



**The influence of the Ecological Systems on Grade Seven Academic Achievers
at a Junior Secondary Township School**

By

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DECLARATION

I, Thabang Collins Sekhothe, student number 47561777, do hereby declare that this dissertation is a product of my original work and that reviewed literature was carefully acknowledged and referenced according to the University's plagiarism policy.

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the influence of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on Grade seven learners' academic achievements, particularly focusing on top achievers at a Junior Township Secondary School in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. Bronfenbrenner critiqued previous theories of child development that focused only on unfamiliar laboratory experiments and argued that child development cannot be limited to laboratory experiments as it is a complex system comprising of diverse relationships that a child has at multiple levels of their surrounding environment. Bronfenbrenner proposed a multidimensional frameworks theory for understanding child development in socio-political and social settings called the ecological systems theory, which has fundamentally affected the teaching and learning field. The ecological systems theory postulates that a child's development is shaped by ecological systems namely, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. Therefore, the study explores the implications of these five ecological systems and factors such as the school location and learners' personality traits on Grade seven top learners' academic achievements. The choice of Grade seven learners in this study is also crucial in that they are at a vulnerable age and their decision making is likely to be influenced by the environment they exist in and the people around them. The school under study is located in a township, and townships in South Africa are generally characterised by economic, social and political struggles which, in one way or the other, affect the development of a child and ultimately their school performance. The study is anchored on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's theory of child development. Vygotsky's theory asserts that children learn cultural values, problem solving skills and beliefs through dialogues with more experienced and knowledgeable members of society. Bronfenbrenner then built on Vygotsky's theory, adding the influence of environmental factors on child development. Vygotsky's theory was criticised for neglecting the biological aspect associated with development as he failed to acknowledge children's ability to influence self-growth. The study employed an interpretivism paradigm and utilised qualitative research approaches namely semi-structured interviews and participant observation as data collection techniques. Purposive sampling was used based on the judgement of the researcher who deemed the small group of participants as the ideal candidates to fulfil the objectives of the study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The study concluded that the academic achievement of learners is largely embedded on the impact that their social environment has had on their development. All elements of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems play a crucial role in the development and socialisation and children, ultimately learners in the case of this study. These include parents/families, teachers, schools where children attend, communities where children reside in and neighbourhoods where schools are located in, churches, parental or family relations with teachers, parents' workplaces and cultural elements.

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ABBREVIATIONS

OBE	Outcome Based Education
ZDP	Zone of Proximal Development
CHE	Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy
UNISA	University of South Africa
ANA	Annual National Assessments
NSC	National Senior Certificate
FET	Further Education and Training
NEEDU	National Education Evaluation and Development Unit
MEC	Member of the Executive Council
SASA	South African Schools Act
SMTs	School Management Teams

KEY TERMS

Bronfenbrenner, ecological systems, top achievers, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem, township school, personality traits, learners.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This study explores the influence of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on Grade seven learners' academic achievements, particularly focusing on top achievers at a Junior Township Secondary School in the Gauteng Province, South Africa. Academic achievement is defined as outcomes of education that indicate the extent to which an individual, teacher or institution has achieved their specific educational objectives (Yates, 2017). Academic achievement is generally recognized as imperative for social and economic prosperity. The study focuses on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, an American psychologist who critiqued previous theories of child development that focused only on unfamiliar laboratory experiments. He argued that child development cannot be limited to laboratory experiments as it is a complex system comprising of diverse relationships that a child has at multiple levels of their surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner 1977; 1988; 1999). Most human development theories from the 1950s to the 1970s largely focused on a child or parent without considering the reciprocal influence between the two. As a result, Bronfenbrenner sought to coin a different understanding of human development that explains growth without focusing on a person's deficits but the environment around them (Crawford, 2020).

In 1979, Bronfenbrenner proposed a multidimensional frameworks theory for understanding child development in socio-political and social settings called the ecological systems theory, which has fundamentally affected the teaching and learning field over very nearly forty years (Davis & Elliot, 2018). This theory embodies a convergence of social, biological and psychological sciences in human development (Crawford, 2020), as it explores human development in order to understand and explain the ways in which a person interacts with different systems within the environment they exist in (Bronfenbrenner, 1983). Bronfenbrenner's theory takes into account the influences of different systems that play a role in the lived experiences of the individual no matter how little the influence is. Therefore, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory defines human development through the spectrum of various environmental interconnections (Crawford, 2020) and the theory seeks to understand and explain the manner in which individuals interact with their environment. The ecological systems theory postulates that a child's development is shaped by ecological systems namely; the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem.

1.1.1 Microsystem

An individual's immediate environment contains a system of influence known as the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner (1999) defined a microsystem as the roles, array of activities and interpersonal relations that a developing person experiences overtime in a particular setting. In the case of this study, the microsystem comprises of a learner's immediate surroundings such as parents, family, neighbourhood, the school and the teachers. These are the people with whom a learner has regular face-to-face contact. The microsystem is the layer closest to the child and contains the structures with which the child has direct contact (Chen & Tomes, 2005). This level of the ecosystem is very crucial as it has an immediate impact on the behaviour and development of a child (Crawford, 2020) and ultimately their performance at school. At this level, relationships have impact in two direction – both away and towards the child. Bronfenbrenner calls these bi-directional influences which have the greatest impact on the child (Chen & Tomes, 2005).

1.1.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem relates to the connection between different microsystems proximal to one's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; 1999). When, microsystems such as the parents and the teachers interact, a mesosystem is created. In the case of this study, mesosystem could comprise of the relationship between the child's family and teachers for the benefit of the child.

1.1.3 Exosystem

The exosystem is similar to the mesosystem as it comprises microsystems that interact with one another, however, one of the microsystems at play cannot have the person/child in question at the centre of the system (Crawford, 2020). In other words, the exosystem is made of the environmental context which the child may not directly experience, but influences their life nonetheless. An example would be parents' workplaces. Although workplaces may not directly involve a child, they influence how parents relate or take care of their children.

