to take note of the socio-economic differences found in South African society. As Davids (2021)

states, inequalities in South Africa still persist, regardless of the efforts to create policies to combat inequality.

The World Inequality Lab (in Sguazzin 2021) gathered data about inequality in South Africa from 1993 to 2017. Their findings indicate that attempts to decrease inequality after apartheid have not been able to wipe away the imbalance. Approximately 3500 adults in South Africa own more than the poorest 32 million people in the country. Most South Africans still do not have access to high-quality education, which does not help them prepare for the demands of the job market. Affirmative action has not been successful in narrowing inequality. Even though black South Africans have outnumbered white South Africans in the richest 10% of the country over the last number of years, there has not been an increase in wealth for the poorest South Africans (Sguazzin 2021).

This study focused on learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. As can clearly be seen from Sguazzin's statistics, a very small percentage of South Africans possess the largest amount of the country's wealth. This is an indication that most of the youth in South African society do not come from high socio-economic status homes. Sguazzin indicates that most South Africans do not have access to high-quality education, which is what this study aimed to investigate. Through this study, I aim to determine whether socio-economic status has a direct link to the quality of education received.

As stated by Turok et al. (2021:88), Cape Town is severely divided according to socio-economic status. The growth of employment in Cape Town over the years has not been sufficient to reduce poverty significantly. The geographical location of residents in Cape Town reinforces even more social divides, as the same opportunities are not available in all neighbourhoods. Different areas of Cape Town have significantly different landscapes when it comes to income and socio-economic equality. In Gauteng, with Johannesburg in particular, the unemployment rates have increased significantly since the 1970s. With the exhaustion of the gold mines, unemployment followed. The difference in wages is no longer the main cause of socio-economic inequality in Johannesburg, but employment and unemployment play the biggest part in the socio-economic divide of the city (Ballard and Hamann 2021:100). According to recent labour statistics, the Western Cape had a reported unemployment rate of approximately 19.6–19.7% in 2024–2025 (Western Cape Government 2025; Statistics South

Africa 2025), while Gauteng (Johannesburg) had an unemployment rate of around 33.1% in 2025 (Statistics South Africa 2025; Gauteng City-Region Observatory 2024).

The examples of two of South Africa's largest cities are an indication of the economic situation found across the entire country. South Africa is known across the world for its economic inequality. The socio-economic diversity and disparity found in Cape Town and Johannesburg are a reflection of the rest of South African society. The richest citizens live a mere stone's throw away from some of the poorest citizens in the country. When seen from an educational perspective, it is clear that there is a mixture of socio-economic statuses in proximity to one another. Learners from high socio-economic status homes live in proximity to learners from low socio-economic circumstances. This study aimed to investigate whether these learners have equal educational opportunities, or whether it is in fact the case that their socio-economic background has an influence on the quality of education received and their academic achievement.

Schotte et al. (2018) used five waves of the NIDS (National Income Dynamics Study) to determine the rise and fall of poverty between 2008 and 2017. This research indicated that only one in four people can be considered part of the stable middle class or elite. It is estimated that approximately 49% of South Africans live in persistent poverty. These statistics are an indication of the complete imbalance of socio-economic distribution across South Africa. An alarmingly high percentage of South African learners thus come from low-income homes. The influence of socio-economic status on a learner's academic and educational achievement is thus an important issue to consider, as most of South Africa's learners are not considered to be part of a middle-class or elite socio-economic status group.

According to Marais (2021:88), close to a third of employed people in South Africa do not earn enough money to afford basic life necessities such as food. This does not even include the unemployed population of the country. The cost of living in South Africa is so high that even those who earn an income cannot afford necessities, as indicated by Marais. This means that the small amount of money available will be spent on food and necessities instead of education. This may be an indication that most learners are not able to afford attending schools or Early Childhood Education centres that have high monthly fees. This study aimed to investigate if low-fee or no-fee schooling can offer the same quality of education and yield the same academic results as high-fee or private schooling.

South Africa's economic structure is still influenced by its apartheid legacy. The challenges of unemployment, poverty, inequality and a low rate of economic growth are rooted in the apartheid era. Even though attempts have been made to address the high rates of unemployment, poverty and inequality after the fall of the apartheid regime, progress has been uneven. South Africa still faces challenges relating to raising economic growth rates and, as a result, transforming the economy. South Africa's unemployment and inequality levels are amongst the highest in the world (Tregenna et al. 2021:3). The influence of apartheid on education is discussed further in the next section. It is, however, important to consider the influence of South Africa's troubled past on the inequalities still rife in broader South African society. One cannot consider educational inequalities without examining societal inequalities first.

The literature therefore presents socio-economic inequality as a structural rather than merely individual problem. The evidence from Davids (2021), Sguazzin (2021), Schotte et al. (2018), Marais (2021) and Tregenna et al. (2021) collectively suggests that differences in household income, employment and access to resources create substantially different starting conditions for learners. However, socio-economic status should not be viewed as a single variable that operates independently of other circumstances. Income may influence access to nutrition, transport, technology, educational materials and suitable study environments, while parental education and employment may influence the educational support available within the household. The significance of socio-economic status therefore lies partly in the resources and opportunities to which it provides access. This distinction is important for the present study because it requires investigation of the specific socio-economic factors through which inequality may influence academic achievement, rather than treating socio-economic status as a single explanatory variable.

The literature also reveals a tension between policy intention and educational outcomes. Although post-apartheid policies have explicitly sought to address historical inequalities, the persistence of substantial socio-economic disparities suggests that policy implementation has not completely transformed the conditions under which learners experience education (Gumede 2015; Wittenberg 2017; Leibbrandt et al. 2021). The existence of policy interventions therefore cannot, in itself, be interpreted as evidence that educational opportunities have become equal. For this study, the important issue is consequently not only whether inequality

persists, but which aspects of socio-economic inequality continue to affect the quality of educational opportunities and academic achievement.

Different policy documents have been developed since apartheid as an attempt to ensure that South Africa becomes an equitable society. These policies include, amongst others, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (1994), the Constitution (1996) and the Discussion Document on the State, Property Relations and Social Transformation (1998). These policies were implemented to raise the levels of equality in South Africa, but it is still a work in progress, and a problem that is far from being settled (Gumede 2015:4).

Bhebe (2018:4) describes socio-economic transformation as a "change process". Many people view times of change as a situation which creates winners and losers, although the process of transformation should never create any losers. Improvement is the aim of transformation, and social justice ought to be promoted through socio-economic transformation. Equal opportunities along with a fair distribution of wealth should be achieved through socio-economic transformation and economic growth. On an economic level, South Africa has struggled with adequate structural transformation during the post-Apartheid era. The structural transformation has been uneven and discontinuous (Andreoni et al. 2021:1).

The policies mentioned above are all aimed at socio-economic transformation. As noted by Bhebe, Gumede and Andreoni above, the process of economic change resulting in social equality has not been successful to date. Even though some progress has been made, the inequalities of the past have not been levelled with regard to social justice and socio-economic transformation. For this study, it was important to note that all learners are influenced by the broader societal differences. It is not merely the adults or parents of learners who live with the daily injustices of economic inequality, but the school-aged learners are directly impacted by societal inequalities. Whether or not these societal inequalities have an educational and academic impact on learners is investigated through this study.

Wittenberg (2017) conducted research regarding earnings inequality in South Africa by using two different datasets, the 2010 Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) and 2011 PIT data. His findings were that earnings inequality has risen since the end of apartheid. Leibbrandt et al. (2021:223) state that South Africa's inequality has persistently remained even though policies were developed to specifically target the elimination of inequality. Half of South

Africa's population falls into the 'poor' category. Wittenberg and Leibbrandt both indicate that the policies set in motion to combat inequality have not entirely been successful. South African citizens hoped that the fall of apartheid would bring about significant economic change and that all people would receive the same opportunities, regardless of their racial or social background. Apartheid not only had a deleterious impact on the inequality of economic societies, but it also had a significant impact on the schooling system and the quality of education offered. In the next section, the effects of apartheid on the South African schooling system are explained in further detail. As this study specifically aimed at investigating the influence of socio-economic status on education, it was important to take note of the impact of society's inequality on education.

2.3. The effects of apartheid on the South African schooling system

As indicated in the section above, the effects of the apartheid system on society cannot be investigated in isolation, without considering the effect thereof on the schooling system. In this section, a brief overview of different literature regarding the impact of apartheid on the schooling system in South Africa is given. This study aimed to investigate the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, where there is a continuity of South Africa's extreme socio-economic inequality since apartheid.

Muller and Hoadley (2019:110) note that the South African schooling system reflects its English and Germanic colonial roots. They indicate that in the Bantu Education schooling system, educators were trained in a very strict authoritarian way, where intellectual ambition was not promoted. Approximately 80% of lower socio-economic schools are still making use of this system, whereas the remaining 20% of schools for the higher socio-economic classes make use of a higher form of didactic teaching. This study investigated whether there is indeed a difference in quality offered at lower- and higher socio-economic schools. The results of this study test whether Muller and Hoadley are correct in stating that the lower socio-economic schools are still making use of historically biased education approaches, and whether the academic results of the learners in these schools will confirm this.

Stark inequality in South Africa is a reality and is mirrored in the country's education system. Even though apartheid ended decades ago, a South African child's economic future is not

merely determined by their hard work or determination. Factors such as race, birthplace (province) and parents' socio-economic circumstances have a direct impact on a South African child's academic success. It is, in many cases, possible to predict a child's life success before the age of seven by examining socio-economic factors in the child's life (Spaull 2019:1). In my opinion, there are cases where this statement by Spaull has been disproven. There are numerous success stories of people who come from lower socio-economic status backgrounds who have made a success in their academics and their careers. It is, however, not the case for most people raised in poverty. Through this study, I aim to determine whether hard work and determination have a greater influence on academic achievement than a learner's socio-economic background. If Spaull is correct, the findings of this study will show that socio-economic circumstances have a greater influence on academic achievement than do hard work and determination.

Legotlo (2014:2-3) provides a brief background to schooling problems in South Africa, where rapid changes have happened in the schooling system during the post-apartheid era (since 1994). In 1995, the first White Paper on Education and Training was set to address the imbalances of the past. The South African Schools Act of 1996 was also implemented to address inequalities and to ensure quality education for all South African learners. Unfortunately, the schooling system from the apartheid era still influences the education system of today. Many schools in previously disadvantaged, low-income societies experience a significant shortage of school desks and textbooks. Teachers are also not motivated to provide quality education due to a lack of resources. As the right to quality education for all learners is a fundamental right, as indicated by the South African Bill of Rights, these challenges need to be addressed to ensure quality education for all.

In many South African schools, especially in disadvantaged and rural communities, there is a shortage of essential educational resources. These include adequate infrastructure, technology, teaching materials, textbooks, etc. This limits effective teaching and learning, which has an influence on educational inequality (Maharaj and Chauke, 2025; Lombo, 2024). A lack of resources makes teaching a challenging task for most educators, which is an indication that Legotlo is correct in stating that educators are not motivated to deliver proper education without it. If learners are not provided with adequate resources, they will, in my opinion, not have the same opportunities for growth and development as learners who have unlimited resources. With the implementation of the above-mentioned policies after apartheid, the aim and hope

were equal education for all, which means an equal distribution of resources. Legotlo notes that lower-income societies still experience a shortage of basic resources such as school desks. When comparing the results from this current study, it became clear that a lack of physical resources had an impact on learners' academic performance. As this was a large-scale study involving schools from different socio-economic levels, with different levels of available resources, the results were able to indicate the importance of resources in achieving academic success.

South Africa and the United States share a commonality in history where education for black people focused primarily on preparing them for manual labour jobs with a low-income probability. Even though efforts have been made to level the inequality in education, the quality of education in both countries is socially graded and unequal. The previously advantaged groups (mainly white males) still hold most of the power and privilege (Pearson and Reddy 2021:402). The participants in this study included learners, parents and teachers from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and racial and ethnic groups; the results indicated that there is indeed a difference between the opportunities available to these different groups. The expectation was that opportunities had less to do with race than with socio-economic groupings. During the apartheid era, inequalities were mainly based on racial or ethnic background, whereas socio-economic inequality, regardless of race, was more the focus of this study.

Essack and Hindle (2019:932) state that research clearly indicates that South Africa's socio-political nature of education cannot be removed from its historical past. The effects of apartheid and the constant struggle with policies have not fully addressed inequalities in the South African schooling system. I agree that South Africa's past cannot be ignored when investigating the differences in opportunities. The historical influences are evident in the way that the schooling system is approached in many ways. This study did not primarily focus on the historical influences of South Africa's economic past, but the current situation cannot be viewed in isolation without noting the influence of history on current events.

The literature on apartheid therefore provides two competing but complementary perspectives on contemporary educational inequality. On the one hand, the formal dismantling of apartheid and the introduction of policies aimed at equity represent significant structural changes to the education system. On the other hand, Muller and Hoadley (2019), Spaull (2019), Legotlo

(2014), Pearson and Reddy (2021) and Essack and Hindle (2019) indicate that historical patterns of unequal resources, school quality and educational opportunity have proved difficult to eradicate. Educational inequality should therefore not be interpreted simply as a continuation of apartheid policies, but as the continuing effect of historical structures interacting with present-day socio-economic conditions. This distinction is particularly relevant to the present study, which focuses on current socio-economic influences on academic achievement while recognising that these influences operate within a historically unequal education system.

Importantly, the literature also cautions against reducing educational outcomes to either historical disadvantage or individual learner characteristics. Spaull (2019) highlights the strong relationship between socio-economic circumstances and educational outcomes, while the existence of learners who succeed despite disadvantage demonstrates that socio-economic circumstances do not determine individual achievement in every case. This suggests that protective factors such as motivation, parental support, teacher support and access to educational resources may mediate the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and academic achievement. Identifying these interacting factors is therefore essential to understanding why learners exposed to similar socio-economic conditions may nevertheless experience different educational outcomes.

With the rise of the new democratic government in South Africa after apartheid, the expectation was that school funding for previously disadvantaged groups would increase substantially. The process was, however, delayed because of backlogs caused by apartheid, the process of redistributing funds to non-personnel and the rise of educational costs. Schools catering for the poor did thus not receive enough funds as was the original expectation (Motlala 2019:303). Schools that needed the funds the most did not receive what was originally promised to them. No-fee or low-fee schools, as a result, still did not receive enough funding to be able to afford high-class and updated resources. The expectation is that learners in these schools would not perform as well as schools with unlimited resources. The results of this study gave an indication that this is in fact true. The average of learners' performance in no-fee, low-fee and high-fee schools was compared to determine whether patterns arose indicating that schools with less funding lead to lower academic achievement.

Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) used a desktop analysis to determine the state of education in post-apartheid South Africa. They used different sources to determine what the

comparative data suggests. Their data analysis indicates that there has been a significant increase in educational expenditure over the last few decades. During the apartheid era, schools for black learners were under-resourced and received less funding (p.1). Even though educational expenditure has increased and is comparable to other affluent countries (p.1), quality indicators demonstrate that South Africa's educational achievements are far below those of international standards. South Africa ranks at the bottom in Science, Mathematics and reading, compared to many other countries (p.5).

International assessments done in the past few years indicate that South African learners still perform significantly lower than global averages in Mathematics, Science and Reading. The "Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study" (TIMSS 2023), showed that South Africa scored an average of 362 in Grade 5 Mathematics, 308 in Grade 5 Science, 397 in Grade 9 Mathematics and 362 in Grade 9 Science. This sits far below the international standard of 500 (Department of Basic Education 2024; Mullis et al. 2024). The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2021) indicated that South African Grade Four learners only achieved a score of 288, compared to the international standard of 500, with 81% not being able to read for meaning (Howie et al. 2023; Mullis et al. 2023). These results indicate that there is a significant gap between South African learners and those in other countries with higher-performing education systems (Department of Basic Education 2024).

The data analysis done by Mlachila and Moeletsi indicates that educational expenditure has increased after apartheid. However, as Motlala suggests, there are many schools that are still under-funded and under-resourced. The conflicting stances suggest that the funding has not been allocated to the correct places, for example, the acquisition of proper educational resources. The data gathered through this study is compared to the findings of Mlachila, Moeletsi and Motlala. The analysis thereof indicated that funding really has a significant influence on academic achievement and success, as schools with different levels of funding and resources participated in the research.

The evidence regarding educational funding presents an important policy tension. Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) demonstrate that public expenditure on education has increased substantially, yet Motlala (2019) indicates that many schools serving poorer communities remain inadequately resourced. Increased expenditure therefore does not necessarily translate directly

into improved academic achievement. The effectiveness of funding may depend on how resources are distributed, the capacity of schools to use those resources effectively, and the extent to which resources address the specific barriers experienced by disadvantaged learners. This suggests that the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement is mediated by institutional factors rather than being explained by household income alone. Consequently, the present study considers resources, school conditions and educational opportunities alongside household socio-economic circumstances.

Boughey and McKenna (2021:28-29) conducted research to determine the ways in which policies have shaped the system of higher education in South Africa. Their research indicates that there is ongoing inequity with regard to different social groups. Black South Africans, who were supposed to be uplifted through the transformation, have not been able to see evidential success as had been the hope. As mentioned earlier, many policies have been developed and implemented to combat the issue of inequality in the South African education system. This research specifically focused on secondary education (Senior and FET Phase); however, there is a direct correlation between success in the secondary education phases and tertiary, higher education. A school learner cannot receive university exemption without achieving a certain, higher level of academic achievement at the school level. The results of this study were expected to indicate whether policies have had an impact on the educational opportunities and equality for secondary school level learners, regardless of race or socio-economic background. Through analysing these results, one could be able to determine whether learners of different racial groups have equal higher educational opportunities, or whether black learners are still burdened by the inequalities of the past, as suggested by Boughey and McKenna.

Christie (2020:3) conducted an empirical enquiry into different schools, with a focus on schools in Carnarvon in the Karoo, noting that the differences and inequalities in schools are a reflection of the inequalities in the broader society. Factors such as social class, gender, race, language and region have an impact on inequalities. There has been a persistence in inequality in South African schooling, even after the fall of the apartheid system. Policies have been made in an attempt to create equity and quality in the South African schooling system, but inequality continues to persist.

This study placed specific focus on Gauteng Province. The data gathered were compared to those of Christie to determine whether there are similarities between the situation in the Karoo

and that of Gauteng. The expectation was that the inequalities in the broader society in Gauteng, as earlier mentioned, have an impact on the inequalities in educational provision and quality.

Through a comparative meta-analysis of experimental and quasi-experimental studies in South African schools, data indicate that South Africa's public school system is weak compared to those of other countries. Unemployment rates, inequality, racial divides and poverty are exacerbated by the low-performing schooling system. South African schools consistently perform poorly in assessments compared to other countries. After the fall of the apartheid system, the government faced the difficult task of trying to undo structural inequalities and address historical oppression. Even though various policies were implemented to try to revamp the South African schooling system, there was very little impact on the achievement patterns of South African learners. Through the analysis of international and national assessment results, it is possible to see that learners in previously "black" schools still perform lower than learners in previously "white" schools (Besharati et al. 2021:27-28). As previously "black" and previously "white" schools formed part of this study, it was possible to compare data to determine the veracity of the argument presented by Besharati et al. The academic averages of learners from the different schools were compared to analyse whether the socio-economic situation of learners and the school, or the racial composition of teachers and learners, has an impact on academic results.

After the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994, there was a radical transformation in the country with the aim of serving the interests of all its citizens. However, the legacy of apartheid left the country with some of the highest levels of inequality in the world. The aim was to transform the education system to enhance economic prospects for those who were deemed historically poor. Even with available fiscal resources to provide for education, educational equality has still not been achieved (Levy et al. 2019). Whether there has been any rise in the availability of economic prospects for those deemed previously disadvantaged. The legacy of apartheid and the historical oppression and disparity continue to exacerbate the educational inequalities of the country. There thus needs to be even more focus placed on creating equal educational opportunities for all learners, regardless of their social, ethnic, or racial status.

2.4. The effects of poverty on the South African schooling system

The previous two sections of this literature review discussed the economic inequalities. It is clear through extant research in this regard that South Africa's inequality remains stark. A large percentage of South Africans live in poverty, and it is therefore important to take note of the effects of poverty on the South African schooling system. According to Wolhuter (2020:11-14), many parents in South Africa cannot afford formal early childhood education for their children due to poverty. Seventy per cent of children under the age of six years are not in structured, formal education settings. As Wolhuter (p.11) explains, this is the first weak link in South Africa's education system. Although school enrolments have increased over the last few years, approximately 500 000 primary school-aged children in South Africa are not enrolled in schools (p. 12). Another problem in South African schools is that the medium of instruction at most educational institutions is either in English or Afrikaans. This means that many learners receive instruction in a third or fourth language rather than their mother tongue (p. 13). All the universal dimensions of inequality are present in South African schools. These include inequality based on ethnicity or race, gender and socio-economic status. Research shows that "white" South African schools are on par with schools in high-performing countries, whereas "black" schools in South Africa are far behind in terms of infrastructure, qualified teachers, spending, achievement of learning outcomes, etcetera (p.14).

I strongly believe that it is important to impart knowledge and skills during the formative years before a learner goes to primary school. According to Heckman (2011) and UNESCO (2022), attending a preschool is extremely important because it supports language and social development as well as cognitive development. This, in turn, improves a child's readiness for formal schooling as well as academic achievement in later years. As stated by Wolhuter, many South African parents cannot afford to send their children to preschools in preparation for formal schooling. The question remains: where and what do these children learn before they must attend formal schooling? The results of this study give some indication of whether learners who attended formal Early Childhood Education institutions have a head start to academic success compared to learners who could not afford to attend such institutions. Wolhuter makes mention of the large number of school-aged learners who are not enrolled in schools. This research mainly focused on learners who physically attend schools, and further investigation will thus be necessary to determine the effects of not attending any formal form of schooling.

The issue of mother-tongue education has long been debated in South Africa. Receiving mother-tongue instruction in South Africa remains a struggle due to the country's highly multilingual context. There is a shortage of teaching materials in all the languages, as well as a shortage of teachers who are trained in African languages. Educational institutions still regard English as the preferred language of instruction, which makes it difficult to enhance mother-tongue instruction (Sibanda 2025; Ngubane 2025).

Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019:87-88) indicate that most children in South Africa are severely impacted by social as well as economic inequalities. Most of South Africa's young children are deprived of their basic rights, such as quality education, proper access to health care, balanced nutrition and socio-economic rights. The effects of poverty, and the resulting lack of balanced nutrition and quality education, can be minimised through quality early childhood development programmes. Intervention programmes such as quality early childhood education programmes can help children to achieve their full potential. Approximately four million children under the age of six live in the poorest 40% of households in South Africa. These children receive less mental stimulation at a young age due to their caregivers' inability to engage with their children in a meaningful way. These caregivers are also not able to afford proper Early Childhood Education programmes.

The South African population can be divided into different income quintiles, where Quintile 1 represents the poorest households up to Quintile 5, which represents the richest households, based on income. Hall et al. (2017:36) indicate the following statistics related to children attending early childhood learning programmes based on information from the different income quintiles: a mere 58% of three- to five-year-old children from Quintile 1 households attend early childhood learning programmes. The number of children attending early childhood learning programmes rises as the quintiles rise: 60% of children from Quintile 2 households, 67% of children from Quintile 3 households, 71% of children from Quintile 4 households and 83% of children from Quintile 5 households attend early childhood learning programmes. These statistics are a clear indication that there is a correlation between income received within a household and the attendance of early childhood learning programmes.

Brown (2022) also describes the division of the South African schooling system into quintiles, where approximately 12,8 million learners in South Africa attend public schools, whereas

approximately 2500 learners attend private schools. Three-fifths of South African schools are Quintile 1 to 3 schools which serve impoverished communities, and the rest are Quintile 4 and 5 schools which serve middle- to high-income communities. The quintile level of the schools reflects the socio-economic status of the communities in which they are located. There is a continuing crisis in the South African schooling system that has been influenced by administrative structures and at the classroom level. The quality of education in South Africa is lacking compared to other countries. As explained by Hall et al., there is a clear correlation between the quintile (income) level of a household, school attendance and educational quality, where lower-income families often struggle to afford the school fees in higher quintile schooling systems.

The literature suggests that poverty affects educational achievement through multiple pathways rather than through a single direct mechanism. Household income can influence whether learners have access to early childhood education, adequate nutrition, transport, learning materials and technology, while the socio-economic position of a school can influence its ability to provide qualified teachers, infrastructure and additional educational support. Hall et al. (2017), Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019), Brown (2022) and Motlala (2019) therefore point towards an accumulation of disadvantage in which several relatively small disadvantages may combine to affect a learner's educational opportunities. At the same time, poverty should not be treated as an inevitable predictor of academic failure. The existence of learners who perform well despite material disadvantage suggests that school-level and relational factors may provide important forms of support or resilience. The key issue for the present study is therefore to determine which socio-economic factors have the strongest relationship with academic achievement and how these factors interact with protective influences within the learner's home and school environments.

Motlala (2019:309) explains that the use of school fees has been highly criticised. Parents are obligated to pay school fees to receive quality education for their children. Schools where school fees are paid by most parents have more money to provide extra educators and resources, whereas no-fee schools have less money to spend on extra educational resources. Private early childhood education programmes are expensive, and most South African parents cannot afford the monthly fees. As indicated by Ashley-Cooper and Hall et al., millions of young South Africans do not receive proper mental stimulation during their formative years as their

caregivers most likely have to spend as much time as they can to obtain funds for basic needs such as food or housing.

Beegle et al. (2016:138) explain that approximately 40% of overall inequality can be attributed to educational attainment in South Africa, Rwanda and Zambia. The broad economic activity of the household head contributes less to inequality than educational inequality in these three countries. If Beegle's statement is correct, the inequality in educational provision is an extremely important factor in levelling economic disparities. If proper education plays such a big role in economic inequality, it becomes crucial to ensure that all learners receive equal opportunities to obtain a high level of education.

The rural communities in South Africa are known to have the highest concentrations of poverty, where learners in rural settings often, compounded by poverty, receive poor schooling compared to learners from more urban settings. Approximately 47% of primary and secondary schools in South Africa are in rural communities. National examination results indicate that these rural schools perform much worse than higher quintile schools. Many teachers are also not adequately equipped to teach in rural schools through their studies. Rural schooling in poor communities is thus not as efficient compared to urban schooling (Timmis et al. 2022). As this was a large-scale study, schools in rural as well as urban settings formed part of the research. A comparison between the academic performance of learners from rural as well as urban schools can be made based on data analysis.

The South African schooling system has been labelled one of the worst performing systems in the world. This label can be attributed to poor teacher training, corruption, the effects of poverty, social class, race and the better performance of schools that charge school fees compared to no-fee schools (Epstein 2019:109). As mentioned above, schools from different socio-economic and geographical settings formed part of this research study. The results of this study thus confirm Epstein's analysis that the reason for South Africa's poor performance on the global stage is correct.

South Africa has historically been characterised by inequality and separation. There is a very large divide between the rich and the poor in the country. The lack of proper education is one of the largest factors influencing poverty and unemployment in South Africa. The erasure of the inequalities of the past is made even more difficult through the weak education system in

South Africa (Ittmann 2018:61). Kurebwa and Dodo (2019:12) explain that the South African education system needs a lot of overhauling. When one looks at the efforts needed to curb unemployment and the creation of jobs, the South African education system is regarded as the weakest link.

If the hypothesis that lower socio-economic circumstances lead to a lower standard of education and vice versa is true, the importance of breaking the cycle cannot be emphasised enough. Even more effort needs to be put into providing quality education for all South African learners, to ensure that the cycle of poverty and a weaker education system is broken. If Ittmann, Kurebwa and Dodo's statements are correct, higher levels of education will lead to better employment opportunities and thus a rise in socio-economic circumstances.

The International Monetary Fund (2022:96) indicates that South Africa has made some improvements regarding educational performance but continues to fare poorly when it comes to education quality, the adult literacy rate, teacher-to-pupil ratio and finding properly qualified teachers. The weak education system leads to further complications, where the youth struggle to find proper employment, specifically youth from impoverished communities. A great deal of focus has been placed on the provision of education for all, and not enough focus is placed on improving educational quality, especially in poorer rural communities. I agree that the provision of education is not enough to strengthen the economic situation in South Africa and to provide improved employment opportunities for the youth. It is important that education is not only provided to all learners, but that focus should be placed on the quality of education that is provided. If teachers are not properly trained and motivated to provide all learners with quality education, regardless of their socio-economic situation, an improvement in the national academic performance rates will not be seen. If South Africa is to be uplifted to the global performance standards in education, a conscious effort needs to be made to improve educational quality.

Large numbers of learners who come from lower socio-economic circumstances are incorrectly being placed in schools for learners with special educational needs. Many learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to struggle to learn to read and write as they were not properly taught during their formative years. This problem predominantly affects the poor and increases inequality (Naicker 2018:28-29). The importance of mental stimulation during the formative years of a child's life is seen through their later academic performance. Many

learners, especially from poor communities, could not attend preschools due to high monthly fees as mentioned above. Important skills for the acquisition of reading and writing skills are taught at these early childhood development institutions. It often happens that learners who did not attend such institutions become late bloomers, who can “catch up” to the other learners at a later stage. As a teacher at a school for learners with special educational needs, it has been my observation that many learners, who demonstrate the ability to succeed academically if given the proper opportunities, have merely been placed in the school due to the lack of proper education and stimulation during their formative years. As mainstream, as well as LSEN schools (schools for learners with special educational needs) formed part of this research, a comparison between educational opportunities in early childhood could be drawn from the data analysis.

There is a widening gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa, where children have unequal access to proper education, which means that inequality is prevalent in the acquisition of skills and education. Only a very small percentage of the population can acquire a high level of secondary or tertiary education (Davids 2021). School attendance should be encouraged at every level of schooling as research has shown that a higher level of education leads to better employment opportunities. In the next section, reasons for learners not attending school on a regular basis will be explored. The relationship between school attendance and academic performance is an important factor that should be investigated regarding the performance of the South African schooling system.

Academic achievement should therefore be understood as a complex and multidimensional outcome rather than simply as a numerical examination result. The literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that achievement reflects the cumulative effects of prior educational experiences, learner engagement, family circumstances, school quality, attendance, access to resources and broader socio-economic conditions. The South African evidence further demonstrates that achievement is unequally distributed across schools and communities. Spaull (2019) highlights the substantial concentration of high-level achievement among a small proportion of schools, while Mlachila and Moeletsi (2019) demonstrate that South Africa continues to perform poorly in international assessments despite increased educational expenditure. These findings raise an important distinction between access to education, participation in education and achievement within education. A learner may have formal access

to schooling without having equal access to the resources, teaching quality and learning conditions necessary to achieve at a comparable level. Consequently, improving academic achievement requires more than increasing school attendance or enrolment; it requires attention to the quality and conditions of learning.

There is also a need to avoid a deterministic interpretation of the relationship between socio-economic status and achievement. Although the literature consistently demonstrates an association between disadvantage and poorer educational outcomes (Spaull 2019; Wolhuter 2020; Timmis et al. 2022), this relationship does not imply that socio-economic background inevitably determines an individual learner's achievement. Factors such as parental involvement, learner motivation, teacher support, school resources and resilience may moderate the effects of disadvantage. This provides an important rationale for the mixed-methods approach of the present study: quantitative analysis can identify the strength and direction of relationships between selected socio-economic factors and academic achievement, while qualitative evidence can provide insight into how these factors are experienced and how they influence learners' educational opportunities.

2.5. School attendance and performance in the South African schooling system

There can be many reasons for irregular school attendance. In this section, literature regarding school attendance is examined to determine which factors influence absenteeism and in turn result in a lower level of educational achievement. Hall (2019) explains that the main reasons for not attending school include the quality of the education that is offered or the ability of learners to progress to higher grades. The high cost of schooling, school uniforms, or transport to and from school constitutes another reason why some learners do not attend school. Disability, illness and pregnancies are yet other factors contributing to non-attendance. In the South African setting, many learners, especially from lower socio-economic communities, are reliant upon public transport systems to get to school. It has been my observation that many learners are reliant upon unreliable transport services, which often results in truancy or absenteeism from school. The questionnaires and interviews in this research project investigated the participants' access to transport to and from school, and whether there is a link between mode of transport and the quality of education that they can obtain.

Mafa (2018:7) conducted a qualitative research study, using case studies, to determine the reasons for learners' absenteeism in a small rural town. The findings of the research indicated that learners' social and economic circumstances had a great influence on their absence from school. As well as their geographical location, for instance, the distance from their homes to school, and unavailable parental guidance. As the focus of this study was specifically on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, the results may indicate whether Mafa's findings regarding the influence of social and economic circumstances on absenteeism from school prove correct. As mentioned earlier, many parents in lower socio-economic status communities spend every moment that they can on obtaining funds for basic needs. These parents are thus not always available to provide learners with the parental guidance that they need to encourage them to attend school on a regular basis.

Mboweni (2014) conducted a qualitative research study, using case studies and interviews, to determine the reasons for low school attendance in Acornhoek in Mpumalanga. His findings indicate that the following reasons were given for low school attendance in this rural town: late coming and truancy, low performance in academics which led to high drop-out rates, bullying at school, over-crowded classrooms, poor school facilities, the use of corporal punishment by teachers, a lack of parental involvement, teachers' negative attitudes towards learners and a lack of facilities to perform sports activities (Mboweni 2014:56-68). This is a mixed-methods study, which not only relied on the views and opinions of participants, but also on statistics regarding the relationship between socio-economic background, school attendance and academic results, which are provided to make a scientific comparison between qualitative experiences and quantitative data. The data were analysed to determine to what extent factors such as poor facilities, late coming and truancy, and negative teacher-learner relationships influence absenteeism and academic achievement.

The literature on absenteeism demonstrates that attendance should not be considered independently of socio-economic circumstances. Hall (2019), Mafa (2018) and Mboweni (2014) identify economic, geographical, familial and school-related factors that can prevent learners from attending regularly. These findings suggest a reciprocal relationship: socio-economic disadvantage may contribute to absenteeism, while repeated absence may further disadvantage learners academically by reducing exposure to teaching and learning opportunities. Attendance can therefore be understood as one of the mechanisms through which socio-economic disadvantage may be translated into differences in academic achievement.

This is relevant to the present study because the investigation considers not only whether socio-economic circumstances are associated with academic performance, but also the pathways through which such circumstances may affect learners' educational experiences.

Naesp (2016) provides the following as reasons for high absenteeism rates in schools: bullying, bad grades, caring for other family members, difficulty with housing or food, illness and mental or emotional health issues. In many South African households, older siblings play an integral role in caring for their younger siblings. Naesp's research indicates that caring for other family members often leads to absenteeism from school. It is to be expected that this will be a factor that is widely seen in the South African setting. As the results of many different studies indicate, South Africa is plagued by poverty, which leads to problems related to housing and food. In my opinion, a hungry learner would rather spend time on obtaining food than caring about obtaining education.

Porter (2019) indicates that many learners from low-income and rural neighbourhoods have a fear of being harassed or attacked on their way to school. There are different factors that constrain learners' movement and travel towards school, including use of hazardous forms of public transport. The School of Education online programmes (2021) state that physical health issues, bullying in school and socio-economic hardship are among the highest contributing factors to absenteeism from school. Socio-economic hardships include unstable housing, homelessness or issues related to transport to and from school.

In South Africa, many people are reliant upon public transport. With regular incidents of taxi violence, road rage, etc., these learners are often placed in compromising and dangerous situations, merely to get to school. South Africa is a country known for violent crime, which will naturally instil fear into learners having to travel along crime-ridden paths to get to school. If the choice must be made between being attacked on their way to school or staying at home, most people will choose the latter.

According to Khan (2019), the causes of high absenteeism rates from school include bullying, sickness, mental health issues, distractions that cause learners to lose interest in education, and external coaching of sports that keep learners out of school. All the researchers already mentioned in this section indicated that bullying is a factor that leads to absenteeism. Children are often ruthless, and learners who struggle academically are easy targets for bullies. This

causes a snowball effect, where learners who already struggle academically do not attend school regularly out of fear of being bullied. Their academic achievement thus does not improve, and the cycle is repeated.

Research indicates that children who live in poverty are more likely to miss school than their peers (Garcia and Weiss 2018). The high cost of schooling, school uniforms, and transport have been mentioned in this chapter as contributing factors to learner absenteeism. Jacob and Lovett (2017) attribute high absenteeism rates to a few factors, including factors at home, school or in the community. Pregnancy, teenage motherhood, lack of parental guidance and support, low academic performance, peer pressure, low family income, unstable housing, stressful family events and responsibilities at home are home factors that contribute to absenteeism. A lack of proper school facilities, low-quality teachers, geographic access to school, poor student-teacher relationships and boredom are all school factors that lead to absenteeism. Community factors that lead to absenteeism include unsafe neighbourhoods, a lack of social and educational support services and job opportunities for school-aged learners. Many South African learners leave school early in search of job opportunities that will help them to provide for their families. Without a proper education, the likelihood of obtaining high-paying jobs is slim, and the cycle of poverty and incompletion of schooling is repeated.

There are numerous challenges that the South African school system faces, as indicated by Legotlo (2014:7-8). Only about 10% of learners who enrol for Grade 1 reach Grade 12 within a reasonable time, which indicates that many others either fail or drop out of school. There is also a significant issue regarding the availability of resources in South African schools. There is a lack of basic resources, such as instructional materials, proper, high-quality school buildings, libraries, educated and competent staff, etcetera. Many learners also lack the discipline and motivation needed to complete their education. Factors such as substance abuse, poverty, high absenteeism and poor life skills influence learners' ability to complete their education.

After exploring several reasons for high absenteeism from school, it is easy to understand the statistics given by Legotlo that indicate low levels of school completion. It is alarming to note that such a high percentage of South African learners never complete their secondary education, not to mention tertiary studies. If learners are to be uplifted regarding their socio-economic circumstances, education is a key component in achieving such upliftment. A proper

education leads to better employment opportunities which, in turn, leads to better socio-economic circumstances. To achieve socio-economic improvement and upliftment in South Africa, more focus should be placed on the obtainment of a proper education.

