

**A case study of high school learners' and social workers'
experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low
socio-economic environments**

by

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DECLARATION

I, Yvette Ingrid van Schalkwyk (Student number: 59575670) declare that a *case study of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments*, is my own unaided work.

I also declare all the sources that I have used or quoted has been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality-checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.



YVETTE INGRID VAN SCHALKWYK

1 FEBRUARY 2024
DATE

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my Mother, Laetitia and Father, Ivo:

You were both the shades in my life's portrait, with love, support, and warmth in each moment. Though you have passed away, the foundation that you placed continues. Mother, your caring heart, and unfailing love influenced who I am today. Your dedication and loyalty echo through my heart and my mind, providing consolation in times of isolation. Father, your courage, bravery, wisdom, knowledge, and life lessons continue to encourage me through life's journey.

I dedicate this study as a remembrance and gratitude for your dreams and aspirations for me and dedication to every step you took in reaching this achievement. You both continue to inspire me, even in your absence.

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Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your GOD will be with you wherever you go" (Bible, 2001:116). Through this challenging and tough journey, Abba Father never had forsaken me. He was the light unto my path and the Holy Spirit (RUACH HAKODESH) gave me insight, wisdom, and comfort in the completion of my dissertation. Therefore, I want to thank the Almighty God, ELOHIM, and ALL THE GLORY TO HIM.

I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to every single person that were instrumental in the completion of my dissertation.

Academically, I would like to give gratitude to Dr T. Calitz of the Department of Social Work (UNISA), my supervisor, for her significant contribution to this project. Without her direction and experience, this endeavour would not have been achievable. I would also like to thank my language editor, Dr B. Lombard, for his outstanding work as an editor in editing my work.

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in South Africa being placed on alert level 5 from 27 March 2020 for the lockdown period, with restrictions on the movement of persons and goods in terms of the Disaster Management Act, Act 57 of 2002. The strict lockdown measures resulted in social isolation, the closing of schools and the economic environment, and the closing of all social events, sports, and religious gatherings.

The purpose of this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences and challenges high school learners faced in a low socio-economic environment during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown to explore the challenges high school learners face during any disaster when schools are forced to close. This study was done from a social work perspective to contribute to school social work practices providing for the emotional and material needs of high school learners during any disaster. Therefore, the experiences and challenges of school social workers in this situation were also explored.

The researcher used the ecological system theory. This study undertook a case-study-based qualitative approach to investigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, complimented by the explorative, descriptive, and contextual designs. Data collection was carried out through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews guided by a set of open-ended questions, involving both high school learners and school social workers. Additionally, their behaviour was observed and documented during these interviews. A purposive sample was selected from the research population for this purpose.

The research population for this study included all high school learners as well as school social workers from different schools in a low socio-economic environment in the Pretoria West suburb of Pretoria. The process that the researcher used to analyse the qualitative generated data involved the steps set out by Tesch and the ATLAS.ti 23 software qualitative research tool used for coding and analysing transcripts. Data were verified through participants' review, triangulation, peer examination, and the audit trail.

The study offers significant insights and recommendations for school social workers

dealing with high school learners from a vulnerable environment during a forced school closure. The study found that high school learners and school social workers appreciated the chance to share their narratives and vent their emotions. Forced school closure compromised the rights of learners to education, continuing to provide essential material needs, emotional support, socialisation, and emotional well-being. On the other hand, school social workers were not able to fully provide for the above needs due to the lockdown restrictions, limited resources, lack of training, limited access to learners, and emotional strain. The results include that school social workers play a vital role when schools are forced to close during a pandemic or disaster, to seek agreeable measures to assist learners with their material and psycho-social needs. Using the study's findings, the researcher created a list of suggestions for social policies, social work practice, further research, training and a contribution to social work knowledge.

KEY CONCEPTS

Experiences, challenges, high school learners, COVID-19, nationwide lockdown, disaster, low socio-economic environment, and school forced closure.

TABLE OF CONTENT

| | |
|--|-----|
| DECLARATION | I |
| DEDICATION | II |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENT | III |
| ABSTRACT | IV |
| KEY CONCEPTS | V |
| TABLE OF CONTENT | VI |
| ADDENDA | XI |
| LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS | XI |
| LIST OF TABLES..... | XII |
| LIST OF FIGURES | XII |
| CHAPTER ONE | 1 |
| INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY..... | 1 |
| 1.1 INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| 1.2 BACKGROUND..... | 1 |
| 1.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM | 6 |
| 1.4 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH | 9 |
| 1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | 11 |
| 1.6 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS..... | 12 |
| 1.6.1 Experiences | 13 |
| 1.6.2 Challenges | 13 |
| 1.6.3 Disaster | 14 |
| 1.6.4 High school Learners..... | 15 |
| 1.6.5 COVID-19..... | 15 |
| 1.6.6 Restrictions..... | 15 |
| 1.6.7 Poverty (Poorness) | 16 |
| 1.6.8 Socio-economic environment | 17 |
| 1.6.9 School Forced Closure | 17 |
| 1.6.10 Case study | 18 |
| 1.7 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY | 18 |
| 1.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES..... | 19 |
| 1.8.1 Research questions | 19 |

| | |
|---|----|
| 1.8.2 Research goal and objectives | 20 |
| 1.9 RESEARCH PARADIGM | 20 |
| 1.10 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN | 21 |
| 1.10.1 Research approach | 22 |
| 1.10.2 Research design..... | 23 |
| 1.11 RESEARCH POPULATION AND SAMPLING | 25 |
| 1.11.1 Research population | 25 |
| 1.11.2 Sampling | 29 |
| 1.12 DATA COLLECTION METHOD AND PROCEDURE | 32 |
| 1.13 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD | 36 |
| 1.14 ENSURING RIGOUR | 38 |
| 1.14.1 Credibility..... | 39 |
| 1.14.2 Transferability..... | 39 |
| 1.14.3 Dependability..... | 39 |
| 1.14.4 Confirmability | 39 |
| 1.14.5 Authenticity..... | 40 |
| 1.15 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS..... | 40 |
| 1.15.1 Obtaining informed consent..... | 41 |
| 1.15.2 Anonymity..... | 42 |
| 1.15.3 Confidentiality | 43 |
| 1.15.4 Protection from harm..... | 43 |
| 1.15.5 Management of information | 44 |
| 1.15.6 Debriefing of participants | 44 |
| 1.16 CONCLUSION | 45 |
| CHAPTER TWO..... | 47 |
| LITERATURE REVIEW: THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSURE ON LEARNERS AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK | 47 |
| 2.1 INTRODUCTION..... | 47 |
| 2.2 DISASTERS, PANDEMICS AND FORCED SCHOOL CLOSURES..... | 47 |
| 2.3 IMPACT OF DISASTERS AND PANDEMICS ON SOCIETY, INDIVIDUALS AND LEARNERS | 50 |
| 2.3.1 Impact on society | 51 |
| 2.3.2 Impact on the individual | 53 |
| 2.3.3 Impact on learners | 55 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 2.4 SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS' ROLE IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM | 60 |
| 2.5 SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS' ROLE DURING AND AFTER DISASTERS | 64 |
| 2.6 CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS DURING DISASTERS | 67 |
| 2.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | 74 |
| 2.8 CONCLUSION | 79 |
| CHAPTER THREE..... | 81 |
| APPLICATION OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH | 81 |
| 3.1 INTRODUCTION..... | 81 |
| 3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY APPLIED | 81 |
| 3.2.1 The qualitative research approach applied..... | 81 |
| 3.2.2 Research design..... | 87 |
| 3.3 RESEARCH METHOD APPLIED | 94 |
| 3.3.1 Population selection and sampling | 94 |
| 3.3.2 Data collection..... | 98 |
| 3.3.3 Pilot testing..... | 100 |
| 3.3.4 Interview venues | 101 |
| 3.3.5 Data collecting..... | 102 |
| 3.4. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA..... | 105 |
| 3.5. ENSURING RIGOUR | 108 |
| 3.5.1 Credibility..... | 109 |
| 3.5.2 Transferability..... | 111 |
| 3.5.3 Dependability..... | 112 |
| 3.5.4 Confirmability | 113 |
| 3.5.5 Authenticity..... | 113 |
| 3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS APPLIED | 114 |
| 3.6.1 Obtaining informed consent and assent..... | 115 |
| 3.6.2 Anonymity..... | 116 |
| 3.5.4 Protection from harm..... | 117 |
| 3.5.5 Management of information | 118 |
| 3.5.6 Debriefing of participants | 119 |
| 3.6 REFLECTION OF RESEARCH PROCESS..... | 119 |
| 3.7 CONCLUSION | 120 |
| CHAPTER FOUR..... | 122 |
| PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH | 122 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 4.1 INTRODUCTION | 122 |
| 4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS | 122 |
| 4.3 OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES AND SUB-THEMES | 126 |
| 4.4 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FOR HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS | 129 |
| 4.4.1 Theme 1: High school learners' experiences of nationwide lockdown .. | 129 |
| 4.4.2 Theme 2: Perceptions of Public Health Measures During the Lockdown | 137 |
| 4.4.3 Theme 3: Home Activities during lockdown | 139 |
| 4.4.4 Theme 4: Feelings during lockdown | 146 |
| 4.4.5 Theme 5: Challenges experienced during the nationwide lockdown | 154 |
| 4.4.6 Theme 6: Enhanced Family Support and Resilience During Lockdown | 159 |
| 4.4.7 Theme 7: Impact of school closure | 161 |
| 4.4.8 Theme 8: Suggestions for Social Work Practice | 165 |
| 4.5 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS | 171 |
| 4.5.1 Theme 1: Job description and daily functions as a school social worker | 171 |
| 4.5.2 Theme 2: The role of the school social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic | 173 |
| 4.5.3 Theme 3: The experiences of school social workers during the nationwide lockdown with service delivery to high school learners | 178 |
| 4.5.4 Theme 4: Challenges faced in rendering services to high school learners during the nationwide lockdown..... | 183 |
| 4.5.5 Theme 5: Transformation in Social Work Practices During Pandemic Restrictions | 189 |
| 4.5.6 Theme 6: Retrospective Insights on Service Delivery to High School Learners During the Pandemic | 190 |
| 4.5.7 Theme 7: Awareness and Impact of Legislation and Policies on Educational Service Delivery During the Pandemic..... | 194 |
| 4.5.8. Theme 8: Suggestions to improve service delivery during Pandemics | 196 |
| 4.5.9 Theme 9: Personal and Professional Impacts of Working During the Pandemic | 201 |
| 4.6 CONCLUSION | 203 |
| CHAPTER FIVE | 205 |
| SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS | 205 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 5.1 INTRODUCTION | 205 |
| 5.2 OVERVIEW | 205 |
| 5.3 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS | 207 |
| 5.3.1 Research question, goal, and objectives | 207 |
| 5.3.2 Research approach | 209 |
| 5.3.3 Research designs..... | 209 |
| 5.3.4 Population and sampling..... | 210 |
| 5.3.5 Pilot testing..... | 211 |
| 5.3.6 Data collection..... | 211 |
| 5.3.7 Data analysis | 211 |
| 5.3.9 Ethical considerations | 212 |
| 5.4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS..... | 213 |
| 5.4.1 Research findings from the high school learners | 213 |
| 5.4.2 Research findings from the school social workers..... | 218 |
| 5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS | 227 |
| 5.5.1 Recommendations for social policy | 227 |
| 5.5.2 Recommendations for school social work practice..... | 228 |
| 5.5.3 Recommendations for school social work education and training | 230 |
| 5.5.4 Recommendations for further research | 230 |
| 5.6 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY | 231 |
| 5.7 CONCLUSION | 232 |
| REFERENCES..... | 233 |
| ADDENDA | 263 |
| ADDENDUM A – INTERVIEW GUIDE | 263 |
| ADDENDUM B – ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE | 265 |
| ADDENDUM C – APPROVAL LETTER FROM DBE | 267 |
| ADDENDUM D – LETTER OF INVITATION..... | 269 |
| ADDENDUM E - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY | 273 |
| ADDENDUM F - PARENTAL CONSENT FOR CHILD’S PARTICIPATION..... | 274 |
| ADDENDUM G - ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY | 277 |
| ADDENDUM H – LETTER FROM DEBRIEFER..... | 278 |
| ADDENDUM I – EDITOR LETTER..... | 279 |
| ADDENDUM J – ORIGINALITY REPORT (TURNITIN) | 280 |

ADDENDA

ADDENDUM A – Interview Guide

ADDENDUM B – Ethical Clearance Certification

ADDENDUM C – Approval letter from the Department of Basic Education

ADDENDUM D – Letter of Invitation

ADDENDUM E – Consent to participate in this study

ADDENDUM F – Parental consent for child’s participation

ADDENDUM G – Assent to participate in this study

ADDENDUM H – Letter from the debriefer

ADDENDUM I – Editor Letter

ADDENDUM J – Originality Report (TURNITIN)

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------------|--|
| COVID-19 | Corona Virus Disease 2019 caused by SARS-CoV-2 |
| DBE | Department of Basic Education |
| DSD | Department of Social Development |
| GDE | Gauteng Department of Education |
| IFSW | International Federation of Social Workers |
| NASW | National Association of Social Workers |
| OECD | The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| POPIA | Protection of Personal Information Act |
| SACE | South African Council for Educators |
| SACSSP | South African Council for Social Service Professions |
| SARS-CoV-2 | Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 |
| SBST | School-Based Support Team |
| SGB | School Governing Body |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| UNICEF | United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund |
| WB | World Bank |
| WHO | World Health Organization |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|--|-----|
| TABLE 1-1: Tesch steps of data analysis. | 36 |
| TABLE 4-1: Biographical information of the high school learners | 120 |
| TABLE 4-2: Biographical information of the school social workers | 123 |
| TABLE 4-3: An overview of the research findings from the high school learners with themes and sub-themes | 124 |
| TABLE 4-4: an overview of the research findings from the school social workers officers with themes and sub-themes | 125 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|-----|
| FIGURE 1-1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological system Theory | 11 |
| FIGURE 1-2: A map of the western side of Pretoria | 25 |
| FIGURE 2-1: Map of Covid-induced partial and full school closures, March 2020 to May 2021 | 47 |
| FIGURE 2-2: Impact of disasters and pandemics on society, individuals, and Learners | 49 |
| FIGURE 2-3: Universal psychological responses after disasters | 54 |
| FIGURE 2-4: The basic structure of South African school social work | 60 |
| FIGURE 2-5: Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development | 75 |
| FIGURE 3-1: Babbie's framework for design | 86 |
| FIGURE 3-2: Principles and Processes of Interview | 102 |
| FIGURE 3-3: Tesch's steps of data analysis | 105 |
| FIGURE 4-1: Overview of theme 1: Storylines | 128 |
| FIGURE 4-2: Overview of activities during the nationwide lockdown | 138 |
| FIGURE 4-3 Examples of potential barriers to healthy behaviours: socio-ecological model | 144 |
| FIGURE 4-4: Overview of feelings presented by the high school learner during the nationwide lockdown | 145 |
| FIGURE 4-5: Overview of challenges expressed by high school learners during the nationwide lockdown | 153 |
| FIGURE 4-6: Overview of the suggestions by high school learners to address challenges | 164 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| FIGURE 4-7: Overview of the role school social workers played during the nationwide lockdown | 172 |
| FIGURE 4-8: Overview of challenges experienced by school social workers during the nationwide lockdown | 182 |
| FIGURE 4-9: Overview of suggestions to improve service delivery during a disaster when schools are forced to close | 194 |

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The introductory chapter of this research focuses on the experiences and challenges faced during a disaster by high school learners from a low socio-economic environment. It provides insights from a social work perspective into why this study was undertaken and outlines its approach. It encompasses background information, the formulation of the research problem, the rationale for the research, the theoretical framework, research inquiries, and the study's goal and objectives. Subsequently, it delves into the research methodology, methods employed, data collection, and analysis techniques, followed by a discussion on maintaining the study's reliability. Ethical considerations, fundamental research concepts, and the dissertation format are also elucidated. The chapter concludes with a concise summary.

The study examines the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners and social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in low socio-economic settings.

1.2 BACKGROUND

Against the backdrop of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, this initial section of the research investigates the profound impact of this global crisis on schools, learners, and the appointed social workers who played a fundamental role in navigating the challenges faced by high school learners hailing from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This information serves to establish the contextual framework for the study.

In China, in the city of Wuhan, the first case of Coronavirus 2019 disease (COVID-19) was diagnosed in late December 2019 and identified as respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that caused the global COVID-19 pandemic. Although China tried to confine the spread of the virus, this extremely contagious virus spread rapidly throughout different countries (Wu, Chen & Chan, 2020:217). According to the

World Bank (WB), resulting from the contagious COVID-19 disease, more than 160 countries had ordered school closures as of 24 March 2020, affecting more than 1.6 billion children, or more than 91% of all learners globally (Golding & Jackson, 2021:523).

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak on 11 March 2020 as a pandemic (Sancho, Mondragon, Santamaria & Munitis, 2021:1). The National Institute of Communicable Diseases (2020) reported the first case of COVID-19 in South Africa on 5 March 2020. This contagious disease spread throughout South Africa and the government required it necessary to implement restrictions on the movement and socialisation of citizens (National Institute of Communicable Diseases, 2020). South Africa was placed on alert level 5, from 27 March 2020, with strict restrictions on the movement of people and goods as stipulated in the Disaster Management Act, Act 57 of 2002 (South Africa, 2020a).

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, numerous studies about the effect of the lockdown regulations and restrictions of movement and human interaction on people, in various countries have been published (AlAzzam, Abuhammad, Abdalrahim & Hamdan-Mansour, 2021; Duby, Bunce, Fowler, Bergh, Jonas, Dietrich *et al.*, 2022; Sikorska, Lipp, Wróbel & Wyra, 2021). More psychological suffering was linked to the lockdown period in Germany, China, and the United States due to greater isolation and a decline in social contacts (Shepherd, Evans, Gupta, McDonough, Doyle-Baker *et al.*, 2021:2). Any individual who underwent one of these lockdowns found them to be psychologically upsetting and unpleasant. Young people, who are more susceptible than adults to acquire psychological disorders, may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of isolation, including school closings, since lockdown disturbs their social ties and physical activity (Panchal, Salazar, Gonzalo, Franco, Moreno *et al.*, 2021:2). Studies revealed that in China, Jordan, the United States, and Austria adolescents' mental health with symptoms of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and negative thoughts, were affected due to limited social interaction, difficulties in schoolwork, changes in their daily routines, fear of becoming ill, boredom, uncertainties about family and friends (AlAzzam *et al.*, 2021:242; Hsieh, Powell, Tan & Chen 2021:2; Pieh, Plener, Probst, Dale & Humer, 2021:3; Zhang, Ye, Fu, Yang, Luo *et al.*, 2020:748).

According to Business-human rights (2020) Dr Gabrielle Wills of Stellenbosch University, during the COVID-19 period, many South African homes went through extreme hardships and adults were able to protect their children from hunger, but this ability waned. To worsen the hardships, job losses in COVID-19 times were more intense among low-income households.

The strict lockdown measures resulted in social isolation, the closing of schools, and the economic environment as well as the closing of all social, sports, and religious gatherings (South Africa, 2022a; Sancho *et al.*, 2021:2). The closing of schools and the discontinuation of school food programmes exacerbated the fear of starvation among the poor (Nwosu & Oyenubi, 2021:9). It is noted that not only a COVID-19 disaster can close schools, but also any disaster such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, war, and other traumatic events which are frequently described in school safety and crisis literature (Capp, Watson, Astor, Kelly & Benbenishty, 2021:79-88).

Schools, especially those in low socio-economic environments, provide for far more different needs beyond the education and socialization of learners. These critical services include aspects such as nutrition, health, and mental health (Hsieh *et al.*, 2021:2). The closure of schools and termination of the school feeding programmes worsened the threat of hunger among the poor (Nwosu & Oyenubi, 2021:9). Another factor is that some high school learners were exposed to punitive parenting, abuse, or neglect within the family because of their parent's emotional distress, which made them more vulnerable (Hsieh *et al.*, 2021:2).

High school learners' outcries for help due to the lack of basic needs, limited food resources, and hunger, were alarming and not visible to the outside world due to the lockdown. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) issued a statement that confirmed the above-mentioned concerns on the adverse consequences of school closure, emphasising that vulnerable and marginalized learners suffered severely due to the lockdown restrictions (UNESCO, 2021). Interrupted learning, poor nutrition, confusion and stress for teachers, parents unprepared for home-schooling and distance learning, gaps in childcare, high costs, unintended strain on healthcare systems, increased pressure on schools and school systems that remained open, a rise in dropout rates, increased exposure to violence

and exploitation, social isolation, and more were among the consequences of the lockdown (UNESCO, 2021).

Hosted by the Sedibeng District Municipality at Vereeniging City Hall in April 2021 a dialogue with Minister Angie Motshekga and learners took place on how the pandemic affected school learners. A learner stated that her right to health, education, freedom, food, and safety had been invaded by the changes that happened due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Moatshe, 2021).

Closing schools in South Africa not only limited access to services such as school lunches, medical care in schools, and the distribution of sanitary supplies, it also isolated high school learners from social support and reduced opportunities for social and cognitive development and socialisation, thereby escalating unmet mental health needs of already vulnerable children. Apart from the school's educational role, the important role of the school regarding the socialisation of learners is emphasised. Eight Italian professionals prepared a statement titled "School is Health" in which they emphasize the importance of the school and how socialization with peers is mostly done inside the school community (Tavormina, 2021:149; Hatzichristou *et al.*, 2021:591).

In addition, schools are part of the safety net where abuse or neglect can be reported. It is of great concern that during the time of the pandemic, the social care systems' ability to protect learners in many countries was reduced as shown by a large fall in child protection referrals (Viner, Russell, Saulle, Croker, Stansfield *et al.*, 2022:2).

High school learners seemed to be less than adults at risk for contracting severe COVID-19 symptoms, however they experienced other challenges such as social distancing and interruption of school routines (Volkin, 2020). The WHO describes adolescence (high school learners) as a period in human growth and development that occurs normally between the ages of 10 and 19 years (Pringle, Mills, McAteer, Jepson, Hogg *et al.*, 2016). Puberty refers to the rapid bodily changes that occur throughout adolescence. The process begins gradually, at roughly 11 years of age for girls and 13 years for boys. Hormonal changes throughout puberty can lead to mental issues like moodiness and restlessness, even before physical changes are visible

(Tidy, 2023). In addition to the neurological, hormonal, and physical changes brought on by puberty, changes in high school learners' social contexts are crucial since they are in the time of life when mental health issues are most prone to arise (Duby *et al.*, 2022:2). According to Weiten (2016:320), the following issues are also important factors in adolescents (high school learners), namely their self-esteem, moral development, socializing processes, cognitive maturation, and physical development. The sense of belonging also intensifies in this developmental stage (Weiten, 2016:317).

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the emotional well-being of high school learners in especially low socio-economic environments. It was important to recognise the diversity of high school learners during this time and there must be cautioned against singular ideas of young people's experiences and realities during a pandemic. There are differences in experiences and impacts, but there are also connections between race, gender, poverty, geopolitics, and age (Gittings, Toska, Medley, Cluver, Logie *et al.*, 2021:957). These unique experiences and differences need to be explored to assist and guide social workers to provide effective services to this vulnerable segment of the population in future disasters.

In South Africa, vulnerable and marginalized high school learners suffered as well. According to the South African government, a child is considered vulnerable if his or her survival, care, protection, or development may be at risk because of a specific condition, circumstance, or occurrence that prevents the exercise of such rights (Weiten, 2016:325). Compliance with the Children's Act 38 of 2005's Chapter Two "The Bill of Rights" (South Africa, 2006), which outlines children's essential rights to be cared for and protected from abuse and neglect, was damaged by the nationwide lockdown and restrictions, according to Fouché, Fouché, and Theron (2020:3).

According to Fouché *et al.* (2020:3), the media stated that during the nationwide lockdown, violence against children escalated, with mental abuse being the most common, followed by physical and sexual assault. The difficulty of escaping or reporting the abuse because of movement limitations, which prevented them from visiting their extended family, schools, community-based leisure facilities, and faith-based communities, increased their susceptibility (Fouché *et al.*, 2020:3).

In an article that was published by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), a social worker at Childline South Africa raised her concerns about the negative impact of the nationwide lockdown on domestic violence, gender-based violence, and sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2020b). The nature of social work services had to adjust to the limitations, but the occurrences of violence against women and children rose during the lockdown, and the only intervention that could materialize was a conversation over the phone (UNICEF, 2020b). Thus, only limited services could be provided by South African school social workers during the forced school closure, which implicated that the emotional and material needs of high school learners could not be met.

Although the experiences and challenges of the high school learner were investigated, it was also important to explore the experiences and challenges of social workers who provided limited services to these high school learners. The researcher correlated these two components so that there would be a more meaningful outcome of the research. School social workers formed part of the research population in this study because it was crucial to recognise that school social workers' involvement with high school learners who may have experienced challenges during the forced school closure, was limited or non-existent. School social workers had an important role to play regarding these unheard outcries for the help of vulnerable high school learners. As a result, it was necessary to comprehend and revisit the nature of school social work if schools were forced to close, given that social workers are just one of several specialist fields that provide social assistance, socio-emotional support, and crisis intervention to high school learners and their families (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:79).

In the section below the study problem is formulated.

1.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

People are fascinating, and the possibility of understanding who we are, what we think, and why we do what we do, leads to an almost unlimited array of questions. Therefore, coming up with a research idea should be very straightforward. We must be curious and ask ourselves why particular patterns of behaviour occur to turn these inquiries into valid research questions (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2015:68). A research

problem, according to Creswell (2016:88), is something that needs to be addressed and handled, and he recommends qualitative researchers to think about research problems in terms such as the nature of "real-life" and "literature" difficulties, according to the problem statement.

Research on the impact of COVID-19 on high school learners has extensively explored various dimensions including educational, psychological, and social effects. Studies have documented significant learning disruptions, educational equity, remote learning modalities, access to technology. Furthermore, research has highlighted the psychological stress and anxiety about academic future, social isolation and health risks (AlAzzam *et al.*, 2021:242; Hsieh, Powell, Tan & Chen 2021:2; Maldonado & De Witte, 2021; Panchal *et al.*, 2021:2; Pieh, Plener, Probst, Dale & Humer, 2021:3; Shepherd *et al.*, 2021:2; Zhang, Ye, Fu, Yang, Luo *et al.*, 2020:748).

Extensive research has been conducted on the role of the social workers during the pandemic in the South Korea, Romania, New Zealand, Italy, UK, Netherland, Germany, Israel and the findings are that social workers play an important role during disasters, providing valuable help to individuals, families, and communities in need. However, various obstacles may limit their efficiency in these instances (Banks & Rutter, 2022:3462; Beltran, Yalim, Morris & Taylor, 2023:428; Calcaterra & Landi, 2023:257; Crawford, 2021:456; Itzhaki-Braun, 2021:714; Truell & Crompton, 2020:36).

It needed to be accentuated the studies, through mixed methods, interviews and rapid reviews had shown that high school learners suffered emotionally and physically during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa (Duby *et al.*, 2022:10; Fouché, *et al.*, 2020:1; Moatshe, 2021; Nwosu & Oyenubi, 2021:9). Duby *et al.* (2022:2), stated that limited information is known about the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health on adolescents and the challenges they faced in low socio-economic areas. During a dialogue, a learner in Gauteng felt that learners' human rights were violated because their movement was restricted, and they did not have access to the necessary services that schools provide (Moatshe, 2021).

While extensive research was done on the role of school social work during a pandemic in countries such as USA and Italy (Capp *et al.*, 2021:79; Cifuentes-Faura,

2020:795; Kelly, Benbenishty, Watson & Astor, 2021:13) more knowledge was needed on what the nature of school social work services needs to be, to provide these critical services in South African schools. Social workers provide an invaluable contribution to addressing the educational, emotional, and social needs of learners and families but there remains a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the specific role of school social workers during a disaster, including pandemics within the South African context due to the fact that school social work is a novel development (Ntshingila & du Plessis-Faurie, 2023:2). Fouche *et al.* (2020:3) did a rapid assessment regarding the impact of lockdown limitations on the susceptibility of South African children to abuse and neglect, as well as requests for social scientists to advise legislation and other government institution. Therefore, it was necessary to study the impact of forced school closure on the high school learner and the critical support role school social workers fulfil during unprecedented times. It underscores the need for more targeted studies that examine how these professionals navigate the complexity of a disaster in a South African setting and how learners' experiences are shaped by such events, thereby providing insight that could guide policy and practice in similar future scenarios.

Due to the forced school closure, school social workers and members from other professions could not render critical services. These critical services included aspects such as nutrition, health, and mental health (Hsieh *et al.*, 2021:2). In schools, services that included material and emotional support were not provided during the forced school closure during the nationwide lockdown. Okafor (2021:3) referred to Cooper and Briggs, 2014 that stated that the presence of the social work profession gives a wonderful chance to set the foundation for future interventions and place itself in a unique position to address difficulties in pandemics and disasters.

The study's problem statement revolved around the lack of knowledge regarding the experiences and challenges encountered by high school learners during a disaster or pandemic when schools in low socio-economic areas were forced to close. Understanding these experiences and challenges and additionally gaining insight from a social work perspective into the experiences and challenges faced by school social workers who could only offer limited services to these high school learners, would contribute to aligning and enhancing service delivery strategies for future disaster

scenarios.

Therefore, the research problem addressed in this study is summarised as follows:

Insufficient information is available on the experiences and challenges of high school learners' and social workers in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.

In the following section, the rationale for the research is discussed.

1.4 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

The justification for a study must be expressed explicitly. It should ideally contribute to reducing the insufficiency of material in the literature, explaining or resolving a specific issue, and enhancing the researcher's professional growth (Dudovskiy 2018:2,6,10). A research study's rationale is based on the recognized problem and aims to explain the reason for the investigation or "why" the study is being conducted (Merriam & Tisdell 2016:76).

During this study, the researcher was employed as a school social worker rendering services to learners, including supporting learners with their emotional, mental, and physical well-being, at a high school in a low socio-economic area. Her observation over the last two years during the pandemic and restrictions was that a large number of learners experienced stress-related feelings without the support or intervention of any professional services. The researcher commenced this study to contribute to finding a solution to the challenges faced during future disasters and restrictions. This study was designed to shed light on the experiences and challenges encountered by high school learners during the nationwide lockdown. It aimed to identify ways in which social services could enhance support for high school learners during forced school closures, ultimately leading to improved service delivery to this group.

Based on the preliminary literature review conducted, the researcher detected that the emotional well-being of high school learners was compromised during these times. The researcher discovered various worldwide and South African studies that focused on the immediate effects of the unique pandemic and the constraints, on the

experiences and challenges high school learners faced during the nationwide lockdown (Moatshe, 2021; Panchal *et al.*, 2021). The researcher embarked on a study to determine the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners during forced school closure in a low socio-economic area from a social work perspective.

The researcher embarked on this study to contribute to a solution to enable school social workers to enhance their service delivery to learners during a forced school closure, such as a pandemic or disaster. School social workers' interventions and support during hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, war, and other traumatic events are frequently described in school safety and crisis literature. Still, little historical research has been done to date that describes the function of school social workers during pandemics (Capp *et al.*, 2021:79).

There was a gap in the literature and a need for further investigations on the impact of a disaster and forced school closure in low socio-economic environments. The critical role of the social work profession and school social workers needed to be investigated regarding rendering assistance, establishing intervention programmes, and liaising between the various stakeholders involved in the high school learner's life.

Exploring these challenges through the lens of the school social worker provided a unique viewpoint on the consequences of such a disaster on learners and their coping mechanisms in times of a forced school closure. This would assist school social workers in improving social work practices at schools and guide social policy development in responding to these needs, thus contributing to improving high school learners' mental health in general.

It is vital to capture the unique views that school social workers give during a pandemic since they are one of the several specialists that provide social support, emotional and psychological growth, emergency assistance, and emotional assistance to learners and their families (Capp *et al.*, 2021:79).

In the section below the theoretical framework that directed this study is unpacked.

1.5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study revolves around the ecological systems theory, notably Bronfenbrenner's model, which encompasses five interrelated systems that impact individuals' development (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016:17-18) These systems include the microsystem (the immediate environment), mesosystem (interactions between microsystems), exosystem (indirect influences), macrosystem (cultural factors), and chronosystem (changes over time) (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016:17-18).

In the context of school social work, this theoretical framework provides a holistic perspective on how high school learners' experiences and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic were influenced by various systems within their environment and society. The study acknowledges that learners are part of interconnected systems, and their experiences were compromised during the nationwide lockdown.

By applying the ecological systems theory, the researcher aimed to understand how social isolation, resulting from disrupted interactions within these systems, affected high school learners during the pandemic and its implications for future disasters.

The study's focus was on identifying influences, interactions, changes, and capacity-building opportunities for school social workers, aligning with the ecological system theory. This theoretical framework served as a guiding structure to explore the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners during the pandemic and to enhance the role of school social workers in supporting and improving services during similar crises. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory is portrayed as follows in Figure 1-1 (Guy-Evans, 2020):

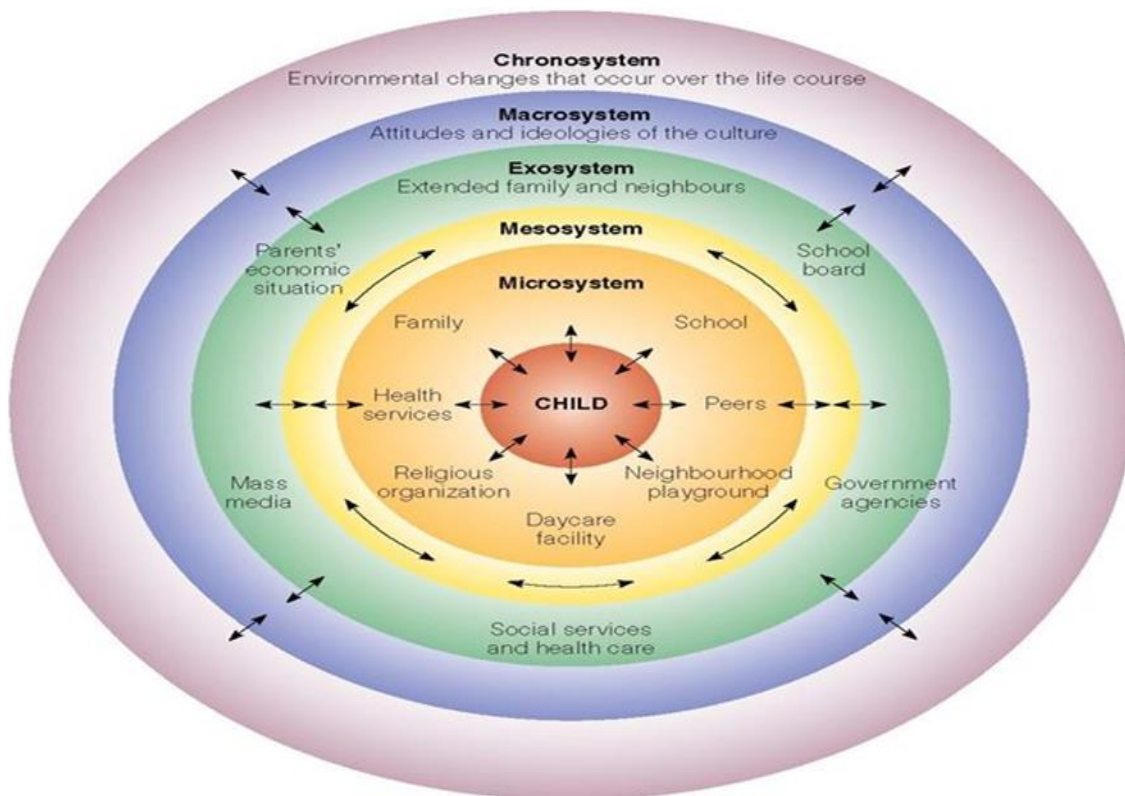


Figure 1-1: Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Theory (adapted from Guy-Evans, 2020)

Figure 1-1 presents an overview of how these interconnected systems influenced the high school learners' experiences and challenges and school social workers' services during the nationwide lockdown, in the form of an illustration. This systems-based approach offers valuable insights into understanding and addressing the impact of social isolation on learners and the role of school social workers in disaster support and recovery. The theoretical framework is examined in greater depth in Chapter Two, to provide a clear grasp of how the systems influenced each other. In the next section, the key concepts of this study are defined.

1.6 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

The definitions of the key terms used in this research are described by clarifying essential concepts and applying them to the current study.

1.6.1 Experiences

Experiences are defined as the process with which a person detected, encountered, or underwent something and gained knowledge or wisdom from what has been personally detected, undergone, or encountered (Dictionary.com: s.v. “experiences”, 2022).

According to Merriam-Webster (s.v. “experiences”, 2022), experience means that one directly observes or participates in events and gain a basis of knowledge and therefore has been affected by or gained knowledge through observing or participating in the event. According to Ingleby (2018:81) social workers focus on how children see and develop their own reality. Sociologists such as Weber investigate the nature of verstehen or 'understanding' that occurs within the child's mind. Each child has a distinct childhood experience. The view of the social world helps us understand why there is so much diversity within it. Individual perceptions of childhood are crucial, given each child's unique perspective. Understanding childhood helps social workers recognize children's individual rights. It allows social workers to meet the needs of children (Ingleby, 2018:81).

In this study, the term ‘experience’ refers to the collective personal encounters, observations, and meanings resulting from the conscious lived through the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown.

1.6.2 Challenges

Challenges are defined as when a person encounters a circumstance that requires significant mental or physical effort to complete something successfully, and their abilities will be put to the test (Cambridge Dictionary, (s.v. “challenges”, 2022). Challenges are obstacles evaluated as opportunities rather than a threat. When a person judges a challenge according to his adequate coping resources and improves the situation to overcome the stress associated with the obstacle, a threat becomes a challenge (American Psychological Association, 2022a).

In this study ‘challenges’ is defined as any factor that was an obstacle faced by a high

school learner or school social worker during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown, that needed great mental and physical effort to deal with and resulted in the testing of the ability of the learner or school social worker.

1.6.3 Disaster

Disaster is a severe obstacle to the ability of a community or society to operate at any level caused by harmful events interacting with vulnerability, capacity, and exposure situations, which may result in one or more of the following effects: Losses in personal, material, economic, and/or environmental terms. The effects of a disaster may linger for a long time, but it can also be quick and limited. In some severe cases, aid from national or international levels may be needed (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2023). As stated above disasters may highlight problematic conditions. If a country lacks a strong economic infrastructure, we can see that learners are disadvantaged on a massive scale. Learners with learning challenges may not have the same support and experiences. It is critical to recognise that the type of children's material circumstances has a significant impact on their growth and development (Ingleby, 2018:70).

This affirms the above definition that a disaster is a sudden catastrophic event that overwhelms a community's or society's resources, resulting in extensive harm and disruption (Comfort, 2015).

Disasters were once thought of as discrete, time-and-space-constrained catastrophes that disturb social order and impair a community's or society's ability to function. More recently, social science has formulated disasters as coming from longer-term global and societal processes, which enhance the possibility of loss, rather than from physical factors that cause them at specific moments. Disasters can have devastating effects, such as fatalities, injuries, and widespread societal disruption (Tierney, 2019).

During school closures due to disasters, it is necessary for this study to take notice of the role of school social workers to continue providing services to learners such as child protection, providing food and mental health support for vulnerable learners

during these difficult times.

1.6.4 High school learners

A learner is a student at any learning facility, school, further education, training entity, or adult educational centre in South Africa. The learner must be registered at an institution (South African Council for Educators, 2022). In the South African education system, secondary schools or high schools run from Grade 8 to Grade 12 (South Africa Education, 2022). For the purpose of this study, the participants were high school learners between 16 and 19 years old, in Grades 10 to 12. During the strict nationwide lockdown in 2020 the learners who participated in this research were from the ages of 13 to 16 years.

1.6.5 COVID-19

According to the WHO (World Health Organization, 2022), Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious illness caused by a unique coronavirus that is now known as severe acute respiratory syndrome, Coronavirus type 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV) COVID-19, is an acute viral respiratory tract infection, as previously stated. Other diagnoses, such as influenza, parainfluenza, adenovirus infection, respiratory syncytial virus infection, metapneumovirus infection, and atypical pathogens like Chlamydia pneumonia (*C. pneumoniae*) and Mycoplasma pneumonia (*M. pneumoniae*) infections, should be considered in this regard (Wu *et al.*, 2020:219). The researcher employed the COVID-19 pandemic situation during 2 years as a case study to investigate the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners and school social workers during a disaster.

It was necessary to be aware of the extent of the restrictions caused by this novel virus which caused a pandemic and to take note of it in this research study.

1.6.6 Restrictions

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (s.v. "restrictions", 2022), a restriction is

something that limits someone's actions or movement, or limits the number, size, or other characteristics of something. It is also described as a formal limit or control on what people or businesses can do or what can happen (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

During a national state of disaster, alert levels define the number of limitations (South Africa, 2020a). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa was placed on alert level 5 on 26 March 2020 for the period of the lockdown, with restrictions on the movement of persons and goods as already indicated (South Africa, 2020a). This remained in force till 31 April 2020. Previously, the country was placed on alert level 4 from 1 May to 31 May 2020. Subsequently the levels were reduced till reaching alert level 1 on 21 September 2020. On 28 December 2020, the country was placed back on level 3, and in 2021, the levels were altered between level 1 and level 4. For the purpose of this study, it is important to take notice of the return dates of the school learners to school. According to the Department of Education's notice in Government Gazette no. 304 of 2020 (South Africa, 2020b), issued after the strict nationwide lockdown, the following return dates for primary and high school learners were ordered as follows: Grades 7 and 12 on 1 June 2020, Grades 1, 2, 3, 6, 10, and 11 on 6 July 2020 and Grades 4, 5, 8, and 9 on 3 August 2020.

According to these restrictions, everybody was confined to their places of residence. For purpose of this study, it should be noticed that all South Africans were restricted in their movement and contact with other people during the nationwide lockdown.

1.6.7 Poverty (Poorness)

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (s.v. "poor": 2022) "poor" is having little money and/or few possessions.

According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), three types of poverty have been identified in social work terminology: absolute poverty (when the earnings of a family falls below a specific limit in comparison to the national average income), moderate poverty, and relative poverty (Ohio University, 2019).

This study was conducted in a low socio-economic environment where there were levels of poverty. Therefore, the researcher needed to understand this concept to determine the different needs of learners and what services a school social worker should provide in case of a forced school closure. High school learners from impoverished families are mostly dependent on the feeding scheme of a school, have other material needs, and require psycho-social support, as discussed further in this study. Understanding poverty and the needs of learners at school is critical for school social workers who want to establish an inclusive and supportive environment for learners during a forced school closure (van Dyk & White, 2019:8).

1.6.8 Socio-economic environment

The environment affects one's health in both social and physical ways. It is embedded in the greater environment and is formed by complex connections between social institutions and economic systems. These organizations and systems have an impact on how power, money, and resources are divided. As a result, the socio-economic environment influences how communities and people obtain the resources required to meet their basic human needs (Walker & Hepp, 2016).

An individual or a group's socio-economic status is determined by their place in society, and it is frequently determined by combining their level of education, income, and occupation (American Psychological Association, 2022b).

To conduct this study, in the light of the pandemic restrictions the researcher needed to understand the socio-economic environment of the learners with reference to the practical element of the combination of education, occupation, and income of the parents of high school learners in a low socio-economic environment.

1.6.9 School Forced Closure

When a school or educational institution must temporarily close because of an emergency or crisis scenario, such as a natural disaster, a threat to the public's health, or a security concern, it is referred to as a "school-forced closure" (Federal Emergency

Management Agency, 2019). This nomenclature of the temporary suspension of regular school operations because of a crisis or emergency that endangers the safety and well-being of learners, staff, and the community being referred to as a “school-forced closure” is confirmed by UNESCO (2019). Recognizing the principle that schools may face closures, served as the foundation for researchers to create a system ensuring that learners’ needs are met even under such circumstances (Boetto, Bell & Ivory, 2021:1626).

1.6.10 Case study

A case study is empirical research that explores a contemporary phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the 'case,' within the context of everyday circumstances, especially when the lines between the phenomenon and its surroundings are unclear (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:37-38). In the present study, the case study design was employed to investigate the impact of COVID-19.

The purpose of the study is discussed in the next segment.

1.7 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Establishing a clear and well-defined purpose or research goal for the study is a critical aspect in research design. Researchers must state their purposes, research questions, or hypotheses unambiguously so that the study stays focused, and the objectives remain attainable (Kumar, Geetha & Rajan, 2023:76)

A good qualitative purpose statement includes information on the major phenomenon being examined, the participants in the study, and the research site (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:179). The purpose of the research is also referred to as the research goal or aim and gives meaning to what the researcher wanted to achieve.

The purpose of this study was –

- *To develop in depth understanding of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.*

- *To make recommendations on how high school learners' and social workers' can be supported regarding the experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.*

The subsections below state the objectives and formulated the research question.

1.8 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The research question and research objectives for this research were formulated as follows:

1.8.1 Research questions

The research questions serve a variety of purposes, including determining the significance of the study, providing a structure, direction, consistency, and establishing the study's parameters, and emphasizing the types of data that will be collected (Doody & Bailey, 2016:20). The early formulation of a research problem into a researchable question is critical, as such a question(s) establishes the outline and process, provides the basis, and indicators what must follow (Yates & Leggett, 2016:225-226).

The research questions serve as a bridge between existing knowledge and the problem that the researcher wishes to address (Grant & Osanloo, 2014:18). The research questions of the current study are based on a theoretical understanding gained from a review of the literature, observation, and gaps in prior research, are formulated as follows:

- *What are the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners' and social workers in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments?*

The researcher describes the research paradigm utilized to achieve the study aim and goals in the next part.

1.8.2 Research goal and objectives

The research objective describes why the topic is important and outlines the research project's action steps to be taken to achieve the research goals. This contextual information assists readers in understanding the study's motivation and real-world impact (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:161). According to de Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2011:95), a research goal is a dream that a researcher aspires to realize. To identify the study's goal, the researcher must establish a long-term goal and characterize the purpose in general terms (Doody & Bailey, 2016:22).

The study aimed to explore the perspectives of the high school learners and school social workers regarding their challenges and experiences faced during forced school closure.

To achieve the above, the objectives were set as follows:

- *To explore and describe the experiences and challenges of High School Learners' in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.*
- *To explore and describe the experiences and challenges of social workers in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.*
- *To offer recommendations for school social work services during future disasters where schools are forced to be closed.*

1.9 RESEARCH PARADIGM

All researchers contribute their own sets of beliefs, worldviews, and paradigms to their research studies, and these paradigms influence how the study is conducted and written. Worldviews are described as a researcher's fundamental philosophical viewpoint on the world and the type of research that they bring to a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 44). The research method may take on a qualitative, quantitative or a mixed method approach, and each approach has different techniques and

interpretations which are described by the respective epistemology and entry points. Epistemology is how to conceptualize, know and justify and ontology is the question of 'being' or 'what is. The entry point is about certain aspects chosen to enter reality and produce knowledge (Acharyya & Bhattacharya, 2020:58).

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018:46), the constructivism or social constructivism paradigm, also known as interpretivism, holds that people want to comprehend the world in which they live and as a result create subjective interpretations of their experiences that are directed toward certain objects or things. This paradigm is frequently thought of as a qualitative research methodology. There are a few presumptions that can be made: humans create meaning as they interact with the world; humans interact with the world and interpret it in light of their cultural and historical backgrounds; and the creation of meaning is fundamentally social and always emerges from interactions with a community (Creswell & Creswell, 2018: 46).

Interpretive research recognises that social reality is affected by human experience and social context, making it ideal for studying human actions in relation to socio-cultural concerns (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022:421). This paradigm relates to this research as it identifies in-depth life experiences. Using data analysis, researchers may recreate the intended meaning of a text by immersing themselves in the participant's perspective and thinking patterns (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022:423).

This study used a qualitative research approach associated with the constructivism or interpretivism paradigm to focusses on participants' challenges and experiences, as well as how they interpreted and responded to the specific situation under consideration.

In the next section the qualitative research approach and the research design embraced by the researcher in guiding this study are explained.

1.10 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

This section provides a detailed description of the research approach and the research design selected. This broad description defines how the study problem was

approached and designed establishes the foundation for the research technique, impacting decisions about data collection, analysis, and interpretation. It ensures that the study is carried out in a methodical and goal-oriented manner (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:100).

1.10.1 Research approach

In general, qualitative research is a means of deeply studying individual experiences using a specific set of methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, content analysis, visual approaches, and narratives or biographies. However, qualitative research entails far more than just the application of qualitative methodology. One of the most distinguishing features of qualitative research is the ability to observe obstacles through the eyes of the study participants and grasp the significance and conclusions that they connect to behaviour, events, or things. (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020:172). A qualitative investigation reaches conclusions without the use of statistical tools or other types of quantification (Doody & Bailey, 2016:25).