1.1.4 Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the societal blueprint (norms/values) for a certain culture and structure (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). It is linked to the child's socioeconomic status and values/norms put in place such as educational laws. This level is created by a pattern of interface amongst different micro, meso and exosystems and it is considered as the outermost layer in a child's development (Chen & Tomes, 2005). The culture of a family for instance develops within the family structure in the microsystem and this is eventually influenced by the meso- and exosystems within that particular family. All these systems are then influenced by the overall

society and culture (Crawford, 2020). Elements of a culture may include the native language spoken at home and the language of instruction at school.

1.1.5 Chronosystem

The chronosystem comprises of environmental changes that occur overtime (Zhang, 2019). This ecological system postulates that as human beings age, they develop and mature due to changes in their biological conditions. Thus, the concept of time is incorporated into human development including "...not only the aging and maturation of the person but also the time in which that person lives and develops" (Crawford, 2020, p. 3).

1.2 TOWNSHIP SCHOOL CONTEXT IN THE GAUTENG PROVINCE, SOUTH AFRICA

This study focuses on the influence of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems on Grade Seven top academic achievers at a Junior Secondary township school in the Gauteng province, South Africa. According to *News 24* (19 January 2023), the Gauteng Province had the second highest matric pass rate of 84.4% out of the country's nine provinces in the 2022 academic year. Although Gauteng is a top performing province in Basic Education, it is a hub of cultural and geospatial diversity, and inequality, with schools located in both high and low socio-economic areas such as townships and rural areas (Monyoe, 2017).

During apartheid rule, the government established racial discrimination in social, economic, political and educational institutions that imposed an intentionally racially inferior society for all non-white populations (Mhlauli, Salini & Mokotedi 2015). Despite being two decades into the post-apartheid era, the racial disparities still operate to date in terms of unequal schooling systems, housing and opportunities of employment (Knaus & Brown, 2016). Schools still face unequal resource distribution and school funding that extend the poverty conditions in Black townships and rural areas with a colonised curriculum and language of instruction (Kennemer & Knaus, 2019).

The school under study is located in a township, and townships in South Africa are generally characterised by economic, social and political struggles which, in one way or the other, affect the development of a child and ultimately their school performance. According to Crawford (2020), Bronfenbrenner's theory sees the learner as impacted by the settled social frameworks they occupy in this environmental model. The researcher believes in the proverb that 'it takes a village to raise a child', which aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory. According to Silalahi (2019), people learn best when cooperating with others during joint coordinated effort, and it is through such collaborative tries with more talented people that students learn new ideas, mental instruments and abilities.

Motseke (2005) conducted a study on the implementation of the Outcome Based Education (OBE) in South African township schools and found that the majority of learners came from very poor backgrounds, living in shacks, having parents with no formal employment, some without television and books, leaving their teachers as the only source of information in their education process. Therefore, the difference in the family backgrounds of learners suggests that the information and experiences that these learners bring to the classroom may vary. The differences in these experiences of the learners have a potential of influencing their learning in various ways. Thus, learners from diverse environmental backgrounds do not necessarily benefit equally from the same educational experience (Motseke, 2005). Backgrounds can never be standardised, hence there will forever be differences in the way learners learn.

Therefore, the environment from which a child grows impacts their development positively or negatively. Amir and Mcauliffe (2020) argue that the ecological theory of growth proposed by Bronfenbrenner has shown to be useful in providing insight into all of the factors that influence people. This study therefore seeks to explore the extent to which Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems impacts a township Grade Seven learner academically. The study also examines if there are other factors outside Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems that influence development and the academic excellence of a learner in the case of this study. Mampane and Boucher (2011) indicate that most learners from townships need a certain level of resilience to overcome adversities and obstacles in the context of development. This study examines whether this resilience and other personality traits learners have contribute to the academic excellence of the top achievers in the township school. Shafaat, Suneel and Munir (2023) conducted a study to investigate the role of personality traits in the academic performance of undergraduate students in Pakistan and concluded that high achievers have high levels of conscientiousness. In the same vein, Hazrati-Viari, Rad and Torabi (2012) also conducted a study on the effect of personality on academic motivation and performance amongst college students and results showed that conscientiousness predicted both of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The academic motivation mediated the relationship between openness to experience and conscientiousness with academic performance. Therefore, although ability and intelligence are considered as predictors of academic achievement, there is evidence that personality variables play a crucial role Hazrati-Viari *et al.* (2012).

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

There is dearth of literature on the impact of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on learners at township schools, especially in South Africa where societal inequality is ridiculously high. The theory postulates that environmental dynamics play a role in child development focusing on Grade seven top achievers at a township school in Gauteng. The location and

type of school, the neighbourhood and the socio-economic status of a child's parents or guardians and other external factors such as culture, are key elements in this study. The choice of Grade seven learners in this study is also crucial in that they are at a vulnerable age and their decision making is likely to be influenced by the environment they exist in and the people around them. It is worth mentioning that when a learner is unable to fulfil academic outcomes, it would arguably seem that one or some of the systems present in the learner's life are not supportive and this circumstance creates a gap that suggests that some systems support academic success and some do not, which eventually can lead to the inability to excel academically or to study further (Baker, Evans & Li et al., 2019).

Due to an imbalance of socio-economic standings, many South African households, particularly those residing in rural areas and townships have a very low socioeconomic status (Ashley-Cooper, Van Niekerk & Amore, 2019). Rhodes and Mckenzie (2018) express that it is well known that South Africa recently met the Millennium Development Goal of cutting backlogs for water and sanitation services in half. However, significant deficits persist, especially in sanitation, and Powers (2019) insists that these deficits are unevenly distributed in the country and can be traced by socioeconomic status. Learners that stem from these disadvantaged households tend to carry many social ills, and as a result, Bojuwoye et al. (2014: 3) state that "learners from impoverished communities prioritised survival-related challenges over those related to academic success". It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to understand how top achievers at a township school excel, given the potential challenges they face, moreover exploring the role of the environmental factors such as family, the neighbourhood and the school in their academics. The study also determines the role of personality traits on Grade seven top achievers as they are perceived to be highly connected to academic achievement (Dong, *et al.* 2022).

1.4 RESEARCH AIM

The study aims at exploring the implications of the ecological systems and factors such as the school location and learners' personality traits on Grade seven top learners' academic achievements.