Regarding academic achievement in 2018, according to Spaull (2019:1), the top 200 high schools had more distinctions achieved in Mathematics than the other 6600 schools combined. That means that a mere 3% of schools in South Africa achieved more Mathematics distinctions than the other 97% of schools combined. This study aimed to determine whether there is a link between the socio-economic circumstances of learners and their schools and academic achievement.

Many comparisons have been made over the years to indicate South Africa's low performance rate compared to other countries, especially with Maths and Science as a focus. There has, however, been an increase in South Africa's performance over the years. An increase in school attendance has made a positive impact on the rise in academic scores. Learners who attended school on a regular basis scored significantly higher in Maths and Science compared to learners who were absent from school once a week or more (Nuamah 2019:113). The importance of regular school attendance in uplifting academic performance cannot be overstated.

With all the policies regarding equal opportunities implemented throughout the country's educational system, and the lack of positive results achieved on an academic level, the focus might need to be shifted to other pressing matters. Matters such as the quality of education, proper distribution of funding, proper educational resources, school attendance and motivation to succeed should become a focus area for government in its attempt to improve the educational system and South Africa's achievement levels on a global stage.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this chapter indicates that socio-economic inequality influences educational opportunities through a combination of structural, material, relational and behavioural mechanisms. Poverty and inequality affect access to resources and quality schooling; historical inequalities continue to shape the distribution of educational opportunities; school funding and infrastructure influence the conditions in which teaching and learning occur; and attendance affects the amount of learning time available to learners. However, the literature does not support a simple causal explanation in which socio-economic status automatically determines academic achievement. Rather, the evidence points to an

interaction between socio-economic circumstances and protective or mediating factors within families, schools and communities.

A further gap emerging from the literature is that many studies examine individual aspects of inequality such as poverty, school resources, attendance or historical disadvantage—without necessarily determining which factors have the greatest influence on academic achievement when considered together. This gap is particularly relevant in the South African context, where considerable variation exists between schools and communities. The present study therefore builds on the existing literature by examining multiple socio-economic factors through a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach. The quantitative component identifies relationships between selected socio-economic factors and academic achievement, while the qualitative component provides contextual insight into participants' experiences. The integration of these findings provides a basis for identifying the most significant factors and informing strategies aimed at reducing educational inequality.

2.6. Chapter summary

This chapter provided a brief description of the current socio-economic situation in South Africa in general. As can be seen through the works of Marais (2021), Bhebe (2018), Wittenberg (2017) and more, the socio-economic situation in South Africa is plagued by rife inequalities. The implications of this knowledge for this research project are that one has a better understanding of the socio-economic situations of school learners in general. As noted by various authors (Naicker 2018, Davids 2021 and more), poverty has an inevitable direct influence on the education system. Regular school attendance is a global problem that needs attention. In South Africa in particular, there can be many socio-economic reasons for learners being absent from school on a regular basis, as can be seen above.

The socio-economic situation, the effects of apartheid on the schooling system, the effects of poverty on the schooling system, school attendance and the academic performance of the South African schooling system are all important aspects that need to be understood before a further investigation is launched into the influence of a learner's socio-economic status on his/her academic performance. Once one has a better understanding of the socio-economic system of South Africa as a whole, it will be easier to further understand and investigate the influence

thereof on the education system. The next chapter contains a theoretical framework, where theories regarding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement are investigated.

CHAPTER 3:
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theories regarding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter was a literature review regarding the theory of inequality in South Africa. To investigate the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, it is important to understand the socio-economic inequality in South Africa. Vinz (2022) explains that a theoretical framework sets the foundation for the current research through reviewing existing theories regarding the research topic. This chapter serves as a theoretical framework that investigates theories that are relevant to the socio-economic influence on academic achievement. Throughout this chapter, it will become evident that there is more than one theory regarding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement that guides the research topic. There are many theories regarding social learning and the impact thereof on the development of the child, with specific focus on cognitive development. Theories regarding the influence of a child's social relationships and environment on their cognitive and emotional development are included in this theoretical framework, as it forms the basis from which this research originates. A child's social environment is directly correlated to their socio-economic circumstances, and therefore theories regarding the influence of society cannot be excluded from this study's theoretical foundations. Theories regarding societal inequalities are also included in the theoretical framework, as it is important to understand societal inequalities before the influence of different socio-economic circumstances on learners' academic performance can be studied and understood.

The focus of this chapter is therefore to establish the theoretical lens through which the relationship between socio-economic circumstances and academic achievement is understood. The chapter examines theories that explain the influence of social interaction, individual behaviour and motivation, and the wider ecological environment on learner development and academic outcomes. These perspectives are considered in relation to the research questions and objectives of the study and provide a framework for interpreting the quantitative and qualitative findings.

The numerous theories, as mentioned above, are thus included in this theoretical framework as the socio-economic influence on academic achievement involves different aspects of a child's environment that cannot be studied in isolation. The theories included in this chapter involve different branches of the current research study and are therefore all included as a base on which to build the study. Three historical theories regarding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement will be investigated. These theories include the works of Vygotsky, Bandura and Bronfenbrenner. A brief overview of Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1934) and how it correlates to the current research study is given. Thereafter, a correlation between Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977) and the current research regarding the influence of socio-economic circumstances on academic achievement is made. The last historical theory included in this chapter is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). These three historical theories form the foundation on which the current research is based.

After reviewing historical theories that correlate to the research, theories on the socio-political understanding of inequalities are explained. In this section, the Social Reasoning Developmental Model (SRD Model), as explained by Elenbaas, Rizzo and Killen (2020), will also be included. A brief explanation of how societal changes affect educational changes, and vice versa, will be given. It is important to take note of the effects of society on education and the effects of education on society when conducting research regarding the influence of socio-economics on academic achievement. As this study made use of a mixed-methods research design and a post-positivistic approach, it is important to note the influence of such a research design on the validity of the research. Therefore, a section addressing asymmetrical power through the post-positivist paradigm is included here. The chapter is concluded by analysing the findings of other research studies done on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement.

3.2. Historical theories regarding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement

In this section, a brief overview of three historical theories involving the influence of the child's social environment on his/her academic performance is given. Vygotsky introduced the social development theory in 1934. As Vygotsky's theory underlines the important influence of the child's social interactions on his/her cognitive development (Vygotsky 1978), it is an important theory to discuss regarding the current research project.

The three theories were selected because they provide complementary rather than competing explanations of the socio-economic influence on academic achievement. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory provides a basis for understanding how social interaction, communication and learning opportunities within the learner's immediate social environment influence cognitive development. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory extends this perspective by explaining the interaction between environmental influences, learner behaviour, motivation and self-efficacy. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a broader framework for understanding how these immediate influences are embedded within interconnected family, school, community, socio-economic and societal systems. No single theory adequately captures all these dimensions; therefore, the combination of the three theories is appropriate for a study investigating socio-economic influences on academic achievement across different educational contexts.

3.2.1. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

The first theory to be discussed is Vygotsky's Social Development Theory. Barnett (2019) notes of Social Development Theory that children learn through social interactions with adults and other children. Barnett (2019) believes that the application of Vygotsky's theory will lead to better classroom management, as there will be an increased focus on social learning. Developmental learning is done through interactive learning, interactivity, and communication between learners, teachers and other adults. A child learns through their environment regardless of the interventions of adults. It is therefore important to constantly monitor a child's surroundings. Communication is key in cognitive learning processes.

As this research study focused on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, it is important to note that the child's social environment plays a significant role in what he/she learns. Vygotsky (1934) states that children learn through social interactions with others. Keeping in mind that these social interactions include all human contact with the child, the child's socio-economic circumstances cannot be excluded from this discussion. The child's first social interactions take place at home as well as his/her first introduction to communication processes. As stated above, communication plays an important role in cognitive learning processes, and it is therefore important to understand the influence of a child's social environment at home on his/her cognitive performance and learning processes.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory explains that human development is a socially driven process. Through social interaction with knowledgeable members of society, children acquire belief systems, cultural values and problem-solving strategies. Social interaction plays a significant role in cognitive development. Vygotsky (1934) held that the child's community plays an important role in the process of "meaning-making", arguing that social learning precedes development. Adults play an important role in teaching children the way their culture interprets and interacts in the world. They also play an important role in equipping a child with the knowledge and processes needed to find meaning in objects and experiences. Higher-order mental reasoning is improved through the child's interactions with others. Vygotsky thus believed that cognitive development takes place through social interactions where children learn from experienced adults. The child's social environment plays a significant role in his/her learning processes (McLeod 2023). In this study, it is of high value to note the influence of the child's social interactions on their academic achievements.

As stated above, Vygotsky (1934) considered the child's community to play a significant role in the child's development. As this current research study focused on the child's socio-economic environment and the influence thereof on his/her academic performance, it is important to acknowledge the role that the child's direct community plays in knowledge acquisition and development. It is within the child's social environment and contact with other community members that the child learns about life, culture, academics and more. I argue that if the child is deprived of proper knowledge-filled interactions within his/her direct community, that this will have a negative impact on his/her academic performance as it will lead to a lower standard of cognitive development. Smolucha and Smolucha (2021) state that, according to Vygotsky, pretend play through using object substitutions in a preschool environment leads to the highest levels of abstract thinking and self-regulation. Within the South African context, it is not always possible for parents to afford formal pre-schooling. Hall et al. (2017:36) state that the number of children attending early childhood learning programmes from lower-income families is significantly less than the number of children attending early childhood learning programmes from higher-income families. Pretend- and social play are important aspects that are focused on in formal pre-school programmes. As a significant number of pre-school-aged children in South Africa cannot attend formal schooling programmes due to a lack of funds,

there are many children who are deprived of the opportunity to learn through pretend play and social interaction in preschools. As stated by Vygotsky (1934), these learners from lower socio-economic circumstances who cannot attend formal pre-schooling will be deprived of higher levels of abstract thinking and self-regulation. This study specifically focused on the influence of the child's socio-economic environment on his/her academic performance.

Through the above, it becomes clear that this research is, in some form, based on Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (Vygotsky 1934), as it is my belief as the researcher that the child's social environment, which includes any social interactions as well as social learning opportunities made possible through economic strength, plays a significant role in a child's cognitive and academic development. It is for these reasons that Vygotsky's Social Development Theory is chosen as a theoretical basis for this study. Investigating the influence of the child's social environment, social interactions and learning opportunities will help to answer the research question, as it will provide answers on the influence thereof on the child's academic achievement.

3.2.2. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

The next historical theory to be discussed is Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. Bandura (1977) developed the Social Cognitive Theory to understand human behaviour. He wanted to understand how people acquire certain values and competencies. This theory is focused on three different branches: Personal, behavioural and environmental influences, as well as the interaction between the three. The "*triadic reciprocal causation*" model explains the relationship between these three factors. Personality characteristics such as attitudes, knowledge, expectations, beliefs and goals are described using this model. The second branch, the behavioural branch, refers to self-efficacy, skills and practice. The last branch, the environmental influences, refers to a person's social circumstances. This can be seen in both the immediate- as well as the broader social contexts and influences in a person's life. This theory also states that a person is able to change with regard to personality, behaviour and capabilities through social interactions, as well as through making decisions based on different life events. Focus is also placed on the fact that an individual can self-develop, self-educate and self-regulate by deciding how to act while facing certain challenges (Koutroubas and Deree 2022).

As can be seen through the explanation above, the child's personal, behavioural and environmental circumstances all interact when it comes to the development of the child. It is my belief that a person's attitude and expectations regarding academics play a significant role in the amount of effort that one is willing to put into the work requirements. If a child sees adults that model goal-driven behaviour, the child is more likely to mimic this behaviour and work harder towards achieving his/her own personal goals. The immense influence of social interactions on the personality, behaviour and capabilities of a child is explained above. The socio-economic circumstances of a child's living situation have an influence on the grouping of people that he/she interacts with daily. These social interactions have a direct influence on every aspect of the child's life, as can be seen through the explanation given by Koutroubas and Deree (2022) above. For this study, it is therefore important to acknowledge that Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977) lays a solid foundation for the belief that social interactions influence a child's attitude towards learning.

Motivation plays a large role in Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2020) use Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory to discuss motivation as a process of initiating and maintaining goal-directed activities. Motivation is an internal process that causes an individual to make choices, make bigger efforts, focus on achieving more and persisting. I believe that motivation plays a significant role in a person's academic achievements. If an individual is not motivated to work hard towards achieving certain academic goals, it will not be possible to reach one's optimal academic potential. This study focused on academic achievement as an indication of the influence of the child's socio-economic circumstances. A hungry child or a child who is deprived of basic needs such as proper health care and nutrition will most likely not be motivated to focus on their academic goals, as their focus will be solely on satisfying their basic needs. As Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019) indicate, most children in South Africa are extremely negatively impacted by socio-economic inequalities. It is therefore my belief that basic economic needs, such as proper nutrition, need to be met before a child can be motivated to focus on their academic achievements. The influence of the child's socio-economic environment on his/her academic achievements and goals is thus highlighted through Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. A learner's self-efficacy has a great influence on his/her academic and career decisions as well as performance outcomes. A person's life experiences

have a direct influence on the changes in self-efficacy over time (Stewart et al., 2020). Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977) highlights the fact that your own life experiences influence your self-efficacy. I believe that children who are deprived of economically based opportunities and satisfaction of needs, such as proper formal pre-schooling and balanced nutrition, will struggle to focus on their self-efficacy as their basic needs overshadow educational outcomes.

Social learning constitutes an important part of a child's development. Devi, Khandelwal and Das (2017:722) explain that Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory gives a comprehensive overview of the influence of social learning on human cognitive processes. Bandura's theory explains that behavioural and social competencies, as well as cognitive skills, develop through observational learning. While observing others in specific situations, cognitive constructs are formed which have an influence on an individual's future behaviour. I believe that the adults in a child's direct surroundings have an immensely significant influence on their observational learning. If the adults model behaviour of hard work and being goal-driven, it will influence the child to mimic their behaviour as well. If there is a lack of role models who can be observed to develop skills, the child will be deprived of better opportunities for cognitive skills development. Learning that takes place through self-regulation plays an important role in child development as well as a child's socialisation processes. This leads to a growth in self-efficacy, self-appraisal and behavioural control (Bembenutty, White and DiBenedetto 2016).

A person's environment has a significant impact on his/ her development. According to Nickerson (2023), Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory states that people can influence as well as be influenced by their environment. This theory focuses on social learning through cognitive processes that influence an individual's behaviour. Bandura's theory argues that individuals' learning is influenced by their own interpretations of the outcomes of their actions. This then influences their personal environments. Bandura's theory underlines the fact that not all human behaviour is influenced by trial and error, but that it is also influenced through observing and imitating other humans' behaviour.

Observational learning in one's personal environment has a significant impact on how one views the world around you. Behzadi and Mahmoudi (2018) performed a study in Chenaran in Iran to investigate the influence of observational learning on the reading abilities of high school students. This study was focused on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. Through analysing 260 questionnaires, the results indicated that more than 60% of learners believed that people who read do not hold social respect or position. These learners did not view educated individuals as worthy role models and rather looked up to athletes and artists. The results of this study further indicated that when learners observed healthy reading habits of others, there was an increase in their own desire to read. The study concluded that the behavioural models of others have a significant effect on learners' desire to read and learn.

Unfortunately, South Africa has a significantly high number of illiterate adults. Khuluvhe (2021:9) conducted a study in 2019 to determine the number of illiterate adults in South Africa. The results concluded that over four million adults in South Africa are illiterate. Based on Bandura's theory (1977) and Behzadi and Mahmoudi's conclusions (2018), it is alarming to note the high number of illiterate adults in South Africa who are the role models that South African children look up to and whose behaviour they most likely will mimic. If a child is thus not exposed to adults who model healthy study and reading behaviours, he/she will most likely not have a desire to study and read further. The low literacy rate in South Africa adds to the problem of unemployment (Khumalo and Alhassan 2021), and therefore, the cycle of lower socio-economic circumstances correlated to lower literacy rates is enhanced. It is thus based on this belief that lower socio-economic circumstances influence academic achievement that this study is built. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is therefore also chosen as a theoretical basis for this study, as the influence of the child's environmental factors and personal factors directly influences the child's behaviour. Behaviour, in turn, influences a child's motivation to either succeed academically or not. Social and observational learning is influenced by a child's socio-economic circumstances, and it is thus important to understand the influences of these factors to answer the current research question.

3.2.3. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

In 1979, Bronfenbrenner proposed the Ecological Systems Theory. This theory focuses on child development through the relationships the child encounters in his/her environment. There

are different levels of relationships that all affect a child's development. This ranges from the child's immediate family and closest relationships to the broader community with its customs, laws and values. According to Bronfenbrenner, when studying a child's development, it is necessary to take the child's immediate environment into consideration as well as the influence of the broader environment (Evans 2023). For this study, the influence of the child's immediate environment on his/her academic achievement is studied.

Bronfenbrenner's theory proposes five different systems of relationships that all influence a child's development. The first level of the different systems of relationships comprises the microsystem, the most influential level consisting of the child's family and school relationships. The mesosystem is comprised of the relationships between the role players in the microsystem. This refers to, for example, the child's family's interactions with his/her teachers. The third level is the exosystem. In this level, there are factors that have an influence on the child's life, but it is not comprised of personal, direct relationships with the child. The fourth level, the macrosystem, affects the child as well as others around him/her through cultural elements such as cultural values and beliefs. The last level is the chronosystem, which refers to the child's life stage and the situations he/she must deal with (Renn and Arnold 2003). I believe that the child's socio-economic environment is comprised of all these different levels of relationships. It is therefore important to understand the influence of these different systems of relationships on the child's academic achievement. Elliot and Davis (2020) explain that Bronfenbrenner's theory offers a way of understanding the influences of the different relationships in a child's life on his/her development. These influences range from the child's family through to economic and political structures. This theory helps one understand human life from early childhood through to adulthood, helping one to understand the different interconnections and the influence thereof on a person's life.

The Ecological Systems Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that the child's world can be seen as an ecological system comprised of different systems that all interact with each other and that influence the child's development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), to understand a child and his/her personal challenges, it proves necessary to analyse the different system environments and their interactions, all revolving around the child as the centre of this complex system (Quickfall 2021). According to Elliot and Davis (2020), there are critics who explain

that Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory ignores the influence of human-nature interconnections on a child's development. These critics believe that the theory states that the sociocultural, economic and political influences on a child's life are of greater importance than the influence of the interconnections in the environment. For this study, I also believe that the sociocultural and economic influences play a significant role in the child's academic success. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's theory is of great significance in this research project.

The environment has a great impact on a child's future. Ashraf, Ibrar and Ullah (2022) conducted studies in the city of Peshawar in Pakistan to investigate the increasing number of street children. The study focused on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and the influence of the quality of the children's environment on the fact that they became street children. This was a qualitative study done through interviewing 50 street children in the city of Peshawar. The results of the study indicated that factors such as parenting styles, deceased parents, family relationships, abuse and the attitude of society were all contributing factors leading to the increase in the number of children living on the streets. Ashraf, Ibrar and Ullah (2022) found that exposure to these factors had a profound effect on the personalities and development of these children.

The aforementioned factors that cause a rise in the number of street children living in Peshawar in Pakistan can all be grouped under socio-economic circumstances. The quality of these children's socio-economic environment had a profound effect on their living circumstances and development. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) thus emphasises the influence of a child's socio-economic circumstances on his/her development and achievements. Crawford (2020) explains that Bronfenbrenner conducted research regarding the socialisation effects of different systems in a child's life before developing the Ecological Systems Theory. These research studies investigate the influence of parenting styles on the development of skills and responsibilities regarding leadership roles in children. The investigation also included the different behavioural patterns in adolescents based on their family structures, the quality of schooling based on social class and other factors such as the socio-economic status of families, the educational levels of parents and the differences in family units. Bronfenbrenner (1979) concludes that social factors have the most profound and prominent effect on the development of the human ecology. Bronfenbrenner found that the

family is to be considered as the system with the biggest influence on a child's development. The different levels of social systems all have an influence on a child's development. Bronfenbrenner also included economic factors such as the socio-economic status of a child and his/her family as a variable influencing the different functioning of the various levels of ecological systems in a child's life. Family structure and authority were found to be greatly influenced by the socio-economic status of the family. Bronfenbrenner found that the different social statuses of family, based on culture and race, affected the impacts of authority on a child's life. Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) is thus of central importance in this current research study.

I have included Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a theoretical basis for this study, as all the social and ecological systems and levels and the influence thereof is included. To answer the research question, one needs to understand the significant impact that all of these levels/systems have on the child. The high impact of the micro- and mesosystems in the child's life and development is an important factor to take into consideration when investigating the socio-economic influence on academic achievement.

The three theories address different but interconnected levels of developmental influence. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory primarily addresses the interpersonal level, explaining how social interaction, communication and guidance from more knowledgeable others contribute to cognitive development and learning. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory operates at the interaction between the individual, behaviour and environment, highlighting the role of motivation, self-efficacy, observational learning and personal agency in shaping academic behaviour. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides the broadest level of analysis by situating the learner within interconnected systems, ranging from the immediate family and school environment to wider community, socio-economic and societal structures. Thus, Vygotsky helps explain how social interaction influences learning**,** Bandura helps explain how learners respond to and act within their environments**,** and Bronfenbrenner helps explain how the different environments and structures surrounding the learner interact to shape development and educational opportunities**.**

Within the context of the present study, these different levels provide a complementary explanation of the socio-economic influence on academic achievement. At the interpersonal

level identified by Vygotsky, differences in parental involvement, teacher support, communication and learning opportunities may influence learners' cognitive development. At the individual-environmental level addressed by Bandura, socio-economic circumstances may influence learners' motivation, self-efficacy, aspirations, behaviour and engagement with learning. At the ecological level addressed by Bronfenbrenner, household income, school resources, community conditions, educational policies and broader socio-economic structures may shape the opportunities available to learners. The three perspectives therefore enable the study to move beyond viewing socio-economic status as a single determining variable and instead examine the interconnected pathways through which socio-economic circumstances may influence academic achievement.

The complementary nature of these theories also corresponds with the research questions of the study. Vygotsky's theory supports the investigation of social and relational influences on achievement, Bandura's theory supports the examination of learner motivation, self-efficacy and behaviour, and Bronfenbrenner's theory supports the investigation of the wider socio-economic and educational contexts in which these influences occur. Collectively, the theories therefore provide a framework for identifying and interpreting the socio-economic factors that are most strongly associated with academic achievement and for considering how these factors may be addressed to promote more equal educational opportunities.

The integrated theoretical framework will be applied throughout the analysis and discussion of the empirical findings to interpret the socio-economic influence on academic achievement at complementary levels. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory will be used to interpret findings relating to social interaction, parental involvement, teacher support, communication and learning opportunities, particularly where these factors influence learners' cognitive and academic development. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory will be used to interpret findings concerning learner motivation, self-efficacy, confidence, behaviour, aspirations and engagement**,** and to consider how these are influenced by interactions between the learner and the surrounding environment. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory will be used to interpret findings concerning family circumstances, school environments, community conditions and broader socio-economic and educational structures**,** thereby situating individual learner experiences within the wider systems in which they occur.

The three theories will not be applied as separate explanations of the findings but will be integrated to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the relationships identified in the study.

For example, where the quantitative findings indicate a relationship between household income or parental education and academic achievement, Bronfenbrenner's theory will assist in interpreting the wider environmental conditions associated with these relationships, while Vygotsky's theory will assist in understanding the role of parental and educational support, and Bandura's theory will contribute to interpreting learner motivation, confidence and behavioural responses. Similarly, the qualitative themes relating to resources, home environment, parental support, teacher responses and learner aspirations will be interpreted through the complementary theoretical perspectives. The integrated framework will therefore provide the basis for moving from identifying what relationships exist in the quantitative findings and how participants experience these influences in the qualitative findings to explaining why and through which mechanisms socio-economic circumstances may influence academic achievement**.**

In the discussion of findings, the theoretical framework will consequently be used to compare the empirical evidence with the propositions of the three theories, identify areas of convergence or divergence, and explain how the findings contribute to understanding socio-economic inequality in education. This approach will also support the development of recommendations by identifying the levels at which interventions may be required, including the learner, family, school, community and broader educational system. The integrated theoretical framework thus provides a conceptual link between the research questions, empirical findings, interpretation of results and recommendations of the study.

3.3. Theories on the socio-political understanding of inequalities

Inequalities in education do not gain the amount of attention that they rightfully should. Elenbaas, Rizzo and Killen (2020) state that inequalities when it comes to education and occupation based on factors such as gender, race and socio-economic status are often overlooked. Research has indicated that social inequalities continue to persist since many people do not understand the magnitude of the situation. People are generally not willing to correct these disparities if they harbour negative stereotypes about specific groups of people or if they believe that it will negatively impact their own social group. The result of the minimisation of the situation leads to persistence in inequality, and these affected groups are at higher risk for negative learning, health- and emotional outcomes. For this study, it is important to place a magnifying glass over these inequalities to understand the influence thereof on educational outcomes.

In order to minimise inequality, it is important to know where certain beliefs and stereotypes come from. Studies regarding developmental science have recently indicated that children become aware of such inequalities from a young age and search for reasons for the inequality that they observe in their daily lives. The influence of the micro social contexts such as the families and peer groups of these children, as well as the macro social contexts, which include their schools and media, has also been studied. Potential pathways to minimise social inequalities from a young age have also been a recent focus point of research studies. Developmental science has the potential to highlight factors that motivate adults as well as children to either ignore, intensify, or challenge social inequalities (Elenbaas, Rizzo and Killen 2020).

3.3.1. The Social Reasoning Developmental Model (SRD Model)

The Social Reasoning Developmental Model forms part of current research that explains how children understand social inequalities. This model focuses on decisions about moral and social issues and judgments that are formed, and reasoning regarding these issues and how these processes change as children develop. Children's reasoning about social-conventional, personal concerns and moral concerns (social domain theory) and how intra- and intergroup dynamics influence their decisions (social identity theory) form part of the SRD model. This helps to make sense of how children interpret moral issues in intergroup contexts. According to the SRD model, children's social-cognitive development forms around their own reflections and understanding of their daily interactions. This enables them to form judgments and opinions regarding their own experiences (constructivist theories). The SRD model states that children start reasoning about morality and identity early on, and this continues throughout their development. Children and adolescents start to consider issues such as social inequalities (Elenbaas, Rizzo and Killen 2020). Elenbaas, Rizzo and Killen (2020) state that researchers who make use of the SRD model examine children's awareness regarding social inequalities, explanations found for social inequalities and their behaviour regarding social inequalities. Children become aware of social inequalities at a young age. This develops from an infant noticing that another infant has more toys to adolescents being aware of economic status and racial inequalities. When it comes to finding explanations for social inequalities, children can consider different possible explanations for social inequalities. The idea that it is normal for certain groups (based on gender, race, etc.) to perform better than other groups are formed.

From a young age, children are taught that greater effort leads to greater rewards. This leads to negative stereotypes that raise the belief that people who are less fortunate are in that position due to a lack of hard work and effort. Children thus have limited knowledge regarding the reasons for social inequalities. Children's behaviour regarding social inequalities is based on their reasoning about what causes social inequalities. Experiments done on children between the ages of three and eight years indicated that they believed that hard work and effort should receive greater rewards than less effort. On the other hand, they also believed that unfair inequality based on gender, for example, should be rectified by allocating equal rewards. Most children supported efforts to reduce inequalities when they know that the inequalities are based on bias or discrimination (Elenbaas, Rizzo and Killen 2020).

One of the main goals of education is to raise children to become responsible adults who can contribute towards society. According to Kavadias, Nohemi Jocabeth and Hemmerechts (2020), educational systems teach children to become active contributors to society. Schools have the responsibility to teach children how to be active citizens in a social world. Unbalanced and unequal distribution of resources, as well as contextual settings, are at the centre of social inequalities. Research indicates that patterns formed through social inequality have an influence on the outcomes of education. Inequalities also lead to negative outcomes regarding civic engagement. These inequalities are already present at a secondary school age level. Not all learners engage in addressing issues of public concern based on social inequalities. This pattern continues into adulthood where disadvantaged groups tend to not voice their concerns regarding community issues. This study aims to minimise bias and stereotypes regarding social inequality by investigating which socio-economic circumstances influence academic achievement the most.

3.4. Societal changes affect educational changes and vice versa

Society and education cannot be parsed. Society and education are interconnected because existing social structures and inequalities are reflected in educational systems. It simultaneously shapes social development, economic opportunities and cultural values (OECD 2023; Tikly 2024). According to StudyCorgi (2023), the educational system undergoes change

and transformation as social change occurs. The world needs an educational system that promotes equality and social justice. The political ideology of a country greatly influences the educational system that is followed. The curriculum of a country's educational system is based on what is viewed as important demands of society. The content of subjects is thus based on societal demand. Social change not only impacts what is taught in schools, but also how teaching is done. Teachers' approaches towards teaching and their modes of instruction are influenced by societal changes. Teaching approaches are changed according to the changing patterns of life in society. The content being taught via the curriculum has increased dramatically over the years to meet the needs of social demands. This directly affects learners who must struggle to navigate the increase in curriculum content. Bhat (2016:2) refers to the term "social change" as the changes that occur regarding human interactions and interrelations. It is thus, in layman's terms, referred to as a change in the system of social relationships. Social changes occur through changes in values, norms, symbols and cultural products in a society. Societal changes are interlinked to cultural changes.

Changes in society can produce an urge for better education. The changes in education ought to be connected to the changes in society (Panday 2020). I argue that it is therefore inevitable that changes in society are likely to affect changes in the educational system. Society and education cannot be separated from one another. I further argue that the educational system has just as great an influence on society. Panday (2020) indicates that there is a strong correlation between social change and education. Social change is not possible without changes in education. Societal reform is thus not possible without proper education. It is thus important that education be utilised to bring about effective reforms in societal changes. A desire for progress is formed through proper education. Through quality education, many disadvantaged children from lower socio-economic statuses have been able to obtain professions that have improved their socio-economic standings. Mass poverty is often caused by illiteracy, where education is the tool to bring about change in this regard.

There are too many children around the world who do not receive formal schooling. According to Ainscow (2020), education systems around the world all struggle with the challenge of including all children in schools. In poorer countries, many children are simply not able to attend schools due to their economic circumstances. In wealthier countries, on the other hand, many children leave school before obtaining a proper qualification. This has led to an increased

interest in providing education that is more inclusive and equitable. Hall (2023) explains that one of the biggest barriers to lower school attendance in South Africa is the cost of schooling and financial constraints. These financial constraints and the fact that people cannot afford going to school can be attributed to 13% of children in South Africa who do not attend any formal schooling.

Over the last three decades, there has been an increase in international efforts to make quality basic education available to everyone. Efforts were made to consider the needs of poor and socio-economically disadvantaged children, where inclusive education became a major focus point around the world (Ainscow 2020). Inclusive education aims at eliminating factors that hinder children from attending school. I argue that it should be one of the most important focus points in society to provide quality education to all children, regardless of their socio-economic circumstances.

I further contend that technological advances and improvements play a significant role in the way that society and education adapt and change. The use of social media and social networks in modern society has greatly influenced student communities, as this has become an ever-increasing part of daily life. Social media has a great influence on changes in social norms and values in society. It has changed the way in which people interact and communicate, as well as the learning processes at educational institutions (Abbas et al. 2019). Epstein (1994) emphasises the fact that schools, families and communities all have the responsibility to work together to support children's educational needs, where it stands to reason that the families and communities of learners greatly influence their education. The strong correlation between society and education is emphasised through Epstein's work. Education cannot be seen in isolation from society and vice versa.

3.5. Addressing asymmetrical power through post-positivistic paradigm

There are different research paradigms that provide the structures to follow during the research process. Farrow et al. (2020) explain that positivistic approaches to research are based on facts and follow the tenet that the only valuable knowledge to gain from the world should be empirical and scientific. The positivistic approach aims to overcome any bias from the

researcher through quantitative data collection methods. The post-positivistic approach understands truth to be objective, but that our own values and experiences cause our experiences of these truths to be imperfect. Post-positivist researchers are more inclined to use mixed-methods research designs based on both quantitative and qualitative data.

Researchers have realised that positivism has limitations when it comes to the social sciences, where positivism is based on observable and analytical facts. Educational researchers then created a post-positivist approach that combines positivism with interpretivism. With post-positivism, it is believed that there is no absolute truth to be found. It does not aim to disprove the scientific elements in research but makes use of multiple methods to draw objective conclusions (Panhwar, Ansari and Shah 2017:253). This research project made use of a mixed-methods approach where both qualitative as well as quantitative research methods were deployed to gain a broader perspective about the hypothesis in question. By using a post-positivist approach, any bias regarding the research question is cancelled due to the scientific data as represented in the quantitative section of the research.

3.6. Existing research done on the socio-economic influence on academic achievement

Numerous studies have been done regarding the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement. Lam (2014) notes that there are two major findings from research studies regarding the influence of socio-economic status on academic achievement. The first finding is that children who come from families who are on the poverty line or below the poverty line achieve significantly less success during standardised tests. The second finding is that the socio-economic status of children's families has the biggest influence during their early and middle childhood years. The influence of socio-economic status seems to become less during adolescence. This current research study aimed specifically at investigating the socio-economic influence on academic achievement of children from the Senior (Grade 7 to 9) and FET (Grade 10 to 12) phases in schools. The results of this study aim to prove that socio-economic status still has an influence during later phases of development.

Some researchers believe that socio-economic status influences IQ levels. According to Wiggins (2012), children from higher socio-economic status homes, on average, perform better

than children from lower socio-economic status homes, where greater wealth is associated with a higher IQ. Research also indicates that children from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to perform better in Mathematics and reading. It is important to note that these findings are based on correlations and not on proven facts. As this current research study made use of a mixed-methods research approach, the aim was to determine whether a correlation between socio-economic status and academic performance could indeed be proven through statistical data as well as through qualitative findings.

Studies conducted with university students also investigated the influence of socio-economics on academic achievement. Gobena (2018) made use of a descriptive survey research design to evaluate the influence of socio-economics on academic achievement among 172 students from the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences faculties at Haramaya University in Eastern Ethiopia. The results indicated that students who came from homes where family members were well educated received greater encouragement and guidance about their studies. Students who came from families who were not highly educated did not receive any contribution from their families towards their own academic achievement. The level of family education, specifically non-educated families, contributed to 40,96% of students' academic achievement levels. As South Africa is faced with high levels of adult illiteracy, the influence of non-educated family structures on the academic performance of participating learners is notable.

There has always been a stark difference in the academic performance of children from different socio-economic backgrounds (Chandra and Azimuddin 2013). Chandra and Azimuddin (2013) conducted research among students from Uttar Pradesh in India and found that academic performance is a result of social status. They state that there is a definite correlation between socio-economic status levels and academic achievement. Children from lower socio-economic circumstances tend to perform at lower academic levels than do children from higher socio-economic circumstances. Research done among 538 students from thirteen different junior secondary schools in Dessie Town in Ethiopia indicates that there is a strong correlation between the socio-economic status of parents, with specific focus on their own education level and occupational status, and the academic performance of their children. Children from better socio-economic status homes scored better during regional examinations than their counterparts (Eshetu 2015). The current research study was a large-scale study which aimed to collect data from a large sample of South African learners, where the results indicated

whether the same findings are true in a South African context as in Ethiopia. Finch and Finch (2022) indicate that students from higher socio-economic status families tend to exhibit higher academic performance, while schools with lower family income averages tend to have lower achievement scores during tests. As a variety of different socio-economic quintile schools formed part of this research project, one of the aims was to verify whether there is a correlation between family income in schools and academic performance.

3.7. Chapter summary

This chapter focused on establishing a theoretical framework for understanding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement by examining key theories related to child development, social learning, and inequality. The main issues covered included an in-depth discussion of foundational theories such as Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, as well as the socio-political understanding of inequalities through the Social Reasoning Developmental (SRD) Model, the relationship between societal and educational change, and the use of a post-positivistic research paradigm. These issues were addressed through the analysis and integration of existing theoretical perspectives and research findings to demonstrate how a child's social environment, including socio-economic conditions, shapes cognitive development, motivation, and academic outcomes. As a result of this chapter, it is now clearly understood that academic achievement cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader social, economic, and environmental contexts in which learners are situated, and that multiple interconnected systems influence development. The chapter further establishes that socio-economic factors play a significant role not only in shaping learning opportunities but also in influencing learners' attitudes, behaviours, and motivation, thereby providing a strong theoretical foundation for the study and highlighting the complexity of the relationship between socio-economic status and academic performance.

When reviewing historical theories such as the Social Development Theory of Vygotsky, the Social Cognitive Theory of Albert Bandura and the Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner, it becomes clear that a child's social environment plays an important role in how he/she views academics, as well as how motivated he/she will be to work hard towards achieving certain goals. This research study focused on a child's socio-economic

circumstances and the influence thereof on his/her academic achievements. The key role players in a child's social environment cannot be excluded from the study, and these three historical theories therefore underline the importance of the child's social environment when it comes to academic achievement.

One cannot investigate socio-economic differences without taking note of certain biases and preconceptions formed around inequalities. As stated through the social reasoning developmental model (SRD model) above, children become aware of social inequalities early on in their lives. Through this research study, I strive to minimise bias surrounding socio-economic status and investigate which socio-economic factors influence academic achievement the most. Through the above, it becomes clear that society has an immense influence on the model of education taught in schools, as well as the mode of teaching that takes place. Education has an influence on how society is transformed and changed. Through the brief explanations of using a post-positivist research approach given above, making use of a mixed-methods research design was the best approach for this current research. It minimises researcher bias through analysing both qualitative and quantitative data.