The qualitative research approach has the following characteristics as applied in this research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:258-259):

- Qualitative research studies the person or phenomenon in its natural setting. Therefore, the researcher collected the data by interviewing and observing the participants at their schools.
- In qualitative research, the researcher's role in the data collection process is to gather the data, through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions. This was applied in this research by the researcher obtaining the data by personally interviewing the participants.
- The qualitative researcher gathers data from various sources and do not rely on one source only. In this research, the researcher interviewed learners and school social workers from different schools in the Pretoria West Municipality area and documented field notes.
- In qualitative research, the researcher uses the inductive data analysis process to ensure a true reflection of the participant's answers. This process is used in

this research by the researcher collecting data relevant to the research study.

- Qualitative research focuses on the true meanings of participants as explained and not on the researcher's own biased personal experience of the case. This took place in this research by being aware of own assumptions and experiences with high school learners previously. The researcher challenged her own opinion with the data analysing process. Reflection was done as well as feedback from supervisor and peer reviewers. To obtain knowledge and applying research methodology made the transition from a school social worker to a researcher easier.
- In qualitative research data are emergent and therefore cannot be tightly described. The researcher was adaptable towards the research plan, as data collection was constantly modified to reflect emerging data. The researcher was open to unanticipated discoveries and insights that may emerge during the research process.
- The researcher was accessible to change at any stage and the researcher used interviewing skills by clarifying and probing questions to provide flexibility.
- Qualitative research is reflexive, and the researcher needs to reflect on how personal experiences and viewpoints, as well as a person's professional framework, can influence the outcome of the study. The researcher adhered to this by not allowing her own biases to influence the research as described above.
- The qualitative research approach is holistic, and a complex picture of the case is developed. The researcher approached the research from a holistic perspective to deal with and research the whole 'picture'.

1.10.2 Research design

The research design refers to the rigorous and logical organization and direction of the investigation. The design is the outcome of combining many research issues into a general scientific notion (Nayak & Singh, 2015:61).

There are five qualitative research designs, namely the narrative design, case study phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:183).

In this research a case study research design is applied supplemented by descriptive and individual interpreted mini-narratives, which give explanations for small-scale circumstances occurring inside particular contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:11).

A **case study** is an empirical research design that examines a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case'), which was regarded as COVID-19 in the context of real-world occurrences namely the Pretoria West schools, these distinctions is important between phenomenon and context because it could be vague (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:37-38). The case study approach was referred to in this study as a case study of COVID-19. A case study approach was the most suitable paradigm for this study because the main objective of case study research was to thoroughly examine a problem within its context in order to comprehend it from the viewpoint of the participants (Patton, 2015:394).

A case study is an exploration; into a "bounded system" or a case (in this case, the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown) over time using thorough, in-depth data collection from numerous sources of contextually rich information. This bounded system, is constrained by space and time (Patton, 2015:394). Applying this design assisted the researcher to explore, describe and contextualise the experiences and challenges of high school learners during the COVID-19 lockdown period, as well as that of school social workers rendering services, describing in detail these experiences to comprehensively understand their experiences.

Analysing existing literature and data, or employing qualitative methods such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, informal dialogues, or case studies, are commonly employed as the initial stages of **exploratory research**. Exploratory studies are conducted to provide researchers with a deeper understanding of the specific case they intend to examine. In situations where information is scarce, researchers opt for an exploratory research design (Nayak & Singh, 2015:61-62). Consequently, the explorative design was used in this research to gain insight and an in-depth understanding of the experiences and challenges of high school learners and school social workers during the nationwide lockdown period.

Descriptive research is used to explain a condition, problem, or phenomenon

systematically and answer queries like who, what, when, where, and how they connect to a research issue or problem. Descriptive research gathers measurable data without introducing variables (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:10).

The main purpose of this study was to describe what was prevalent concerning the experiences and challenges of high school learners during the COVID-19 lockdown and to unpack the experiences and challenges that school social workers perceived during their service delivery to these high school learners during the pandemic.

A **contextual research design** is frequently used in qualitative research, by many researchers who believe that the best way to comprehend any condition is to view it in its context (Acharyya & Bhattacharya, 2020:21).

A contextual research design emphasizes understanding phenomena within the specific environments or situations where they naturally occur. This approach is particularly effective for sensitive topics, where direct questions might lead to biased or guarded responses. By asking participants to provide examples of behaviour within their context, researchers can gather more authentic and nuanced insights (Neuman, 2014: 329). Hence, a contextual research design is also applied in this research.

In the following section the research population and sampling are explored.

1.11 RESEARCH POPULATION AND SAMPLING

Having clarity about the research population and sampling, is essential in research. These components assist the researcher in structuring the study to generate solid and applicable results.

1.11.1 Research population

According to Hennink *et al.* (2020:148) and Hilton *et al.* (2020:154), studying the existing research on a researcher's study topic can help the researcher to determine a research population and that persons with particular experiences or characteristics

are likely to be key sources of information on the study topic.

The researcher's interpretation of a population is that it consists of all the people who have similar characteristics or experiences that the researcher wants to study. The population for this study was all high school learners who, at the time that the research took place, were aged from 16 to 19 years, who were aged from 13 to 16 during the pandemic, that attended school in a low socio-economic area in the municipal boundaries of Pretoria West.

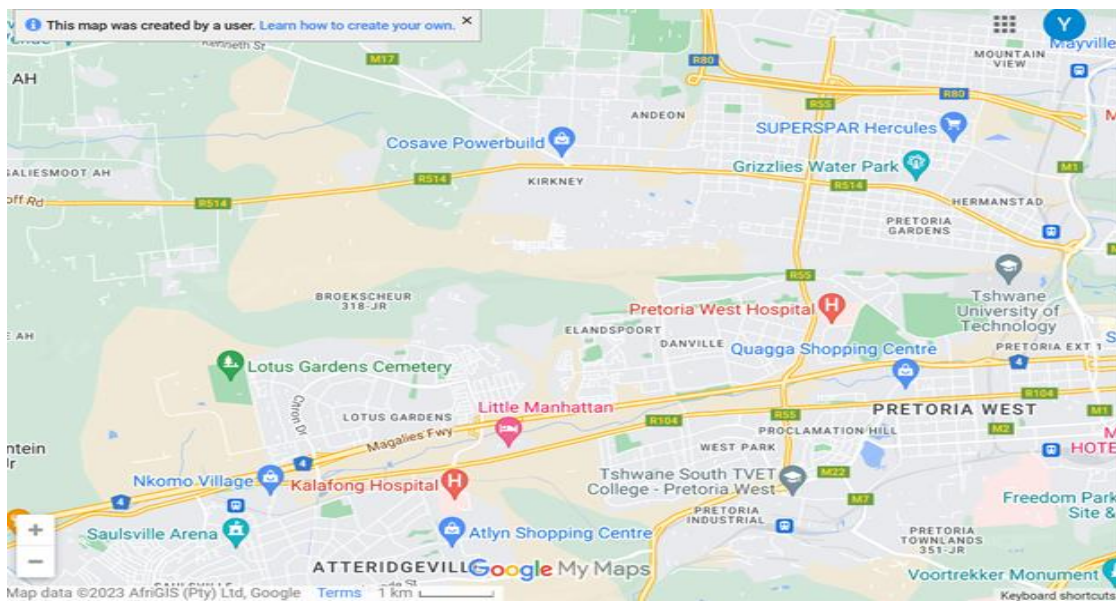


Figure 1-2: A map of the western side of Pretoria indicating the area where the study was done (Google-maps, 2023)

The boundaries of Pretoria West are shown in Figure 1-2. This age group between 13 and 16 years was chosen for the participant group, high school learners because it presents a critical period between childhood and adulthood. It is important to understand the sensitive and challenging developmental stage the learner's experiences and Tidy (2023) explains that adolescence is the time between childhood and adulthood that generally spans from the ages of 13 to 19 years and is often referred to as teenage years with physical, emotional, and psychological changes. Puberty begins gradually, often around 11 years for girls and 13 years for boys (Tidy, 2023).

The population of this study attended schools that are situated in in a low socio-

economic environment. This included learners from some of the following neighbourhoods: Danville, Daspoort, Elandspoort, Claremont, Hermanstad, Suiderberg, and Lotus Gardens, as shown in Figure 1-2.

The area of Danville and Elandspoort has various community outreach activities that help residents in need. Community-based donation programmes, such as soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and food banks, distribute food, clothes, and other necessities to the needy. These long-standing initiatives, operated by churches and other non-profit organizations (NGOs), rely primarily on public donations (Abbey, 2007:42). These above statements emphasize the statement of Van der Klashorst (2010:24), that in the low socio-economic communities, such as Danville and Elandspoort in the Tshwane Metropolitan poverty and unemployment is prevalent.

Hamann and Horn (2020:2016) explained that there is a socio-economic inequality between the northwest and southeast divisions of the City of Tshwane and that over time it demonstrated that spatial patterns of socio-economic inequality have not changed appreciably toward a more equal city of Tshwane. The centre part of the city and its nearby areas such as the western side of Pretoria have been steadily declining over time, while settlement patterns on the outskirts of townships remain far remote from socio-economic opportunities. Van der Klashorst (2010:163) confirms the above by stating that the variance between the populations of middle to high socio-economic status communities in Pretoria East and populations of low socio-economic status communities in Pretoria West, is all too obvious.

According to Kings (2013), a new community has been created in Elandspoort, an expansion of Danville, with 110 planned 407 dwellings already completed. Since the studies of Abbey (2007) and Van der Klashorst (2010), this poverty situation has not improved. The streets in Pretoria's older Danville district resemble those of many other lower-middle-class communities. In the middle of the day, people are sitting or wandering around aimlessly, with many of them obviously out of jobs, and their poverty is evident.

According to Chanee (2020:1), since the establishment of democracy in 1994, access to high-quality, fair education for all learners, irrespective of their socio-economic

status, has been a concern in Gauteng. In an effort to promote access to and quality of learning in all schools, the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) designated schools in quintiles one to three throughout the province to be fee-free (Chanee, 2020:1).

The GDE expanded its no-fee policy in 2010, allowing schools to apply to convert their status from fee-paying to no-fee-paying. This requires a school to speak with the parent community to be certified as a no-fee school and give up the privilege to collect compulsory school fees (Chanee, 2020:5). Furthermore, in 2010, Gauteng chose to equalize financing for fee-paying schools in quintiles four and five. In effect, the GDE instituted a subsidy payment by parents if they are not able to pay school fees. These consist of two categories of subsidy payment, namely fee-exemption and fee-defaulters in quintile four and five schools. The economic situation triggered the increased number of fee-exemption applications and fee-defaulters in quintile four and five schools (Chanee, 2020:5). Tshwane West District, which also serves the schools in the Pretoria West Municipality area has 104 urban quintile one schools out of 173 urban schools, which are no paying fees schools (Department of Basic Education, 2022).

The quintile ranking of a school is crucial for determining its fee and financing status. The ranking method for schools based on community poverty factors may not correctly reflect the poverty of the learner community (Van Dyk & White, 2019:2). Schools are categorized from one to five according to the quintile system. Hence, quintiles one to three refer to needy learners in no fees paying primary and high schools and quintiles four and five are affluent schools. Still, there are also needy learners in quintiles four and five schools (Munje & Jita, 2019:26). However, research and practical data show that, despite significant progress with the school feeding schemes being made, much more work needs to be done in the educational sector. Inundated with educational issues in post-apartheid South Africa, the democratic government took it upon itself to redesign the school feeding system by boosting accessibility, especially to needy learners, thereby prioritizing it within its poverty reduction agenda (Munje & Jita, 2019:25).

The second part of the research explores the experiences and challenges of social

workers providing social work services to high school learners during the COVID-19 lockdown period in the mentioned municipality boundaries. For this part of the study, the population identified was school social workers from the different Tshwane West district schools. The researcher anticipated that with this choice of the population, access would be obtained through the school systems in the mentioned area, with the learners and school social workers rendering services in this area. During this study, the researcher was employed in this area, which made this population accessible and ensured cost-effectiveness for the research. Although the researcher worked during this study at a school in the same area, her school did not form part of the research to prevent a conflict of interest.

The following section defines the sample and sampling procedures.

1.11.2 Sampling

The research question and the objective of the study determined the sampling procedures. Having a large sample is not the goal in qualitative research, instead, qualitative approaches aim for a thorough and nuanced understanding of the experiences and views of participants and often employ purposeful sampling (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019:3). The researcher understood sampling as the process of selecting a small group of participants from a larger group that had similar experiences and characteristics as the whole population.

Purposive sampling is frequently used in qualitative research as it enables researchers to create samples depending on their own assessment. This strategy incorporates defined criteria for including or excluding participants, which are driven by the study's objectives and their understanding of the target population (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:149-150). Therefore, the researcher obtained and used participants for this purpose, to provide in-depth insight into the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown as a case under study.

The selection criteria for the high school learners were as follows:

- Participants who were between the ages of 16 and 19 years.

- Attending a school in the Pretoria West municipal area.
- Learners from all genders and all races.
- Learners who speak English.
- Learners who were willing to participate and whose parents provided consent for them to participate.

The exclusion criteria for the high school learners were as follows:

- Learners under the age of 16.
- Cognitively and mentally challenged learners.

The selection criteria for social workers were as follows:

- School social workers who provided services at a high or a vocational school during the nationwide lockdown period.
- Social workers who provided services in at least one of the schools in the demarcated area of Pretoria West.
- Social workers with at least one year of practice experience as social workers.
- Social workers who were willing to participate in this study.

The exclusion criteria for social workers were as follows:

- Social workers with less than one year of practice experience in social work.
- Social workers who were under any form of investigation regarding misconduct.

The schools were chosen mostly through quota sampling based on their geographical closeness to the researcher's place of occupation. The schools were in the vicinity of Pretoria West area. The distance to the schools varied, some were closer and others further. The researcher compiled a list of five accessible schools in descending geographical order. Quota sampling selects individuals according to pre-set criteria. This technique guarantees that the sample accurately reflects the population's particular characteristics. This strategy allows for faster data gathering and insights that correlate with demographic features by constructing samples that fulfil predefined criteria (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:150). The school social workers were chosen through snowball sampling from the schools in Pretoria West area. The researcher asked for assistance from the school social workers in the form of references if they knew other

school social workers who fitted the criteria. Snowball sampling is utilized when individuals are difficult to locate. It is useful for researching delicate issues or connecting with difficult populations. Using the snowball principle, researchers contact a few individuals that meet the inclusion criteria and ask them for the referral of persons that they know who also meet the criteria, thereby leveraging their network to locate others who share similar qualities (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:150). Both snowball sampling and quota sampling are non-probability sampling and there is not a predetermined structure and therefore it might not image the characteristics of the broader population (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:147).

Qualitative research sampling aims to gather information that is useful for understanding the depth, complexity, and variation of the phenomenon, so the criterium for sufficient sample size is the principle of data saturation. The sufficient sample size is impossible to specify in advance. An indication of adequate sample size is the concept of saturation where there is no or little new information (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg & McKibbon, 2015:1782). The researcher did not know beforehand the number of individuals who would be included in the sample until the data reached saturation point.

The necessary permission was sought from parents or guardians where children were participants, for their children to participate in the research (Creswell, 2016:232). Working with gatekeepers to gain access to potential participants may be incredibly beneficial since they are reliable sources who manage access to the target sample (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019:3). A letter was sent to the GDE to obtain permission to conduct the research. Recruitment was done through the school system in collaboration with the delegated person and school social worker. It was important to point out that no data collection would be done without consent granted by parents and assent by high school learners concerned. The researcher wrote a letter of invitation to the principals of schools that was sampled through the quota sampling as well as to the parents of the learners who were to be interviewed (Addendum D). A letter was given to the delegated person in managerial position to explain what the research entails for the conduction of interviews with the high school learners and school social workers. Another consideration to obtain information and permission from participants, was to meet the requirements of the Protection of Personal

Information Act (POPIA), Act 4 of 2013 (Accessible Law, 2019). In terms of this act the researcher also needed to comply with the prescriptions for obtaining, handling, and storing of the participants' information and safeguarding this information (Accessible Law, 2019).

In the following section the data collection method, and procedure are discussed.

1.12 DATA COLLECTION METHOD AND PROCEDURE

According to Creswell (2016:302), data collection is the way of scientifically acquiring information about a research subject, it is critical to safeguard the integrity of research. In this respect, data collection incorporating various information sources (such as observations, interviews, multimedia material, records, and reports) and providing a case description, as well as case-based themes, are important (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 40).

A relevant data collection method for this study was conducting semi-structured interviews, consisting of less structured discussions guided by open-ended questions to provide information about participants' personal experiences and challenges. Conducting semi-structured interviews call for a certain amount of flexibility and reflexivity to examine themes for each participant in varied depths and orders as opposed to structured interviews, which ask the same questions of all participants in the same sequence (Rose, McKinley & Briggs Baffoe-Djan, 2020:115-116). The researcher gathered information from face-to-face interviews with individual participants, as well as from field notes. The face-to-face interviews yielded the most information. It was an effective way to explore the participants' thoughts, feelings, and opinions by conducting semi-structured interviews assisted by an interview guide with open-ended questions (Addendum A). This was a flexible way to gather data from the participants. The method was individualized, and delicate experiences of participants could also be perceived and explored (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019:2).

The fact that some people find it difficult to communicate and discuss sensitive or private issues, will complicate an interview. As interviewing certain participants might be difficult for skilled and novice interviewers alike, the researcher must thoroughly

apply the necessary interviewing skills. Common blunders include neglecting to probe or ask for further information, neglecting to actively listen, not having an interview guide with robust open-ended questions, and asking insensitive questions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019:5). Further clarification of the composition of an interview guide is that it outlines the main topic of an interview and the order in which they are covered (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:215).

The researcher conducted different interviews with different research participants, namely high school learners and school social workers, in a conducive environment for both parties. The researcher requested a private room or office at the school to conduct the interviews. She contacted the social workers and parents of the learners telephonically and requested an appointment to explain the purpose of the research and requested participation in the study. During the face-to-face meeting, the researcher introduced herself, explained the purpose of the study, mentioned the topics that were inquired about, discussed the issue of voluntary participation (Addendum D) and the selection criteria. The researcher also informed the participants that the interview would be audio-recorded and provided them with the informed consent/assent letter (Addenda E, F and G) which they perused and signed before the commencement of the interviews. The participants were informed in advance about the research and the letter of invitation was also given to the participants ahead of time. The parents gave prior consent, and the learners gave consent before the start of the interview. Before the commencing of the interview, it was confirmed with each participant whether he/she wants to continue to participate in the study. The researcher made appointments for the interviews scheduled on a time, date, and at a venue convenient for the participants. The approximate length of the interview between 10 and 20 minutes, was also communicated to the participants. This time period did not include establishing rapport with the participant.

The researcher used two different interview guides for the different participant groups namely biographical and topic related questions that are fit for high school learners and then biographical and topic related questions for school social workers. The following biographical and topical questions as outlined in the interview guide (Addendum A) were asked:

PARTICIPANTS GROUP 1: HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS

Biographical questions

- a) What is your age?
- b) What grade are you in?
- c) What is your gender?
- d) Do you have siblings and if yes what are their ages?
- e) Are one or both of your parents employed?
- f) If stated yes on one or both, what employment do they have?

Topic-related questions

1. Please describe how you experienced this period of nationwide lockdown.
2. Why do you think in your understanding, it was important to stay at home and apply social distancing during the nationwide lockdown?
3. With what activities did you keep yourself busy at home during the nationwide lockdown?
4. How did you feel:
 - 4.1 not seeing your friends?
 - 4.2 not attending school?
 - 4.3 not attending any social gatherings at church?
 - 4.4 not attending any social gatherings with your friends?
 - 4.5 not attending any sports activities or cultural activities?
5. What challenges did you experience during the nationwide lockdown?
6. What kind of support did you receive from your immediate family during the nationwide lockdown?
7. Schools provide for different needs of learners, not only educational but emotional and material needs for example food. During the nationwide lockdown schools were closed and school social workers also did not work. Do you think that learners' needs have suffered as a result? And if yes why?
8. Based on your experiences during the nationwide lockdown what do you think social workers can do to help children who feel unsafe, needy, or dismayed in their

home situation?

9. Is there any information you would like to add, or do you have any suggestions or questions?

PARTICIPANTS GROUP 2: SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

Biographical information

a) What is your age?

b) How long have been a social worker?

Topic-related questions

1. Kindly tell me about your job description and daily functions.
2. What was the role that you played as a school social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What were your experiences during the nationwide lockdown with service delivery to high school learners?
4. From your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown, what challenges did you face in rendering services to high school learners?
5. Did the nature of social work service delivery to high school learners change during these restricted periods?
6. Knowing what you know now, how would you address service delivery to the high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown?
7. Do you know of any legislation and/or policies that were in place during the nationwide lockdown in addressing service delivery during a pandemic to high school learners?
8. To improve service delivery during a pandemic, do you have any suggestions?
9. How was working during a pandemic affecting you on a personal and professional level?
10. Is there any information you would like to add, any suggestions, or any questions?

The researcher used interviewing skills as listening attentively and respectfully, encouraging the participants and being sensitive during the semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions so that the participants could be comfortable in giving their responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019:5). The researcher swiftly established rapport by paying close attention to and treating the participants with respect. The researcher maintained respect throughout, encouraged the participants to express their opinions, and recognized the delicate nature of the subject matter. The researcher became aware of contextual or cultural elements that might affect the participant's opinions (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019:5). As part of the preparation process, pilot testing was undertaken with two participants from the group of high school learners and one of the group school social workers in order to test the data collection process (Creswell & Creswell 2018:154). The feedback was utilized to streamline the interview protocol and interview guide as well as the interview process. These participants did not form part of the final sample group.

For the qualitative study, the sample size was not prescribed but data were collected until data saturation was reached, meaning that no new information or data were retrieved from participants and the data obtained is starting to repeat itself (Creswell & Creswell 2018:186). Permission was obtained from participants to use an audio recorder to capture the data obtained from participants.

The next section describes the method of data used.

1.13 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

A data analysis method is a plan explaining how collected data are to be processed and analysed (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:77). In general, the purpose of analysing the data is to review and evaluate data to get insights and information. Researchers do data analysis from several angles to uncover new perspective and knowledge (Kumar, *et al.*, 2023:126). It includes segmenting, deconstructing, and reassembling the data, similar to peeling back different onion layers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:267).

The commonly used approach to analyse data across qualitative designs is thematic analysis. A wide range of research issues and topics can be handled in this way, and

it flexibly minimizes data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018:2). When analysing data, researchers examine interview transcripts and field notes from observations made during the interviews, to find and list the key themes that participants in the study mentioned in both the interviews and noted in the observation notes (Kumar, 2014:319). The process the researcher used to analyse the qualitatively generated data involved the steps set out by Tesch (Creswell, 2014:198) and ATLAS.ti 23. The software program, ATLAS.ti was developed during the ATLAS project (1989-1992) at the Technical University of Berlin, Germany. The qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti avoids the need for researchers to manually attach narrative parts, create collages, or create spreadsheets for grouping qualitative data. ATLAS.ti organizes research information and allows for data analysis within the software. The researcher remains in charge of the analysis process as the critical thinker (Friese, Soratto & Pires, 2018:12). The researcher followed the steps outlined by Tesch to upload the data into ATLAS.ti. Tesch's steps of data analysis are tabled as follows:

Table:1-1: Tesch’s steps of data analysis (Creswell, 2014:198)

| Step | Description |
|---|--|
| 1. Getting a bigger picture of the case under study. | Read each transcription of all participants. |
| 2. Choose a top-of-the-pile transcribed interview. | Determine the underlying meaning rather than its actual content and also note ideas. |
| 3. Identifying emerging topics and themes | Columns were created for the topics, and they were listed according to important, unusual, and leftover subjects. |
| 4. Categorising topics or themes into codes | Returned to the data using a list of themes to write the topics’ acronyms as codes next to the relevant passages of the text. Themes were reduced into codes, using keywords. The instances were counted in which a particular theme appeared in an interview. |
| 5. Consolidate ideas into themes, then group them together. | Went through the transcriptions of all the interviews as well as the observation notes and the responses were categorised under different themes and the keywords |

| | |
|---|--|
| | were identified that best describe the themes and then grouped them together. |
| 6. List the final themes in alphabetical order. | During the discussion of the main themes, verbatim responses were used to provide a brief, clear, logical, non-repetitive, and engaging account of the experiences and challenges of the participants during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. A final acronym for each group was chosen and codes were arranged in alphabetical order. |
| 7. Preliminary analysis. | Gathered all the information from each category in one location and did a preliminary analysis and wrote a report. |
| 8. Determined whether recoding the existing data were needed. | If required, recoded the data to ensure it was correctly categorised. |

Discussing the analysing process of utilizing Tesch and ATLAS.ti software with the supervisor provided clarity, and the chance to address any questions or issues that may emerge.

In the following section, the data verification applied to the study in ensuring its trustworthiness, is explained.

1.14 ENSURING RIGOUR

Researchers have serious personal responsibilities to aspire to the highest levels of rigour or trustworthiness in their studies. This includes understanding intellectual biases and errors to which decision-making processes are prone to, building in protections and precautions against natural influences favourable to current ideas, individual prejudices, own desires, and the systems of incentives that surround the quest of science (National Academics of Sciences-Engineering-Medicine, 2017:39). For this purpose, Lincoln and Guba developed a set of criteria for trustworthiness, comprising of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity

(Patton, 2015:988-989).

1.14.1 Credibility

The degree to which the analysis of findings can be deemed trustworthy is referred to as credibility which requires the use of credible sources, correct references, and effective research techniques (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:7). To make this study credible the researcher gave a clear account of the methodology that was used in this study. Triangulation, defined as the use of multiple methods of data collection, for example an interview, observations, and reading of documents was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:244-245). The researcher adopted triangulation by applying multiple methods of data collection through interviews, observation and literature study and the study was also discussed with the supervisor and fellow students to ensure its credibility.

1.14.2 Transferability

Transferability is the external validation and the extent to which the findings of qualitative research can be extrapolated to different contexts, locations, and participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:253). To ensure external validity is to provide precise descriptions that provide a robust platform for comparison (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:290). The researcher obtained adequate information enabling the process of transferability of data thus if anyone wants to duplicate this study the findings can be transferred.

1.14.3 Dependability

Dependability or reliability requires that when a research study is repeated, the same results will be obtained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:251). The triangulation as explained under credibility was also applied to ensure dependability or reliability. Documenting a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures ensured that if repeated, it will generate the same outcomes.

1.14.4 Confirmability

Confirmability can be viewed as objectivity and the question will be asked of whether these findings would be confirmed by other researchers (Patton, 2015:990)? The goal of research reports is to convey findings and analyses that are free of subjective judgments, thus the wording stays neutral, factual, and free of emotive sentiments, allowing readers to analyse the research objectively (Kumar, *et al.*, 2023:173; Creswell, 2016:251). The researcher regularly did introspection and kept a reflective journal for improving confirmability. The researcher further separated her own opinions and prior assumptions from the participants' intended meaning, perception, or experience.

1.14.5 Authenticity

Authenticity is the awareness of one's own perspective, appreciation for other people's perspectives, and fairness in depicting constructions and the values that underpin them (Patton, 2015:989). In this research, authenticity is presented with the variety of opinions displayed in the findings.

The next section examines the application of ethical considerations applied in the qualitative research approach.

1.15 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Nygård and Saus (2016:671) introduced two types of ethical principles: internal and exterior ethics. Internal research ethics include informed consent, confidentiality, study validity, respect for and limiting possible harm to participants, and compensating of participants. External ethics are concerned with the ethics and safety of the community in question in the form of justice, cultural responsibility, social duty, and community respect.

Ethics are the study of right and wrong behaviour as well as moral obligations. It is the moral principles of professional conduct that are thought to be desirable for excellent professional activity. Social research ethics involves an obligation and responsibility toward participants, sponsors, and beneficiaries (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:61). The Belmont

Report identified three such values to assist researchers in determining appropriate behaviour and it is considered to be a pillar of human research ethics (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:61). The values are respect, beneficence, and justice where personal dignity and autonomy are recognized, and researchers are obliged to protect people from harm and the benefits and burdens of research should be distributed fairly (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:63).

Studies involving vulnerable populations, such as children, convicts, or pregnant women, must be carefully assessed to ensure that participants' rights are not infringed and that adequate safeguards were in place. Many vulnerable groups are at risk of being used unethically as research participants. Their rights must be safeguarded. However, this necessitates a tough balancing act between their right not to be exploited because of their susceptibility and their right to engage in research that may benefit them (Yegidis, Weinbach & Myers, 2018:33,40).

The researcher interpreted the application of research ethics as a framework for always acting and conducting herself in the best interest and for the well-being of the participants. The following social work research ethical considerations were considered and applied in the research to ensure that the vulnerable participants were protected at all times during their participation in the research.

The following ethical considerations were applied during the research:

1.15.1 Obtaining informed consent

In giving their informed consent to participate in research, participants who are at least 18 years old and older can sign a statement stating their willingness to participate, but for participants under the age of 18 years, their parents or legal guardians must provide consent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:188).

Informed consent means that the participants in the research study are informed of all aspects of the research, and it might influence their decision to participate in the research because it is voluntary and without any pressure (Kumar, 2014:437). The

researcher worked through the school system. Permission to involve learners and school social workers employed by the department in the research, was asked from the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Permission was granted on 26 September 2023 by the GDE to do research. The researcher drew up a letter with all the relevant and adequate information about the research, explaining the methods, advantages, and possible risks which were furnished to the adult participants and the learner participants' parents, requesting their voluntary participation (Addendum D). The schools sent out letters to parents asking permission to give their children's biographical information to the researcher and confirming that this information would be handled confidentially and would only be used for this research purpose to comply with the POPIA Act (Accessible Law, 2019).

The researcher contacted the participants, parents of the learners, and the school social workers telephonically to request an appointment in person or telephonically with each one to explain the purpose of the research and to request participation in this study. The researcher obtained parental or guardian approval for the participants who were under the age of 18. Included in this letter was an informed consent/assent form to be signed (Addenda F and G). The school social workers also signed a consent letter (Addendum E) before participating. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage.

1.15.2 Anonymity

The right to privacy is one of the key values in research and it is the right to control under which circumstances others could have access to the information, and the record of participants' beliefs, values, and behaviour (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:69). To ensure privacy is to keep the participants anonymous, which means that no one can link the data and the research results to individual participants, and it is accomplished by using numbers or pseudonyms with the data collected (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:196). The researcher considered the participants' right to anonymity and used alphabetic and numeric codes for each participant. The researcher gave participants the assurance that their information would be analysed and reported anonymously, and that no one would be able to recognize them or their school. Researchers released their data to the public, but it is in a collective form and anonymous, thus the whole group's findings

are reported, therefore it will encourage people to participate and give honest responses (Hilton *et al.* 2020:70). The researcher kept the information obtained through this study of high school learners and social workers confidential by not revealing any of their identities in this research to academics, colleagues, or the public. The service of a debriefer was obtained and she was on standby if any participant needs debriefing or intervention, during or after the interview. A confidentiality agreement form with a third party was completed by the debriefer.

1.15.3 Confidentiality

Anonymity differs from confidentiality. Confidentiality allows researchers to link replies to specific respondents, but this information is not shared publicly. Anonymity prevents researchers from linking responses to specific respondents (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:70; Green & Thorogood, 2014:72).

The purpose of confidentiality is to ensure that no participant can be identified from the data that were obtained from them throughout the research study. The researcher requested a private office or room at the high school to be made available to interview the participants individually and in privacy.

1.15.4 Protection from harm

Participants should not be put in dangerous or uncomfortable situations, either physically or mentally (Louw 2014:266). If a research study has the potential to cause such discomfort, the participants must be properly informed about it, the possible research findings must be significant enough to justify the risk, and there must be no way to achieve the desired results without taking this risk. It is never appropriate for people to be in circumstances that could endanger them. Human services research seldom entails physical risk, however, there are study contexts where psychological discomfort might be a factor (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:72).

School officials usually have no problem letting researchers into their buildings as long as they do not harm learners or bring in parents who might file complaints. Receiving

the necessary permissions is a good idea before doing research in schools (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:111).

Therefore, it was the ethical duty of the researcher to prevent harm to the participants during the data gathering with both the groups, the high school learners, and school social workers. The researcher made sure the interview surroundings were secure to keep everyone involved safe from harm, discomfort, or awkward or uncomfortable circumstances.

1.15.5 Management of information

To safeguard human subjects, data should be maintained in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality (Louw, 2014:265). To protect human subjects' anonymity, it is recommended to utilize code numbers to link surveys to digital files and storing transcripts of taped interviews without identifying information (Pruzan, 2016:290).

The researcher safeguarded all the documents pertaining to the research, namely collected information, transcriptions, observation field notes, and audio recordings in a locker at home to which only the researcher has access, and a password was used to protect electronic information stored on a computer. All the mentioned documents will be kept for a minimum period of five years and after that, they will be destroyed.

1.15.6 Debriefing of participants

Debriefing of participants provides them the opportunity to work through their feelings and experiences resulting from being interviewed and it is one method of assisting the participants to minimize harm. During the interview, the participants might remember painful memories or events in their life which may cause emotional distress, therefore, it is a good practice to deal with these emotions and if necessary, refer them to a counsellor (Dempsey, Dowling, Larkin & Murphy 2016:484; Hennink *et al.*, 2020:120). The topic under investigation was about the participants' personal experiences during and resulting from the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. This could be a very sensitive issue for some participants, and they may have remembered experiences and feelings

that could disturb them. The researcher explained to the participants that if they felt the questions were too intense the researcher would withdraw the participant from the interview and further participation and refer the participant to the debriefer who was on standby for counselling or debriefing participants (See Addendum H, confidentiality agreement form completed by the debriefer).

1.16 CONCLUSION

This chapter introduced the reader to the background information of the study. Provided is an overview of the pandemic and the spread of the virus, forced school closure, and the challenges, and experiences thereof by high school learners as well as school social workers in parts of the world, Africa as well as South Africa.

The problem statement for this study relates to the experiences and challenges high school learners faced during a disaster or pandemic such as that caused by COVID-19, when schools were forced to close. Therefore, it was essential to obtain a detailed understanding of the experiences and challenges of high school learners during forced school closures and to also understand from a social work perspective what the experiences and challenges were of school social workers, who could only provide limited services to these high school learners during the pandemic, so that service delivery for future disasters can be aligned and improved.

This study was done from a social work perspective to contribute to the knowledge base and practices of school social work, to provide for the emotional and material needs of high school learners during any disaster. The researcher used the ecological system theory. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was investigated using a case-study-based qualitative method in this study. The population for this study consisted of all high school learners as well as school social workers from different schools in a low socio-economic environment. The researcher also described the research method, emphasizing elements such as the target population, sample, and sampling techniques used. This chapter also focussed on the data collection method; pilot testing; preparation of participants; data gathering; data analysis; before presenting the study's trustworthiness, and the ethical considerations used in the research.

The following chapter examines the literature to offer a global perspective on the effect of forced school closure in the high school system on learners and school social workers' role and challenges in this regard.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW: THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CLOSURE ON LEARNERS AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One the experiences and challenges high school learners faced and the role of school social workers during the forced school closure resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are introduced by means of a literature review. This chapter presents a global perspective on disasters, forced school closures, and the impact of disasters and pandemics on society, the individual, and the learner. This is followed by an exploration of the role of school social workers in the educational system, and their role during and after times of disaster before the challenges they face in such circumstances are analysed. In conclusion, the theoretical framework used in this research is described.

2.2 DISASTERS, PANDEMICS AND FORCED SCHOOL CLOSURES

The number of humanitarian crises resulting from natural and man-made wars and disasters is at an all-time high. Natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and wildfires cause disruption by destroying property, causing physical harm and death, causing psychological pain, uprooting people, and their families, and significantly impairing everyday routines. Similar to natural disasters, man-made disasters including wars, social unrest, protests, conflicts, and terrorist attacks have a variety of effects on the impacted people's physical, emotional, and social well-being (Cueto & Agaton, 2021:1).

Over 500 million school-age learners globally, or one in every four, live in countries affected by humanitarian emergencies such as wars, natural disasters, and disease pandemics. Approximately 75 million learners are currently slipping behind in their studies, are receiving poor teaching, or are on the verge of dropping out entirely. In the absence of protected learning environments, they risk being coerced into underage labour, child marriage, abuse, and enrolment into armed organizations (Briggs, 2018).

Learner's emotions, conduct, and performance have been strongly affected by disasters. After a crisis, schools can provide every learner with a sense of security, optimism, and connectivity. It is anticipated that learners' well-being will be harmed if educational institutions close and care systems are halted. Recent research indicated that enduring school closures harms academic success (Segarra-Alméstica, Caraballo-Cueto, Cordero & Cordero, 2022).

As described by Briggs (2018), the year 2018 posed significant challenges for learners worldwide, as conflicts and natural disasters resulted in millions of learners being unable to attend school. Over the course of the seven-year civil war in Syria during 2011 until 2018, more than eight million children have been severely touched, including 2.6 million registered refugees that fled to neighbouring countries and six million children living within Syria. In Nigeria, 110 girls were kidnapped in February 2018 from a Government Girls' College. In South Sudan, the militants use child troops and although it was revealed in February 2018, that hundreds of child soldiers had been freed, a large number of 19,000 of them were still serving with militias. A devastating earthquake struck Papua New Guinea in March 2018, destroying schools, and interfering with the education of tens of thousands of learners. Yemen's three-year conflict put hundreds of thousands of learners out of school and since 2015 about 500 000 learners have quit school. Due to the violence and turmoil caused by the Lake Chad crisis, about 1,000 schools in Chad, Niger, northeast Nigeria, and Cameroon are either closed or not working normally. A severe earthquake struck the Indonesian island of Lombok on a Sunday evening in August 2018. Some schools on the vacation island were entirely destroyed or severely damaged. In the Central Sulawesi region, a second earthquake and tsunami struck in September 2018, displacing over 210,000 people, and causing damage to at least 1200 schools. Learners missed out on education and lack access to a safe place during these traumatic events. In the Philippines, a typhoon disrupted in September 2018, education for more than one million learners (Briggs, 2018).

Natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes and pandemics, such as COVID-19, can jeopardize learners' access to academic services, including the standard and amount of learning. Natural catastrophes, such as floods and cyclones, can result in the loss of life, a reduction of educational opportunities, and the destruction of school

buildings. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic had led to governments enforcing physical distancing, resulting in learners staying at home (Lassa, Petal, Surjan, 2022:412). Figure 2-1 displays the Covid-induced partial and full school closures, March 2020 to May 2021 (Sievertsen, 2021). Large-scale shutdowns of schools resulted in long-term scholastic separation, technological isolation, inadequate technology management, and heightened psychological concerns among at-risk learners.

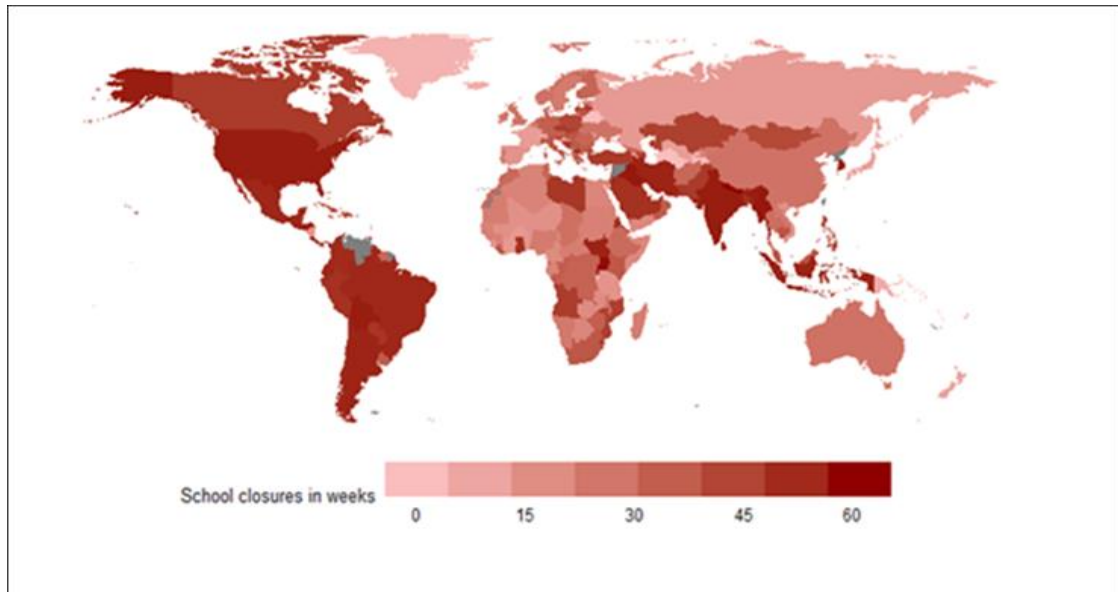


Figure 2-1 Map of Covid-induced partial and full school closures, March 2020 to May 2021 (Sievertsen, 2021)

As an illustration, during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, approximately 320 million learners across 1.5 million schools were affected (Lassa *et al.*, 2022:416).

In South Africa flooding has disrupted schooling as above-normal rainfall continued in January 2022. All nine provinces encountered heavy rainfall during the festive holiday season, leading to the closure of schools. However, in Ladysmith, KwaZulu-Natal, the commencement of the academic year was disrupted as learners were unable to attend on the first day due to the town being flooded. The occurrence of road closures, structural collapses, and buildings and homes being flooded prevented learners from attending school (Phillips, 2022). According to Health Minister, Dr Joe Phaahla, the floods in KwaZulu-Natal have had a profound impact on over 630 schools. Of these

schools, 101 were unreachable, and 124 have experienced significant damage (Government of South Africa, 2022).

Disasters and pandemics are recurring, unforeseen events that can have a global impact on communities and individuals and have far-reaching implications. These disasters and pandemics provide numerous difficulties to populations' physical well-being as well as their social, economic, and educational settings.

2.3 IMPACT OF DISASTERS AND PANDEMICS ON SOCIETY, INDIVIDUALS AND LEARNERS

Natural disasters and pandemics can have far-reaching consequences on society, individuals, and learners. These consequences can be both immediate and long-term, influencing many parts of one's life. The magnitude and intensity of an event frequently undermine the capacity of systems and services to respond, resulting in major infrastructure and facility destruction. The succeeding ongoing stressors and social disturbance compound the trauma of the original occurrence and can have a long-term negative impact on mental health and well-being that society, individuals, and learners may face, and special problems connected with distinct phases of physical, mental, emotional, cognitive, and social development (Gibbs, Nursey, Cook, Ireton, Alkemade *et al.*, 2019:1). Some of the major ways in which disasters and pandemics can affect these three groups are the following (Figure 2-2):



Figure 2-2 Impact of disasters and pandemics on society, individuals, and learners

2.3.1 Impact on society

Disasters and pandemics have multifaceted effects on society, touching on health, economics, social dynamics, education, mental health, technology, governance, the environment, migration, and global relations. The extent and nature of these impacts can vary widely depending on the specific event and the capacity of societies to respond and adapt. The various impacts on a broad basis that disasters and pandemics can have on the community are as follows:

Health impact - such events lead to widespread illness, deaths, and straining the healthcare system. The healthcare system with disasters and pandemics can be overwhelmed and lead to a strain on resources. The nature of epidemics is such that their outbreak is frequently abrupt, resulting in an increase in hospital admissions and mortality in many situations. Due to infection, the mortality rate is higher in the elderly and comorbid patients. The COVID-19 outbreak has also nearly brought the healthcare system to its knees (Malik, Chhabra & Chandra, 2022:836,853).

Economic impact - Disasters can disrupt economies by damaging infrastructure causing job losses and impacting businesses. The occurrence of large-scale disruptive events around the world necessitates an understanding of the socio-economic consequences on societies (Malik *et al.*, 2022:836). Drought grasped the worldwide spotlight in Cape Town in early 2018, and it was the most severe drought on record, affecting the water taps of four million people. Water can be considered an urgency for socio-economic growth in this context, as it is inextricably linked to poverty reduction, work creation, food production, and public well-being (Enqvist & Ziervogel, 2019:12).

Indeed, the economic consequences of the pandemic disproportionately affect underprivileged communities during COVID-19. Within South Africa, the COVID-19 outbreak and the imposition of lockdowns in the country have not only played a role in controlling the virus's spread but have also left a significant imprint on the financial stability of its citizens. Nonetheless, this has given rise to extensive and unparalleled societal upheaval, including the loss of income (Ramoshaba, 2023a:51). Pandemics or disasters have the potential to severely disrupt the functioning of a society.

Mental health impact - Economic and social disturbances can have a complicated impact on a society's psychological well-being, affecting physical as well as mental wellness. Unemployment, income loss, property loss, or loss of healthcare insurance, as well as delays in healthcare, hospital prevention, and delay of planned medical care, increase fatality can have a related influence on a society's mental well-being (Antipova, 2021:1).

In South Africa, when disasters such as floods occur communities face threats with insufficient coping capacity, rendering them more vulnerable. Hazards in such situations can result in widespread injury and death, severe property loss, and environmental degradation (Ngcamu, 2023:2).

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports (2022) that most emergency victims will endure short-term emotional trauma that will recover with time. One in every five people (22%) who went through war or other conflict in the last 10 years may suffer from signs of depressive disorders, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, or psychotic. Communal self-help initiatives and social assistance may be improved, for example, by establishing or re-forming community groups in which people work together to address problems and participate in initiatives like disaster relief or gaining new skills (WHO, 2022).

Displacement - Displacement caused by disasters or pandemics creates new challenges for a society and a community as reflected by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Between 2008 and 2013, disasters and natural disasters relocated about 47 million people in South Asia. The extent of disaster-caused relocation is affected by the community's vulnerability to stressors as well as its ability to survive the severe weather. In these conditions, social, economic, and political factors all have a substantial influence on one's capacity to cope and have several consequences for people and communities. In disaster scenarios, dwellings and livelihoods are destroyed, networks of social support are harmed and novel challenges such as family separation, neglecting of children, and gender-based violence are created. These risks become more severe if people are relocated more often and for longer periods (Kaluarachchi, 2018:444).

Disasters are frequently distinct to a location, highlighting the community as a place-based entity, and they may be specific to an individual, or a specific population group, as a result making a shared identity or activity visible. Social workers are required to consider and assist all types of communities in their attempts to improve disaster resilience, disaster catastrophe readiness, and long-term disaster support (Alston, Hazeleger, & Hargreaves, 2019:131).

2.3.2 Impact on the individual

Disasters, pandemics, and similar crises can also impact individuals in various ways, with specific repercussions depending on the characteristics and intensity of the event, as well as an individual's circumstances and resilience. There are several effects that a disaster and pandemic can have on the individual. These effects include the following:

Mental health – People's mental health is compromised due to stress and trauma associated with disasters and pandemics and can lead to a significant increase in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Trauma is a complex result of an unexpected occurrence, or a series of complex events and it defines trauma as both an event and a mental state response. The response to trauma can be linked to prior conditions, for example social and economic vulnerabilities as well as an individual's existing weaknesses and their ability to recover in the aftermath of a disaster. Trauma of a disaster can also include grief or loss of loved ones, anger, and loss of a place, or undermining the safety of a home (Alston *et al.*, 2019:150-152).

Physical health- A person's physical health may be harmed by bodily injury and death due to natural disasters such as tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and wildfires, as well as man-made disasters such as warfare, social unrest, conflict, and terrorist acts (Cueto & Agaton, 2021:1).

Grief and loss - Grief and loss due to a disaster and pandemic caused a significant disruption in typical bereavement. The death of a loved one in a natural disaster is exceptionally traumatic and distressing, because it usually occurs quickly and

unexpectedly. Natural disasters frequently occur as major catastrophic occurrences, placing others' and one's own lives in danger and causing numerous types of losses at the same time, including human life losses (Gesi, Carmassi, Cerveri, Carpita, Cremona *et al.*, 2020:2). Research in Sri Lanka found that not knowing whether a lost family member was dead or alive predicted significant depression and dysfunction and protracted grief disorder in survivors (Rahmani, Ashraf & Pumariega, 2022:484).

Economic disruption - Individuals living in poverty were particularly hard hit by the economic disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is due to greater exposure to the disease, as well as potential loss of employment, increased in additional expenses, decreased exposure and limited public transportation, wider educational gaps on bureaucracy and digital means, as well as limited access to services and support structures for the poor. Many firms could no longer employ their employees and as a result, a vast majority lost their jobs mainly members of marginalized groups (Itzhaki-Braun, 2021:716). This is in line with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), which reported that COVID-19 brought economic challenges such as increased poverty and unemployment levels (Ramoshaba, 2023a:512).

To understand the emotional process an individual goes through during and after a disaster, the universal psychological responses as set out and described by Sheek-Hussein, Abu-Zidan and Stip (2021:4) in terms of their Universal Psychological Response Cycle, gives insight into emotional and psychological experiences that an individual will go through during and after such event. The Universal Psychological Response Cycle, which consists of four responses, is a paradigm that helps to understand how people normally respond to disasters and traumatic situations. While everyone reacts and respond differently, this framework aids in recognizing general patterns of behaviour.

The four responses of the cycle, as shown in Figure 2-3, are (1) the fear response; (2) the emotive response to separation, loss, and grief; (3) the adaptive learning, sleep, and social cognition response, (4) finally sensemaking reaction. All these reactions are controlled by interaction between them, and social workers need to identify where the individual is in this cycle to provide the correct intervention (Sheek-Hussein *et al.*,

2021:4).