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To explore the role of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems on the academic success of Grade seven top achievers at a township school.
- To explore the implications of a school location (township) on academic success of Grade seven top achievers.

- To determine the role of Grade seven top achievers' personality traits on their academic success.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What roles does Bronfenbrenner's ecological system play in the academic success of Grade seven top achievers at a township schools?
- What are the implications of school location (township) on the academic success of Grade seven learners?
- What is the role of Grade seven top achievers' personality traits on their academic success?

1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.7.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's theory of child development

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is built on Vygotsky's theory of child development (Phan, 2012). Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian-Jewish psychologist who argued that children learn cultural values, problem solving skills and beliefs through dialogues with more experienced and knowledgeable members of society. Children's learning ability and intellectual development is mediated and guided by sociocultural factors and their social interactions, particularly with those more skilled, therefore emphasising the importance of education as opposed to one's independent journey of discovery. Vygotsky believed that community plays a key role in children's meaning-making process. Vygotsky's theory of development postulates that learning is influenced by parents, teachers, peers and the wider society.

Vygotsky introduced the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he defined as the distance between a child's actual developmental level and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or intellectual peers (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015). The ZPD helps in determining the cognitive functions of the child which are in the process of maturing or show signs of maturing soon. Therefore, the ZPD emphasises that the teacher for instance, should not be limited to what the learner can do presently but to what he/she would be able to do should help be offered (Aprile, 2010). Through the help of knowledgeable members of society, in the ZPD appears a chain of inner development processes, which later become part of the independent achievement. The instruction and development are two different processes which are joined together through a mutual complex relationship (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015).

Bronfenbrenner built on Vygotsky's theory, adding the influence of environmental factors on child development (Phan, 2012). Vygotsky's theory is largely linked to sociocultural factors while Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is associated with environmental factors. Vygotsky's theory was criticised for neglecting the biological aspect associated with development as he failed to acknowledge children's ability to influence self-growth. Comparing the two theories, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory has the biggest influence on intentional and productive learning as it recognises the dynamic nature of the learning process (Phan, 2012). Although the ecological systems theory is more relevant in today's settings, it cannot be ignored that it was foregrounded by Vygotsky's social development theory. As soon as the ecological system appears, scholars such as Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) have criticised it for being difficult to test and having vaguely defined and understood systems such as the mesosystem and the chronosystem. It is not entirely clear how the elements of the mesosystem such as friends, family and school interact with each other to foster child development. This study therefore seeks to explore the applicability of these systems on Grade seven top achievers at a township school.

1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The study employed an interpretivism research paradigm which accepts that the truth is not equitably solved, but it is socially developed. Therefore, by putting participants in their social settings, there are chances of comprehending the insights they have of their daily exercises, and this is the very reason why the study is embedded in interpretivism. The study is also embedded in the qualitative research approach which implies that results cannot be arrived at by means of statistical procedures (Walia, 2015). This research is mostly concerned with the circumstances that surround the ecosystemic support of the learners. Therefore, a qualitative research approach is suitable for the study, seeing that it is labourous in the interpretation of research questions that observe social settings and the individuals who are a part of it (Reay, Asma & Pedro, 2019). Shufutinsky (2020) state that qualitative research serves to give rich depictions of social or human wonders from the point of view of the individuals who experience them, clarify human conduct inside specific settings, or add to assessments of mediations, programs or wellbeing administrations. Therefore, qualitative research is ideal for this study to solicit the learners' perspectives on the impact of different ecological systems on their academic performance.

1.8.1 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were used to collect data. Individual and face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the five Grade seven learners from a township school in Tshwane, Gauteng. Semi-structured interviews "involve a

series of open-ended questions based on the topic areas the researcher wants to cover” (Mathers, Fox & Hunn, 2002, p. 2). The questions were partly structured and partly flexible. The researcher prepared a list of topics/questions to be asked and ensured that they elicit open responses by the learners. The conversations developed from the questions beyond anticipation and learners answered comfortably and sought clarity where needed. Therefore, although a research tool, semi-structured interviews are a human encounter as they foster valuable principles namely, Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy (CHE) (Brown & Danaher, 2017).

The researcher, being a teacher by profession at the same school and familiar with research participants, was suitable to interview and probe learners sensibly without manipulating them, owing to the existent teacher-student relationship. Taylor and Smith (2014) argue that the relationships between researchers and research participants are crucial elements in face-to-face interviews as they determine the extent of freedom of expression and participation. In this study, learners responded without hesitation, fear or discomfort as there was an existing reciprocal symbiotic relationship between them and the researcher. With the permission of the learners, the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and notes were written by the interviewer during the interview process. Each interview session lasted between 20 minutes to 30 minutes.

While interviews helped us understand how learners make sense of their worlds, participant observation helped me understand how they act and behave. Participant observation was used to understand the participants’ perspectives and experiences from their own point of view (Kawulich, 2005). Participant observation was a perfect method in this study in that the researcher is a teacher and spends a lot of time at school, which is the setting where learners also spend quality time and engage in their academic activities. My position as a teacher gives this method an advantage, and observing learners comes as a natural phenomenon I was trained to do. I was able to observe the learners in a natural setting, rather than in an artificial environment.

While the interviews provided more in-depth information on grade 7 learners’ experiences, participant observation provided insight into the actual notable behaviours and interactions whether complementary or contradicting to what they said during the interviews. Grade 7 learners are young and may not necessarily provide or respond to interview questions in a way that is anticipated due to factors such as discomforts or past traumas, therefore, observation may allow the researcher to note other non-spoken cues. By using both the interviews and participant observation, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of the grade 7 learners’ experiences.

1.8.2 Sampling

Sampling is a basic and complex piece of any examination study. In qualitative research, sampling alludes to the deliberate choices that help figure out who will be the people or gatherings that will take part in the investigation (Johnson, Adkins & Chauvin, 2020). A non-probability sampling approach called purposive sampling was employed in the study. The goal of purposive sampling is to gain an early understanding of a tiny or under-researched community, rather than to test a theory about a large population. Therefore, five Grade seven top achievers were purposefully selected for the study from a township school in Tshwane, Gauteng Province. The criteria for selecting the learners was based on the learners' academic performance from previous years, and also based on the positive references that were made by their class teachers. Mweshi and Sakyi (2002) state that purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, is used in qualitative research when the researcher wants to gain detailed knowledge about a specific phenomenon rather than to make statistical inferences, or when the population is small and specific. Due to the defined criteria and rationale for inclusion, purposive sampling was the most effective technique.