The overview of existing research done regarding the topic strengthens the hypothesis that socio-economic circumstances do in fact come to bear upon learners' academic achievements. This research study aims not only to verify these existing results, but also to investigate which socio-economic factors play the biggest role in the outcomes of academic achievements in learners from different socio-economic circumstances. The next chapter includes a comprehensive explanation of the research methodology and data collection methods used in the study.

CHAPTER 4:

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter provided a theoretical framework for the present study. This chapter will focus on the research design and methodology followed. This includes an explanation of the methodological and epistemological considerations. A brief analysis of the different research

paradigms are given as well as an explanation for the chosen paradigm wherein this current research project falls. The research design will be explained in detail by giving a detailed description of the sampling methods used, the rationale for the school sampling as well as the participants of the study. The data collection methods will be explained and issues such as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability will be explored. The chapter will be concluded by explaining the importance of obtaining ethical clearance and discussing some limitations of the present study.

In this chapter, particular focus is placed on the mixed method research design. The problem is investigated through using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. With the qualitative approach, I made use of interviews and open-ended questions in questionnaires. With the quantitative approach, I made use of closed-ended questions in the questionnaires which focused primarily on academic marks, number of years of schooling, etc. The focus of this investigation is on exploring the socio-economic influence on learners' academic achievements.

As described in Chapter 1, a mixed method approach is used to investigate participants' opinions and beliefs regarding their own experiences of the socio-economic divide and the influence thereof on their academic achievement. Apart from participants' beliefs and opinions, it is important to gather the statistical data regarding academic achievements in order to corroborate the findings. Consequently, the research design and methodology is based around a mixed method approach, where qualitative and quantitative research methods are combined into one study in order to ensure validity of the findings (McBride, MacMillan, George and Steiner 2019).

4.2. Methodological and Epistemological considerations

In this chapter, I will present the epistemological perspective and its relationship to the research paradigm. Sol and Heng (2022) describe epistemology as a branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge, and it deals with the nature of our knowledge. There are different key epistemological approaches that will be explained further in the next section. These include positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism. The pragmatic view of the

researcher directly influences the direction and research paradigm to be followed. The research paradigm creates the foundation for the study's research methodologies. It can be described as the method or model used when conducting research. The research paradigm provides a guideline for the research methods that are to be used in a specific study, that ensures that the research study is undertaken reasonably and legitimately (Abbadia 2022). According to Kahtri (2023:1), a research paradigm answers ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions. In the following sections, I will describe how I used ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies to answer the research question.

Ontology specifies all the different concepts that are involved, the relationships between these concepts and the properties and conditions that exist (Stancin, Poscic and Jaksic 2020). Epistemology is referred to as the study of knowledge and answers the question: "How do we know what we know?" (Dew Jr. and Foreman 2020:1). According to Kumari et al. (2023:9), research methodology can be defined as a systematic way to find solutions to a problem by using various procedures, steps, schemes, and algorithms. All the methods used during the research study can be defined as research methodology. These can include observations, experiments, statistical approaches, etc. There is a significant relationship between the three (ontology, epistemology and methodology), where I explain my use of the theories of reality, the theories of knowledge, and knowledge acquisition, as well as different methodological approaches to explain the influence that the socio-economic circumstances of learners have on their academic achievement. What follows is a brief explanation of different research paradigms, along with the post-positivist paradigm of the research.

4.2.1. A brief analysis of the different research paradigms

A research paradigm refers to the assumptions and beliefs that provide the structure used when doing research. This includes a philosophical framework which includes beliefs, biases and ideas that guide the research process. The research paradigm helps to determine the way the research will be approached and conducted (Ulz, 2023). In this section, I provide a brief explanation of the following research paradigms: positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and post-positivism.

4.2.1.1. Positivism

Studies that are aligned with the positivism research paradigm use quantitative approaches to find explanatory associations and causal relationships to answer research questions. Typically, large sample sizes are used where findings can be replicated, and generalised inferences can be made. Controlled experimentation is a favoured method in a positivistic approach (Park, Konge and Artino 2020). With a positivistic approach, the quest for knowledge must be objective and value-free. The researcher and the reality that is being observed are independent of each other. With positivism, reality consists of discrete events that are experienced through the human senses (Karupiah 2022). According to Park, Konge and Artino (2019), positivism is aligned with the "hypothetico-deductive" model of science. It builds on verifying a hypothesis by using results from experiments on a large scale. Quantitative approaches are used to identify explanatory associations and causal relationships which explain the results of the experiments. As explained in Chapter 3 (Section 3.5), there are limitations to a positivistic approach when it comes to the social sciences. As positivism focuses on observable and analytical facts through quantitative approaches, it was deemed not to be the most suitable approach for this current research project.

4.2.1.2. Interpretivism

Scholars began disputing the validity of positivistic methodologies in the social sciences in the 1980s. As a critique towards a positivistic approach where objectivity, generalisation and linear processes of research prove to be the focus, interpretive scholars realised the importance of their own knowledge production and the validity thereof (Scauso 2020). Interpretivism is a research approach that focuses on understanding the experiences of individuals within a social context as well as the subjective meanings given by individuals. Interpretivists are of the view that the beliefs and motivations of individuals within a social context play an essential part in decoding the data collected regarding a specific phenomenon. Interpretivists make use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. They do, however, believe that there is no single right path towards knowledge and believe that there is not just one methodology that will lead to the truth regarding a specific phenomenon (Nickerson 2022). Where positivists believe that there is an objective reality independent of the viewer, interpretivists believe that people's understanding and knowledge of reality is a social construction. They thus believe that there cannot be an objective reality or truth in a social world (Ali, Shah and Shah 2021). As an interpretivist approach may be viewed as a suitable approach for this research project,

being of a social sciences nature, the approach is not enough to objectively answer the research question. As both scientific data and individual experiences are needed to gain a proper understanding of the current research phenomena, a different approach combining the two approaches (Positivism and Interpretivism) was needed. Therefore, a further look at critical theory and a post-positivist approach will be given.

4.2.1.3. Critical Theory

Critical theory is oriented towards critiquing and changing society as it focuses on the connection between politics, values, and knowledge to determine what constitutes legitimate scientific knowledge. Issues such as exploitation and asymmetrical power relations are main focuses of a critical theory paradigm (Fui, Khin and Ying 2011). Critical theory not only describes social reality, but it also provides insight into the forces operating within society in a way that can guide the researcher towards practical action that can bring about change (Celikates and Flynn 2023). Critical theory challenges the status quo and strives towards a balanced and democratic society, where human beings are emancipated from the circumstances that "enslave" them (Asghar 2013). Even though the critical theory paradigm closely relates to the current research project as it concerns socio-economic oppression and inequality, it was deemed not to be the correct paradigm for this project. The current research project was not mainly focused on the politics regarding socio-economic inequality, but rather on the result of socio-economic circumstances related to learners' academic achievements.

4.2.1.4. Post-positivism

The post-positivism research paradigm was developed out of a need that educational researchers identified when it comes to research in the field of social sciences. These researchers realised that they needed to combine a positivistic approach with an Interpretivist approach to fulfil the identified need. It is out of this need that post-positivism was created. Multi-methods are used to be able to make objective conclusions about the research (Panhwar, Ansari and Shah 2017:253). A post-positivist approach combines elements of reductionism, objectivism and determinism. This means that this research paradigm can be seen as pragmatic, as it focuses on practical considerations and not only on theoretical considerations (Prayag

2023). This current research project focuses on the practical implications of socio-economic circumstances on academic achievement and therefore a more pragmatic research paradigm is needed.

The post-positivism approach made a shift from the rigid quest for absolute truths towards an emphasis on interactive dialogue and continuous learning. Within a post-positivist approach, qualitative and quantitative research methods are integrated to be able to address complex social issues more effectively (Musa and Aldiabat 2024). As this current research project made use of a mixed-method research approach which combines qualitative and quantitative methods, the post-positivistic paradigm was the most suitable paradigm within which to be positioned. Gamlin and McIntyre (2018) explain that mixed-method designs are well suited within a post-positivist epistemological framework. Within a post-positivist paradigm, researchers do not always find ways to solve the problems that they investigate. Research can thus be about problem setting, and not merely about problem-solving. Research can thus have an open-ended character. Within this paradigm, the researcher also realises that life and experiences are complex and not always straightforward. Truth is constructed through dialogue and knowledge gained from different members of the community (Ryan 2006). This current research project investigated the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, which is a complex social phenomenon. It is not a question that merely has one answer or solution. This research can thus be labelled as open-ended, which makes the post-positivist paradigm ideally suited to the project. In the next section, I will elaborate on the research design for the current research study.

4.3. The research design

The research design forms the blueprint for your data collection, data measurement and the interpretation of the data. It involves the strategy and analytical approach that the researcher chooses to integrate the different components of the study to ensure that the research problem / question will be fully investigated (De Vaus, 2001). McCombes (2021) explains that a research design involves the strategies used to answer a research question. When creating a research design, it is necessary to determine the research objectives and approach. The sampling methods, data collection methods, procedures to collect data and data analysis methods all form part of the research design. A good research design addresses all the

following: a well-defined research question, a data collection plan, a data analysis method and a results interpretation method (Singh 2023).

The researcher acknowledges that her professional background, experiences and position within the South African education system influence the perspective from which this study was conceptualised and interpreted. As an educator with experience across different socio-economic and educational contexts, including mainstream and LSEN education, the researcher has observed differences in educational resources, opportunities and learner experiences. These experiences contributed to the identification of the research problem and the decision to investigate the socio-economic influence on academic achievement. However, the researcher's professional experience was recognised as a potential source of both insight and bias. The researcher therefore distinguished between professional observations that motivated the study and the empirical evidence generated through the research process. Reflexivity was maintained by grounding interpretations in the collected quantitative and qualitative data, considering the perspectives of learners, parents and educators, and comparing findings across different socio-economic and educational contexts. The researcher's positionality was therefore treated not as something that could be completely removed from the research process, but as a perspective that required continual critical reflection.

The researcher further acknowledges that research on socio-economic inequality in South Africa takes place within a society shaped by colonialism, apartheid and continuing structural inequalities. A decolonial perspective requires the researcher to remain critically aware of how knowledge is produced, whose experiences are represented and how dominant assumptions may influence the interpretation of educational inequality. In this study, this required attention to the voices and experiences of learners, parents and educators from diverse socio-economic and educational contexts rather than interpreting inequality solely through externally developed concepts or deficit-based assumptions. The inclusion of participants from previously disadvantaged, township, former Model C, LSEN and private schools provided opportunities for different educational experiences to inform the empirical findings. The researcher therefore sought to approach participants as knowledgeable contributors to the understanding of their own educational circumstances and to interpret their experiences within the historical and socio-economic context of South African education.

4.3.1. The mixed method research approach

For this research project, I chose a mixed-method research approach. It is the approach that I believe to be best suited to answer my research question / hypothesis. The mixed-method research approach emerged in response to limitations experienced with using solely one method of research, namely either qualitative or quantitative (Doyle, Brady and Byrne 2009). Mixed method research has become increasingly popular as it combines the contextual views of qualitative research with the generalisations of large-scale quantitative research. Mixed method designs are used to produce a credible data source. By employing a mixed method design, one core issue is investigated through the collection, analysis and interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data within one study (McBride, MacMillan, George and Steiner 2019). According to Radhakrishnan (2014), there are many advantages to using a mixed-methods research approach, as the different designs, qualitative and quantitative, complement each other and enhance theoretical insights and validity. Mixed-method research approaches are often used in social sciences, behavioural sciences, health sciences, and especially in complex situational or societal research (George, 2022), which makes it the ideal approach for the current research project. Using mixed methods can help to strengthen the quantitative data findings by adding "meat to the bones" through qualitative data that corroborates the findings. When the qualitative and quantitative data converge, the validity of findings and conclusions is strengthened through this process of triangulation (George, 2022). According to Thierbach, Hergesell and Baur (2020), new insights can be provided when qualitative and quantitative data analysis strategies are integrated and complement each other. For a mixed methods design to effectively integrate qualitative and quantitative research, researchers ought to possess a certain skill set to bring the two methods together in the most appropriate way. It is important that researchers pay special attention to the selection of the best approach to designing and implementing quantitative and qualitative information and formulating the findings in a way that offers greater insights into the findings and ensures validity of its applicability (Wasti et al. 2022).

The use of mixed methods was considered appropriate because the research question concerns both the measurable relationships between socio-economic circumstances and academic achievement and the experiences through which these circumstances may influence learners. A quantitative approach alone could identify patterns and relationships between variables but would provide limited insight into how learners, parents and teachers experience these influences. Conversely, a qualitative approach could provide detailed contextual explanations but would not provide the same opportunity to identify measurable patterns across the selected

socio-economic variables. The combination of the two approaches therefore provides complementary forms of evidence rather than simply increasing the quantity of data.

The mixed methods approach also presents methodological challenges. Combining quantitative and qualitative evidence requires careful attention to the compatibility of the research questions, instruments, analysis procedures and interpretation of findings. The two forms of evidence should therefore not be treated as separate studies but should be integrated meaningfully to determine areas of convergence, divergence and complementarity (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2007; Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). Fetters, Curry and Creswell (2013) further emphasise that integration is central to mixed-methods research because the value of the design lies in combining the evidence to produce insights that could not be obtained as effectively through either approach alone. In the present study, the quantitative findings provide evidence of relationships between socio-economic factors and academic achievement, while the qualitative findings provide contextual explanations of participants' experiences. The subsequent comparison and integration of these findings therefore support a more comprehensive interpretation of the socio-economic influences on academic achievement.

The mixed-methods design was consequently appropriate for the present study because the phenomenon under investigation is multidimensional and cannot adequately be understood through numerical relationships or individual experiences alone. The design also corresponds with the research questions: the quantitative component addresses the identification of significant relationships, the qualitative component explores the experiences and mechanisms underlying these relationships, and the integration of both forms of evidence contributes to the development of recommendations for reducing educational inequality.

Taherdoost (2022) explains that a mixed-methods approach employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. By combining both approaches, researchers can address complex research circumstances in different fields of research. Taherdoost (2022) provides an explanation of different mixed-method design types. There is the sequential design type, which involves the following sub-categories: sequential explanatory, sequential exploratory and sequential transformative types. The concurrent design type involves the following sub-categories: concurrent triangulation, concurrent embedded and concurrent transformative types. A brief explanation of the two main mixed method design types and their sub-categories is to follow:

4.3.1.1. Sequential design type

According to Taherdoost (2022:59-61), the sequential design type involves the following sub-categories: sequential explanatory, where quantitative data is collected and analysed first. Then, during the second phase, qualitative data is collected and analysed. The quantitative data outweighs the qualitative data during the data analysis phase. The sequential explanatory design was particularly appropriate for this study because the quantitative phase provided an initial indication of the relationships between socio-economic factors and academic achievement, after which the qualitative phase enabled these relationships to be explored in greater depth. The qualitative findings could therefore provide contextual explanations for patterns identified in the quantitative data. This sequencing was important for the present study because socio-economic influence is not only measurable through variables such as household income, parental education and academic performance, but is also experienced through family, school and community circumstances. The design consequently enabled the study to move from identifying relationships to developing a deeper understanding of the processes and experiences underlying those relationships (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018; Ivankova, Creswell and Stick 2006).

Sequential exploratory, where the qualitative data is collected and analysed first. Quantitative data is then collected and analysed based on the results of the qualitative data. The quantitative data is used to support the qualitative data. Sequential transformative involves a two-phased process with a theoretical lens. The qualitative and quantitative data are used to support the theoretical issues, and the weighting can be distributed between the two as the researcher chooses.

4.3.1.2. Concurrent design type

Taherdoost (2022:61-62) divides the concurrent design type into the following sub-categories: concurrent triangulation, where data from qualitative and quantitative methods are gathered concurrently. The databases are then examined to find convergences, differences, etc. Equal weight is given to qualitative and quantitative data, respectively. Concurrent embedded, where the qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously during the first phase. A theoretical perspective is used to inform this first phase. During the second phase, the mixing process, the data are compared with each other. Concurrent transformative, where qualitative and quantitative data are collected concurrently, using a particular theoretical perspective. This

perspective is based on ideologies and overshadows the aim of the research questions, as well as different methodologies during the research.

4.3.2. Sampling

There are various sampling methods that a researcher can make use of depending on the type of research and type of sample required. Mukherjee (2019) describes random sampling as a technique where the sample is randomly selected from the population without any specific conditions. Systematic sampling is a widely used method of random sampling where the total population is divided by the sample size, which gives a figure that becomes the sampling interval for selection. This type of sampling works best when the population group is homogeneous and shares the same characteristics. According to Radhakrishnan (2014), the following main categories of sampling techniques are used in Quantitative research designs: non-probability sampling and probability sampling. Each has its own sub-categories that will be explained in depth below. The following sampling techniques are commonly used in Qualitative research designs: convenience sampling, snowball sampling, purposive sampling and theoretical sampling.

The study employed a cluster sampling strategy within the mixed-methods design. Schools were used as the primary clusters and were selected to represent different socio-economic and educational contexts. This strategy was appropriate because the study aimed to investigate the socio-economic influence on academic achievement across diverse schooling contexts rather than within a single type of school.

The selection of research sites was guided by the need to include variation in socio-economic circumstances and educational settings. The study therefore included mainstream and special educational needs schools, as well as government and private schools, representing lower-, middle- and higher socio-economic contexts. The inclusion of these different contexts enabled the study to consider differences in educational opportunities, resources and experiences associated with socio-economic circumstances.

4.3.2.1. Non-probability sampling

This type of sampling technique is less likely to produce accurate samples than probability sampling (Radhakrishnan 2014). The following sub-categories fall under non-probability sampling:

Convenience sampling

This type of sampling, as the name suggests, entails using the most conveniently available group of people as study participants; another name for this type of sampling is "accidental sampling" (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Snowball sampling

Snowball sampling can also be referred to as "network sampling" or "chain sampling". The researcher starts with a group of participants who then identify and refer other people who meet the eligibility criteria to participate further in the study (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Quota sampling

The researcher starts by identifying population strata and then determines how many participants to select from each stratum (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Purposive sampling

Another name for this type of sampling is called "judgmental sampling". The researcher uses his/her knowledge about the population to hand-pick sample members (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Within the selected school clusters, participants were drawn from the three stakeholder groups most directly connected to the educational process, namely learners, parents and educators. These participant groups were included in both components of the mixed-methods study to obtain quantitative evidence of relationships between socio-economic factors and academic

achievement and qualitative insight into how these factors were experienced within the home and school environments.

4.3.2.2. Probability sampling (Random sampling)

This type of sampling involves random selection of elements from a population group (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Simple random sampling

This type of sampling involves the random selection of elements from a sampling frame that considers all the elements (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Stratified random sampling

The population is first divided into subgroups that have the same characteristics. From there, elements are selected at random (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Cluster sampling

Another name for this type of sampling is "multistage sampling". There is a successive selection of samples starting from a larger sample to smaller units by using simple random or stratified random methods (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Systemic sampling

Participants are selected at a specified interval on a list. The population size is divided into a desired sample size. The researcher then decides on a specific interval which forms the standard distance between the selected elements (Radhakrishnan 2014).

The sampling strategy therefore supported the sequential explanatory mixed-methods design by providing participants from comparable educational contexts for both components of the study. The quantitative component provided evidence of patterns and relationships between

socio-economic factors and academic achievement, while the qualitative component provided contextual explanations of participants' experiences and perceptions. The two components could consequently be integrated during the interpretation of the findings.

4.3.2.3. Sampling techniques used in qualitative research

Qualitative researchers look at the theoretical demands of the study, which then helps them to select participants with certain types of experience needed for the study (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Convenience sampling

Convenience sampling in qualitative research is often referred to as "voluntary sampling". This type of sampling technique is used when participants must come forward and identify themselves (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Snowball sampling

Researchers ask initial participants to refer other study participants (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Purposive sampling

With this type of sampling, participants are hand-picked on purpose because their participation will be beneficial to the study (Radhakrishnan 2014).

Theoretical sampling

Data is collected, coded and analysed, and then the researcher decides what data to collect next. The researcher then finds the data and participants to develop his/her theory as it emerges throughout the process (Radhakrishnan 2014).

For this study, purposive sampling was chosen as the best technique to use. After evaluating all of the different sampling techniques, I chose purposive sampling as it best served the purpose of this study. I will give a detailed explanation of purposive sampling in the section below and explain how I incorporated it into the current research project.

4.3.2.4. Purposive sampling

For this research project, I chose purposive sampling as the favoured technique to use. It is not always possible to research the entire population. According to Campbell et al. (2020), purposive sampling is chosen as it better matches the sample with the aims and objectives of the research project. It further improves the trustworthiness of the data and results. Thomas (2022:4-5) explains that there are numerous advantages to using purposive sampling. Using purposive sampling enables the researcher to make planning more customisable, as various tactics can be used as needed to achieve the intended outcome. It provides researchers with enough time to make judgments based on the evidence that they have gathered. It is also possible to break purposive sampling up into several stages, which creates a bigger pool of non-probability sampling possibilities to choose from. As it is a very versatile sampling technique, it enables researchers to save time and expenses while gathering data. It is possible to achieve a high level of variance, which provides more information on the subject at hand. Purposive sampling is also used when the researcher believes that the best data and results can be produced by seeking out the best cases for the study. Cases that are “information rich” are sought out to produce the best results (Mweshi and Sakyi 2020:190).

There are different sampling technique sub-categories to purposive sampling, as described by Thomas (2022:4). The first is homogeneous sampling, where the chosen participants have components with the same traits or properties. Homogeneous sampling is typically used where the research topic focuses on specific features of a particular population. Typical case sampling is where the researcher compares the findings of related studies to utilise the information to choose a sample. Total population sampling is where the entire population is included in the sample for a set of characteristics. For this study, homogeneous purposive sampling was chosen as specific schools from a variety of suburbs in the Gauteng Province were chosen to participate. Care and consideration were taken in choosing the schools to participate in the study.

4.3.3. Rationale for school sampling

As mentioned above, schools from specific socio-economic groupings were chosen to participate in this study. To obtain the most accurate results regarding the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, it was important to include schools from different socio-economic circumstances. Different schools from the Gauteng Province were chosen to participate in this study based on the following criteria:

i. Mainstream schools (primary as well as high schools) from affluent suburbs with learners from higher socio-economic status circumstances.
ii. Mainstream schools (primary as well as high schools) from middle to lower socio-economic status circumstances.
iii. Mainstream schools (primary as well as high schools) from lower socio-economic status circumstances.
iv. LSEN (Learners with special educational needs) schools with mixed socio-economic status circumstances.

I believe that, by including schools with different socio-economic status circumstances, a more accurate understanding of the influence of socio-economics on academic achievement could be achieved. The participating schools were purposefully chosen so that a greater variety of academic achievements, socio-economic circumstances and cultural groups were included in the study. This allowed for more accurate results, including all spheres of socio-economics.

4.3.4. Participants of the study

For this study, I chose participants who would be able to supply the most information regarding the differences in socio-economic influences on their schooling. Angeloska Galevska (2023:157) states that the participant sample should be large enough so that the results can be generalised to a high degree to the rest of the population. Therefore, I chose to include as many participants as possible from the different schools as mentioned in section 4.3.3.

The sample for this study consisted of the following participants:

i. Parents, learners and teachers from Grade 7 to 12 from all the different schools who had access to the Internet and who were able to complete the Google Forms questionnaires.
ii. Parents, learners and teachers from Grade 7 to 12 from schools who did not have access to the Internet and who completed the questionnaires on paper with the same questions that were included in the Google Forms questionnaires.
iii. The teachers from the participating schools who had access to statistics regarding academic marks to participate in interviews and complete questionnaires.
iv. Willing parents, learners and teachers from the participating schools to participate in interviews.

The parents, learners and teachers from the different participating schools all represented a broad spectrum of socio-economic circumstances. In particular, the research sample included participants from previously disadvantaged schools, disadvantaged township schools, former model-C schools, LSEN schools and private schools. Saunders and Townsend (2018) explain that the number of participants is dependent upon the purpose of the research. For this research, as many participants as possible from the participating schools were chosen. All the participants, i.e., parents, learners and teachers, were chosen for a specific purpose. All the participants were directly involved in the home and/or academic life of the learners. This means that they were all knowledgeable regarding the participating learners' socio-economic circumstances as well as their academic achievements. I chose them as each participant plays a role in the life of the learners and hence, they would possess the necessary information needed in order to complete the investigation.

4.3.5. Data collection methods

It is important to choose the correct data collection methods for a study as the information collected is reliant upon the methodology and analytical approach that the researcher applies (Paradis et al. 2016). Various research instruments were used in this mixed-methods study, such as Google Forms questionnaires, physical hard-copy questionnaires and interviews. By using a variety of data collection methods, I was able to gain a broader understanding of the research question. Using a variety of data collection methods also enabled me to make use of a mixed-method approach, as qualitative as well as quantitative questions and measures could be used in the data collection methods. Since data for this study was collected in more than

one way, it was necessary to examine the concept of triangulation as it plays an important role in this research study.

4.3.5.1. Triangulation

Triangulation was employed during this study to validate the research findings. Bans-Akutey and Tiimub (2021) explain that triangulation describes how the researcher uses different methods and approaches during a study to gather the required information and to critically analyse the findings. This helps the researcher to be able to establish validity and credibility. Triangulation is the meaningful application of multiple research approaches, that each possess their own strengths and weaknesses, to create a stronger basis for causal inference. A single method will, most likely, not be able to answer a causal question, whereas triangulation helps to improve the transparency and robustness of the research (Hammerton and Munafo 2021). Triangulation is used to reduce bias, which improves the evaluation of the findings. Using triangulation helps to reinforce the credibility and dependability of the study. It helps to identify inconsistencies in emergent patterns in the findings (Lemon and Hayes 2020:606).

The importance of triangulation has been confirmed in different studies conducted by various researchers. Dzwigol and Dzwigol-Barosz (2020) conducted research to determine the importance of triangulation during the research process. Their findings indicate that 66% of participants believe that methodological triangulation plays an important role in the research process. Of these participants, 82% stated that triangulation supported their research process. Further studies conducted in the field of management sciences concluded that triangulation is a useful technique for gathering and analysing data for studies. Triangulation makes it easier for researchers to validate the data that they have collected. It also enables researchers to make better-supported arguments from the data that they have collected. Using triangulation will help management sciences to enhance the quality of research studies (Olubayo and Oloyede, 2020). According to Cornelissen (2023), triangulation also plays an important role in management research as it helps to validate theoretical assumptions.

It is important to use triangulation in research as it employs multiple data sources, methods or perspectives which allow researchers to cross-verify the evidence that they have gathered. This

strengthens the validity, trustworthiness and credibility of the research and reduces potential bias (Ahmed, 2024; Meydan and Akkaş, 2024). It is thus widely accepted that triangulation adds to the validity and credibility of research findings. As this was a mixed-methods study, it was important to be able to validate the findings of both the qualitative and quantitative aspects using triangulation. Triangulation was ensured using in-depth interviews (qualitative), Google Forms questionnaires (qualitative and quantitative) and physical hard-copy questionnaires (qualitative and quantitative), which are explained in detail below.

4.3.5.2. In-depth interviews

As this was a mixed-methods research study, both qualitative and quantitative aspects were included in the study. In-depth interviews are qualitative research techniques that are used to conduct interviews with a smaller number of participants (Rutledge and Hogg 2020). In this study, interviews were conducted with a selected number of parents, learners and teachers from the participating schools. Jain (2021:544) explains that an interview can be seen as an interactive form of data collection. Questions are asked directly by the researcher. Prior research has indicated that interviews can be seen as a suitable data collection method. Interviews played an important role in the current research project as socio-education is largely structured around people's experiences and opinions. By conducting interviews with the participants, it facilitates gathering factual data and provides better insight into the life and experiences of those involved in the study. Brinkmann (2022:1) explains that human beings have always used conversation as a tool to gain knowledge from each other. Qualitative interviewing has become an increasingly popular method of obtaining information in the human and social sciences. Through interviewing, we can engage with the issues that concern us.

The value and validity of the data collected during an interview largely depend on the competence of the interviewer and the strength of the interview questions. The choice of questions, therefore, is of utmost importance. The questions should be appropriate and support the goal of the research (Roberts 2020). George (2022) explains that there are three main types of interviews. The first is a structured interview where predetermined questions are asked in a set order. They most commonly make use of closed-ended questions. The second is a semi-structured interview, which is often open-ended. There is a clear plan for what the interviewer

wants to ask, but the questions do not have to follow a specific order. Even though they are more open-ended, semi-structured interviews follow a predetermined thematic framework that gives a sense of order. The third is an unstructured interview, where the questions and the order in which they are asked are not set. This type of interview is more spontaneous and mostly based on the participant's answers. For this study, semi-structured interviews were used, where there was a clear set of questions, but where room was left for open-ended questions and answers that could possibly guide the interviewer towards other questions as well. Semi-structured interviews help to keep the interview focused while the researcher still could explore pertinent ideas that may arise during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021).

As this research was done in the field of socio-education, it was important that participants be granted the opportunity to give their opinions and explain their experiences in broader detail. In-depth interviews can be a powerful tool to use as it goes beyond the "what" and "when" and explores answers to "why", "what", "how" and "in what context" (De Janasz and Katz 2021). While investigating the socio-economic influence on academic achievement, it was important to go beyond the "what" and "when". It was important to investigate the deeper contexts as well as why certain aspects of socio-economics have such a profound impact on people's lives. In-depth interviews allow participating individuals to explain how they understand and interpret the world around them by using their own words (Knott et al. 2022). It is important in the field of socio-education to allow participants to express their opinions, beliefs and experiences in their own words. It is for this reason that open-ended questions were asked as part of the interviews, to allow participants to use their own words to express their experiences.

The use of audio recordings is not always the best approach to use during interviews. Comparative data indicates that the use of physical hand-written transcripts is, in some cases, more effective than audio recordings (Rutakumwa et al. 2020). For this study, the interviews were recorded on a recording device, but the use of hand-written transcripts was also employed where notes were made during the interviews. The handwritten transcripts as well as the audio notes were then used to transfer the data onto a computer for digital safekeeping and comparison.

Siedlecki (2022) provides a list of interview protocols that a researcher should follow while conducting interviews. She states that the interview ought to be kept as short as possible. It is necessary to avoid using too many specific questions and ask a few broad questions. The interviewee should be invited to share his/her story. The researcher should be wary not to talk too much in order to not accidentally give away any of his/her own beliefs and opinions. Be aware of your body language as non-verbal communication from the researcher may also indicate what he/she believes. Work with a script that contains an introduction and conclusion with all the research questions and prompts in between. It is for this reason that an interview schedule should be drawn up as explained below.

4.3.5.3. The interview schedule

As mentioned in section 4.3.5.2, an interview schedule is drawn up to guide the researcher during the interview to be able to conduct the interview in a professional and unbiased manner. Bearman (2019) describes an interview schedule as a list of topics and associated questions that are asked to the participant by the interviewer. The interview schedule focuses on the core questions that need to be asked to answer the research question. These questions are guided by the literature review and are specifically focused on answering the research question at hand. In terms of the current research project, the interview questions were based on experiences and challenges faced by parents, learners and teachers from different socio-economic circumstances. Questions regarding socio-economic circumstances as well as academic performance were included in the interview schedule. The questions comprised open-ended as well as closed-ended questions. The interviews were conducted with written consent from the participants.

4.3.5.4. Google Forms questionnaires

The use of Google Forms questionnaires enables the researcher to reach a very large audience in a short amount of time. As the participants merely must follow a link from their cell phones to complete the questionnaires, it is an easy and effective way to gather data from participants. Chernikov (2023) explains that Google Forms is a great tool to use for the creation of surveys, etc., in a quick and easy manner. These forms are accessible from anywhere, and it automatically collects the responses from participants. Google Forms makes use of an

“intuitive user interface” that makes it easy for anyone to create forms. There is no limit to the number of responses that can be received, which makes it an effective tool to use during large-scale research studies. Google Forms are integrated into other Google services, which means that you can transfer data into Excel spreadsheets for easy data analysis and evaluation.

The questions contained in the Google Forms questionnaire comprised both qualitative and quantitative questions. The qualitative section allowed participants to share their experiences and beliefs regarding the research topic. The quantitative section had closed-ended questions with more specific, scientific data questions. The data collected from these questionnaires were analysed and compared with the data collected during the interviews and physical questionnaires. Conclusions regarding the data are then drawn from all the available sources.

4.3.5.5. Physical hard-copy questionnaires

I made hard-copy questionnaires available to those participants who did not have Internet access to be able to complete the Google Forms questionnaires. As this study specifically focused on participants from different socio-economic backgrounds, it was important to level the playing field by providing the same questionnaires to those who are socio-economically disadvantaged. Cheung (2021) states that a structured questionnaire is a document with a set of standardised questions. There is a fixed scheme to the questionnaire with a specific order of questions to gather the information needed for the data collection. As is the case with the Google Forms questionnaires, the physical hard-copy questionnaires also consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. There were both qualitative and quantitative questions included in the questionnaire.

A formal pilot study was not conducted prior to the main data collection. The research instruments were developed in accordance with the research questions, objectives and themes identified from the literature review and were designed to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information relevant to the study. The questionnaires were standardised across the electronic and hard-copy formats, while the semi-structured interview schedule was developed around the central research questions. Although a pilot study could have provided an opportunity to identify potential ambiguities or weaknesses in the instruments before the main study, the absence of a formal pilot was considered within the limitations of the research.

Attention was therefore given to the clarity and alignment of the questions, consistency of the instruments and the use of multiple data sources to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

4.3.6. Data analysis and presentation

As this is a mixed-methods study, it is important to use both qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques. Onwuegbuzie and Combs (2011) explain that, with mixed-methods research, the researcher has to make use of qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques within the same study. I therefore made use of both qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques, depending on the section of data that was being analysed. As explained in the section above, there were both qualitative and quantitative questions included in the Google Forms questionnaires, as well as the hard-copy questionnaires. It was thus important to analyse the data according to the specific type of questions presented.

For the qualitative questions and the interviews, I made use of qualitative data analysis techniques. Mezmir (2020) defines qualitative data analysis as the classification and interpretation of linguistic material gathered throughout the research process. This linguistic or visual material is then analysed to be able to make implicit and explicit statements about the material to make meaning of what is given in the material. The aim is to find generalisations through comparing various materials and/or texts. According to Lester, Cho and Lochmiller (2020), there is a variety of techniques that a qualitative researcher can employ to analyse the data gathered through their research. These authors suggest that the researcher affix certain codes to their field notes that are drawn from their interviews. The researcher should also make notes in the margins of their transcripts as they go along. While sorting through the material, researchers ought to try to identify similar phrases, patterns, themes, relationships between variables, etc. The researcher should then find sets of generalisations in the data and formalise the data in the form of constructs or theories.

Qualitative data can be analysed through a five-phase approach. During Phase 1, the researcher should organise the data into categories by using “attribute coding”. During Phase 2, the data is then sorted into relevant topical categories through deductive analysis processes. The different topical categories should be aligned to the research question. By using these categories, it makes it easier for the researcher to find comparisons in the data. Phase 3 is where

open/initial coding is done. The data that has been sorted into different categories is then reviewed by reading through each category and applying codes that divide the data into emerging topics or concepts, which may later develop into themes or findings. During Phase 4, the researcher identifies patterns, themes and findings. Through inductive analytical work, the researcher identifies themes, which are then turned into finding statements. During Phase 5, the researcher then applies theory to explain the findings of the research. Themes and constructs that were identified during the literature review phase are then compared to the findings of the research (Bingham 2023). The researcher can make the data analysis process easier by doing constant comparisons and using data-generated codes (Dierckx de Casterlé et al. 2021).

When doing the analysis of the Qualitative portion of my research project, I first started by transcribing the notes taken during the interviews. These notes were then transcribed into a Word document. I made use of the techniques as described by Lester, Cho and Lochmiller (2020) and Bingham (2023). I divided the data into categories to form codes by finding similarities, differences, themes and concepts in the data. I further analysed the data in the categories to form even more defined codes based on relationships and linkages found within the data. I then used this data to find inferences and make summaries to generate a theory and make conclusions regarding the research question. I followed the same process when analysing the data from the qualitative sections in the questionnaires. The qualitative data analysis only formed one part of my data analysis, as the quantitative data section still had to be explored.

As this was a mixed-methods research design, it was important to analyse the quantitative section of the questionnaires in as much detail as possible. Ali (2021) explains that quantitative data analysis involves the collection and evaluation of measurable and verifiable data. There is a statistical mechanism involved in the assessment and analysis of the data. The main purpose of the quantitative researcher's data analysis is to quantify a hypothetical situation. With quantitative data analysis, the researcher should systematically categorise, sum up and illustrate observations. According to Jansen and Warren (2020), quantitative data analysis is numbers-based, or the data can easily be converted into numbers without losing its meaning. They explain that quantitative data analysis is used to find differences between groups, relationships

between variables and to test hypotheses. As quantitative data analysis involves numbers, it provides statistics as a result.

The quantitative section of the questionnaires involved numbers such as learners' academic marks, parents' qualification levels, household income, etc. It is thus numerical data that could easily be transferred into statistics and graphs. I made use of computer programmes and software to convert the numerical data gained from the quantitative data section into statistics and graphs.

After completing the data analysis of the two separate sections (qualitative and quantitative), I undertook an in-depth analysis of all the findings. I looked for patterns and differences in all of the findings. From there, I formed conclusions and made comparisons to the theoretical data that was included in the literature review section. I made use of the data to answer the research question at hand. To ensure that the data gathered through the findings were true and correct, it was important to pay attention to matters such as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability. These matters are explained in the sections to follow.

Integration occurred after the separate analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data through comparison of the patterns, relationships, themes and differences identified in each dataset. The quantitative findings were considered alongside the qualitative explanations to determine whether the two forms of evidence converged, complemented one another or differed. This approach is consistent with the principle that integration should occur at the interpretation stage so that the combined findings produce a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Fetters, Curry and Creswell 2013). In this study, integration was particularly important because statistical relationships alone could not explain the contextual mechanisms through which socio-economic circumstances influence academic achievement, while qualitative experiences alone could not establish the extent or pattern of relationships between the selected variables.