Figure 2-3: Universal psychological responses after disasters (Sheek-Hussein *et al.*, 2021:4)

Finally, the effects of disasters on an individual are multifaceted. While they can create a great deal of pain and disruption, they also present chances for growth and resilience. Understanding how these effects interact is critical for both individual healing and social readiness. It is crucial to recognize that people can react to emergencies in various manners, and their capacity to bounce back and manage the situation can differ. Early availability of support services, such as social work services, psychological therapy, and social aid, might alleviate certain adverse consequences of crises on individuals. Community and social support networks are crucial in assisting individuals in navigating and recovering from the consequences of catastrophes and pandemics.

Having established the importance of support services and community networks, attention will now shift to the distinct ways in which learners might be impacted by disasters.

2.3.3 Impact on learners

Each learner, according to the ecological system theory of Bronfenbrenner (Hayes, O'Toole & Halpenny, 2017:81), has a distinct and extremely specific collection of

experiences that result in a distinct life story. Every child is a lifelong learner who develops into a member of a family and a community with distinct customs and lifestyles. It has been determined in recent years that fostering young children's agency is essential to their learning, development, and overall well-being (Hayes *et al.*, 2017:81).

Like other people, learners also have the need to be acknowledged, valued, accepted, loved, and impacted by others (Hayes *et al.*, 2017:86) This idea emphasizes the importance of acknowledging every learner as an individual and relating to them as thinking, self-reliant human beings, by listening to their ideas, thoughts, and desires. (Hayes *et al.*, 2017:86). Therefore, it is crucial to voice the effect disasters can have on a learner.

Natural disasters carry substantial economic and social ramifications, with health-related disasters arguably exerting a more pronounced influence on education than many other types of crises (Shan & Beheshti, 2021). This also applies to the COVID-19 pandemic (Itzhaki-Braun, 2021:716). During this pandemic, high school learners have experienced significant losses. A period that should have marked the development of greater independence has been hindered by shelter-in-place guidelines. Milestones like graduations, proms, athletic events, college visits, and numerous other social and educational experiences have been disrupted or cancelled, and the opportunity to relive these moments is no longer possible (Hoofman & Secord, 2021:1074). The influence of disasters and pandemics on high school learners' lives were as follows:

Educational disruption - Disruption of education due to disasters and pandemics can lead to learning loss, academic delays, and a lack of access to high-quality education (Hoofman & Secord 2021:1073). The educational consequences of the lockdown during the COVID-19 situation and school closures in South Africa, are expected to be significant and long-lasting. At least four million learners will have missed more than half (57%) of the number of school days typically scheduled up to August 7, 2020. Studies have shown that learners demonstrate a negative effect of a discrepancy between curricular expectations and the learners' level (van der Berg & Spaul, 2020:16).

Learning loss - Despite diligent attempts to establish a supportive remote learning environment, emerging evidence indicates that school closures have indeed led to tangible learning setbacks (Maldonado & De Witte, 2021:70). Unequal impacts of extended school closures have resulted in severe learning loss, particularly for learners from low-income families. According to Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek *et al.* (2020:262) and Hoofman and Secord (2021:1072), exposure to parental unemployment indicates a significantly wider achievement difference in both mathematics and reading. Learners may lose an average of 37% to 50% of their annual advances in mathematics during extended school closures.

Mental health challenges - Learners also face mental health challenges during disasters and pandemics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, learners experienced heightened stress, anxiety, and despair (Li, 2022:1).

Factors like uncertainty, worry, and upheaval can have a negative impact on learners' mental health, weakening their capacity to focus and learn efficiently. Children and adolescents who have mental health needs experienced a scarcity of the normal resources that educational institutions offer as a result of these closures. Eighty-three percent of the 2 111 participants with a history of mental illness in the United Kingdom who participated in a survey conducted by the mental health charity Young Minds, aged 25 or older, stated that the pandemic worsened their conditions (Lee, 2020: 421). In addition, 26% of young people reported encountering barriers to procuring mental health assistance due to the cancellation of in-person and peer support services, as well as difficulties utilizing remote support platforms via phone or the Internet (Lee, 2020: 421).

The pandemic has had a detrimental impact on learners' mental health, resulting in a higher incidence of major depressive disorder (MDD) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). This, according to Li (2022:1) significantly exacerbated mental health issues like feelings of frustration, stress, and sadness.

Social isolation - Linked to increased anxiety and depression up to nine years later, is social isolation. Closing schools has a significant impact on both learners and parents as they adjust to the loss of all school functions (Hoofman & Secord

2021:1073). For example, during widespread lockdowns, the absence of socialisation within a school system is difficult to substitute, and it increases learners' loneliness (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2023:3). Social isolation, particularly among learners, can result in feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and despair. According to research, social engagement is essential for mental health and well-being (Almeida, Rego, Teixeira & Moreira 2021:1).

Limited involvement with religious, sports, and cultural activities - In a disaster where forced lockdowns are implemented, social connections from social and spiritual support are crucial in helping mitigate stress (Fogel, Sela & Hen-Herbst, 2022:11). To combat the spread of COVID-19, health officials imposed policies that raised physical distance and limited person-to-person contact. This included the closure of schools, community centres, parks, wellness centres, and the halting of organized sports. Cancelling school, sports, and leisure options can have a significant influence on high school learners' health behaviours, such as physical exercise, social relationships, and mental well-being (Shepherd *et al.*, 2021:2). The lack of cultural and social activities in a disaster resulted in feeling alone and disconnected from their communities (Chavez Villegas, Peirolo, Rocca, Alessandra Ipince & Bakrania, 2021:5).

Rights of learners - The rights of learners are infringed upon due to forced school closure. According to Munir (2021:1-2) many learners' rights were being violated as a result of school closures to restrict the spread of COVID-19. Lockdowns and school closures have disproportionately impacted learners' well-being and exacerbated vast inequities between the advantaged and poor. There is a need to recognize how ongoing restrictions affect learners and to protect the rights of all learners.

Food insecurity - When schools are forced to close, their feeding schemes also close, resulting in food insecurity, which distresses the learners of families who are striving to make ends meet. While some families are poor, others are falling further into poverty. The strain on social services has restricted access to healthcare and nutritional food, endangering learners' health. School closures have impacted almost 90% of learners, or 1.6 billion, and globally, the lockdown has harmed learner's rights to learn and develop scholastically (van der Berg & Spaull, 2020:140).

As stated by van der Berg and Spaul (2020:140), the economic repercussions of disasters and pandemics can affect poor-income families, making it difficult to provide for the material needs of learners. In the context of COVID-19, learners suffered due to hunger. In 2018, 77% of learners in public schools in South Africa, or nearly 9 million learners, get food every school day and it is a basic need that was lost during the nationwide lockdown.

Safety and security - Extended and unregulated periods of time spent on online educational platforms have exposed children, adolescents, and young adults to potentially detrimental and aggressive material, and an increased likelihood of facing cyberbullying according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020:28). Due to the closure of schools and strict containment measures, an increasing number of families have resorted to utilizing technology and digital solutions for educational purposes, entertainment, and maintaining connections with the external world (OECD 2020:28).

The significant surge in the utilization of virtual platforms has been associated with an escalation in incidents of domestic violence and child abuse. This is due to the fact that the perpetrators are frequently present within the household or nearby, which serves as both a psychological diversion and a danger to the individuals engaged in online learning (Ravichandran, Shah & Ravichandran, 2020:3118).

Resilience and adaptability – While disasters and pandemics pose challenges, on a positive side, resilience and adaptability in learners can be fostered during and after a disaster. Learners gain life skills such as problem-solving abilities, social skills, confidence in oneself, autonomy, the need to study, analytical thinking, how and when to seek help, in the context of effective schools. As a result, schools play an essential function in disaster readiness, risk mitigation, and resilience (Masten, 2021:5).

The correlation between personality types and handling school closures, has also been verified in recent times. Conscientiousness is one personality attribute that has been linked to self-regulation learning strategies and problem-solving techniques as an underlying mechanism in dealing with school closures (Mazrekaj & De Witte, 2023:4)

It is critical to recognize and address these consequences on learners' well-being by establishing ways to prevent negative effects and enhance their well-being. This includes taking into consideration the role of the school social worker in ensuring that the crucial needs of learners are met in times of crisis, as discussed in the next section.

2.4 SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS' ROLE IN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Social work's path to environmental consciousness has been complicated by modernity, individualism, a narrow understanding of environment in the 'person-in-environment' concept, and a prevailing neoliberal ideology. Social work has traditionally emphasized the individual as the topic, with the environment serving as a modifier or setting (Alston *et al.*, 2019: 24). According to Alston *et al.* (2019: 28) social workers like Helen Perlman concentrated on providing clients with individualized care to help them adapt to their circumstances during the post-World War II era. People have to change their behaviour in order to fit into and survive their immediate social environment. As a result, throughout this time, the social environment—the elements of family and community that influenced people's lives—became linked to the environment. However, the definition of "environment" did not include elements related to the physical environment, despite the fact that the idea of the "person-in-the-environment" was widely regarded as an important theoretical construct (Alston *et al.*, 2019: 28).

According to Alston *et al.* (2019:83), the lack of a worldwide social work voice conveying the voices of people affected by environmental disasters keeps the vocabulary of climate change and disasters centred on economic, scientific, and technological discourse and answers. There is a pressing need to enhance social work 'environmental literacy', not just for the benefit of social work, but also to facilitate a greater understanding of social implications among the larger community of disaster academics (Alston *et al.*, 2019: 83).

The history of school social work is intertwined with the evolution of social work as a profession and the awareness of the value of treating learners' social and emotional needs within the educational system. The origins of school social workers may be

dated back to the "visiting teacher" that started nearly simultaneously in four cities in 1906-1907, namely New York, Chicago, Boston, and Hartford, Connecticut. The New York programme wanted to satisfy their learners' needs and develop stronger interaction between home and school. Healthcare for learners, leisure activities, and guidance for parents have already been demonstrated in social communities to foster healthy learner development. The benefits of these visiting teachers were greatly acknowledged after 1913, since most school social services were a natural part of the public-school system (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017:10,11).

According to Vergottini and Weyers (2020:128), the South African education system has transformed fundamentally since the beginning of the democratic era, 1994 and onwards. In accordance with the Bill of Rights in the new Constitution (South Africa, 1996), all learners, including those with impairments, have the right to be educated and have equitable access to educational facilities. In 1996, the then-President and Minister of Education; formed two organizations to make recommendations and present solutions to all special and supportive needs in education. The Education White Paper 6 as mentioned by Vergottini and Weyers (2020:130) was one of the utmost prominent policy publications that accentuated the wide range of learning demands of learners. These learning demands including physical, psychological, sensory, cognitive, and developmental deviations, as well as psychosocial issues, learning gaps, particular life events, and socio-economic hardship needs to be addressed by the educational system. To address part of the above demands a conference was held in July 2010 where a recommendation was made to the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) to include school social work as a speciality field in social work. As a result, the National Committee for School Social Work Education and Practice was formed to draw up a proposal that included the recommendation that school social work becomes a field of speciality, which was accepted in 2017 by SACSSP (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020:129-130). Although this recommendation was made, school social work is currently not a specialisations field in this profession (SACSSP: 2024).

The majority of school social workers are employed by provincial education departments. In addition, individual school governing bodies (SGBs) of mainstream and special schools have the power to appoint non-subsidized social

workers and pay them from their financial resources as showed in Figure 2-4 (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020:125).

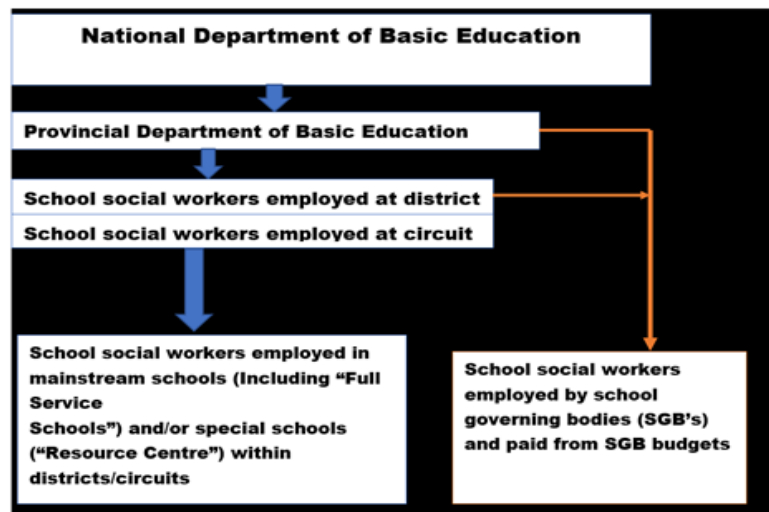


Figure 2-4: The basic structure of South African school social work (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020:126)

School social work is an expanding field of practice that aims to help learners achieve academic success and healthy development outcomes in reaching his or her full potential. School social workers collaborate with teachers, administrators, and other school officials to ensure learner achievement. The concept of a school social worker evolves with each new and emerging assignment, requesting a larger repertoire of abilities to fit the demands of a particular educational context. The increasing importance of school social workers calls for daily flexibility due to constant shifts in public schooling, such as rising levels of poverty, greater reliance on alternative school settings, and competitive education reform approaches (Sosa *et al.*, 2017:44).

A school social worker wears numerous hats, including that of a case manager, learner and parent advocate, learner mediator, counsellor, and resource provider. School social workers are typically “on-site”, and they have a particular role and function within their schools (University of Southern California, 2019).

Social workers in a 'typical' South African school framework, whether employed by the provincial government or the SGB, can carry out a variety of duties, including the following (Vergottini & Weyers, 2020:131-132):

- screening, identifying, and assessing learners in requirement of social work services;
- construing and evaluating identified requirements and problems;
- offering direct intervention services;
- encouraging parental and community involvement;
- consulting with parents, educators, support staff, and other professionals about any concerns (physical, academic and emotional) affecting a learner;
- being in partnership with other role-players and coordinating services to ensure the expansion of inter-professional teams through, for example, the use of case conferences;
- cooperation with resource persons within other departments and organisations; and
- generating and maintaining a workable, effective managerial system.

According to Reyneke (2018:85), international requirements are that education be available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptive as referred to by what is known as the 4A framework. The school social worker contributes to the 4A framework by having the following responsibilities:

- Development of programmes to address learning hurdles such as poverty, safety concerns, and a lack of psychosocial well-being;
- Arrange and present workshops and training for employees;
- Screening and evaluation of new admissions;
- Developing of Life Orientation curriculum and assistance to instructors;
- Compiling and presenting programmes of assistance for learners and their parents/guardians;
- Presenting prevention programmes, such as addressing bullying, suicide, drug addiction, negative parenting, crime, and teen pregnancy;
- Identifying and providing access to resources such as food programmes;
- Policy formulation and implementation;
- Psychosocial counselling, including trauma counselling; and
- Contacting outside NGO's or Department of Social Development and referring to them.

School social workers, have skills and information that educators do not have, and their contribution to schools can assist in building a school atmosphere that fulfils learners' rights to basic education and social services (Reyneke, 2018:102-103).

Hence, it is clear that school social workers can play an important and vital role in promoting learners' overall welfare and success. This is done by addressing their social, emotional, and behavioural needs and collaborating with educators, parents, and community resources to create a supportive and inclusive school environment.

The focus in the next section is on the school social worker's role during and after a disaster.

2.5 SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS' ROLE DURING AND AFTER DISASTERS

During and after a disaster, school social workers can play an essential role in offering vital support to learners, their families, and school personnel. Their efforts are crucial in assisting individuals and communities in dealing with disaster aftermath in the school context. People with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, people who are homeless, and families with learners all have different needs in disaster situations. Hence, learners in a disaster situation will also have a diversity of needs (Boetto *et al.*, 2021:1626). As there are limited research resources available about the role school social workers play during and after a disaster, this research was undertaken to contribute to filling this gap in the social work knowledge gap.

The coronavirus pandemic increased the criticality of resolving the population's social demands, and the services of social workers were vital in dealing with all facets of this emergency circumstances, including education, for example, For example, the scenario generated by COVID-19 resulted in the suppression of activities at all stages of schooling in most countries, forcing the populations to remain at home. As a result, social workers must ensure the educational community's support in such situations through digital means to secure the social protection of learners (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020:796).

Social workers, work with people who have had lengthy and complex histories of abuse and trauma, as well as urgent physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Even when social workers are not helping the most vulnerable, they may be working with people who have been through a traumatic experience that has had an impact on their lives and well-being (Kawam & Martinez, 2017). In an article, Lana Lipe (2020), quoted, Lindy Alexander, a social worker, and author's words: "It's a privilege to be able to bear witness to someone's story when they may not have had the chance to tell it before." This is the foundation and pinnacle of intervention efforts. Social workers have been doing this work long before the pandemic and will continue to be champions for rendering social services in the future (Lipe, 2020).

According to school social workers their present functions in South African schools consist of emergency response, therapy, and offering support services to learners and their families, which may include house calls and referrals to other service providers, recognizing and creating support networks, and giving training on social issues. The school social worker is seen as a member of a diversified support team responsible for delivering psychosocial support services within the context of equitable learning opportunities but retains a particular role as a social worker (van Sittert, 2016:2).

During and after a disaster, social problems including poverty, people with disabilities, gender discrimination, child labour, and criminality increase. Social workers are willing to help those in need, especially those who are vulnerable during and after disasters (Mohinuddin, 2020).

Disaster preparedness necessitates an understanding of a community's or in this regard the learners, level of resilience, potential hazards, and dangers, as well as enhancing the learner-community capacity to cope with the repercussions and impacts of a disaster occurrence. Disaster preparedness also necessitates an integrated approach including all sectors of the community, including citizens and groups from the local community, corporate and governmental organizations, and local governments. Social work's ethical responsibility to promote climate justice as a profession committed to social justice and human rights, in this regard the learners, could be met through a comprehensive approach to disaster practice that more completely integrates preparedness (Boetto *et al.*, 2021:1624).

Other abilities, as set out by Yeshiva University (2019), required for disaster relief, also relevant to school social work, to conduct:

- Case management: Entailing ensuring a meaningful mix of services for learners, by locating the appropriate programmes, services, and resources.
- Case finding: An important service after a disaster, since many victims are unaware of all of the disaster relief resources that are available to them; alternatively, they may be afraid of being judged by their peers for accessing social services.
- Outreaches: Increasing the geographical and social accessibility of programmes and services by establishing satellite locations for relevant programmes.
- Advocacy: Using professional contacts within organisations to advocate for customers qualifying for assistance.

Because of the complexity and dimensions of reality that exist in society, social work experts can perform many functions during a disaster. Their initiatives concentrate on treating social problems and encouraging change in society, an extensive area of intervention, prevention, and support. Disasters or pandemics significantly heighten the urgency of solving the population's social needs, and social workers, including school social workers, have a critical role to play in all aspects of dealing with this emergency.

To guarantee conformity with the principles of equality, social justice, and full participation of all learners, no matter their social and cultural status, gender, or individual characteristics, barriers to education and skill acquisition must be removed. Education and social policies cannot be detached from the formation of a consistent and just society in which an inclusive social model gives an educational response. The presence of social workers in schools enables preventive and specialized interventions in cases of lack of protection, social disadvantage, and educational challenges of learners (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020:795-796). In terms of leadership, school social work can act as educational leaders who collaborate with schools to fulfil the needs of all learners in any difficult situation, and they are in the position to do resource coordination (Berg, 2022:20).

As a result, school social workers have an important and complex role to play in disaster management. As research and literature in the fields of school social work and disaster management continue to highlight the value of their contributions, it is clear that school social workers play an important role in creating a supportive and nurturing environment in which learners can thrive, even in the face of adversity in the South African school system.

The next section discusses the challenges that school social workers might face during a disaster.

2.6 CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS DURING DISASTERS

As explained previously, in recent years, the world has seen an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural and man-made disasters such as hurricanes, wildfires, pandemics, and violent actions, and also recently in the COVID-19 pandemic (see section 2.2). School social workers, who are educated to give critical support in various settings, including educational settings, can play an important role in assisting learners, families, and school personnel in dealing with the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of disasters. Despite their critical role, however, school social workers face severe challenges when responding to and minimizing the effects of disasters. The difficulties faced by school social workers during disasters range from resource limits to the emotional toll of their employment. The following challenges are explored:

- **Concerns about personal health and safety**

Social workers often work in conditions that are not conducive to their own health and safety and they may have to manage dangerous scenarios such as the results of natural disasters, pandemics, or violent events. Weng, (2022:1444) indicated that little is known about social workers' experiences in these contexts, but Weng stated that , while many social workers believed their organizations handled the COVID-19 pandemic appropriately, they still feared getting the virus due to the numerous unknowns at the start of the pandemic.

Despite the safety precautions put in place, social workers mentioned multiple instances that made them concerned about contracting the illness and infecting loved ones. This vulnerability affected the morale and sense of safety of social workers (Weng, 2022:1436).

- **Emotional Impact**

Witnessing learners' and families' suffering and trauma can be emotionally draining for school social workers. While providing support, they may need to regulate their own emotional responses. Social workers, like any other profession, have constraints that make it difficult for them to carry out their mandate during and after natural disasters. Social workers who work with disaster survivors experience weariness and secondary traumatic stress is also evident amongst them, as well as burnout (Matlakala, Nyahunda, Makhubele, 2021:190). Therefore, to be effective in dealing with emotionally charged circumstances social workers must be skilled at managing their own emotions as well as emotionally accessibility to clients (Weng, 2022:1442). Negative outcomes can emerge if social workers' emotions are disregarded and/or not managed. This obligation, especially during times of high intensity, such as a disaster or pandemic, can be physically and emotionally exhausting.

- **Limited resources**

Disasters can strain available resources, making it difficult to get supplies and services for learners and their families. School social workers may face a shortage of mental health services and other essential resources. However, due to a lack of or insufficient resources, social workers could be unable to carry out their responsibilities. According to Matlakala *et al.* (2021:191) social workers from the Tzaneen Municipality area stated that they are unable to assist community members during natural disasters owing to a lack of capital resources. Legislators decreased financial support for social workers due to their lack of understanding of the importance and the role of social workers during natural disasters (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:190-191).

Weng (2022:1438) stated that some social workers were surprised at how their services were transformed during the COVID-19 pandemic into services over the phone and the social media. Another difficulty for social workers was connecting

clients to community resources and/or contacting outside providers for information. Outside social workers operating from home may lack the necessary resources to work from home, creating barriers that harm clients.

The 2008 Child Protection Strategy (UNICEF, 2022:4) has led to an emphasis on system strengthening, particularly in the social services setting working with school learners. There is an absence of sufficient funding for social work services as resources will undermine all attempts to develop child protection sustainably, therefore human resources dedicated to learners and families across all sectors including social protection, justice, health, education, and disaster management must be prioritised (UNICEF, 2022:5). As a result, during such times, social workers often are unable to deliver excellent service because they are unable to keep up with the number of communities to serve and are unable to respond to all emergencies on time (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:194).

The majority of school social workers are employed either at the district or provincial level. According to the March 2023 report of the Social Service Workforce obtained by Health-e News from the DBE, there are 606 school social workers in South Africa. Based on the South African Government's 2021 estimate of 14 million learners in the public-school system, this translates to one school social worker for every 23 000 learners (Jiang, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is of critical importance that the scarcity of school social workers be addressed in order to provide a complete and supportive environment to learners in disaster situations.

- **Challenges to connect to learners**

Social workers may have to adjust to new communication strategies and methods during a disaster. Disasters can impair communication infrastructure, making it difficult to coordinate activities, communicate with family, or acquire critical information. In this regard, Crawford (2021:458) emphasised that whether interacting by phone, video, or in person, social workers must develop ways to convey empathy and validate clients' experiences in order to indicate that they are not emotionally alone, even when they are physically alone. Even if natural disasters strike, social workers should prioritize

therapeutic listening through whatever communication channels or media are available.

Communicating with clients according to a social worker was the most difficult aspect during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many clients did not have an internet connection or a device and therefore it has resulted in a decrease in social service delivery and an increase in clients' need for support (Weng, 2022:1438). Another social worker expressed discomfort with being on digital platforms (Weng, 2022:1438). She stated that it did not feel normal to communicate with families through digital communication and so much information went lost.

School social workers, like many other professionals, clearly should be prepared to adapt to alternative interaction methods with learners during a disaster.

- **Sensitivity for diversity**

Sensitivity to diversity is essential in the context of school social work to ensure that all learners and their families receive the assistance they require, especially during disasters. Understanding and respecting cultural differences and beliefs is a key component of cultural competence.

Learners are at a stage where they develop their cultural and ethnic identities. How people react to disasters depends on their cultural identity and the way they create adaptive methods, and process external help and support. It is therefore important for social workers, including school social workers to understand the environment, influenced by culture, and encourage the individuals to engage in activities to navigate them to resources they need. Social workers need to avoid criticizing individuals or communities for failing to thrive during a disaster. Cultural humility, understanding, and sensitivity are critical in resolving the traumatic impact of disasters on learners, particularly in disaster-prone areas of the world (Rahmani *et al.*, 2022:481-482).

In the research by Rahmani *et al.* (2022:482), more than 60% of the resources did not include culturally sensitive information, and more than 60% did not include preparatory information for learners with impairments. Any helping professional must know the cultural elements that influence learner's crisis responses.

Addressing the absence of cultural diversity understanding during disasters is critical for developing an inclusive and successful emergency response system. Training on cultural diversity can assist in bridging this gap and ensure that learners from all cultural backgrounds receive the support and care they require in times of crisis.

- **Legal and Ethical Considerations**

Even in emergency situations, school social workers must be conscious of legal and ethical constraints. Balancing the urge to assist with confidentiality and informed consent can be difficult during a disaster.

The profession of social work is governed by a code of professional ethics and conduct (Reyneke, 2020:157), as well as particular statutory standards outlined in the South African Constitution (South Africa, 1996), the Social Service Professions Act, 1978 (Act 110 of 1978) as amended (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 1999), and the Children's Act (South Africa, 2006). Furthermore, school social workers must abide by the requirements and ethical codes of the SACSSP and the South African Council for Educators (SACE) (Reyneke, 2020:157). As part of their commitment to ethical practice, all social workers must have the independence and discretion in making decisions and judgments based on their professional expertise, knowledge, and social work values (Itzhaki-Braun, 2021:719).

Social workers were required to engage in 'moral reasoning' as part of their daily employment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harrikari, Romakkaniemi, Tiitinen & Ovaskainen, 2021:1650). This is not, however, a new phenomenon because social workers' daily responsibilities often include professional judgments that entail professional ethics. The shifting status of the pandemic and the organisational norms compelled social workers to examine and use ethical guidelines in their making choices (Harrikari *et al.*, 2021:1650).

According to UNICEF (2022:32), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) provides suggestions for guiding excellent ethical outcomes in school settings. It includes the following: obtaining informed consent; maintaining privacy and confidentiality; addressing mandated reporting; negotiating conflicts between school policy and social work ethics; working with school administration to create social media

policy; ensuring appropriate handling of subpoenas with ethical, legal, and procedural considerations; avoiding conflicts of interest; and ensuring that documentation is accurate, timely, and protected.

Ethical concerns during a disaster will arise, such as being cautious not to integrate client experience with the social workers' experiences and focus on it as "we are in it together". This takes the attention away from the professional relationship between the client and the social worker. Important aspects in this regard are respect for others, social justice, and professional honesty. Other ethical considerations are the concern about client prioritization - who is seen first and why, personal boundaries being breached in order to provide a humanitarian response to survivors, such as hugging someone who is in distress, and that social workers, who are obviously identified, must meet clients in public places, due to forced school closure, privacy can be a concern (Alston *et al.*, 2019:272).

In times of disaster, school social workers' ethical responsibility is not only a professional duty but also a moral imperative, and their unflinching commitment to these principles demonstrates the social work profession's strength and integrity.

- **Changing Roles and Responsibilities**

During disasters, school social workers frequently find themselves in new positions and duties. These could include having to assist with crisis management, giving emergency food and shelter, or assisting learners with distance learning.

Social workers are unsure of their tasks before, during, and after natural disasters. As a result, people end up doing a variety of jobs that put them at risk of burnout. As a result, it is advised that social workers be assigned specific roles to play by their employers when interacting with natural disaster victims and survivors (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:194). Therefore, it is important to discuss the roles of social workers during disasters such as, what kind of support was needed and when and, most importantly, what they hoped would be better the next time a disaster happens (Crawford, 2021:457). In looking at social workers' roles during such times, it should be taken in consideration that social workers handle clients' social and emotional needs through a variety of tasks such as a counsellor, advocate, educator, support, and referral

(Weng, 2022:1433).

School social workers have a vital role to play in disasters, ensuring that no one is left behind and that some of society's most vulnerable people, the school learners are supported and protected. School social workers' commitment to human rights, social well-being, and ethical conduct is not only a professional obligation but also a humanitarian commitment that highlights the responsibility of school social workers.

- **Lack of training and experience**

During a disaster, social workers' lack of training and experience can have serious consequences for the effectiveness of disaster response and the well-being of impacted individuals. Weng (2022:1443) demonstrated the unpreparedness of social workers in providing integrated health care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than reacting to current events, the social work profession should be prepared to deal with and participate in the prevention and resolution of future disasters (Weng 2022:1443). The social work profession might do a better job of teaching social workers about the history of pandemics and disasters and the impact they impose on vulnerable people (Weng, 2022:1443).

In the South African context, some social workers are unprepared to deal with disasters. In a study where five social workers were purposefully selected to participate in an individual semi-structured interview from Tzaneen Municipality, it was apparent that they lack experience dealing with traumatized people and adequate government resources for this purpose are lacking (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:194). This is supported from an article by Okafor (2021:2) showing that in a world of developing global disasters, emphasized that the educational training acquired by social workers does not always adequately prepare them for specific tasks in the emergence of a pandemic.

Furthermore, social workers are under-supervised, under-supported, and under-trained for this purpose (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:194). Natural disaster victims require the experience and abilities of social workers. In this regard, it is recommended that social workers, including school social workers, attend seminars to obtain further training in dealing with natural disaster victims and survivors (Matlakala *et al.*,

2021:194).

The importance of recurrent training in disaster work encompasses aspects such as leadership, cooperation, and cross-sector communication. Social workers need to keep trying to expand their comprehension of the different kinds of responses that are most suitable for disaster survivors, be aware of the intricate nature of individual circumstances and requirements, and always understand that the people with whom social workers work have had their lives completely obstructed by the disaster. In all of this, it is vital that social workers' needs should be addressed and that they receive the types of assistance required to guarantee that they continue to be valued emergency response professionals (Alston *et al.*, 2019:188).

To be prepared for the eventuality of a disaster occurring, social workers must be proactive to ensure that they are appropriately prepared to play an important role in disaster response. They must be equipped to render speedy and effective assistance, and it will also strengthen their ability to protect the well-being of individuals and communities in the face of adversity.

The next section discusses the theoretical framework that was applied to this research.

2.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Having assessed various crucial aspects related to disasters, forced school closures, and its broad societal and individual impacts, particularly on learners, it is imperative to establish a theoretical framework that outlines and frames this study's exploration of these factors' interconnectedness.

A theoretical framework is characterized as a structure that summarizes ideas and hypotheses that were developed from prior investigations and issued knowledge created to have a theoretical foundation or basis for the analysis and interpretation of the significance stated in research data (Kivunja, 2018:46). If there is no theoretical framework, it is like a house without a blueprint, and the structure and vision for a study are unclear. A theoretical framework must be included in a research plan in order for

the study to be solid and ordered (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner, the well-known proponent of the ecological method, separated the environment into four layers that constantly influence each other (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016:17-18).

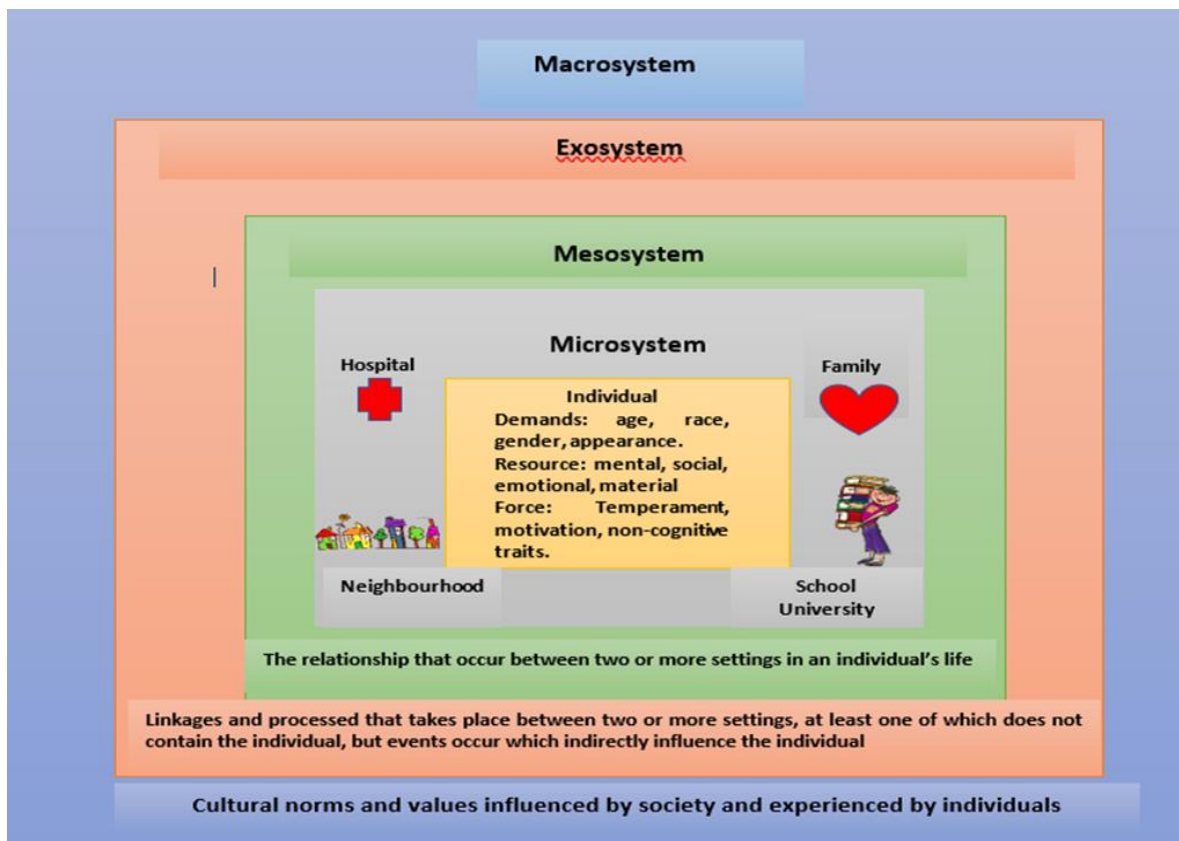
For the purpose of this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, labelling the different aspects of five levels or systems influencing the learner's environment, were implemented. In terms of the theory, Guy-Evans, (2020) states that people and things that directly interact with the child in his or her immediate environment make up the first level or **microsystem**. The child's interactions within the microsystems are very personal and have a direct influence on the nurturing and support of the development of a child. The mutual contact between parties, such as parents and teachers of the child, is the emphasis of the second level of the **mesosystem**, which is connected to the other systems (Guy-Evans, 2020).

The term "mesosystem" refers to the interactions and processes between two or more microsystem components, such as a family and a school. For example, a learner who does not get any help from their parents with their homework, can skip class out of concern about the teacher's reactions in the classroom. Although it is more distant from the person yet still has an impact on them, the **exosystem** that surrounds the microsystem includes things like their parents' employment, their extended family, their friends, and their neighbours (Coetzee & Venter, 2016:3). The social context in which the child was not actively involved, but indirectly influenced was referred to as the third level exosystem.

The fourth level, **macrosystem**, of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which concentrates on how ethnic and cultural factors like socio-economic status, prosperity, impoverishment, and race influence a child's development, is the theory's more extensive aspect (Guy-Evans, 2020). It is made up of cultures and subcultures that function in specific ways. Learners are impacted directly by friends, relatives, and social networks such as their community, religion, and culture (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016:17).

The **chronosystem**, or the last level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, is made up of all environmental changes that take place across time (Guy-Evans, 2020). The chronosystem discusses how time affects development. This considers time both historically and from the standpoint of the individual; it is relevant to early childhood practitioners when thinking about transitional issues, for example, going from preschool to primary school or from primary to high school (Hayes *et al.*, 2017:7). The practice of social work concentrates on the individual within his or her surroundings holistically. The objective is to establish homeostasis in which the individual interacts with and reacts to his environment in a way that promotes positive development, social functioning, and progress (Teater, 2015:16).

According to the SACSSP, school social work differs from general social work since schools are small populations with distinct psychological and emotional demands (Reyneke, 2020:158). This involves fostering a culture of learning, maximizing learners' human potential, attending to their psychosocial needs, and carrying out these tasks as part of a multidisciplinary team within the context of inclusive education (Reyneke, 2020:158). Figure 2-5 below, displays the multifactorial interactions that shape a learner on the different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (Hamwey, Allen, Hay & Varpio, 2019:1621).



Chronosystem: Historic and temporal aspects of time on an individual's development, includes one's own experiences and those of others who are close.

System: Consider how the ecological system theory of human development might assist struggling learners.

Individual: Although a learner's demand characteristics may be steady, variations in force and resource may explain certain differences across learners, such as a loss of financial revenue by the family.

Microsystem: Changes in family situations may have a detrimental impact on the learner's growth and performance.

Mesosystem: The microsystem of the learning environment may hamper the learner's progress and what is expected of them.

Exosystem: The learner's supervisor may provide just a limited time to work with or mentor the learner, impeding the learner's growth.

Macrosystem: While norms, values, and culture are constant for all learners in a given organisation, various expectations may arise across training situations, influencing total learning.

Chronosystem: Each learner's life and family circumstances are unique and may have a detrimental impact on their development, influencing their instruction and experiences.

Figure 2-5: Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Model of Human Development (Hamwey et al., 2019:1621)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, with the five layers or systems depicted above, improves school social work's long-term objective to address contextual and ecological factors that adversely impact people in need. The heart of the Ecosystem's perspective "the person-in-environment concept", is the core of this perspective and

views individuals and their environments as unified (Poulin & Matis, 2019:9-11).

The ecological system theory was applied to this study because it emphasized the social interaction between the high school learner and the different systems of the environment and society as shown in Figure 2-5, which were compromised due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The learner as an individual, experiences changes during a crisis/disaster for example loss or a lack of resources. In the microsystems, the learners may experience changes in the family system due to a disaster and it may negatively affect the development of the learner. In the mesosystem the learner may experience an educational loss, the exosystem is where the learner is disadvantaged due to a lack of support from a school social worker, counsellor, or mentor during a disaster. The macro-system is based on norms, values, and culture hence during a disaster different expectation may be needed from the learner to adapt to the new situation. Chronosystem refers to personal and environmental challenges that the learner may experience to survive a disaster and it may accumulate influences that affect the learners' development (Hamwey *et al.*, 2019:1621). To describe the Ecosystem's perspective in the context of school social work Vergottini (in Reyneke, 2020:159) defines school social work as the use of social work theory and procedures in the setting of education to provide complete social work services to learners, parents, educators, and the school population in general. The fundamental purpose is to build an atmosphere in which the learner may realize his or her greatest potential by addressing interpersonal, emotional, social, economic, and behavioural barriers to learning (Reyneke, 2020:159).

Therefore, using the systems theory provided an understanding of how experiences and challenges were perceived during forced school closure by learners and how it influenced the individual, family, and community. The school social worker would then be better able in supporting and enhancing services during a disaster.

As the research study mainly aimed to focus on the experiences and challenges the high school learners faced during the COVID-19 restrictions, the principal theoretical framework was to study and understand how the social isolation from different levels of systems that are interlinked impacted the high school learner in the current pandemic relating to future disasters. The researcher focused throughout the study on

the influences, interactions, and changes as well as capacity building by school social workers in line with the ecological system theory.

2.8 CONCLUSION

The chapter concludes with an assessment of numerous essential factors related to disasters, forced school closures, and their impact on society and individuals, particularly learners. Disasters and pandemics are periodic, unanticipated events that can have a global impact on communities and individuals, with far-reaching consequences. These natural disasters and pandemics pose significant challenges to learners' physical well-being as well as their social, economic, and educational environments. The subsequent ongoing stressors and social disruption compound the trauma of the initial disaster and can have a lasting harmful impact on psychological health and well-being that society, individuals, and learners may encounter issues as they progress through the phases of mental, physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development (Gibbs *et al.*, 2019:1).

Also attended to in this chapter, is the function of school social workers in crisis management and the difficulties they face in such situations. It is clear that in disaster management, school social workers perform a crucial and complex role. Their talents in crisis intervention, assessment, referral, psycho-education, and coordination with community resources contribute significantly to the well-being of learners, their families, and the entire school community, during and after a disaster.

Despite the important role school social workers have, there are significant hurdles in school social workers responding to and mitigating the effects of disasters. The challenges that school social workers encounter during disasters range from limited resources being available to the emotional toll of their work and other challenges as described in this chapter. There is little information on the impact of disasters on high school learners, as well as the role and challenges experienced by school social workers, especially in South Africa. This holistic viewpoint emphasizes the relevance of disaster and pandemic preparedness, response, and support networks in the educational context. More research and action are needed to improve the

effectiveness of school social workers in maintaining learners' well-being and education during these difficult times.

Chapter Three outlines the application of the research methodology planned and adopted in Chapter One. It delineates how the research methodology and techniques were employed to facilitate the researcher in addressing the research query and accomplishing the research aims, as emphasized by Kastner, Antony, Soobiah, Straus and Tricco (2016:46).

CHAPTER THREE

APPLICATION OF THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The issue under study, namely the effects of disasters on high school learners, and the role and issues faced by school social workers in such instances, is introduced in Chapter One. This is done by setting the stage for the research procedure and research plan to be applied. In Chapter Two an overview is provided of the literature on the forced school closure and the impact disasters have on high school learners, as well as of the role and challenges experienced by school social workers. This chapter describes the application of the research plan developed in Chapter One. The focus is on the research method applied, the data analysis, ensuring rigour of the study, the ethical considerations applied, and a reflection of the research process. A conclusion is also presented.

3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY APPLIED

The study of how scientific research is done is known as research methodology. It is a strategy of addressing the research problem systematically by following logical stages, and it assists in understanding not only the findings of research study, but also the method itself (Patel & Patel, 2019:48). Hence, methodology is the process of gathering data and information to make decisions on the research. The goal is to explain, evaluate, and draw conclusions from a variety of data collection techniques while keeping in mind their advantages and disadvantages (Muzari, Shava & Shonhiwa, 2022:16). The research methodology applied is explained in terms of the qualitative research approach applied and the research design used.

3.2.1 The qualitative research approach applied

In this study, the researcher implemented a qualitative approach as planned to better understand the real-life experiences of high school learners and school social workers, in a pandemic or disaster in the context of COVID-19. The social constructivist

viewpoint is frequently found in qualitative research methods. Social constructivists depend on participants' viewpoints on the situation being investigated. To understand people's backgrounds, they take into account both their personal and professional experiences (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018:246).

The interpretative approach motivates researchers to investigate the deeper reasons behind human conduct, connections, and community. This entails the academic seeking to gain an in-depth subjective grasp of people's lives. Both social constructivism and interpretivism strive to understand someone's reality through their experiences (Pulla & Carter, 2018:9).

Drawing on the characteristics of the qualitative approach as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018:258-259), it was determined that this approach was the most appropriate for the current study. The researcher applied this research approach in a way that was guided by the following qualities of qualitative research:

- **Qualitative research is conducted in a natural situation**

With the permission of all the relevant gatekeepers, the interviews were conducted at the different schools where the participants were registered as learners. The schools provided a secure and private setting to interview the learners. The learners felt more comfortable being interviewed at school than at their homes.

Due to the busy schedules of the school social workers, the interviews with them were conducted in places that were convenient for them. The interviews with some of the school social workers were conducted in their offices at school, others were at the District Office of Tshwane West Department of Education.

- **The researcher is the primary research instrument**

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews aided by an interview guide with open-ended, unstructured questions with the participants. The objective with this was to ensure communication between the participants and the researcher in collecting the data, enabling the researcher to engage thoroughly with the participants.

- **Researchers gather data from multiple data sources**

The researcher observed, made field notes, and recorded the interviews with the participants' permission. Incorporating several information sources in qualitative research improved the study by offering a comprehensive and varied range of facts, permitting a more profound and detailed comprehension of the topic. The researcher then transcribed the interviews to verify that no material was lost, and that the data were accessible, and the researcher coded the data, using ATLAS.ti 23 (Soratto, Pires & Friese, 2020:4).

- **Analysing data is an inductive process**

Because of its emphasis on life experiences, qualitative research lends itself to the development of new research questions employing the inductive technique which can then be tested with additional deductive reasoning (Muzari *et al.*, 2022:15).

Using this methodology as planned provided an in-depth exploration and comprehension of the unique experiences of high school learners in a low socio-economic environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on the detailed observations and narratives of these learners, the researcher gathered detailed observations and personal narratives to uncover themes and patterns directly from the data.

This methodology guaranteed that the results were relevant to the specific circumstances and closely correlated with the learners' real-life experiences during the pandemic. The adaptability of the inductive approach facilitated the study's ability to incorporate new themes, resulting in a thorough and detailed comprehension of the COVID-19 disaster's impact on this particular population.

The researcher used an inductive approach, systematically analysing the obtained data and themes to achieve an accurate representation of the responses. Subsequently, the researcher employed a deductive approach to examine the data in order to uncover more evidence and narratives that would support and strengthen the chosen themes.

- **The participants' meaning is central to qualitative research**

In studies where the participants' interpretation is of utmost importance, it is important to highlight the researcher's dedication to maintaining an objective position to guarantee the effective use of the qualitative approach. The researcher purposefully avoided putting her personal interpretations on the gathered material, regularly engaging in self-reflection to maintain objectivity. This method was improved by actively listening to the participants, with a specific emphasis on understanding and accurately communicating their viewpoints and interpretations.

The researcher's commitment to accurately representing the participants' perspectives was supported by an ongoing process of introspection throughout the investigation. The combination of reflective practice and a strong dedication to participant-centred understanding emphasized the effectiveness of the qualitative method in capturing genuine and significant insights into the experiences of high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly within their unique socio-economic circumstances.

- **Qualitative research yields descriptive meanings**

In this study, school social workers provided extensive and lengthy comments and descriptions regarding their various experiences and challenges about service delivery when schools are forced to close due to a disaster or pandemic. High school learners were more modest and reserved in terms of their answers and descriptions, but after a bit of probing they responded more readily.

- **The design of qualitative research is emergent rather than predetermined**

The effective use of the qualitative approach in this study, particularly its emergent rather than predetermined design, was demonstrated through the researcher's adaptability and responsiveness as the research process unfolded. This is *inter alia* demonstrated by the modifications made to the selection criteria for high school learners and the revision of the interview guides following the pilot testing. These adjustments – both in the selection criteria and the interview guide – highlight the emergent and dynamic nature of qualitative research. The researcher's dedication to refining the study design and instruments to align with the participants' settings and comprehension underlines the researcher's commitment. This approach enhances the

research findings by increasing their relevance and depth.

Throughout the investigation, vital adjustments were made in response to the findings displayed during the pilot test. A notable modification entailed a rewriting of the selection criteria for high school learners. The age restriction was modified to 19 years to accommodate those who were still enrolled in the educational system as a result of grade failure or retention, and to acknowledge the influence of compulsory school closures on their academic progress. This alteration showed the flexible character of qualitative research, in which design features are adjusted in response to the developing understanding of the study's environment and participants.

Furthermore, the researcher's revision of the interview guides post-pilot testing exemplified the flexibility inherent in qualitative research. The pilot testing participants had difficulty answering a particular question in the original guide regarding the responsibilities of social workers during the lockdown.

The researcher adjusted the question to enhance its clarity and applicability to the participants' own experiences. The new question was reframed to acknowledge the multifaceted role of schools. They provide not only education, but also emotional and material support, including food, which was disrupted during the lockdown. The revised question was formulated to recognize the multifaceted function of schools in offering not only academic but also emotional and material assistance, such as meals, which were interrupted during the lockdown. This rephrasing made the question more relatable and likely to elicit insightful responses about the impact of school closures on learners' needs.

- **Qualitative research is holistic**

In this study a qualitative research approach is used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of high school learners from a low socio-economic environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach allowed for a multi-dimensional exploration of the learners' lives, extending beyond the immediate educational impacts of school closures to include emotional and material aspects. By considering the broader role of schools in providing not just education but also emotional support and basic necessities, the researcher was able to capture the full

spectrum of the pandemic's impact on these learners. This included the effects of the absence of school social workers and other support systems on their overall well-being. The researcher modified interview questions to reflect the learners' entire school experience, further exemplifying this holistic approach.

Throughout the research process, a wide range of data were collected, providing a detailed and relevant picture of the complex reality these learners faced, thereby enhancing the study's depth and relevance.