1.8.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The first step in thematic analysis is to make sense of the data to answer the research questions (Nowel et al., 2017). The interviews were transcribed word for word and read thoroughly to get a complete sense of the sentiments and views of the research participants. A form of data filtering was conducted to select data deemed useful and a list of topics was noted and, those with similar characteristics were grouped together. Categories were created from the descriptive words to start the process of coding, splitting the text or transcript into discrete categories of information, looking for evidence supporting the code in the text, and then assigning a label to the code are all steps in the coding process (Venter et al., 2016). The themes that emerged from the codes led to the interpretation of data. Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate data analysis technique for the research design and approach of this study because it offers a wide strategy for making deductions by impartially and methodically recognising explicit attributes of messages (Vaismoradi, et al., 2016). Thematic analysis has been characterised as a methodical, replicable procedure for compacting numerous expressions of text into fewer substance classifications dependent on definitive principles of coding (Graneheim et al., 2017).

1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa (UNISA). An ethical clearance certificate was issued by the university's research ethics

committee which provided assurance that all ethical standards were adhered to. Since the research participants of this study were minors, consent was sought to interview them from their parents/guardians as well as the school authorities. Research participants also assented to take part in the study and their responses were treated with anonymity and confidentiality.

1.10 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

As a professional teacher, studying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides me with a comprehensive framework for understanding child development within the context of various environmental systems. This research will help me to understand learners' different dynamics and the various factors that influence their learning and ultimately assist me in ensuring that my teaching style caters for the diversity of learners. Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasizes the importance of examining development at multiple levels, hence promoting a holistic understanding of a child or a learner. The township school context further gave the study a unique angle as townships have their own culture that compel learners to adapt to, in and outside the school area.

This study has multiple benefits for the teaching profession as a whole. It will help teachers and basic education stakeholders gain insights into how learners' development is influenced by various environmental systems including family, school community and culture. The study will help in creating supportive structures for learning environments, identifying and addressing barriers to learning, help in fostering collaboration between families and communities and inform policy and practice that support positive development various contexts. This may include advocating for increased funding in the case of township schools that are in most cases disadvantaged, promoting culturally responsive teaching practices and supporting initiatives to address system inequalities. In a nutshell, the findings of this study will equip teachers and basic education stakeholders with a deeper understanding of the complex interactions that shape learners' development and learning experiences. By applying this knowledge in the classroom, teachers will create more supportive, inclusive and effective learning environments for all learners.

This particular study is situated at a township school context in Gauteng, South Africa. In South Africa, township school learners usually exhibit a range of characteristics influenced by their socio-economic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and educational experiences. Therefore, interviewing five grade seven top achievers helped the researcher to understand the unique and some common characteristics among township school learners such as diverse cultural backgrounds, socio-economic challenges, resilience and determination and the challenges they face.

Overall, studying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments, with implications for research, practice and policy. Situating this study to a township school in Gauteng gave it a unique context that exposed different forms of support that learners get from their environment and lack thereof.

1.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The study focuses on the influence of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on Grade seven learners' academic achievements, focusing on top achievers at a Junior Township Secondary School in the Gauteng Province. Bronfenbrenner argued that child development is a complex system encompassing diverse relationships that a child has at various levels of their environment. These systems or multidimensional frameworks are the microsystem (the learner's parents, family, neighbourhood, school and teachers), mesosystem (parents and teachers' interaction), exosystem (parents' workplaces), macrosystem (societal norms and values) and the chronosystem (environmental changes that occur overtime). The school under study is located in a township, and townships in South Africa are generally characterised by economic, social and political struggles which, in one way or the other, affect the development of a child and ultimately their school performance. Therefore, the location and type of school, the neighbourhood and the socio-economic status of a child's parents or guardians and other external factors such as the culture are key elements in this study.

The differences in family backgrounds of learners for instance may influence their learning in various ways. Upbringing can never be standardised, hence there will always be differences in the way learners learn. Given the challenges that learners face at township schools, the study sought to understand the role of Bronfenbrenner's environmental factors such as family, the neighbourhood and the school, as well as other factors outside the perimeters of the ecological systems on learners' academic performances. The study leans on both Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's theory of child development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was built on Vygotsky's theory, which, through its ZDP helps in determining the cognitive functions of a child which are in the process of maturing. Vygotsky's theory was criticized for excluding the environmental factors in the development of a child; hence Bronfenbrenner coined the ecological systems to close the gap. Data was collected qualitatively using semi-structured interviews with Grade seven pupils from a township school in Tshwane. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data.

1.11. STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 1: This chapter introduces the topic orientation, background to the study, a brief context of township schools in the Gauteng Province, the problem statement, the research aim, objectives and questions, and the theoretical framework, research methods and ethical considerations.

Chapter 2: This chapter contextualises literature on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems and Vygotsky' socio-cultural cognitive theory as the foundational theoretical framework. The chapter also delves into the history of education in South Africa, township schools context, the academic success of learners and its determinants and barriers as well as the role of teachers in the academic success of learners.

Chapter 3: This chapter summarises the research design, methodology, ethical considerations, limitations and delimitations of the study.

Chapter 4: The chapter presents the main findings of the study and the data analysis.

Chapter 5: The chapter presents the main conclusions of the study and the recommendations to various stakeholders involved in the growth and education of a learner. The study also recommends further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 begins by defining a top achiever in the context of this study. It further examines in writing the cutting-edge literature on eco-systemic support in township schools, academic success, and the psychological development of grade seven learners, Vygotsky' socio-cultural cognitive theory as well as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. These theories show how proximal development is a continuous phase, that children have the ability to grasp concepts through interaction and that social interaction shapes a child's development at different levels. Vygotsky is interested in a person's language and cultural development, while Bronfenbrenner's eco-systems are concerned with the cultural relationship between an individual and their growth. Neither theorist separates growth into distinct stages; instead they describe it as a sequence of phases (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015). This chapter focuses on methods to improve learning by examining strategies for effective learner performance, the roles of the teacher, development of multiple processes for individual functioning, the purpose of school engagement and the role of education.