4.3.7. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an important aspect of any type of research and research findings. Trustworthiness of the data can be ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Stahl and King 2020).

Credibility

Credibility in the qualitative aspect of the study can be ensured by basing the data on a natural world setting. By investigating a real-world problem, it helps to ensure the credibility of the findings, as the researcher should search for evidence required to answer the research question. By codifying the data in a systematic way, credibility of the findings can be ensured. The data must be organised and coded in a logical and systematic way. By testing the hypothesis through experimentation (comparing the theoretical component to the real-world construct), credibility can further be ensured. When the theory is then verified by quality evidence, accepting the results or theories as justified generalisations further ensures credibility of the findings (Gagani 2019).

As this was a mixed-methods approach, it was important to ensure credibility of the quantitative aspect of the research as well. Gagani (2019) further states that credibility in quantitative research can be ensured by basing the data on a natural world setting or on previously proven data. Codifying the data systematically is another way of ensuring credibility of the findings. Testing the hypothesis through experimentation is the third step in ensuring credibility. Lastly, accepting the results and theories as justified generalisations further ensures credibility.

It is evident that the ways to ensure credibility for both qualitative and quantitative research findings prove similar. This research project was already based on a real-world problem, which is a prerequisite for credibility. I systematically coded the data and formed categories as I went along. I tested the hypothesis by comparing my findings with theoretical aspects regarding the topic as well as comparing the qualitative data with the quantitative data. I accepted the results as true and justified.

Transferability

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the findings need to possess transferability. Transferability is the degree to which the findings of the research can either be generalised or transferred to other settings or contexts (Williams 2024). Transferability can be ensured through providing evidence that my findings can be applicable to other situations as well. By, for example, providing evidence that socio-economic status gives an advantage to some and a disadvantage to others when it comes to education, I ensured that the unequal influence of socio-economics is transferable to other life situations. I compared my findings to the findings of other studies to see if there were comparisons and transferability between the different studies.

Dependability

Dependability highlights the need for accounting for the ever-changing context wherein the research takes place. The researcher ought to describe the changes that occur in the setting and how the research approach is affected by these changes (Williams 2024). Even though research circumstances may be ever-changing, consistency can be ensured through triangulation. As already mentioned earlier in this chapter, I made use of triangulation to ensure that my findings are valid amid an ever-changing context.

Confirmability

As the name suggests, confirmability means that the results of the study should be able to be confirmed or corroborated by others (Williams 2024). By comparing the findings with other theories and literature regarding the topic or similar topics, I was able to ensure trustworthiness through confirmability.

4.3.8. Ethical considerations

As educational research involves human participants, it is of utmost importance that proper consideration be given to ethical matters. Ethics in research is needed in order to safeguard the safety and well-being of the research participants (Nichol, Mwaka and Luyckx 2021). Bhandari (2024) explains that ethical considerations in research are needed in order to protect the rights of the research participants, enhance the validity of the research findings and to

maintain academic integrity. While conducting research involving human participants, it is of utmost importance to constantly ensure that their rights and dignity are not being violated. Ethical considerations can be ensured through getting ethical clearance and approval by different departments and individuals.

Bhandari (2024) states that it is important to submit your research proposal to an institutional review board for approval before the study commences. Ethical measures can also be ensured through voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, potential for harm, and results communication. Ethical principles were applied throughout this study by ensuring the following:

i. Ethical clearance was given by the University's Ethical Clearance Board before the research commenced.
ii. Voluntary participation: it was made clear to participants that they voluntarily participated in the research and were welcome to leave the study at any time.
iii. Informed consent: participants signed a consent form before participating in the research.
iv. Anonymity: pseudonyms were used, and no identifiable markers for participants were made public.
v. Confidentiality: participants' answers were kept confidential and were only used for this research study.
vi. Potential for harm: the potential for harm was minimal as anonymity and confidentiality were ensured using pseudonyms.
vii. Result communication: the results of the study are made available to all participants for review and dispute purposes.

As ethical considerations are of utmost importance when conducting a research study involving human beings, I did not stray from the ethical guidelines provided by the University of South Africa Ethics Board. I did not commence the research project until clearance was obtained from all the relevant parties. Prior to the commencement of data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant research ethics structures of the University of South Africa (UNISA). Permission to conduct the research was subsequently obtained from the participating schools. The school principals or relevant school authorities were approached and provided

with information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study, the nature of participation and the ethical safeguards that would be applied. Data collection commenced only after the required institutional and school-level permissions had been obtained. This process ensured that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the university and the relevant education authorities.

For learners who were under the age of 18 years, participation was subject to informed parental or guardian consent as well as the learner's assent. Parents or legal guardians were provided with information explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of the learner's participation, the procedures involved, the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw without negative consequences. Learners were also provided with age-appropriate information about the study and were asked to indicate their willingness to participate. Participation therefore proceeded only where the required parental or guardian consent and learner assent had been obtained. This process ensured that participation by learners was voluntary and that both parental/guardian permission and the learner's willingness to participate were respected.

Additional ethical safeguards were applied to ensure that learners with special educational needs were able to participate voluntarily, meaningfully and with dignity. Information about the study and participation requirements was communicated in a manner appropriate to the learners' individual levels of understanding and communication needs. Sufficient opportunity was provided for learners to ask questions and to indicate whether they wished to participate, without pressure or coercion. Where necessary, appropriate support was provided to facilitate the learners' understanding of the research questions and participation process, while ensuring that such support did not influence their responses. Learners were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study without negative consequences. Attention was given to maintaining privacy, confidentiality and respectful treatment throughout the data collection process. These safeguards were intended to ensure that LSEN learners were treated as autonomous participants to the greatest extent possible and that their participation was based on informed willingness rather than merely on permission provided by others.

Potential risks to participants were minimised through voluntary participation, informed consent and learner assent, confidentiality and anonymity, and the participants' right to decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study without negative consequences. Questions were framed to avoid unnecessary intrusion into participants' personal circumstances, and

participants were not required to disclose information that they were uncomfortable sharing. Data were handled confidentially and reported in a manner that protected participants and schools from identification. Care was taken when engaging with learners and LSEN learners to ensure that participation did not result in embarrassment, discrimination, pressure or psychological discomfort. The researcher maintained a respectful and non-judgemental approach throughout the data-collection process and ensured that participation did not interfere unnecessarily with learners' educational activities. These measures were intended to uphold the principles of beneficence by ensuring that the research had potential value, non-maleficence by minimising possible harm or discomfort, justice by ensuring fair and appropriate treatment of participants, and respect for persons by recognising participants' autonomy, dignity and right to voluntary participation.

The ethical conduct of the study was guided by the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice, which are internationally recognised principles for research involving human participants and are also endorsed by UNISA (UNISA 2016; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research 1979). These principles were considered interrelated rather than as isolated requirements, as ethical decision-making requires a balance between protecting participants' rights and achieving the legitimate aims of the research (UNISA 2016).

Respect for persons requires recognition of participants' autonomy, dignity and right to make voluntary and informed decisions about participation. It is particularly important where research involves children, young people or participants who may have reduced autonomy, as additional protections may be necessary (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research 1979). In this study, respect for persons was reflected through informed consent, parental or guardian consent where required, learner assent, the right to withdraw and the provision of information appropriate to participants' levels of understanding. This principle was particularly relevant to the participation of LSEN learners, for whom meaningful participation required additional attention to communication, understanding and individual needs. BERA (2018) similarly emphasises respect for participants' autonomy, privacy, diversity and dignity in educational research.

Beneficence requires researchers to consider the potential benefits of the research and to maximise these where possible while ensuring that participants are not exposed to unnecessary

risks (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research 1979). In the present study, the potential benefit lay primarily in generating knowledge about the socio-economic factors influencing academic achievement and informing strategies to promote more equitable educational opportunities. Beneficence therefore required that the research procedures remained proportionate to the intended contribution of the study and that participants' time, experiences and information were treated responsibly. BERA (2018) similarly requires educational researchers to balance the potential benefits of research against possible risks or harms.

Non-maleficence, closely related to beneficence, requires researchers to avoid causing harm and to take reasonable steps to anticipate and minimise potential physical, psychological, social or reputational risks. Although the study was considered low risk, discussion of socio-economic circumstances could potentially cause discomfort, embarrassment or feelings of disadvantage, particularly among learners. The researcher therefore avoided unnecessary intrusive questioning, emphasised voluntary participation and the right to decline to answer, and maintained confidentiality when handling and reporting information. This approach is consistent with the principle that risks should be reduced to those necessary to achieve the research purpose (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research 1979; UNISA 2016).

Justice concerns the fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of research and requires that participants are selected according to appropriate and defensible criteria rather than because they are easily accessible or vulnerable (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research 1979). This principle was particularly relevant to the present study because learners from different socio-economic contexts, including LSEN settings, were included. Their inclusion was justified by the research questions and the need to understand educational inequality across diverse contexts, rather than by their vulnerability or accessibility. UNISA (2016) similarly requires fairness in the distribution of research risks and benefits, while BERA (2018) emphasises fair and respectful treatment of participants and attention to structural inequalities that may affect research relationships.

Collectively, these principles provided an ethical framework for balancing the purposes of the research with the rights, dignity and well-being of participants. Their application was particularly important because the study involved learners, including LSEN learners, and examined potentially sensitive socio-economic circumstances. The principles therefore

informed not only the formal ethical approval process, but also decisions concerning recruitment, consent and assent, risk minimisation, confidentiality, data handling and the reporting of findings.

4.3.9. Limitations of the present study

As it was not possible to involve all the schools in Gauteng, I had to limit the number of participating schools to a manageable amount. This therefore makes generalisations difficult throughout the province and country. The sample was thus small in comparison to the rest of the country and therefore not representative of the entire population of South Africa.

Finding volunteers from all of the socio-economic spheres to participate in the interviews proved to be a slight problem, as not all people were trusting of strangers. It could possibly present the study with an unbalanced representation of the different socio-economic groups. Even though these limitations exist, I hoped that this study would be beneficial to the quality of education offered to the different socio-economic groups throughout South Africa.

4.4. Chapter summary

This chapter focused on the research design and methodology. The chosen research paradigm, the choice of using a mixed-methods approach, the chosen sample and the data collection methods were all centred around answering the following research question:

- *What is the socio-economic influence on the academic achievement of school-aged learners?*

This chapter has given a description of the research methodology used during this study to gain a better understanding of the socio-economic influence on the academic achievement of learners in the Gauteng Province. The next chapter provides a presentation, analysis and description of the data collected through the interviews, Google Forms questionnaires and the physical hard-copy questionnaires.

CHAPTER 5:

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter explained the research design and methodology in depth, along with the reasoning for the use of a mixed methods approach, as well as how the trustworthiness of the data and ethical considerations were assured. This chapter presents the study findings. The aim of the research was to define and describe the socio-economic influence on academic achievement and to explore the contextual socio-economic factors that play the most significant role in the provision of quality educational opportunities. The aim was also to investigate how the knowledge of these factors can be used as a foundation for developing a plan to reduce inequality in South African schools.

Various studies undertaken in the past have demonstrated that there is a significant relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement (Sirin, 2005; White, 1982; Bradley and Corwyn, 2002). The Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) stated that family background had a greater influence on learner academic outcomes than that of school resources. Further analysis also indicated that learners from higher socio-economic status backgrounds in general performed better in academics, due to access to better educational resources, more opportunities for enrichment programmes, and better parental involvement and support (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2015).

This study focuses solely on the South African context. In South Africa, socio-economic disparities and educational inequalities remain strongly intertwined (Spaull, 2013; Taylor and Yu, 2009; Van der Berg, 2008). Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural and social capital states that access to resources creates an advantage in educational achievement.

When using a mixed-methods research approach, the researcher combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods within a single study to gain a more expanded and comprehensive view of the research problem. Through using this method, one can gain insight into measurable outcomes (quantitative) as well as insight into the real-life experiences of participants (qualitative) (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

A mixed-methods approach was employed during this study to combine quantitative data with qualitative data. The quantitative component provided patterns that can be measured through statistics, while the qualitative component provided deeper insights into participants' personal opinions and lived experiences. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner (2007) state that mixed-methods research is used to draw on the strengths of both research approaches (quantitative and qualitative), while at the same time minimising or eliminating the weaknesses of both approaches. When one uses quantitative methods, it is easy to apply numerical precision so that findings are easier to generalise. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, allow the researcher to get a more in-depth and contextual insight into the perspectives of the participants (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). It is thus a valuable tool to combine these two methods in order to get a more complete and rounded picture of the research results than when using one approach alone.

When doing educational and social science research, a mixed-methods design can be particularly valuable as the researcher is enabled to verify the statistical trends through the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2014). The validity of the research findings is enhanced through using this triangulation. Mixed-methods research is particularly useful in socio-educational studies as complex issues, such as the current research problem, can be explored in greater depth. This is because numerical statistics as well as human experiences can be critical for interpretation (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2016).

The integration of these different methods may occur during the different stages of the research study. It can occur during data collection, analysis and interpretation phases. There are several mixed-methods research designs from which researchers can choose (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Mixed-methods research is a strong methodological choice when doing research in the field of socio-education.

The qualitative findings of this study are presented under key themes that arose from the data. The statistical results gathered through the quantitative component are integrated with the qualitative findings gathered through the interviews and questionnaires. This was done to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research findings.

The Google Forms questionnaires comprised both quantitative and qualitative questions. The data were analysed using the sequential design type, where quantitative data is analysed first, followed by qualitative data analysis (Taherdoost 2022:59-61). Throughout the research

analysis process, patterns were identified to make informed conclusions regarding the data that was gathered.

The findings of the research are presented according to the questions asked in the questionnaires and interviews, and in the end, the quantitative and qualitative results are integrated so that a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings can be presented.

This chapter contains an overview of the data collection, the quantitative responses to the Google Forms questionnaires and an analysis of the quantitative results. This is followed by the qualitative responses to questionnaires and interviews as well as an analysis of the qualitative results.

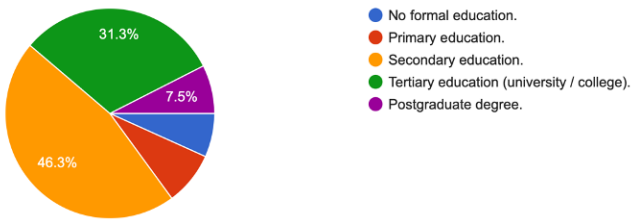
5.2 Overview of Data collection

Data type:	**Participants:**	**Instruments:**	**Sample size:**
Quantitative	Learners, Parents, Teachers	Google Forms questionnaires	346
Qualitative	Learners, Parents, Teachers	Google Forms questionnaires. Interviews.	378

5.3. Google Forms Questionnaires: Quantitative section

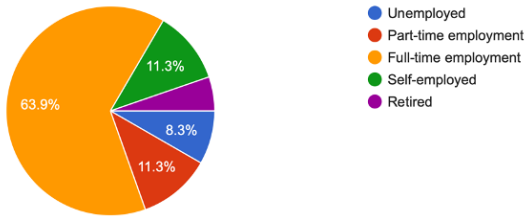
5.3.1. Responses to quantitative questions from learners and parents

Question 1: What is the highest level of education of the adults in the household?



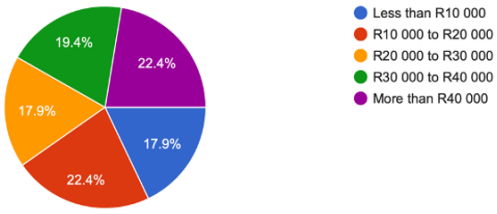
According to the responses from learner/parent participants, 46,3% of adults in the household have a Secondary education, followed by 31,3% who have a tertiary qualification. Only 7,5% of participants indicated that the adults in the household have a postgraduate degree. Only 6,7% of parents/learners indicated that the adults in the household received no formal education. The amount of parents/learners who participated in the study who only have a Primary education were 8,2 percent.

Question 2: What is the current employment status of the adults in the household?



The learner/parent participants indicated that 63,9% of adults in their households were employed full-time. Of all the participants, 11,3% of adults were part-time employed, and another 11,3% were self-employed. An alarming 8,3% of participants indicated that the adults in the household were unemployed. Only 5,3% of participants indicated that the adults in the household were retired (these are some of the same participants who indicated that a grandparent / other relative was the primary caregiver of the children in the house)

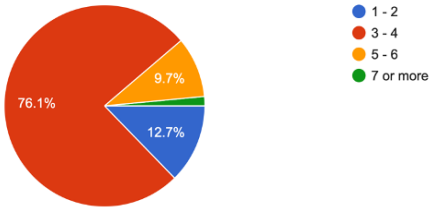
Question 3: What is the total monthly household income?



The learner/parent participants indicated that 17,9% of households received a total monthly income of less than R10 000, 22,4% received between R10 000 and R20 000 per month, 17,9% received between R20 000 and R30 000 per month, 19,4% received R30 000 to R40 000 per

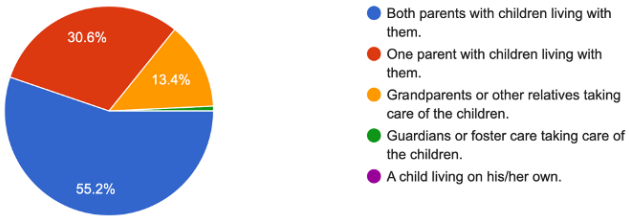
month and 22,4% received more than R40 000 per month. This indicates that there was a clear variation between the monthly household incomes of participants.

Question 4: How many people live in the household?



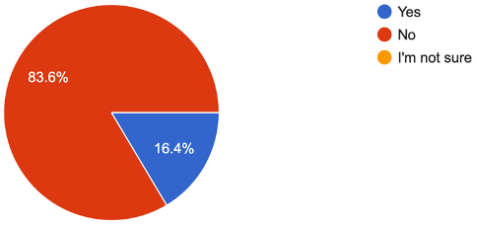
The statistics above clearly indicated that most of the participants came from households comprising of 3 to 4 members (76,1%). The households who had 1 to 2 members comprised of 12,7% of participants. These were the same participants who indicated that they came from single-parent families. Only 9,7% of participants indicated that there were five to six family members in the household. From the group of participants who participated in the study, 1,5% indicated that they had more than seven people living in the household.

Question 5: What is the composition of the members of the household?



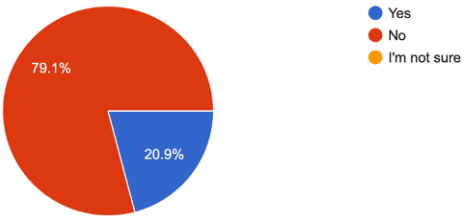
From the list of participants, 55,2% indicated that both parents lived in the household with their children. Single-parent families comprised of 30,6% of the participants. Cases where grandparents or other relatives took care of the children comprised of 13,4% of participants. Only 0,7% of participants comprised of households where children live in the care of guardians / foster care.

Question 6: Do you / your child receive free subsidised school meals?



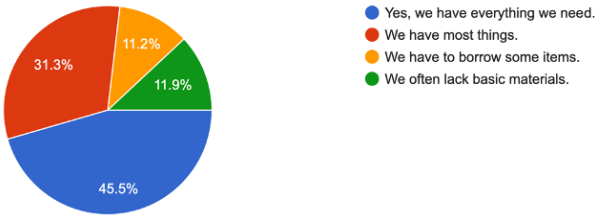
Out of the participants, 83,6% supplied their own meals for lunchtime, while 16,4% of participants received free subsidised meals from school.

Question 7: Does the family receive help from the government? (Grants etc.)



20,9% of participants received help from the government in the form of grants, while 79,1% did not receive any additional financial help from the government.

Question 8: Do you have your own study materials? (Textbooks, notebooks, calculators etc.)



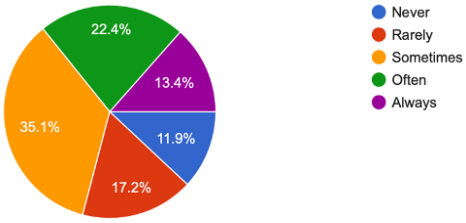
With regard to study materials and resources, 45,5% of participants indicated that they had everything that they needed; 31,3% indicated that they had most things that they needed; while 11,2% indicated that they sometimes had to borrow materials from others. The remaining 11,9% indicated that they often lacked basic materials.

Question 9: Is there a quiet place to study at home?



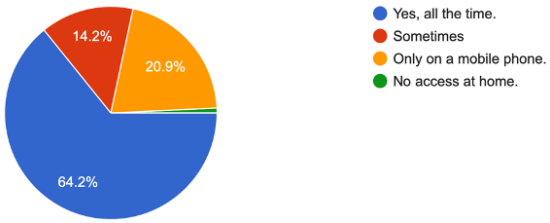
From all of the learner/parent participants, 53,7% indicated that they always had a quiet place to study at home; 32,1% indicated that they sometimes had a quiet place to study at home; while an alarming 14,2% indicated that they could not find a quiet place at home to study.

Question 10: How often do the children in the household have to help with chores or care for others before doing homework?



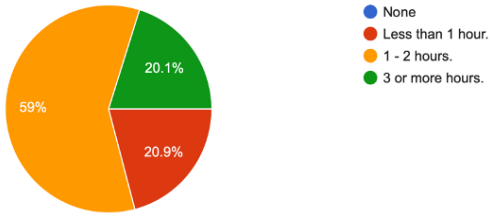
Only 11,9% of participants indicated that the children in the household never had to help with household chores before they could do their homework; 17,2% rarely had to do chores before doing homework while 35,1% of participants indicated that they sometimes had to do chores before doing homework. A high number of learners (22,4%) had to often do chores before doing homework, while 13,4% of learner/parent participants indicated that the children in the household always had to help with chores before they could start with their homework.

Question 11: Do you have access to the Internet at home?



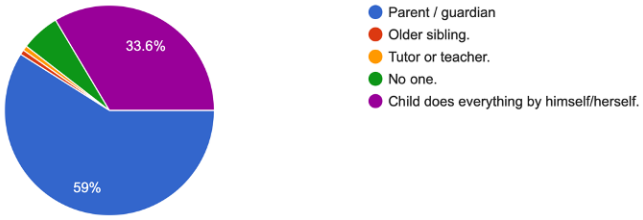
When asked about internet access, 64,2% indicated that they had internet access all the time at home; 14,2% indicated that they sometimes had internet access at home, while 20,9% indicated that they only had internet access on a mobile phone. A mere 0,7% of participants indicated that they had no access to the internet at home.

Question 12: How many hours a day is spent on homework or studying in your household?



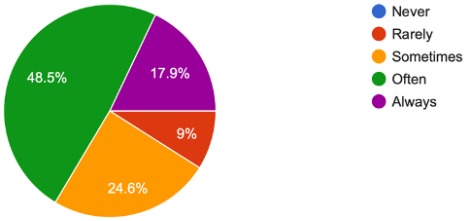
When asked about the amount of time spent doing homework in the household, 20,9% of participants indicated that they spent less than one hour on homework each day; 59% of participants indicated that they spent one to two hours on homework each day; and only 20,1% spent more than three hours on homework each day.

Question 13: Who helps with most of the schoolwork at home?



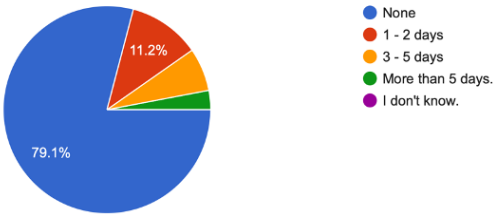
When asked who helped with the schoolwork at home, 6% of participants indicated that no one helped them with schoolwork, 0,7% indicated that they had a tutor or teacher who helped them, and 0,7% indicated that they received help from an older sibling. 33,6% of participants indicated that the child did everything by himself/herself, while 59% indicated that a parent/guardian helped with schoolwork at home.

Question 14: How often is homework completed on time in your household?



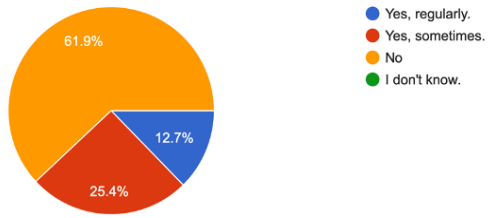
Regarding homework completion, 17,9% of participants indicated that they always completed homework at home; 48,5% indicated that they often completed their homework at home; while 24,6% indicated that they sometimes completed their homework at home. Only 9% indicated that they rarely completed their homework at home.

Question 15: How many days of school have you / your child missed this term due to family or financial reasons?



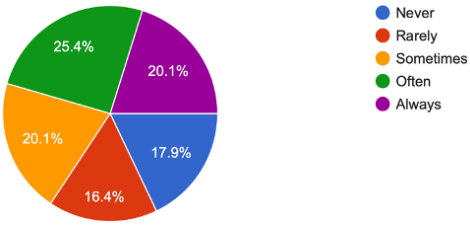
Participants indicated that 79,1% of them never missed school due to family or financial reasons; 11,2% of participants missed 1 to 2 days of school during the term; 6,7% of participants missed school for 3-5 days during the term; and 3% missed school for more than five days due to family or financial reasons.

Question 16: Do you / your child have access to extra help? (Tutoring, after-school programmes etc.)



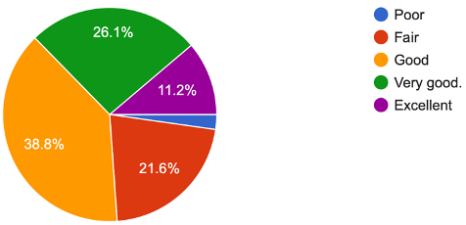
The responses of participants indicated that only 12,7% of participants had regular access to tutoring or after-school programmes; 25,4% sometimes had access to tutoring or after-school programmes; while 61,9% of participants had no access to extra help.

Question 17: How often do you worry about money or basic needs? (Food, clothing, transport)



Out of all the participants, an alarming 20,1% indicated that they always worried about money or basic needs; 25,4% often worried about money or basic needs; while 20,1% sometimes worried about money or basic needs. Only 16,4% rarely worried and 17,9% never worried about money or basic needs.

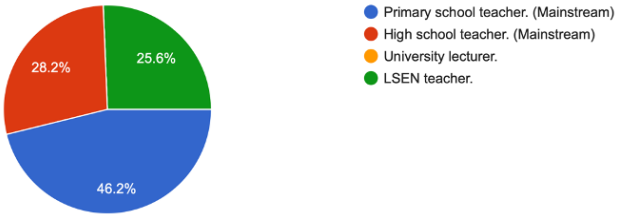
Question 18: How would you rate the quality of the school you / your child attend/s?



Only 2,2% of participants believed that the school that the children in the household attended was of poor quality; 11,2% believed the quality of their school to be excellent, 26,1% believed their school to be very good, 38,8% indicated that their school was good, and 21,6% indicated that their school was fair.

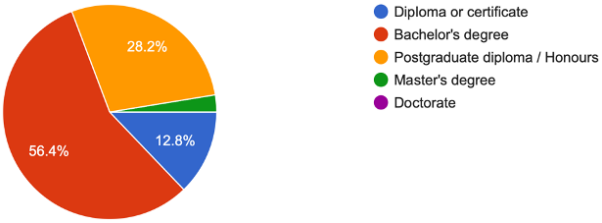
5.3.2. Responses to Quantitative questions from educators

Question 1: What type of teacher are you? (Primary, High school etc.)



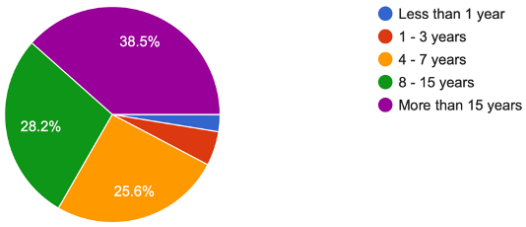
The teacher participants comprised the following: 46,2% primary school teachers (mainstream); 28,2% high school teachers (mainstream); and 25,6% LSEN teachers.

Question 2: What is your highest level of education?



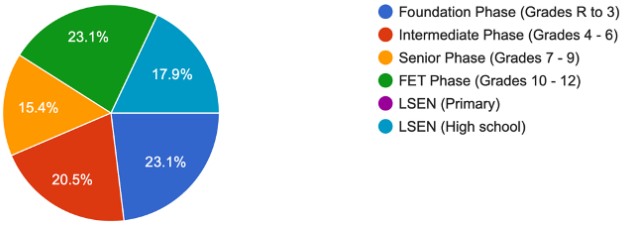
Out of the group of teacher participants, 56,4% had a Bachelor's degree; 28,2% had a Postgraduate diploma or Honours degree, and 12,8% had a Diploma or Certificate. Only 2,6% of participants indicated that they had a Master's degree.

Question 3: How many years have you been teaching?



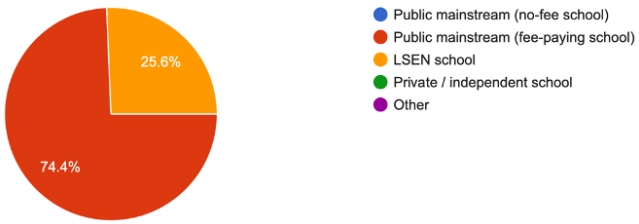
Out of the participants, a mere 2,6% had less than one year of teaching experience and 5,1% had one to three years of teaching experience. This is an indication that most participants were experienced teachers, with most having more than 15 years of teaching experience (38,5%). The remaining teachers had more than four years of teaching experience (28,2% had 8 to 15 years' experience and 25,6% had four to seven years' experience)

Question 4: What Grade levels do you currently teach?



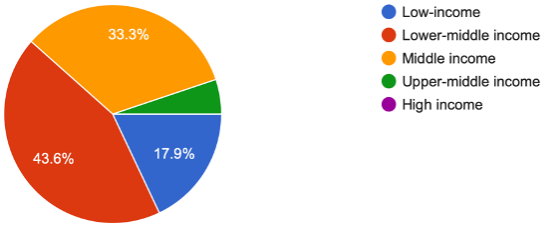
The participant group comprised a variety of different grade-level teachers: 23,1% taught Foundation Phase; 20,5% taught Intermediate Phase; 15,4% taught Senior Phase; 23,1% taught FET Phase; and 17,9% taught at an LSEN High school level.

Question 5: What type of school do you teach at?



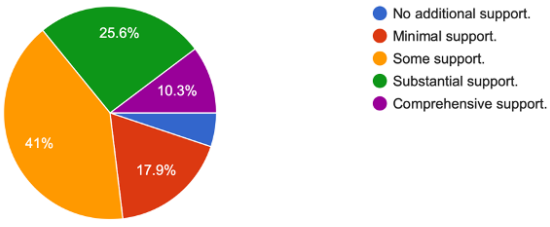
Most participants indicated that they taught at public mainstream schools, whereas 25,6% indicated that they taught at LSEN schools. The discrepancies between Question 4 and Question 5's answers can be explained by the fact that some of the LSEN teachers taught at Foundation Phase or Intermediate Phase levels (Even though they taught at LSEN High schools). This is because the LSEN school system accommodates DCAPS (Differentiated CAPS curriculum) learners who have been classified as Severely Intellectually Disabled (SID).

Question 6: What is the approximate socio-economic status of most of your learners?



Most participants taught at schools where learners came from lower-middle-income schools (43,6%). That is followed by middle-income schools (33,3%); 17,9% of participants indicated that the learners in their school came from low-income households. The participants indicated that only 5,1% of learners come from upper-middle-income families.

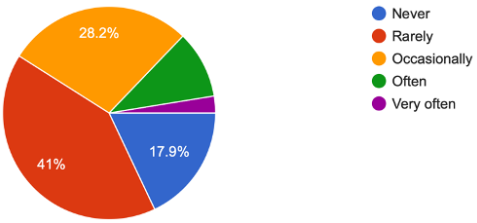
Question 7: Does your school provide additional academic support for learners from low-income families?



Participants indicated that most schools provided some additional academic support for learners from low-income families (41%); 25,6% indicated that the school provided substantial support; 17,9% indicated that the school provided minimal support; and 10,3% indicated that

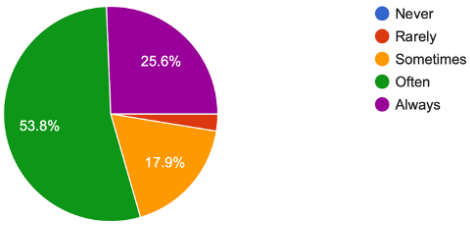
the school provided comprehensive support. Only 5,1% of participants indicated that their school provided no additional support to learners from low-income families.

Question 8: Do you receive training on how to address socio-economic diversity in the classroom?



It became clear that most participants rarely or only occasionally received training to address socio-economic diversity in the classroom, with 10,3% indicating that they received training often and 2,6% indicating that they received training very often; 17,9% indicated that they never received training, 41% indicated that they rarely received training and 28,2% indicated that they occasionally received training.

Question 9: How often do you have to communicate with parents or guardians about learners' academic challenges? (Frequency of academic challenges that occur.)



Through the responses, it became clear that participants often had to communicate with parents or guardians regarding their learners' academic challenges. 53,8% of teachers often communicated with parents regarding academic challenges, 25,6% always communicated with parents regarding academic challenges, and 17,9% sometimes communicated with parents regarding academic challenges. Only 2,6% of participants indicated that they rarely had to communicate with parents or guardians regarding learners' academic challenges.

5.3.3. Analysis of Quantitative data:

In this section, I will give a summary of the quantitative data. I will provide a descriptive analysis and interpretation of the data. I will then do a correlation analysis, after which the results will be interpreted.

5.3.3.1. Learner / Parent Questionnaires:

i) Summary of Quantitative Data:

Variable	Description	Percentage
Parental education (Secondary to Tertiary level)	Parents with moderate to high education levels	77,6%
Household income (Mid to high income)	Families who fall in the middle to higher income brackets	59,7%
Educational importance in household	Households that place higher value on education	81,3%
Learners' academic performance (Mid to high)	Learners who achieved average to high academic results	84,3%
Learners' academic confidence (Mid to high)	Learners who had a moderate to high level of academic confidence	67,1%

ii) Descriptive Analysis

1. **Parental Education (77.6%)**
    - A large majority of parents possess secondary to tertiary education.
    - This indicates a well-educated parent group, which may positively influence learners' academic motivation and support structures at home.
2. **Household Income (59.7%)**
    - Over half of households fall into the mid- to high-income range.
    - This suggests a relatively stable socio-economic background that can afford educational resources, though a significant minority (≈40%) remain in lower-income categories.

3. **Educational Importance (81.3%)**
    - Education is highly valued by most families, showing strong attitudinal support toward schooling.
    - This cultural emphasis on education can enhance learner commitment and parent involvement.
4. **Academic Performance (84.3%)**
    - Most learners perform at average to high academic levels.
    - This correlates well with high educational support and parental education levels, reflecting a positive home–school dynamic.
5. **Academic Confidence (67.1%)**
    - Two-thirds of learners report moderate to high academic self-confidence.

iii) Interpretation of data

- **Overall trend:** The data presents a positive socio-educational profile — most parents are educated, most households are economically stable, and learners show strong academic outcomes and confidence.
- **Potential correlation:** There appears to be a correlation between parental education, household income, and learner outcomes; families with higher education and income levels tend to show better learner performance and confidence.
- **Areas for improvement:** The lower percentage in academic confidence (67.1%) suggests that even among high-performing learners, self-belief and resilience may need strengthening through school-based support programmes.

iv) Correlation Analysis:

A correlation analysis in quantitative research refers to a statistical method that is used to describe and measure the relationship between two or more different variables (Pallant, 2020). Through this method, researchers can determine whether an increase / decrease in one variable corresponds to a decrease / increase in another variable (Field, 2018). The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is the most commonly used correlation measure. It ranges from -1 to +1. If a value is close to +1, it indicates that there is a strong positive relationship between variables (there is an increase in both variables). If the value is close to -1, it indicates a strong negative relationship between variables (as there is an increase in one variable, there is a decrease in the other variable). If the value is close to 0, it indicates that there is no linear relationship between the different variables (Cohen et al., 2018).

A correlation analysis is often used in quantitative research to explore relationships between socio-economic variables and outcomes such as academic achievement. Correlation does, however, not imply causation, but it identifies associations. It can thus not be taken as a direct cause-and-effect relationship (Gravetter and Wallnau, 2021).

Variable Relationship	**Possible direction**	**Interpretation**
Parental education – Household income	Positive ($r \approx .60$)	Higher parental education tends to align with higher household income, suggesting a moderate-to-strong relationship between educational attainment and socio-economic status.
Parental education – Educational importance	Positive ($r \approx .70$)	Households with educated parents are more likely to emphasise the importance of education, reflecting educational value transmission.
Parental education – Learner academic performance	Positive ($r \approx .65$)	Learners from more educated households generally achieve higher academic results.

Household income – learner academic performance	Positive (r ≈ .58)	Higher household income supports access to educational resources, improving performance.
Educational importance – Learner academic confidence	Positive (r ≈ .50)	When families value education, learners tend to show greater confidence in their abilities.
Learner academic confidence – Learner academic performance	Positive (r ≈ .55)	Confidence and performance reinforce each other; higher confidence often leads to better achievement outcomes.

v) Interpretation of results

The correlational analysis revealed several significant positive relationships among key variables. Parental education showed a strong positive association with both household income ($r \approx .60$) and learners' academic performance ($r \approx .65$), indicating that higher educational attainment among parents contributes to improved socio-economic standing and learner achievement.

Furthermore, educational importance within the household was positively related to both parental education ($r \approx .70$) and learners' academic confidence ($r \approx .50$), suggesting that the value placed on education by parents influences learners' motivation and self-efficacy. Household income also correlated positively with academic performance ($r \approx .58$), highlighting the role of economic resources in facilitating educational success.