Based on the above, the qualitative approach was applied for the following reasons (Walliman, 2022:96-97):

- The knowledge obtained is new; little is known and explored regarding the impact of forced school closure on the high school learner and the role of the school social worker during, and after a disaster in South Africa.
- The researcher intended to learn from the participants rather than rely on assumptions, points of view, and experiences, as well as previous study findings.

In addition, as Walliman (2022:96-97) further suggests, the researcher sought to –

- Recognize the significance that high school learners and school social workers place on their experiences and challenges faced during a forced school closure in a disaster period.
- Obtain a comprehensive description of high school learners' and school social workers' experiences and challenges faced during a forced school closure in a disaster period.
- Convey the findings on the experiences and challenges of high school learners and school social workers during forced school closure in their specific context in South Africa and avoid generalization.
- Collect and present information from multiple sources, that is, high school learners, school social workers, and literature on forced school closure during a disaster.

- By using the participants' words, create a set of themes and sub-themes to explain their experiences and challenges during forced school closure during a disaster.

Interpretivism fits very well with qualitative research methodologies such as ethnography and grounded theory, as well as approaches such as narrative analysis, constructivism, and phenomenology. All qualitative research attempts to comprehend the individual and their personal interpretations of the subject's experience. The research entails examining the human holistically, considering the context of the individual's experience in this case the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners and school social workers when a school is forced to close during a disaster (Pulla & Carter, 2018:11).

The next section focuses on the research designs used in this study and their importance in conducting the research.

3.2.2 Research design

To select a research design that aligns with desired outcomes, the researcher needs to consider the research topic, as well as available resources, including time, data, and costs. Research is a methodical and rigorous approach to addressing issues and making new intellectual contributions and enhancing human knowledge (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021:86).

A research design is a plan that specifies how a study will go from the research purpose/questions to the results. It is a comprehensive planning technique used to collect and analyse facts to improve knowledge of a given topic (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018:238).

Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018:241) describe Earl Babbie's work as laying the framework for social scientific research, including theory, research design, and statistics. Designing a study entail determining who or what will be studied, when, how, and for what reason. The framework shown in Figure 3-1 displays the seven stages of

applying a research design.

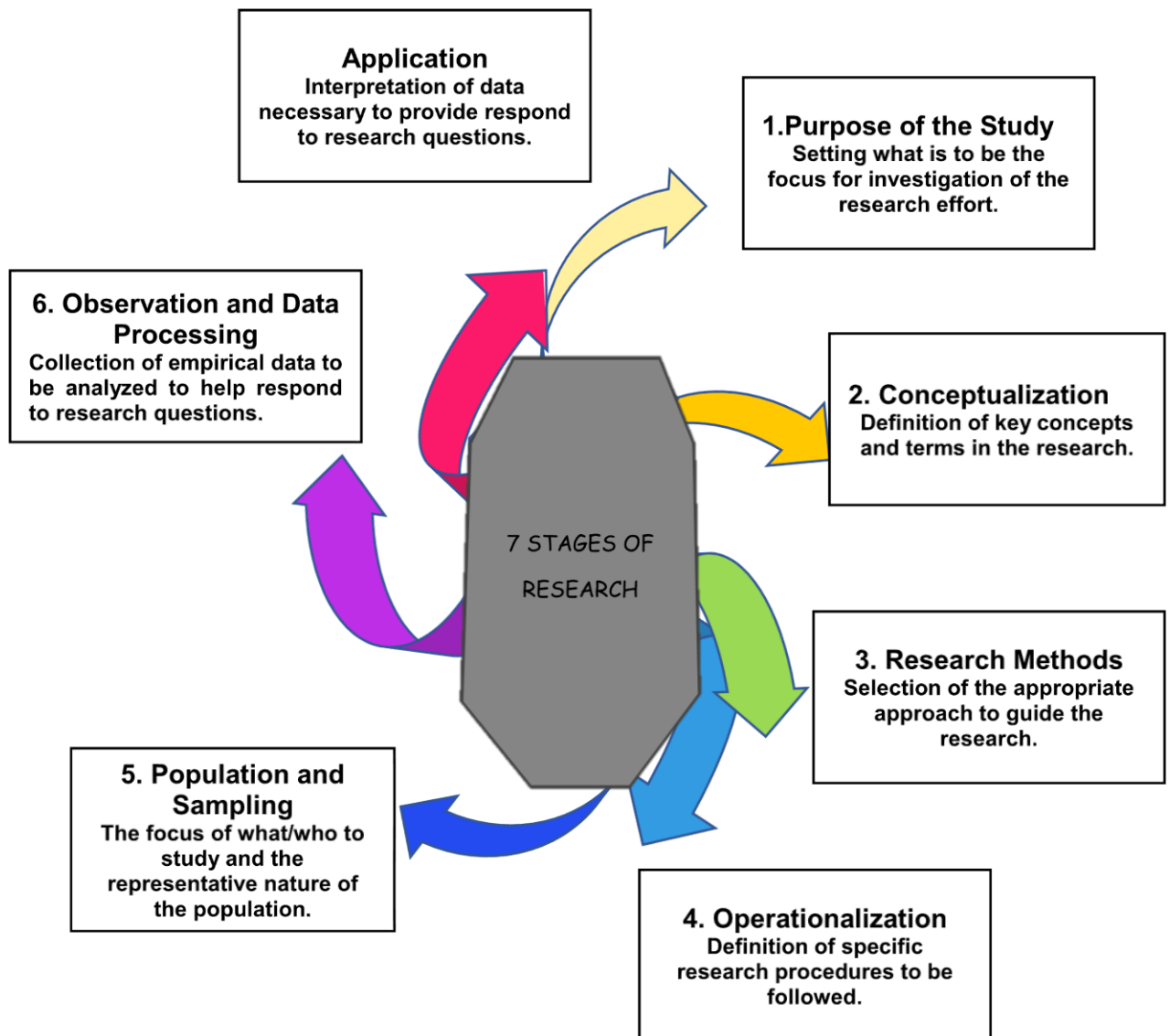


Figure 3-1: Babbie’s research design framework (Abutabenjeh & Jaradat, 2018:241)

In this study of qualitative research design, a case study of COVID-19 was utilized as a research strategy because it is an empirical investigation that focuses on current challenges and experiences in the field of forced school closure. It defines the boundaries of lived experiences. The decision to utilize a single case- study design in this was sufficiently justified, as it did not involve any comparisons with other instances or events. This approach stemmed from the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic,

which provided a distinct and unprecedented context for exploration. Focusing exclusively on this particular scenario allowed for an in-depth understanding of the learners' and social worker's experiences within this specific socio-economic setting, aligning with the study's objectives to delve into the "how" and "why" of these experiences. The unique character of the pandemic, together with the particular difficulties encountered in this socio-economic environment, implies that conducting a comparative examination with other occurrences or diverse circumstances could have diminished the subtle and distinct discoveries about this group. Furthermore, the selection was practical in terms of resource and time effectiveness and reduced the dangers of oversimplification that might emerge from comparing significantly distinct contexts or events. The utilization of the concepts described in the offered article by Hunziker and Blankenagel (2021:209) on single case research designs allowed for a comprehensive and detailed investigation that effectively captured the intricate nature of the learners' experiences throughout the global crisis. This strategy was specifically designed to avoid the necessity of external comparisons.

A case study approach was the best paradigm for this study because the major goal of case study research was to completely analyse a topic within its context to comprehend it from the participants' perspective. The single case- study approach was ideally suited for the study of high school learners and school social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic due to its descriptive, explorative, and contextual capabilities. These designs allowed for a thorough and nuanced exploration of the learners' and school social workers' experiences, providing a detailed, in-depth, and contextually rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, the explorative, descriptive, and contextual research designs were applied. An overview of how each of these designs was used in this study is provided below.

- **Exploratory Research Design**

As stated in Chapter One (1.10.2), exploratory research is a research methodology that prioritizes the formulation of research questions over their immediate testing, allowing researchers to explore and generate innovative ideas. This strategy is especially useful when existing information about a specific topic is limited (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:13). Case studies are highly suitable for doing exploratory research,

particularly when examining novel or insufficiently studied domains, and when existing information about a specific topic is limited (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:13). The case study provided an opportunity for the researcher to investigate the unique experiences of high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed for a thorough exploration of parts of their life that had not been widely researched previously. This questioning inclination allowed the discovery of new perspectives and understanding regarding the impact of the pandemic on this particular group. It became clear that the problem of school social workers providing services during a forced school closure to high school learners in a disaster or pandemic was limited and had received little attention.

In this specific exploration, participants of both groups namely high school learners and school social workers were asked to share their experiences and challenges they faced during the case study of COVID-19. The following questions as stated in the interview guide were asked to high school learners to specifically explore their experiences and challenges:

- Please describe how you experienced this period of nationwide lockdown.
- What challenges did you experience during the nationwide lockdown?
- What kind of support did you receive from your immediate family during the nationwide lockdown?
- Schools provide for different needs of learners, not only educational but emotional and material needs for example food. During the nationwide lockdown schools were closed and school social workers also did not work. Do you think that learners' needs have suffered as a result? If yes, why?
- Based on your experiences during the nationwide lockdown, what do you think social workers can do to help learners who feel unsafe, needy, or dismayed in their home situation?

The following questions from the interview guide were asked to school social workers to specific explore their experiences and challenges:

- What was the role that you played as a social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- What were your experiences during the nationwide lockdown with service delivery to high school learners?
- From your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown, what challenges did you face in rendering services to high school learners?
- Did the nature of social work service delivery to high school learners change during these restricted periods? Although this was a closed question the researcher probed, and a comprehensive answer was given.

The response to the above questions gave the researcher information-rich data and an in-depth understanding of the case.

- **Descriptive research design**

Qualitative descriptive research produces data that explains the "who, what, and where" of occurrences or experiences from an individual's point of view. From a philosophical position, this research process is applied best in accordance with constructionism, interpretative, and ecological critical theories (Doyle, McCabe, Keogh & McCann, 2020:445). A single case- study inherently possesses a descriptive nature. It seeks to provide a detailed and accurate portrayal of the event, situation, or phenomenon under study (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021:144). In the context of the study on high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, the descriptive aspect involved detailing the learners' experiences, reactions, and adaptations within their specific socio-economic environment. This approach helped in painting a vivid picture of the real-life circumstances and responses of the learners during the pandemic.

In the context of the study on high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, the descriptive aspect involved detailing the learners' experiences, reactions, and adaptations within their specific socio-economic environment. This approach helped in painting a vivid picture of the real-life circumstances and responses of the learners during the pandemic. In order to provide a full account of the opinions of the social workers' role during the nationwide lockdown, the researcher transcribed the interviews as soon as feasible after they were conducted. This provided the researcher with the time to reflect on the participants' remarks and identify when data saturation occurred. Throughout the data analysis process and capturing of the research

findings, the researcher focused on giving thorough accounts to be able to answer the 'how', 'what', and 'why' queries. Thereby effectively examining the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners and school social workers during a disaster when schools are forced closed. The following questions from the interview guide for high school learners required detailed descriptions of the case under study:

- Why do you think in your understanding, that it was important to stay at home and apply social distancing during the nationwide lockdown?
- With what activities did you keep yourself busy at home during the nationwide lockdown?
- How did you feel: ...not seeing your friends, not attending school, not attending any social gatherings at church, not attending any social gatherings with your friends, not attending any sports activities or cultural activities?
- Schools provide for different needs of learners, not only educational but emotional and material needs for example food. During the nationwide lockdown schools were closed and school social workers also did not work. Do you think that learners' needs have suffered as a result? If yes, why?

For school social workers, the following questions stated in the interview guide required extensive descriptions of the case under study:

- Kindly tell me about your job description and daily functions.
- Do you know of any legislation and/or policies that were in place during the nationwide lockdown in addressing service delivery during a pandemic to high school learners? This was also stated as a closed question but with probing the participants gave inclusive answers.
- To improve service delivery during a pandemic, do you have any suggestions?
- How did working during a pandemic affect you on a personal and professional level?

Although this approach allows researchers to understand the feelings of the participants, it is critical for researchers using this research approach to lay out the setting, theoretical framework, and concepts that support it, as well as the process of decision-making that recommended the layout of their qualitative descriptive study,

including specified research methods, and how these lead to the study's aims and objectives (Doyle *et al.*, 2020:452).

- **Contextual research design**

This strategy aids researchers in comprehending issues by evaluating their context and the value individuals place on them. The primary objective is to elicit meaning, purpose, and reality from participants' viewpoints and experiences. The contextual design encourages personality, culture, and social justice, resulting in a content-rich diversity of information that, while subjective, is current (Bos, 2020:351). To apply the contextual research design, the researcher made sense of the lived experiences and challenges of high school learners and school social workers in order to gain insight into their daily lives within the school environment. The emphasis of this study was on high school learners attending school in a low socio-economic area of Pretoria namely municipal area of Pretoria West and school social workers who worked in this area. These schools provide in much needed physical requirements of learners by providing services such as feeding schemes. The researcher visited the participants at the different schools and offices where they felt relaxed and in a safe environment. The school social workers' environment, roles, and functions were similar. All interviews with them were done in school hours and some were interviewed at their workstations at schools and some at the departmental office of Tshwane West district. For the purposes of this study, their natural environment was used where they felt comfortable and at their respective workplaces. In retrospect, the learners felt more comfortable to be interviewed at their schools, as they would have at their home situation.

It is important to do research on a real-life phenomenon in its context and natural setting and therefore a case study is recommended. A case study is a type of inquiry design in which a researcher creates a detailed analysis of a case, and it is an extensive examination of a person, organization, institution, or phenomenon in its actual setting, particularly in cases when there is little to no difference between the phenomenon and the context (Asenahabi, 2019:82). The strength of a case study also lies in its ability to examine the subject within its real-life context. This was crucial in the study of high school learners, as the impact of COVID-19 cannot be fully understood without considering the socio-economic environment in which these learners were situated. The contextual design aspect of the case study ensured that

the research took into account the environmental, social, and economic factors that shaped the learners' experiences.

3.3 RESEARCH METHOD APPLIED

Research methods are useful methods applied in conducting research. They serve as the "tools of the trade" that enable data collection and analysis. A research project's primary driving force, the nature of the research challenge, determines what data are gathered and how it is analysed (Walliman, 2022:35). The research methodology was implemented as planned in Chapter One. The research methodology outlines the different actions the researcher took to investigate the case of high school learners and school social workers' experiences and challenges during forced school closure due to a disaster or pandemic in providing service delivery. Hence, to continue with this study, the researcher filed a proposal to the Department of Social Work Research and Ethics Committee, as prescribed, and authorization was received from the Committee on 10 August 2023 to conduct the research and with the proposal's approval, ethical clearance was gained (reference number Rec-240816-052). Population selection and implementation of sampling method are conferred in the following section.

The research method applied is explained in terms of the population selection and sampling, data collection, pilot testing, interview venues, and data collecting.

3.3.1 Population selection and sampling

The major group that the research is concerned with is the population of interest for the study, the research population, which is made up of the persons, groups, organizations, or other entities that one desires to understand and to whom the study results can be applied or transferred (Casteel & Bridier, 2021:343). The target population of this study was twofold namely, all high school learners and school social workers. In order to interview high school learners and school social workers and inform them of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the researcher contacted the GDE for authorization. After permission was granted on 26 September 2023, the researcher contacted the schools in the area and spoke to the relevant gatekeepers, either the

deputy principal or the coordinator for the School Based Support Team (SBST). The SBST not only identifies educational needs but also the emotional and physical needs of a learner and act accordingly (Nong, 2020:1246).

Using purposive sampling designs, or non-random selection, are necessary for studies that seek to explain a specific occurrence in a specific environment (Tobi & Kampen, 2018:1214). This, sampling design is used to put together certain situations that would yield rich, in-depth data. Purposive sampling was the method of sampling used in this research to provide pertinent and in-depth information to gain a thorough understanding of experiences and challenges when schools are forced to close in a low socio-economic area, such as the municipal area of Pretoria West. There were too many high school learners to involve them all as participants to participate in this research study. Hence, a sample of the population was chosen based on certain inclusion criteria. The unique context of a low socio-economic environment will give insight into the experiences and challenges of the high school learner during forced school closure. Quota sampling was used to select the high school learners from the schools in the municipal area of Pretoria West. Schools were chosen on their geographical closeness to the researcher. A list of accessible schools in the Pretoria West municipal region was compiled in descending geographical order by proximity to the researcher. Quota sampling is an approach for identifying the relevant attributes of the participants, as well as their total prevalence. Participants are chosen that have the same proportion of important features as the population (Leavy, 2023:163).

The planned selection criteria for the high school learners were as follows:

- Participants who were between the ages of 16 and 19 years.
- Attending a school in the Pretoria West municipal area.
- Learners from all genders and all races.
- Learners who speak English.
- Learners who were willing to participate and whose parents provided consent for their participation.

The exclusion criteria for the high school learners were the following:

- Learners under the age of 16 years.
- Learners who are cognitively and mentally challenged.

The second population included school social workers. According to the information published by Health-e News from the DBE, the number of school social workers is restricted (Jiang, 2023). Snowball sampling was used to select the school social workers. When the researcher conducted interviews with the first school social workers, the researcher followed up with each of them to find out if they knew of a school social worker that fitted the inclusion criteria, that the researcher could approach to obtain their participation. This sampling approach, also known as chain sampling, occurs when one instance naturally leads to the next. Patton's framework describes a sequential and emergence-driven sampling approach commonly employed in fieldwork. Volunteers may recommend new volunteers they believe could contribute valuable data for the research (Leavy, 2023:92).

The planned selection criteria for social workers were as follows:

- School social workers who provided services at a high or a vocational school during the nationwide lockdown period.
- School social workers who provided services in at least one of the schools in the demarcated area of Pretoria West Municipality area.
- School Social workers with at least one year of practice experience in social work.
- School social workers who were willing to participate in this study.

The planned exclusion criteria for social workers were the following:

- School social workers with less than one year of practice in social work.
- School social workers who were under any form of investigation regarding misconduct.

The researcher set up appointments with the prospective participants to discuss the research and prepare them for the research process. The researcher presented the contents of the information letter in detail so that the participants could make an informed decision to participate or not. Fortunately, all possible volunteers consented to participate voluntarily and signed the informed consent and assent forms (Addenda E, F and G). The engagement with the prospective participants was constructive, and the process unfolded further.

In qualitative research, the size of samples is determined by the principle of data saturation. Data saturation is universally recognized as a crucial methodological standard in qualitative research. It suggests that, given the current data collected or evaluated, there is no need for additional data gathering and analysis (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield *et al.*, 2018:1894). Adopting this strategy is crucial to ensuring that the research thoroughly and dependably captures all facets of the topic being studied. By reaching data saturation, the research demonstrates that it has explored the topic thoroughly and that additional data would likely not yield new insights (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020:2). This is particularly important in qualitative research where depth and detail are crucial.

The principle of data saturation, which occurs when no or little new information come to light when interviewing, indicates an adequate sample size. The researcher did not know how many people would be included in the study until the data reached saturation point. This idea refers to the process of collecting and examining data until no new facts, concepts, or themes arise, and all concepts of the abstracted theory are fully established (Peters, 2023:2). Data saturation occurred when respectively 28 high school learners from various schools and six school social workers from different schools and the Tshwane West District office were interviewed.

Applying data saturation as a methodological standard to determine the size of the samples in the study of high school learners' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and school social workers' role during the same time, aligns with the principles of qualitative research, emphasizing in-depth analysis and contextual understanding.

Galvin conducted a meta-analysis of 54 qualitative research studies and determined that if an idea (theme) is present in 55% of the broader study population, there is a likelihood of over 99% that it will be identified among a sample of six persons (Guest *et al.*, 2020:3). This discovery corroborates the notion that data saturation can be attained with comparatively modest sample sizes in qualitative research, as long as the themes or concepts are widespread throughout the population under investigation. This idea was applicable in the examination of high school learners and school social workers, wherein the experiences of a smaller cohort might serve as an accurate

representation of the wider reality experienced by the greater population impacted by the epidemic.

The process of implementing and evaluating data saturation presents specific difficulties, including the absence of consistency in measurement criteria and its reliance on probability theory, which is normally used for non-probabilistic, purposeful sampling methods that are suitable for qualitative research (Guest *et al.*, 2020:5). Despite these challenges, reaching data saturation remains a crucial goal in qualitative research, including in studies using a case design. It guarantees that the investigation is thorough and that its conclusions are trustworthy and dependable.

Ultimately, seeking data saturation in this study was fitting, as it enhanced the thoroughness, dependability, and inclusiveness of the research outcomes. This methodology ensured that the study comprehensively and accurately depicted the learners' and school social workers experiences within the context of the pandemic.

3.3.2 Data collection

Before delving into the specifics of data collection, it is important to understand that this phase is crucial in any research study, as it involves the systematic gathering of information relevant to the research question or problem (Kabir, 2016:202).

The methods and strategies employed during data collection play a pivotal role in determining the quality and integrity of the research findings (Kabir, 2016:202). In qualitative research, the process of collecting data is often time-consuming, regardless of the type of data being gathered. The following methods are generally used, inquiries added to surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, literary or content analysis of media or academic papers, government reports, organization regulations and guidelines, correspondence, documents, videos, pictures, art, minutes of meetings, or checklists (Kabir 2016:203; Paradis, O'Brien, Nimmon, Bandiera & Martimianakis, 2016:263-264).

It is essential for the researcher to carefully and systematically document all potentially

relevant data. This can be done through various means such as field notes, sketches, audio recordings, photographs, and other appropriate methods. It's important to ensure that the data collection methods adhere to ethical research standards. There are several methods used for collecting data in qualitative research including face-to-face interviews by telephone, and interviews by means of the social media. This is a productive way for gathering information regarding the “what, why, and how many” of research (Asenahabi, 2019:80).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews aided by two interview guides (Addendum A) with open-ended questions were conducted as planned during this study. Interview guides are typically tailored and focused on questions that participants will likely be able to answer owing to their experience and function regarding the research topic (Hamilton & Finley, 2020:4). Semi-structured interviews, with less structured talks directed by open-ended questions to convey personal experiences and challenges, were a suitable data-gathering method for this study. The researcher obtained the required information through individual face-to-face interactions with participants. Conducting semi-structured interviews was an excellent technique to examine the participants' thoughts, feelings, and opinions, and it was a flexible way to acquire data from the participants. The strategy allowed for the perception and exploration of delicate information (Hamilton & Finley, 2020:2). Conducting semi-structured interviews necessitates the researcher to gather information in person. The researcher attempted to grasp each participant's world and perceptions about their experiences and challenges faced during a forced school closure by employing a semi-structured interview and a conversational tone. This allows individuals to answer in their own terms in any direction (Kapoor, Mahamuni, Bhowmick & Qureshi, 2022:65-66).

The researcher obtained data through interviews as well as through making field notes. The school social workers verbalized their experiences and the challenges they faced rendering services to high school learners during forced school closure, in depth. Some of the high school learners gave blunt answers which required exploration. While investigating this, the researcher concluded that poverty experiences, such as food insecurity, stigma, and prejudice, can lead to emotions of humiliation and bad self-evaluation, which can lead to shame. People are prone to comparing themselves to others, and where personal failure against societal norms is seen, shame can occur

(Frankham, Richardson, & Maguire, 2020:405). O'Connell and Brannen (2021:225) added in their research that some children will downplay or deny their situation or that they are missing out on anything.

Poverty can make children feel 'different' when they are unable to participate in activities particularly involving food and they are afraid of being excluded from their peers. It is crucial for them to feel socially inclusive. Participation compromise - when people feel motivated to compromise or minimize their participation because of socio-economic considerations or other reasons, can elicit feelings of shame. In such cases, a learner's personal reputation may be harmed, hurting children's social positions in their peer groups, which in turn affects how they feel about their circumstances when they compare themselves to others, lowering their self-esteem (O'Connell & Brannen, 2021:64-65). Hence, the researcher was extremely sensitive, and did not probe too much when it would have been insensitive to do so. After conducting the interviews, typing the verbal transcriptions, and integrating their perspectives with the written documents obtained, the researcher moved on to data analysis.

3.3.3 Pilot testing

Prior to its official implementation, it is customary to conduct a pre-test of the interview guide on a limited number of individuals. This is referred to as pilot testing. The aim with pilot testing is for the researcher to get feedback about the composition of the interview guide and the way that the interviews are to be conducted in. If necessary, this can be corrected before the study begins (Walliman, 2022:135). The researcher gains familiarity with the method of data collecting to be applied, through the pilot testing. The researcher may at first be unfamiliar with the sequence that the questions are to be discussed in, but by means of the pilot test, the researcher will become proficient in doing it. This is necessary to keep the study's consistency and will also streamline the process (Bordens & Abbott, 2018:158).

It is clear from this discussion that a pilot test is a small sample test conducted with participants who will not be included in the main study but who are nevertheless beneficial in helping the researcher uncover potential issues related to the research

questions, methods, data collection instruments, and interview techniques. The researcher contacted the relevant gatekeeper at a school and made two individual appointments with two learners meeting the inclusion criteria for conducting the pilot test interviews with them. Due to the limited number of school social workers in the Pretoria West municipal area, the researcher only used one school social worker meeting the inclusion criteria, for that pilot test.

Discussing and working through pilot tests with an academic supervisor is a critical element in research design, as it contributes significantly to the study's success (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002). Therefore, during the research procedure, the results of the pilot tests were also thoroughly examined and resolved in collaboration with the academic supervisor. This partnership was a crucial milestone, guaranteeing that the pilot tests had been carefully organized and successfully synchronized with the research objectives. The participation of the academic supervisor offered essential supervision and expert advice, which greatly contributed to bettering the pilot tests. The steps of discussing and revising where needed with the supervisor aided in detecting and resolving potential flaws in the research design of the two interview guides (Addendum A), thereby improving the reliability and validity of the pilot tests. Following this, the interview guides were adapted by the supervisor and researcher. The active involvement with the academic supervisor at this phase highlights the dedication to strict academic criteria and the quest of quality in research techniques.

The pilot test gave the researcher insightful information to adapt the criteria and question. The consultation's amendments were made to the participants group one (high school learners) criteria and a question to obtain a more in-depth description. The information of these pilot tests was not used in this study.

3.3.4 Interview venues

The researcher should possess sufficient flexibility to allow the participants to select their interviews' location, time, and date of their choice. However, there are limitations for the researchers as well. While flexibility is necessary for equity, researchers also need to understand how to arrange interviews so that the final timetable suits both of

them for a conducive interview environment (Seidman, 2019:56). Interviewers engage potential participants they are unfamiliar with via gatekeepers who regulate access to persons (Seidman, 2019:48).

The researcher conducted a confirmation process with the gatekeepers at the different schools before the scheduled interviews with the participating high school learners. The researcher set up a meeting with the prospective participants to introduce herself and provided them with the interview guide (Addendum A), informed consent, and assent forms for the learners under 18 years (Addenda F and G), and the information letter that requested voluntary participation (Addendum E). The researcher gained permission from the participants to record the interviews. All the high school learners, with the permission of their parents preferred to be interviewed at their schools. The researcher interviewed the high school learners in a private room, one school set up the interviews in their boardroom and one school learner preferred to be interviewed outside under a tree. The participants' verbal preferences were considered and an environment familiar to them and comfortability was acknowledged.

The times of the interviews were scheduled with the gatekeepers so that there would not be any disruption in their educational program. The school social workers were interviewed either at the Tshwane West District Office or at an office at their schools, at a time that was convenient for them. Before each face-to-face interview began, the researcher had a chance to view the environment of choice of location to get an impression and to foster understanding (Seidman, 2019:54).

3.3.5 Data collecting

Fortunately, all the learners and school social workers approached, voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The data collection interviews with the high school learners took place from the 25 September 2023 until the 29 September 2023 and the school social workers were interviewed from the 18 October 2023 to the 23 October 2023. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and parents where applicable and they were assured beforehand that their identity would be protected, and a number and a letter were assigned to their recording and the transcripts of each participant.

The most crucial interviewing skill required from the researcher in conducting the interviews is listening. For numerous researchers, maintaining silence while intently listening is the most difficult task. Researchers must concentrate on the content to make sure that they understand it. They have to be aware of the energy level of the participants as well as any nonverbal cues they might be giving off. To evaluate the progress, a researcher needs to pay close attention to the interview and to be aware of cues from the interviewee regarding how to proceed with the conversation (Seidman, 2019:85-86). Without taking the time establishing rapport with the participants into account, both the interviews with the two groups were approximately between 10 to 20 minutes or longer. Both interviews included questions about the biographical particulars of participants and the topic-related questions. The interviews were conducted in English, as all participants were informed beforehand, and no objections were voiced.

The researcher tried to build rapport with participants by starting with some small talk and gained their trust by ensuring the participants that confidentiality would be maintained at all times. Building rapport between the researcher and the participant is a requirement. An excessive or insufficient level of rapport may cause the participant's account of events during the interview to be distorted. The interviewing relationship needs to be characterized by the researcher showing respect, interest, attention, and good manners. The researcher has to be on the lookout for what is appropriate at all times (Seidman, 2019:103).

People's experiences with class, race, ethnicity, and gender issues shape their social identities. Hence the researcher needs to be sensitive to the way these issues may be affecting the participants (Seidman, 2019:105). The participants were reassured by the researcher that neither their names nor the names of their schools would be revealed. The researcher was aware that blunt answers some of the high school learners gave, could have been from too much and ill-timed exploration of the participant's words that could have created a feeling of defensiveness and shifted the meaning. At the same, time it was realised that too little probing could have made the researcher uncertain of the meaning of the content gathered (Seidman, 2019:90). In directing the flow of the interview, the researcher dealt with it. Hence, the researcher

needed to read the situation to be sensitive at all times, but clarification had to be done when required.

The researcher applied the necessary interviewing techniques and principles as shown in Figure 3-2 during the interviews to improve the efficacy and efficiency of the interview process (Dursun, 2023:104):

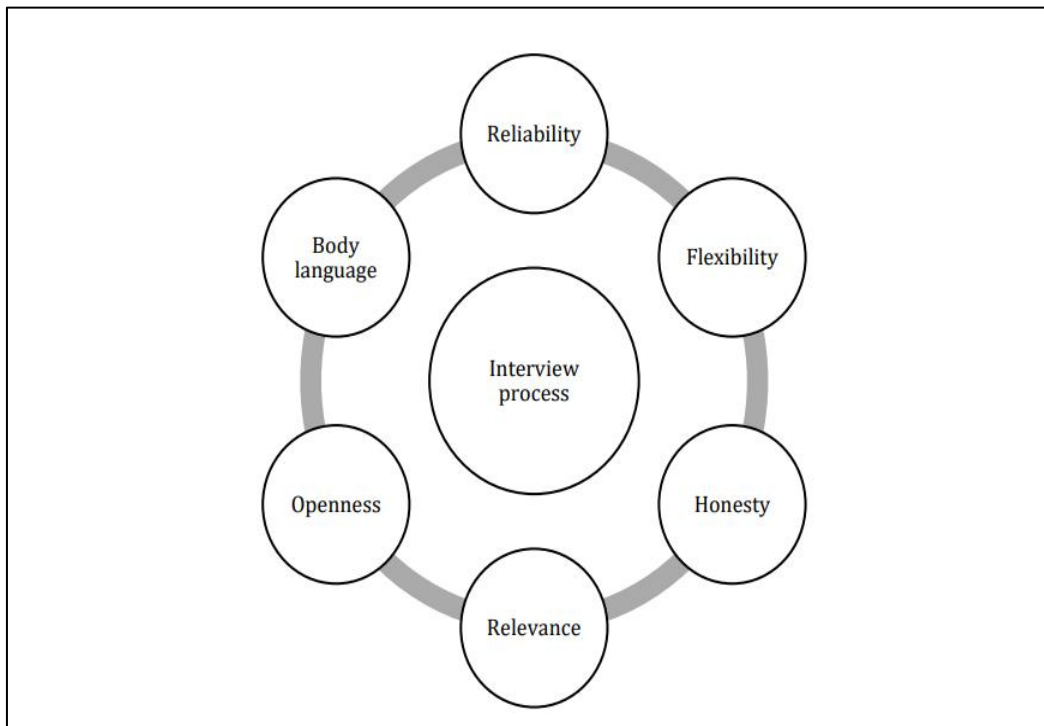


Figure 3-2: Principles and Processes of Interview (Dursun, 2023:104)

Dursun (2023:105) mentioned the following strengths of interview techniques:

- In face-to-face interviews, there is no noticeable pause between questions and answers; both the interviewer and the participant can respond immediately to each other's actions or words.
- Ending the interview by thanking the participants for their cooperation and asking if they have any more questions about the subject or the interview process is a clear way to end the interview.
- Participants are given the flexibility to explain problems based on their level of knowledge through the interview technique. When required, the researcher steps in and poses various queries regarding the topic.

- The interview process allows the researcher to get as much specific information as feasible. With various question formats, it can provide diversity and depth to the data.
- Regarding the information that the participant provided during the interview, the researcher can provide prompt feedback. In this manner, the researcher can clarify unclear answers during the interview.
- At any point during the research process interview techniques can be applied.
- The participant can open up about delicate and emotional topics once the process has been proven to be reliable.

It is customary to transcribe the interviews after gathering the interview data. To maintain an accurate record of the interview, many researchers record every interview verbatim (Leavy, 2023:155). For use in the data analysis, every recording was extracted from the digital voice recorder and transcribed by using Microsoft Word and each transcript with the recording was verified to be a verbatim record of the information given by each participant and stored on an external hard drive. Each line of the transcription was given a distinct alphabetical letter.

Field notes assist the researcher in organizing thoughts regarding the data obtained, by combining ideas, synthesizing data, and identifying patterns within the data (Leavy, 2023:150). Field notes were taken on each participant's answers to the interview questions after each interview. At the start of some interviews, participants appeared to be a little uneasy, but as the interview continued the participant gained more confidence. In the cases of two of the high school learners, they challenged the researcher at the end of the interview about the legitimacy of COVID-19. The field notes aided the researcher's comprehension of the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners and school social workers during a forced school closure in providing service delivery.

3.4. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Data analysing is defined as finding or making meaning of the data and summarizing and organizing the data. Hence it is a recursive process—analysis leading to

interpretation leading to analysis, and so on (Leavy, 2023:163-164). In qualitative research, meaning and meaning production are always contextual, positioned, and placed, and qualitative data analysis is like telling incidents, comprehending, and creating rather than seeking for and locating what is true that is "out there" (Braun & Clarke, 2019:591).

The research effort involved a thorough data analysis process, which combined human and electronic approaches. The analysis incorporated Tesch's detailed process of data analysis (Creswell, 2014:198) and utilised the advanced features of ATLAS.ti software. As described, the manual data analysis using Tesch's process entailed a thorough and tactile methodology, systematically examining the data to discern patterns, themes, and subtle insights (see Figure 3-3 below). The conventional method of qualitative data analysis was enhanced by utilising ATLAS.ti software, an effective instrument specifically built for managing complex data sets, by using ATLAS.ti, meticulous, yet rapid and concise data analysis can be carried out without risking trustworthiness (Tajuddin & Jauhar, 2014).

The involvement of the research supervisor was crucial during the analysis phase. Frequent dialogues and collaborative idea generation with the supervisor yielded invaluable perspectives and enhanced the analytical process. An active and available supervisor was critical to ensure thorough and ethical research. This included providing scientific information and assisting with troubleshooting during any process of the research (Antes, Kuykendall & DuBois, 2019:11).

The combination of manual analysis and electronic tools such as ATLAS.ti under the supervision of an experienced supervisor, ensured a comprehensive and strong study of the data and the identification of the themes. This approach increased the dependability and accuracy of the findings, guaranteeing that the results were not only based on the data but also thoroughly examined and analysed within the suitable academic and research frameworks (Tajuddin & Jauhar, 2014:15,16). The integration of manual and computerised analysis, together with professional assistance, was crucial in attaining a thorough and reliable examination of the research data.

When analysing the data manually the researcher used the following eight steps from

Tesch as depicted in Figure 3.3 (Creswell, 2014:198) and described below:



Figure 3-3: Tesch's steps of data analysis (Creswell, 2014:198).

As depicted in Figure 3-3, Tesch's eight step process of data analysis were applied as follows by the researcher:

Initial Reading: The researcher began by reading through the interview transcriptions to gain a holistic understanding of the content. This step was crucial for familiarizing with the data and setting the foundation for a more detailed analysis.

Identifying Underlying Meaning: Focusing on one document at a time, the researcher delved deeper to understand the underlying meanings. During this process, short notes were made to capture initial interpretations and reflections on the data.

Topic Listing and Clustering: After thoroughly reviewing the data, a comprehensive list of all topics was compiled. These topics were then categorized into three distinct clusters: major themes, unique themes, and leftover topics. This classification was key in organizing the data for further analysis.

Coding and Identifying New Themes: Each topic was assigned an abbreviation as a code, which was noted alongside the relevant data passages. During this coding process, the researcher remained vigilant for emerging new themes and sub-themes, ensuring that the coding system captured the breadth of the data.

Descriptive Labelling and Grouping: The researcher selected the most descriptive words for each topic and grouped related topics together. This step involved synthesizing and condensing the data into coherent groups that represented key themes in the research.

Finalizing Codes: A final review of the codes and their abbreviations was conducted. This involved ensuring that each category was accurately represented by an appropriate and easily identifiable alphabetic code.

Consolidating Data for Analysis: All coded data were collected and assembled in one location. This consolidation facilitated a preliminary analysis, allowing the researcher to begin drawing initial conclusions from the data.

Recoding: In the final step, the researcher revisited the coding process, adjusting and refinements as needed. Recoding ensured that the themes and sub-themes accurately reflected the depth and nuances of the data (Creswell, 2014:198, Tesch, 1990).

3.5. ENSURING RIGOUR

In qualitative research, credibility is essential for evaluating the "rigour" and "truth value"(trustworthiness) of one's findings as well as their applicability in the chosen theoretical and methodological framework. The concept of 'trustworthiness' is frequently employed as a standard for evaluating the credibility and dependability of a

study (Koonin, 2014:253). In order to put the reliability of research into practice, academics have employed various models to assess the method and application of reliability (Peters, 2023:2).

To strengthen the reliability of the research, the researcher applied the criteria for trustworthiness outlined in the Lincoln and Guba model (Johnson, Adkins & Chauvin, 2020:141). This model includes the subsections credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. This approach emphasises the dedication to a rigorous and precise process, which guarantees the integrity and trustworthiness of the research.

The study's trustworthiness was ensured based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as defined by Coleman (2021:2041).

3.5.1 Credibility

The issue of credibility in qualitative research is complex. As Haven and Van Grootel (2019:237-238) observe, such study rigour should lead to expert consensus on descriptions, evaluations, and themes. According to Yoon and Uliassi (2022:1091), qualitative research credibility requires extensive, thick description, particular details, demonstrating rather than stating, triangulation, and numerous voices.

Credibility is achieved by the use of "triangulation," "member check," "reflexivity," "peer debriefing," and "prolonged engagement" are crucial. Multiple investigations revealed "persistent observation" and "peer check" or "member check" phrases. According to Riazi, Rezvani and Ghanbar (2023:5), these terminologies are proxy categories that help verify data. This deliberate methodology ensures trustworthy and rigorous research.

Using probing questions and techniques to extract specific information from the participants, the researcher ensured that the research findings regarding the case under investigation, were credible and confident. This level of detail allowed for a deeper understanding of the context, enhancing the credibility of the findings. Notes were made after each audio-recorded interview and the researcher utilized reflective

commentary after each interview to document her initial observations that emerged from the data collection. Emphasis was placed on capturing and conveying specific details within the data. The focus on detail guaranteed that the conclusions were firmly based on the factual information, enhancing the validity and reliability of the interpretations. The researcher used the following criteria to apply credibility to her study:

- The researcher engaged with her peers in the academic field and her supervisor over a two-year period to get feedback and to reflect on the process and findings.
- To strengthen the study's credibility, a variety of interviewing strategies were employed, including summarizing, verbal and nonverbal cues, and probing. This resulted in obtaining more in-depth content from school social workers than from the high school learners. The researcher applied strategies of probing and exploration on a sensitive and empathetic level to make up for it.
- Terms such as "member check," "reflexivity," "peer debriefing," and "prolonged engagement" were not just jargon used but were actively applied in the research process. For instance, member checks were conducted to validate findings with participants, and reflexive practices were used to critically examine the researcher's own biases and assumptions.
- Basing findings on facts, the researcher demonstrated that through the use of direct quotes from participants and specific examples from the data in reporting the research results.
- Using data triangulation bases the research on involving different sources to confirm findings (Denzin, 1978:301), and it addresses both validity and reliability (Yin, 2018:174). It is a tool that can be used to increase confidence in the summary conclusions, and it is a popular method for combining several approaches to answer the same question (Leavy, 2023:167). In doing this, the researcher used different sources data sources and methods, including reading literature, taking notes after semi-structured interviews, and conducting semi-structured interviews to enhance credibility.
- The researcher is a social worker with thirty-four years of experience in the field of social work of which ten years as a social worker working with high school learners, where she had dealt with both troubled and needy learners.

All these strategies collectively contributed to the data verification process, as described by Riazi *et al.*, (2023:5).

3.5.2 Transferability

This study addressed the concept of transferability, as described by Leavy (2023:256-257), by showcasing how the findings substantiate, enrich, and broaden the scope of previous research. The research provides a foundation for other researchers to evaluate the relevance of its conclusions to different contexts or comparable studies by thoroughly explaining how the study's outputs align with and enhance the existing body of knowledge. This methodology enables a comprehensive assessment of the study's significance and usefulness in wider academic and practical contexts, emphasizing its contribution to the field of research. While the study primarily focuses on a certain audience within a specific field, researchers from different domains may also benefit from the findings. This is because engaging in critical self-analysis can improve the overall quality of qualitative research (Johnson *et al.*, 2020:144).

Qualitative research results cannot be fully generalized since it is unique to a limited number of situations and people. However, in this case the researcher's background as a school social worker could relate to the thick descriptions by participants in the context of the schools where social workers work, which gave the researcher insight into the meaning and content of the data received. The study ensured transferability by offering comprehensive explanations of the research setting, methods, and participant attributes. Providing this level of specificity enables other researchers or readers to assess the applicability of the findings to comparable situations. The attention to detail in documenting the study's environment, processes, and participants' experiences guarantees that the research may be comprehended and perhaps reproduced in other contexts with similar characteristics, thus improving the transferability of the findings (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022:1091).

The researcher ensured that the results of this study could be applied elsewhere by gathering enough information from twenty-eight high school learners and in-depth

accounts from six school social workers about the experiences and challenges they faced during forced school closure with service delivery to high school learners. This will allow the application of the results to different situations, people, or groups.

3.5.3 Dependability

The researcher discusses the study procedure in such detail that if the work is replicated, the same results will be obtained. In order to guarantee dependability, the research methodology needs to be thoroughly documented so that the audience can ascertain that appropriate research procedures have been adhered to and that the study can be replicated by future researchers and have the same results (Johnson *et al.*, 2020:141-142).

Deeper levels of data collection and analysis are made feasible by the benefits of qualitative research. This is guaranteed by employing techniques like sustained involvement and data concentration that can ensure the study's dependability. Qualitative research offers fresh perspectives on participant attitudes, behavioural patterns related to demographics, and emotional reasoning processes and is therefore social in nature, its conclusions are drawn from humanism's emotive aspects with deep detailed descriptions (Muzari *et al.*, 2022:19).

To maintain dependability throughout the data analysis process, certain standards of rigour are frequently employed, such as the use of software for computers, audit trails, triangulation, and peer review (Johnson *et al.*, 2020:143). Therefore, by documenting the data, the researcher in this study sought to address the dependability issue more directly. This has to do with how the research is designed and carried out, the participants' ideas and experiences rather than their traits and preferences, the specifics of data collection, and the research reflective methodology. By creating a summary of the research plan, which was provided in Chapter One, and providing information about the research's application in this chapter, the researcher made sure that there was a research audit trail.

3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability pertains to how well the data gathered align with the researcher's interpretation of the findings (Koonin, 2014). It refers to the ability of others to confirm or corroborate the findings (Johnson *et al.*, 2020:143). Instead of focusing on personal biases, the researcher made it a priority to ensure that the findings accurately mirrored the replies of the participants in order to guarantee the research's confirmability. This was accomplished through a variety of means, including:

- Engaging peers to assess the study method and findings in order to improve objectivity is what is meant by the term "peer review".
- In order to reduce prejudice and increase the reliability of evidence, triangulation involves using a variety of methodologies, sources, and theories.
- The practice of bracketing involves separating data into observations and interpretations in order to preserve clarity and prevent the impact of the researcher.
- As a method for monitoring and controlling personal bias, reflective practice involves keeping a record of one's own ideas and feelings, which are then addressed with peer reviewers. The researcher achieved confirmability by ensuring the research process used was fully discussed in the methodology section.
- The process of accurately capturing the voices of participants without the researcher having to interpret them, known as transcribing of the audio recordings.
- Consultation with the supervisor: Seeking help for preserving reflexivity during hard phases of study via consultation with the supervisor.

These techniques, which were utilized in accordance with the guidelines provided by Johnson *et al.* (2020:140,145) and Stahl and King (2020:27-28), were essential in maintaining the research's integrity and objectivity.

3.5.5 Authenticity

The authenticity principle acknowledges that political and ideological forces have an

impact on judgment and understanding because they are based on values. As a result, stakeholder negotiation is required for evaluation in order to incorporate the foundation of their beliefs and understandings. While initially seeming radical, the authenticity principle and its concerns about fairness were assisted in addressing ethical and ideological issues that eventually became mainstream (Johnson & Rasulovala, 2016:6).

The researcher addressed this issue through purposeful sampling, incorporating research participants' opinions into the design of the study, eliciting from participants a range of perspectives and experiences related to the case, and working with them to articulate the findings, the suggestions of participants were considered, persistent observation, peer debriefing and triangulation were applied (Johnson & Rasulovala, 2016:16-17).

Throughout the research, transparency was maintained in documenting the methods and analysis, and the findings were presented faithfully to reflect the participants' true experiences.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS APPLIED

The study of ethics involves determining what is valuable, significant, and morally correct. It tries to respond to the query of what you should do (Bos, 2020:31). Ethical considerations are relevant from the outset when choosing a study topic. The researcher's values guide the selection of topics, and the consideration of which issues need investigation, as well as the possible outcomes of the study. Making an ethical choice about how to handle the "who" of the study—the participants—is important (Leavy, 2023:25).

This study needed to be conducted ethically correct because it involves interviewing participants, including high school learners, some up to the age of 19 years, and school social workers. Therefore, the following ethical standards were followed: Obtaining informed consent/assent and voluntary involvement; anonymity; confidentiality; protection from harm; management of information and debriefing of participants.

3.6.1 Obtaining informed consent and assent

The informed consent approach, which is founded on the concept that involvement in research should not impact participants, protect their fundamental rights, and recognize their connections, relationships, and commitments, is perhaps the most crucial instrument for establishing confidentiality (Bos, 2020:154). According to Flemming and Zegwaard (2018:210) the term relates to "well-informed" and "permission," two critical components that require careful thought. All participants should be fully aware of the expectations, the planned application of the data, and possible repercussions. To take part in the study, participants must provide unambiguous, informed consent in writing. This permission must include a declaration of the understanding of the rights to access their information and to withdraw at any time. Learner's institutions will have someone in charge of their well-being and protect the rights of learners. Such individuals operate as gatekeepers and researchers must persuade these gatekeepers that their planned research is valuable and poses little risk to the learner's health and emotional well-being (Seidman, 2019:50).

Therefore, in order to carry out this study, the researcher submitted a proposal to undertake the research to the Department of Social Work Research and Ethics Committee (DR&EC) at Unisa. On August 10, 2023, the Committee authorized the study to be conducted, and after the proposal was approved, ethical clearance was obtained (reference number Rec-240816-052). Permission was also granted on 26 September by The GDE for authorization to do research in the schools in the area (Addendum C). All the relevant gatekeepers, either the deputy principal or the coordinator for the School-Based Support Team (SBST) were contacted in recruiting the participants.

In order to gather data, information letters were given to the gatekeepers of the school, high school learners, and school social workers requesting their voluntary participation and providing informed consent and assent forms (see Addenda E, F and G). Detailed information was discussed to make sure they understood the goal of the study. They were able to make informed decisions as a result and informed consent and assent forms were signed voluntarily by each participant who agreed to take part. During this process, the researcher was always conscious of the potential repercussions in the

event that moral standards might have been broken. As part of the discussions with each participant, it was necessary to secure their consent for the digital recording of their interviews and the transcription of recordings.

3.6.2 Anonymity

Given that researchers have to shield participants from unforeseen repercussions, anonymity appears to be a more reliable promise than confidentiality. When a researcher accepts anonymity, no personal data are identified. It is feasible to combine or generalize indirect identifiers, such as information about age, workplace, training, or career, but doing so comes with the danger of information loss (Bos, 2020:156-157).

To ensure that the study met the requirements for anonymity, personal information about the participants, their place of employment, and other details that could be used to identify them were left out.

3.6.3 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is the agreement between the researcher and the participant to treat sensitive or delicate data with the utmost care. Confidentiality is ultimately based on trust. The participant must have assurance that the researchers are looking out for their best interest (Bos, 2020:154).