This study explores the applicability of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on Grade seven learners' academic achievements at a township school in South Africa. According to the World Bank (2022), South Africa is the most unequal country in the world with apartheid racial disparities still present in spatial planning to date (Knaus & Brown, 2016). The apartheid-era spatial zoning was a way of maintaining urban fragmentation. During the apartheid regime, the African (Bantu) groups were separated into homelands or Bantustans for them to form a separate nation far from white people. Their area constituted 13% of the South African land while the remaining land was set aside for white people. Townships then emerged as the residential areas were reserved for black people who lived and worked in areas that were strictly for whites only.

Township dwellers were largely the servants of white people and toiled in mines and industries with little remuneration. As a result, the concept of townships is more pronounced in South Africa than in any other part of the world. In the present day, township dwellers are still largely servants of others and live below the minimum wage, as a result, their standard of living impacts their children in one way or the other when considering the elements of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. If parents are ill-treated at work, they are likely to spill their frustrations to their children. Township schools also do not have all the necessary resources for learning to take place as compared to schools in affluent suburbs. South African townships are characterised by high crime rates (Knaus and Brown, 2016), therefore this, *inter alia* affects the development of children living in that environment.

The study also explores if these harsh conditions of the township environment enables learners to learn survival skills as they grow. This study is very significant in that it focuses on a niche group that stems from a point of oppression and injustice in one way or another yet they still manage to excel academically. Children's opinions have been neglected for a long time in qualitative studies; children have been viewed as objects rather than subjects of research. This study thus gives children a voice to express their views and experiences.

2.2 TOP ACHIEVERS - CONTEXT

The success and/or achievement in educational institutions is measured by academic performance or how well a learner meets the standards set by the local educational bodies or the school itself (Mahlangu, 2016). According to Eiselen and Geyser (2003), a top achiever usually refers to a top academic performer in terms of having obtained a high mark or average (e.g. a distinction) in a specific subject or a number of subjects or being amongst a specific percentage or a number of top performers (Mahlangu, 2016). Hong and Lee (2000) define (high) achievers as students in the upper quartile of scores obtained. Caldwell and Ginthner (1996) define them in terms of the top number of performers. Top achievers are learners who perform outstandingly. In other words, they outshine their counterparts in academic achievement, as they are always on top (Mahlangu, 2016). For the purpose of this study, the term 'top achievers' is used to distinguish students who have performed well from those who are always above the ceiling (i.e. performing above their minimum requirements). Although top achievers are located on the basis of their academic performance in Grade seven, in this study, these learners' achievements were traced from the time they were in Grade five. In order to come up with a better understanding of the concept of 'academic achievement' it is important to firstly clarify the concept 'achievement', which is derived from the verb to 'achieve'. To achieve is to successfully 'accomplish' something. Aligning this definition with the study, it would mean that achievement here refers to the successful accomplishment of educational goals. Therefore, in this study, for a learner to be regarded as a grade seven top achiever, he/she would have surpassed other learners academically and consecutively from grade five to seven.

2.3 BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Urie Bronfenbrenner, an American Psychologist also known as one of the world's contributing intellects in the field of developmental psychology advocated the idea that the child's development is greatly influenced by the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Krishnan, 2010). Bronfenbrenner developed the Ecological systems theory which interprets individual knowledge and development among other social alters determined by the social system. According to Bronfenbrenner's model of child development, these series of events all take

place within the five systems of Bronfenbrenner’s model, namely the Microsystems, Mesosystems, Exosystems and Macrosystem, and of course all the reciprocal actions within these systems are largely affected by the Chronosystem which defines the periods and events lived (Donald et al., 2017).

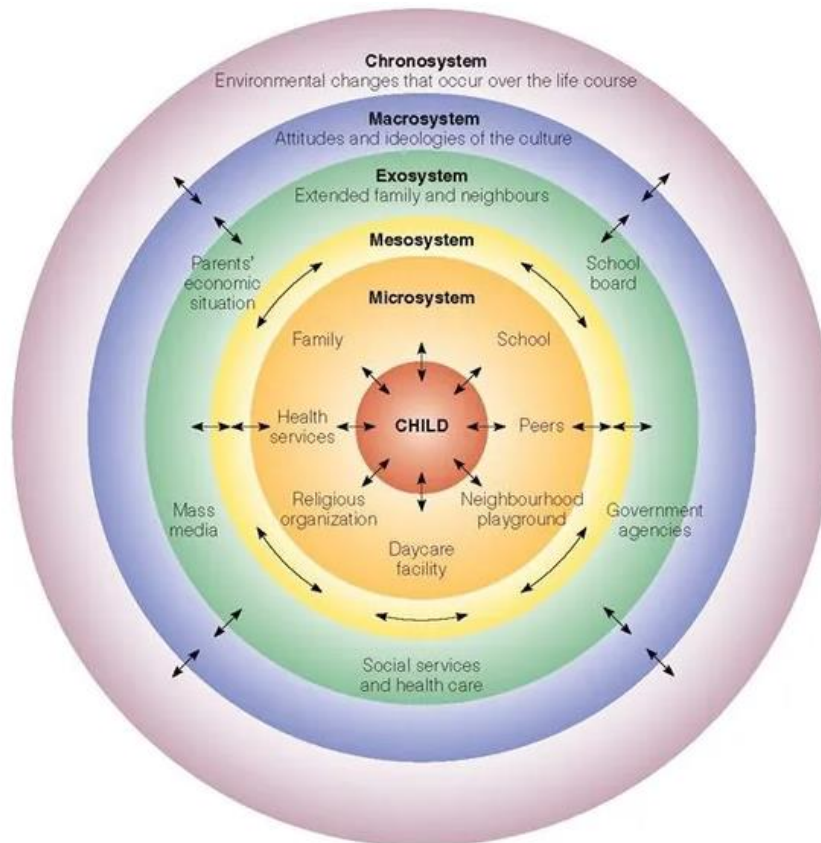


Figure 2.1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Source: Olivia Guy- Evans (2020)

Figure 2.1 illustrates Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, showing the child as the central figure to the systems. The figure shows that the five systems are interrelated, the influence of one system on a child’s development depends on its relationship with others. The systems are explained at length in the next section.