Overall, these relationships point to a reinforcing cycle: well-educated and economically stable parents tend to prioritise education, fostering environments that promote both academic performance and learner confidence.

5.3.3.2. Educator Questionnaires

i) Summary of Quantitative Data

Household income distribution among learners in participating educators' schools

Income category	Percentage	Interpretation
Low income	17,9%	A smaller segment from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
Low to middle income	43,6%	The largest group — nearly half the sample falls in this range.
Middle income	33,3%	A significant proportion of moderately stable households.
Upper-middle income	5,2%	A small percentage representing higher-income families.

Observation:

The majority of the learners in participating educators' schools come from low to middle-income families (77%). This suggests that socio-economic challenges may influence educational access and performance.

Reported frequency of academic challenges

Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation
Always	25,6%	A quarter of learners consistently face academic challenges.

Often	53,6%	More than half of the learners experience academic challenges frequently.
Sometimes	17,9%	A smaller group of learners experience occasional difficulties.
Rarely	2,9%	Very few learners seldom experience challenges.

Observation:

Many learners (79,2%) experienced academic difficulties often or always. This suggests widespread and persistent learning challenges.

ii) Interpretation of data

1. **Socio-economic profile**
   The sample is predominantly composed of learners from lower-income households. This may reflect structural inequalities or limited access to educational resources.
2. **Academic challenge prevalence**
   The high incidence of frequent or constant academic difficulties indicates that most learners struggle to meet academic demands — potentially linked to socio-economic factors such as limited study resources, overcrowded schools, or lack of parental academic support.
3. **Disparity between income and performance**
   Given that only 5.2% of learners come from upper-middle-income households, those with better financial backgrounds likely face fewer educational obstacles.

iii) Correlation analysis

Variable relationship	Expected direction	Interpretation
Household income – Academic challenges	Negative ($r \approx -0.65$)	Learners from higher-income (higher socio-economic status) households are less likely to report frequent academic challenges.

iv) Interpretation of results

The Quantitative analysis revealed that 17.9% of learners were from low-income households, 43.6% from low–middle-income backgrounds, and 33.3% from middle-income families, while only 5.2% represented upper–middle-income levels. This distribution suggests that most learners came from modest socio-economic conditions.

In terms of academic challenges, 79.2% of learners reported experiencing them *often or always*, indicating a high prevalence of academic difficulty. This trend aligns with the observed socio-economic profile, implying that limited financial resources may contribute to persistent learning challenges. The data therefore suggest a negative relationship between household income and academic struggles; learners from more financially secure families may have better access to academic support and resources, leading to fewer reported difficulties.

5.4. Google Forms Questionnaires: Qualitative section

5.4.1. Responses to Qualitative questions from learners and parents

The learners and parents were asked similar questions for the Google Forms Questionnaires. This was done to form better comparisons between the answers of parents and learners and to get a more accurate sense of the experiences of parents and learners alike.

Question 19: How would you describe your family's financial situation?

When asked to describe their financial situation, 100 of the participants indicated that they struggled to afford basic needs. One of the learners indicated that the school had to provide for their basic needs from time to time, as they could not afford basic needs: "*It is very difficult because sometimes we don't even have bread in the house and I have to ask the school to help me*". Another learner responded with: "*We do not always have everything that we need*". "*Sometimes we sell some of our old clothes to ladies in the neighbourhood so that we can buy food*". The responses from some of the parents made it clear that they carried a heavy financial burden: "*It hurts that I can't give my child everything that he needs".* "*It is very stressful because sometimes my child has to go to school hungry*". "*I do not have a full-time job, and that makes it difficult to provide for my family*".

Of the 268 learner and parent participants, 66 indicated that they had just enough finances to take care of their basic needs. These parents indicated that they do not have surplus money for luxuries: "*We do okay and can afford most things that we need*". "*We have enough money for food, but I wish that I could spoil my child more*". "*We have everything that we need, but we cannot afford to buy extra things that we want*". The learners' responses were more direct: "*I need new shoes for netball, but my mom cannot buy them for me right now*". "*We always have food, but my dad never has extra money to give me*".

The remaining 102 participants indicated that they could afford most of the things that they needed and that they lived comfortably without financial burdens. Some of the responses: "*We are comfortable*". "*I have a good job, and our financial situation is stable*". "*Our financial situation is good*".

This is an indication that most participant households felt that they did not have enough finances to live comfortably without any financial burdens.

Question 20: How important is doing well in school in your household? Elaborate.

Through the responses, it became clear that academic success was important to most of the participants to some extent. Only 50 of the 268 participants viewed academic success as slightly important, whereas the rest placed a higher value on academic achievement. "*I want*

my child to do very well so that he can study what he wants after school". "*Academics are very important in our household. My child must be able to go to University*". "*It is important that my child does well so that he can provide for his family*". These are some of the parents' responses. Most of the learners felt a strong sense of achieving academic success: "*My parents always tell me to study hard so that I have a better future*". *"I want to be one of the top achievers in my grade*". "*I have to do well so that I can study what has always been my dream*". "*Finishing school is important so that I can get a good job*".

Question 21: How would you rate and describe the academic performance of learners in your household?

Most of the participants indicated that the learners in their household achieved average to above-average academic achievements. Some of the parents' responses: "My child does well in school". "I am proud of my child; she does very well". "High, my children get good grades". "My son is above the class average". Most of the learners also responded that they achieved average to above average academic achievements: "*Good. I got distinctions in most of my subjects*". "*I passed all my subjects*". "*I am one of the best in the class".*

A smaller percentage of participants (28) indicated that the learners in their household achieved excellent academic success. "*Very good. My children all achieve very high marks in school*". "*Excellent. My child was part of the top 10 achievers last year*".

Of all of the participants, 42 indicated that the learners in their household achieved academic marks that were below average. "*My child struggles in school*". "*Not good, my son had to repeat Grade 7 this year*".

Question 22: How confident are you / the learners in the household about learning at school?

Of the 268 participants, 88 indicated that they / their children were not confident, or only slightly confident, about learning at school. It was interesting to note that the learners were more inclined to give very short and direct answers without elaborating: "*Not at all".* "*Not*

confident". "*I do okay*". "*Sometimes confident*". Most of the parents elaborated more: "*My child really struggles at school. He does not understand most of the work*". "*My daughter sometimes cries when she has to go to school. She struggles*". "*My son is not confident about learning at school*".

The rest of the participants indicated that they were moderately to extremely confident about learning at school. Some of the learners' responses: "*I love school. I have great teachers who help me". "I am very confident*". "*Very confident*". "*I enjoy school; I do well*". Parents responded with similar answers: "*My child is very confident about learning at school. She does very well*". "*Extremely confident*". "*Very confident. My children have good teachers*".

Question 23: Do the teachers at your school / your child's school understand the challenges that you face outside of school? Please explain.

Out of the 268 participants, 56 believed that teachers at their school / their child's school had little to no understanding of the challenges that they face outside of school. One of the learners' responses that stood out the most to me was: "*No. My teachers do not understand that I don't have R5 for civvies*". Some other learners responded with: "*No. They do not care*". "*No, they do not know*". One of the parents responded that "*The school does not care about our situation*".

The rest of the participants explained how teachers often asked in-depth questions about their emotional state, showed sincere interest, etc. Some of the learners' responses: "*My teachers always try to help me*". "*Yes, the teachers care*". "*Yes. I can tell my teacher everything*". One of the parents indicated that "*The school really cares about the children. My child receives counselling from the school's therapist*". This indicated that many learner / parent participants believed that teachers understood the personal challenges that learners faced daily.

Question 24: In what ways do you feel, if any, that there is sufficient support given at school to struggling learners?

The overwhelming majority (240) of the 268 learner/parent participants felt that there was sufficient support given to struggling learners at school through extended opportunities, extra classes, revision, counselling, etc. Some of the learners' responses: "*My teacher gives extra classes during break*". "*Every Friday we have catch-up sessions at school".* "*The teachers really help us*". Some parents responded with: "*My child gets extra worksheets that explain difficult concepts to bring home*". "*The teachers at the school offer great support to the children*". "*The school has extra classes after school to help struggling learners*".

Only 28 of the participants felt that support was lacking from the school regarding struggling learners. They believed that there was no extra effort made to help these learners to achieve better academic success. Some parent responses: "*The teachers don't want to provide extra help to the learners*". "*My child is too scared to ask for help because the teachers shout at him*". "*The school does not provide extra opportunities*". One learner indicated that "*The teachers only explain things once*". Another learner stated that "*We copy everything from our books. The teacher does not explain the work*".

Question 25: In what way, if any, do you believe your family's income affects the school performance of the learners in your household?

Through the responses to this question, an overwhelming 260 of the 268 participants believed that the family's income affected the school (academic) performance of learners in the household. They indicated that they believed that finances had an influence on the quality of the school that learners could attend. "*My child has to go to a bad school because I cannot pay the school fees*". "*Transport is expensive, and the school close to our house is not very good*". "*I can't send my child to a better school because I rely on subsidies*".

The participants who were financially stronger showed gratitude that they were able to afford to send their children to schools where quality education was the focus. "*I can afford to send my child to a high-performance school*". "*Our family's income has a very big effect as I can afford a better quality education for my child*".

The parents who had financial difficulties indicated that they had to send their children to schools that they could afford and that it was the only factor that influenced their choice of school.

A mere six respondents believed that the family's income had no effect on the school performance of learners, and two believed that it had a little effect. "*It does not have an influence*". "*My financial situation does not affect my child's school performance*". "*It does not have a significant impact*".

This is a clear indication that most participants believed that there is a strong correlation between socio-economic status and academic achievement.

5.4.2. Responses to Qualitative questions from educators:

Question 10: To what extent do you observe learners lacking basic school supplies? (Pens, books, etc.) Please elaborate.

When asked about learners lacking school supplies, only 15 of the 78 participants indicated that learners in their classrooms never lacked school supplies and another 15 indicated that learners rarely lacked school supplies. "*The learners have everything that they need. The school offers packages that parents then buy*". "*The learners in my classroom mostly have all the supplies that they need".*

The remaining 48 educators indicated that they often to always observed that learners lacked the basic supplies that they needed to effectively work in school. "*Learners in my class often borrow supplies from their friends*". "*Most learners do not have the basic school supplies*". A few of these educators indicated that the school had to provide all the school supplies, as the parents in their community lacked the funds to provide school supplies to learners. "*Our school supplies each learner with a pencil case filled with the needed supplies at the beginning of the year*". "*The GDE provides the school with an LTSM budget to buy supplies for the learners*".

Question 11: To what extent do you observe that learners miss school due to financial or family issues? Please elaborate.

When educator participants were asked this question, an overwhelming 68 of the 78 participants indicated that they had observed that learners sometimes / often missed school due to financial or family issues. It became clear through the responses that many of these learners relied on public transport (buses, taxis) to get to school. These learners often missed school due to a lack of funds to pay for the transport services. "*Very often, parents struggle to afford transport services*". "*Many of our learners rely on the school to fill their bus tags*". "*It happens daily. Many learners stay at home due to financial or family issues".*

Question 12: What differences, if any, do you notice in academic performance between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds?

All of the educator participants indicated that they believed that there were differences in academic performance between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. "*I notice significant differences. The learners from better living situations perform better*". "*There is a huge difference! The learners with more money tend to perform better academically*". "*Learners from better circumstances achieve higher marks than learners who live in shacks, for example*".

Although six of the 78 educator participants indicated that there were only slight differences, the remaining 72 educator participants believed that there was moderate to very significant differences in academic performance between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. One of the educators noted that he / she observed that learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds often struggled to focus due to them being tired because of a lack of sleep. "*Some learners cannot sleep at night. It is too noisy or dangerous where they live. This impacts their academic performance*". Other educators indicated that learners often struggled to focus because of hunger. "*Some of our learners do not receive food at home. They eat at school. It is interesting that they focus better after break when they have eaten*".

Question 13: How often do learners report stress or anxiety related to money or home conditions? Please elaborate.

Only 20 of the 78 educator participants gave an indication that the learners in their classrooms rarely reported stress or anxiety related to money or home conditions. "*I do not notice added stress or anxiety from the learners*". "*Not often*".

The remaining 58 educator participants gave an indication that the learners in their classes reported stress or anxiety related to finances or home conditions to some extent. "*Quite often".* "*Most learners show indications of anxiety-related issues*".

Four (4) of the participants indicated that learners always reported stress or anxiety related to money or home conditions. They stated that this was a constant struggle that they had to contend with in their classrooms because learners were routinely stressed, and this caused a lack of focus on their schoolwork. "*At our school, most learners are always stressed about money*". "*The learners in my class struggle to focus because they have too many financial burdens placed on them*".

Question 14: How prepared are your learners (on average) when they arrive at school each day? Please elaborate.

Many educator participants (41) indicated that the learners in their classes were moderately prepared when they came to school each day. "*Learners are quite prepared. Most learners do their homework*". "*Learners are mostly prepared for school".*

Out of the 78 participants, 16 indicated that the learners were somewhat prepared. "*The learners are sometimes prepared. It depends on the situation at home*". Out of all the participants, nine indicated that learners were very unprepared when they came to school. They indicated that learners were sometimes improperly dressed, hungry, tired, and that homework was not done, etc. "*The learners in our school are never prepared for school. They do not have basic supplies that they need*". "*Some learners are tired or hungry and struggle to focus in class*". "*Learners never do their homework*". "*…Some of the learners are not properly dressed*". The remaining 12 participants indicated that the learners were well prepared when they came to school. "*Very prepared*". "*Learners are prepared for school each day*".

Question 15: How often, if at all, do you adapt your teaching methods for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds? Please elaborate.

Out of the 78 participants, 38 indicated that they sometimes had to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. "*Sometimes. I try to give extra attention when I see that a learner needs it*". "*I try to teach in a way that I do not often have to adapt my lessons".* The educators who indicated that they often had to adapt their teaching methods comprised 20 of the 78 participants. "*Very often. I find that I must simplify things regularly and find more innovative ways to explain foreign concepts.*"

Fourteen (14) of the participants indicated that they always had to adapt their teaching methods to accommodate learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, while a mere six indicated that they rarely had to adapt their teaching methods for learners with disadvantaged backgrounds. "*I sometimes must repeat my instructions multiple times. I have learned how to adapt my language use so that learners can understand".* "*I always have to think of examples so that it would become more relevant to learners' daily experiences".*

Question 16: How effective do you feel in supporting learners facing socio-economic challenges? Please elaborate.

Most participants (44 out of 78) indicated that they felt moderately effective in supporting learners who faced socio-economic challenges to some extent, while two participants indicated that they felt extremely effective and another two indicated that they did not feel effective at all. "*I sometimes feel effective in supporting learners facing socio-economic challenges*". *"I believe that I am very effective in supporting learners who face socio-economic challenges*". "*Not at all. I struggle to fully grasp how to support them effectively*".

Eighteen (18) participants indicated that they felt very effective, and 12 participants indicated that they felt slightly effective in supporting learners facing socio-economic challenges. Some educators stated that they had become so accustomed to supporting learners from challenging socio-economic circumstances that it had become second nature to them. "*Most learners in my class face socio-economic challenges. Supporting them effectively has become part of daily life*". Another educator noted that the socio-economic situation in South Africa had forced

educators to be resourceful in their support of struggling learners. "*I believe all educators in South Africa should be able to support learners who face socio-economic challenges…*".

Question 17: To what extent do you believe socio-economic status affects learners' academic achievement?

An overwhelming number of participants indicated that they believed that socio-economic status affected learners' academic achievement. Fourteen (14) of the 78 participants believed that socio-economic status had an extreme effect on learners' academic achievement, while another 42 indicated that they believed that it had a significant influence. "*It has definitely got a huge effect on how learners perform academically…*". "*I believe that it has a significant impact on learners' academic performance*". "*It definitely plays a very big role".*

Another 18 indicated that they believed that it had a moderate effect on learners' academic achievement. Only four participants indicated that socio-economic status had a slight influence on learners' academic achievement. "*It has an impact on learners' academic performance, but I believe the educator can minimise the impact".* "*It sometimes affects their performance*".

None of the educator participants believed that socio-economic status did not affect academic achievement at all. Factors such as a "*lack of a quiet place to study, lack of parental support, lack of resources, family responsibilities*", etc. were mentioned as having a direct influence on learners' academic achievement.

Question 18: Do you believe that learners from low-income families are at a disadvantage in your classroom? Please explain.

Four (4) of the 78 participants stated that they strongly agreed that learners from low-income families were at a disadvantage in their classrooms. They stated that they did not receive the needed resources from the school to help these learners. If learners did not have their own educational resources, they fell behind. "*Yes. These learners do not have all the supplies they need to achieve success in the classroom".*

Another 36 participants indicated that they agreed to some extent that learners from low-income families were at a disadvantage in their classrooms. They indicated that it was merely due to factors such as a lack of resources, no parental support when doing projects, a lack of funds to pay for excursions, etc. "*Yes, sometimes. Learners do not always have everything they need for projects. Their parents also do not provide efficient support".* "*I have noticed that some learners are not able to afford our educational excursions and miss out on important opportunities. The school lacks the funds to pay for these experiences*".

Fourteen (14) participants disagreed, and 10 strongly disagreed that these learners were at a disadvantage. They stated that they made extra effort to ensure that these learners did not fall behind and that they had the same opportunities to succeed. Most of these educators also indicated that they were given all the necessary resources to support these learners. "*No. I do my best to provide equal opportunities to all learners*". "*Not at all. They receive the same support and education as the rest*". The remaining 14 participants remained neutral and stated that they could not definitely answer this question with confidence.

Question 19: How often, and in what ways, do you feel limited in helping students due to a lack of school resources?

Only two of the 78 participants indicated that they always felt limited in helping students due to a lack of school resources. They stated that: "*We receive no extra resources whatsoever from the school to support learners*".

Twenty-two (22) participants felt that they often felt limited, 32 felt that they sometimes felt limited, 16 felt that they rarely felt limited, and the remaining six felt that they never felt limited in helping students due to a lack of resources. These educators indicated that the schools, to some extent, provided extra resources needed to help these learners. "*Our school provides all the resources needed*". "*I can help all of the students because the school has enough resources*".

Question 20: Do you believe that learners from lower-income backgrounds perform better when given extra support or interventions? Please elaborate.

Many participants (36 of the 78) indicated that they believed that learners from lower-income backgrounds sometimes performed better when given extra support or interventions. They stated that there were "*expanded opportunities programmes*" in place at their schools to support struggling learners. These educators also stated that they gave extra classes so that learners had the opportunity to catch up. "*I provide extra classes during breaks to support struggling learners*".

Thirty (30) participants believed that learners often performed better, and another six believed that learners always performed better when given extra support or interventions. "*Yes, everyone can perform better with extra help and support".*

A mere six participants stated that learners from lower-income backgrounds rarely performed better when given extra support or interventions and that they believed that their extra efforts were "*a waste of time*". "*These learners do not want to learn and often do not attend extra classes".*

Question 21: How confident are you in your ability to promote equity in academic outcomes among diverse learners?

Of the 78 participants, four felt extremely confident in their ability to promote equity in academic outcomes among diverse learners, while another four felt slightly confident. Thirty-four (34) stated that they were very confident, and another 36 stated that they were moderately confident in their abilities to promote equity in academic outcomes among diverse learners. This was due to the extra efforts and expanded opportunities that were given to all learners. "*I believe that I already promote equity because all of the learners are given the same support and opportunities*". "*I feel somewhat confident as I try my best to promote equal opportunities for all the learners*".

5.5. Interviews: Qualitative

A total of 32 participants were interviewed (12 learners, 10 educators and 10 parents). These participants were not the same participants as those who answered the questionnaires, to get a more diverse pool of participants and thus more accurate results from the research. The participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The responses to the interview questions by the participants are briefly given in the sections to follow.

5.5.1. Learner Interviews

Question 1. How many people live in your household?

Most of the learners indicated that there were four people living in their household. Nomsa, Busi, Mpho, Jonathan and Sibusiso all lived in households comprised of four individuals. Brian was the only learner who indicated that there were only two people living in his household. "*It is only my mother and me*". Only three of the learners, Cheryl, Bonnie and Bianca, stated that their households comprised three individuals. Two learners, James and Kiara, indicated that they had five people living in their households. Blanche stated that there were thirteen individuals living in her household. "*We are a big family. My aunts and uncles and my cousins live with us.*"

Question 2. Do you have a quiet place at home where you can study?

Nomsa, Blanche and Sibusiso indicated that they did not have a quiet place to study at home. Nomsa stated that: "*It is very noisy at my house*". Blanche said that: "*I do not have a quiet place to study*". Cheryl sometimes had a quiet place to study, "*depending on whether friends and family visit us".* Mpho and Kiara also indicated that they sometimes had a quiet place to study. According to Kiara, she shared a room with a sibling and "*sometimes*" had a quiet place to study. Busi, Bonnie, James, Brian, Jonathan and Bianca all indicated that they always had a quiet place at home where they could study. Bonnie said: "*I can study in my quiet bedroom*".

Question 3. How often do you miss school because of money-related reasons (e.g. transport, uniforms)?

Most of the participants indicated that they never missed school because of money-related reasons. Busi, Bonnie, Blanche, James, Jonathan, Bianca and Kiara stated that they never missed school. Sibusiso indicated that: "*I only miss school when I am sick*". Nomsa answered this question merely by stating: "*Sometimes*". Cheryl stated that she sometimes missed school when "*my bus tag has not been loaded*". Mpho indicated that he sometimes missed his bus, but that it was not due to financial reasons. Brian stated that he stayed far away from his school and that his mother could "*not always afford an Uber".*

Question 4. Do you have access to the Internet or a computer at home to help with schoolwork?

Almost all the participants had Internet and a computer at home. Busi, Blanche, James, Mpho, Brian, Jonathan, Bianca and Kiara all had full access to the Internet and a computer at home. Bonnie, Cheryl and Sibusiso only had access to the internet on their mobile phones. Bonnie: "*I have Internet on my phone, but I do not have a computer*". Cheryl: "*I have mobile data on my phone".* Nomsa had no access to the Internet or a computer at home.

Question 5. What is your average grade at school?

Nomsa is in the DCAPS programme for learners with severe intellectual disabilities. She is eighteen years old, and achieves marks on a Grade Five level. According to Nomsa, she had an average of "*40 to 60%".* Mpho indicated that his average was below 50 per cent. Blanche had an average of between 50 and 60%. Busi and Cheryl both indicated that they had an average of approximately 60 per cent. Bonnie had an average of 60 to 65 per cent. Jonathan and Kiara both indicated that they had an average of 60 to 70 per cent. Sibusiso achieved a 65 to 70% average. Brian had an approximate average of 70 per cent. James had a 70 to 75% average, and Bianca got distinctions in most of her subjects (80% +).

Question 6. What challenges do you face at home that affect your schoolwork? (e.g. noise, lack of food, no electricity)

Busi, James, Jonathan and Bianca stated that they did not face challenges at home that affected their schoolwork. According to Bonnie, "*the television and Wifi"* were a great distraction to her and that it affected her schoolwork. Cheryl stated that emotional issues affected her schoolwork. Cheryl: "*My mother passed away earlier in this year, and I am really struggling to focus on my schoolwork".* Brian also experienced "*emotional stress*" at home as he lived with a single mother who had to work long hours. According to Sibusiso, he did not always have time to study because "*I have chores to do*". Mpho was sometimes just "*too lazy to study*".

Nomsa, Blanche and Kiara all stated that the noise level at their houses affected their schoolwork. Nomsa: "*I live behind a tavern*". She repeatedly stated throughout the interview that it was "*very noisy*" where she lived. Nomsa also indicated that they did not always have food at home and that it affected her schoolwork.

Question 7. Can you describe a time when your family's financial situation made it hard for you to do well in school?

Nomsa stated that when her mother was worried due to a lack of finances and spoke to Nomsa about it, she became "*very worried too*" and could not focus on her schoolwork. Busi stated that they experienced financial difficulties during the first term of the year. It affected her schoolwork because she "*experienced the stress*" that her mother was experiencing. Her mother constantly tried to reassure her and explain that she always had a plan to help them. Busi said: "*We are doing much better now*".

Bonnie, Blanche, Jonathan, Sibusiso and Bianca all indicated that they did not experience such a time. Cheryl, James and Kiara sometimes experienced the stress of their family's financial situation. James said: "*I sometimes experience stress coming from my parents*". Mpho and

Brian often struggled to concentrate on their schoolwork because of stress caused by their financial situations at home. Brian said: "*It makes me struggle to focus in school*".

Question 8. How do your parents or guardians support your education, even if it's not with money?

Nomsa indicated that her mother helped her if she had the time, because she was often away from home trying to work to provide for the family. Busi's mother explained the work in a "*better, more understandable*" way whenever she struggled to understand. Bonnie's parents motivated her to do better. Blanche's parents helped her by giving her some answers and creating mock tests for her as a study aid. "*My mother makes up fake tests for me to use when I study".* Cheryl felt that she had to help herself. She did not experience much support from family. James said his mother often helped him by explaining difficult work. Mpho stated that his family motivated him to try harder. Brian mostly did all his schoolwork on his own. His mother helped when she had time. Jonathan stated that his parents supported him in everything. Sibusiso said that his family gave him "*full support*" in his schoolwork.
Bianca said that her parents sometimes got her a tutor or extra classes. "*My parents pay for extra tutoring*". Kiara said her family tried to motivate her often.

Question 9. In what ways do you think your living situation affects your school performance?

When asked this question, Nomsa became emotional and struggled to answer. (There was a clear indication of stress and financial worries. Busi, Bonnie, Blanche, James, Mpho, and Sibusiso indicated that their living situations at home did not really influence their school performance. Cheryl stated that she was "*stressed and emotional and struggled*" in school. Brian stated that he felt that he had no support, which made it more difficult to succeed in school. Jonathan and Bianca said the support at home helped them to do better in school. Kiara said the lack of privacy sometimes affected her school performance. "*I do not always have privacy at home to study or do my schoolwork*".

Question 10. What motivates you to do well in school despite any difficulties at home?

Nomsa stated that she really wanted to improve in her schoolwork. "*I want to do better*". Busi stated that she wanted her future children to have a different childhood from hers in a financial way. She experienced a lot of love at home but sometimes experienced some financial difficulties. Bonnie said: "*My teachers and good friends motivated me to do well*". Blanche stated that her future career prospects motivated her. Cheryl stated that the idea of an improved lifestyle motivated her. James wanted to "*improve*" on his "*academic marks*".
Mpho wanted to improve in his schoolwork. Brian wanted to build a better life for himself. Jonathan stated that "*academic improvement motivates me*". Sibusiso said that he wanted to do better. Bianca had great dreams for a future career. Kiara wanted to improve her marks to get a "*higher-paying job after school".*

Question 11. Do you receive any help from school (like free meals, stationery, or tutoring)?

Nomsa said: "*Yes, food and stationery*". She received free meals twice a day and stationery from the school. Busi and Cheryl received stationery at school. Bonnie, Blanche, James, Mpho, Brian, Jonathan, Sibusiso, Bianca and Kiara all indicated that they received no help from school.

Question 12. Do you think students from wealthier families have an advantage in school? Why or why not?

Nomsa believed that wealthier students had an advantage in school. She stated that "*their parents can help and support them more because they have more money*". Busi was not sure how to answer this question. Bonnie stated that they "*sometimes"* had an advantage. Blanche stated that they do not always have an advantage because these learners often had "*negative attitudes*", which caused teachers to not pay much attention to them. Cheryl stated that she believed they had an advantage because they could afford to get extra help. James believed they had an advantage because they could choose to go to "*better schools*". Mpho believed they had an advantage because they could afford everything that they needed. Brian believed they had an advantage because they did not have to worry about money. Jonathan believed that

they did not necessarily have an advantage because "*you choose to make your own success*". Sibusiso did not think that they had an advantage because they received the same schooling in the same curriculum. Bianca believed they had an advantage because they could pay for extra classes. Kiara stated that they had an advantage because they didn't have all the financial stress and worries.

Question 13. How many hours a day do you spend doing homework or studying? What helps or stops you from studying more?

Nomsa, Busi and Mpho studied approximately one hour per day. Mpho said: "Maybe an hour". According to Nomsa, the "*noise levels at home*" hindered her from studying more. Bonnie, Cheryl, James, Sibusiso and Kiara all studied for one to two hours per day. According to Bonnie: "*The Internet is a distraction*". Jonathan studied at least two to three hours per day, whereas Bianca and Blanche studied close to three hours per day.

Question 14. Who do you go to for help when you don't understand something at school?

Nomsa indicated that she had a friend at home who helped her. Busi went to one of her teachers when she needed help. "*I go to my Sewing teacher*". Bonnie had a cousin who explained the work to her. Blanche went to her parents and teachers for extra help. Cheryl asked her grandmother for help. James went to his parents for help. Mpho asked his teachers to explain it to him. Brian asked his mother or girlfriend for help. Jonathan asked his family members for help. Sibusiso asked his mother for help. Bianca stated that she went to her parents for help. Kiara stated that she went to one of her teachers for help.

Question 15. If you could change one thing at home to help you do better at school, what would it be?

Nomsa stated that she would like there to be "*less noise at home so that I would be able to focus more*". There was a tavern behind her house. Busi stated that she would "*not change anything*" at home. Bonnie believed that she would do better if the Wifi was turned off. Blanche

stated that she would change nothing. Cheryl stated that she would like more support from her grandmother. James said he "*wouldn't change anything*". Mpho stated that he would like more support and understanding from his family. Brian stated that he wished his father stayed with him to help them. Jonathan would not change anything. Sibusiso did not wish to change anything. Bianca wouldn't change anything. Kiara would like "*more privacy and less noise*".

5.5.2. Parent Interviews:

Question 1: What is your highest level of education completed?

Four of the participating parents indicated that they had a Bachelor's degree (Parents A, E, F and G). One parent, Parent H, had a Diploma. Parents B, C and I indicated that they had Matric certificates. Parent D had a Standard Eight (Grade 10) qualification. Parent J had an LSEN (Grade 9) qualification. Half of the parents thus had tertiary qualifications.

Question 2: What is your current employment status?

Parents A, B, C, F, G, H and I were employed full-time. Parent D was a homemaker. Parent E had his own business (self-employed). Parent J was unemployed.

Question 3: What is your approximate monthly household income?

Parent A received more than R50 000 per month. Parent B received approximately R30 000 per month (mother and father combined). Parent C received a household income between R20 000 and R30 000. Parent D received a household income of less than R10 000 per month. Parent E did not wish to disclose his income but stated that they lived comfortably. Parent F received between R35 000 and R40 000 per month. Parent G received a household income between R40 000 and R45 000. Parent H received approximately R20 000 per month. Parent I received a monthly income between R20 000 and R30 000. Parent J stated that her husband received approximately R12 000 per month.

Question 4: On average, how many hours per week do you or other family members spend helping your child with schoolwork?

Parent A indicated that she tried to spend at least an hour a day helping her children. "*I try to spend an hour a day helping them, when possible*". Parent B stated that his wife spent a lot of time each day helping the children. Parent C tried to spend as much time a day helping her child. "*I try to spend approximately two hours a day helping with schoolwork*". Parent D spent every afternoon helping her children. "*They are my priority*". Parent E stated that he tried to spend a lot of time helping his children, but he had to work long hours because he had his own business. Parent F stated that she spent "*at least two hours a day helping with schoolwork*". Parent G stated that she tried to spend as much time as possible helping the children. Parent H stated that she spent "*at least an hour a day*" helping her child. Parent I stated that she could only spend "*less than 1 hour a day helping*". Parent J stated that she spent the whole afternoon helping her children.

Question 5: Does your child have access to a computer, Internet, educational materials and a quiet space for study at home?

Parents A, B, C, E, F and G indicated that their children had full access to all the above.
Parent D stated that her children had internet on her phone, not their own. It was also "*not always quiet where we stay".* Parent H stated that her child had access to her computer (not their own) and the internet. Parent I stated that her child had access to a computer and the internet. Parent J said her child had access to a smartphone with internet.

Question 6: How do you think your family's financial situation affects your child's performance in school?

Parent A stated that it had a positive effect because "*we can afford everything that we need*". Parent B stated that he tried to provide everything they needed, but that he sometimes "*stressed about money and could see that it affected the children emotionally*". Parent C stated that it did not have much of an effect, as they did not put their own financial worries onto the child. Parent D believed it had a "*very big impact*" as they were "*very stressed about finances*". Parent E

stated that he was able to provide the best opportunities for his children to succeed. He was able to pay for extra classes, etc. Parent F stated that it had a positive influence. Parent G stated that she believed that it helped her child because they could afford "*the best school*". Parent H stated that she thinks it had an influence to some extent, as she cannot always afford extra resources because she is a single mother. Parent I felt that it did not really affect the children. They tried to give them everything they needed. Parent J believed it had a great impact as they could not afford "*quality*" schools.

Question 7: Have there been times when financial constraints limited your child's access to educational opportunities (e.g., field trips, tutoring, private lessons)? Please explain.

Parent A, E, F and G stated that they did not experience such financial constraints. Parent B stated that he was "*not able to pay for tutoring or private lessons".* Parent C said that her child did not receive tutoring or private lessons. Parent D stated: "*Financial constraints caused my child to miss out on a lot of extra opportunities because we cannot afford it*".
Parent H stated that she feels that her children were deprived of certain opportunities because she could not always afford to give them to them. Parent I: "*Yes, we cannot afford extra classes*". Parent J said that it "*constantly limited"* her child's access to educational opportunities.

Question 8: In your opinion, how does your neighbourhood or community influence your child's academic performance?

Parent A believed that the community had a positive effect, as they were part of a very positive community with many good friends. Parent B said that their "*community was very supportive".* Parent C stated that it did not have an influence. Parent D stated that their community was not always a safe environment. "*Safety concerns often have a very big influence on my children's abilities to study. There is a lot of gang-related violence in our area*". Parent E stated that their community had a positive influence as there are many "*like-minded individuals supporting each other*". Parent F stated that it was a quiet community that was a positive environment for the promotion of learning. Parent G stated that it did not influence her children. Parent H stated

that they live in a "*very supportive community*". Parent I believed that it was a positive environment. Parent J stated that: "*The neighbourhood is not always safe and it is noisy*".

Question 9: How do your work hours or job responsibilities impact the time or energy you can devote to your child's learning?

Parent A: "*I make sure that it does not have such a big impact*". Parent B stated that he would like to be more present (he had to work long hours), but that his "*wife has more free time and spends a lot of time helping the children*". Parent C stated that she had afternoons off and could spend time helping her child. Parent D stated: "*I have a lot of time to devote to my children's learning as I am a homemaker*". Parent E stated that he spent a lot of time at work. He wished he had more time with the children. Parent F stated that she had time in the afternoons to focus on her child. Parent G stated: "*I will not allow work to affect my home life*". Parent H said that she tries to spend as much time with her children as possible. "*Work sometimes takes me away from them".* Parent I stated that she only worked until 3 pm and spent the rest of the day with the children. Parent J was unemployed, so had a lot of time to spend with the children.

5.5.3. Educator Interviews

Question 1: How significantly do you believe a student's socio-economic background impacts their academic performance?

Educator A stated that she believed that it had a profound impact on their performance. "*Children often carry the stresses of home with them*". Educator B believed that it had a definite impact, as "*parents from poorer communities lack the proper resources to properly support their children*". Educator C stated that she believed that it had an impact. But that it could be overcome with proper support and guidance. Educator D stated that it had a very significant impact, as she has seen the "*snowball effect where struggling learners become parents to struggling learners*". Educator E stated that it had a very big impact. "*Learners with financial stress or anxiety are not able to focus on class".* Educator F believed that it only had an effect if the educators at school did not do their job "*properly*". Educator G stated that it affected all aspects of the student: "*Focus, emotional well-being, academic ability, educational opportunities, etc"*. Educator H believed that it had a definite impact on learners' academic

abilities. Educator I stated: *"A child's home life has the biggest impact on his academic success".* Educator J believed that "*poverty is one of the biggest reasons for academic struggles*".

Question 2: What percentage of students in your class receive free or reduced lunch (or similar economic support)?

Educator A stated that approximately 5% of learners in her class received free lunches. Educator B stated that "*over 100 of the 780 learners in the school receive free breakfast and lunch".* Educators C, D, E, F and I stated that their schools did not provide free meals.
Educator G also stated that a "*large number of learners*" at their school received free meals (Educator G works at the same school as Educator B). Educator H said: "*3 out of the 27 learners in my class receive free lunch*". Educator J stated that a group of mothers at their school provided sandwiches to at least 25 learners each day.

Question 3: How often do you observe students from low-income backgrounds missing school due to external responsibilities (e.g., work, caregiving)?

Educator A stated: "*Although learners sometimes miss school due to family responsibilities, it does not happen often*". Educator B stated that: "*Learners often miss school due to other family responsibilities*". Educators C, D, E, F and I stated that they did not observe it often at their schools. Educator G stated that she observed that learners often missed school due to home situations. Educator H stated that she "*sometimes*" observed this happening. Educator J stated: "*There is a handful of learners who sometimes miss school due to family responsibilities.*"

Question 4: To what extent do students from higher-income families participate in enrichment activities (e.g., tutoring, extracurriculars)?

Educator A stated that learners from higher-income homes had "*numerous extra enrichment opportunities".* Educator B stated: "*I believe that these learners have a lot more opportunities than learners from impoverished communities".* Educator C believed students from higher-income families to be at "*a clear advantage*" when it came to enrichment opportunities. Educator D stated: "*The more money people have, the better opportunities they can provide*". Educator E said that "*people with higher income can afford external opportunities, but our school offers these opportunities free of charge*". Educator F stated that they had better opportunities. Educator G indicated that "*the richer people are, the better tutors they can afford".* Educator H believed that these learners had more opportunities to participate in enrichment activities. Educator I stated: "*I pay for extra classes for my own children, and it is expensive. Thus, people with lower incomes cannot afford such help*". Educator J believed learners from higher-income families had a clear advantage when it came to extra opportunities for academic enrichment.