The participant involvement was treated in strict confidence; any publications or presentations that come from it would refer to participants under pseudonyms. The researcher used numbering and lettering to identify participants. After the audiotapes were transcribed, they were kept on a hard drive with password protection, and on the interview transcripts only the pseudonyms that have been assigned to the participants were used (Leavy, 2023:36).

The researcher ensured the participants that their identity would be protected as well as the identity of the schools. The school social workers did not want to be identified

through their workplace and assurance was given that the schools' names would not be mentioned. Hence, no identities were discussed with the supervisor, peer reviewers or editor and no identifying information was noted or written on the audio device, notes, or transcripts. The researcher took all the required safety measures and informed each participant in advance that they could withdraw from the study at any moment if they felt in uncomfortable. No participant in this study felt compelled to end an interview before it was finished.

3.5.4 Protection from harm

For the purpose of the study, protection from harm is included due to the fact that children form part of the study. This study must take into account the likelihood of harm to participants, researchers, the greater community, and the institution. The harm might be psychological, physical, social, or financial (including time). When evaluating the probability of risk, the best course of action is to completely notify the participants and take actions to remove, isolate, and limit the risk in descending order (Flemming & Zegwaard, 2018:211).

The most important aspect in this study might be that the high school learners felt exposed about their situation, and it could potentially induce emotional responses and might lead to psychological harm. However, ethical concerns occur even when all norms and codes are followed (Bordens & Abbott, 2018:206). As can be seen, there are many complicated concerns related to using children as research subjects and the question of whether or not children should be able to take part in psychological research has no easy solution. Abandoning a significant research avenue, that of "throwing the baby out with the bathwater", might have negative effects on society. Of course, it is possible to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research on minors and carry out this kind of study in a morally righteous manner (Bordens & Abbott, 2018:206).

The researcher safeguarded the participants, both the high school learners and the school social workers, by interviewing them in places where they felt safe and at ease. The researcher was empathetic and sensitive toward the participants in dealing with

questions that might have disturbed them.

At the start of the interview the researcher explored with each participant if they were willing and able to proceed. During the interview, the researcher observed their body language to check if they felt uneasy, and after the interview, the researcher enquired about their feelings and if they needed support. The participants were informed before commencing the interviews by the researcher that should they feel that the questions were too intense, they would be removed from the interview and from any further involvement; instead, they will be referred to the debriefer for counselling or debriefing (Addendum H). Thankfully, none of the participants felt pressured throughout the interview process.

3.5.5 Management of information

Areas of importance to manage research data are arranging, preserving, and disseminating the data; developing data management strategies; and guaranteeing that all research is ethical and repeatable (Kanza & Knight 2022:2). Ineffective data management can result in data breaches, which can lead to failed and perhaps harmful research endeavours. All the work related with the project at hand should be back up, but versions should also be retained so that changes can be logged, and papers or data may be rolled back to a prior version if needed (Kanza & Knight, 2022:2).

It is conceivable that the researcher's findings include confidential information about persons or organizations. As a result, it is vital to build a secure storage system that is proprietary to the researcher. It must be ensured that the method of transmission is safe and impervious to unwanted access if data must be sent out (Walliman, 2022:62). Furthermore, information protection covers the secure storage of data (such as encrypted, anonymized data) and, if applicable, the manner and recipients of its disclosure. Information security both during and after research is the researcher's responsibility (Surmiak, 2018:15).

The researcher used a hard drive and password protection for digitally stored

documents and back-upped the data and digital recordings. All of the researcher's notes taken during the investigation, the researcher's diary or journal, and the transcripts of the interviews used in the data analysis were all printed out during the process. All printed materials are locked away in a secure location that is only accessible by the researcher.

3.5.6 Debriefing of participants

After data has been gathered, the researcher has an ethical obligation to the participants. It should not be forgotten that the interviews may be disturbing to these people's lives. Therefore, a debriefing phase may be incorporated into the research design, depending on the specifics of the research. During the debriefing, participants can be asked about their experiences and provide input (Leavy, 2023:42).

It is ethically required of a researcher to leave participants in a state that is at least equal to what was found when starting with the interviews, if not better. The researcher must carefully consider plans for participant debriefing and restoration after data collection, acknowledging that almost all research involving human participants has the potential to affect or alter people in some way (Yegidis, Weinbach & Myers, 2018:36).

In this research, participants were informed by the researcher that should they feel that the questions were exposing or make them feel uncomfortable, they would be removed from the interview and from any further participation; instead, and that they would be referred to the debriefer for counselling or debriefing (see letter of commitment by debriefer, Addendum H). The researcher had a social worker on call for the debriefing, should it be required. Fortunately, it was not needed.

3.6 REFLECTION OF RESEARCH PROCESS

The researcher reflected on the suitability of the research topic and the research design. The pandemic was an exceptional event that could occur at any time; therefore, the question arose of what the relevance of it for the future is and in which

way the findings of this research could be useful for future occurrences of this nature. The potential was identified with the help of the supervisor that disasters which occur more often, can also lead to forced school closure with the same experiences and challenges faced as the case of COVID-19. It was therefore important to study the experiences and challenges of the two populations, namely the high school learners and the school social workers, to understand the impact of forced school closures from them for future reference.

Before commencing with the study, the researcher reflected on her role as a school social worker which could lead to preconceived ideas and conceptions in the research process. She needed to reflect on her professional background and how it might influence her role as researcher in this process. Once permission was granted and the researcher acted in her role as a researcher having interviews with the high school learners and school social workers, the process was established, and the researcher felt comfortable in her role as researcher.

The researcher reflected on the interviewing techniques that she employed in gathering data from high school learners. It was important to consider the developmental stage of the high school learner and where personal failure such as poverty against societal norms is seen, shame can occur, as described in subsection 3.3.2. The researcher considered her techniques and how it might have impacted the scope and depth of the findings. In order to provide meaningful insights to the academic community and the field of school social work, this reflective approach is imperative.

3.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter is placed in the context of its preceding two chapters by explaining the application of the research plan (Chapter One) and presenting a perspective on the effect of forced school closure on high school learners and school social workers (Chapter Two). This chapter includes a thorough explanation of how the first chapter was applied using a qualitative research plan for this study. The application of the study strategy, research design, methodology, and population, as well as the

techniques and processes for sampling and data collecting, are outlined. The description also covers the methods used to obtain access to the research participants, apply pilot testing, prepare participants for the interviews, and gather and analyse the data. Also discussed is how the study's trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. The ethical considerations applied in the research were discussed in this chapter.

The next chapter presents a discussion of the research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The preceding chapter concentrated on the qualitative research methodology and its application by the researcher during data gathering and processing, ensuring that it adheres to ethical guidelines. This chapter's primary goal is to present and analyse the research findings that the literature has supported or contested pertinent to the studied case.

The first section of the chapter begins with listing the participants' biographical profiles, of both samples that of the high school learners and the school social workers. This is followed by a summary of the themes, and sub-themes that emanated from the interviews with the two study groups and a detailed discussion of all the themes and their sub-themes.

4.2 BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Both groups of participants' biographical data are listed below. Tables 4-1 and 4-2 below, respectively provide the biographical data of the high school learners and school social workers who took part in this research. Each table has biographical details following it.

Table: 4-1: Biographical information of the high school learners

| Participant | Age | Grade | Gender | Siblings | Parents: both or one employed |
|-------------|-----|-------|--------|----------|-------------------------------|
| 1A | 16 | 10 | Male | Three | Both |
| 2AA | 16 | 11 | Male | None | One |
| 3B | 16 | 10 | Male | Three | Both |
| 4BB | 16 | 10 | Female | Two | Both |
| 5C | 17 | 10 | Female | One | One |
| 6CC | 17 | 10 | Female | Two | One |

| | | | | | |
|------|----|----|--------|--------|------|
| 7D | 16 | 10 | Female | Two | One |
| 8DD | 16 | 10 | Male | Two | One |
| 9E | 17 | 11 | Female | Three | Both |
| 10EE | 17 | 10 | Male | Three | One |
| 11F | 17 | 11 | Female | Two | One |
| 12FF | 17 | 11 | Female | Four | One |
| 13G | 17 | 11 | Female | Two | Both |
| 14GG | 17 | 11 | Female | Two | Both |
| 15H | 16 | 11 | Female | Two | Both |
| 16HH | 17 | 11 | Female | Two | One |
| 17I | 16 | 11 | Male | Three | One |
| 18II | 17 | 10 | Male | Five | Both |
| 19J | 17 | 10 | Male | Two | One |
| 20JJ | 16 | 10 | Female | One | Both |
| 21K | 16 | 10 | Female | Two | One |
| 22KK | 19 | 11 | Female | One | None |
| 23L | 17 | 11 | Male | Four | Both |
| 24LL | 19 | 11 | Male | Two | One |
| 25M | 18 | 12 | Male | Two | One |
| 26MM | 19 | 12 | Male | Four | None |
| 27N | 18 | 12 | Female | Eleven | None |
| 28NN | 19 | 12 | Male | Three | None |

Table 4-1 lists the high school learners' age, grade, gender, family composition, and employment status of the parents. The researcher has not disclosed the high school learners' names instead the researcher used numerical and alphabetical codes for them in the biographical data to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

As indicated in Table 4-1, 28 high school learners between the ages of 16 to 19 years took part in the study. The grades learners were in varied from grades 10 to 12. Interviews were conducted with 13 male and 15 female high school learners. To gain a thorough understanding of this case, research studies must incorporate the perspectives of both genders. Including equality in gender in academic and scientific research refers to "inclusive excellence" (Palmén; Arroyo; Müller; Reidl; Caprile & Unger, 2020:7).

Only one learner has no siblings, and one learner's family composition consists of 12 children. The majority of the high school learners live in small families that consist of three children. The employment status of parents comprises 14 one-parent breadwinners, 10 households where both parents are employed, and four households with no breadwinner.

The type of parental employment is categorised in terms of having a stable income working for a governmental department or business, earning daily wages consisting of the amount of work completed or hours worked, and lastly having no income. Fifteen participants indicated that their parents have stable employment, 11 indicated that their parents are dependent on daily wages and two indicated that their parents are unemployed. Flexible employment can lead to risks by providing less security, integration, and social deprivation for employees. An unstable income has negative effects on individuals' health, well-being, family formation, and social life beyond the workplace. Living income is rooted in humanistic ideas and aligns with the concept of decent employment which is fair remuneration, productive and decent employment that provides social security, workplace rights, equal treatment, self-development chances, and recognition (Seubert, Hopfgartnerand & Glaser, 2021:808,810). The schools are situated in a low socio-economic environment in the Pretoria West municipal area.

It is crucial to take notice of the biographical information of the participants to understand the ecological system theory as it refers in the microsystem to the bio-ecological model of human development, shown in a pattern of roles, activities, and interpersonal relationships that the developing individual experiences in each setting with specific material and physical characteristics (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022:4-5). Table 4.2 that follows contains the biographical information of the school social workers.

Table 4-2: Biographical information of the school social workers

| Participants | Age in Years | Gender | Years of experience registered and practising as a social worker | Appointed by DBE or SGB |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|---|--------------------------------|
| 10 | 27 | Female | 4 years | DBE |
| 200 | 44 | Female | 14 years | DBE |

| | | | | |
|-----|----|--------|----------|-----|
| 3P | 44 | Female | 10 years | DBE |
| 4PP | 25 | Female | 3 years | DBE |
| 5Q | 67 | Female | 48 years | SGB |
| 6QQ | 41 | Female | 5 years | SGB |

The study involved six female school social workers, with no male participants, highlighting a gender distribution trend observed in the social work field. This aligns with the findings of Galley (2020:11), in which it is noted that social work, both academically and professionally, has traditionally been female dominated.

As seen in Table 4-2 the professional experience of these social workers varied from three to 48 years, indicating that each participant had the necessary expertise to function effectively as a school social worker, providing social work services to high school learners. This expertise is essential, as social workers need to be both qualified and experienced to meet their clients' needs, as per the various levels of the ecological system theory.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, these social workers played a crucial role in delivering of social services by means of online communication at multiple levels of the ecological system theory (Ramoshaba, 2023b:123).

At the microsystem level, they engaged in direct practice with clients such as high school learners, educators, parents, and families in face-to-face settings. The mesosystem level involves interactions that are less intimate than family relationships but more significant than those in organizational contexts, like those in therapy groups or among peers at work or school. At the macro level, social workers facilitate change through community networks and institutions, dealing with broader societal issues (Hepworth, Rooney, Dewberry Rooney & Strom-Gottfried, 2017:12).

The ecological system theory also plays a vital role in understanding the complex experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of adolescents and young people during the initial weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa. Gittings *et al.* (2021:948) emphasize that this approach contributes to the understanding of vulnerabilities and resilience factors among young people during such crises.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the real names of the participants and their institutions were omitted from the biographical information. The subsequent section of the study an overview of the identified themes and sub-themes.

4.3 OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

The data analysis in this study was performed utilising Tesch's eight steps, as outlined in Creswell (2014:198), in conjunction with the ATLAS.ti 23 software program. After consulting with the supervisor and a peer reviewer, the researcher listed the themes and sub-themes in comprehensive tables. These themes and sub-themes emanated from the data obtained in the interviews conducted with high school learners and school social workers. The collaborative process led to the determination of the final themes and sub-themes. The condensed results, including overarching themes, and sub-theme produced from the initial group of participants, high school learners, are methodically displayed in Table 4-3. In Table 4-4 the themes and sub-themes are presented that were identified from the interviews conducted with the second set of participants, namely the school social workers.

Table 4-3: High school learners' themes and sub-themes

| THEMES | SUB-THEMES |
|--|---|
| Theme 1: High school learners' experiences of nationwide lockdown | Sub-theme 1.1: Impact on relationships Sub-theme 1.2: Impact on emotional well-being Sub-theme 1.3: Limited education Sub-theme 1.4: Grief and loss of family members |
| Theme 2: Perception of public health measures during the lockdown | |
| Theme 3: Home activities during the lockdown | Sub-theme 3.1: Limited engagement and non-organised activities Sub-theme 3.2: Recreational screen time and technology Sub-theme 3.3: Trying out new hobbies and increased family time |

| | |
|--|---|
| Theme 4: Feelings during the lockdown | Sub-theme 4.1: Friends and social networks Sub-theme 4.2: Feelings regarding school Sub-theme 4.3: Feelings regarding Church Sub-theme 4.4: Feelings regarding sport and culture |
| Theme 5: Challenges experienced during the nationwide lockdown | Sub-theme 5.1: Social support and communication challenges Sub-theme 5.3 Financial-related challenges. |
| Theme 6: Enhanced family support and resilience during the lockdown | |
| Theme 7: Impact of school closure | Sub-theme 7.1: Financial and material impact. Sub-theme 7.2: Therapeutic and supportive impact. |
| Theme 8: Suggestion for social work practice | Sub-theme 8.1: Ongoing contact with social workers. Sub-theme 8.2: Continuous financial and material support. |

Table 4-4: School social workers' themes and sub-themes

| THEMES | SUB-THEMES |
|---|---|
| Theme 1: Job description and daily functions as a school social worker | |
| Theme 2: The role of the school social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic | Sub-theme 2.1: No services Sub-theme 2.2: Telephonic support and counselling Sub-theme 2.3: Limited food distribution efforts |
| Theme 3: The experiences of school social workers in rendering services to high school | Sub-theme 3.1: Challenges in remote communication and service delivery |

| | |
|--|---|
| learners during the COVID-19 pandemic | Sub-theme 3.2: Increased risks and vulnerabilities of learners Sub-theme 3.3: Emotional strain and helplessness among school social workers |
| Theme 4: Challenges faced in rendering services to high school learners during the nationwide lockdown | Sub-theme 4.1: Feeling overwhelmed Sub-theme 4.2: Limited resources and support Sub-theme 4.3: Limited knowledge and training |
| Theme 5: Transformation in School Social Work Practices During Pandemic Restrictions | |
| Theme 6: Retrospective insights on service delivery to high school learners during the pandemic | Sub-theme 6.1: Staying connected with learners Sub-theme 6.2: Involvement of the community |
| Theme 7: Awareness and impact of Legislation and Policies on Educational service delivery during the pandemic | |
| Theme 8: Suggestions to improve service delivery during pandemics | Sub-theme 8.1: School social workers need to be regarded as frontline and essential services Sub-theme 8.2: Supportive plans, legislations, and guidelines Sub-theme 8.3: Localized and accessible service centres Sub-theme 8.4: Non-closure of schools |
| Theme 9: Personal and Professional impacts of working during the pandemic | |

Following the overview of the themes and sub-themes as presented above in Tables

4-3 and 4-4, the themes and sub-themes emerging from and supported by the data are discussed in detail. Direct quotations selected from the transcripts and narratives of the interviews are used to discuss the research findings and validate the themes and their corresponding sub-themes. References from the literature in the form of a literature control are used to confirm and/or contrast the findings presented, verifying, or opposing the results. The themes and sub-themes of the high school learners are first presented, followed by that of the school social workers.

4.4 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FOR HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS

The data analysis of the twenty-eight high school learners who took part in the study revealed eight themes. The sub-themes for each theme are discussed below. The quotations or coded narratives of the high school learners are included to support each theme and sub-theme.

4.4.1 Theme 1: High school learners' general experiences of nationwide lockdown

This theme explores the range of experiences that high school learners went through during the pandemic, particularly focusing on how their lives, routines, and education were disrupted. The question that was asked of the participants, "Please describe how you experienced this period of nationwide lockdown", led to the deduction of this theme. Therefore, comprehending how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced individual and sensemaking processes is a pertinent and valuable undertaking. A pandemic or other extraordinary worldwide event can cause people to question their sense of purpose and have experiences on their own. It necessitates the constant redefining and reshaping of identities, relationships, routines, and habits. To comply with the preventive measures imposed by national governments and health authorities, as well as to adapt to and cope with the disruptive modifications brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the learners' personal and social schedules had to shift (Procentese; Gatti & Ceglie, 2021:2).

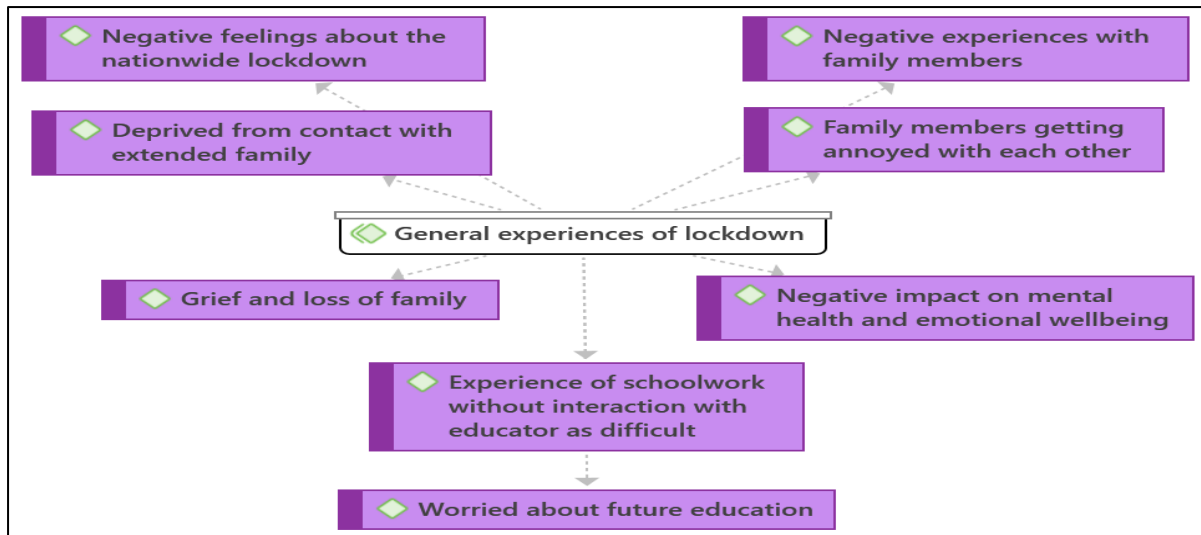


Figure 4-1: Overview of Theme 1: Storylines

Within this broad theme, general negative experiences about the nationwide lockdown delves deeper into the specific difficulties and challenges that learners faced during this period. This includes the emotional, educational, and social impacts of the lockdown measures. As demonstrated by Figure 4-1, it was evident that the participants had negative experiences of the nationwide lockdown. The high school learners were able to express their experiences overall and these quotes support this:

“...it was just bad. I don’t want that. You know, that was my bad experience about nationwide lockdown.” **10 EE**

“...it was not a nice experience.” **16 HH**

“It’s actually not nice I don’t feel comfortable in the lockdown. I don’t think it is good for our nation.” **27 N**

4.4.1.1 Sub theme 1.1: Impact on family relationships

This sub-theme specifically focuses on how the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown influenced learners' interpersonal relationships, particularly within their families.

The following quotes are narratives of family relationship challenges:

“We usually went to my aunts every weekend...so we get under each other's feet and annoyed by everyone.” 21 K

“Being... in one place all the time can get tiring because you see the same people each and every single day... Everything makes her angry.” 22 KK

“There's a lot of commotion in the families...but we adapted within time.” 25 M

These storylines from the learners highlight the strain and tension experienced within family dynamics during the lockdown. The enforced proximity and lack of usual social outlets led to increased irritation and conflict. October, Petersen, Adebisi, Rich, and Roman (2021:2-3) underscore that the impact of the pandemic on family relationships varied depending on the family structure, with some experiencing increased arguments and feuds. High school learners' opinions of feeling constrained, experiencing increased displeasure and disagreement as a result of imposed closeness, and the lack of traditional social outlets are consistent with larger study findings. Families with children, in particular, reported high rates of parental stress (Griffith, 2022; Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore & Fasolo, 2020:2), along with notable parenting-related exhaustion (Marchetti, Fontanesi, Mazza, Di Giandomenico, Roma *et al.*, 2020:1114).

Additionally, there were elevated levels of depression and anxiety observed among both parents and children during this period (Wang, Cheong, Zhu, Havewala & Ye, 2022: 2). This indicates that the pandemic not only disrupted people's daily routines but also that it had profound psychological impacts on families, exacerbating mental health challenges. The pandemic-induced lockdown necessitated a shift in family dynamics, requiring members to adjust to new ways of communication and managing the strain caused by the situation (Andrade, Gillen, Molina & Wilmarth, 2022:205,206; Fogel *et al.*, 2022:2).

Irwin, Lazarevic, Soled and Adesman (2022:108) highlight that learners' experiences of the pandemic are influenced by various factors, including socio-economic status, cultural background, and family circumstances. This suggests that the impact on

relationships and family dynamics is not uniform but varies across different households. The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 has strained family connections, but the repercussions are mostly dependent on the strength of relationships and family well-being before the outbreak (Andrade, *et al.*, 2022:205).

The impact on interpersonal relationships during COVID-19 reflects broader issues that can arise in any crisis situation. The pandemic, much like other disasters, can exacerbate existing family tensions and create new relational challenges (October, *et al.*, 2021:3). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for providing appropriate support and interventions to help families navigate these difficult times.

These narratives place the specific challenges of family relationships during the COVID-19 lockdown within the broader context of the pandemic's impact on high school learners. It links personal experiences to academic research, highlighting the complex nature of family dynamics in times of crisis and the need for nuanced approaches to support families.

4.4.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: Impact on emotional well-being

Focusing specifically on the emotional range, this sub-theme delves into how the lockdown and the pandemic at large affected the mental and emotional well-being of high school learners. The following are narratives of emotional experiences:

"...at first I was happy about not going to school...until I realized how badly it affected my mental health. Being isolated..." 11 F

"I felt very sad...without my friends, I just feel alone..." 7 I

"I felt very claustrophobic...I prefer to be outside...so I just felt claustrophobic." 21 K

"...being at home all the time was very tiring..., it was exhausting. So, I felt very sad..." 22 KK

These accounts from high school learners paint a colourful picture of the range of emotions they experienced during the lockdown – from initial relief and happiness to feelings of sadness, loneliness, claustrophobia, and emotional fatigue. These first-hand accounts correspond with research findings on the emotional impact of the pandemic on adolescents. According to Procentese, Esposito, Leone, Agueli, Arcidiacono *et al.*, (2021:2), during this period learners experienced a spectrum of emotions, including fear, distress, sadness, rage, and loneliness. The study highlights the complexity of these emotional responses and underscores the necessity of coping strategies, resilience, and strong interpersonal relationships to support young individuals during such unprecedented times.

While these narratives are specific to the COVID-19 pandemic, they resonate with the general emotional challenges faced by adolescents in other crisis situations (Masten, 2021:3). The emotional responses of high school learners to stressful events like pandemics or natural disasters are crucial indicators of their psychological health and resilience (Masten, 2021:7). Recognizing and addressing these emotional impacts is essential in providing appropriate support and intervention strategies, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic but in any similar crisis situations.

4.4.1.3 Sub-theme 1.3: Limited education

The experiences of high school learners regarding educational loss during the COVID-19 lockdown reflect a broader global issue faced by various disasters and pandemics.

Learners' personal accounts are:

“Not attending school was not really a disappointment for me, but it affected me because I couldn't get to learn properly...” **15 H**

“I didn't have to wake up early in the morning to come to school... But then what was not nice I had some... subjects... I didn't have someone to help me with the work...”
23 L

“Because we forgot, we forget what we learn... So now I had to repeat everything, I

read so I can catch up with what we are learning. So, it was hard.” 1 A

These statements illustrate varied experiences with educational disruption, from challenges in understanding subjects without a teacher's guidance to difficulties in maintaining learning progress. The perspectives shared by these learners align with the conclusions drawn by Munir (2021:7), who emphasises that not all learners have equal access to remote learning possibilities. The ongoing pandemic has worsened existing disparities in education, disproportionately impacting vulnerable communities. This is a worldwide concern, as analogous problems are recognised in other catastrophic situations where the continuity of education is interrupted.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequities in global access to educational resources (Hoofman & Secord, 2021:1072). Within many crisis scenarios, comparable challenges emerge when remote education becomes difficult as a result of insufficient financial or physical resources (Kona, 2022:18). The extent to which parents contribute to educational support at home varies significantly, with many lacking the necessary knowledge or resources to properly encourage learning. This worry is not only limited to the current epidemic but also applies to earlier crises (Dändliker, Brüneck, Citterio & Lochmatter, 2022:14,15).

The long-term educational consequences of disruptions, such as those encountered during the COVID-19 lockdown, can significantly impact the educational paths of learners, especially in regions that already struggle with educational difficulties (Segarra-Alméstica, *et al.*, 2022).

Addressing these educational problems requires a worldwide response, prioritising assistance to vulnerable groups and guaranteeing fair access to education during times of disasters and pandemics.

This narrative explores the direct impact of educational challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown, highlighting their connection to broader global issues in education during times of disasters and pandemics. It highlights the importance of fair and robust educational institutions to assist learners in many crisis scenarios.

4.4.1.4 Sub-theme 1.4: Grief and loss of family members

As well as disrupting everyday routines and education, the COVID-19 pandemic caused personal losses. This study found that high school learners lost family members during the nationwide lockdown, a very emotional and stressful experience.

The storylines on grief and loss are:

“...that is like what we... were used to like beside church also family gatherings and stuff like that. We missed our families and some of them passed away during the COVID.” **23 L**

“...challenges I've experienced is that I found out that my grandmother died from...COVID.” **5 C**

“There were many challenges I have faced. Many of my relatives have died.” **10 EE**

“...because once bad things happen in the family, maybe if we have a family member that has passed on. They would support me and tell me that this is something that we're going to get through...” **22 KK**

These quotations powerfully depict adolescents' sadness and loss. The pain of losing family members is compounded by the restrictions of the lockdown, which disrupted traditional mourning practices and family support systems. These learners' experiences match the findings of Fitzgerald; Nunn and Isaacs (2021:18), that quarantine regulations enhanced family grief during the epidemic. The inability to be with loved ones during their final moments, difficulties affording consolation, and funeral limitations exacerbated their grief. Studies show that mourning and finding closure during the epidemic are challenging, emphasising the need for additional help for family members (Walsh, 2020:899). This narrative contextualises high school learners' loss and grief during the COVID-19 epidemic within the broader literature, showing the specific problems of mourning during a global health disaster. This approach emphasises the need for extensive support services to help youth cope with these challenges.

The sub-theme of "Grief and Loss of Family Members" shows high school learners' personal difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic and reflects a common human experience in global crises like pandemics and disasters.

These learners' stories reflect the deep pain that follows family loss in disasters worldwide. We all feel loss, whether from COVID-19, natural disasters, or humanitarian crises. The epidemic has highlighted the challenges of grief and closure under constrained conditions, a common disaster scenario. Disruptions to conventional mourning traditions complicate and aggravate grief.

Young people are most affected by such losses. Traumatic experiences may influence high school learners' mental health and emotional well-being, who are at a vital developmental time (Revet, Bui, Benvegna, Suc, Mesquida *et al.*, 2020:1). This highlights the need for strong support networks in all calamities, not only pandemics like COVID-19. Helping young people cope with loss and sorrow requires mental health, community, and educational interventions.

In this expanded narrative, the personal accounts of loss and grief among high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic are placed within a global context of disasters and pandemics. This approach emphasises the global issues of grief and the need for extensive support networks for young people experiencing such significant experiences (Gesi, *et al.*, 2020:3).

These sub-themes, rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (Hayes, *et al.*, 2017:15) ecological systems theory, underline the interconnectedness of individual experiences and broader societal structures. The microsystem, involving personal relationships and school settings, was heavily disrupted, while the macrosystem, encompassing broader societal and governmental responses, imposed new norms and constraints. The mesosystem's breakdown, seen in the disconnection between schools and families, led to additional stress. The exosystem, including community resources and healthcare systems, indirectly influenced the learners' experiences, and the chronosystem captured the evolving nature of these experiences over time (Hayes, *et al.*, 2017:7).

These narratives and sub-themes underscore the importance of considering the multi-layered impacts of pandemics and disasters on young individuals, calling for holistic support systems that cater to their diverse needs.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Perceptions of Public Health Measures During the Lockdown

Almost every high school learner acknowledged the importance of complying with the COVID-19 regulations which is to not be in contact with other people in order to contain the spread of the virus and to be safe.

The question that was put to the high school learners was as follows: “Why do you think in your understanding, that it was important to stay at home and apply social distancing during the nationwide lockdown?” The lockdown restrictions resulted in changes in school routines and everyday life and the goal of this question was to gain knowledge if the learner has insight into why these regulations needed to be adhered to (October, *et al.*, 2021:7).

The narratives of participants **17 I**, **12 FF**, and **9 E**, centring around the topic "perceptions of public health measures during the lockdown," exhibit the deep understanding and willingness to embrace the public health measures enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The high school learners' responses were similar, and the majority understood and provided an informed answer to this question. The storylines that follow support this:

”I think it was, it was very important because it was about our health to keep us healthy and to protect us from the sickness that was in our surrounding.” 17 I

“Basically, it was...more of not going and getting... to get sick when going out and coming with the disease at home and giving it to other people and you know, so it was really important for us to apply the social distancing so that we don't get sick and having that in your family.” 12 FF

“...to reduce the spreading of the virus since it was very deadly. I was one of the people that... had contracted the virus it is not... nice. So, I think they were just trying to reduce the virus and actually keep everyone safe.” 9 E

These narratives can be connected to literature in order to enhance understanding of adolescents' perspectives and behaviours about these measures. The narratives demonstrate an in-depth awareness of the critical importance of public health measures, such as social isolation, in reducing the transmission of COVID-19. These results are consistent with the research conducted by Gittings *et al.* (2021:958), which suggests that South African teenagers and their communities have effectively heard and comprehended the public health message, while facing difficulties and vulnerabilities.

Despite concerns regarding teenagers and young adults lacking knowledge or spreading misleading information, these accounts demonstrate that adolescents possess a comprehensive understanding of current research on COVID-19, encompassing symptoms and prevention. This indicates that adolescents have both knowledge and gratitude towards the reasons underlying these health practices.

Research conducted by Ganczak, Pasek, Duda-Duma, Komorzycka, Nowak *et al.*, (2021:1-2) has indicated that young adults may exhibit a reduced likelihood compared to other age groups in complying with preventive measures. Hence, it is important to provide teenagers with complete details regarding COVID-19 infection to enhance compliance. This could potentially have a favourable influence on their behaviours and attitudes, promoting resilience amid the epidemic.

Overall, the accounts and perspectives presented by the participants offer interesting observations on how adolescents perceive and react to public health efforts during a pandemic. This understanding can guide approaches to guarantee improved compliance with such measures and foster overall community resilience.

The participants' accounts of their perceptions of public health measures during the lockdown reflect the many levels of impact described in the classic reference of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. According to this idea, individual

behaviour is shaped by several environmental systems, which range from the close surroundings of family and school as the microsystem to the broader societal and cultural setting, the macrosystem (Hayes *et al.*, 2017:7). This theme indicates that high school learners have taken in the importance of these measures, demonstrating that their understanding extends beyond the individual level and aligns with the wider societal norms and expectations—the macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model (Lopez, Ruiz, Rovnaghi, Tam, Hiscox *et al.*, 2021:3). They acknowledge their responsibility in the broader community to contain the transmission of the virus.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Home Activities during lockdown

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the entire lifestyle of adolescents. Research indicates that they experienced a decline in their access to nutritious food, an increase in their consumption of fast food, a drop in physical activity, an increase in sedentary behaviour, a reduction in the number of days they spent driving and the distance they travelled, and an increase in the amount of time they spent using screens for leisure activities (Breux, Cash, Lewis, Garcia, Dvorsky *et al.*, 2023:1).

Research by Sikorska *et al.* (2021:81) underlines the importance of being active for adolescents, emphasizing its role in human development, education, emotional health, and satisfaction. The restriction of these activities during lockdowns or similar measures in other disasters can have significant implications for the mental and physical health of adolescents.

The theme's findings came from the question, "With what activities did you keep yourself busy at home during the nationwide lockdown?" Out of this theme, three sub-themes ascended namely limited engagement and non-organized activities, recreational screen time and technology, and trying out new hobbies and increased family time.

The participants who experience a difficulty with keeping busy with activities or feel deprived of exercising are in the minority. Figure 4-2 encapsulates the activities that

the learners kept themselves busy with, for example with technology, playing activities alone, applying remote education and exercising, as described below.

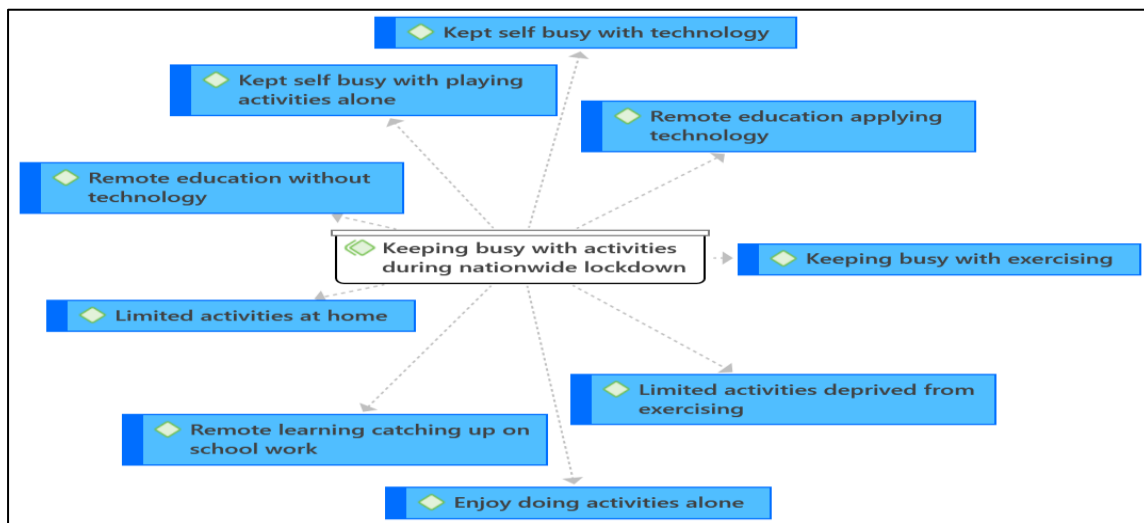


Figure 4-2: Overview of activities during the nationwide lockdown

4.4.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Limited Engagement and Non-organized Activities

Under this theme, given the learners’ storylines, some of which are included below, offer a vivid portrayal of the constraints faced by individuals, particularly high school learners, during the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences can be contextualized within the broader scope of pandemic-related restrictions and compared to similar situations in other disasters.

“I was... bored. I was lonely and it's not easy to stay in the house...” **15 H**

“I couldn't go out and jog...it was tough for me because I used to stay inside my room then and think a lot...” **17 I**

“The challenge...was basically about me not actually being myself inside and socializing...” **1 A**

“It was that was difficult because I love being sports. Fitness that's my thing...I felt bored. Not really much to do.” **26 MM**

These accounts reflect the feelings of boredom, loneliness, and frustration due to the inability to engage in normal activities and exercise. They highlight the emotional and psychological impact of the restrictions. The experiences align with the findings of Procentese *et al.*, (2021:3), perceiving the lockdown as a "frozen time," halting regular activities and creating a sense of estrangement and detachment. This also aligns with Xiang, Zhang and Kuwahara (2020:531), who highlight that the lockdown may have occasionally had an adverse effect on the health of adolescents. Several studies conducted in Europe, South America, and Asia have demonstrated notable alterations in dietary patterns and a decline in physical activity among teenagers when compared to the period before the epidemic. This research illustrates the profound impact of lockdowns on the daily routines, social interactions, and emotional well-being of individuals (Xiang *et al.*, 2020:531).

The following learner kept busy with non-organized sport activities:

"I kept myself busy playing soccer... in my backyard." **10 EE**

This storyline reflects an approach to adapting to the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This narrative aligns with the findings from the study by Breaux *et al.* (2023), which highlights the significant reduction in participation in extracurricular activities and part-time work, particularly in the first year of the pandemic.

The connection between the storylines and the literature is evident in the way adolescents had to find alternative means to engage in physical activity and maintain some semblance of their regular routines. While organized extracurricular activities and group sports were curtailed due to pandemic-related restrictions (Breaux *et al.*: 2023), individuals like the one in the above storyline found ways to remain active within the confines of their immediate environment, such as playing soccer in their backyard.

Empirical evidence substantiates the advantages of physical activity and involvement in meaningful activities (Pillay, 2023:4). This research indicates that these activities can promote resilience and operate as a protective barrier against adverse events. Such activities are vital for adolescents, as they play a significant role in fostering their educational, emotional, and physical growth.

4.4.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Recreational screen time and Technology

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to expanded opportunities and more time for youth engagement on the Internet (Annam *et al.*, 2022:1) as illustrated in the storylines below:

“I was busy with schoolwork and studying... I was always on my phone and watching TV.” **16 HH.**

“...also, I used to be a gamer too. Just play on my phone and game.” **24 LL**

“I sometimes exercise and was always on my phone and try doing my schoolwork, but it didn't work.” **14 GG**

The pandemic period saw a significant surge in digital activities worldwide, as reported by Munir (2021:6). This included a notable rise in the use of social media platforms and streaming services. Adolescents globally increased their use of social media, particularly platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, as a means to stay connected with peers. This trend in increased digital engagement is substantiated by the research of Fernandes, Biswas, Tan-Mansukhani, Vallejo and Essau (2020:60), who observed a heightened usage of social media for maintaining social contacts.

Additionally, there was a marked escalation in gaming, especially among adolescents in Europe and the United States, according to Fernandes *et al.* (2020:60). This increase in gaming was largely seen as a response to the psychological stress induced by the pandemic. Gaming served as a form of escapism, providing adolescents with a virtual outlet for distraction and a sense of engagement during a time characterized by social distancing and isolation.

However, technology was also used for keeping up to breast with educational activities (Widnall *et al.*, 2022). The closure of schools and the resulting modifications in educational methods have brought attention to several difficulties, specifically in relation to online learning. These challenges include issues of accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity. For instance, learners who lack access to technology or

have special educational needs and disabilities face significant obstacles about it. Nevertheless, the closure of schools has also generated several positive prospects. These encompass accounts of enhanced collaborations between educators and parents and novel avenues for instruction and acquisition through innovative means. For instance, there has been an increase in the utilisation of virtual learning platforms (such as Google Classroom) that offer supplementary materials and opportunities for remedial learning at home.

4.4.3.3 Sub-theme: 3.3 Trying out new Hobbies and Increased Family time

During the COVID-19 pandemic, significant lifestyle alterations were witnessed, particularly in leisure activities. Research by Takiguchi, Matsui, Kikutani and Ebina (2023:3) underscores the steep decline in travel and group-oriented pastimes, paralleled by an upswing in home-centred leisure pursuits. Activities compatible with lockdown and social distancing rules, like cooking, gardening, DIY projects, and engaging in online entertainment, gained traction. As the narrative of high school learners indicate:

“I started a garden, and then I also watch TV and spend time with my family” 20 JJ

“I would say we were basically I learned how to cook and bake and would play games a little bit with the family. And study sometimes.” 12 FF

“So my mom and I started a YouTube channel, so we did yoga and started cooking together and that's what we did.” 9 E

These storylines mirror earlier studies, including those by Morse, Fine and Friedlander (2021:2), suggesting a rise in home-based hobbies and family interactions. This period saw individuals leaning into activities such as gardening, social media usage, gaming, and reading, more than before. Notably, this shift in dynamics led to varied outcomes in family settings. While some families discovered enhanced bonding opportunities, others faced increased domestic strife, as noted by Bera, Souchon, Ladsous, Colin, and Lopez-Castroman (2022:38). The proactive coping mechanisms and adaptability demonstrated by individuals during the pandemic, as highlighted by Procentese, Gatti,

and Ceglie (2021:8), point towards an active engagement in managing daily responsibilities under restricted conditions. These strategies reflect the concerted efforts to maintain a semblance of normalcy and well-being amidst challenging times.

The concept of psychological resilience, as examined by Duby *et al.* (2022:3), also has considerable importance. The combination of resilience and social support is crucial for protecting mental health from harmful consequences. Masten (2021:2) expands this to the capacity of social-ecological systems to withstand stressors, emphasizing the importance of maintaining structure and functions in the face of uncertainty.

These unique stories of adjusting to lockdown conditions through different activities highlight the significance of resilience and coping mechanisms during times of crisis. During a pandemic such as COVID-19 or other scenarios with similar limitations, it is essential to discover methods to remain physically and mentally active in order to uphold overall well-being. Understanding these adaptive behaviours can inform strategies to support individuals, especially adolescents, in future crisis scenarios.

The theme represents the different experiences of high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. These sub-themes are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as they demonstrate the impact of the imposed modifications on the learners' microsystem, which refers to their local environment and everyday activities, and how they adjusted within their limited circumstances.

These sub-themes demonstrate the reduced physical and social activities that are important for the optimal development and growth of adolescents. Learners described sentiments of boredom and isolation when their customary schedules were interrupted. This aligns with the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's theory, where the link between home and school, two main environments for development, was broken, resulting in a noticeable effect on the learners' welfare.

On the other hand, the stories also demonstrate the ability to bounce back and adjust as learners discovered other methods to interact with their surroundings, which is a fundamental idea in the exosystem. They exhibited the ability to establish fresh

patterns and pastimes, such as engaging in backyard football, dedicating themselves to school assignments, and allocating time for family interactions, so attaining a sense of normality and mastery over their situation. These experiences emphasise the significance of the macrosystem, which refers to the broader societal and cultural norms and values, in influencing the learners' reactions to the lockout. The public health crisis mandated a unified reaction, and the teenagers' capacity to adjust was impacted by the wider cultural narratives of resilience and adaptability. In summary, these sub-themes highlight the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's classic reference, (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) ecological systems theory in comprehending the intricate interaction between individual adolescent experiences and the various levels of environmental impact during a crisis such as the COVID-19 epidemic.

The theory facilitates the understanding of the various levels of influence caused by the pandemic, providing guidance for the creation of interventions that not only address the immediate disruptions but also the wider systemic adjustments required to support adolescents during these extraordinary events. As explained in Figure 4-3 high school learners experienced barriers that made it difficult to meet prescribed physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and sleep standards, which can have a long history of harmful habits. As depicted in Figure 4-3, a socio-ecological model is used to analyse the influence of COVID-19 on 24-hour lifestyle activities (Bates, Zieff, Stanford, Moore, Kerr *et al.*, 2020:2).

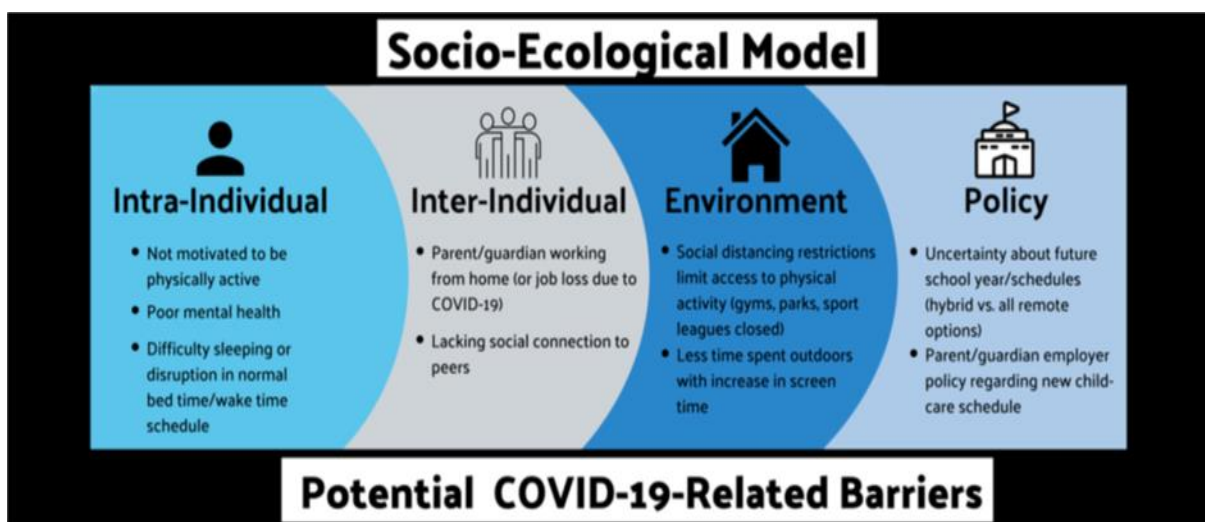


Figure 4-3 Examples of potential barriers to healthy behaviour across the 24-h

day: socio-ecological model (Bates, *et al.*, 2020:2)

The mesosystem, which refers to the interaction between many microsystems, is evident in the impact of the school environment's absence on their behaviour and attitudes towards public health norms. The adolescents' lack of exposure to this familiar microsystem may have resulted in increased dependence on messages from larger societal systems (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022:5).

The exosystem covers various environments that have an indirect influence on individuals, such as the workplaces of parents and the availability of community health resources. The high school learners' comments demonstrate comprehension of the cascading consequences that their activities can exert on these secondary systems (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022:6).

The chronosystem, which includes the element of time and change, is significant because the high school learners' perspectives have been influenced by a specific historical event—the COVID-19 epidemic. The protracted duration of the epidemic has the potential to modify their growth and conceivably their enduring dispositions towards public health (Hayes, *et al.*, 2017:62).

4.4.4 Theme 4: Feelings during lockdown

High school learner's daily routine was impacted due to isolation, and COVID-19 regulations which affected them on different levels as emotionally, physically, and socially (Hussain, Jawed, Mughal & Shafique, 2022:2). The high school learners were asked to share their feelings on the following subject: "How did you feel: ...not seeing your friends, not attending school, not attending any social gatherings at church, not attending any social gatherings with your friends, and not attending any sports activities or cultural activities?"

These feelings are presented in four sub-themes, namely:

- 4.1: Friends and social networks,
- 4.2: Feelings regarding school,
- 4.3: Feelings regarding church and

4.4: Feelings regarding sport and culture.

As seen in the Figure 4-4 most of the high school learners reported that they were not content with the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown and restrictions.