2.3.1 Microsystem

A microsystem comprises elements or groups in which children are in close relation to people who are within their everyday experiences such as family members or programs that they are involved in (Juang & Syed, 2019). The microsystem is the immediate environment. It is essentially made up of the context and environment consisting of proximal processes involving close contact. Proximal processes and interactions are most prevalent in the contiguous surrounding conditions. In a microsystem, relationships are bidirectional, which means that the child may be affected by others in their world while still having the ability to change the

values and behaviour of others. Moreover, the child's responses to individuals in their microsystem may have an impact on how they perceive them in exchange. Microsystem experiences are often very intimate, and they are critical for encouraging and promoting a child's growth. When a band of microsystems unendingly assemble, a Mesosystem is assumed to exist (Roberts et al, 2020). This is perhaps because various social aspects of a person's life often interact, and this interaction can create a co-existing experience of the systems (Furnari, 2019).

2.3.2 Mesosystem

In the mesosystem, the developing individual is continuously associated with more than one contiguous surrounding condition (Velez-Agosto et al., 2017) and these environmental influences result in the development of the individual. An example would be a grade R learner who learns how to behave and write at crèche and would receive the same teachings at home. These lessons could still be extended to the Sunday school class. Individual microsystems in a person's mesosystem do not work separately, but rather are interconnected and exert influence over one another. If a child's parents connect with the child's teachers, for example, this relationship will have an impact on the child's growth. A mesosystem is essentially a set of microsystems.

2.3.3 Exosystem

The exosystem has a lot to do with community involvement. The child might not directly be involved in community affairs but is arguably affected by it. According to Donald et al. (2017), this stage has as a part, other systems in which a child is not involved straight away. This level influences the people or systems that are present within the microsystem. The exosystem has an indirect influence. Neighbourhoods, parents' jobs, parents' friends, and the media are all examples of exosystems. These are situations in which the child is not interested and is not part of their experience, but which can have an effect on them.

The effects of this system come as a result of what occurs outside of the individual's contiguous surrounding conditions. For example, a child's immediate environment can be influenced by the type of work the parent does (Lindsay et al., 2017). A child whose parents are always travelling because of work will experience having absent parents, however a child whose parents work a job that requires fewer hours are most likely to be present at home with the child, thus the child is more likely to experience the love and care that is required for healthy development (O'Neil & Rothbard, 2017). Another example would be if one of the parents had a disagreement with their employer at work, exosystems may affect the child's

development. As a result of something that happened at work, the parent could come home and have a bad temper with the child.

2.3.4 Macrosystem

The Macrosystem is the one most dictated by social conditions seeing that it “involves dominant social and economic structures, as well as values, beliefs, and practices that influence all other social systems” (Donald et al., 2017: 46). The macrosystem can be viewed as the central system amongst the other systems, merely because it seems to represent characteristics of the exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem. Iruka et al. (2020) states that the distinction between the macrosystem and the previous ecosystems is that it does not apply to the unique environments of a single developing child, but rather to the already developed community and culture in which the child is growing. This may also include factors such as socioeconomic status, race, geographic place and cultural ideologies.

2.3.5 Chronosystem

If a child, for example, grows up in a wealthy community, and the family enjoys a life of abundance, the child is most likely to exhibit an attribute of self-assurance and freedom (Magubane, 2016). Time is perhaps regarded as an abstraction belonging to growth, seeing that a person grows over the extension of time (Sharp & Wall, 2018). Arguably, growth exists because of time. Therefore, the chronosystem is more or less defined in this fashion.

Ethnocentric self-perception in this case can become a problem when a teacher tries to understand the development of the child because the process has to be understood in the context of the child’s community (Nolan & Raban, 2015). The teacher should avoid being partial and ought to know that the social environment serves as a means for discovering, “this means that learning with and from others is prioritised” (Nolan & Raban, 2015: 9).

The ‘nature versus nurture’ debate is probably at the core of what child development is about. The debate is whether or not the child's development is more influenced by the environment in which they grow up or if the development is likely shaped by their DNA and genes (Meloni, Cromby, Fitzgerald & Lloyd, 2017). An interesting observation is the potential for which children from the same home with the same parents can develop opposing characters.

Based on this observation, I think the most relevant question one could ask is what happens to the characteristics that a child is born with? Are these characteristics shaped by the environments in which they grew up, or are these characteristics shaped by the family setting?

There are a lot of factors to growth such as neuroscience, biology and the environment (Nelson & Bosquet, 2000). The societal conditions and the child’s living conditions are

arguably the bigger influences on the outcomes of how the child will grow, learn and behave. To help figure some of these questions out, one can borrow the ideas of Bronfenbrenner's theory on child development. The theory helps in attempts to understand the growing child, and this is particularly important because the circumstances can be changed to help the child if he or she is not doing well (Tudge, et al., 2016). Those who are in a position to influence children positively, such as educators, social workers, health practitioners, or curriculum developers should try to provide optimal environments for children (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018).

Any environment that supports the well-being of a child ensures that they develop in a healthy manner (Luke, Sinclair, Wollgar & Sebba, 2014). Every child has a potential that they can reach and it has been proven that early intervention programs that emphasise programs for parents and learning as well as health screening are ideal to fulfil the child's potential. First-world countries such as The United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan enjoy some benefits that come with a developed country such as an excellent education system, a good health department, and welfare services (Morton et al., 2017). However, it would probably be very naïve for one to assume that there are no inequalities in these countries. The inequalities are made evident by the gap between the successful and the less successful (Lamont, 2018).

There are still those that live in the more advantaged communities within these countries, and such communities experience less crime rates, high rates of teenage pregnancy, and health problems just to name a few. It is indicated in several studies that children in such advantaged areas are less vulnerable to fail in school (Griffiths & Ferguson, 2015). There are a high number of numeracy and literacy achievement levels due to the quality of support. On the other hand, children in disadvantaged communities such as Townships experience rough neighbourhoods, an increased disease prevalence, and poverty (Mendelso, Turner & Tandon, 2010). One would hope that in these well-developed economies, all children would enjoy the opportunities that are available in those countries.