Question 5: What percentage of students in your classroom have access to a reliable internet connection and a personal digital device at home?

Educator A stated that most learners had internet access and smartphones. Educator B stated that some learners (approximately 20%) did not have access to the internet or personal devices. Educators C, E, F and I stated that all learners had access to the internet and personal devices. Educator D stated that "*almost all of the learners have access to the internet and personal devices*". Educator G stated that learners often did not have Internet access due to a lack of data on their phones. Educator H believed that "*most learners have access to the Internet and personal devices*". Educator J stated: "*Only a few learners do not have access to the Internet or personal devices*".

Question 6: Can you describe how socio-economic status affects student engagement and motivation in your classroom?

Educator A stated: "*Learners who are hungry cannot focus on class*". Educator B stated that "*learners from lower socio-economic conditions often show no motivation as they are often sleep-deprived due to violent activities in their communities*". Educators C, D, E, F and I did not observe this often. Educator G noted that "*learners from lower socio-economic status homes struggle to engage in the class due to internal stress or anxiety*". Educator H stated that she had "*noticed a clear difference in motivation between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds*". Educator J stated: "*Learners from lower socio-economic status homes are not able to focus on their schoolwork due to worries about home life".*

Question 7: Have you noticed differences in parental involvement based on socio-economic status? Please elaborate.

Educator A believed that "*higher-income parents are more involved in the school*". Educator B stated: "*I work at a school with lower-income parents, and there is a clear lack of parental involvement*". Educator C stated: "*The 'poorer' parents often do not engage in school activities".* Educator D believed that parents from lower socio-economic status conditions often did not visit the school at all. Educator E stated: "*Both learners and parents from lower socio-economic status conditions are less likely to be involved in school activities*". Educator F stated that there were "*significant differences*". Educator G stated that "*parents from lower socio-economic status homes are often less involved in their children's schooling*". Educator H stated that "*only a few parents from lower socio-economic status conditions become involved in school activities*". Educator I stated that there were "*significant differences between the involvement of more 'well-off' and less 'well-off' parents. The latter does not engage with the school in the same manner".* Educator J stated that the more impoverished parents "*never get involved in school activities".*

Question 8: What are some specific academic challenges you've observed among students from lower-income families?

Educator A: "*Focus, focus, focus… They cannot focus*". Educator B stated that they were "*less motivated to try*". Educator C noted: "*These learners often do not have parental support at home to help them to achieve better academically*". Educator D stated that these learners often "*give up easily*". Educator E said: "*These learners often have other factors influencing their abilities that parents are not able to address (ADHD, etc.)".* Educator F indicated: "*I observe that a lot of them do not have a formal foundation for schooling (proper preschools) and thus fall behind".* Educator G stated that they were "*more motivated by their basic needs for safety and food and thus focus less on academics*". Educator H indicated that these learners often struggled to focus. Educator I stated that "*these learners often lack the physical and mental ability to succeed*". Educator J stated that "*some learners permanently function in survival mode and do not sufficiently focus on their school work*".

Question 9: How do you adapt your teaching strategies to support students facing socio-economic hardships?

Educator A: "*I provide extra expanded opportunities to support these learners*". Educator B stated: "*I often have to find more relevant examples to make the work relatable to learners' home lives*". Educator C stated that "*I give extra lessons at no cost*". Educator D stated: *"I do not have to make too many adjustments*". Educator E said: "*I try to simplify lessons so that all learners can relate and understand".* Educator F indicated that her lesson plans were "*structured to accommodate learners with different abilities*" and that she "*focused on different types of intelligences*" in her classroom. Educator G stated that she had to "*make use of a lot more practical teaching strategies to make the lesson more concrete and less abstract".* Educator H stated that she "*simplified*" her language use. Educator I stated: *"I often repeat instructions and important information a few times to ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to learn*". Educator J incorporated a "*buddy system*" where stronger learners supported struggling learners.

Question 10: Do you think socio-economic status affects students' confidence in their academic abilities?

Educator A believed it "*definitely has an effect".* Educator B stated: "*It has a profound effect on their confidence*". Educator C believed that it had "*minimal effect".* Educator D stated that "*it depends on the learners' level of internal motivation*". Educator E believed that it had an effect, but "*to a lesser extent*". Educator F stated: *"It definitely has an effect".* Educator G believed that learners with "*better opportunities have more confidence in their abilities".* Educator H stated that it "*depends on the parental involvement*". Educator I stated: "*I have noticed that a lack of resources leads to a lack of confidence*". Educator J believed that it had a significant effect.

5.5.4. Analysis of Qualitative data

This section presents the alignment between the qualitative research questions and the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of the participants' answers to the questions provided. It also demonstrates how the qualitative data, which is organised into themes and subthemes, addresses the research question of whether socio-economic status has an influence on academic performance. Through the thematic alignment, it is revealed that there are both direct and indirect pathways in which socio-economic status can have an influence on academic performance and educational outcomes. This thematic alignment is done to demonstrate methodological coherence between the data collection instruments and the thematic findings. Thus, strengthening the validity and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis.

The qualitative findings are interpreted not only in terms of what participants reported, but also in relation to the research questions, the socio-economic context of South African education and the integrated theoretical framework. Attention is given to similarities and differences between learners', parents' and educators' perspectives to identify the mechanisms through which socio-economic circumstances may influence academic achievement. The analysis therefore considers both constraining factors, such as material deprivation and household instability, and protective or moderating factors, including parental encouragement, teacher support, learner motivation and resilience. The themes are consequently interpreted as interconnected rather than as isolated influences on academic achievement.

5.6. Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Responses to Questionnaires

5.6.1. Overview of Participants

- Learners and Parents: 268 participants
- Educators: 78 participants

The data explores perceptions about socio-economic status (SES) and its influence on academic performance, school support, and teacher understanding.

A. Themes Emerging from Learners and Parents

The qualitative questionnaire items directed at learners and parents aligned closely with the six themes identified in the analysis.

Theme 1: Financial Constraints and Living Conditions

Question 19, which asked participants to describe their family's financial situation, directly informed this theme. Responses concerning limited disposable income, difficulty meeting basic needs, and varying levels of economic comfort provided the foundational data for understanding the material conditions shaping learners' educational experiences.

Participants' descriptions of financial strain, limited disposable income, and difficulty meeting basic needs provide strong contextual evidence that socio-economic status shapes the conditions under which learning occurs. Households experiencing economic hardship reported structural barriers, such as limited access to educational resources and unstable living conditions. These material constraints form the environmental context within which academic performance is either facilitated or hindered.

Support for the Research question

The findings indicate that socio-economic status influences academic performance indirectly through living conditions, resource availability, and overall household stability. Financial

insecurity creates contextual disadvantages that affect learners' capacity to engage fully with schooling.

The responses indicate that financial disadvantage operates through several interconnected pathways rather than through income alone. Learners experience the consequences of household financial constraints through access to resources, food, transport and stable living conditions, while parents experience these constraints through their ability to meet their children's educational and basic needs. The finding therefore addresses the research question concerning the contextual socio-economic factors that influence educational opportunities by showing that economic disadvantage can become an educational disadvantage when it restricts the conditions necessary for learning. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, these experiences demonstrate the influence of the learner's immediate home environment and the wider economic circumstances affecting the family. The findings therefore suggest that academic achievement cannot be understood independently of the material and social environments in which learning takes place.

Theme 2: High Value Placed on Education

Question 20, which explored the importance of doing well in school within the household, generated responses that reflected strong educational aspirations. The overwhelming prioritisation of academic success among participants contributed to the interpretation that education is perceived as a pathway to upward mobility.

Despite economic hardship, participants overwhelmingly expressed that academic success is highly valued and seen as a pathway to a better life. This reflects strong aspirational capital within households across socio-economic levels.

Support for the Research Question

While socio-economic status constrains material resources, the high value placed on education suggests that economic disadvantage does not diminish educational aspirations. However, the tension between aspiration and structural limitation highlights that positive attitudes alone cannot fully offset socio-economic barriers. Thus, socio-economic status influences performance conditions even when motivation remains high.

An important finding is that socio-economic disadvantage did not necessarily correspond with low educational aspirations. Learners and parents across different circumstances continued to describe education as important and as a means of improving future opportunities. This challenges a purely deficit-based interpretation of low-income families, because the data indicate that limited achievement opportunities cannot simply be attributed to a lack of parental or learner commitment. Rather, the findings suggest a distinction between valuing education and having the resources to act on that value**.** This distinction is important in answering the research question because it indicates that educational inequality may persist even where families possess strong aspirations. From Bandura's perspective, such aspirations may contribute to motivation and future-oriented behaviour, while Bronfenbrenner's framework highlights the continuing influence of environmental constraints on what learners are able to achieve.

Theme 3: Mixed Academic Achievement Levels

Question 21, focusing on learners' academic performance within the household, corresponded directly with this theme. Participants' descriptions of excellent, average, and below-average performance revealed variability in achievement patterns across socio-economic contexts.

Reported variations in academic performance—ranging from excellent to below average—demonstrate heterogeneity within socio-economic groups. Although some learners from economically strained households perform well, below-average performance was more frequently associated with financial instability.

Support for the Research Question

These findings suggest that socio-economic status does not determine achievement in a deterministic manner, but it increases the probability of academic difficulty. The presence of resilience among some learners indicates moderating factors (e.g., motivation, support), yet the overall pattern reflects a correlation between socio-economic conditions and performance variation.

The variation in achievement is important because the qualitative data do not support a deterministic conclusion that low socio-economic status inevitably produces poor academic

performance. Some learners from financially constrained households reported satisfactory or strong academic performance, suggesting that socio-economic circumstances influence the probability of outcomes rather than determining them absolutely. The differences between participants point to the importance of protective factors such as motivation, parental encouragement, teacher support and learner confidence. This finding strengthens the mixed-methods interpretation because the quantitative relationships indicate associations between socio-economic factors and achievement, while the qualitative evidence illustrates why similar socio-economic circumstances may not produce identical outcomes. The finding therefore supports an ecological and social-cognitive interpretation in which environmental conditions interact with individual agency and supportive relationships.

Theme 4: Confidence in Learning

Question 22, which investigated learners' confidence in learning, provided data for this theme. Responses indicating moderate to high confidence among many learners, alongside instances of low self-efficacy, reflected the complex relationship between economic stress and academic self-belief.

Learners reported varying levels of academic confidence, with a notable proportion indicating low or slight confidence. Economic stress and home instability were frequently associated with diminished self-efficacy.

Support for the Research Question

This theme demonstrates the psychosocial pathway through which socio-economic status influences academic performance. Reduced confidence and self-efficacy can negatively affect motivation, participation, and achievement outcomes. Therefore, socio-economic status influences not only material conditions but also internal academic beliefs.

The findings suggest that the influence of socio-economic circumstances extends beyond material access to the psychological domain of learning. Learners who experience financial stress or instability may also experience reduced confidence in their academic abilities. This provides an important link between socio-economic circumstances and academic achievement because confidence can influence participation, persistence and willingness to engage with

challenging academic tasks. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is particularly relevant here because self-efficacy is shaped through experiences, social interactions and perceptions of capability. The findings therefore suggest that interventions aimed at reducing educational inequality should not focus exclusively on material resources but should also strengthen learners' confidence and sense of academic agency.

Theme 5: Perceived Teacher Understanding and School Support

Questions 23 and 24 addressed perceptions of teacher empathy and the adequacy of school support for struggling learners. These items informed the interpretation that positive teacher–learner relationships and institutional support structures serve as enabling and protective factors within economically constrained contexts.

Participants largely perceived teachers as empathetic and schools as providing additional support through tutoring and counselling.

Support for the Research Question

This theme reveals buffering mechanisms that mitigate the influence of socio-economic status on performance. While socio-economic disadvantage creates barriers, institutional support systems partially offset these effects. This supports a moderated influence model, where socio-economic status impacts performance, but teacher and school interventions reduce the severity of that impact.

The participants' perceptions of teacher empathy and school-based support reveal that schools can function as important protective environments in contexts of socio-economic disadvantage. However, the finding should not be interpreted as evidence that teacher support eliminates inequality. Rather, teacher support appears to mediate or reduce some of the effects of disadvantage. This distinction is important because the responsibility for addressing structural inequality cannot be transferred entirely to individual teachers. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, the school forms a critical microsystem that interacts with the home environment, while Vygotsky's theory highlights the importance of supportive social relationships in facilitating learning. The findings therefore support the view that educational responses to

inequality need to combine effective classroom support with broader institutional and systemic interventions.

Theme 6: Strong Belief in the Income–Achievement Link

Question 25, which asked participants whether family income affects school performance, aligned directly with this theme. The strong consensus that income influences educational outcomes confirmed participants' perception of socio-economic status as a determinant of academic opportunity.

An overwhelming majority of participants believed that family income directly affects school performance, particularly in relation to school choice, access to resources, and quality of learning conditions.

Support for the Research Question

This theme provides direct perceptual evidence from participants that socio-economic status influences academic achievement. The consensus strengthens the interpretive conclusion that socio-economic inequality is widely recognised as shaping educational outcomes.

The strong agreement among participants that income affects educational outcomes reinforces the central focus of the study, but these perceptions should be interpreted alongside the other qualitative themes rather than treated as proof of a simple income–achievement relationship. Participants identified school choice, resources and learning conditions as mechanisms through which income may influence educational opportunity. The finding therefore supports a multidimensional understanding of socio-economic influence in which income operates through access, environmental conditions, parental capacity and institutional opportunities. It also corresponds with the quantitative finding that household income was positively associated with academic performance, while the qualitative data provide greater insight into the mechanisms underlying this association.

B. Themes Emerging from Educators

The qualitative questionnaire directed at educators produced eleven distinct but interconnected themes, each linked to specific questions.

Theme 1: Lack of Basic Learning Resources

Question 10, addressing the extent to which learners lack essential school supplies, informed this theme. Educators' observations of material deprivation highlighted the impact of resource scarcity on learner preparedness and engagement.

Educators frequently observed learners lacking essential supplies such as books, pens, and uniforms.

Support for the Research Question

Material deprivation directly affects classroom engagement and preparedness, illustrating a tangible mechanism through which socio-economic status influences performance.

Theme 2: Absenteeism Linked to Financial Hardship

Question 11, concerning learner absenteeism due to financial or family challenges, aligned with this theme. Educators frequently reported transport difficulties and home instability as contributors to irregular attendance.

Educators reported high rates of absenteeism due to transport costs and family instability.

Support for the Research Question

Irregular attendance disrupts learning continuity and contributes to lower academic achievement, demonstrating a direct behavioural consequence of socio-economic disadvantage.

Theme 3: Socio-economic Differences Affect Performance

Question 12, which explored performance differences across socio-economic backgrounds, revealed perceived achievement disparities linked to hunger, fatigue, and home stressors.

A strong majority of educators perceived clear performance disparities between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Support for the Research Question

This theme provides professional observational evidence of a socio-economic-status–achievement relationship, reinforcing the argument that socio-economic background significantly influences academic outcomes.

Theme 4: Emotional Stress and Anxiety among Learners

Question 13 directly informed this theme, as educators described frequent money-related stress and emotional fatigue affecting learners' concentration and classroom behaviour.

Money-related stress and emotional fatigue were commonly observed among learners.

Support for the Research Question

This finding highlights the psychological pathway through which socio-economic status affects learning. Stress reduces concentration, engagement, and cognitive functioning, thereby impacting performance.

Theme 5: Varying Learner Preparedness

Question 14, focusing on daily learner preparedness, reflected the spillover effects of home instability into school readiness.

Learner readiness upon arrival at school was frequently influenced by home instability.

Support for the Research Question

Preparedness differences reflect the spillover effect of socio-economic conditions into daily academic functioning.

Taken together, the first five educator themes demonstrate that socio-economic disadvantage enters the classroom through multiple interconnected pathways. Lack of learning materials represents a direct resource barrier, while transport difficulties and family instability affect attendance and continuity of learning. Hunger, fatigue, emotional stress and unstable home circumstances further influence learners' readiness and capacity to engage academically. The significance of these findings lies in their cumulative nature: disadvantage is not represented by one isolated factor but by overlapping conditions that can reinforce one another. The educator perspective therefore extends the learner and parent accounts by showing how household and community circumstances become visible in everyday classroom participation and academic preparedness. This supports Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective because influences outside the classroom can affect learners' functioning within the school microsystem.

Themes 6–11

Themes 6 to 11 are interconnected and support the research question in the same manner. The overarching themes connecting these six themes together are: Adaptive practices, effectiveness and equity.

Theme 6: Adaptive Teaching Practices

Question 15, which examined the extent to which educators adapt their teaching methods for disadvantaged learners, informed this theme. Educators described differentiated instruction and contextualised teaching strategies.

Educators reported adapting instruction, providing interventions, and striving to promote equity despite resource constraints.

Theme 7: Teacher Effectiveness and Limitations

Questions 16 and 19 contributed to this theme. While educators reported moderate levels of self-efficacy in supporting learners, they also acknowledged limitations imposed by insufficient school resources.

Theme 8: Belief in the Impact of Socio-economic status on Achievement

Question 17 confirmed a strong consensus among educators that socio-economic status significantly influences academic performance.

Theme 9: Perception of Disadvantage among Low-income Learners

Question 18 explored whether learners from low-income families are disadvantaged in the classroom. Responses reflected widespread recognition of structural inequities, though some educators highlighted compensatory interventions.

Theme 10: Value of Extra Support and Interventions

Question 20 informed this theme, with educators indicating that targeted academic support, tutoring, and counselling positively influence learner outcomes.

Theme 11: Confidence in Promoting Equity

Question 21 aligned with this theme, as educators expressed moderate to high confidence in their capacity to promote equitable academic outcomes despite contextual constraints.

The educator findings introduce an important tension between teacher agency and structural limitation. Educators reported adapting teaching, providing additional support and attempting to promote equity, demonstrating that schools are not passive recipients of socio-economic

inequality. At the same time, their ability to compensate for disadvantage is restricted by limited resources and insufficient systemic support. The findings therefore suggest that teacher commitment can moderate the effects of socio-economic disadvantage but cannot independently resolve structural inequality. This distinction is important for the research question concerning how identified socio-economic factors may inform strategies to reduce inequality: effective intervention requires both classroom-level responses and broader institutional and policy-level support.

Support for the Research Question emerging from themes 6 – 11

These themes demonstrate that while socio-economic status influences academic performance, teacher agency and targeted interventions can mediate its effects. The findings support a contextual and systemic understanding of socio-economic status influence rather than a purely individual explanation.

5.6.2. Interpretation of results

This qualitative analysis reveals a complex, interdependent relationship between socio-economic status, educational opportunity, and academic performance.

- Economic hardship directly limits learners' ability to participate effectively in school life—through lack of supplies, transport issues, and emotional strain.
- Educators, aware of these barriers, often adapt their teaching practices and provide extra support, though systemic resource limitations hinder their efforts.
- Both parents and educators acknowledge the transformative role of education, showing a shared belief in learning as a path to social mobility.
- The recurring reference to teacher understanding and school-based interventions highlights schools as critical spaces of social support in low-income contexts.
- Ultimately, the data underscores a persistent inequality in South African education tied to socio-economic status — but also resilience, commitment, and hope among families and educators striving for equity.

5.7. Thematic Analysis of Interviews:

5.7.1. Overview of Participants:

- Learners: 12 participants
- Parents: 10 participants
- Educators: 10 participants

5.7.2. Coding and Thematic Analysis Process:

Step 1: Open Coding

Open coding refers to the initial phase of qualitative data analysis, where data is broken down and labelled into different parts or concepts in order to be able to identify emerging themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Key recurring ideas were extracted from the interviews and assigned preliminary codes (e.g., *financial stress*, *lack of study space*, *emotional strain*, *parental involvement*, *motivation*).

Step 2: Axial Coding

Axial coding happens after open coding where data is reassembled through identifying relationships among different categories and subcategories. This helps to develop a framework for the themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Codes were grouped into conceptual categories showing relationships (e.g., *household environment*, *school support*, *psychological impact*).

Step 3: Selective Coding / Theming

Selective coding / theming in qualitative data analysis refers to the final stage where categories are refined and integrated around central themes in order to construct a coherent theory or narrative (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These categories were integrated into overarching themes that describe socio-economic influences on learners' academic performance.

5.7.3. Coding Patterns

Code	Frequency (across groups)	Indicative Quotes/Responses
Financial stress / instability	High	"My mother was worried about money, so I couldn't focus." (Nomsa)
Lack of study space / noise	High	"It's noisy; I live behind a tavern." (Nomsa)
Emotional stress / family issues	High	"Emotional issues affected my schoolwork." (Cheryl)
Parental support / involvement	Moderate–High	"My mother explains the work." (Busi); "Parents from poorer homes rarely attend meetings." (Educator B)
Motivation and aspiration	High	"I want a better life for myself." (Brian)
Resource access (Internet, computer)	Moderate	"I only have data on my phone." (Cheryl)
School-level support	Low	"I receive free meals and stationery." (Nomsa)
Socio-economic disparity awareness	High	"Richer students have an advantage—they can get extra help." (Kiara)
Teacher adaptation / empathy	Moderate	"I simplify lessons and use relatable examples." (Educator B)
Community influence	Moderate	"Our neighbourhood is noisy and unsafe." (Parent D)

5.7.4. Central Themes, Subthemes, and Interpretations:

The following themes and subthemes were derived from the participants' answers to the interview questions. Each theme is discussed in terms of the interview questions that support

the themes, the subthemes emerging from the data, as well as how each theme answers the research question.

Theme 1: Socio-Economic Status and Educational Access

The information that supports this theme was derived from the following Learner interview questions: Question 2, which concerned a quiet study space; Question 3, which indicated whether learners missed school due to financial issues; Question 4, which involved internet/computer access at home; Question 6 regarding home challenges affecting schoolwork; Question 7, which investigated financial difficulty affecting performance; Question 11 based on school-based assistance; Question 13, regarding hours spent studying and barriers to studying; Question 15, regarding what could be changed at home.

The following parent interview questions supported this theme: Question 2 regarding parental employment status; Question 3 regarding household income; Question 5 involving educational resources at home; Question 6 regarding how financial situations affects performance; Question 7 on how financial constraints limits opportunities.

The Educator interview questions that supported the theme: Question 2 regarding students receiving economic support; Question 3 about school absence due to responsibilities; Question 5 concerning internet/device access; Question 8 regarding academic challenges among low-income learners.

Sub-themes

Material resources and learning tools

Emerged strongly from Learner Question 2, Question 4, Question 13; Parent Question 5; Educator Question 5. Responses consistently indicated disparities in internet access, devices, and quiet study environments.

Household economic constraints

Linked to Learner Question 3, Question 6, Question 7; Parent Question 2, Question 3, Question 6, Question 7; Educator Question 3. Financial instability was directly associated with absenteeism, hunger, lack of transport, and reduced participation.

School-based assistance

Derived from Learner Question 11 and Educator Question 2. Support such as free meals and stationery was described as helpful, but insufficient.

Support for the Research Question

This theme demonstrates a direct structural pathway between socio-economic status and academic achievement. Limited material resources reduce study time, school attendance, and access to enrichment opportunities.

Thus, socio-economic disadvantage functions as a tangible barrier to academic performance through restricted educational access.

Interpretation

Learners from low-income households face direct material barriers that limit access to quality education. This aligns with existing research showing that economic deprivation restricts learners' ability to benefit fully from schooling opportunities (Siraj and Mayo, 2014).

The accounts across learners, parents and educators indicate that educational access is multidimensional. Access is not limited to school attendance or formal enrolment but includes access to learning materials, technology, transport, food, appropriate study spaces and opportunities for additional academic support. The different participant perspectives are complementary: learners experience the immediate consequences of resource limitations, parents experience the difficulty of providing those resources, and educators observe how resource shortages affect participation and preparedness in the classroom. The theme therefore provides a direct link to the research question concerning contextual socio-economic factors and demonstrates how economic conditions are translated into unequal educational opportunities.

Theme 2: Home Environment and Emotional Climate

The following learner interview questions supported this theme: Question 1 regarding household size; Question 2 involving a quiet study space; Question 6 regarding home

challenges; Question 7 involving financial stress experience; Question 9 about the living situation and performance; Question 13 regarding barriers to studying.

The parent interview questions that supported this theme: Question 6 regarding their financial situation affecting performance; Question 8 about the neighbourhood influence.

The educator interview questions which supported this theme: Question 6 regarding engagement and motivation; Question 8 regarding academic challenges.

Subthemes

Noise and overcrowding

Directly linked to Learner Question 1, Question 2, Question 6, Question 13. Large household size and lack of space disrupted concentration.

Emotional distress and loss

Emerging from Learner Question 6, Question 7 and Educator Question 6, Question 8. Financial stress, parental absence, and instability affected emotional wellbeing and focus.

Motivational resilience

Linked to Learner Question 9 and Question 10, where learners expressed determination, despite adversity.

Support for the Research question:

This theme reveals the psychological and environmental mechanisms through which socio-economic conditions influence achievement. Beyond material deprivation, emotional insecurity and unstable home environments reduce cognitive engagement, concentration, and motivation—factors essential for academic success. Socio-economic status therefore affects not only access to learning, but readiness to learn.

Interpretation:

Emotional strain within the home, often linked to financial difficulties or unstable environments, has a pronounced effect on learner concentration and academic motivation. This supports socio-educational findings that emotional security forms a critical foundation for learning readiness (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Maslow, 1943).

This theme demonstrates that the home environment influences academic achievement through both physical and psychological pathways. Learners' accounts provide insight into noise, overcrowding and emotional stress, while parents' accounts reveal the financial and neighbourhood circumstances underlying these experiences. Educators provide a further perspective by observing the effects of these conditions on concentration, engagement and motivation at school. The convergence across participant groups strengthens the interpretation that socio-economic influence is relational and ecological rather than simply financial. Bronfenbrenner's framework is particularly useful here because the learner's home microsystem is connected to wider economic and community conditions that shape daily educational functioning.

Theme 3: Parental Support and Involvement

The learner interview questions which supported this theme: Question 8 regarding parental support ; Question 14 regarding who learners go to for help.

The parent interview questions which supported this theme: Question 1 regarding education level; Question 4 about hours spent helping; Question 5 regarding home resources; Question 6 regarding financial impact; Question 9 about work hours and involvement.

The educator interview questions that supported this theme: Question 7 regarding differences in parental involvement; Question 10 about confidence in academic ability.

Subthemes:

Educational assistance at home

Linked to Parent Question 1, Question 4; Learner Question 8. Higher parental education correlated with more frequent homework assistance.

Time and resource constraints

Emerged from Parent Question 9 and Educator Question 7. Long working hours reduced involvement, particularly in low-income households.

Motivational support

Strongly evident in Learner Question 8. Even financially constrained parents provided emotional encouragement.

Support for the Research Question

This theme demonstrates an indirect pathway between socio-economic status and academic achievement. Lower income limits parental time, educational confidence, and material support, thereby reducing academic scaffolding. However, motivational support remains strong across socio-economic groups, indicating that disadvantage is logistical rather than attitudinal.

Interpretation

Parental education and time availability strongly correlate with children's academic confidence. Educators confirm that low-income parents tend to engage less, often due to logistical rather than attitudinal barriers (Epstein, 2011).

The findings challenge the assumption that lower parental involvement necessarily reflects a lack of interest in education. Learners and parents described emotional encouragement even where material resources were limited, while educators associated lower involvement among some low-income families with working hours and practical constraints. The evidence therefore suggests that socio-economic circumstances influence the capacity for involvement rather than necessarily the value placed on involvement. This distinction is important for interpreting educational inequality and suggests that interventions should address barriers that limit parental participation rather than simply expecting greater parental involvement. Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and Bandura's emphasis on social modelling and support provide complementary explanations for the importance of these relationships.

Theme 4: School and Teacher Response to Socio-Economic Inequality

Educator interview questions that supported this theme: Question 1 regarding the impact of socio-economic background; Question 6 about engagement and motivation; Question 7 about parental involvement differences; Question 8 regarding academic challenges; Question 9 about adaptive teaching strategies; Question 10 about confidence effects.

Question 11 of the learner interview questions regarding school-based help also supported this theme.

Subthemes

Adaptive teaching strategies

Directly linked to Educator Question 9. Teachers reported differentiated instruction and additional lessons.

Empathy and awareness

Emerging from Educator Question 1, Question 6, Question 8. Teachers recognised emotional fatigue among disadvantaged learners.

Institutional constraints

Appeared in Educator Question 1 and Question 8, highlighting systemic limitations.

Support for the Research question:

This theme shows that socio-economic inequality is visible within classroom practice. Teachers attempt to compensate for disparities, but responses are largely individual rather than systemic. Thus, socio-economic status influences achievement in ways that exceed the corrective capacity of individual educators.

Interpretation:

Educators exhibit high awareness of socio-economic effects, but lack systemic support. Their adaptations are personal, rather than institutionalised, revealing a need for policy-level interventions and psychosocial support mechanisms (OECD, 2019).

The different participant perspectives indicate that teachers occupy an important mediating position between socio-economic disadvantage and learner outcomes. Educators describe the strategies they use to compensate for inequality, while learners experience these strategies through additional support and teacher understanding. The finding nevertheless reveals a structural tension: individual teachers can adapt pedagogy and provide emotional support, but they cannot independently compensate for unequal access to resources or wider socio-economic disadvantage. The theme therefore supports a multilevel interpretation of inequality

in which school-based interventions are necessary but insufficient without broader systemic support.

Theme 5: Aspirations, Motivation, and Resilience

Learner interview questions that supported this theme: Question 9 regarding living situation and performance; Question 10 about motivation despite difficulty; Question 12 regarding the advantage of wealthier students.

The following Educator interview questions supported this theme: Question 6 about engagement and motivation; Question 10 regarding confidence in academic abilities.

Subthemes:

Intrinsic motivation

Derived from Learner Question 10. Learners expressed aspirations for financial independence and improved lifestyles.

Social comparison

Linked to Learner Question12. Awareness of inequality influenced both motivation and discouragement.

Self-determination despite hardship

Emerged across Question 9 and Question 10, showing persistence despite constraints.

Support for the Research question

This theme highlights that socio-economic influence is probabilistic, rather than deterministic. While structural barriers exist, intrinsic motivation and resilience can moderate negative effects. However, resilience does not eliminate inequality—it functions as a coping mechanism rather than a structural solution.

Interpretation

Resilience emerges as a cross-cutting strength, particularly among disadvantaged learners who express strong future orientation. This reflects findings in educational psychology that intrinsic motivation can buffer against socio-economic adversity (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Learner aspirations provide an important counterpoint to the structural barriers identified in the other themes. The data demonstrate that disadvantaged learners are not passive recipients of socio-economic circumstances; many remain motivated and future-oriented despite recognising inequalities between themselves and more advantaged learners. However, resilience should not be interpreted as evidence that socio-economic inequality is insignificant. Rather, resilience appears to operate as a protective or moderating factor that may help learners navigate disadvantage without removing the structural barriers themselves. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory is relevant in explaining the role of motivation, self-efficacy and perceived capability, while Bronfenbrenner's framework cautions that individual agency remains embedded within broader environmental conditions.

Integrated Analytical Response to the Research Question:

The qualitative findings reveal that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through multiple interrelated mechanisms:

1. Structural access limitations (resources, attendance, technology)
2. Environmental and emotional stressors (overcrowding, instability)
3. Variations in parental involvement capacity
4. School-level adaptive responses constrained by systemic limits
5. Learner resilience and motivational buffering

The data confirm that socio-economic influence operates across ecological levels—home, school, and individual psychology.

Academic achievement is therefore shaped not only by cognitive ability, but by socio-economic conditions that affect access, emotional stability, parental support, institutional capacity, and learner motivation.

5.7.5. Interpretive Discussion

Aspect	Key Insights
Theoretical Framework	Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory — learners' outcomes are shaped by microsystemic (home, school), mesosystemic (parent-teacher interaction), and exosystemic (community and employment) influences.
Key Observations	• Economic disadvantage manifests in tangible resource gaps and psychological stress. • Parental support acts as both a buffer and amplifier—families with time and education invest more directly in learning. • Educators recognise these disparities but operate within structural constraints that limit the depth of their interventions. • Learners, despite obstacles, articulate strong aspirations, showing the potential impact of motivation, teacher care, and supportive school environments in mediating inequality.

When the five themes are considered collectively, the findings demonstrate the complementary contribution of the three theoretical perspectives. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains how socio-economic influences operate across the home, school, community and wider social environments. Vygotsky's Social Development Theory contributes an understanding of how learning is mediated through relationships with parents, educators and other significant individuals. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory explains the psychological dimension of the findings, particularly the relationships between learner confidence, motivation, observation, aspirations and perceived capability. The qualitative evidence therefore indicates that socio-economic circumstances influence academic achievement through an interaction between environmental conditions, social relationships and learner agency, rather than through economic status in isolation. This integrated interpretation provides a stronger explanation of the findings than any single theoretical perspective could provide.

5.7.6. Summary Table of Themes

Theme	Subthemes	Key Participant Groups	Interpretive Summary
1. Socio-Economic Status and Educational Access	Financial constraints; Resource inequality	Learners, Parents, Educators	Economic hardship restricts participation and academic focus.
2. Home Environment and Emotional Climate	Noise, stress, overcrowding	Learners, Parents	Emotional instability reduces concentration and learning readiness.
3. Parental Support and Involvement	Educational help, motivation	Parents, Educators	Parental time and education shape children's outcomes.
4. School and Teacher Response to Socio-economic Inequality	Adaptive pedagogy, empathy	Educators	Teachers compensate creatively but need systemic support.
5. Aspirations, Motivation and Resilience	Future aspirations, intrinsic drive	Learners	Learners show remarkable determination to overcome adversity.

5.7.7. Interpretation of results

The findings indicate that socio-economic background is a strong determinant of academic opportunity and performance, but not an absolute predictor of success. While material poverty introduces clear disadvantages, psychological resilience and support systems (both familial and educational) act as powerful mediators.

This qualitative insight supports quantitative trends in socio-educational literature — demonstrating how economic capital, social support, and emotional wellbeing intersect to shape learner trajectories in complex, context-specific ways.

Across the learner, parent and educator data, the findings suggest that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through a set of interacting mechanisms rather than through a single direct pathway. The learner and parent accounts emphasise household resources, emotional climate, parental capacity and aspirations, while educators provide evidence of how these circumstances become visible through attendance, preparedness, classroom engagement and academic performance. Importantly, the data also reveal protective factors, including parental encouragement, teacher support, adaptive teaching, learner motivation and resilience. The findings therefore answer the central research question by indicating that socio-economic circumstances create unequal conditions for academic achievement, while also demonstrating that these effects can be moderated by supportive relationships and educational interventions. However, the persistence of structural barriers indicates that such protective factors should not be regarded as substitutes for broader measures to address educational inequality.

5.8. Comparison between Quantitative- and Qualitative data results

Quantitative data analysis of learner / parent participants indicated that 77.6% of parents had secondary to tertiary education, 59.7% reported mid- to high-income levels, and 81.3% valued education highly. Correspondingly, 84.3% of learners demonstrated average to high academic performance, and 67.1% reported moderate to high academic confidence. Correlation patterns suggest that parental education and income are positively related to both learners' academic outcomes and confidence levels, mediated by the value placed on education within the home.

Overall, the data from educator participants indicated that socio-economic status was a significant factor influencing learners' academic experiences. Most learners came from low- to middle-income households, and the majority frequently experienced academic challenges. The pattern suggested that lower household income was associated with higher levels of academic difficulty, highlighting the continued impact of socio-economic disparities on educational outcomes.

The qualitative analysis highlighted the intricate interplay between socio-economic status (SES), educational opportunity, and academic performance. Learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds faced tangible barriers, such as inadequate learning resources, transport challenges, and emotional stress, all of which constrained their academic engagement.

Despite these obstacles, educators demonstrated awareness and adaptability, offering additional support within the limits of under-resourced systems. Both parents and teachers shared a strong belief in education as a means of social advancement, with schools emerging as key sites of emotional and academic support. Overall, while socio-economic inequality remains a defining factor in South African education, the findings also reveal notable resilience, determination, and hope among learners, families, and educators. These results align with broader socio-educational research, confirming that although economic hardship hinders opportunity, psychosocial resilience and supportive relationships can significantly mediate its effects on learner success.

5.9. Summary

Chapter Five presented, analysed, and interpreted the findings of the study titled *The Socio-economic Influence on Academic Achievement*. Using a mixed-methods sequential design, the chapter integrated quantitative data from 346 questionnaire respondents with qualitative data from 378 questionnaire participants and 32 interviewees (learners, parents, and educators). The purpose was to determine how socio-economic status (SES) influences academic achievement within the South African context and to explore the mechanisms through which inequality affects educational opportunity. By triangulating statistical trends with lived experiences, the study strengthened the validity and depth of interpretation.

The quantitative findings revealed a generally positive socio-educational profile among many participants, with 77.6% of parents possessing secondary to tertiary education and 59.7% reporting mid- to high-income levels. A strong valuing of education (81.3%) corresponded with 84.3% of learners achieving average to high academic performance and 67.1% reporting moderate to high academic confidence. Correlation analysis indicated significant positive relationships between parental education, household income, educational values, academic performance, and learner confidence. However, educator data showed that the majority of learners across participating schools came from low- to middle-income households, and that 79.2% frequently experienced academic challenges. A negative relationship was identified between household income and academic difficulties, suggesting that lower socio-economic status increases the likelihood of learning barriers.