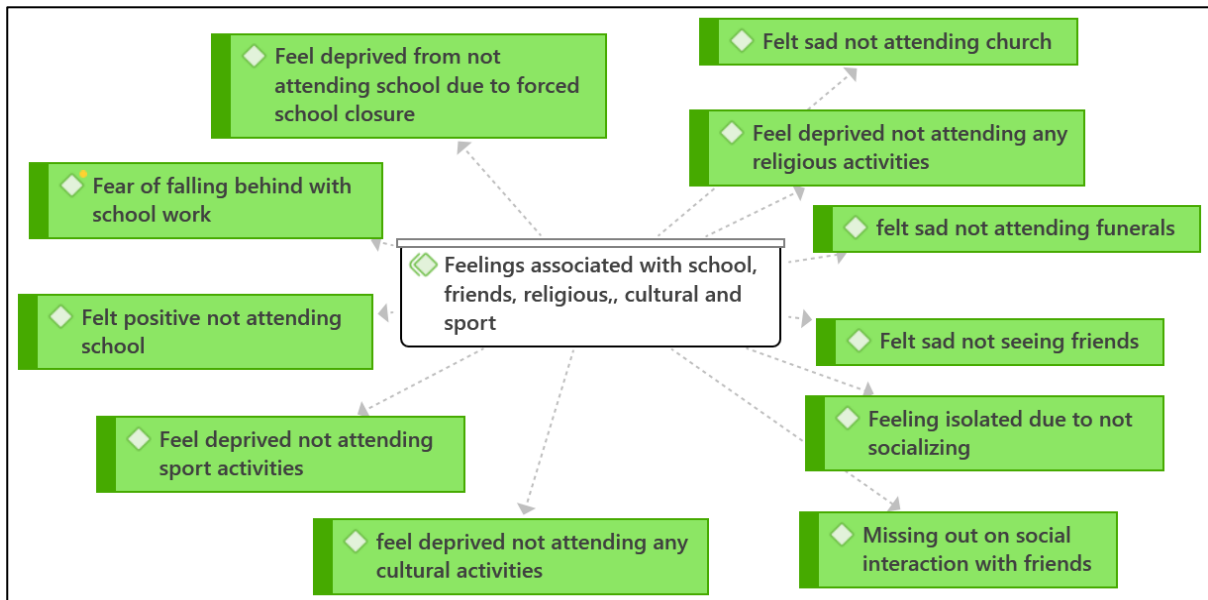


Figure 4-4: Overview of feelings presented by the high school learner during the nationwide lockdown

4.4.4.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Friends and Social networks

To combat the pandemic, social distancing and isolation were widely used as non-pharmacological measures to limit the disease's spread and population contamination (Almeida, *et al.*, 2021:2). Learners were informed that they could not socialize with their peers, and storylines below support this:

“At first, I was happy about it...don't want to lie, I'm not going to school. Staying at home the whole time until I realized how badly it affected my mental health. Being isolated away from people not being able to socialize and experience more of the outside world.” 11 F

“I felt very sad... because sometimes without my friends, I just feel alone because, you know, when you are used to your friends being there for you and all of the sudden,

they're not there, so you feel like you are alone.” 17 I

“...I found it difficult and during the run cause the interactions we had with the friends...was very limited and also trying to explore outside of this would become very limited. So overall say it was it was more of not a nice [uh] lock down. ...something that. you'd like to experience every time.” 24 LL

“It is very sad. Like I missed socializing with my friends.” 8 DD

The narratives from participants like **11 F** and **17 I** highlight the initial relief of not having to attend school, which quickly turned into feelings of loneliness and mental health challenges due to isolation. This reflects the psychological effects of social distancing, where the lack of regular social interaction leads to feelings of loneliness and distress.

Participant **24 LL**'s experience of limited interactions and the restricted ability to explore outside spaces underscores the broader impact of lockdown measures on social life. Similarly, **8 DD**'s expression of missing socializing with friends emphasizes the emotional toll of being cut off from regular social networks. These experiences are corroborated by research, such as the study by October *et al.* (2021:3), which discusses the psychological effects of social isolation resulting from lockdown restrictions. Being with people is often a coping strategy, especially in trying times; thus, the absence of social support can exacerbate feelings of distress and loneliness (Rich, Butler-Kruger, Sonn, Kader & Roman, 2022:8).

The challenges of social isolation and limited interactions are not unique to COVID-19 but were common in various disasters and pandemics. In scenarios where social distancing is necessary, whether due to health risks or other dangers, similar feelings of loneliness and mental health challenges are likely to arise (Sheek-Hussein, *et al.*, 2021:4). The value of social support as a coping mechanism in difficult times is a recurring theme in disaster management and mental health interventions. The need for connectedness and the psychological impact of its absence are key considerations in planning responses to any crisis (Rahmani, *et al.*, 2022:482). Understanding the experiences during COVID-19 can inform strategies for future crises. Developing ways

to maintain social connections, even when physical proximity is limited, is essential for supporting mental health and emotional well-being in times of crisis.

The storylines under the theme of social distancing and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic provide valuable insights into the psychological impact of such measures. These insights are relevant not only for the current pandemic but also for understanding and preparing for similar challenges in future crises.

4.4.3.2 Sub-theme 4.2: Feelings regarding School

Under the sub-theme "Feelings Regarding School" during the COVID-19 pandemic, the storylines provided by the participants offer a range of perspectives on how the disruption of traditional schooling impacted high school learners. These experiences can be linked to the broader context of educational disruptions during pandemics and other crises.

"I was angry even when lockdown occurred and we didn't do all the things we were supposed to do in grade 7, so we got to grade 8 it became a little bit more difficult because a lot of the work we had not completed and most grade sevens, they have the end of the year farewell and their entrepreneurs day, ...we never had any of that. So, I experienced it was... very difficult and..." 21 K

"...experience it as hard life because I was scared if like let's say for my exam, that you going have to write? Because we didn't have time to you know for the teachers to teach us because we were staying at home, and I went to put Mpumalanga far away from my school. " 6 CC

"I was so happy. Not in a bad..., but I felt happy because we used to not see the teachers, do not have a lot of work." 13 G

"I was happy about the idea...I didn't want to see teachers honestly. Teachers are just too much stress and books and all that..." 18 II

"We got to spend time at home. You could stay with the family. We got to actually take

somewhat of a break from school, so it wasn't really that bad of an experience.” 3 B

Participant **21 K**'s frustration about missing key academic and social experiences in grade 7, which led to difficulties in grade 8, highlights the disruption in the educational continuum caused by the lockdown. The concern expressed by **6 CC** about the impact of missed classroom time on exams, reflects a common anxiety among learners regarding their academic progress during periods of school closure. On the other hand, participants **13 G**, **18 II**, and **3 B** expressed relief and happiness due to the break from the traditional school environment, teacher pressure, and academic workload.

The varied feelings towards school during the pandemic, align with the findings of Widnall, Adams, Plackett, Winstone, Haworth *et al.*, (2022:10), who noted that being removed from the physical school setting provided comfort to many learners and reduced their anxiety. This suggests that while some learners struggled with the lack of structure and missed opportunities, others appreciated the break from the stress associated with the school environment. Some learners preferred spending time at home rather than attending school (Buchanan, Hargreaves & Quick, 2023:1082).

The different emotional responses to school closures during COVID-19 are likely to be mirrored in other situations where education is disrupted, such as natural disasters or other pandemics. Learners may experience a range of emotions, from anxiety and frustration due to interrupted learning to relief from the pressures of the school environment. The pandemic underscores the need for flexibility in educational approaches to cater to diverse learner needs during crises. Tailored support and alternative learning methods can help address the challenges faced by learners in adapting to new learning environments. The psychological impacts of sudden changes in the educational setting are significant. Understanding these impacts is crucial for developing strategies to support the mental health and well-being of learners during crises.

The storylines provide insights into the complex emotional landscape of high school learners in the face of educational disruptions. These insights are relevant for understanding and addressing the challenges faced by learners in similar crisis situations, highlighting the need for adaptable and supportive educational frameworks.

4.4.4.3 Sub-theme 4.3: Feelings regarding church

The relationship between devotion to faith and health is a growing field of research, demonstrating a constant connection between religious involvement and improvements in both mental and physical well-being. This phenomenon becomes especially important during periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has placed significant emotional and physical burdens on people. Examples that demonstrate this connection are the following narratives from learners:

“I don't feel quite well because church is the... only place I go to when I need to like talk about something and I literally do that when I'm at church and like I can literally communicate with God when I'm at church and... with the people around me at church.” **16 HH**

“It, it was bad. Yeah, it was bad because some of my friends are there and family at church. So just kind of bad because, like I said, I like to see people and I like to talk to people” **1 A**

“That was bad for me because I'm very religious. I like being in church a lot.” **25 M**

Proactive participation of religious communities provides tremendous solace during pandemics and promote effective communication about pandemic response. Some research indicates a rise and strengthening of religion during the pandemic (Sisti, Buonsenso, Moscato, Costanzo, Malorni. 2023:14).

Religious rituals and beliefs have a crucial role in providing psychological solace and effective coping strategies. They function as catalysts for societal cohesion, optimism, and adaptability, assisting citizens in managing the turbulent obstacles posed by unforeseen occurrences such as a pandemic. Furthermore, as emphasised by Hemberg, Sundqvist, Korzhina, Östman, Gylfe *et al.* (2024:10) the pandemic has made teenagers and young adults particularly susceptible. Their dependence on social connections is vital for the robust development of their identity, personality, and perspective. The previously cited story lines emphasise this susceptibility and the

crucial requirement for constructive conversation and relationships during difficult periods.

4.4.4.4 Sub-theme 4.4: Feelings regarding sport and culture

The loss of sports and cultural involvement during the nationwide lockdown affected the development of a balanced individual. These activities promote one's physical wellness, mental health, and interpersonal abilities, all of which are crucial elements of a high school learner's progress. After the regulations were reduced it led to more physical activity, social relationships, and improved mental health (Shepherd, *et al.*, 2021:2; Sikorska, *et al.*, 2021:80), as indicated in the following narratives:

“Well, attending sport like I love sport. I’m... a sports person and that’s my game also to become a sports person. So, I was playing soccer. So, our coach told us that our guys we wouldn’t like to go back and train or do any like football matches or league matches and then we all said like, imagine training alone at home, you understand? So, it was your responsibility at the end to make sure that you get fit, and you do the work alone. So that maybe when the coronavirus finishes, which we don’t know of. Maybe when the coronavirus finishes or this lockdown gets done, they won’t come back and... you are on another level. So does your responsibility. So, it was really sad for me to train alone and all that...it’s lonely, understand. And I’m not, I wasn’t used to that like the whole I was like I said I was Grade 9, and I was like 15/16... around there so I wasn’t even used to train alone or do anything alone. So that’s how it is, yes.” 28 NN

“That stopped a lot of things, especially in... it created a bit of an inconvenience. As to not being able to attend any cultural activities, like I said, I am a spiritual being and I’m attending cultural activities and church... things that boost my spirituality.” 11 F

“Yeah, it was bad. Because I love sports like it was very bad.” 7 D

“It was that was difficult because I love being sports. Fitness that’s my thing and yeah, so without fitness, I feel bored. Not really much to do.” 26 MM

It is clear from an emotional standpoint, that the lockdown made most learners feel scared, anxious, depressed, lonely, or stressed, according to research done all over the world. Additionally, learners from low-income families and people with small living spaces experienced these effects to a much higher degree. In addition, it would be beneficial to find out how learners handled lockdowns, considering the various risks to learners' well-being that are being noticed on a global basis. It is pointed out that children live in many domains with various activities, all of which have an impact on their well-being, which cannot be studied from a single perspective, level, or indicator (Sancho, *et al.*, 2021:2). Researchers should be mindful of this.

The theme, and particularly the sub-themes, capture the emotional turmoil experienced by high school learners during the COVID-19 lockdown. These sub-themes, within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, can be analysed by examining the immediate environments (microsystems) of the learners, such as their homes, schools, and community settings, which were significantly altered during the pandemic.

Learners expressed a sense of loss for the regular activities that constitute their daily routines and social identity, highlighting the importance of these activities in their mesosystem, and the interconnection between the various contexts they navigate, such as the relationships between peers at school and other social settings. The learners' narratives about missing their friends and the usual social interactions also underscore the disruption of their social networks within the exosystem. The lack of peer support and engagement reflects a significant shift in their social landscape, which is vital for their psychological well-being and development. The sub-themes reflect the broader macrosystemic impact of COVID-19, which includes societal responses to the pandemic, such as lockdown measures and public health directives. The learners' feelings and reactions are embedded within this broader context, which shapes their understanding and coping mechanisms.

In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or other disasters, it is essential to consider the holistic well-being of high school learners. The ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding the multifaceted effects of such crises on young individuals and underscores the need for supportive measures that address the

disruptions in their microsystems and mesosystems. It also emphasizes the role of the exosystem and macrosystem in shaping the experiences and responses of adolescents during these times. Recognizing the interconnectedness of these systems is crucial in developing interventions that foster resilience and support learners' emotional and social needs during a lockdown and similar restrictive situations (Analisah & Indartono, 2018:240).

4.4.5 Theme 5: Challenges experienced during the nationwide lockdown

In addition to the loss of life, the pandemic has generated a number of issues for families and children, including increasing financial difficulty, unemployment, closures of schools, social exclusion, and anxiety regarding infection. Children and teenagers are at a significant risk of stress linked to the overall psychological impact of the pandemic (Layman, Mann, Smith, Kogan & Kristjansson, 2023:370).

This theme emerged from the discussion of the participants' challenges that they perceived during the nationwide lockdown. The high school learners were asked the following question in this regard: "What challenges did you experience during the nationwide lockdown?" From their replies, the following sub-themes are presented: Social support and communication challenges and financial-related challenges. Figure 4-5 below, shows the challenges the high school learners mentioned during the interviews.

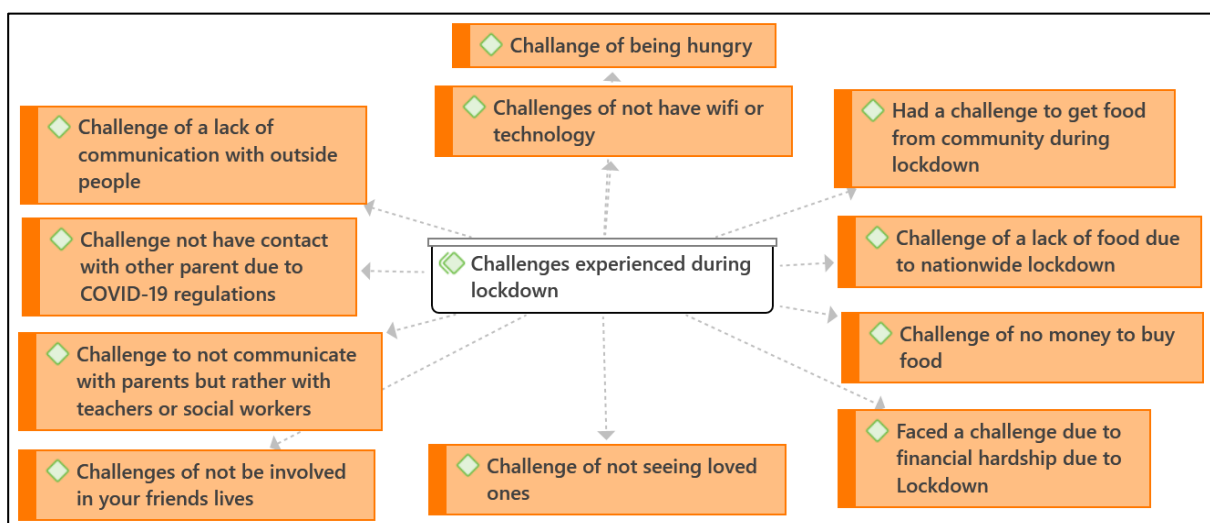


Figure 4-5: Overview of challenges expressed by high school learners during

the nationwide lockdown

4.4.5.1 Sub-theme 5.1: Social support and communication challenges

The storylines provided offer valuable insights into the challenges experienced by high school learners during the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly in terms of their interpersonal relationships and communication. Throughout the pandemic, families across the globe have had to manage the economic, physical, and mental health consequences of both the virus itself and the public health measures implemented to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 (Mulkey, Bearer & Molloy, 2023:1586). Based on these narratives and the referenced literature, a suitable sub-theme under the main theme of "challenges experienced during COVID-19 lockdown" was identified based on these narratives:

“Yes, I think so we because some, some school learners are used to talking to the social workers at school or the teachers at school about what they're dealing with, so since... the... nationwide strike, some learners you know, they don't feel comfortable talking to their family. They need someone that they... know they will give them that advice that they need so. When... the school closed it, it was a very tough journey for them.” 17 I

“[Yeah]. Yes, mam, because most of the learners, like they don't prefer to talk with their parents. [Yeah]. So, it really affected most of them...because it's not easy to... like to talk with your parent and like, tell her or him like because you know, so if she's going to judge you or maybe shout you or something. So, it was really difficult and like we stayed like... home and we stayed for months at home. So, like you were suffering. So [yeah], I...would say...there was a like a really bad impact on us because when you and they're like the trauma of losing... like your loved ones. And you don't have someone to talk to you and [yeah], it was really bad to them. I would say it had, like, a lot of negative impact, I would say, [yeah].” 7 D

“I could not go to my mother who stayed in Krugersdorp. Because we could not drive far. I stayed with my father when the lockdown started, and I could not go back to my mother.” 2 AA

“I would say lot of lack on communicating to people because you won't be able to talk to people in person, but on the phone or computer or whatever. And [yeah].” 26 MM

The first two quotes from participants **17 I** and **7 D** highlight the disruption in social support networks that learners typically access at school, such as social workers and teachers. The lockdown led to a lack of comfortable avenues for discussing personal issues, contributing to increased emotional distress, especially when coupled with the trauma of losing loved ones.

The stories from participants **2 AA** and **26 MM** underscore the challenges in family communication and physical separation caused by the lockdown. These barriers hindered the ability to maintain essential familial connections, leading to feelings of isolation. The study by October *et al.* (2021:8) resonates with these experiences, indicating a decline in socializing and communication within families during the lockdown. This disruption in family dynamics can have significant psychological impacts. According to Andrade *et al.* (2022:208) almost all families faced upheaval and uncertainty during the lockdown period which significantly influenced family connections. Some families lived in cramped conditions and others were separated. Walsh (2020:1) provides a systems perspective on how key family mechanisms mediate members' adaptation to stressors like the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown's persistent pressures exacerbated distress and affected family bonds, demonstrating vulnerability and resilience within family systems.

The first two quotations align with the findings of El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022:7), showing how school environments can provide a space for learners to express themselves freely and feel a sense of belonging. The absence of this support during the lockdown was a significant challenge. October *et al.* (2021:3) highlight the limited data on how COVID-19 has impacted South African families. Understanding these impacts is essential for addressing similar challenges in future disasters.

The sub-theme social support and communication challenges illustrates the broader implications of lockdowns and similar restrictive measures in disasters. It highlights the importance of understanding the psychological and social impacts of such crises

on high school learners and the need for supportive interventions that address disrupted communication and social support networks. This understanding is crucial for developing strategies to support individuals, especially adolescents, in similar crisis situations.

4.4.5.2 Sub-theme 5.2: Financial related challenges

The sub-theme financial related challenges encapsulate the economic hardships and the resultant psychological distress experienced by families during the COVID-19 lockdown. The reported narratives that follow, provide a glimpse into the struggles faced by households, particularly those with school-going children who were accustomed to receiving meals at school and whose parents' faced unemployment and financial instability.

“The challenges I face is that obviously, none of my parents were employed, so they were maybe getting piece jobs every time, so it was hard to get piece jobs, obviously. So, we suffer sometimes we get food, and you see how the country was. So, we also... were going around asking people for help and all that and it was like we're disturbing them at the end. So that was the... main challenge that we faced not getting food like not having the things to keep surviving. Like we'll stay hungry maybe for two days, and now it feels like to stay hungry for two days and we'll drink water and then we will look in the cupboards to check what is there to finish and eat you understand. So, it was a bit depressing for us.” **28 NN**

“Because some of the learners did not have technology to work at home or did not have Wi-Fi and some of them did not have food at home, so they received their lunch at school.” **2 AA**

“A situation because there was unemployment, my mother was sitting at home so she couldn't get money to buy us some food, so we were stressed about the food situation.”
6 CC

“Financial problems, obviously, as you know, like I said in the beginning of this interview, parents wanted money and all this. It was very hard, you know, gaining supplies, like food and toiletries and all that.” 18 II

The shared experiences highlight the grim reality where families were unable to secure basic necessities, such as food, due to loss of income and employment. The accounts of learners like **28 NN**, who faced days without food, reflect the severity of these challenges. Learner **2 AA** touches upon the digital divide that exacerbated educational disparities when remote learning became a necessity. Learners **6 CC** and **18 II** speak to the stress and depression tied to the financial strain and inability to provide for their families. These first-hand accounts are supported by research from Alaba, Hongoro, Thulare, and Lukwa (2022:2), who note the dramatic increase in unemployment and household hunger due to stringent lockdown measures. Furthermore, Munir (2021:4) emphasizes the cessation of school-provided meals, highlighting the compounded effects of food insecurity on already vulnerable populations. Van der Berg and Spaull's (2020:14) findings correlate the experience of hunger with psychological distress, noting its profound impact on children. Gcwabe (2021) further elaborates on the challenging decisions families must make, often at the expense of nutritional needs, which are vital for the healthy development of children.

These narratives and their resonance with broader research can be understood within the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979). The microsystem of the learners—encompassing their immediate environments like home and school—was disrupted by the lockdown, directly impacting their access to food and education. The exosystem, consisting of the employment market and economic structures, indirectly affected the learners through the unemployment of their parents. The macrosystem, inclusive of societal attitudes towards poverty and governmental responses to the pandemic, shaped the overarching conditions in which these hardships occurred (Godber & Atkins, 2021:5). In addition, the chronosystem, which takes into account the timing of life events and socio-historical circumstances, is significant as these challenges were exacerbated by the sudden onset of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown (Hayes, *et al.*, 2017:7).

The financial challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect issues that could arise during other disasters and pandemics, where economic structures are disrupted, and social support systems are strained. Understanding these challenges within the interconnected layers of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory can inform the creation of robust support systems that address both the immediate and indirect needs of children and families during crises, ensuring that interventions consider the various ecological levels impacting individuals.

The financial struggles outlined in these narratives, supported by empirical research, underscore the importance of a holistic approach to aid during disasters. Such an approach should consider all levels of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems to ensure comprehensive support for families facing economic hardship in any crisis scenario.

4.4.6 Theme 6: Enhanced Family Support and Resilience During Lockdown

This theme captures how the COVID-19 lockdown, despite its challenges, facilitated stronger emotional connections and resilience within families. The high school learners' narratives revealed that they received substantial emotional support from their immediate and extended family members, leading to enhanced family bonding and resilience during this difficult period.

They comforted me. They gave me hope that it will all stop one day, and things will go back to normal.” 11 F

“My mother used to say, like if you are together, nothing will keep us down. If you're feeling lonely, talk to us. Then we'll find a way to lift up your spirits. So [yeah], they give me love and support every day.” 19 J

“Well, they didn't have much. They didn't have much to help with, but then they always like motivated me. That's the... kind of help that they gave to me. They... only could help like maybe something that I didn't understand. Maybe when I was reading my schoolbooks or study, maybe I ask them a question and then they would help me with

that. That's the only support that they could give me anything so they couldn't really give me the other kind of support, like helping me train you understand. You know, you cannot really do anything when there's nothing in your stomach, you understand me, you see? So, I will do that alone and then I will just say better days will come.” **28 NN**

“I wouldn't say it was a good experience, but it was more of like having to socialize and knowing your family better than the days that you would know them with. And basically, it was more of like a family time and [yeah].” **12 FF**

“We used to stay as one and we used to bond as a family.” **13 G**

“I experienced it well because it has given me more quality time with my family to bond with them and understand them.” **25 M**

“...was normal, was happy, made jokes and just went on.” **2 AA**

These accounts illustrate the critical role of family in providing emotional support, which is crucial for fostering resilience in challenging times. The experiences align with the findings of Rich *et al.* (2022:6-7), who emphasize the importance of mutual support within the family as a key element in navigating pandemic challenges and increasing family resilience. Further, Chen and Bonanno (2020:52) highlight the importance of positivity, social support, and camaraderie in coping with unpredictable factors during a crisis like COVID-19. The family's role in maintaining a positive atmosphere, indulging in laughter and fun, and utilizing online contact to lessen social isolation has been invaluable. Learner's ability to deal with the problems posed by disasters is largely dependent on the state of their families and the community's ability to support the individuals, families, and systems that make up the community system as a whole (Masten, 2021:8).

In line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, these narratives emphasize the microsystem's role, particularly the immediate family environment, in shaping the learners' experiences during the lockdown. Protective factors within this local context, such as emotional support and positive family interactions, play a crucial

role in developing personal resilience and coping mechanisms (Coetzee & Venter, 2016:3).

The resilience and coping strategies developed in the microsystem have broader implications for the macrosystem, influencing societal attitudes towards family support and resilience during crises. Moreover, understanding these dynamics can guide the development of community and societal strategies to support families and individuals in future disasters and pandemics (Koller, dos Santos Paludo & de Morais, 2019:212).

In conclusion, this theme highlights the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family dynamics, underscoring the importance of emotional support and resilience within the family unit. These insights, grounded in both the learners' narratives and relevant literature, are crucial for understanding the role of family support in navigating crises and can inform strategies to strengthen familial resilience in similar situations.

4.4.7 Theme 7: Impact of school closure

The majority of high school learners referred to the important function of schools as not only providing educational needs but also emotional and material needs. Two sub-themes emerged from this question: "Schools provide for different needs of learners, not only educational but emotional and material needs for example food. During the nationwide lockdown schools were closed and school social workers also did not work. Do you think that learners' needs have suffered as a result? And if yes why?" These two sub-themes are: Financial and material impact and therapeutic and supportive impact.

4.4.7.1 Sub-theme 7.1: Financial and material impact

Schools were forced to close due to the COVID-19 regulations and learners did not receive any material needs or food from the schools. The following quotations express this:

"Yes, I believe that learners need to have suffered because, for example, there

learners who don't really have the privilege to sleep with a stomach that has food in it. So, I feel like a lot of people could not they couldn't supply... What can I say? They couldn't donate the food to them because of the COVID-19 regulations. They were not allowed to come in contact with each other or visit each other that. often, so I think they were affected by this because they couldn't get anyone to come and help them as usual before the lockdown has happened.” 15 H

“Yes. They have suffered because some of them get food here at school. They eat once a day, so for them not attending school made it very hard for them because they don't receive food at home or any kind of support at home. Having to come to school getting everything you need here at school, some of us get pads here at school because they give us pads... as girls, they get food. We have a social worker that helps us with our problems, whereby we can go to her for counselling and tell her what... was bothering us. So not coming to school made it difficult because you needed someone to talk to and there wasn't someone to talk to, because you can't always talk to your parents about it. You needed food. There's no food at home where you needed pads when your parents didn't have money to get your pads.” 22 KK

“Yes, they have a lot because I stay next to an informal settlement and they used to receive... they used to receive food from school, so because they didn't come to school for a very long time, they couldn't. They didn't have basic needs such as food. ...the school also provided cosmetics for them. They couldn't because the schools were..., so they did suffer a lot for a very long time, for that matter.” 9 E

“Yes, they... suffered a lot because if there were social workers in school, they were helping a lot of kids because other kids are at home, they don't have food. So, when they go to school, they get a chance to eat something they provide for them everything they need especially the food so they can fill their stomach to feel very good, [yeah].”

10 EE

The above storylines confirm the view of Alaba *et al.* (2022:13) that school feeding programmes have traditionally served as a vital safety net for children who are starving in areas with limited resources. By promoting better nutrition and education, school health programmes have benefited public health, especially for vulnerable populations

like the poorest learners. Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the closure of the majority of schools worldwide, leaving children increasingly defenceless and malnourished. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic's disruption of safety nets as a result of severe lockdown measures, can be blamed for the rising poverty-related hunger inequality among learners in South Africa.

Many South African learners depend on school feeding schemes. The closure of government schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic during strict lockdown had a significant impact on these learners. South African children's rights to education were at risk by school closures, especially for those from disadvantaged households (Fouché, *et al.*, 2020:2-3).

4.4.7.2 Sub-theme 7.2: Therapeutic and supportive impact

The learners' accounts underscore the multifaceted impact of the pandemic, highlighting not only financial and material hardships but also the absence of therapeutic support typically provided by school social workers. Their experiences reflect a disparity in support received:

“Yes, I think so. Must I give like most of the children at home? They suffer like some... other learners don't like... home because their parents used to fight and when they school, they have their friends... happy. They can talk to their social workers and they sometimes they don't have much food. It's good they give them support, food, and everything. So, I think it really impacted on those children.” 19 J

“I think... their needs suffered because of most... of the time we get help from social workers from schools, especially from schools. Like if we have a problem at home or maybe something that we need or and then we go and ask our social workers at school. So, by that time when social workers were not working at all, and we were not going to school. Oh, and then it became like... we're gonna reach out. I mean, you will pray. Yes, I know. We will pray. My God will make up something. But then how would you reach out to that social worker? So that was the problem... Yes, and I'm talking for every kid and every person by that time was suffering like it was a bit depressing for them as well because of they didn't really have any other person to reach out. ...many

of their parents, they lost their jobs and all that... So, when we're really looking out for help, but then until we had to wait until the lockdown finished and then just the only way that we will get a solution.” **28 NN**

“Yes. So, they were suffering from, you know, food and needs that they used to get from school. So, I would say. Those kids really...needed a person to come and visit them every weekend so that they can check how their well-being is and how they could to help them...” **12 FF.**

“...and... the therapies they offer to call it, also not available at home.” **8 DD**

Learner **19 J** points out the crucial role of school social workers in providing emotional support for learners dealing with domestic conflicts. The lack of this support during the pandemic was keenly felt, especially by those who relied on the school as a safe haven from turbulent home environments. Learner **28 NN** emphasizes the gap left by the unavailability of school social workers, who often serve as a vital resource for learners dealing with personal and familial issues. The lockdown not only limited access to these support systems but also compounded the stress experienced by learners whose families faced job losses.

Learner **12 FF** touches on the need for continuous support, suggesting that regular check-ins on learners' well-being would have been beneficial during the lockdown, especially for those dependent on school resources. Learner **8 DD** further remarks on the lack of accessible therapeutic services at home, which typically would be offered in the school setting.

These narratives bring to light the ongoing disparities in support and resources available to less privileged learners, a situation that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. The disproportionate impact of lockdowns and school closures on underprivileged communities highlights significant gaps in social equity. The pandemic has intensified the challenges faced by these communities, bringing into sharp focus the inequities in access to healthcare, psychosocial support, and basic necessities. Countries are undergoing an economic downturn, and masses of people have lost financial support. This has a bigger impact on disadvantaged families striving to make

ends meet. While some families are struggling, others are sinking further into poverty. The load on social services has restricted access to social and health support putting children's interests at risk. The urgent need to address these disparities is underscored by studies like Munir (2021:2,13) and Okafor (2021:3), which emphasize the severe effects of the pandemic on vulnerable populations and the broader implications for human dignity and social justice.

The narratives highlighting the financial and material hardships faced by learners during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the loss of essential services like school feeding programs, resonate with the broader impacts of pandemics and disasters. These experiences align with global trends observed during similar crises, where the closure of schools and other institutions disrupts vital support systems, exacerbating inequalities and vulnerabilities, particularly among disadvantaged populations. Disasters can jeopardise children's sense of safety, stability, and normality, leading to increased occurrences of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, mood swings, and other adverse emotional responses (Miller & Hui, 2022:1; Pfefferbaum, Jacobs, Van Horn & Houston, 2016:3). Ensuring a prompt and secure reintegration into school following a traumatic incident such as a wildfire is essential for preserving a stable network of assistance for children, as educational institutions provide vital structures and services such as meals and counselling (Miller & Hui, 2022:1).

By applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, a comprehensive understanding can be gained of how school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have affected learners not just educationally, but also emotionally, materially, and socially, highlighting the interconnected nature of these systems and the importance of considering all levels of influence in addressing the needs of young people.

4.4.8 Theme 8: Suggestions for Social Work Practice

The research findings suggest that school social workers are deeply worried about lack of fundamental resources such as food, housing, and mental health assistance for both learners and families during the COVID-19 pandemic (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:79). The high school learners were specifically asked a question about their suggestions

to address challenges through this question: “Based on your experiences during the nationwide lockdown what do you think social workers can do to help children who feel unsafe, needy, or dismayed in their home situation?” Figure 4-6 below, shows the suggestions for social work practice made by high school learners to address the challenges.

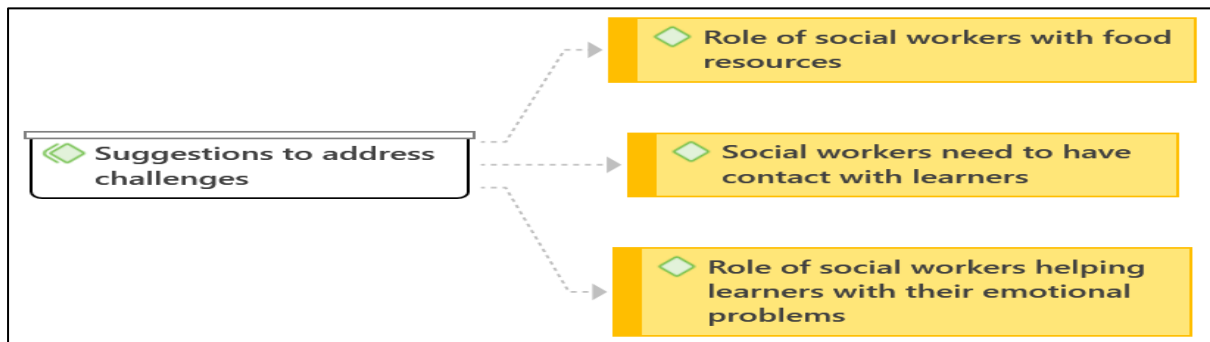


Figure 4-6: Overview of the suggestions by high school learners to address challenges

A significant number of high school learners interviewed voiced that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers needed to sustain their support by keeping in touch with learners. This involved providing food to those enrolled in feeding programmes and aiding them with emotional issues, as illustrated in Figure 4-6 From these discussions, two key sub-themes emerged:

4.4.8.1 Sub-theme 8.1: Ongoing Contact with Social Workers

The pandemic-induced closure of schools had far-reaching effects: educational disruptions, heightened vulnerability among children, and increased child protection risks. These outcomes necessitated the continuous involvement of social workers. Learners particularly emphasized the need for social workers to keep in touch during such challenging times, a sentiment echoed in various statements:

The quotations that follow, confirm that school social workers provide necessary services and play an important role in social support, emotional, crisis intervention, and mental health services to learners. It's crucial to preserve their unique views during pandemics (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:79).

“I think what they should do, what they could have done, it was they could have booked an appointment. They should meet... They could have just made an appointment one-on-one. You know...should meet and talk about anything and...” **10 EE**

“I feel like maybe if they could expand their work from like the schools to other places where children can like get in contact with them outside of school. That could actually help the kids that are in need.” **20 JJ**

“I think they could still open like a mobile office or something where children can go and get help from them, and even though they can't really touch each other or, but they can still communicate and then they can get some advice from them like what to do from hard situations and what they can also do to help with the food and whatever.” **26 MM**

“I think social workers can like they... can give them a phone... that this is the phone number. You can call us. You can call us anytime. We're always here for you or they can go to other schools like...every school. You can do a home where they can stay there and feel safe because they're not safe in their home..., but they can be safe in the other home that the social workers have provided for them.” **5 C**

Learner **10 EE** suggested scheduling one-on-one appointments for personal discussions. Learner **20 JJ** proposed expanding social work services beyond schools to make them more accessible. Learner **26 MM** recommended the idea of a mobile office for children to seek help. Learner **5 C** spoke about providing contact numbers for round-the-clock support and creating safe spaces for those in unstable home environments.

These suggestions align with the broader findings that emphasize the need for social workers to provide uninterrupted support during crises. This could involve regular check-ins, counselling, and addressing risk situations. Such proactive engagement is crucial in ensuring that children's various needs are met during times like the COVID-19 pandemic (Chavez Villegas *et al.*, 2021:6).

The feedback from high school learners clearly indicates the necessity for social

workers to maintain contact with learners during pandemics or other disasters. The pandemic's restriction on service delivery highlighted the need for social workers to develop contingency plans for such events, especially when it comes to vulnerable groups. The ongoing power load-shedding or "blackouts" in South Africa, further exemplifies potential crises where such planning is essential (Muller-Kluits & Slabbert, 2023:16). The comprehensive care provided by social workers should encompass not only immediate needs but also adequate planning for unforeseen situations (Okafor, 2021:4).

School social workers play a vital role in supporting the emotional well-being of learners. They need to consider various factors such as intellectual, emotional, social, and cultural growth, along with physical and emotional security while working with learners and developing services (Reyneke, 2018:80). High school learners shared their experiences, highlighting how social workers could visit them at home, provide emotional support, and assist with family situations (**12 FF**), offer support to learners with suicidal tendencies (**17 I**), and aid in solving problems through social interactions (**23 L, 25 M**).

"They could come and visit mam...so they can actually go to the learners that they knew that they need that in need of social help and they needy of something and helping them in their family situations, they could go... and help them through the national lockdown and give them what they need and actually visiting them every time to check if they're doing well and they can actually help them through a lot and have be their emotional support." **12 FF**

"Now what I would like to add is that I would like to thank the social workers of the school we because they are really helping our school learners a lot because some... school learners experience the...suicidal mind set and with the social work has been there, they can... take them out of that same situation. They can take them out of that situation, and they can...reset their mind, yes." **17 I**

"I would say yes because we don't know what other learners are going through in life, so I think they really needed the social interaction with the teachers and social workers to solve that problems, you see." **23 L**

“I think they can help them just by talking to them and understanding the problem and taking it from there with them.” 25 M

4.4.8.2 Sub-theme 8.2: Continuous Financial and Material Support

The closure of schools also impacted access to government-sponsored nutrition programmes, raising concerns about poor nutrition and its effects on children's health and learning. Learners suggested various ways to ensure continuous support during school closures:

“Has two suggestions, that was my one suggestion, maybe I should go through a bit more details. So again, I'll just explain, I would say like they should get contact with those in learners in need. Right, in order to help them while they're at home while they are in need... the other learners that don't get that much help from their parents. Maybe they could get help from social workers. Maybe to help with food and resources such as like that...” 3 B

“I think maybe I should like... they stay at home and make a huge meal if possible and then wear their safety... equipment and then go to the children's houses because when you sign up for these kinds of things, they have their addresses, then they go to the house and drop off the food there.” 21 K

“They could have not maybe, checked the address of the learners knock, leave the food at the gate then leave.” 13 G

“Yes, I think they have suffered, I feel like though it wasn't possible, but I feel like there had to be means made that maybe in local... halls or something community halls so that there can be support groups for them and if they need something they can just go there. They need food, they can just go there, they need to talk to, they can just go there. But that didn't happen. I don't know I feel like there had to be something made so that they can meet them.” 14 GG

Learner **3 B** talked about contacting learners in need to provide food and resources. Learner **21 K** envisioned distributing meals directly to children's homes. Learner **13 G**

suggested dropping off food at learners' gates. Learner **14 GG** emphasized the need for community support groups where children could receive food and emotional support.

These learner insights underscore the importance of continuous social work support, especially in managing the multifaceted needs of learners during crises. UNICEF (2022:28) also highlights the vast range of mental health and emotional challenges learners face, emphasizing the critical role of social workers in addressing these issues. The absence of school-based services during closures highlights the crucial role of social workers and other child protection professionals in bridging these gaps, particularly in times of crisis (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020:6).

The reduced capacity of schools to address child protection issues during closures points to the need for social workers to maintain contact with learners. This ongoing communication is vital for safeguarding the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of children during crises. The pandemic has thus highlighted the essential role of social workers in maintaining the safety net that schools typically provide, emphasizing the need for innovative and proactive approaches to child protection in times of widespread disruption.

The feedback from the learners, along with the suggestions for social workers to maintain contact during pandemics and disasters, aligns with the broader research indicating that such support can help mitigate heightened risks and challenges faced by children. This is particularly important for those from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the critical role of schools in addressing non-academic needs of children, creating an opportunity for programmatic and policy changes to enhance the future delivery of non-academic school-based services and supports (Hoffman & Miller, 2020:301).

The continuous interaction with social workers during school closures as suggested addresses the microsystem and mesosystem levels, highlighting the direct assistance inside the immediate school setting and the vital links between home and school. This sub-theme also highlights the importance of preserving these contacts and bridging gaps in situations where physical educational surroundings are not available.

Continuous financial and material support involves the exosystem and macrosystem, which encompass broader community resources, government policies, and society norms. The pandemic, being a significant societal occurrence, changed these systems, highlighting the importance for social workers to negotiate larger systems for the welfare of learners and indicating systemic disparities and essential policy modifications. Furthermore, the significance of social workers in providing mental health and emotional assistance during the pandemic emphasises the necessity of hands-on support within the school environment (microsystem). This also draws attention to the chronosystem, taking into account the socio-historical circumstances of the pandemic and how it has affected the development of learners.

The next section presents research findings in reference to the role of school social workers.

4.5 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

Given that school social workers are one of the various professionals who provide social assistance, emotional and social development, crisis counselling, and therapy to learners and their families in schools, it is important to document the distinctive viewpoints that social workers offer during a pandemic (Capp *et al.*, 2021). As in the case of the learners, the research findings related to the school social workers' perspectives, are discussed using supporting quotations from the transcripts and narratives of the interviews. The nine themes and their associated sub-themes are listed in Table 4-4. The results are subjected to a literature control, with reference sources from the literature either supporting or refuting the findings. Nine themes emerged during the analysis of the data obtained from the six school social workers who participated in the study. The themes and sub-themes are presented, with supporting quotations in the form of coded narratives from the school social workers.

4.5.1 Theme 1: Job description and daily functions as a school social worker

This theme's findings emerged from the discussion with the school social workers on their role and functions of a school social worker regarding their involvement with high

school learners. The question that was posed was: “Kindly tell me about your job description and daily functions.” The answers to this question are summarised as follows: Psycho-social support, counselling, and child protection.

Most of the school social workers reported that they do psycho-social support, counselling, child protection and drug prevention programmes. They work closely with the learners, parents, and teachers. The following quotations illustrate this:

“OK, so I'm a school based social worker. I am responsible for Mabopane and part of City Schools. So basically, what I do is provide psychosocial support to learners at those different schools when there's a need. Psychosocial support in terms of maybe bullying, learner pregnancy abuse, neglect included what else? Any cases that need a social worker, maybe learners who are suicidal, they are also referred to us and obviously, we refer to relevant stakeholders. What else we do? Awareness. Different awareness programs at different schools. Awareness based on maybe the need of the school, for example, some schools can be bullying, some can be abused, cyberbullying is also a problem in high schools. So [yeah], we do awareness based on the issues that we've encountered. By that, we foresee that the school might have... a problem, right? So basically, [yeah] in short, ...that's what I do.” 1 O

“OK, school social worker and the school social workers core function is we are at intake and field. So, the intake being all the cases are reported to us. Then we do assessment, and we refer to other stakeholders or within the Department of Social Development or Department of Health... As long as we are able to make sure that the children receive the best services that is needed and we also do the... crisis intervention, we do childcare protection. Our focus mainly is on childcare, childcare, protection, we do the removals, we do form 36, place the children, go to court. We also do the programs early intervention programs, the program, which is focused on the drug abuse. We also do the group sessions and participate in parent meetings, in stakeholders' meetings. [Yeah], we work in a multi-disciplinary team within the District Department and [yeah], that's basically what we do actually we have reporting to two departments. Here under multidisciplinary team in social work, in social development under intake and field.” 3 P

“My job description is to offer psychosocial support to the learners the pupils [yeah] at school and their parents as well. And also, to assist the teachers, so their educational set up, their academics wherever the children are struggling. Then I come in, especially social related, behavioural related and even emotional.” 6 QQ

The nature of their daily functions and responsibilities are confirmed by Reyneke (2018:84) explaining that the aim of social work is to improve people's social functioning by empowering and liberating individuals to improve their well-being, promoting societal change, and solving problems with consideration for interpersonal connections. Social work intervenes where people interact with their surroundings by drawing on ideas of human behaviour. This encompasses the school setting as well, as it serves as a venue for learners to socialize with people. Strengthening children's social functioning and fostering a supportive social environment are essential to ensuring children's well-being and realizing their right to education because the school environment has such a significant impact on their current and future development (Reyneke, 2018:84).

Schools do not only provide in educational needs but also in material and emotional needs and therefore the Department of Basic Education utilized an ecological systems approach to comprehend and address learners' needs. Learners are living in an ecosystem; therefore, school social work services must be seen from this angle as a subsystem that interacts with peers, families, the school, and the community inside the larger educational system (van Sittert & Wilson, 2018:16).

4.5.2 Theme 2: The role of the school social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic

This theme emerged from the discussion about the role of school social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The question was: “What was the role that you played as a social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic?” Figure 4-7 provides an overview

of the role social workers played during the strict nationwide lockdown.

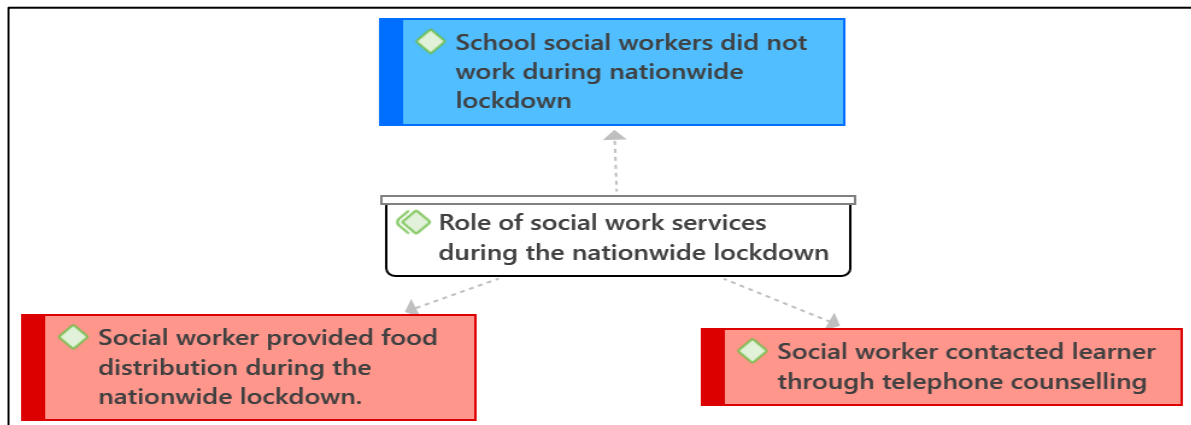


Figure 4-7: Overview of the role school social workers played during the nationwide lockdown

4.5.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: No services

This sub-theme explores the varied experiences and capacities of social workers during the COVID-19 crisis. It recognises that while some social workers were able to adapt and continue providing essential services, others faced significant barriers.

The school social workers reported that at the time of the strict lockdown period, they could only provide restricted services. The storylines below confirm this:

“No, we were not coming to work.” 1 O

“You know it, as I said it, it was difficult. And the thing that I learned from lockdown as a social work with service delivery to high school learners. We... were unable to reach the learners, we were unable to reach them at all. Because remember, it's lockdown. We are at home and it's frustrating as well to know that you have learners like, you know, at this time, I would have seen... maybe they are the Grade 12 learners giving intervention of some sort motivations and... [Yeah], it was frustrating.” 3 P

“Wait I work from home. [Yeah]. The only time I could you know, at the beginning we didn't work, [yeah].” 4 PP

The above findings accentuated that school social workers were not able to continue working when vulnerable people needed them most and this was one of the worst setbacks brought on by the strict COVID-19 restrictions. It goes on to say that the majority of incidences of physical and sexual assault occurred during this time, because women and children were ‘imprisoned’ in their homes and had nowhere to escape to (Gwebu, 2021). The most vulnerable were denied access to social support due to lockdown restrictions and social isolation, which was essential to overcoming suffering and loss on all levels due to the pandemic.

Bhagwan (2023:191-192) stated that for a large number of individuals social work services were not available during the COVID-19 lockdown. A more coordinated effort combining interdisciplinary teamwork to address the effects of difficulties resulting from the pandemic, was needed and social work's lack of attention to the pandemic was regretted.

This research demonstrates how social work organizations were caught off guard by the pandemic and had to swiftly adjust before launching appropriate methods of operation (Harrikari *et al.*, 2021:1669).

4.5.2.2 Sub theme 2.2: Telephonic Support and Counselling by Social Workers

This sub-theme delves into the adaptation of social workers to provide continued support through telephonic services. It examines how social workers utilized phone calls to offer counselling, guidance, and emotional support to learners. This mode of communication was crucial in maintaining a connection with learners, especially for those requiring regular mental health support or guidance in navigating the pandemic's challenges as shown in the below quotations:

“They were texting you because we have pool phone. They were texting and I would respond. We would provide counselling telephonically. But it was... not as efficient as it was in person, yes.” 4 PP

“...and I would also do telephone counselling assisting families intervening for them wherever they are struggles because I was working remotely.” 6 QQ

“...Maybe communicating over the phone because follow-ups literally would just do them over the phone. No home visits, no school visits. Nothing. [Yeah].” 1 O

In the different articles, telephone counselling is referred to as telehealth counselling, telephonic services, teletherapy, or telematical counselling. In the light of the above, the rejected field of telehealth, is here to stay and not going away. In addition, the advantage of video communication by means of Zoom and Microsoft Teams software is also readily available (Crawford, 2021:458). In most countries, the COVID-19 situation resulted in the suppression of education at all levels and the forced confinement of the populace to their homes. Thus, to guarantee the social protection of learners, social workers must telematically and digitally assure the educational community of their support. Social workers must take even more action in these COVID-19-related and similar situations. They must follow up the situations of vulnerable learners via phone or video call with the reference persons concerned, to determine their needs and whether support or protection is needed (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020:795). Learning how to conduct teletherapy and having access to sufficient technology and the Internet at home, presented additional challenges for some social workers (Weng, 2022:1437).