Essentially, what Bronfenbrenner's model intends to do is to have the idea that the life of the developing child is designed in a constantly altering environment, and to study the development of the child, the context of their environment and culture should be taken into consideration (Shadle, 2014). Perhaps what one should also consider is that children are not just mere puppets that are resistless to any environmental influences. As a matter of fact, children are very much involved in influencing the environment (Fang, Ng & Chang, 2017). An example would be a child that smokes drugs, he/she may steal the family belongings to maintain their drug addiction and that can harm the family's finances and it could also affect

their stands in the community because people will lose confidence and may view them as a broken home.

It may also be that when homes are broken into, the first suspect would be the child that uses drugs in the neighbourhood (Ford, Sacra & Yohros, 2017). Another example would be to look at children that change the socio-economic status of their homes by going to school, graduating and getting well-paying jobs that allows them to give back to their homes and changing the situation at home.

When more children get to change the situation at home it ultimately changes the circumstance of the community (Hurst, 2014). Perhaps another important factor that should not be overlooked and should be discussed again is the chronosystem. The chronosystem is possibly the most significant because it is a resource that depicts experiences in which events can come to pass. A lot can happen over time and the world has witnessed many historical changes (Dhakal & Kattel, 2019).

A child will grow and change over time (Downey & Gibbs, 2020), but so will the people and the environment around the child, and the child will be treated differently over time as well (Kasearu & Olsson, 2019). For example, a three-year old that throws a tantrum at a mall will be treated with much more patience in trying to resolve their behaviour. A 9-year-old child displaying the same behaviour is not likely to be treated with the same amount of patience merely because society would not expect an older child to behave in that manner (Killen, 2013).

The chronosystem is a significant part of the proximal process. The chronosystem also indicates the duration of one's lifespan (Bergeman, Blaxton & Joiner, 2020). Many studies have made claims to the predictions of the life span of men and women respectively, with women predicted to outlive men (Rootz, 2017). The various stages of human growth have been indicated (ranging from infancy, adolescence, adulthood and old age) all-encompassing proximal processes occurring in a large society.

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.4.1 Vygotsky' socio-cultural cognitive theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is built on Vygotsky's theory of child development. Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian-Jewish psychologist who asserted that children learn cultural values, problem solving skills and beliefs through dialogues with more experiences and knowledgeable members of society. A child's learning ability and intellectual development is mediated and guided by sociocultural factors and a child' social

interactions particularly with those more skilled, therefore emphasising the importance of education as opposed to one's independent journey of discovery. Vygotsky believed that community plays a key role in children's meaning-making process. According to Vygotsky's theory of development, learning is influenced by parents, teachers, peers and the wider society.

Vygotsky introduced the idea of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he defined as the distance between a child's actual developmental level, and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or intellectual peers (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015). The ZPD helps in determining the cognitive functions of the child which are on the process of maturing but show signs of maturing soon. Therefore, ZPD emphasises that the teacher for instance, should not be limited to what the child can do presently but to what he/she would be able to do should help be offered (Aprile, 2010). Through the help of knowledgeable members of society, in the ZPD appear a chain of inner development processes, which later become part of the independent achievement. The instruction and development are two different processes which are joined together through a mutual complex relationship (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015).

According to Vygotsky, development is determined by mediation which occurs through proximal social interaction (Donald et al., 2017). Mediation in this sense has to do with intervening and getting involved in the construction of the child's knowledge. Mediation occurs within ZPD. The ZPD is the vital area where children find information complicated to understand, however possesses the potential to grasp the content, provided there is interaction with a person who has the knowledge. Essentially what this means is that "the common conception of the zone of proximal development presupposes an interaction between a more competent person and a less competent person on a task" (Chaiklin, 2003, p. 2).

The less competent child should ultimately develop independence and become skilled at the initial task. The notion of the ZPD is such that "... the social information of the mind" is defined by reciprocal action in which the child needs to understand their involvement in their discovering (Luff, 2010, p. 42). The term zone of proximal development (ZPD) could be interpreted as a theoretical strategy that aims to depict the ability to learn with the help of others, otherwise known as scaffolding.

The impression that the ZPD gives is that children have the potential to learn, which of course suggests that the possibility of future success exists (De Haan, 2017). The presumptive level can be implied only as a possibility through guidance. This sort of complication could allow for criticism, seeing that one could argue that merely assuming that a child only reaches his or her potential through assistance, can be debatable. In some cases, a learner could illustrate

development through self-learning and reaching great amounts of potential without any form of support system (Rajaram, 2019).

The concept of the learning process has had a significant contribution from the zone of proximal development with regards to how learning takes place. What is more intriguing is that the learning theory suggests more collaborative roles (Morgan & Skaggs, 2016). The concept recognises that pedagogical support can be extended to the learner's peers of equal ability and even those that are less capable than the learner is. The extension can also be to the learner working alone. To further explain this, one can look at examples where two learners of equal abilities communicate with each other going back and forth attempting to bounce ideas off each other. This can be seen as a collaborative effort even when a learner works with another learner of less capability to complete a task (Hargreaves & O'Conner, 2018), the efforts can benefit both parties in the sense that the lesser capable learner will get the necessary assistance and the more capable learner will grow their ability and in confidence (Hargreaves & O'Conner, 2018). When a learner works alone, it is their internal dialogue that they interact and collaborate with (Urbanek et al., 2020).

Bronfenbrenner built on Vygotsky's theory, adding the influence of environmental factors in child development. Vygotsky's theory is largely linked to sociocultural factors while Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is associated with environmental factors. Vygotsky's theory was criticised for neglecting the biological aspect associated with development as he failed to acknowledge children's ability to influence self-growth. Comparing the two theories, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory has the biggest influence on intentional and productive learning as it recognises the dynamic nature of the learning process. Although the ecological systems theory is more relevant in today's settings, it cannot be ignored that it was foregrounded by Vygotsky's social development theory. As sound as the ecological system appears, scholars such as Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, (2000) have criticised it for being difficult to test and having vaguely defined and understood systems such as the mesosystem and the chronosystem. It is not entirely clear how the elements of the mesosystem such as friends, family and school interact with each other to foster child development. This study explores the applicability of these systems on Grade seven top achievers at a township school.