The qualitative findings provided deeper insight into the pathways through which socio-economic conditions shape academic outcomes. Five central themes emerged, namely: (1) socio-economic status and educational access; (2) home environment and emotional climate; (3) parental support and involvement; (4) school and teacher responses to inequality; and (5) aspirations and resilience. Financial hardship limited access to learning materials, quiet study spaces, transport, enrichment opportunities, and technological resources. Emotional stress, overcrowding, and instability further affected learners' concentration and motivation. While parental involvement varied according to education level, employment demands, and financial stability, motivational support remained strong across socio-economic groups. Educators demonstrated awareness of socio-economic disparities and adapted their teaching practices; however, systemic resource constraints limited the extent to which inequalities could be mitigated.

Overall, the integrated findings confirm that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through multiple interconnected structural, environmental, psychological, and institutional mechanisms. Although socio-economic status does not deterministically predict performance, it significantly shapes access to opportunity, learning conditions, and academic confidence. Importantly, the chapter also highlights resilience among learners and the buffering role of parental encouragement and teacher support. The findings therefore support a contextual and ecological interpretation of academic achievement, demonstrating that while socio-economic inequality remains a persistent determinant of educational outcomes in South Africa, targeted support systems and strong relational networks can partially mediate its effects.

5.10. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate a clear and multifaceted relationship between socio-economic status, parental support, and learners' academic outcomes. Quantitative analysis indicates that higher parental education and income levels are positively associated with learners' academic performance and confidence, largely mediated by the value placed on education within the household. Conversely, learners from low- to middle-income backgrounds frequently encounter academic challenges, reflecting the persistent influence of socio-economic disparities on educational experiences.

Qualitative insights further illuminate the complexity of these dynamics, revealing that learners from economically disadvantaged households face tangible barriers such as limited resources, transport difficulties, and emotional stress, which constrain academic engagement. Despite these challenges, educators exhibit adaptability and commitment, providing additional support within the constraints of under-resourced schools. Parents and educators alike express a strong belief in the transformative potential of education, highlighting the role of schools as both academic and emotional support environments.

Overall, the findings underscore that, while socio-economic inequality continues to shape educational opportunities in South Africa, resilience, determination, and supportive relationships play a critical mediating role. Learners' success is therefore influenced not only by material conditions, but also by the psychosocial environment fostered by families and educators, aligning with broader research on socio-educational outcomes. The next chapter will discuss the findings of the research according to the themes as discussed above.

CHAPTER 6:

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter contained a presentation, analysis and description of the research findings. This chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of the findings emerging from the mixed-method investigation into the socio-economic influence on academic achievement. Building on the statistical results and qualitative insights presented in Chapter Five, this chapter interprets the findings in relation to the research question and the theoretical framework underpinning the study. The purpose of this discussion is not merely to restate the results but to critically analyse how the identified patterns reveal the mechanisms through which socio-economic status shapes learners' academic experiences and outcomes within the South African context.

The findings are discussed according to the themes developed through the integrated analysis of quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative interview responses. The concurrent analysis of both data strands enabled the identification of converging and complementary evidence, strengthening the explanatory power of the themes. Each theme reflects a distinct yet interconnected dimension of socio-economic influence, illustrating how material conditions, emotional climate, parental involvement, institutional response and learner perceptions collectively shape academic performance. Throughout the discussion, empirical findings are interpreted alongside relevant literature to situate the results within broader scholarly debates.

Importantly, the discussion demonstrates that socio-economic status operates through multiple interacting pathways rather than as a singular, deterministic factor. Structural inequalities in access to resources, environmental stressors within the home, psychological processes such as stress and self-efficacy, and relational dynamics involving parents and teachers all contribute to shaping academic outcomes. While protective factors such as resilience, parental encouragement and teacher support may buffer some of these effects, they do not fully neutralise structural disadvantage. The chapter, therefore, advances a contextual-ecological interpretation of academic achievement, highlighting the layered and systemic nature of socio-economic influence.

6.2. Findings according to the developed themes

In this section, the findings of the research will be discussed according to themes that were developed from the participants' answers to questionnaires as well as interviews. The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed in conjunction with each other in order to develop these themes.

6.2.1. Theme 1: Socio-Economic Status and Educational Access

Subtheme 1.1: Material Resources and Learning Tools

The findings of the research, as indicated in Chapter 5, clearly demonstrate disparities in access to essential educational resources, such as internet connectivity, digital devices, study materials, and quiet study spaces.

Quantitative results showed that 14.2% of learners had no consistent quiet place to study. Out of all the participants, 11.9% often lacked basic materials needed for educational success. Concerning internet access, 20.9% relied solely on mobile internet access and had no other stable form of internet access at home.

These statistics are substantiated by qualitative evidence: "It's noisy; I live behind a tavern." (Nomsa). "I only have Internet on my phone." (Cheryl). "Most learners do not have the basic school supplies." (Educator questionnaire). "Learners in my class often borrow supplies from their friends." (Educator). Educators confirmed this pattern: "These learners do not have all the supplies they need to achieve success in the classroom."

According to the Pew Research Centre (2018), having reliable internet access at home has a significant impact on learners' academic access. Without reliable internet, learners lack the resources needed to finish homework and tasks, and it directly diminishes learning time and educational outcomes. Having reliable internet at home provides direct access to quality resources and platforms that enhance the learning process. It provides learners with the opportunity to access a wide array of learning platforms and educational resources that can aid in the improvement of their understanding of certain subject matter (UNESCO, 2023). The importance of reliable internet access at home was brought to light during the COVID-19

school closures. According to UNESCO (2023) and OECD (2024), the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the pre-existing inequalities between learners from lower- and higher socio-economic backgrounds. Learners with internet connectivity were able to receive continued educational instruction, while learners without internet connectivity could not.

Reliable internet access is thus widely regarded as an essential tool that provides an educational advantage to those who have internet access at home, compared to those who do not.

Having a quiet place to study at home has a much greater impact on learners' academic success than merely helping with concentration. It plays a significant role in supporting cognitive functioning and information processing. According to cognitive load theory, more effective learning takes place when there are fewer distractions so that the learner can focus on relevant tasks more efficiently (Sweller, 1988). Reading comprehension and memory retention are also greatly impacted by environmental noise factors (Evans and Johnson, 2000; Shield and Dockrell, 2003). Reduced academic performance has also been associated with prolonged noise exposure (Hygge, Evans and Bullinger, 2002). When learners experience elevated stress levels, they function at a lower level than usual, which means that it has a negative impact on learning outcomes (Evans, 2006; Evans and Kim, 2013).

According to Cooper, Robinson and Patall (2006), having a designated study space helps learners to complete their homework more effectively and helps them to achieve better academic outcomes. Learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds often experience limited space to study due to overcrowding (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002; Sirin, 2005).

It is thus not only important, but indeed essential, to have a quiet and dedicated space to study in order to achieve academic success. Nomsa's experience illustrates the intersection between poverty and environmental disruption. The lack of study space is not merely an inconvenience but a structural limitation affecting concentration and academic engagement.

This theme provides direct structural evidence that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through restricted educational access. Learners from lower-income households face material barriers that directly constrain their academic participation and performance.

Subtheme 1.2: Household Economic Constraints

Although 59.7% of households reported mid- to high-income levels, qualitative findings revealed significant financial strain within a substantial minority of participants.

Learners described: “Sometimes we don’t even have bread in the house.” “My bus tag has not been loaded.” “It makes me struggle to focus in school.” (Brian)

Parents expressed emotional burden: “It hurts that I can’t give my child everything that he needs.” “It is very stressful because sometimes my child has to go to school hungry.”

Educators confirmed absenteeism linked to finances: “Very often. Parents struggle to afford transport services.” “Many learners stay at home due to financial or family issues.”

Financial burdens and stress have a direct influence on learners’ mental health, which in turn reduces their cognitive functioning and minimises the emotional resources learners need to learn effectively. Research has indicated a strong association between financial hardship and conditions such as depression and anxiety, which, in turn, reduce concentration and cause lower grades in school (Tibbetts, 2025). Qualitative- as well as mixed-methods studies performed on secondary school and college learners, indicated that financial strain increased insecurity regarding food and housing, increased worry, impaired emotional well-being, and reduced study time (Moore, 2021; Russel, 2025).

Increased family income is linked to improvements in academic outcomes, whereas economically strained conditions and poverty are linked to a decline in school performance (Duncan et al., 2011; Layte, 2022). Financial stress thus not only leads to fewer resources but also to poorer mental health (Duncan et al., 2011; Layte, 2022; Russel, 2025).

Stress and worries about a family’s financial situation thus directly impact a learner’s academic performance.

Economic instability affects attendance, focus, emotional well-being, and access to opportunity. This demonstrates that socio-economic status operates through behavioural (absenteeism) and psychological (stress) pathways to influence academic outcomes.

Subtheme 1.3: School-Based Assistance

While 83.6% did not receive subsidised meals, qualitative findings highlight the protective role of school-based support: When asked if they receive extra help from school, learners and educators responded: “Yes, food and stationery.” (Nomsa) “I provide extra classes during breaks.” (Educator) “Our school supplies each learner with a pencil case.” However, support was uneven: “The teachers only explain things once.” (Learner)

Additional support from schools, such as extra classes, feeding programmes, and the provision of learning materials such as textbooks and stationery, has been proven to play a significant role in the academic success of learners from lower socio-economic status homes. Feeding programmes at school significantly improve learners’ cognitive functioning, concentration and school attendance by addressing malnutrition and hunger (Grantham-McGregor et al., 1991; Adelman, Gilligan and Lehrer, 2008). Empirical research has indicated that an improvement in nutrition leads to better learning outcomes and educational participation (Jomaa, McDonnell and Probart, 2011).

Academic support from schools, such as tutoring services and extra classes, has been shown to improve learner achievement by reinforcing the content contained in the curriculum and by providing more immediate feedback to learners (Lauer et al., 2006). Learners at risk of underachievement have shown profound increases in numeracy and literacy performance through supplementary programmes provided by schools (Durlak and Weissberg, 2007). Access to materials such as textbooks and stationery shows a strong correlation to improved academic achievement (Heyneman, Farrell and Sepulveda-Stuardo, 1981; Fuller and Clarke, 1994).

Thus, extra school-based assistance plays a significant role in reducing the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantages and promotes educational equity. School support serves as a buffer, but does not eliminate structural inequality. This supports a moderated influence model: socio-economic status shapes academic conditions, while institutional support partially mitigates effects.

6.2.2. Theme 2: Home Environment and Emotional Climate

Subtheme 2.1: Noise and Overcrowding

Household size and environmental instability emerged as significant factors. Blanche reported: "We are a big family… thirteen people live with us." Nomsa reiterated: "It is very noisy." Kiara added, "I do not always have privacy at home." Quantitative data showed that 14.2% never had a quiet study space, reinforcing qualitative accounts.

As already discussed in Subtheme 1.1. above, noise and overcrowding have a significant impact on academic success because they inhibit cognitive processing, impair concentration and have a negative influence on psychological well-being. Research indicates that continued exposure to noise reduces memory retention, reading comprehension and sustained attention (Shield and Dockrell, 2003). Studies indicate that learners who are exposed to high noise levels perform lower in reading and memory tasks than other learners who are not exposed to such noise (Hygge, Evans and Bullinger, 2002). Evans and Maxwell (1997) also indicated that high noise levels decrease reading performance among primary school learners.

Overcrowding increases stress levels and limits access to quiet places to study. Elevated psychological distress and lowered academic performance have been linked to household crowding (Evans, 2006). When learners live in overcrowded homes, they are more likely to struggle with homework completion and independent study. This has been shown to decrease educational achievement (Goux and Maurin, 2005). Executive functioning and self-regulation are also negatively impacted by the stress associated with crowding; this has a very negative influence on academic success (Evans and Kim, 2013).

The literature thus indicates that noise and overcrowding provide environmental barriers to cognitive development, emotional well-being, and educational performance. Socio-economic conditions influence academic achievement through environmental disruption. Learning readiness is compromised when concentration is persistently interrupted.

Subtheme 2.2: Emotional Distress and Financial Stress:

Learners internalised parental financial anxiety: “My mother was worried about money, so I couldn’t focus.” (Nomsa) “Emotional issues affected my schoolwork.” (Cheryl) “Children often carry the stresses of home with them.” (Educator A). Educators observed: “Learners permanently function in survival mode.”

Emotional distress interferes with cognitive functioning, motivation, and self-regulation. That is why it has been shown to have a severe negative impact on learners’ academic performance. It reduces concentration, and it impairs working memory, which in turn lowers academic achievement (Owens et al., 2012; Putwain, 2007). Emotional distress also inhibits academic engagement, and it undermines self-efficacy, which also inhibits academic performance (Bandura, 1997; Suldo et al., 2011). When learners experience psychological distress, they are more likely to withdraw from classroom participation, not complete their homework and receive lower scores during examinations (McLeod and Kaiser, 2004). Chronic stress has a negative impact on executive functioning and emotional regulation (Evans and Kim, 2013).

Extant research indicates that socio-economic hardship negatively impacts academic achievement (Sirin, 2005). When parents experience financial stress within their household, it reduces their ability to provide academic support, which in turn has an influence on learner performance (Conger et al., 2010). Heightened emotional distress among young learners is linked to economic strain, which further underlines the relationship between poverty and lower academic success (McLoyd, 1998; Evans and English, 2002). Socio-economic status affects academic achievement through psychological pathways, reducing cognitive engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy.

Subtheme 2.3: Motivational Resilience

Despite adversity, learners expressed strong aspirations: “I want a better life for myself.” (Brian) “I want to be one of the top achievers.” “Finishing school is important so that I can get a good job.” This aligns with the 81.3% of households that valued education highly.

Emotional resilience helps learners to cope with stress and adversity in an effective way, which plays a significant role in promoting academic success. Resilience can be defined as the ability

to adapt positively despite being exposed to risky or stressful situations (Masten, 2001). When learners have higher levels of resilience, they demonstrate stronger emotional regulation, better problem-solving skills and perseverance. All contribute to improved academic success (Martin and Marsh, 2006). According to research, resilient students were able to stay motivated longer, engage actively despite setbacks and thus achieve higher academic outcomes (Waxman, Gray and Padrón, 2003). Self-efficacy, academic persistence and resilience have been described as predictors of high-level achievement (Bandura, 1997; Cassidy, 2016).

According to research studies, resilience can decrease the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantages, emotional distress and increase academic performance. According to Masten et al. (2005), resilient children who were exposed to adverse situations were more likely to achieve educational success compared to those who were less resilient. Morales and Trotman (2004) found that learners from low-income backgrounds who were academically successful often exhibited strong internal resilience. Resilience is thus a dynamic process which is shaped by supportive relationships and positive educational environments (Rutter, 1987). Emotional resilience enhances learners' capacities to sustain engagement and achieve academic success while managing stress, even though they come from lower socio-economic environments. Socio-economic disadvantage is not deterministic. Motivation and resilience moderate effects, but do not eliminate structural barriers. This serves to prove that socio-economic status still influences academic achievement, regardless of motivation and resilience.

6.2.3. Theme 3: Parental Support and Involvement

Quantitative data showed strong parental educational attainment (77.6% secondary–tertiary). Correlation analysis indicated:

- Parental education – academic performance ($r \approx .65$)
- Parental education – educational importance (r. 70)

Qualitative evidence illustrates this dynamic: "My mother explains the work in a better way." (Busi) "My parents pay for extra tutoring." (Bianca) "Parents from poorer homes rarely attend meetings." (Educator B). Time constraints also emerged: "I wish I had more time with the children." (Parent E)

Research indicates that parental involvement plays a significant role in academic success. It influences learners' achievements through emotional, behavioural and cognitive pathways. Research further demonstrates a positive relationship between parental involvement and academic success (Jeynes, 2012; Hill and Tyson, 2009). Parental expectations are one of the strongest components leading to higher academic achievements (Fan and Chen, 2001). When parents are actively involved in their children's schoolwork, for example, attending school meetings, monitoring homework and communicating their educational expectations, learners tend to be more motivated to achieve academic success (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems and Holbein, 2005).

Epstein's model of school-family partnerships suggests that collaboration between parents and schools enhances learners' academic performance by reinforcing academic standards across the school and home contexts (Epstein, 2001). Studies further indicate that parental involvement leads to improved school attendance, better behaviour and better numeracy and literacy outcomes (Hill and Craft, 2003). Parental involvement can also minimise the negative effects of a lower socio-economic status by creating a supportive home-learning environment, which in turn increases academic self-efficacy (Sirin, 2005; Wilder, 2014). Socio-economic status influences academic achievement indirectly through parental capacity. Lower income restricts time, educational confidence, and enrichment opportunities — not necessarily parental motivation.

6.2.4. Theme 4: School and Teacher Response to Inequality

Educators overwhelmingly acknowledged socio-economic influence: "It has definitely got a huge effect." "Poverty is one of the biggest reasons for academic struggles." "Learners with financial stress are not able to focus."

Adaptive strategies included: "I simplify lessons." "I repeat instructions multiple times." "I use relatable examples." However, constraints were evident: "We receive no extra resources whatsoever."

Socio-economic inequality within the classroom plays a significant role in academic outcomes, especially with regard to disparities in resources, institutional expectations and peer composition. Research indicates that learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds

achieved lower marks on standardised assessments (Sirin, 2005). Research further indicates that learners who attend schools with higher concentrations of poverty-stricken learners tend to achieve lower academic outcomes (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005). This can partly be attributed to limited access to material resources, less experienced teachers and less enriched learning environments (OECD, 2019). Inequality within the classroom therefore affects both the quality of instruction received and learner engagement in the classroom.

Research indicates that expectations for academic achievements are not the same for learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. This influences motivation and achievement (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2011). Learners from higher socio-economic status homes often have an advantage in the classroom because they know what the school's expectations are, and they experience better classroom participation and teacher interaction (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic hardship is strongly associated with reduced parental involvement, high stress levels and limited academic support at home. This may negatively influence learners' classroom performance and behaviour (McLoyd, 1998). Socio-economic inequality is visible in classroom practice. Teachers mitigate disparities, but systemic limitations restrict transformative impact. Socio-economic status effects exceed individual teacher capacity.

6.2.5. Theme 5: Aspirations, Confidence, and Perceived Inequality

Quantitative findings:

- 67.1% reported moderate to high confidence.
- Confidence correlated positively with performance ($r \approx .55$).

Learners' perceptions: "Richer students have an advantage — they can get extra help." (Kiara). "You choose to make your own success." (Jonathan). Educators added: "A lack of resources leads to a lack of confidence."

Learners' subjective awareness of the socio-economic inequalities within their school or classroom can significantly influence their academic achievement due to psychological and motivational pathways. The social comparison theory states that learners evaluate their own abilities and worth in relation to others around them. When they perceive disadvantages, it can negatively affect their self-concept and motivation to succeed academically (Festinger, 1954).

When learners feel that they are socio-economically inferior to others, they may experience feelings of not belonging and reduced academic self-efficacy. Both are strongly linked to higher or lower levels of academic performance (Bandura, 1997; Walton and Cohen, 2011). According to research, when learners feel that they are unfairly disadvantaged or deprived, they have decreased engagement and increased "academic disengagement" (Smith et al., 2012). Thus, learners' own subjective perceptions of inequality can have a profound influence on their expectations and achievement outcomes.

When learners exhibit negative feelings toward their socio-economic group, they may experience performance anxiety, which affects their academic performance and working memory (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Studies further indicate that learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds who believe that they are discriminated against are more likely to have lower academic aspirations, and do not achieve high academic success (Destin, 2017). It is widely recorded that students' sense of belonging and feelings of fairness within the school environment mediates the relationship between socio-economic background and academic achievement (OECD, 2018). Perceived inequality can have a psychosocial influence on learners, which provides a disadvantage due to a lack of motivation and engagement, leading to lower academic achievement. Socio-economic status influences academic confidence, which in turn influences performance. Psychological self-belief operates as a mediating variable between socio-economic status and achievement.

6.3. Integrated Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that socio-economic status (SES) influences academic achievement through a complex interaction of structural, environmental, psychological, relational and institutional mechanisms. Rather than operating independently, these mechanisms interact to shape learners' educational experiences and opportunities. In a country such as South Africa which is characterised by socio-economic inequality, these mechanisms reinforce each other, which then creates advantages for learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds. It also generates barriers for learners who come from disadvantaged socio-economic environments (Spaull and Van der Berg, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). The results of this study therefore supports the view that academic achievement is not solely understood through learner ability, but the broader socio-economic contexts must be taken into consideration

(OECD, 2023). Across all themes, socio-economic status influences academic achievement through interconnected mechanisms.

6.3.1. Structural Mechanisms

Learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, however, frequently have to attend schools with fewer resources. These schools often have overcrowded classrooms and limited access to educational materials. These structural disparities have significant influences on the quality of teaching and curriculum delivery received as well as learning support offered to learners. Research conducted in South Africa have demonstrated that the inequalities in aspects such as school infrastructure, teacher distribution and access to quality learning materials contribute to persistent gaps in academic performance between learners from different socio-economic groups (Spaull and Van der Berg, 2023). Structural inequality therefore plays a significant role in shaping the academic opportunities available to learners.

This also refers to the broader socio-economic conditions that have an influence on access to educational resources, quality of schools and enrichment opportunities. Socio-economic inequality directly influences the quality of schools that learners are able to attend, the educational resources available to them, and also the extent to which learners are able to access extra learning opportunities such as technology, tutoring and extra-curricular programmes. Learners from more advantaged socio-economic conditions are generally able to attend schools with better resources and they also have better access to educational enrichment programmes. This has a direct influence on academic performance (Van der Berg et al., 2022; OECD, 2023).

Access to extra enrichment programmes outside of school, or lack of access, is also an indication of structural socio-economic disparities. Families who are from higher socio-economic circumstances are able to invest in additional learning support such as tutoring, Internet access, extra cultural experiences etc. Whereas learners from lower socio-economic circumstances are not able to access such resources. This limits their exposure to extra academic stimulation and skills development (UNESCO, 2023). Structural mechanisms thus create a foundation upon which other socio-economic influences operate.

6.3.2. Environmental Mechanisms

This relates to the immediate social and physical conditions in which learners live and learn. The findings of this study indicate that factors such as overcrowding, neighbourhood safety and household noise levels can significantly affect learners' ability to concentrate, complete homework and engage effectively with their studies. Research studies have indicated that overcrowded households lead to learners who struggle to find quiet study spaces which in turn has a negative impact on their academic productivity and their ability to concentrate (Evans, 2022).

Environmental stressors, such as community instability, high crime levels and overcrowded households are conditions that hinder effective learning. This is, unfortunately, the case for many learners who come from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Unsafe conditions further lead to psychological issues such as stress, anxiety and distractions, which hinder learners from focusing on their studies (UNICEF, 2023). Limited space within the household as well as noise pollution negatively impacts learners' ability to focus on their studies.

These environmental mechanisms also influence learners' emotional well-being, routines and sleep quality. These are all important factors for healthy cognitive functioning and academic performance. Stressful and unstable home conditions hinder learners from participating fully in their school activities and academics. Thus, environmental conditions are important contextual factors that influences the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement (OECD, 2023).

6.3.3. Psychological mechanisms

Another way in which socio-economic conditions influence academic achievement is through psychological mechanisms. Learners from lower socio-economic conditions often experience higher levels of anxiety, stress and academic insecurity. This can be attributed to financial instability, uncertainty about future prospects, as well as family pressures. Chronic exposure to stress has a definite negative effect on memory, concentration, and cognitive functioning, which then impacts learning outcomes (Evans, 2022).

Research studies indicate that socio-economic disadvantage negatively impacts learners' academic self-concept and confidence. When learners believe that they do not have adequate resources or opportunities, they may develop feelings of reduced self-efficacy and academic inadequacy. These negative perceptions influences their motivation, persistence and engagement with academic tasks (OECD, 2023).

At the same time, the findings of this study suggest that psychological resilience may act as an important protective factor. Learners who maintain strong intrinsic motivation, goal orientation, and determination may still achieve high academic outcomes despite socio-economic constraints. Other factors, such as positive teacher relationships, supportive school environments and family encouragement also impact psychological resilience (UNESCO, 2023). Psychological mechanisms can thus reinforce the disadvantages associated with socio-economic inequality, but it can also contribute to resilience if the appropriate support structures are in place.

6.3.4. Relational mechanisms

Relational mechanisms refer to the influence of social relationships. This particularly involves relationships with parents, teachers and caregivers, with particular reference to their academic development. Research indicates that parental involvement has been identified as one of the strongest predictors of academic success across different socio-economic groups (Hill and Tyson, 2023). When parents actively engage with their children's education, for example assisting with homework, encouraging academic effort and regularly communicating with teachers, it has a positive influence on learners' academic motivation and performance.

Socio-economic circumstances may also influence the way in which parents are able to be involved in their children's education. As indicated in the previous chapter, parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds often have to work long hours, have more than one job or have limited academic backgrounds, which also reduces their ability to sufficiently support academic development at home (Spaull and Van der Berg, 2023). These are not necessarily caused by a lack of parental commitment, but rather by structural limitations associated with economic hardship.

Extra support from teachers also play a significant role in mediating socio-economic disadvantage. When teachers provide academic guidance, encouragement and emotional support, it has a significantly positive influence on learners' engagement with schoolwork and academic confidence. When there are positive relationships between teachers and students, it improves academic motivation, classroom participation and educational outcomes (OECD, 2023). When learners face socio-economic hardship, supportive and positive teacher relationships may act as a buffer to minimise academic disadvantage.

6.3.5. Institutional mechanisms

Institutional mechanisms refer to the systemic structures and the broader organisation of the education system that shape learning opportunities. There are significant differences between schools when it comes to infrastructure, learning resources, teacher qualifications and support systems. These institutional disparities are closely related to socio-economic conditions in countries such as South Africa (Spaull and Van der Berg, 2023).

Schools in disadvantaged socio-economic conditions often face systemic constraints. They have shortages of qualified teachers, limited funding, insufficient learning materials, and inadequate infrastructure. These challenges have a negative impact on the quality of instruction offered. It also limits the academic programmes available to learners. Schools in more economically affluent communities have better financial resources, advanced learning resources, and technology and specialised academic support services (OECD, 2023).

Systemic inequalities and institutional policies therefore reinforce existing socio-economic disparities. Educational outcomes and success are thus not only shaped by individual effort, but also by the structural organisation of the schooling system, and the resources made available to different schools. Systemic interventions are thus required to address socio-economic disparities to reduce institutional inequalities and promote quality education to all (UNESCO, 2023).

6.3.6. Alignment with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework

The findings of this study strongly align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises that human development occurs within multiple interconnected environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). This framework states that academic achievement is shaped by individual learner characteristics, as well as interactions with family and school (microsystems), relationships between family and school (mesosystem), community and institutional structures (exosystem). and the broader socio-economic and policy contexts (macrosystem).

The structural, environmental, psychological, relational and institutional mechanisms identified in this study correspond closely to these ecological layers. For example, parental involvement and teacher support operate within the microsystem, while school resources and community conditions reflect broader exosystem and macrosystem influences. This integrated perspective highlights the interconnected nature of socio-economic influences on education and underscores the importance of addressing inequality across multiple levels of the education system.

Importantly, the findings also demonstrate that socio-economic status does not deterministically predict academic failure. While socio-economic disadvantage significantly increases the likelihood of educational challenges, many learners demonstrate resilience and achieve academic success despite structural barriers. Factors such as supportive teachers, learner motivation and parental encouragement are able to mitigate the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage. They do, however, not eliminate systemic inequality (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Effective educational interventions thus need to address both structural inequalities as well as supportive relationships which encourage learner resilience.

6.4. Overall answer to the research question

The findings confirm that socio-economic status does influence academic achievement in the South African context, operating through structural, environmental, psychological, and institutional pathways. While resilience and support systems moderate these effects, socio-economic inequality remains a powerful determinant of educational opportunity and performance. The data therefore support a contextual-ecological interpretation, where

academic achievement is shaped not only by learner ability, but by socio-economic conditions that structure access, stability, support, and self-belief.

6.5 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter examined the findings of the study through an integrated thematic discussion, demonstrating that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through multiple, interconnected pathways. Structural disparities in access to material resources such as Internet connectivity, study space, learning materials and transport directly constrained learners' academic participation. Household financial strain further affected attendance, concentration and emotional well-being, while environmental factors such as noise and overcrowding disrupted cognitive functioning and independent study. Although school-based assistance and teacher support provided meaningful buffering effects, these interventions did not fully compensate for underlying socio-economic inequalities. The findings, therefore, confirm that educational access and performance are deeply embedded within broader socio-economic conditions.

The discussion also highlighted the significant role of psychological and relational mechanisms in mediating academic outcomes. Emotional distress linked to financial instability reduced motivation, self-regulation and academic engagement, while parental involvement emerged as a strong predictor of learner performance. Correlation analyses indicated meaningful relationships between parental education, perceived importance of education and academic achievement. Furthermore, learners' confidence levels were positively associated with performance, illustrating how perceived inequality and self-belief function as mediating variables between socio-economic status and achievement. At the same time, the presence of resilience and strong aspirations among learners demonstrated that socio-economic disadvantage is not deterministic, but probabilistic.

Overall, the findings support a contextual-ecological interpretation of academic achievement. Socio-economic status operates through structural, environmental, psychological, relational and institutional mechanisms that collectively shape learners' educational trajectories. While protective factors such as resilience, parental encouragement and teacher responsiveness can moderate some of these effects, systemic inequality remains a powerful determinant of

opportunity and performance. The research therefore confirms that academic success cannot be understood solely in terms of individual ability; it must be interpreted within the socio-economic environments that structure access, stability, support and self-belief in the South African educational context. In the next chapter I will provide a summary, conclusions and recommendations for further research and practice.

CHAPTER 7:

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter contained a discussion of the Research Findings. This chapter presents the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study titled *Exploring the Relationship between Socio-Economic Status and Academic Achievement*. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesise the theoretical foundations, methodological approach, and empirical findings of the research to address the central research question guiding the investigation:

What are the most significant socio-economic factors that influence academic achievement, and how can knowledge of these factors be used to create equal educational opportunities for all South African learners?

Even in post-apartheid South Africa, educational inequality remains one of the highest pressing social challenges in the country. Even though significant changes and reforms in policy have taken place since 1994, there are still significant disparities between the educational opportunities and achievements for learners from different socio-economic backgrounds (Spaull, 2013; Van der Berg, 2015). The quality of education offered often varies greatly depending on socio-economic background, available resources and geographic location, even though access to schooling has improved immensely (Fiske and Ladd 2004; Soudien 2012).

International research has consistently indicated that academic achievement is strongly influenced by socio-economic status (Coleman et al. 1966; Sirin 2005). Learners who come from higher socio-economic backgrounds typically have access to better educational resources, more supportive learning environments and significantly higher parental involvement when it comes to their education. Whereas learners from lower socio-economic status backgrounds often encounter a variety of barriers that have a negative impact on their academic achievement and educational attainment (Bradley and Corwyn 2002; Duncan and Murnane 2011).

Within the South African context, these disparities are further enhanced by the historical legacy of apartheid-era education policies that had unequal distribution of resources, teacher quality, and a disparity in infrastructure across schools as a result (Fiske and Ladd 2004). As a result, many learners continue to attend schools that face significant resource constraints,

overcrowded classrooms, and limited academic support systems. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to integrate the findings of the study with the theoretical framework and existing literature in order to draw meaningful conclusions and provide practical recommendations for addressing socio-economic inequality in education.

The chapter begins with a summary of the research problem, aims, and objectives. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework and methodological approach guiding the study. Thereafter, the key findings are synthesised and interpreted in relation to existing research. The chapter concludes with recommendations for educational policy and practice, suggestions for future research, and concluding reflections on the broader implications of the study.

7.2 Summary of the Study

7.2.1 Research Problem

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. This is characterised by high levels of income inequality and socio-economic stratification (World Bank, 2018). These socio-economic disparities have profound implications for educational opportunities and academic achievement.

Despite the fact that the South African government has invested substantial funding in education and policy reforms, which had the improvement in access to schooling in mind, there are still significant differences in educational outcomes across different socio-economic groups (Spaull and Kotze, 2015). Learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds frequently experience barriers such as limited access to learning resources, unstable home environments, inadequate school infrastructure, and reduced access to academic support.

International research studies have consistently demonstrated that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through multiple spheres, such as parental education, household income, home learning environments, and access to educational resources (Sirin 2005; Reardon 2011). Within South Africa, these inequalities are further highlighted by the historical legacy of apartheid education systems, which created great disparities between schools from different communities (Fiske and Ladd 2004; Soudien 2012).

Although a substantial body of research exists on socio-economic inequality and education, there remains a need to understand how these factors interact within specific educational contexts. In particular, there is a need to explore how socio-economic conditions influence learners' academic experiences and outcomes in ways that either reinforce or mitigate educational inequality. The research problem addressed by this study, therefore, focused on identifying the specific socio-economic factors that influence academic achievement and understanding how knowledge of these factors can contribute to promoting greater educational equity.

7.2.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study was to identify the most significant socio-economic factors influencing academic achievement and to explore how knowledge of these factors could contribute to creating more equitable educational opportunities for South African learners.

To achieve this aim, the study pursued four key objectives:

1. to define and describe the socio-economic influence on academic achievement based on relevant theoretical and empirical literature.
2. to explore contextual socio-economic factors influencing educational opportunities within South African schools.
3. to identify the most significant socio-economic determinants of academic achievement through empirical investigation; and
4. to develop recommendations aimed at reducing socio-economic inequality in education.

These objectives provided a structured framework through which the research question could be systematically investigated.

7.2.3 Research Design and Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method research approach situated within a post-positivistic research paradigm. This approach enabled the researcher to combine quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative insights in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Data were collected from the following group of participants including:

- Learners
- Parents
- Teachers

The study included participants from schools representing different socio-economic contexts in Gauteng Province, including affluent schools, middle-income schools, disadvantaged township schools, and LSEN schools.

The data collection methods included:

- Google Forms questionnaires
- Semi-structured interviews

Quantitative data were analysed using statistical techniques including descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The quantitative data were analysed using a combination of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarise the characteristics of the participants and the distribution of the selected socio-economic and academic variables. Frequencies and percentages were used to identify patterns in factors such as parental education, household income, educational importance, access to resources, academic confidence and academic performance. This provided an overall description of the socio-economic and educational circumstances represented in the sample. Correlation analysis was subsequently used to examine the relationships between the selected socio-economic factors and academic achievement. The analysis enabled the study to determine the direction and strength of associations between variables such as parental education, household income, educational importance, academic confidence and academic performance. This approach was appropriate for the second research question, which sought to identify the contextual socio-economic factors that play the most significant role in academic achievement and the provision

of quality educational opportunities. The quantitative findings were subsequently considered alongside the qualitative findings to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the socio-economic influences on academic achievement.

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, as this approach was appropriate for identifying, organising and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning within participants' responses and interview data. Thematic analysis was considered suitable because the qualitative component sought to explore how learners, parents and educators experienced and perceived the influence of socio-economic circumstances on academic achievement and educational opportunities. The analysis involved systematically reviewing the open-ended questionnaire responses and interview data, identifying recurring ideas and assigning initial codes, grouping related codes into categories, and subsequently developing broader themes and sub-themes. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they were supported by the data and were relevant to the research questions. The final themes were then interpreted in relation to the quantitative findings and the theoretical framework to provide contextual explanations of the socio-economic factors identified in the study.

7.3 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and Vygotsky's Social Development Theory.

7.3.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, human development occurs within a complex system of interacting environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These contexts include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Within the context of this study, learners' academic achievement is shaped by multiple ecological layers. The microsystem, which includes family and school environments, directly influences learners' access to educational resources, emotional support, and academic guidance. The mesosystem refers to interactions between these environments, such as

relationships between parents and teachers. At a broader level, the macrosystem represents the wider socio-economic and cultural context within which education occurs. In South Africa, this includes historical inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and national education policies that influence resource distribution and educational opportunities. This ecological perspective highlights the interconnected nature of socio-economic influences on academic achievement.

7.3.2 Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasises the interaction between personal factors, behavioural processes, and environmental influences in shaping human behaviour and learning (Bandura, 1986). Central to this theory is the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to succeed in specific tasks. Learners who develop strong academic self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate persistence, motivation, and resilience when facing academic challenges (Schunk and DiBenedetto 2020). Socio-economic conditions can influence learners' self-efficacy by shaping their exposure to positive academic role models and supportive learning environments. Learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds may have fewer opportunities to observe successful academic behaviours, which can affect their educational aspirations and motivation.

7.3.3 Vygotsky's Social Development Theory

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory emphasises the importance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this theory, learning occurs through interactions with more knowledgeable individuals such as teachers, parents, and peers. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that learners achieve higher levels of cognitive development when provided with appropriate guidance and support. In socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, limited access to educational guidance, mentorship, and academic support may restrict opportunities for cognitive development and academic success.

7.4 Summary of Key Findings

This section presents a synthesis of the key findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study, providing a comprehensive overview of how socio-economic factors influence academic achievement. By integrating statistical trends with participants' lived experiences, the findings reveal not only the extent of socio-economic disparities but also the underlying mechanisms through which these disparities shape educational outcomes. The discussion highlights the interconnected roles of parental education, household income, home environment, and school support systems, while also acknowledging the persistence of structural inequalities alongside learner resilience and motivation.

7.4.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings revealed several important relationships between socio-economic variables and academic outcomes. Firstly, parental education levels were strongly associated with learner academic performance and confidence. A large proportion of parents (77.6%) possessed secondary or tertiary education, which corresponded with relatively strong learner performance and academic support structures at home. Secondly, household income levels showed a positive relationship with academic achievement. Learners from middle- to higher-income households generally had access to more educational resources, including learning materials, technology, and academic support. Thirdly, households that placed a high value on education demonstrated higher levels of learner motivation and academic confidence.

Correlation analysis revealed several significant relationships:

- Parental education was positively correlated with household income and learner academic performance.
- Household income was positively associated with academic achievement.
- Educational values within the home were positively related to learner confidence and motivation.