4.5.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: Limited food distribution efforts

This sub-theme focuses on the role of social workers in facilitating limited food distribution. It reflects on the challenges faced in providing physical resources like by showing her SACSSP registration card to verify that she was a social worker if she was stopped by the authorities. The following storylines are presented:

“I was actually working, although it was the lockdown. I was working, especially with regard to the food distribution because most people lost their jobs. So, I remember I went to several homes distributing grocery packs, and I actually had my social work things so that whenever they wanted to stop me then I would say no, I'm just going to help the family because most of the parents would call the school and then the school would call me. So, I was the only one who could at least move around and deliver the packages.” 6 QQ

“And you couldn't estimate what the problems were at home, was there food and that those things.” 4 PP

“I'm not so sure if it was going to be possible...., remember, most of the children the only time they... receive food and services was through the schools and when schools were closed and we don't, we're not even allowed to go to, you know, to use the GG cars to conduct home visit.” 4 PP

The findings reflect a particular reaction from school social workers working during COVID-19, who felt helpless against institutional and governmental guidelines and policies and on the other hand were not being able to fulfil their ethical duty. However, others expressed concern that they would have to carry out "business as usual" (such as making in-person home visits) or adhere to new protocols, which they believed to be risky. Ultimately, it may be determined that the appropriate course of action was a novel approach that was prohibited by either the previous or the new regulations, for example being allowed to distribute food to clients. Social work practices are specifically examined from an ethical perspective, considering what constitutes ethical practice in a pandemic, how this is tried and/or done, and the lessons that may be learned for professional ethics in general (Banks & Rutter, 2022:3461,3469).

Harrikari *et al.* (2021:1651) demonstrate the social workers' steadfast adherence to professional ethical standards, as there is concern over the nutritional intake of learners during the closure of schools. The ethical standards of social work and the moral reasoning of social workers were inextricably intertwined in the writers' works with the issue of the "professional competencies, working skills, and knowledge base" being required and applied in new circumstances. Social workers appear to need specialized skills during and whilst preparing for times of crisis, like extraordinary flexibility, operational preparedness for unforeseen events, and problem-solving talents.

The functions of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as represented in the different sub-themes discussed here, perfectly correspond with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Telephonic support and counselling present their influence within the microsystem, directly impacting learners' immediate

environments. The efforts in the restricted allocation of food illustrate the relationship with the exosystem, wherein social workers work alongside broader societal processes and institutions. The macrosystem's influence is emphasised by specific roles and limitations, with the pandemic causing significant changes in larger society's attitudes, values, and policies. These positions also demonstrate the dynamics of the mesosystem, establishing links between various surroundings such as home and school. Moreover, the influence of the chronosystem is apparent, as the pandemic, a significant societal event, has completely altered the functioning of these institutions and the responsibilities of social workers within them. The complex interaction between different ecological systems highlights the nuanced and flexible nature of social work practice in addressing global crises.

4.5.3 Theme 3: The experiences of school social workers during the nationwide lockdown with service delivery to high school learners

Social workers' experiences throughout this unique period are highlighted by their efforts to meet the diverse needs of the high school learners and their families, for example their role as social worker, their personal well-being, and online communication and learning (Matlakala, *et al.*, 2021:194). The school social workers were asked the following question: "What were your experiences during the nationwide lockdown with service delivery to high school learners?" Their experiences with service delivery to high school learners during the nationwide lockdown are presented under the following sub-themes: Challenges in remote communication and service delivery, increased risks and vulnerabilities of learners, and emotional strain and helplessness among school social workers.

4.5.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Challenges in Remote Communication and Service Delivery:

Since the pandemic, social workers have reported engaging in telephonic counselling, although their comfort and ease with using telephonic means for this, varies significantly (Beltran, *et al.*, 2023:432). The following storylines encompass the difficulties faced in telephonic communications, technical limitations, and the inability

to address comprehensive needs:

“...It was difficult because at times you want to render service, the child is COVID positive, you do interviews, telephonically. And in social work, the most important thing is the... nonverbal behaviour, because what the person is saying verbally can contradict what you see, which will also assist in identifying the discrepancy...” 3 P

“Unnatural. And then the other thing is sound. A simple thing like sound, especially on... your phone you know then they break up on their side, there's no signal on my side. There's no signal. So, it's very superficial. It's very unnatural. No, we... did it because that was the only thing we got. We did it. We need to help the people but...you know, if there's really something happening to that person during your session that is serious you...are not there to comfort them or... to help them, or they make sure that they are safe...you're not there.” 5 Q

“No, it wasn't, actually. One couldn't really go to the learners. I could only go to main important things like food, and then most of the things I could do them telephonically. But now there were the ones they didn't have telephones, data, all those things. It was very difficult, so there was a lot of, one can say because when the schools reopened, you could see that the children were actually very different behaviourally, emotionally, even mentally, you know, so it was a lot of work that you had to start from scratch, now, again, building them, rebuilding their confidence and having to help them open up.” 6 QQ

According to the above responses, conducting telephonic interviews were not recommended for interviews, despite being helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns about phone consultations include the inability to see the clients' facial expressions during interviews. However, if the problem has already been determined, there have been enough prior exchanges, and there is a relationship of trust, then it might be beneficial (Sheek-Husseini, *et al.*, 2021:6). There were difficulties nevertheless, particularly in initial encounters. For instance, social workers who investigated domestic abuse complaints claimed they were unable to determine if they were chatting privately with the victim or if someone else was present and listening in on them (Truell & Crompton, 2020:14).

An additional revelation stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic was the necessity of face-to-face communication for the efficient provision of social services. In social services, you are always going to need that “human touch,” emphasizing the idea that in-person interactions should once again take centre stage in social work (Schmid & Bradley, 2022:13). It is not reasonable to presume that learners in a home would have unrestricted or exclusive access to their cell phones during a lockdown to access support. Another problem is that numerous children in a single home have to share a cell phone, and data are expensive (van der Berg & Spaul, 2020:8).

4.5.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: Increased Risks and Vulnerabilities for Learners

The majority of the school social workers reported that they were affected by knowing that the learners were in non-conducive circumstances and not able to give amicable services or at least that there was a platform to deal with these issues. This is confirmed by the following storylines:

“...We were actually needed because many learners lost their parents during that period, and we were not actually there to support them. That was the saddest thing. Some were in anxiety and even going back to school, they went back with that anxiety, so it was a lot of chaos at school, but no support was there during that period, specifically when they were not at school. And another thing many learners were abused. Remember, learners are at home and a lot of abuse happens at home. So, you can imagine what was happening at home? No social workers were actually there to...support that or see that. Cause in school at least teachers are able to identify that this learner is not ok, doesn't look well taken care of, so during COVID it was isolation altogether. So, if maybe there was abuse, the abuse is going to increase because no one is going to actually notice that this learner is not ok. So that was the biggest... thing. What else? Yeah, it was the loss of parents the abuse, and the anxiety itself” 1

O

“...because when they were at home, they are very vulnerable at home as the school is actually a safe place. So, most of them would be neglected at home all alone, having no one to go to. And even peer pressure would be in the open because I mean the

whole 8 hours during the day, there's nothing to do. Some of the parents would call them luckily, the children had their books at school, so making homework so the children just keeping them busy was one of the things that they could do, and the ones who had phones, they actually got into some of them got into cyber bullying because the parents would leave them the whole day because remember especially essential service parents who had to go to work. So, you can imagine what was happening to the children alone, so they were vulnerable in the sense of you don't know what's happening. You know who the child is meeting. Remember there's cases of sexual abuse, emotional abuse all those things so the children went through those and especially with the high school one's peer pressure and involvement in drugs and alcohol.” 6 QQ

Social workers have voiced worries and difficulties with the pandemic and the ensuing social distancing regulations, which have an impact on their practice. They debate whether it is better to promote socialization for the client's mental and emotional well-being or to discourage it for the sake of their physical health. Families in child welfare settings are not permitted to have in-person visits, therefore social workers must use critical thinking and creativity to stay in touch with them (Beltran, *et al.*, 2023:430).

The responses above are consistent with other findings that social isolation, stress among parents and other caregivers, and erratic access to housing and food are a few risk factors for child abuse. Learners are no longer under the close supervision of their educators, counsellors, friends, and extended family because school facilities have been closed for several months (Ravichandran *et al.*, 2020:3119).

4.5.3.3 Sub-theme 3.3: Emotional Strain and Helplessness Among Social Workers

This theme reflects the emotional impact of the lockdown on social workers. According to the findings, school social workers are very worried about a shortage of basic needs resources, such as food, shelter, and mental health help for learners and families (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:79). The participants, **4 PP** and **3 P's** storylines, inserted below, wherein the social workers express their frustration and pain about learners being

locked down with their abusers and the lack of ability to help, highlight the feelings of helplessness and emotional strain experienced by professionals in this field during the lockdown (Truell & Crompton, 2020:8).

“I think I can say we were kind like denied opportunity to services. They were in, lock down with them with their abusers, without any help, you may put it that way. Yes, because remember that time it was strictly, you know, there had to be locked down. The [yeah] so they were just that... home with their abusers so I could imagine the frustration, you know, the pain, they went through.” 4 PP

“...it's a challenge as well as a social worker whether I'm rendering the right service. Because it's something new. You are not used to giving service over the telephone. Sadly, you know, yeah, those were the things that you learn as you go. And yeah, it was a challenge. I think it was also challenged to also the learners as well. That's why we end up having suicidal thoughts after the COVID, there were a lot of depression cases, suicidal cases people were frustrated”. 3 P

The experiences of school social workers during the COVID-19 lockdown, as captured in the storylines from social workers, **3 P** and **4 PP**, can be profoundly understood in the context of the broader challenges highlighted in recent literature. The social worker's account of the frustration and pain from knowing that learners were locked down with their abusers, and unable to receive help, reflects a significant dilemma. This narrative aligns closely with the observations made by Capp *et al.* (2021:86), that the universality of COVID-19's impact on communities and the strong commitment of school social workers to serving their school communities, despite personal struggles and concerns.

The situation described by **4 PP** also resonates with the findings of Fouché *et al.* (2020:13). Their research points out that while the laws implemented to shield learners from COVID-19 were crucial for public health, they inadvertently limited the protection that learners received from abuse and neglect. This highlights the unintended consequences of protective measures, which, though essential for safeguarding physical health, simultaneously placed vulnerable learners in potentially harmful

situations. The dual burden faced by social workers during this period is thus illuminated: the pain of witnessing the suffering of those they aim to help, compounded by the frustration of being constrained in their ability to provide necessary support due to the lockdown measures.

Both Capp *et al.* (2021:83) and Fouché *et al.* (2020:15) provide insight that underscore the complexities and emotional challenges faced by school social workers during the pandemic. Their commitment to their roles, despite significant personal and professional hurdles, highlights the need for more nuanced and flexible strategies in child protection and public health policy, especially in times of global crises.

4.5.4 Theme 4: Challenges faced in rendering services to high school learners during the nationwide lockdown

The roles, experiences, and challenges that the social workers faced during the pandemic are interlinked with each other and it presents as a golden thread throughout this study. Figure 4-8 portrays the challenges communicated by the school social workers during the interviews. The question that was asked here is: “From your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown, what challenges did you face in rendering services to high school learners.” The challenges faced were as follows: feeling overwhelmed, limited resources and support and lastly limited knowledge and training.

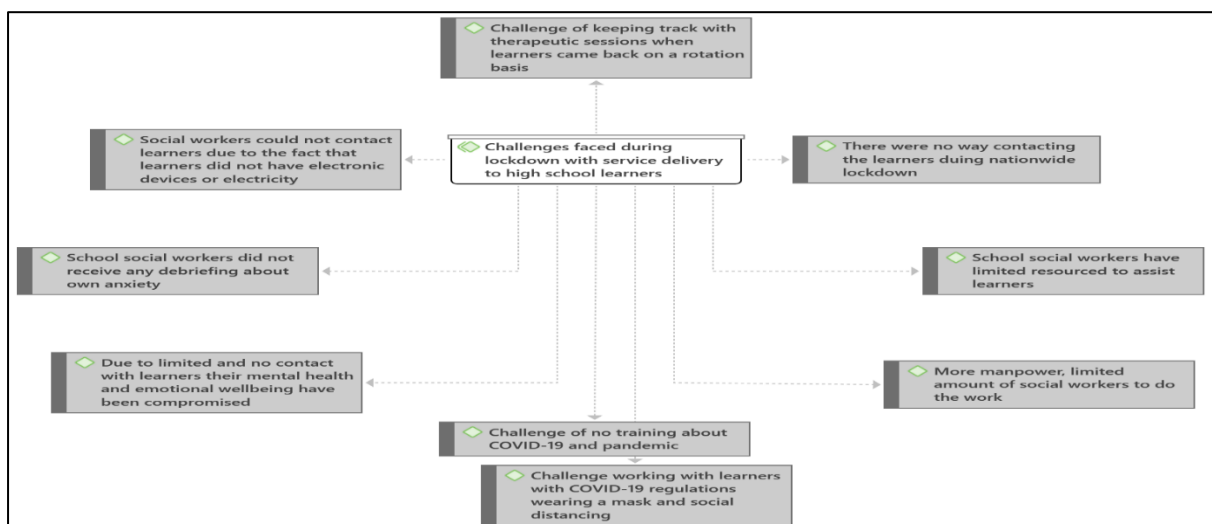


Figure 4-8: Overview of challenges experienced by school social workers during

the nationwide lockdown

4.5.4.1 Sub-theme 4.1: Feeling overwhelmed

Investigating the effects of the pandemic, resulted in the extensive social service assistance schools offer to learners and families having been pointed out. Providing these services remotely and without resources is quite challenging (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:82). This is substantiated by the following quotations as discussed by the school social workers:

“Challenges the...one-on-one interaction and the most of the awareness’s we couldn’t, so they felt alone. Also, even the teachers, it was hectic. Even the teachers, they needed our services, but we couldn’t because of we are also not safe. So [yeah], it was hectic.” **2 OO**

“You know it, as I said it, it was difficult. And the thing that I learned from lockdown as a social work with service delivery to high school learners. We... were unable to reach the learners, we were unable to reach them at all. Because remember, it’s lockdown...”

3 P

“It is mostly electronic and in for those who did not have phones and electricity, they were disadvantaged as we couldn’t reach to them, yes, because we have those, we are servicing areas that they do not have electricity and you know they are very disadvantage and they... don’t even have phones with them do you understand. So, the easy way was to get them everything, you know that you’ll find them in school. So, they were no longer at school they were at home. So, it was a challenge, so we did not service them.” **4 PP**

During the nationwide lockdown, social workers faced unique challenges in providing services to high school learners. They struggled with adapting to remote communication, as seen in their attempts to provide one-on-one interactions and awareness programmes through electronic means. This shift to remote communication led to feelings of isolation and helplessness among both learners and social workers, as they were unable to fully support their clients or ensure their safety.

Compounded by the lack of formal training to deal with the changed circumstances and scarcity of resources, social workers felt overwhelmed and unprepared to address the complex needs arising during the pandemic.

This sense of being overwhelmed is corroborated by research indicating high levels of stress, anxiety, frustration, exhaustion, and feeling overwhelmed among healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Weng, 2022:1432). Many healthcare workers, including social workers, reported increases in emotional exhaustion, sleep troubles, and work-related dread, reflecting the intense pressure and challenges they faced (Weng, 2022:1439). Additionally, a significant portion of healthcare workers felt they lacked adequate emotional support and professional assistance which likely contributed to their feelings of being overwhelmed (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:79). These findings underscore the immense pressure and mental health challenges experienced by helping professionals during this period, highlighting the need for better support and resources.

4.5.4.2 Sub-theme 4.2 Limited resources and support

According to Kelly *et al.*, (2021:5), even before the pandemic, some schools had considerable resource constraints, as seen by socio-economic and academic indices, and school social workers perceived the further negative impact on families and communities due to limited resources during the pandemic. The vast majority of school social workers reported that through limited resources, training, and debriefing they could have contributed more effectively to the situation where learners' emotional well-being was compromised. The narratives below support this statement:

“One couldn't move around, so one couldn't really help. The only way was to some parents would make please call me because we don't have money as well. So, it was very challenging, especially with also resources. You know, having enough resources like a time to call the parents and to link them with the necessary services that they needed. It was really very difficult, [yeah].” 6 QQ

“...I think manpower if maybe, because now we are only 9 social workers. And then we are servicing 160 something schools can you imagine, you just you don't know

what to and where to start. So, I think manpower will do.” 2 00

“We're not helping enough. Because even the resources we didn't have the... protective gear, like the health workers, the so... government couldn't provide for us.”

2 00

“...You know, psychologically you might think, you know, maybe I caught the COVID itself...but you have to carry on working. So it was, [yeah], that was also, with us the panic and not much debriefing was... provided, honestly speaking, and social workers will need debriefing so you can imagine going through all of that. Again, the lack of resources so we have to share maybe a car, four of us it is a pandemic, and we have to travel together.” 1 0

However, it was evident that the moral and ethical issues faced by social workers went much beyond concerns about risk and intimate interaction. Social workers around the globe have acted quickly and significantly in contributing to lessening the impacts of COVID-19. However, a steep price had to be paid for this, because employees had to make tough choices without practice guidelines or any resources (Truell & Crompton, 2020:19,20). Weng (2022:1433) provides crucial context to the challenges faced by social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in terms of limited resources and support. It highlights that social workers, like medical providers, feared COVID-19 exposure and the risk of infecting loved ones. This fear impacted their morale and sense of safety, contributing to the challenges in service delivery. This finding supports the storylines from social workers **6 QQ** and **2 00**, who spoke about the difficulties of restricted movement, the lack of resources like time to call parents, and insufficient manpower to service a large number of schools. Additionally, the lack of protective gear, as mentioned by **2 00**, further emphasizes the limited support and resources available to social workers, aligning with the vulnerabilities and concerns noted in the study. The combination of these factors created significant barriers to effective service delivery, impacting the ability of social workers to support high school learners adequately during the pandemic.

Social workers in South Africa do not always have enough resources at their disposal to carry out their duties. Everything that a person needs to complete a task or reach a

goal is referred to as a resource (Matlakala, *et al.*, 2021:191). Social workers stated that they are unable to help individuals in the community because they do not have the necessary capital resources (vehicles and stationery). It is reported that the ignorance of social workers' roles during natural disasters contributes to a lack of financial assistance for resources (Matlakala, *et al.*, 2021:191).

This is an important factor to mention because at the time, social workers were compelled to make plans and be creative and innovative to help the underprivileged. Social workers were expected to provide services during the challenging periods of the novel COVID-19 restrictions, which posed a risk to their health and well-being. As a result, during pandemics, social workers' workload, resilience, and well-being should be a top priority (Ramoshaba, 2023b:120).

4.5.4.3 Sub-theme 4.3: Limited knowledge and training

Before the pandemic, the utilisation of synchronous virtual care, encompassing both telephonic and video appointments, was limited in various health and social sector contexts. Although social workers may have some practical experience with virtual care, there is a significant lack of education and training on how to integrate virtual technology into practice competently and ethically (Ashcroft, Sur, Greenblatt & Donahue, 2022:1726).

The storylines of the school social workers confirm the limited training they experienced:

“...[Yeah], there was a lot of anxiety. Especially the older ones and we had to do awareness about COVID-19. But also remember we are social workers, so we had to share the little that we knew through maybe social media and what we have ourselves just studied. There was no formal training so it was kind of difficult because some learners actually had questions that needed maybe healthcare professionals that we couldn't provide, but [yeah], it was we couldn't provide services fully because of that period.” 1 ○

“...Because it's something new. You are not used to giving service over the telephone.

Sadly, you know, [yeah], those were the things that you learn as you go...” **3 P**

The above narratives correlate with Ashcroft *et al.* (2022:1727) who indicated that frontline workers encountered numerous challenges, such as inadequate resources to fulfil their duties, concerns about their personal well-being, feelings of guilt, humiliation, grief, and weariness. Additionally, they often lacked proper supervision and training to adapt to their evolving responsibilities, which expose them to the potential harm of moral injury. It also aligns with Ramoshaba (2023b:121) stating that responding to the COVID-19 pandemic was not an easy assignment for social workers, especially in South Africa where most universities' social work curricula are not rigorous enough to prepare social workers to deal with all sorts of pandemics, with the exception that social workers employ the generic skills to alleviate such difficulties. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on a large number of people and families, including the creation of stigma and discrimination against those who were infected and those who survived the virus. As a result, social workers had to play a unique role in eradicating these stigmas and discrimination through education. Consequently, it is clear that social workers lack sufficient training to deal with pandemics or disasters.

School-based social workers require sufficient training and instruction to effectively gather resources, navigate it in positions of power, advocate for the needs of their learners, and practice in the light of the additional pressures posed by the growing learner population. Not only do school social workers need to train to assist learners, but they also need leadership training. School social workers require greater preparation, training, and support within the context of leadership to influence systems to obtain success and outcomes that will benefit the vulnerable learners (Perry; Elswick & Cuellar, 2022:2-3).

This study summarised the findings of the sub-theme limited resources and support, stating that social workers are underprepared to assist victims and survivors of natural disasters due to a lack of resources and training. The study also discovered that during disasters, there is a lack of staff, inadequate inter-professional coordination, and position ambiguity. According to the study's findings, social workers who help victims and survivors of natural disasters are frequently overworked, work in understaffed situations, and are at risk of burnout (Matlakala, *et al.*, 2021:189; Ashcroft, *et al.*,

2022:1739).

4.5.5 Theme 5: Transformation in Social Work Practices During Pandemic Restrictions

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers were compelled to rapidly adapt their social work practices in line with public health directives (Banks, Cai, de Jonge, Shears, Shum, *et al.*, 2020:570). This included adopting and using personal protective equipment (PPE), observing physical distancing, and adjusting to the closure of certain in-person workspaces. Despite these challenges, they continued to ensure that their connection with clients remained strong and effective (Krist, DeVoe, Cheng, Ehrlich & Jones, 2020:349). Findings in terms of this theme came from the discussion with the school social workers on their views on the nature of social work services during the nationwide lockdown and if they have changed. The question that was given to them was: “Did the nature of social work service delivery to high school learners change during these restricted periods?”

Individual participants responded as follows to this:

“It changed a lot..., though you know the process of change is painful, but in the process, it was also a learning curve. To both the learners and the social worker as well. Because we learned a lot of different methods, lot of coping method and it also needed lot of reading as well because we cannot assist somebody without having a knowledge of how do I actually intervene in this kind of situation.” **3 P**

“... Yes, I delivered food packages, and I would also do telephone counselling assisting families intervening for them wherever they are struggles because I was working remotely.” **6 QQ**

“We... stayed at home, but we're using our cell phones. Yes, we're using our cell phones so children, most of them were communicating through our cell phones.” **2 OO**

The experiences shared by social workers, such as delivering food packages, conducting telephone counselling, and using cell phones for communication with learners, align with the transformative changes in practice highlighted by Ashcroft *et al.* (2022:1726). Due to the social distancing requirements of the pandemic, social workers rapidly adopted using virtual technologies. This shift to remote methods, as depicted in the storylines, is a direct response to the need for maintaining service delivery amidst restrictions, demonstrating a significant adaptation in the field of social work.

The experiences and adaptations of social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as reflected in the quotations and the broader context provided by Harrikari *et al.* (2021:1661) and Weng (2022:1442), align with an ecological system theory. This perspective underscores the emergence, connectivity, and interdependence within the socioecological environment, highlighting the holistic approach required in social work practice. The pandemic's challenges have prompted significant innovations in social work service delivery, demonstrating the profession's resilience and adaptability. These adaptations involve both external factors, such as community support, and internal factors like attitudes and problem-solving approaches, as discussed by Itzhaki-Braun (2021). Social workers' ability to employ a variety of strategies and resources reflects the resilience of highly adaptive systems, emphasizing the profession's crucial role in anticipating and preparing for future crises.

4.5.6 Theme 6: Retrospective Insights on Service Delivery to High School Learners During the Pandemic

The main challenges the school social workers mentioned in the interviews were limited access and contact with the learners during the nationwide lockdown as well as limited availability of resources. Throughout the interviews with the school social workers, a variety of challenges emerged relating to access to learners, resources, and shortage of resources that should have been available, but were not. Despite the many challenges regarding the above, the data and literature also displayed that in some instance's resources were available, but they needed to be strengthened through leadership. The question presented to the school social workers was as

follows: “Knowing what you know now, how would you address service delivery to high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown?”. The following sub-themes relate to their insights developed to reflect their insights:

4.5.6.1 Sub-theme 6.1: Staying connected with learners

The first sub-theme that developed from the storylines was the need to stay connected with learners.

“I think for me this I think the most important thing is that data capturing that data sharing, because if we do proper data, keep sharing, I think even if we can have whatever crisis, we'll be able to overcome it. If I say data capturing I...we have to know the family, like holistically in that way, I know that I can be able to assist that family because I really understand their circumstance. You understand, because if I don't know that family like... how they function then I will...it will take me long to be able to assist them. I will give you a scenario, for me to get to know the family, I have to do home visit and I have to do interviews... I have to... I actually focusing on them to give me information, but then if I the... structure of our report it's...in a way that it gives me, it allows me to give... to have all the information that is needed. Then I can be able to assist...any child that I come across.” 3 P

“It's a challenge. The logistical thing. How can you keep contact? A data basis. Even your own safety is at risk then. It's a lot of things that we think that we must think about to stay in contact with them or to get an alternative, you know, like a community centre where they can go to and still receive the basic needs.” 5 Q

“To be proactive by making available enough resources, giving out emergency numbers that the children should always have at home like they must put it somewhere at home, and the ones we have phones to have, all those emergency numbers on their phones. And to train the parents to regularly have contact with each child, have activities with each child so that you know to build enough connection because of once those things have been sowed into a person, when such times happen, then at least the people are supposed to survive. You know it kind of like build resilience because you have sowed enough love connection and now you know the activities. You know

when there's connection, that sense of belonging, which we all need, so and the basic needs like savings...help and connecting the people with the resources, giving them the numbers of different food centres and even shelters so that they can be equipped so that whatever happens and they can't get hold of you, then they are resourceful enough, you can be able to tap into those things themselves.” 6 QQ

The shared experiences of social workers, as narrated in the storylines, summarise the essence of the subtheme of staying connected with learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social worker **3 P** underscores the criticality of comprehensive data capturing and an in-depth understanding of family dynamics to offer effective support and maintain connections. Social worker **5 Q** addresses the logistical hurdles and safety concerns in maintaining contact, highlighting the need for alternative solutions like community centres for meeting basic needs. Social worker **6 QQ** elaborates on proactive strategies, such as distributing emergency telephone numbers and training parents, to foster resilience and a sense of belonging among learners. Together, these accounts reflect the multifaceted and proactive efforts by social workers to sustain meaningful connections with learners amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The narrative shared, aligns with the findings and strategies discussed by Polizotto and Zinn (2021:1) and *Kelly et al.* (2021:2). Polizotto and Zinn (2021:2) suggest a comprehensive intervention plan that includes schools distributing information through community providers, websites, and direct communication with parents, ensuring access for all families. Similarly, *Kelly et al.* (2021:6) highlight how social workers can adapt by employing various methods such as text-based apps, phone calls, emails, and virtual meeting platforms like Zoom and Google Hangouts. These studies reflect the innovative and adaptive approaches social workers can use to maintain connections with learners and their families, despite the challenges of working virtually or remotely and the initial lack of clear guidance on how to transition to these new methods of service delivery.

4.5.6.2 Sub-theme 6.2: Involvement of the community

The following quotations provide suggestions on how to be pro-active in the

involvement of the community:

“I think the community must be involved is just involve the community because the community are the one who knows their problem better than we...think we do. So, I think to solve the problems of community, we need to involve them, [yeah]. Hear from them how best we can help them. Yes, because I can speak on their behalf, but you find out this it... could not be the solution to them, so you always throw it back to the community that you are servicing.” 4 PP

“Even if I'm doing an intake, I also need to understand the community where these people come from, which is very important because if I understand the community, I understand their way of doing things within that particular community. When I enter that community, I know the kind of services that is needed though, I will be focusing on one client, but you know the... community, the people, what do they say in social like...the environment...influence the behaviour. [Yeah], one way or the other...that we rely more on the community way of doing things to be able to assist a particular family within.” 3 P

“First of all, networking gets your networks in place before a disaster. Know, exactly what is available around your school, who is responsible for what? Who can you use in a... situation like that...” 5 Q

The above quotations endorse the findings that the awareness of available community resources needs to be increased and that school social workers should engage in more networking to enable them to effectively and efficiently link clients to the support they require (Weng, 2022:1440). In this context, the term "community" refers generically to a collection of individuals who have something in common, such as a common location, a shared hobby, or similar circumstances. This field of social work practice is crucial since readiness levels are inextricably related to a community's ability to adapt and recover after a disaster (Boetto *et al.*, 2021:1624). It is first needed to comprehend the requirements of each community, family, school, and learner during the pandemic before the type of service by school social workers is determined (Kelly *et al.*, 2021:3).

Matlakala *et al*, (2021:193) stated that the community has resources in place to shield its residents from the effects of natural disasters. In this case, interprofessional collaboration not only fosters professional coexistence but also supplies the community with enough human resources in the wake of and during natural disasters.

Social workers who involve the entire community in emergencies, work on a macro level of the ecological system theory. Social workers in communal settings have had to broaden the scope of their work during a time of disaster to support the following: planning and response assistance for communities; helping communities obtain necessary services for all of their members; supporting community efforts to maintain social solidarity as well as physical distance; and persistent advocacy for better health and social service delivery to promote health and lessen social inequalities (Itzhaki-Braun, 2021:714).

4.5.7 Theme 7: Awareness and Impact of Legislation and Policies on Educational Service Delivery During the Pandemic

A pandemic is a type of health calamity that affects a huge number of people in several geographic locations and is likely to overwhelm a country's health-care infrastructure unless the illness spread is limited and controlled. Doing social work in these situations is tough, dangerous, and unsafe and to perform duties in these circumstances needs to be defined by legislation or policies (Dominelli, 2020:2). All the school social workers reported that there were no clear policies or guidelines for school social workers in addressing service delivery to high school learners during the strict nationwide lockdown. The question that they were asked to address this was: "Do you know of any legislation and/or policies that were in place during the nationwide lockdown in addressing service delivery during a pandemic to high school learners?" The following citations confirm this:

"Honestly, no, I don't know of any policy. I'll be lying." 1 ○

"...I'm really not sure about this that is the time I started working here, so the schools developed that time temporary policy on... because I think in COVID we develop the

stuff as we... run. There was no handbook, there was no manual about that so all I know about was the policies of the school and...DBE also sent through guidelines and so, but I... really don't know whether there was formal..." 5 Q

"To individuals, there were no I don't know of any. Maybe there are, but I don't know of any. The most was that was actually looked at was the poverty side of things, distributing food for people, and essential health services..." 6 QQ

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a national lockdown and a state of disaster, which severely affected learner's access to education. The Disaster Management Act of 2002 established restrictions that, among other things, mandate social separation, self-isolation, and quarantine—steps taken to stop the spread of COVID-19. In light of this, schools were forced to close on March 26, 2020, leaving the educational system with no choice except to rely on digital technology to carry on with teaching and learning. But after schools closed, the great majority of learners were unable to acquire an education because of the digital divide (Kona, 2022:16).

The above quotations confirm that the directives and regulations limited the protection of South African children from maltreatment and neglect, either directly or indirectly. The following departments issued regulations and directives, namely the Department of Co-operation and Governance, the Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Social Development, the Department of Justice and Correctional Services, the Department of Labour, the Department of Trade and Industry, and the Department of Water and Sanitation. But the Department of Basic Education's conspicuous lack of regulations or directives during the rigorous lockdown suspended the school-based feeding schemes that contributed to the neglect of learners (Fouché, *et al.*, 2020:13).

Numerous learners suffered during the countrywide lockdown. Some learners could not learn by using the remote learning system technology due to unequal access to learning materials, while others went to bed without having eating. Consequently, under these circumstances, it is in the children's best interests to return to school in full as soon as possible, as any longer delay will compromise their education (Kona, 2022:13).

4.5.8. Theme 8: Suggestions to improve service delivery during Pandemics

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided deep thoughts into the role of a school social worker during a disaster, as social workers are committed to assisting and supporting learners and families in any time of need. However, the novel nationwide lockdown brought new insight into approaches and adaptable ideas and techniques about school social work during a disaster (Kelly, *et al.*, 2021:1). School social workers were not specifically asked questions on their recommendations, but they were asked if they had any suggestions to improve service delivery during a pandemic. These suggestions are visible in Figure 4-9. The following question was asked to school social workers to obtain the necessary answers: “To improve service delivery during a pandemic, do you have any suggestions?”

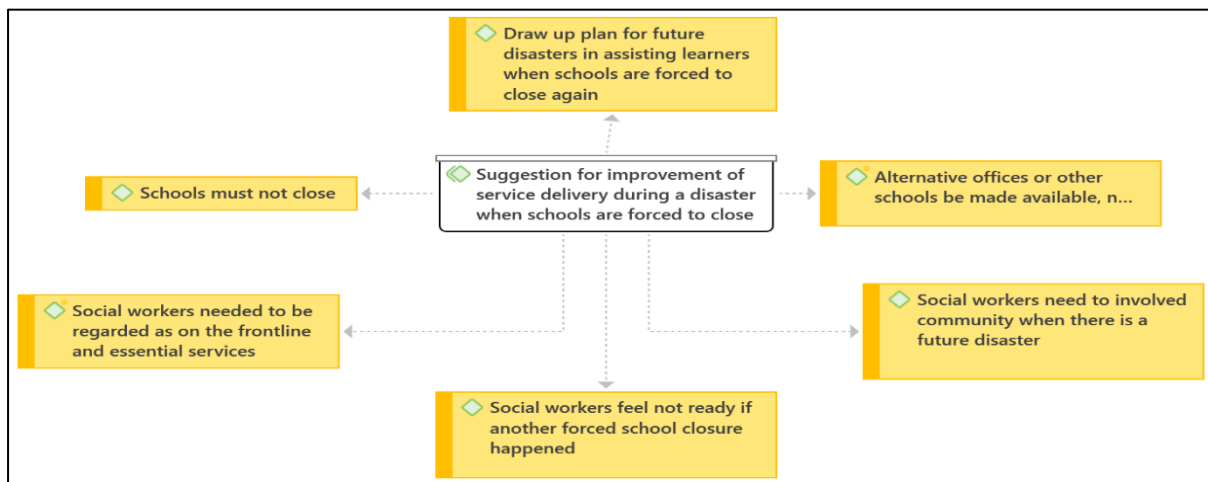


Figure 4-9: Overview of suggestions to improve service delivery during a disaster when schools are forced to close

These suggestions are given in the form of four sub-themes, namely school social workers need to be regarded as frontline and essential services, supportive plans, legislations and guidelines, alternative offices or schools, and community involvement, and if possible, schools must stay open.

4.5.8.1 Sub-theme: 8.1 School social workers need to be regarded as frontline and essential services

The following storylines confirm the school social workers’ opinion that school social workers need to be regarded as frontline and essential services as follows:

“...Honesty, I don't know, but like I said previously with regards to us as social workers and maybe we also have to be put on the frontline because health wise it was attended, but emotionally, mentally, how was it addressed? So, I think maybe in the future social workers can be considered as ...frontline workers and actually assist. So that... the people can be taken care of holistically, not only health-wise but also socially and mentally and otherwise.” 1 O

“Yes, it definitely did, because social workers, we are actually the centre that link people to different sources, resources that they need. So, during lockdown you were limited.” 6 QQ

The South African Council for Social Work Professions (SACSSP) announced in its General Notice number 2 of 2020 that the Minister of Labour added social service providers to the official list of individuals who provide essential services (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2020). Social workers were reminded that they were required to carry both their Permit to Perform Essential Service (Annexure C: Form 1) and an official form of identification, such as a driver's license or ID book and provide their Practice Card, which was issued by the SACSSP (South Africa. 2020c). According to the findings of this study, it seems that there was uncertainty about the role of the school social worker in such crisis's times.

Despite all the challenges school social workers faced during the pandemic, there need to be clear guidelines of what is expected of a school social worker during a pandemic or disaster. The "extremely vague" guidelines were described by a child protection social worker as follows: "It says we aren't to conduct home visits except in exceptional circumstances, but it doesn't say what that is, so I had to rely on my professional judgment." Because of this, the social worker had to make decisions about whether to make home visits. These decisions would not have arisen if the instructions had been more explicit (Banks & Rutter, 2022:3468).

4.5.8.2 Sub-theme: 8.2 Supportive plans, legislations, and guidelines

The social workers made the following suggestions about providing policies or a management plan for school social workers during a disaster when schools are forced

to close:

“...But I think that is the first thing. You need to have your networks. You have to have your plans in place of what needs to be done and then think further on how we can give the learners the information that they have.” 5 Q

“...we should be proactive enough so that when such times come then the policies are actually amended accordingly so that when there are such times then people are covered holistically.” 3 P

Social workers must sufficiently prepare for pandemics and natural disasters by delivering a plan to provide the best and most considerate care to the vulnerable (Ramoshaba, 2023b:121). Social workers are officially recognized as members of the emergency response system in many nations, and their performance, duties, and functions are governed by laws. These will differ, based on the nation. Employers in the social work field ought to be aware of these policies and guidelines to communicate them to their staff. To prepare social workers for a pandemic, they should be included in qualifying training and internal training programmes preparing for such a situation (Dominelli, 2020:2).

Without the necessary policies or regulations, schools are being deprived of necessary resources for assistance to the vulnerable learner populations in the already prevalent inequality in educational opportunities. There is a critical need for the development of a national strategy to restructure the way resources and staff are allocated to learners and their families, especially during crisis periods. Current research highlights the critical need for more resources to support school communities in meeting their basic requirements, mental health needs, and other needs. School social workers experience the absence of structural and systemic support for learners and families during the pandemic (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:86-87).

During the pandemic, child protection practitioners and other service providers should be aware of these and other social-ecological stakeholders' abilities to improve the operationalization of laws designed to safeguard learners from abuse and neglect. Laws must also guarantee that children's social, emotional, and intellectual needs are

met—even during pandemics and disasters. Realizing legislation's ability to increase children's resistance to abuse and neglect in environments where disadvantage is pervasive, would also require social justice to be embraced by the entire community, not just by lawmakers and the government (Fouché, *et al.*, 2020:13).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasized less obvious and farther-reaching influences on a learner's life in the exosystem of the ecological system theory, such as choices made by a setting manager, the standard of the parent's place of employment, social media, and unofficial social networks. The community that makes educational policies is another example of an exosystem; although individual learners typically do not have a say in matters of policy, the policies nevertheless have an impact on the education that a learner receives (Hayes, *et al.* 2017:16).

4.5.8.3 Sub-theme: 8.3 Localized and Accessible Service Centres

This subtheme revolves around the idea of creating localized service points to minimize movement and ensure accessibility. The suggestion includes organizing learners to visit designated schools or centres close to their residences, as proposed by **3 P**, and setting up temporary mobile offices or tents, as mentioned by **4 PP**. These solutions aim to facilitate the continuity of services in a more controlled and convenient manner, reducing the risk of exposure while still meeting the basic needs of learners. This approach also encompasses the idea of utilizing community centres as alternative venues for service delivery, ensuring that basic needs are met even during lockdowns. The following suggestions were made by the school social workers for establishing localized and accessible service centres:

“...They place a learner anyway, so it means they can use the same strategy saying. These learners who are staying in this section, they must come to one school, meaning the... learners who stay around this place come to this, though, is not your school, but come to this place so that there won't be lot of movement.” **3 P**

“...I think at least we supposed to be allowed, maybe you know, maybe on each and every Wednesday ...there's a tent there and they would at least come, mobile

whatever mobile offices at least.” 4 PP

“...It's a lot of things that we think that we must think about to stay in contact with them or to get an alternative, you know, like a community centre where they can go to and still receive the basic needs.” 5 Q

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social workers played a crucial role in identifying and coordinating community-based resources to progress associated social support and assuring community development and organization (Ramoshaba, 2023b:122). Through collaboration, members of different professions can work together in the community and use each other's logistics and resources. That does not imply, however, that all professions should work together for the community's welfare in the face of natural disasters. Through research, it is established that there is no contributing inter-professional collaboration between professions. To put it simply, certain professions seek to appear more productive than others at the expense of the people they are meant to assist (Matlakala, *et al.*, 2021:192). The colonial and apartheid legacies, which emphasized that each profession should concentrate on its mandate and disregard the relevance and application of other professions, are to blame for this (Matlakala, *et al.*, 2021:192). For example, there is a scarcity of literature illustrating the cooperation between the disaster management team and social workers (Matlakala, *et al.*, 2021:192). This needs to be addressed so that the distinctive views and skills of each profession working together in the community and allocating resources, play a very important part in supporting learners and families.

4.5.8.4 Sub-theme: 8.4 Non-closure off schools

One school social worker expressed the view that schools should remain open during pandemics, arguing that the risks for learners at home might outweigh those at school. The social worker suggested as follows that rotational attendance to mitigate risks, be instituted:

"You know I...am of...the opinion that they must not close schools because the more they are at home, the more they are at risk as compared to learners being at school, they will rather do the issue of rotations or let the learners who... are staying in this

remember..." 3 P

This perspective aligns with the research of van der Berg and Spaul (2020), which initially supported cautious school closures due to uncertainties about COVID-19's impact on children. However, subsequent insights into the virus and the adverse effects of lockdowns led them to advise against such measures in the future, considering the significant social and financial ramifications, particularly for vulnerable groups like learners. Furthermore, Fouché *et al.* (2020) suggest that if empirical data indicates low risk for learners in classrooms during pandemics, schools could serve as vital centres for support services, food distribution, and public education.

4.5.9 Theme 9: Personal and Professional Impacts of Working During the Pandemic

The theme personal and professional impacts of working during the pandemic, encapsulates the multifaceted effects of the COVID-19 crisis on school social workers, illuminating the intricate interplay between their personal lives and professional roles during this challenging period. In this context, their narratives provide profound insights into the transformational journey they underwent as follows:

"[Yeah], you know, when we talk about the pandemic, we are moving away from giving service to the learners, but also having time to yourself and you experience so many things that you are not aware of. I was not aware that I'm... this person who like people socializing, I realized that I love life. Though I'm giving service to, actually I'm on the right position of working with learners. They make me happy, you know? And professionally you know, when you're sitting at home, you're able to go through those files and [yeah...] but there's one I didn't do it correctly. Then I must change the strategy and you also learn to accept failure professionally, you grow because you also see that I did lot of changes. I was actually there to assist. I was there as a helping under helping profession. But I actually love what I'm doing. [Yeah], you know, as social workers, we don't sleep at night you go through the files while you are sleeping and you correct and come up with strategy in terms of changing some of the things that you do to clients, you also check them you know in your mind. I didn't have a lot

of regrets, but I had lot of way of maybe changing methods, not regret because what I'm doing, I'm going to do it for a very long time.” 3 P

“There was a lot of restrictions and limitations and also fear of conducting that COVID, you know, because...it was also very quiet. There were not a lot around, so it was actually also some kind of like risky to go out there and do certain things. So, it wasn't [yeah] especially when you were alone, you know, having to go out there and deliver some services that you could deliver. So [yeah] it was on a personal level you did your work with some kind fear, restrictions, limitations and not fully as you would when things are normal.” 6 QQ

“...I think for all of us, remember, for all..., it was new. We were also scared. We were also anxious. We didn't know what is going to happen. So sometimes it was actually a relief that they closed down that... we can get to our homes and houses and the children that they can be safe. So, I think the initial thing was a relief. To say OK. Thank you, I don't need to be here. I can go where I am safe. The long term, the after effect was... a bigger issue.” 5 Q

Primarily, these narratives reveal the personal aspect of their experiences. While facing the challenges brought about by the pandemic, social workers started to confront their own social and emotional requirements. The unrelenting demands and uncertainties of the crisis caused them to confront their vulnerabilities and concerns, ultimately resulting in a deep self-awareness. Upon discovering this newfound consciousness, they felt obliged to prioritise their own self-care and emotional well-being. They realised that their capacity to effectively assist others depended on their resilience.

At the same time, the pandemic promoted substantial professional development among these school social workers. Within their narratives, they actively engage in intense introspection over their work tactics and methodologies. The pandemic brought about unique difficulties that required innovative problem-solving and flexibility. Social workers engaged in a process of reviewing their methods, exploring new approaches, and developing their expertise. This phase of professional

development not only improved their capacity to assist their clients but also developed a stronger bond with their professional responsibilities.

These narratives demonstrate a deep-seated enthusiasm and dedication towards their responsibilities as school social workers. Despite the general fears and anxieties, a significant number of individuals made the conscious decision to persist in their profession, driven by their unwavering commitment to assist others. Crawford's views (2021:460) align with the notion that certain social workers choose to remain actively involved in their profession, motivated by a profound sense of obligation and empathy toward the populations they cater to.

The experiences of social workers resembled those of their clients. They experienced similar concerns and anxieties caused by the pandemic, which led to a deep sense of empathy and connection with the individuals and families they were assisting (Calcaterra & Landi, 2023). The recognition of this common vulnerability brought a personal element to their professional connections, underscoring the significance of considering the welfare of both social workers and their clients.

The combination of professional responsibility and emotional vulnerability represents the special and complex difficulties that social workers encountered during the pandemic. Their stories highlight the ability to recover, adjust, and show the care that characterised their reaction to the emergency, finally transforming them into more understanding, self-conscious, and proficient professionals in the domain of school social work.

4.6 CONCLUSION

Results that highlight the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners in a low socio-economic environment during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown and school social workers' experiences and challenges providing services are explored in this chapter. It was found that high school learners experienced that their emotional and physical well-being were compromised but it was found that high school learners were able to navigate their way during the nationwide lockdown despite all the

challenges they faced. The high school learners highlighted challenges that are aligned with social support and communication challenges as well as financial-related challenges and made suggestions on how school social workers can improve services during forced school closure.

It is significant to remember that school social workers execute a wide range of functions in a school environment. Some of the core duties are psycho-social support, providing resources, protecting, and advocating the rights of learners, and fostering relationships between communities, professionals, and families. During the nationwide lockdown, these core duties were limited to adaptive methods according to the guidelines provided by the lockdown regulations which essentially impacted negatively on the vulnerable high school learners in a low socio-economic area. Fostering leadership and training, advocating for the provision of sufficient services and resources, challenging, and modifying social policies related to the needs of learners, when schools are forced to close, and assisting in the creation of preventative plans and programs, are the objective.

According to the ecological system theory applied in this study, school social workers are primarily concerned with the social well-being of individual learners and their families concerning the interconnectedness of their physical, educational, social, and emotional well-being with their environment at the micro (intrapersonal) and meso (interpersonal) levels.

School social workers typically show a higher ability to see beyond the concerns and evaluate the wider human, social, and political challenges in educational health at the macro level (community, organizational, and policy).

The research report is summarized in the following final chapter, which also includes an outline of the overall conclusions and recommendations derived from the data collected from the high school learners and school social workers who took part in the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

During and resulting from the recent COVID-19 pandemic, high school learners' emotional and physical well-being have been compromised globally, due to the restrictions of movement that governments implemented worldwide (Duby, *et al.*, 2022:2). At the same time, stemming from the challenges school social workers faced during the pandemic, the effectiveness of the role of school social work during a pandemic or disaster, became questionable (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:79).

The researcher, being a school social worker with first-hand experience of the matter, became concerned about the effects of disasters on high school learners from a low socio-economic environment and the difficulties faced by school social workers in dealing with it during the pandemic. It turned out that this matter was not widely documented (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:87) and that increasing the efficacy of school social workers in preserving learners' well-being during such trying times, required greater comprehension. Hence, the researcher resolved to investigate the matter and contribute to filling this gap in the social work knowledge base. In doing so, the effects of the disaster on high school learners in a low socio-economic environment are investigated and the importance of disaster and pandemic preparedness, response, and support networks for social workers in the educational setting, is emphasized from a holistic point of view.

This chapter consists of a summary and overview of the research, conclusions drawn on the research process, conclusions of the research findings, recommendations, limitation of the study, and the conclusion of the research.

5.2 OVERVIEW

The procedure and results of this research are captured as follows in this research

report:

In Chapter One the experiences and challenges high school learners encountered during the forced school closure, as well as the function of school social workers, in the case study on the COVID-19 pandemic are introduced. Subsequently, the study's aims, objectives, and research questions were outlined and clarified. Included in the chapter is a discussion of the ecological system theory, which served as the conceptual basis for the investigation. A thorough theoretical explanation of the qualitative research methodology and study designs was also provided. Furthermore, the key concepts and adherence to the multiple ethical factors were presented.

Chapter Two looks at past instances of forced school closures and how they affected learners in high schools all around the world, with a focus on Africa and South Africa. The critical function that school social workers play both during and after forced school closure is covered, as well as the historical development of the role of the school social worker in connection to service delivery in schools both inside and outside of South Africa. It becomes clear that during the pandemic, social workers faced a variety of challenges.

An explanation of the researcher's application of the qualitative research approach and methods in the study is provided in Chapter Three. Along with the application of the research design consisting of an explorative, descriptive, contextual, and case-study design, the characteristics of a qualitative research approach as employed in the study are explained. The researcher went into detail about how the research methodology is used. This covered the research populations, sampling, the method of data collection, and data analysis (using Tesch's eight steps, and ATLAS.ti 23 software). Ensuring the trustworthiness of the research (by using Guba and Lincoln's data verification model) is discussed, followed by a description of to the application of the various ethical considerations in this research.

In Chapter Four, the research findings about the experiences and challenges high school learners from a low socio-economic environment faced during the forced school closure, as well as the role of school social workers during such times and with those learners, are presented. The themes and sub-themes reflecting the experiences and

views of the participants, were supported, or refuted by means of a literature control. Findings are communicated respectively by means of the storylines of the two participant groups. Eight themes emerged from the storylines of the high school learners and nine themes emerged from the school social workers' narratives.

This chapter presents an overview of the study, the research study's conclusions about the research process and the research findings, recommendations for policy development, social work practice, social work education, and potential future research projects, and the limitations of the study.

5.3 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research findings and conclusions of the research process are summarised by describing the research question that led to this research, the study's goal, and objectives; the research approach; research designs; population and sampling; pilot testing; data collection; data analysis; ensuring rigour; and ethical considerations.

5.3.1 Research question, goal, and objectives

The researcher set out to address the following research problem at the outset of the investigation:

Insufficient information is available on the experiences and challenges of high school learners' and social workers in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.

The research question of this study was:

What are the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners' and social workers in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.

The formulation of the research purpose was based on the research question. The purpose of this study was:

- To develop in depth understanding of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.
- To make recommendations on how high school learners' and social workers' can be supported regarding the experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.

The researcher was able to obtain a thorough understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown and a detailed description of experiences and challenges faced by school social workers during the nationwide lockdown and forced school closure. The research question was adequately addressed, and the study's goal was accomplished by achieving the research objects by linking the existing knowledge with this study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014:18).

The following objectives for the study's research were met:

- *To explore and describe the experiences and challenges of high school learners' in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.*

The researcher was able to learn more about the experiences of this target group by conducting semi-structured interviews with the sample of this research population. High school learners who satisfied the selection criteria were chosen by using purposive sampling (Tobi & Kampen, 2018:1214). An interview guide that could be modified to allow for the inclusion of questions that produced more detailed information, guided the interviews. The researcher was able to obtain details from high school learners from a low socio-economic environment about the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown in the same way as above.

- *To explore and describe the experiences and challenges of social workers in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.*

School social workers were able to speak with the researcher during the semi-structured interviews about the experiences and challenges they encountered during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown.

- *To offer recommendations for school social work services during future disasters where schools are forced to be closed.*

These recommendations are offered in this chapter (see 5.5.2).

The research objectives were achieved as detailed in the present chapter, with conclusions and recommendations derived from the data presented in Chapter Four. After an extensive review of the literature and assisted by a literature control, conclusions were formulated from the collected data and recommendations were devised for enhancing school social work services (see 5.5.1). These recommendations encompassed areas such as policy, practice, education, and directions for future research. Applying the theoretical framework laid the groundwork for comprehensive and impactful recommendations, while also acknowledging the importance of interactions between systems, protective factors, genetic influences, environmental conditions, and social policy in the context of forced school closure (Kivunja, 2018:46).

5.3.2 Research approach

To gain a deeper understanding on the topic of this study the researcher used a qualitative approach with the characteristics described by Creswell and Creswell (2018:258-259). Eager to learn about both participant groups processes and interpretations of words as they were expressed, the researcher was able to gain a better understanding of high school learners' and school social workers' experiences and challenges during a forced school closure in the nationwide lockdown, as well as their perspectives on this. The qualitative approach thus enabled the researcher to use the two sets of participants' words to create a collection of themes, and sub-themes and to explain their experiences and challenges, to give a twofold holistic account of high school learners' and school social workers' experiences and challenges during the forced school closure.

5.3.3 Research designs

A **case study design** was used to explore how high school learners and school social workers perceived and made meaning of their experiences and challenges during

forced school closure A single case-study approach in this example was well justified because there were no comparisons to other occurrences or events. This technique was motivated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented a novel and unexpected backdrop for investigation. The single case-study technique was suitable for studying high school learners and school social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic because of its descriptive, exploratory, and contextual characteristics.

Explorative case study design made it possible to thoroughly examine aspects of the high school learners' and school social workers' experiences and challenges that did not previously receive much attention from researchers and make findings.

The **descriptive design** chronicled the results of the study on what high school learners went through during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role of school social workers in this regard, involved describing the learners' experiences, responses, and adaptations within their particular socio-economic setting. As soon as the interviews were conducted, the researcher transcribed them to provide a thorough picture of the learners' experiences and the social workers' role perceptions in this study.

By applying the **contextual design**, the researcher gained insight into the daily lives of high school learners and school social workers. The researcher interviewed the high school learners and school social workers in the environment in which they felt comfortable to be interviewed.

The research designs used in this study were effective in exploring and describing the experiences of high school learners and school social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in a less studied socio-economic context. The participants showed to be well-versed in their realms and were able to describe and explain their experiences and challenges from their own perspective till the researcher attained an in-depth comprehension of the issue under investigation and made certain findings.

5.3.4 Population and sampling

The study's target group was twofold, namely all high school learners and school social workers which met the inclusion and exclusion selection criteria. Purposive

sampling designs, or non-random selection, were used to obtain samples from the two research populations, namely high school learners from schools in a low socio-economic areas and school social workers rendering social services to these learners and their families (Tobi & Kampen, 2018:1214). The researcher found that the sampling procedure effectively selected suitable participants with the required characteristics for the study.

5.3.5 Pilot testing

The researcher conducted a pilot testing with two high school learners that satisfied the inclusion criteria for a sample of the high school learners research population group, to test the questions in the group's interview guide. Due to the scarcity of school social workers in the Pretoria West municipal area, the researcher utilized just one individual who met the inclusion criteria for a sample of the school social workers research population, to test the questions in the group's interview guide. Alterations were subsequently made to one question for the high school learners and a minor change to the selection criteria, by adapting the age from 18 to 19 years. The pilot test solved potential negative issues and refined the questions so that detailed, real-life descriptions were produced by the participants (Walliman, 2022:135).

5.3.6 Data collection

Conducting semi-structured interviews, consisting of semi-structured discussions guided by open-ended questions to reflect personal experiences and challenges of participants, demonstrated to be an appropriate data collection method for this study. The researcher gathered information through individual face-to-face conversations, and these interviews yielded valuable information. Conducting these semi-structured interviews was a suitable strategy for examining participants' ideas, feelings, and views, as well as a flexible means to collect data from them (Hamilton & Finley, 2020:2).

5.3.7 Data analysis

The researcher used Tesch's framework and ATLAS.ti 23 software to ensure a

thorough analysis of the data from the research findings (Creswell, 2014:198; Friese, Soratto & Pires, 2018:12). The academic supervisor helped the researcher organize the enormous amount of information obtained into themes and sub-themes, which were then subjected to a literature control. Through the data analysis, evidence-based recommendations are provided in this chapter to direct and assist decision-making processes on a larger scale.

5.3.8 Ensuring Rigour

In ensuring the rigour of the research, Guba and Lincoln's model for data verification was used. This model ensures the trustworthiness of the research study against five criteria, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. This emphasizes the adherence to a thorough and exact procedure, which ensures the integrity and credibility of the study. In applying the model, the researcher found that this study is trustworthy and that it meets the five criteria for ensuring rigour in qualitative research (Patton, 2015:988-989).

5.3.9 Ethical considerations

In applying the ethical considerations prescribed for conducting research, the objectives, methods, and purpose of the study were explained to prospective participants in advance. They received an explanatory letter asking them to take part in the research. By signing consent and assent papers, participants' informed consent and assent were confirmed. The ethical standard of participant anonymity was applied by guaranteeing that the participants' anonymity would not be jeopardised. Confidentiality was maintained at all times during the study. The participants received guarantees that their identities and the names of the schools involved, would remain confidential. Information about the participants, including audio tape recordings, transcripts, and field notes were password-protected and stored in a secure location that only the researcher can view. When reflecting on the ethical principles applied in this research, it is evident that the participants were treated with the utmost respect and regarded as invaluable contributors to the study (Hilton *et al.*, 2020:63).

5.4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The focus now falls on summarising the research findings emanating from the themes, and subthemes presented in Chapter Four. This is accompanied by the conclusions drawn from the research findings for each of the two target groups. This presentation is structured per individual research team.

5.4.1 Research findings from the high school learners

The thematic research findings relating to the high school learners' experiences and challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as presented in Chapter Four, are proffered in summarised form here. This is accompanied by the conclusions drawn by the researcher from the high school learners' narratives about the eight themes identified.

Theme One: Conclusions based on the high school learners' experiences of nationwide lockdown

The views expressed by participants were that they experienced the nationwide lockdown as multifaceted and it impacted on their education, relationships, emotional well-being as well as loss and grief.

- The high school learners' general experiences of the nationwide lockdown were negative.
- The high school learners voiced that negative interpersonal relationships emerged during the nationwide lockdown.
- The participants experienced that their emotional well-being was compromised, and emotions of fear, distress, sadness, anger, and loneliness were voiced.
- The high school learners did not welcome the limited educational experiences.
- The high school learners had the opportunity to talk about the loss of a family member, the feelings of unhappiness during the nationwide lockdown, and the lack of opportunity to be with their families.

Theme Two: Conclusions based on the perception of Public Health Measures during the lockdown

Based on all the participants' points of view about the regulations, high school learners agreed that it was critical to follow the COVID-19 guidelines, which include avoiding contact with others in order to protect themselves and stop the virus from spreading.

Theme Three: Conclusions based on home activities during the lockdown

The majority of participants found it easy to stay occupied with activities.

- The participants verified that they kept themselves busy with numerous activities for example, playing and keeping themselves busy with technology, playing alone, doing remote learning, and exercising.

The conclusion can be made that this kind of coping showed an active attitude, which means it was focused on acting in the circumstances one finds oneself in to achieve the greatest advances possible in this situation. It demonstrated resilience in the "capacity of a social-ecological system" to absorb or tolerate uncertainties and other stressors while maintaining the system's structure and functioning (Duby, *et al.*, 2022:3; Masten, 2021:2).

Theme Four: Conclusions based on feelings during the lockdown

High school learners consistently expressed their views about not being allowed to attend any gatherings.

- High school learners missed out on various activities, for example school, religious, cultural, and sports activities.
- They voiced their feelings of anger, stating that it was hard, and they did not feel well about having been prohibited to attend church, and sad about not being allowed to do sports.
- Their feelings underlined the benefits of attending gatherings and the emotional support received from these activities. Therefore, prioritizing the understanding and specific needs of high school learners during the nationwide lockdown in a broader context, is needed.
- A small percentage of high school learners stated that they experienced a brief break from the demands of education and felt relieved not having to be in class.
- The psychological repercussions of the social isolation brought on by lockdown limitations were felt by a large number of the participants.

The final conclusion that can be drawn from these findings, is that the nationwide lockdown significantly impacted the emotional well-being of high school learners. The absence of regular social gatherings, including school, religious, cultural, and sports activities, led to feelings of anger, sadness, and discomfort among many learners. Although a small portion of individuals found relief from academic stress, the majority experienced psychological difficulties as a result of being socially isolated. These issues highlighted the significance of social contacts and emotional support in the lives of high school learners, emphasising the necessity for tailored support techniques to meet their individual requirements during such crises (Rich, *et al.*, 2022:1).

Theme Five: Conclusions based on challenges experienced during the lockdown

High school learners encountered various challenges during the nationwide lockdown. These challenges included not being able to communicate with parents, friends, and extended family, as well as financial-related challenges by not being able to buy food, feeling hungry, lack of food, and not affording data.

- Learners perceived difficulties in effective communication with parents and would rather communicate with peers, teachers, or social workers.
- The high school learners voiced a decrease in communication and socialization with a divorced parent or other significant people.
- High school learners' basic needs were not satisfied during the nationwide lockdown.
- In addition, some of the learners mentioned that their parents did not receive any income during this period and could not afford to provide in their basic needs. The secondary economy—which was mostly composed of daily-wage part-time labour—was severely impacted.

The final conclusion from these findings is that high school learners faced significant challenges during the nationwide lockdown, which impacted both their physical and emotional well-being. These challenges included restricted communication with parents, friends, and extended family, financial struggles leading to food insecurity, and difficulty in accessing basic needs due to parents' loss of income, especially those in the secondary economy. Furthermore, the disruption of normal communication

channels led to a preference among learners to communicate with peers, teachers, or social workers instead of parents. The combination of these factors highlights the profound impact of the lockdown on the basic needs and social dynamics of high school learners. These challenges stemming from legal and regulation frameworks that were put in place to create a safe environment during the nationwide lockdown, but the contrary is that the basic needs of high school learners were not met (van der Berg & Spaull, 2020:14).

Theme Six: Conclusions based on enhanced family support and resilience during nationwide lockdown

In examining the support high school learners received from their environment, it is apparent that the learners experienced nurturing positive support from their immediate family. In response to this query, the high school learners also emphasize positive family interaction. In conclusion, the importance of parental support is therefore highlighted, in terms of the experiences and challenges high school learners faced in this unprecedented period of nationwide lockdown, without any physical and emotional support from the wider community. Hence the protective factor that the microsystem of the ecological system theory provides plays a crucial role in the supportive nature of an immediate family (Coetzee & Venter, 2016:3).

Theme Seven: Conclusions based on impact of school closure

Although schools are educational institutions, schools also provide tangible support for emotional, and material needs as well. All the high school learners voiced their concern that the needs of high school learners had suffered due to the forced school closure. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme: learners were denied food and/or other material resources due to forced school closures; and social workers did not provide them with any emotional support or counselling.

- Some learners do not have the privilege to receive a meal at home and are dependent on the school feeding scheme. High school learners could not receive food from the school feeding scheme due to the forced school closures, and no measures were put in place to provide a meal for these learners.
- Unfortunately, hygiene packages were not provided due to forced school closure, and parents receiving no-wages or low incomes could not provide for

these basic needs.

- The high school learners responded that their pathway was taken away to discuss their emotional and home circumstances problems with a social worker at school during the nationwide lockdown.

In addition, the lack of psychosocial support services during the forced school closure by social workers or counsellors undermines human dignity and basic rights. It is quite evident that not every learner is given the same level of support as the more privileged learner. This can have an ongoing effect on the less fortunate learner for years to come, and the pandemic has highlighted these disparities (Munir, 2021:13). This deficiency raises concerns about the challenges vulnerable and poor learners suffered during the forced school closure due to the nationwide lockdown.

In conclusion, the closure of schools during the lockdown not only disrupted education but also stripped away critical support structures for high school learners, particularly those from less privileged backgrounds. This situation underscores the need to consider schools as holistic support systems, providing both educational and essential psychosocial services.

Theme Eight: Conclusions based on suggestions for social work practice

The perspectives shared by the vast majority of high school learners recommended that school social workers should continue to support them by keeping in touch, giving meals to learners who are enrolled in the feeding programme, and assisting them with their emotional issues.

- The responses from high school learners indicated that to address their vulnerable condition, school social workers must maintain contact with them during a forced school closure with the learners.
- The high school learners suggested the provision of maintaining contact with the learners either by telephonic means, other offices, a mobile office, or by booking an appointment.
- They suggest that school social workers should actively address the unique challenges they face by giving advice to them, keeping communication lines open, and if necessary, removing them to a safe place.

- In addressing these basic needs of the high school learners mentioned, they suggest that the provision of food resources should continue during forced school closures. Their suggestions are to either deliver the food directly at their addresses or to make a community hall available to provide food resources.
- Adding to the above, the high school learners recognised the important role school social workers play by applying intervention services to the vulnerable learners who experience suicidal tendencies, and mental health problems through strengthening their coping mechanisms.

In conclusion, the perspectives of high school learners emphasise the need for school social workers to adapt and continue their support roles, even in the face of disruptions like school closures (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020:6). This involves maintaining communication, providing essential resources like food, and offering specialized support for mental health and safety concerns. Before forced school closures are put into place, several issues must be resolved, such as potential feeding plans, the learner's home environment, and whether the family can meet the learner's demands. These actions are critical in addressing the overall well-being of learners, particularly in challenging times.

5.4.2 Research findings from the school social workers

The thematic research findings relating to the experiences and challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic by school social workers providing their services to high school learners from a low socio-economic environment, as presented in Chapter Four, are presented here in summarised form. This is accompanied by the conclusions drawn by the researcher from the school social workers' narratives about the nine themes identified.

Theme One: Conclusions based on job description and daily functions as a school social worker

- All the school social workers stated that they provide counselling, psycho-social assistance, and child protection services. They collaborate closely with educators, parents, and learners.

- These statements by the participants suggest that social workers who work in schools greatly enhance the emotional and psychological health of their learners by providing advocacy, support, and counselling. Their all-encompassing strategy fosters circumstances where every learner can flourish by acknowledging the connection between personal and academic life.

In conclusion, school social workers are vital to the educational system, offering multifaceted support that extends beyond academic learning. Their role in enhancing the emotional and psychological well-being of learners, in collaboration with other stakeholders, creates a welcoming environment where each learner has the opportunity to thrive holistically (Reyneke, 2018:84).

Theme Two: Conclusions based on the role of school social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

The following conclusions were drawn by the researcher about the school social workers' views of the role they played during the nationwide strict lockdown period.

- One of the worst consequences of COVID-19's severe limits was that school social workers were unable to continue doing their work when the most vulnerable individuals needed them, as the responses highlighted.
- These responses included that the school social workers could not go to their places of work, they worked from home, and they were unable to reach the learners.
- School social workers narrated that during the nationwide lockdown, their only involvement with learners was conducting phone interviews with them. Some school social workers recounted that they did counselling over the phone. School social workers keenly wanted to address the needs of high school learners in the context of a forced school closure.
- Delivering food parcels to address the basic needs of learners was done by a school social worker and if queried by law enforcement, she would be able to present her SACSSP registration card. This practice of a school social worker to meet the basic needs of learners, demonstrate a commitment to professionalism, ethical considerations, and legal guidelines.

- The school social workers reflected on the fact that learners did not receive food from the school feeding scheme and they were concerned about these needs not being fulfilled.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the traditional role of school social workers, posing challenges in reaching and supporting learners. Despite these obstacles, school social workers adapted to continue providing essential services, demonstrating their commitment to the welfare of learners and their ability to navigate professional and ethical complexities during a crisis.

Theme Three: Conclusions based on the experiences of school social workers in rendering services to high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the context of the nationwide lockdown, the only way the school social worker was able to engage with the high school learner was through telephonic means which can be seen as an important way to provide services to learners. School social workers acknowledged the first-hand experience of offering only assistance through these means.

- Concerns were mentioned about phone consultations including the inability to see the non-verbal behaviour of the learners.
- The effectiveness in doing telephonic counselling was disturbed by the poor network and frequent sound interruption of telephonic discussions.
- Another main concern was that if during this telephonic counselling the learner needed more intense intervention, the social worker was not able to comfort the learner or intervene directly in the situation which could have detrimental effects on the learner.
- Irrespective of limited or inadequate telephonic intervention experiences, the fact as described by a social worker is that not all of the learners had telephonic means or data available due to their low socio-economic circumstances. On the side of the school social workers, some of them had to accept that they had to use their phones, data, or airtime which has a financial impact on the school social worker.
- One of the worst consequences of COVID-19's severe limits was that school social workers were unable to continue their work when the most vulnerable

individuals needed them, as the responses emphasized.

- These responses included that the school social workers could not go to work, they worked remotely, and they were unable to reach the learners.

An additional facet of school social workers' experiences of service delivery to high school learners during the nationwide lockdown, was knowing that the learners were not in favourable conditions. There was no platform to address these difficulties, or receive amicable assistance, which had an impact on them:

- Concerns were that learners lost immediate family members during the COVID-19 pandemic and the school social workers could not assist them with grief counselling.
- The feeling that resonated was that the learners' home environments were not conducive as the learner may be isolated in the house with an abuser and exposed to other negative circumstances such as bullying, stress among parents, and erratic access to food.
- The foundation that was laid during this research was that schools are also a safety net as described by the school social workers. Building a trusting relationship between the learner and educator or school social worker plays a vital role in reporting neglect and abuse as well as identifying the needs of learners.
- Social workers also express their concerns over the non-adherence to regulations by high school learners and the involvement of negative peer pressure resulting in drug and alcohol abuse.

It can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic severely restricted the capacity of school social workers to effectively support high school learners. The shift to remote support methods, compounded by socio-economic barriers and the inability to offer physical presence, significantly impacted their service delivery and the well-being of the learners they serve (Fouché *et al.*, 2020:15).

Theme Four: Conclusions based on challenges faced in rendering services to high school learners during the nationwide lockdown

School social workers faced a variety of difficulties in rendering services to high school

learners during the nationwide lockdown. These challenges include feeling overwhelmed, limited resources as well as insufficient staff and limited training, and knowledge. The researcher derived the following conclusions from the school social workers' descriptions of the challenges they encountered in rendering services during the nationwide lockdown:

- School social workers sincerely felt the need to have access to learners and emphasized this challenge as they desired to provide services to vulnerable learners.
- The school social workers highlighted that they experienced challenges with limited resources and manpower. The school social workers felt they did not provide services because they did not have the resources to do so.
- One school-based social worker mentioned that there are only nine school social workers rendering services to 160 schools.
- An integral feeling of not having enough information about COVID-19 and the social media as the main source of information, made it difficult to advise high school learners about the virus.
- Although the school social workers provided telephonic counselling, they expressed uncertainty and a lack of training to do it properly.
- The limited debriefing sessions presented by the employer to deal with the school social workers' feelings of panic and psychological aspects in rendering services in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, were voiced.

The conclusion from the challenges faced by school social workers in servicing high school learners during the nationwide lockdown can be summarized as follows:

School social workers encountered significant obstacles in providing services to high school learners amidst the lockdown. These challenges were multifaceted, involving limited access to learners, insufficient resources and manpower, inadequate training, and a lack of debriefing opportunities (Capp, *et al.*, 2021:79). Social workers keenly felt the need to reach vulnerable learners but were hindered by resource constraints and a high demand-to-service ratio, as evidenced by nine social workers serving 160 schools. Information scarcity regarding COVID-19, with social media being a primary information source, complicated their advisory role. The transition to telephonic

counselling brought its own set of uncertainties, exacerbated by a lack of specific training for such a crisis. Additionally, the absence of sufficient debriefing sessions left social workers grappling with their own psychological stress and panic. These conditions forced them to make challenging decisions without proper practice guidelines or support, highlighting a pressing need for comprehensive training and resource allocation to enhance their ability to effectively support the growing needs of learners in such unprecedented circumstances (Kelly *et al.*, 2021:5).

Theme Five: Conclusions based on transformation in School Social Work Practices During Pandemic Restrictions

This research explored the nuanced feelings that the nature of school social work services changed during the context of the restricted periods. Social workers worked remotely and were compelled to embrace a new type of adaptive way, which entails using telephonic counselling.

- The school social workers put forward that they used their cell phones to contact high school learners to communicate with them and provide counselling and assistance to families.
- These adaptive ways are viewed as an opportunity to show resilience by the school social workers.

The conclusion from the research on the transformation in school social work practices during pandemic restrictions is as follows:

During the restricted periods of the pandemic, the nature of school social work services underwent a significant change. Social workers, adapting to the constraints imposed by remote working conditions, embraced new methods of service delivery, primarily relying on telephonic counselling. This shift involved using personal cell phones to maintain contact with high school learners and to provide counselling and assistance to their families. Despite the challenges posed by this transition, school social workers viewed these adaptive methods as an opportunity to demonstrate resilience (Itzhaki-Braun, 2021:720). This change signifies a notable shift in the approach to school social work, reflecting both the flexibility and the resourcefulness of social workers in continuing to support their learners amidst unprecedented challenges.

Theme Six: Conclusions based on retrospective insights on service delivery to high school learners during the pandemic

The school social workers' accounts painted a picture of lessons to be learned to maintain their services in future disasters. The lessons are about staying connected and involving the community. School social workers revealed the following for bettering service delivery during a future lockdown:

- To provide services in future disasters, the focus must be on comprehensive data capturing, through reports that can provide significant information about the circumstances of the family, their needs, and the community they reside in.
- Communication between the social worker and learner can be established by means of telephonic or internet communication such as Teams and Zoom.
- Although social support systems were not in place for high school learners, the school social workers could link them telephonically to a community centre.
- Another suggestion was the empowerment of learners through the educational system and counselling to build resilience and in a future disaster they will be equipped and resourceful enough.
- The value of the community as a support network needs to be emphasised. The school social workers viewed a community as a resources-based environment and each community has its characteristics in solving problems.
- However, the school social workers need to be proactive in having their networks in the community in place before a disaster or forced school closure.

The conclusion that can be drawn in hindsight underlines valuable lessons for future disasters, centring on the importance of maintaining connections and community involvement. Key aspects include the need for comprehensive data capturing to understand family and community needs better, the effective use of community centres for telephonic support in the absence of formal systems, and the empowerment of learners through education and counselling to build resilience. Additionally, the role of the community as a vital support network is emphasized, highlighting the unique problem-solving capabilities of different communities (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:193). This calls for school social workers to proactively establish and strengthen their community networks well before crises like forced school closures occur. These insights point towards a more integrated, community-

focused, and resilience-oriented approach in school social work, highlighting preparedness and adaptability as crucial elements in responding to unforeseen challenges.

Theme Seven: Conclusions based on awareness and impact of legislation and policies on educational service delivery during the pandemic

School social workers faced a lack of supportive legislation requiring them to provide service delivery during a pandemic to high school learners.

- When it came to providing services to high school learners during the rigorous nationwide lockdown, all of the school social workers stated that there were no clear legislation and/or policies about it in place.
- During the nationwide lockdown they lacked detailed guidelines in acting and providing services.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this theme is as follows:

School social workers identified a significant gap in supportive legislation and clear policies specifically tailored for service delivery during a pandemic. This lack of well-defined legislative and policy guidance became particularly evident during the difficult nationwide lockdown. The absence of detailed guidelines left school social workers without a clear framework or protocol for action in providing services to high school learners under these unprecedented conditions. Consequently, this situation stressed the need for the development and implementation of specific legislation and policies that can guide school social workers and other educational professionals in effectively responding to the unique challenges posed by a pandemic or similar crisis situation (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:194).

Theme Eight: Conclusions based on suggestions to improve service delivery during pandemics

The responses of the participants regarding suggestions to improve service delivery during a pandemic or future disaster include the following: school social workers need to be regarded as essential service providers and, on the frontline. Further suggestions are supportive plans, alternative offices or schools, community involvement, legislations and guidelines and lastly, if possible, schools must stay open.

- The school social workers suggested that they be regarded as frontline workers and allowed to holistically assist the learners. The main emphasis here is the contingency of providing services to vulnerable learners who are dependent on the school system to deal with their emotional, physical, and psycho-social needs.
- In alignment with the above suggestion supportive plans, legislations, and guidelines need to be in place. School social workers mentioned that adopting supportive policies, plans, and guidelines will enhance service delivery during a forced school closure and it will be perceived legitimacy.
- The suggestion is that the learners must attend the nearest or available school during a forced school closure, or a mobile office or a community centre to attend to the needs of the vulnerable learner.
- Unfortunately, it seems that school social workers had no collaboration with professional experts or the community.
- Again, under this theme the suggestion was made that it would strongly advise against school closures in the future. One school social worker suggested keeping schools open even during a pandemic.

It can be concluded that a comprehensive approach to improving service delivery during extraordinary situations, emphasizing the critical role of school social workers, the necessity of supportive policy frameworks, the importance of alternative service delivery methods, the need for collaborative efforts, and rethinking the strategy of complete school closures, is needed (Matlakala *et al.*, 2021:194).

Theme Nine: Conclusions based on Personal and Professional impacts of working during the pandemic

The lack of awareness among the 'powers that be' concerning the school social workers' worries and anxieties must be addressed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and guidelines, social workers have had to deal with concerns, fears, and anxieties that are identical to those of their clients, which has had a negative impact on coping strategies and personal boundaries.

- The school social workers amplified the feelings of being fearful, scared, and anxious about their health as well as that of their families.
- Feelings of relief were also felt when the lockdown regulations were instituted

regarding their safety and well-being.

The final summarized conclusion indicates that the pandemic significantly affected the personal and professional lives of school social workers, highlighting the need to acknowledge their fears and anxieties, which often mirrored those of their clients. The COVID-19 regulations and the accompanying uncertainties led to challenges in maintaining effective coping mechanisms and personal boundaries for these social workers. School social workers expressed feelings of fear, being scared, and anxiety concerning their health and the health of their families. Alongside these concerns, there were also feelings of relief when lockdown regulations were implemented, as these measures were seen as protective of their safety and well-being. This situation underscores the importance of considering the mental health and emotional well-being of school social workers, who are often on the front lines of crisis response in educational settings (Kelly *et al.*, 2021:11).

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations for social policies, school social work practice, social work education, and future research have been developed by the researcher, based on the research findings:

5.5.1 Recommendations for social policy

The following recommendations are made about the institution of social policy to provide for the continuation of school social work services during periods of forced school closure:

- The National Disaster Management Framework 2023 prioritise disasters of varying severity and scale in South Africa, with a focus on reducing vulnerability in disaster-prone areas, communities, and families (South Africa, 2023). The framework provides guidelines within certain processes and structures and these can be integrated to provide services to vulnerable learners. It is advised that these formal processes and structures can provide support and guidelines to enhance the coordination and integration of services provided to vulnerable high school learners by the various responsible government departments and

schools in the event that schools are forced to close due to a disaster.

- It is recommended that a formal coordinating committee be established, consisting of members from the DBE, DSD, and the corps of school social workers. The objective of the committee should be to develop a policy and procedure to provide protection to learners during times of disaster and forced school closure, such as providing in learners' physical needs in the absence of school feeding schemes and continuing to render social work services and psycho-social support to learners.
- To address these issues, a system needs to be in place to support learners during forced school closure, and a formal network needs to be established. This should involve all role players concerned—the DBE as the lead department, the DSD, non-governmental organisations, school social workers and community leaders. A body must be established and governed by a procedure or policy agreement.
- The to be established body should attend to the development of a national disaster management plan pertaining to the needs of learners during a forced school closure to guide schools and school social workers in dealing with it. Procedural and legislative guidelines should be put in place addressing contingency plans regarding not only educational needs, but also the emotional and material needs of learners under such circumstances, as there are currently no such guidelines.
- It is further recommended that school social services be extended to all schools, specifically those in poor communities. The need for school social services is greater in impoverished communities and the government need to allocate sufficient funds to provide school social work services in these communities.
- South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) advocate and register school social work as a social work field of specialty.

5.5.2 Recommendations for school social work practice

It is recommended that the authorities and role players concerned attend to dealing with the following school social work practice aspects to be prepared for times of forced school closure:

- Creating a customized disaster plan model based on theories and best practices for school social work, to adapt to the needs of learners, schools, and communities in providing services during forced school closure.
- Developing of an in-service training programme on the role of a school social worker during a disaster and forced school closure.
- Creating collaboration/partnerships with professional experts and the communities in mediating resources and manpower during a disaster as well as conducting community outreach programmes to assist impoverished communities during a disaster and forced school closure.
- Reaching consensus about school social services being a frontline and essential services during a disaster.
- Developing a system to maintain contact with learners during times of forced school closure, to continue providing psycho-social and material support to learners in partnership with all role players. The requirements of the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act 4 of 2013 need to be considered (Accessible Law, 2019) in this regard.
- Developing school social workers' skills in utilizing telephonic counselling and the Internet communication facilities such as Teams and Zoom.so that they can have the necessary knowhow and self-confidence to utilise it,
- Reviewing the nature of school social work supervision of school social workers to provide them with guidance and to enhance their leadership skills so that they can practice skilful decision-making during a disaster. Supervision of school social workers must be more systematic to address all the requirements of supervision services as well as identify risks of burnout and being overworked.
- Advocating by the school social workers for the rights of learners from disadvantaged households for education, food, material needs, psycho-social support, and protection.
- Enabling school social workers to contribute to the curriculum of Life Orientation in equipping learners with skills to be resourceful during forced school closure and building resilience.

5.5.3 Recommendations for school social work education and training

The following recommendations are made for the education and training of school social workers by the departments of social work at universities:

- Further education and training on a postgraduate level is recommended for school social workers and it is the responsibility of the school social worker to continue professional development.
- Recommendations for additional education and training for social workers in disaster management as part of continue professional development training since the Bachelor of Social Work degree provide a generic professional education.

5.5.4 Recommendations for further research

Derived and flowing from the research findings it is recommended that further research be undertaken regarding the following topics:

- Further research on the long-term impact of the nationwide lockdown and forced school closure on high school learners.
- Further research on the role and task of the school social worker and the social work profession to offer disaster management strategy and directions to learners and their parents during a forced school closure due to a disaster.
- Investigate the elements and procedures to be followed in order to organize community networks to support comprehensive assistance to learners during forced school closure resulting from a disaster.
- Research about the way in which multidisciplinary teams can assist high school learners during forced school closure due to a disaster.
- It is recommended that this study be repeated on a larger scale in the form of a quantitative research study.

5.6 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study relies on an exploratory design to obtain information about a fairly unresearched topic, through interviews with high school learners and school social workers. During the interviews, some of the high school learners gave blunt answers which required exploration and the researcher needed to read the situation to be sensitive at all times but to get the information needed. Despite this challenge, the researcher could do clarification when required.

The inability to generalize the research findings is a restriction. Qualitative study was conducted to gain insight into the experiences and challenges faced by high school learners and school social workers in the Pretoria West Municipal area. This technique provides context-bound information and does not allow for the generalization of findings to larger contexts. Small sample numbers may not accurately reflect the diversity and complexity of the population under study. As a result, conclusions may not be easily applicable to larger groups or circumstances.

Convenience sampling, namely quota and snowball sampling can produce a biased sample because it depends on participants who are easily accessible or readily available. This might result in overrepresentation or underrepresentation of specific demographics or features in the sample, not accurately represent the larger population.

A constraint was that the researcher was only authorized by the DBE to conduct the study for one week, during the final week of September 2023. It was forbidden to do research during the fourth quarter of the academic year. Despite the researcher's limited time, all gatekeepers provided their full support, allowing and assisting the researcher to conduct all interviews until data saturation was reached, as agreed upon with the supervisor, all without interfering with the educational programme. This procedure was more appropriate because the high school learners preferred the interviews to take place at their schools.

5.7 CONCLUSION

The chapter concludes with a summary, conclusion, and recommendations derived from the research findings. A summary of each chapter is provided. It is indicated that the research process concluded with the study's goals and objectives having been met, by conducting the research as planned. Based on the themes and sub-themes respectively obtained from the narratives provided by the high school learners and school social workers, conclusions and recommendations are made based on the research findings. Based on, and related to the research findings, suggestions are offered for social policies, social work practices, future, and additional education and further research. Lastly, the limitations of the study are explained.

To develop and implement school social work services that are based on information about the demands regarding the type and content of school social work services during a disaster and forced school closure to a vulnerable population, the researcher assumes that the study's findings will be contributing to the social work knowledge base and the gap encountered in the research about the research topic.

A quote from Hunter Patch Adams: "You treat a disease, you win, you lose. You treat a person, I guarantee you, you'll win, no matter what the outcome".

(Shadvac, T, Patch Adams, 1998)

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ADDENDA

ADDENDUM A – INTERVIEW GUIDE

PARTICIPANTS GROUP 1: HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS

Biographical information

- a) What is your age?
- b) What grade are you in?
- c) What is your gender?
- d) Do you have siblings and if yes what are their ages?
- e) Are one or both of your parents employed?
- f) If stated yes on one or both, what employment do they have?

Topic-related questions

1. Please describe how you experienced this period of nationwide lockdown.
2. Why do you think in your understanding, it was important to stay at home and apply social distancing during the nationwide lockdown?
3. With what activities did you keep yourself busy at home during the nationwide lockdown?
4. How did you feel:
 - 4.1 not seeing your friends?
 - 4.2 not attending school?
 - 4.3 not attending any social gatherings at church?
 - 4.4 not attending any social gatherings with your friends?
 - 4.5 not attending any sports activities or cultural activities?
5. What challenges did you experience during the nationwide lockdown?
6. What kind of support did you receive from your immediate family during the nationwide lockdown?
7. Schools provide for different needs of learners, not only educational but emotional and material needs for example food. During the nationwide lockdown schools were closed and school social workers also did not work. Do you think that learners' needs have suffered as a result? And if yes why?

8. Based on your experiences during the nationwide lockdown what do you think social workers can do to help children who feel unsafe, needy, or dismayed in their home situation?

9. Is there any information you would like to add, or do you have any suggestions or questions?

PARTICIPANTS GROUP 2: SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

Biographical information

a) What is your age?

b) How long have been a social worker?

Topic-related questions

1. Kindly tell me about your job description and daily functions.

2. What was the role that you played as a school social worker during the COVID-19 pandemic?

3. What were your experiences during the nationwide lockdown with service delivery to high school learners?

4. From your experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and nationwide lockdown, what challenges did you face in rendering services to high school learners?

5. Did the nature of social work service delivery to high school learners change during these restricted periods?

6. Knowing what you know now, how would you address service delivery to the high school learners during the COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown?

7. Do you know of any legislation and/or policies that were in place during the nationwide lockdown in addressing service delivery during a pandemic to high school learners?

8. To improve service delivery during a pandemic, do you have any suggestions?

9. How was working during a pandemic affecting you on a personal and professional level?

10. Is there any information you would like to add, any suggestions, or any questions?

ADDENDUM B – ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

10 August 2023

Dear Ms Yvette Ingrid van Schalkwyk

NHREC Registration # :
Rec-240816-052
CREC Reference # :
59575670_CREC_CHS_2023

Decision:
**Ethics Approval from 10 August 2023
to 10 August 2024**

Researcher(s): Name: Ms. Y. I. van Schalkwyk
Contact details: 59575670@mylife.unisa.ac.za
Supervisor(s): Name: Dr. T. M. Calitz
Contact details: calittm@unisa.ac.za

Title: Experiences and challenges faced during a disaster by high school learners from a poor socio-economic environment: A case study of Covid-19 from a Social Work perspective

Degree Purpose: Masters

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Unisa College of Human Science Ethics Committee. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **high risk application** was reviewed by College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, 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(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. 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 College Ethics Review Committee.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.



4. 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, accompanied by a progress report.
5. 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.
6. 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 require additional ethics clearance.
7. No fieldwork activities may continue after the expiry date (**10 August 2024**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **59575670_CREC_CHS_2023** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Yours sincerely,

Signature:



Prof. KB Khan
CHS Research Ethics Committee Chairperson
Email: khankb@unisa.ac.za
Tel: (012) 429 8210

Signature: PP



Prof ZZ Nkosi
Executive Dean: CHS
E-mail: nkosizz@unisa.ac.za
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ADDENDUM C – APPROVAL LETTER FROM DBE



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Date: | 26 September 2023 |
| Validity of Research Approval: | 08 February 2023– 30 September 2023 2023/450 |
| Name of Researcher: | Van Schalkwyk YI |
| Address of Researcher: | [REDACTED] |
| Telephone Number: | [REDACTED] |
| Email address: | yvschalkwyk@gmail.com |
| Research Topic: | Experience and challenges faced during a disaster by High school learners from a poor socio-economic environment: A case study of COVID-19 out of a social work perspective |
| Name of University: | UNISA |
| Type of qualification | Masters |
| Number and type of schools: | Secondary Schools, LSEN Schools |
| District/s/HO | Tshwane West |

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. **Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.**
4. **The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.**
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards



Dr. Gurnani Mukatuni
Acting CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 26/09/2023

2

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Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

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ADDENDUM D – LETTER OF INVITATION

Research title:

A case study of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments

Researcher:

Yvette Ingrid van Schalkwyk

Student Number: 59575670

Ethics clearance reference number:

Research permission reference number (if applicable):

5 July 2023

Title: A case study of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Yvette Ingrid van Schalkwyk, a student researcher, I am doing research with Dr T.M. Calitz, a senior lecturer at the Department of Social Work towards a Master of Social Work at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled “Experiences and challenges high school learners faced during the Nationwide COVID-19 lockdown in a low socio-economic environment: a case study of Covid-19 from a social work perspective”.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

I am conducting this research to find out what the experiences and challenges the high school learner faced as well as school social work services in a low socio-economic

environment during the COVID-19 pandemic nationwide restrictions and lockdown in order to enhance social work services during a disaster.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You have been invited to take part in the research because you are a high school learner between the ages of 16 and 19 years and for the first time you will have the opportunity to express your experiences and challenges that you faced during the nationwide lockdown. You as a school social worker working in the area of Municipality area of Pretoria West, are also invited to take part to give your perspective on social work services to high school learners during the nationwide lockdown. The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act 4 of 2013, will also be complied with in the obtaining, handling, and storing of the participants' information and safeguarding this information.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The study will consist of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, observation, and open-ended questions to a learner. An example of a question will be “with what activities did you keep yourself busy at home during the nationwide lockdown?” The questions will not take longer than 30 minutes and you will return to your school activities. The participation by the school social workers will also be at their convenience.

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

It is entirely up to you whether you choose to take part in this study; you are not required to give your permission. You will be given this information sheet to retain and asked to sign a written consent form if you choose to participate. You may leave at any time without providing a reason. A parental consent/assent form for a child under the age of 18 will also need to be signed.

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

We can better service delivery through understanding and insight into what the research may reveal about your experiences and challenges during the period of the nationwide lockdown for future pandemics.

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

No. The questions are about your experiences and challenges during the nationwide COVID-19 pandemic, and you cannot pass or fail. You simply respond based on what is true for you. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

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

No one will be able to link your replies to you, and your identity won't be recorded anywhere. Your responses will be assigned a code or a pseudonym, and the data, any publications, or other research reporting techniques, including conference proceedings, will all relate to you in this way. People in charge of ensuring that research is conducted ethically, such as the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee, may examine your responses. Due to the fact that the interviews will be individual, the other participants will not be aware that you are a part of the study.

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

In order to use your responses for upcoming research or academic needs, the researcher will keep hard copies of your responses for at least five years in a locked filing cabinet at her home. A password-protected PC will be used to store electronic data. Future uses of the saved data will be governed by additional Research Ethics Review and, if necessary, approval.

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

There is no payment for participating and no cost to participating in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

The study received ethics approval.

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

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Yvette van Schalkwyk at cell number: 0829733487 or email address:

yvschalkwyk@gmail.com. The research results are available for 5 years. Contact the research supervisor, Dr. T.M. Calitz, of the Department of Social Work, UNISA, at 012 429 8768 or calittm@unisa.ac.za if you have any questions concerning how the study was carried out. Alternatively, you can get in touch with the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee's chair (CREC), Professor KB Khan. He can be reached at khankb@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.



Yvette van Schalkwyk

ADDENDUM E - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Research title: A case study of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments

Researcher: Yvette van Schalkwyk

Student no: 5975670

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

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the semi-structured interviews and taking notes.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

_____ **(please print)**
Participant Name and Surname

_____ _____
Participant Signature Date

_____ _____
Signature of Researcher: Yvette van Schalkwyk Date

ADDENDUM F - PARENTAL CONSENT FOR CHILD'S PARTICIPATION

Title of the Study: A case study of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments

Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether to let your child participate in this research study. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether to give your permission for your child to take part. If you decide to let your child, be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

Purpose of the Study

If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study about how your child experienced the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown regulations namely social distancing, closure of school, church, sport and cultural activities and the challenges your child perceived. The purpose of this study is to determine what the experiences and challenges the high school learner faced in a low socio-economic environment during the COVID-19 pandemic nationwide restrictions and lockdown in order to enhance social work services during a disaster when schools are forced to be closed.

What is my child going to be asked to do?

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to:

- Answer biographical and topic-related semi-structured questions which will take approximately 30 minutes.
- No studying or preparation is needed to answer the questionnaires.

An example of a biographical question is: “do you have siblings and if yes what are their ages?”

An example of a topic-related question is: “with what activities did you keep yourself busy at home during the nationwide lockdown?”

- This will take place during school times at the learner’s school, during a period where no schoolwork will be missed, and will not require additional transport arrangements.
- There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. Your child’s name will not be mentioned in the report and no direct results will be allocated to your child’s name.
- The potential benefit of the study is an improved social service delivery to high school learners during a disaster.

Does my child have to participate?

No, your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. You can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty.

What if my child does not want to participate?

In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. If your child does not want to participate, they will not be included in the study and there will be no penalty. If your child initially agrees to be in the study, they can change their mind later without any penalty.

Will there be any compensation?

No.

How will your child’s privacy and confidentiality be protected if s/he participates in this research study?

No one will be able to link your child’s replies to him/her, and your child’s identity won’t be recorded anywhere. Your child’s responses will be assigned a code or a pseudonym, and the data, any publications, or other research reporting techniques, including conference proceedings, will all relate to you in this way. People in charge of ensuring that research is conducted ethically, such as the transcriber, external

coder, and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee, may examine your child's responses. Due to the fact that the interviews will be individual, the other participants will not be aware that your child are a part of the study.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your child's participation you can contact the researcher, Yvette van Schalkwyk at cell number: 0829733487 or email address: yvschalkwyk@gmail.com. The research results are available for 5 years. Contact the research supervisor, Dr. T.M. Calitz, of the Department of Social Work, UNISA, at 012 429 8768 or calittm@unisa.ac.za if you have any questions concerning how the study was carried out. Alternatively, you can get in touch with the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee's chair (CREC), Professor KB Khan. He can be reached at khankb@unisa.ac.za

Signature

You are deciding about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow them to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study, you may discontinue her participation at any time. You will be given a copy of this document.

Printed Name of Child

Printed Name of Parent (s) or Legal Guardian

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Date

Signature of Researcher: Yvette van Schalkwyk

Date

ADDENDUM G - ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Research title:

A case study of high school learners' and social workers' experiences and challenges in the face of COVID-19 disaster in low socio-economic environments.

Researcher: Yvette van Schalkwyk

Student Number: 59575670

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

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet (Addendum D). I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study. I give my permission according to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), Act 4 of 2013, that my biographical information be used as part of this research.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Printed Name of Child

Signature of Child

Date

Signature of Researcher: Yvette van Schalkwyk

Date

ADDENDUM H – LETTER FROM DEBRIEFER

Date: 07 November 2022

Dear Yvette van Schalkwyk

Re: REQUEST FOR PARTICIPANTS' DEBRIEFING SERVICES

This letter serves as confirmation that I, [REDACTED], will accept your request for debriefing services. I am happy to provide such services to your research participants free of charge.

You are required to notify me at least two weeks before the interviews commence so that I can be ready to meet your participants when the need arises.

Wishing you great success with your studies.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dui', is positioned above a solid black rectangular redaction box.

Mobile numbers:

Email:

ADDENDUM I – EDITOR LETTER

DR J LOMBARD
**RESEARCH REPORT CRITICAL READING, LANGUAGE & TECHNICAL
EDITING**

Cell: 078 116 8018
e-mail: berto@woodcarving.co.za

136 Erich Mayer St
PRETORIA NORTH
0182

W99

EDITOR'S LETTER

EDITING OF MSW DISSERTATION: MS YI VAN DSCHALKWYK (S/NO 59575670)

This is to certify that I have critically read and edited Yvette Ingrid van Schalkwyk's dissertation for the degree Master of Social Work (MSW) at UNISA, entitled:

Experiences and challenges faced during a disaster by high school learners from a poor socio-economic environment: A case study of COVID-19 from a social work perspective

The following aspects of the dissertation were edited:

- Spelling
- Grammar
- Sentence structure
- Logical sequencing
- Consistency of layout
- Consistency of referencing and in-text references
- Consistency and completeness of reference list

The responsibility to do the corrections and implement my comments and suggestions correctly, remains that of the student.



DR J LOMBARD
14 February 2024

ADDENDUM J – ORIGINALITY REPORT (TURNITIN)



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Submission title: **YI van Schalkwyk Dissertation**
File name: **YI_van_Schalkwyk_Dissertation.docx**
File size: **3.06M**
Page count: **228**
Word count: **69,724**
Character count: **394,362**
Submission date: **23-Feb-2024 04:06PM (UTC+0200)**
Submission ID: **2302424477**

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter of the research, focuses on the experiences and challenges faced during a dissertation for high school learners from a poor socio-economic environment, provides insight from a social work perspective into why this study was undertaken and outlines its approach. It encompasses background information, the formulation of the research problem, the theoretical framework, research inquiries, and the study's goal and objectives. Subsequently, it details the research methodology, methods employed, data collection, and analysis techniques, followed by a discussion on interpreting the study's findings, ethical considerations, fundamental research concepts, and the dissertation format are also elucidated. The chapter concludes with a concise summary.

The study is about the experiences and challenges faced during a dissertation for high school learners from a poor socio-economic environment. A case study of COVID-19 from a social work perspective.

1.2 BACKGROUND

Against the backdrop of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, this initial section of the research investigates the profound impact of this global crisis on schools, learners, and the associated social workers who played a fundamental role in navigating the challenges faced by high school learners hailing from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. This information serves to establish the contextual framework for the study.

In China, in the city of Wuhan, the first case of Coronavirus 2019 disease (COVID-19) was reported in late December 2019 and identified as respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that caused the global COVID-19 pandemic. Although China tried to contain the spread of the virus, this extremely contagious virus spread

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YI van Schalkwyk Dissertation

ORIGINALITY REPORT

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