However, data from educator participants revealed that a large proportion of learners experienced frequent academic challenges, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Approximately 79% of learners were reported to experience academic

difficulties frequently or consistently. These findings indicate that while some learners benefit from supportive socio-economic environments, many others continue to experience structural disadvantages that affect their academic outcomes.

7.4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis provided deeper insight into the mechanisms through which socio-economic status influences academic achievement. Five major themes emerged from the analysis:

Socio-Economic Status and Educational Access

Learners from low-income households often lacked essential educational resources such as computers, internet access, study materials, and quiet study spaces. These limitations restricted their ability to complete schoolwork effectively and participate fully in educational activities.

Home Environment and Emotional Climate

Financial stress, overcrowding, and unstable home environments frequently affected learners' concentration and emotional wellbeing. These factors created psychological barriers that interfered with learning and academic engagement.

Parental Support and Involvement

Parental education and work schedules significantly influenced the level of academic support available at home. Parents with higher educational backgrounds were generally more able to assist with homework and academic guidance.

School and Teacher Responses to Socio-Economic Inequality

Educators demonstrated strong awareness of socio-economic disparities and often adapted their teaching practices to support disadvantaged learners. However, many teachers reported that systemic resource constraints limited their ability to address these inequalities effectively.

Aspirations, Motivation and Resilience

Despite facing significant socio-economic challenges, many learners demonstrated strong motivation and aspirations for upward mobility through education. This resilience highlights the potential for supportive educational environments to mitigate the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage.

7.5 Integrated Analysis of the Findings

7.5.1 Socio-economic Status and Educational Resources

The findings revealed a strong relationship between socio-economic status and access to educational resources. Learners from higher-income households generally had greater access to books, computers, internet connectivity, and study spaces. These findings align with international research demonstrating that socio-economic status influences academic achievement through differences in access to educational resources (Sirin, 2005; Reardon, 2011). Learners from disadvantaged households frequently reported limited access to internet connectivity, insufficient study materials, and inadequate learning environments.

7.5.2 Home Environment and Emotional Well-being

The study found that home environments significantly influenced learners' academic engagement and performance. Financial stress, overcrowded living conditions, and unstable family environments often reduce learners' ability to concentrate on their studies. Research indicates that chronic exposure to poverty-related stress can negatively affect cognitive functioning and emotional regulation (Evans and Kim 2013). Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, these findings illustrate how socio-economic conditions within the family microsystem influence learners' academic outcomes.

7.5.3 Parental Education and Academic Support

Parental education emerged as one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement. Parents with higher levels of education were more likely to provide academic guidance, assist with homework, and encourage educational aspirations. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that parental education influences children's academic outcomes through expectations, support, and the creation of stimulating home learning environments (Davis-Kean, 2005).

7.5.4 School and Teacher Responses to Socio-economic Inequality

Teachers played a critical role in mitigating socio-economic inequalities by adapting their teaching practices to support disadvantaged learners. However, educators reported significant challenges including large class sizes and limited resources. These systemic constraints limited teachers' ability to provide individualised academic support.

7.5.5 Learner Motivation and Resilience

Despite socio-economic challenges, many learners demonstrated strong motivation and resilience. These findings support research suggesting that resilience can act as a protective factor enabling learners to succeed despite adversity (Ungar, 2013). However, resilience alone cannot fully compensate for structural inequalities in educational opportunity.

7.6 Conclusions

Based on the integrated findings of the study, several key conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the study confirms that socio-economic status plays a significant role in shaping academic achievement. Socio-economic conditions influence access to educational resources, learning environments, parental support, and psychological well-being. Secondly, the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement is complex and multidimensional. Rather than functioning as a single determinant, socio-economic factors operate through

interconnected structural, environmental, and psychological pathways. Thirdly, parental education emerged as one of the strongest predictors of learner academic success. Parents with higher levels of education were more likely to provide academic guidance, encourage educational aspirations, and create supportive learning environments. Fourthly, household income affects educational opportunities by determining access to resources such as study materials, technological devices, private tutoring, and stable living conditions. Fifthly, schools play an essential role in mitigating socio-economic inequalities. Teacher support, institutional interventions, and school-based assistance programs can significantly reduce the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage. Sixthly, the findings demonstrate that socio-economic disadvantage does not inevitably determine academic failure. Many learners display remarkable resilience, motivation, and determination to succeed despite challenging circumstances. However, individual resilience alone cannot compensate for systemic inequalities. Addressing socio-economic disparities requires coordinated efforts across educational policy, school systems, and community support structures.

7.7 Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for educational policy and practice. Educational policymakers should prioritise equitable resource allocation to disadvantaged schools. Increased investment in infrastructure, educational technology, and teacher professional development is essential. Teacher education programmes should also incorporate training on strategies for supporting learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Additionally, schools should be recognised as critical support environments that provide both academic and psychosocial assistance to learners.

7.8 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, a number of important recommendations can be made at policy, school, and community levels to address the socio-economic factors influencing learners' academic achievement.

Policy-Level Recommendations

At the policy level, it is recommended that there be increased funding for disadvantaged schools to ensure that they have access to adequate resources, infrastructure, and learning materials. Many schools in under-resourced communities struggle to provide quality education due to financial constraints, and additional funding would help to bridge this gap. Furthermore, the expansion of national school nutrition programmes is essential, as proper nutrition is closely linked to learners' concentration, energy levels, and overall academic performance. Ensuring that more learners receive regular, nutritious meals at school can significantly improve their ability to engage in learning. In addition, improving access to digital learning technologies is crucial in an increasingly technology-driven world. Providing learners with access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital platforms can enhance learning opportunities and reduce inequalities between schools.

School-Level Recommendations

At the school level, it is recommended that schools establish tutoring and academic support programmes to assist learners who may be struggling academically. These programmes can provide targeted support, helping learners to better understand subject content and improve their performance. The provision of counselling services is also important, as many learners face emotional and psychological challenges related to their socio-economic circumstances. Access to counselling can support learners' well-being and create a more conducive environment for learning. Additionally, there is a need for ongoing professional development for teachers, particularly in inclusive teaching practices. Equipping teachers with the skills to address diverse learning needs and backgrounds can improve classroom effectiveness and ensure that all learners are supported.

Community-Level Recommendations

At the community level, it is recommended that parent education programmes be implemented to empower parents with the knowledge and skills needed to support their children's education. When parents are actively involved and informed, learners are more likely to succeed academically. Strengthening school-community partnerships is also vital, as collaboration between schools and community stakeholders can lead to shared resources, support systems, and improved educational outcomes. Finally, the development of community-based academic

support initiatives, such as after-school programmes or study groups, can provide additional learning opportunities for learners outside of the classroom. These initiatives can help to reinforce learning and create supportive environments that contribute to academic success.

7.9 Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to selected schools within the Gauteng province, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other regions. Additionally, participation in interviews was voluntary, which may have resulted in unequal representation across socio-economic groups.

7.10 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should explore longitudinal studies examining the long-term influence of socio-economic status on educational outcomes. Comparative studies across different provinces may also provide valuable insights into regional variations in socio-economic inequality.

7.11. Contribution of my study

According to The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF), *a doctoral thesis must demonstrate high-level research capability and make a significant and original academic contribution at the frontiers of a discipline or field.* (HEQSF 2013)

This research study accomplishes the requirements of the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) by demonstrating both high-level research capability and a significant, original contribution to the field of education. In terms of research capability, the study is characterised by a rigorous and well-justified mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative and qualitative data to address a complex social issue. The systematic collection, analysis, and triangulation of data reflect advanced methodological competence, while the ability to draw coherent conclusions from multiple data sources demonstrates a high level of analytical skill. Furthermore, the study shows depth in its engagement with relevant literature

and theoretical frameworks, including social constructivist, social learning, and ecological perspectives, which are critically applied rather than descriptively presented. This indicates the capacity to operate at an advanced level of independent scholarly inquiry.

The study also makes a significant and original academic contribution by generating new, context-specific knowledge on the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement within South African schools. While the broader topic of educational inequality is well established, this research advances the field by empirically identifying and integrating structural, environmental, psychological, and relational mechanisms that influence learner outcomes. The combination of statistical patterns with lived experiences offers a more comprehensive explanatory model than many existing studies, thereby extending current understandings at the frontier of the discipline. In addition, the inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives, particularly those of educators, provides novel insights into how socio-economic inequality is experienced and mediated within classrooms. This adds depth and originality to the research and strengthens its contribution to both theory and practice.

Finally, the study's findings have clear implications for educational policy and intervention, demonstrating not only theoretical advancement but also practical relevance. By bridging the gap between empirical evidence and real-world application, the research meets the HEQSF expectation of contributing meaningfully to both academic knowledge and societal development.

7.12 Concluding Reflections

This study set out to investigate the socio-economic influence on academic achievement within the South African education system. Through an integrated mixed-method investigation combining quantitative analysis and qualitative insights, the research sought to identify the most significant socio-economic factors influencing learner performance and to explore how knowledge of these factors could contribute to creating more equitable educational opportunities. The findings of the study confirm that socio-economic inequality continues to exert a powerful influence on educational outcomes. At the same time, the results highlight the complex interplay between structural conditions, institutional responses, and individual agency in shaping learners' academic trajectories.

A central conclusion emerging from the study is that socio-economic status remains one of the most significant determinants of academic achievement in South Africa. Consistent with international research, the findings demonstrate that learners from economically advantaged households generally benefit from a range of structural advantages, including access to educational resources, supportive home learning environments, and higher levels of parental involvement in schooling (Sirin 2005; Bradley and Corwyn 2002). In contrast, learners from disadvantaged socio-economic contexts frequently encounter structural barriers that limit their academic opportunities. These barriers include inadequate access to learning materials, limited technological resources, overcrowded living conditions, and reduced availability of academic support within the home environment.

Within the South African context, these socio-economic disparities are further intensified by historical patterns of inequality embedded within the education system. Despite significant policy reforms implemented since the end of apartheid, the legacy of historically unequal resource distribution continues to influence the quality of education available to learners in different communities (Fiske and Ladd 2004; Soudien 2012). As a result, many schools serving disadvantaged communities continue to face challenges such as insufficient infrastructure, large class sizes, limited access to technology, and shortages of educational materials. These systemic constraints not only affect the quality of teaching and learning but also contribute to persistent disparities in educational outcomes across socio-economic groups (Spaull 2013; Van der Berg 2015).

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that educational inequality cannot be understood solely in terms of individual learner ability or effort. Rather, academic achievement must be viewed within a broader socio-economic framework that acknowledges the structural conditions shaping learners' educational experiences. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful lens through which to interpret these findings. The theory emphasises that child development is influenced by multiple interacting systems, ranging from immediate family environments to broader societal structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the context of this study, socio-economic factors operating within the family microsystem, such as parental education, household income, and home learning environments, were found to have a direct influence on learners' academic engagement and performance. At the same time, broader macro-level influences, including national education policies and socio-economic inequality within society, shape the distribution of educational opportunities across schools.

Another important insight emerging from the study is the significant role of parental education in shaping learners' academic outcomes. Parents with higher levels of education were more likely to provide academic guidance, assist with homework, and encourage educational aspirations. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that parental education influences children's academic achievement through both cognitive and motivational pathways (Davis-Kean, 2005). Educated parents are often better equipped to support their children's learning and to navigate educational systems effectively. Conversely, parents with limited formal education may face challenges in providing academic support, even when they place a high value on their children's education.

The study also highlights the important role of schools and teachers in mitigating socio-economic inequalities. Educators participating in the research demonstrated a strong awareness of the socio-economic challenges faced by many learners and often adapted their teaching practices to support disadvantaged students. These efforts included providing additional academic support, modifying instructional strategies, and offering emotional encouragement to learners experiencing socio-economic stress. Such practices reflect the potential of schools to function as supportive environments that help reduce the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage.

However, the findings also indicate that teachers frequently operate within institutional contexts characterised by significant resource constraints. Large class sizes, limited access to learning materials, and insufficient support services often restrict educators' ability to provide individualised assistance to learners. These challenges highlight the need for systemic interventions that strengthen school capacity and ensure that teachers are adequately supported in their efforts to promote educational equity.

An encouraging aspect of the study's findings is the resilience and determination demonstrated by many learners despite the socio-economic challenges they face. Numerous participants expressed strong aspirations for academic success and viewed education as a pathway toward social mobility and improved life opportunities. These findings align with research suggesting that resilience can act as a protective factor enabling learners to succeed despite adversity (Ungar, 2013). The presence of supportive relationships with teachers, peers, and family members often played a crucial role in fostering this resilience.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that individual resilience alone cannot compensate for structural inequalities in educational opportunity. While motivated learners may overcome certain challenges, persistent disparities in access to educational resources and supportive learning environments continue to shape academic outcomes. Addressing educational inequality therefore requires systemic approaches that address both educational and socio-economic factors.

From a policy perspective, the findings of this study underscore the importance of developing strategies aimed at reducing resource disparities between schools. Policies that prioritise equitable funding, improved infrastructure, and expanded access to educational technology are essential for creating more balanced educational opportunities. In addition, targeted support programmes for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds—including academic tutoring, counselling services, and school nutrition programmes—can play a vital role in supporting learner wellbeing and academic engagement.

The study also highlights the importance of strengthening partnerships between schools, families, and communities. Education is not solely the responsibility of schools; rather, it represents a collaborative process involving multiple stakeholders. Initiatives that support parental involvement in education, community-based learning programmes, and mentorship opportunities can contribute significantly to improving educational outcomes for learners from disadvantaged contexts.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that teacher education and professional development programmes should place greater emphasis on strategies for addressing socio-economic inequality within the classroom. Teachers require not only pedagogical knowledge but also an understanding of the social and economic factors affecting learners' lives. Training in inclusive teaching practices, differentiated instruction, and trauma-informed educational approaches can equip educators with the skills necessary to support diverse learner populations effectively.

In reflecting on the broader implications of the study, it is evident that achieving educational equality in South Africa requires a holistic and multi-dimensional approach. Educational reform must extend beyond curriculum changes and assessment practices to address the socio-economic conditions that influence learners' educational experiences. Poverty, unemployment, and social inequality continue to shape educational opportunities in profound ways, and efforts

to improve educational outcomes must therefore be integrated with broader social and economic development strategies.

Ultimately, education remains one of the most powerful tools available for promoting social mobility, economic development, and democratic participation. By providing learners with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities necessary to succeed, education has the potential to break cycles of poverty and inequality. However, this potential can only be realised if educational systems actively address the structural barriers that limit access to quality education for many learners.

This study contributes to the growing body of research highlighting the importance of addressing socio-economic inequality within education systems. By identifying the key socio-economic factors influencing academic achievement and examining how these factors operate within specific educational contexts, the research provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to promote educational equity.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reaffirm that socio-economic inequality continues to shape educational opportunities and academic achievement in South Africa. While significant progress has been made in expanding access to education, much work remains to be done to ensure that all learners, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to high-quality educational opportunities. Achieving this goal requires sustained commitment from governments, educators, communities, and society as a whole. Only through coordinated and sustained efforts can education fulfil its transformative potential as a catalyst for social justice, equality, and national development.

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Appendix A: Google Forms Questionnaires

Parents and Learners Google Forms Questionnaires : Quantitative section

Question 1: What is the highest level of education of the adults in the household?

- *No formal education*
- *Primary education*
- *Secondary education*
- *Tertiary education (University / College)*
- *Postgraduate degree*

Question 2: What is the current employment status of the adults in the household?

- *Unemployed*
- *Part-time employment*
- *Full-time employment*
- *Self-employed*
- *Retired*

Question 3: What is the total monthly household income?

- *Less than R10 000*
- *R10 000 to R20 000*
- *R20 000 to R30 000*
- *R30 000 to R40 000*
- *More than R40 000*

Question 4: How many people live in the household?

- *1-2*
- *3-4*
- *5-6*
- *7 or more*

Question 5: What is the composition of the members of the household?

- *Both parents with children living with them.*
- *One parent with children living with them.*
- *Grandparents or other relatives taking care of the children.*
- *Guardians or foster care taking care of the children.*
- *A child living on his / her own.*

Question 6: Do you / your child receive free subsidised school meals?

- *Yes*
- *No*
- *I'm not sure*

Question 7: Does the family receive help from the government? (Grants etc.)

- *Yes*
- *No*
- *I'm not sure*

Question 8: Do you have your own study materials? (Textbooks, notebooks, calculators etc.)

- *Yes, we have everything we need.*
- *We have most things.*
- *We have to borrow some items.*
- *We often lack basic materials.*

Question 9: Is there a quiet place to study at home?

- *Yes, always.*
- *Yes, sometimes.*
- *No, it's usually noisy.*
- *Studying doesn't take place in our home.*

Question 10: How often do the children in the household have to help with chores or care for others before doing homework?

- *Never*
- *Rarely*
- *Sometimes*
- *Often*
- *Always*

Question 11: Do you have access to the Internet at home?

- *Yes, all the time.*
- *Sometimes*
- *Only on a mobile phone.*
- *No access at home.*

Question 12: How many hours a day is spent on homework or studying in your household?

- *None*
- *Less than 1 hour.*
- *1 – 2 hours.*
- *3 or more hours.*

Question 13: Who helps with most of the schoolwork at home?

- *Parent / guardian*
- *Older sibling.*
- *Tutor or teacher.*
- *No one.*
- *Child does everything by himself / herself.*

Question 14: How often is homework completed in time in your household?

- *Never*
- *Rarely*
- *Sometimes*
- *Often*
- *Always*

Question 15: How many days of school have you / your child missed this term due to family or financial reasons?

- *None*
- *1 – 2 days*
- *3 – 5 days*
- *More than 5 days.*
- *I don't know.*

Question 16: Do you / your child have access to extra help? (Tutoring, after-school programmes etc.)

- *Yes, regularly.*
- *Yes, sometimes.*
- *No*
- *I don't know.*

Question 17: How often do you worry about money or basic needs? (Food, clothing, transport)

- *Never*
- *Rarely*
- *Sometimes*
- *Often*
- *Always*

Question 18: How would you rate the quality of the school you / your child attend/s?

- *Poor*
- *Fair*
- *Good*
- *Very good*
- *Excellent*

Parents and Learners Google Forms Questionnaires : Qualitative section

Question 19: How would you describe your family's financial situation?

Question 20: How important is doing well in school in your household? Elaborate.

Question 21: How would you rate and describe the academic performance of learners in your household?

Question 22: How confident are you / the learners in the household about learning at school?

Question 23: Do the teachers at your school / your child's school understand the challenges that you face outside of school? Please explain.

Question 24: In what ways do you feel, if any, that there is sufficient support given at school to struggling learners?

Question 25: In what way, if any, do you believe your family's income affects the school performance of the learners in your household?

Teachers Google Forms Questionnaires : Quantitative section

Question 1: What type of teacher are you? (Primary, High school etc.)

- *Primary school teacher (Mainstream)*
- *High school teacher (Mainstream)*
- *University lecturer*
- *LSEN teacher*

Question 2: What is your highest level of education?

- *Diploma or certificate*
- *Bachelor's degree*
- *Postgraduate diploma / Honours*
- *Master's degree*
- *Doctorate*

Question 3: How many years have you been teaching?

- *Less than 1 year*
- *1 – 3 years*
- *4 – 7 years*
- *8 – 15 years*
- *More than 15 years*

Question 4: What Grade levels do you currently teach?

- *Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3)*
- *Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 – 6)*
- *Senior Phase (Grades 7 – 9)*
- *FET Phase (Grades 10 – 12)*
- *LSEN (Primary)*
- *LSEN (High school)*

Question 5: What type of school do you teach at?

- *Public mainstream (no-fee school)*
- *Public mainstream (fee-paying school)*
- *LSEN school*
- *Private / independent school*
- *Other*

Question 6: What is the approximate socio-economic status of the majority of your learners?

- *Low-income*
- *Lower-middle income*
- *Middle income*
- *Upper-middle income*
- *High income*

Question 7: Does your school provide additional academic support for learners from low-income families?

- *No additional support.*
- *Minimal support.*
- *Some support.*
- *Substantial support.*
- *Comprehensive support.*

Question 8: Do you receive training on how to address socio-economic diversity in the classroom?

- *Never*
- *Rarely*
- *Occasionally*
- *Often*
- *Very often*

Question 9: How often do you have to communicate with parents or guardians about learners' academic challenges? (Frequency of academic challenges that occur.)

- *Never*
- *Rarely*
- *Sometimes*
- *Often*
- *Always*

Teachers Google Forms Questionnaires : Qualitative section

Question 10: To what extent do you observe learners lacking basic school supplies? (Pens, books etc.) Please elaborate.

Question 11: To what extent do you observe that learners miss school due to financial or family issues? Please elaborate.

Question 12: What differences, if any, do you notice in academic performance between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds?

Question 13: How often do learners report stress or anxiety related to money or home conditions? Please elaborate.

Question 14: How prepared are your learners (on average) when they arrive at school each day? Please elaborate.

Question 15: How often, if at all, do you adapt your teaching methods for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds? Please elaborate.

Question 16: How effective do you feel in supporting learners facing socio-economic challenges? Please elaborate.

Question 17: To what extent do you believe socio-economic status affects learners' academic achievement?

Question 18: Do you believe that learners from low-income families are at a disadvantage in your classroom? Please explain.

Question 19: How often, and in what ways, do you feel limited in helping students due to a lack of school resources?

Question 20: Do you believe that learners from lower-income backgrounds perform better when given extra support or interventions? Please elaborate.

Question 21: How confident are you in your ability to promote equity in academic outcomes among diverse learners?

Appendix B: Interview schedules

Learner Interviews:

Question 1. How many people live in your household?

Question 2. Do you have a quiet place at home where you can study?

Question 3. How often do you miss school because of money-related reasons (e.g. transport, uniforms)?

Question 4. Do you have access to the Internet or a computer at home to help with schoolwork?

Question 5. What is your average grade at school?

Question 6. What challenges do you face at home that affect your schoolwork? (e.g. noise, lack of food, no electricity)

Question 7. Can you describe a time when your family's financial situation made it hard for you to do well in school?

Question 8. How do your parents or guardians support your education, even if it's not with money?

Question 9. In what ways do you think your living situation affects your school performance?

Question 10. What motivates you to do well in school despite any difficulties at home?

Question 11. Do you receive any help from school (like free meals, stationery, or tutoring)?

Question 12. Do you think students from wealthier families have an advantage in school? Why or why not?

Question 13. How many hours a day do you spend doing homework or studying? What helps or stops you from studying more?

Question 14. Who do you go to for help when you don't understand something at school?

Question 15. If you could change one thing at home to help you do better at school, what would it be?

Parent Interviews:

Question 1: What is your highest level of education completed?

Question 2: What is your current employment status?

Question 3: What is your approximate monthly household income?

Question 4: On average, how many hours per week do you or other family members spend helping your child with schoolwork?

Question 5: Does your child have access to a computer, Internet, educational materials and a quiet space for study at home?

Question 6: How do you think your family's financial situation affects your child's performance in school?

Question 7: Have there been times when financial constraints limited your child's access to educational opportunities (e.g., field trips, tutoring, private lessons)? Please explain.

Question 8: In your opinion, how does your neighbourhood or community influence your child's academic performance?

Question 9: How do your work hours or job responsibilities impact the time or energy you can devote to your child's learning?

Teacher Interviews:

Question 1: How significantly do you believe a student's socio-economic background impacts their academic performance?

Question 2: What percentage of students in your class receive free or reduced lunch (or similar economic support)?

Question 3: How often do you observe students from low-income backgrounds missing school due to external responsibilities (e.g., work, caregiving)?

Question 4: To what extent do students from higher-income families participate in enrichment activities (e.g., tutoring, extracurriculars)?

Question 5: What percentage of students in your classroom have access to a reliable internet connection and a personal digital device at home?

Question 6: Can you describe how socio-economic status affects student engagement and motivation in your classroom?

Question 7: Have you noticed differences in parental involvement based on socio-economic status? Please elaborate.

Question 8: What are some specific academic challenges you've observed among students from lower-income families?

Question 9: How do you adapt your teaching strategies to support students facing socio-economic hardships?

Question 10: Do you think socio-economic status affects students' confidence in their academic abilities?

Appendix C: Data outputs

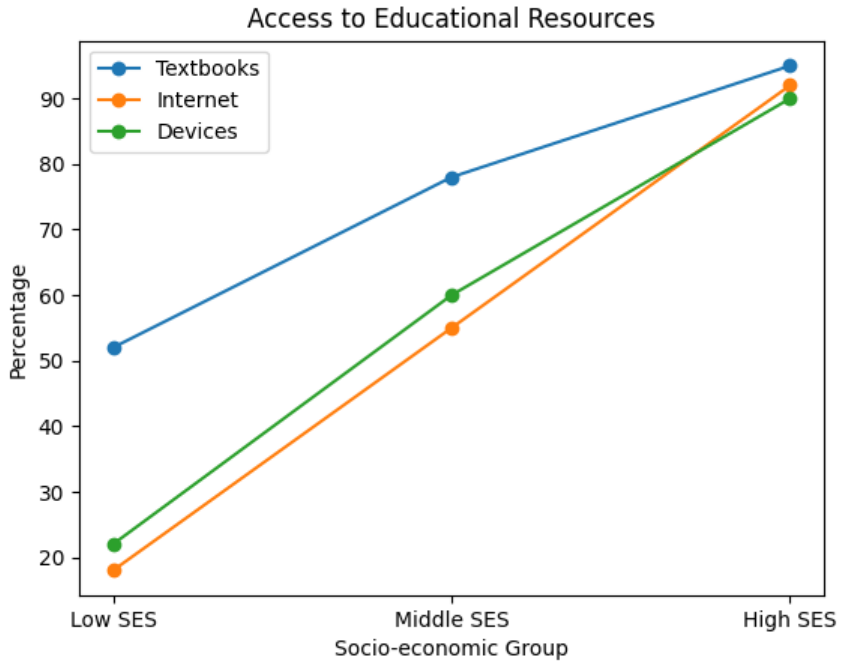
SAMPLE DATA OUTPUTS

Appendix C1: Access to Educational Resources by Socio-Economic Status

Socio-economic group	Access to textbooks (%)	Access to internet (%)	Access to devices (%)
Low SES	52%	18%	22%
Middle SES	78%	55%	60%
High SES	95%	92%	90%

Interpretation: The data indicates a clear disparity in access to educational resources across socio-economic groups.

Access to Educational Resources

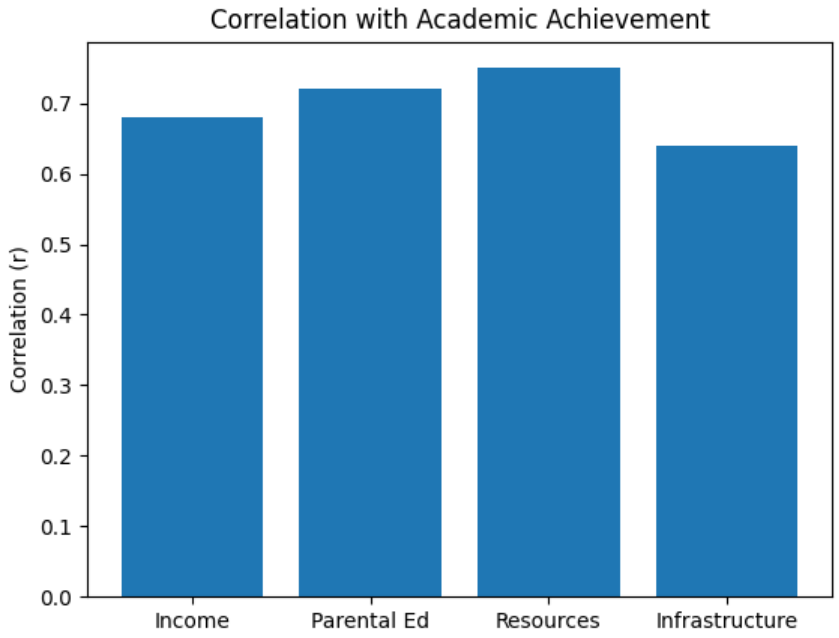


Appendix C2: Correlation Between Socio-Economic Factors and Academic Achievement

Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)
Household income	0.68
Parental education	0.72
Access to resources	0.75
School infrastructure	0.64

Interpretation: Strong positive correlations exist between socio-economic variables and academic achievement.

Correlation Analysis



Appendix C3: Academic Performance by School Quintile

Learners in lower quintile schools show lower academic performance compared to higher quintile schools

Appendix C4: Thematic Analysis of Interview Data

Theme	Description	Example Response
Lack of resources	Limited access to books and technology	We do not have computers at home.
Parental involvement	Limited support	My parents cannot help with homework.
School infrastructure	Poor facilities	Classrooms are overcrowded.
Learner resilience	Efforts to succeed	I study hard even without resources.

Appendix C5: Coding Framework for Qualitative Data

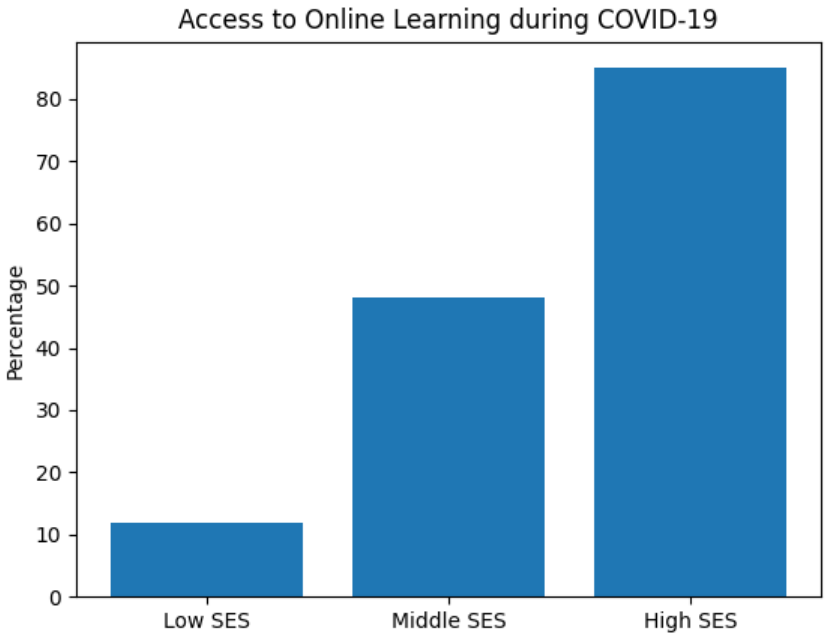
Code Category	***Sub-codes***
Socio-economic factors	Income, employment, household conditions
Educational resources	Textbooks, internet, devices
Family environment	Parental education, involvement
School environment	Infrastructure, teacher quality

Appendix C6: Access to Online Learning During COVID-19

Socio-economic group	Access to online learning (%)
Low SES	12%
Middle SES	48%
High SES	85%

Interpretation: COVID-19 intensified inequality in access to online learning.

COVID-19 Access



Appendix D: Consent forms

PARENTAL CONSENT LETTER FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Title of Study:

The Socio-economic Influence on Academic Achievement

Researcher: Jeanne-Marie Lotter
Institution: University of South Africa

Dear Parent/Guardian

You are invited to grant permission for your child to participate in a research study that investigates the influence of socio-economic factors on academic achievement among school learners.

The study forms part of a doctoral research project conducted through the University of South Africa (UNISA). The purpose of the research is to better understand how different socio-economic conditions may affect learners' educational experiences and performance.

What participation involves:

If you consent, your child may be asked to participate in a short interview. The interview will focus on general questions about their learning experiences, school environment, and access to educational resources. The interview will take approximately 15–30 minutes and will be conducted at a time that does not interfere with school activities.

Ethical considerations:

- Participation is entirely voluntary.
- Your child may withdraw at any time without any negative consequences.
- All information will be treated as strictly confidential.
- Your child's identity will remain anonymous in all reports and publications.
- No harm is anticipated as a result of participation in this study.

Consent:

By signing below, you indicate that:

- You have read and understood the information provided.
- You give permission for your child to participate in the interview.
- You understand that participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw consent at any time.

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Child's Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Contact Number: _____

If you have any questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact the researcher.

Thank you for your support and cooperation.

Yours sincerely

Jeanne-Marie Lotter
Doctoral Candidate
University of South Africa (UNISA)

TEACHER CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Title of Study:

The Socio-economic Influence on Academic Achievement

Researcher: Jeanne-Marie Lotter
Institution: University of South Africa

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the influence of socio-economic factors on learners' academic achievement. This study forms part of a doctoral research project conducted through the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how socio-economic conditions affect teaching and learning, as well as learner performance in schools.

What participation involves:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview. The interview will focus on your experiences and perspectives regarding socio-economic influences on learners' academic achievement. The interview will take approximately 20–30 minutes and will be conducted at a time convenient to you.

Ethical considerations:

- Participation is entirely voluntary.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.
- All information will be treated as strictly confidential.
- Your identity will remain anonymous in all reports and publications.
- No harm is anticipated as a result of your participation.

Consent:

By signing below, you confirm that:

- You have read and understood the information provided.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- You understand that you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

School Name: _____

Contact Number (optional): _____

If you have any questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact the researcher.

Thank you for your valuable contribution to this research.

Yours sincerely

Jeanne-Marie Lotter
Doctoral Candidate
University of South Africa (UNISA)

PARENT PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Title of Study:

The Socio-economic Influence on Academic Achievement

Researcher: Jeanne-Marie Lotter
Institution: University of South Africa

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the influence of socio-economic factors on learners' academic achievement. This study forms part of a doctoral research project conducted through the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how socio-economic conditions affect teaching and learning, as well as learner performance in schools.

What participation involves:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview. The interview will focus on your experiences and perspectives regarding socio-economic influences on learners' academic achievement. The interview will take approximately 20–30 minutes and will be conducted at a time convenient to you.

Ethical considerations:

- Participation is entirely voluntary.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.
- All information will be treated as strictly confidential.
- Your identity will remain anonymous in all reports and publications.
- No harm is anticipated as a result of your participation.

Consent:

By signing below, you confirm that:

- You have read and understood the information provided.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- You understand that you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

School Name: _____

Contact Number (optional): _____

If you have any questions regarding the study, please feel free to contact the researcher.

Thank you for your valuable contribution to this research.

Yours sincerely

Jeanne-Marie Lotter
Doctoral Candidate
University of South Africa (UNISA)

LEARNER ASSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Title of Study:

The Socio-economic Influence on Academic Achievement

Researcher: Jeanne-Marie Lotter
Institution: University of South Africa

Dear Learner

You are invited to take part in a research study about how different socio-economic factors may influence learners' academic achievement. This study is part of a doctoral research project.

Before you decide whether to participate, it is important that you understand what the study is about.

What will happen if you take part?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a short interview. You will be asked questions about your school experience, learning environment, and access to resources. The interview will take about 15–30 minutes.

Important information:

- Taking part in this study is completely voluntary.
- You can choose not to answer any question.
- You can stop the interview at any time without any consequences.
- Your answers will be kept private and your name will not appear in the research.

Your agreement:

If you understand the information above and would like to take part in the study, please sign below.

Learner Name: _____

Signature: _____

Grade: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

Yours sincerely

Jeanne-Marie Lotter

Doctoral Candidate

University of South Africa (UNISA)

Appendix E: Permissions

SCHOOL PERMISSION LETTER

School name: _____

School address: _____

_____

School contact number: _____

Email address: _____

Date: _____

To Whom It May Concern

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

This letter serves to confirm that permission has been granted to *Jeanne-Marie Lotter* a doctoral candidate at the University of South Africa, to conduct research at _____.

The research study, entitled *"The Socio-economic Influence on Academic Achievement"*, aims to investigate the relationship between socio-economic status and learners' academic performance.

Permission is granted for the researcher to collect data from selected participants, including learners, teachers, and parents, through the use of questionnaires and interviews, subject to the following conditions:

- Participation is voluntary, and informed consent must be obtained from all participants (and parents/guardians where applicable).
- The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants must be strictly maintained.
- No disruption to normal teaching and learning activities may occur.
- The school reserves the right to withdraw permission should any ethical concerns arise.

The school acknowledges that the findings of this research may contribute to a better understanding of the socio-economic factors influencing academic achievement and may provide valuable insights for improving educational practices.

Principal name: _____

Principal signature: _____

School Stamp:



Appendix F: Editor's certificate

PRO EDIT PTY LTD
PO BOX 23081, CLAREMONT CAPE TOWN 7735

EDITING CERTIFICATE

Date: 2026/04/27

This serves to confirm that the document entitled:

Exploring the Relationship between Socio-Economic Status and Academic Achievement

by

Jeanne-Marie Lotter

has been language edited on behalf of its author.

Genevieve Wood
Pro Edit Pty Ltd

Appendix G: Ethical clearance

UNISA university of south africa

UNISA COLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 08 January 2025

Ref: **2024/11/15/000000414/08/RB**
Name: **JEANNE-MARIE**
Student No.: 40778177

Decision: Ethics Approval form

Dear **JEANNE-MARIE**

Researcher(s): Name: **JEANNE-MARIE**
E-mail address: **48774177**@mylife.unisa.ac.za
Telephone: **0796420942**

Supervisor: Name: **Dr L M. Luvalo**
E-mail address: luvallm@unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 0738035736

Title of research: ***Socio-economic Influence on Academic Achievement.***

Qualification: **PhD**

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 **2025/01/08** to **2030/01/08**.

*The **low risk level** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on **15 November 2024** 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.
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. The study's risk level is Category 2- Low risk: Human participants are involved and there is foreseeable risk of inconvenience. Non-vulnerable adult participants and non-sensitive information is involved.
9. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2030/01/08.** Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

The reference number **2025/01/08/00000414/07/RB** *should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Kind regards,

Prof RB Monyai
Acting Head: CEDU Research
monyarb@unisa.ac.za

Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean: CEDU
qakisme@unisa.ac.za

University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
PO Box 392 UNISA 0003 South Africa
Telephone: +27 12 429 3111 Facsimile: +27 12 429 4150
www.unisa.ac.za