2.5 HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has one of the most diversified education systems in the world (Gleason, 2018). While the system has a history of racial, socioeconomic, and gender inequality, it is not unique, as the university system in countries such as the United States of America also exhibits signs of injustice. Whitcomb and Singh (2020) point out that historically disadvantaged ethnic groups

remain severely underrepresented. The topic of race concerning student admissions has long been a significant aspect of discussions about equity and access in higher education. According to Ashwin and Case (2018), South Africa has a long tradition of cost-sharing in higher education. The term "cost-sharing" refers to a shift in costs from the government or taxpayers to parents and pupils.

Higher education regulations in South Africa were contentious before the country's first democratic elections in 1994. Friedman (2019) notes that since the 1960s, the topics of "free" higher education and periodic tuition cost increases have been hotly discussed. Black students, in particular, began to demand "free" higher education after 1994. As a result, significant changes occurred in terms of extending access to South Africa's higher education system, particularly for historically disadvantaged populations. Mutanga (2017) observed that access and ethnic representation are used as indices of change and therefore, higher education in South Africa has changed dramatically in recent years.

Another element worth mentioning is the issue of maths education for instance in South African schools. As a teacher, I believe that the South African mathematics education system is unhealthy, and based on Gailard's (2019) study, there has only recently been evidence of prospective long-term improvements. According to Moloï (2019), deeper research reveals a bimodal distribution in South African education outcomes, mirroring our two-nation heritage; one 'nation' represents a tiny, rich, primarily white sector whose schools are capable of generating learners who achieve the mathematics assessment standards at their grade level. Plucker and Peters (2018) express that another 'nation' represents a huge segment of the population that is poor and Black, and whose schools are unable to produce students who can pass mathematics at the required level for further study.

Mathematics was just not an option for the majority of South Africans before democracy. Similar to how Dolamo (2017) puts it, the African child was viewed as subhuman by the apartheid state; not a full citizen of the nation of his or her birth, a labourer, and especially not a young mathematician. As a reference to the issues outlined by Street, Centre and Mbanda (2018), it is worth remembering that under apartheid, "Bantu Education" was at least an attempt (although of poor quality) to increase access to education for African children, but its predecessor, "Native Education" under colonial authority, had no such mass aims. Africans could only get Native Education through missionary schools, and it was only on a small scale (with few schools available).

Prince et al. (2021) mention that before democracy, mathematics was not a required subject in secondary school, and students in Grades 10–12 could choose to either not learn mathematics or to take mathematics at various degrees of difficulty, with distinctions between

higher and standard grades. It is expected that race was a significantly bigger differentiator in educational performance than class, given the history of legislative racial inequality (Maistry & Africa, 2020).

Bonnin and Ruggunan (2019) emphasise that apartheid's 19 different ethnically and provincially defined education departments were disbanded when the country gained democracy. In its place, a unified public school system was developed that was open to people of all races. South African schooling now consists of 13 years of formal education (Grade R to Grade 12). At the end of Grade eight, South African learners transition from primary to secondary school. Annual National Assessments (ANAs) were given to all learners in mathematics and home language from Grades 1 to 6 and Grade 9 from 2011 to 2014. Grades 10, 11, and 12 are the final three years of secondary education, and they culminate in a nationwide standardised evaluation known as the National Senior Certificate (NSC).

Pure mathematics with an emphasis on the formal mathematics required for future postsecondary study in mathematics is referred to as 'mathematics.' For learners who will not need pure mathematics in their future studies and jobs, 'mathematical literacy' is a more practical mathematics/numeracy course that focuses on the appropriate use of mathematical concepts in problem-solving contexts. Nel and Luneta (2017) point out that mathematics is currently a required subject for all South African learners.

The addition of a mandatory Grade R year (with a formal curriculum that articulates specific requirements for mathematics learning) and the inclusion of mathematics literacy in the Further Education and Training (FET) band of our educational system has increased access to mathematical thinking processes for more learners, both young and old than was previously the case. Buthelezi (2018), reports that in post-democracy South Africa, these improvements reflect a considerable increase in access to chances for mathematics learning. It seems to reason that if certain groups are legally prohibited from physically accessing mathematics, as was the situation during apartheid, there will be disparities in mathematical achievement between those groups and others.

Kotok (2017) reveals that the achievement of white students in mathematics is much higher than that of black students, particularly African students. When it comes to the quality of mathematics passes at the NSC level, this racial disparity is most visible. On the other hand, Shepherd (2020) comments that in 2014, the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) reported that when the pass level for mathematics was set at 30%, the ratio of Black African learners to white learners who passed was approximately 7:1; when the pass level was set at 50%, the ratio was approximately 3:1; and when the pass level was set at 60%, the ratio was 2:1.

2.6 TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Apartheid in South Africa came to an end in the early 1990s. Apartheid's scars, on the other hand, are still visible in South Africa's townships as indicated by Lawler (2017). Townships, which were created as a means of segregating black South Africans under the Group Areas Act of 1950, are placed on the outskirts of cities and provide limited plots of land to huge populations. Despite the end of apartheid, many black South Africans are still cut off from public services, transportation, and sufficient education in townships (Tait, 2021). Nakidien, Singh and Sayed (2021) indicate that the 1996 South African Schools Act set a foundation for equitable education for children of all races and genders, but townships' overall marginalisation prevents actual equality.

A wide disparity in the learner-teacher ratio adds to a large chunk of townships' educational deficiencies, and Diepsloot's Khan Academy has been an organisation for instance that has attempted to provide the remedy. Classroom overcrowding detracts from learner attention. Turan and Bayar (2017) argue that learners can easily fall behind without their teachers' knowledge; due to overpopulation thus teachers in townships must place a greater emphasis on involvement than comprehension. Rather than working one-on-one with pupils who don't understand a subject, teachers try to involve all of their learners.

According to the 2012 Annual Report of the South African Education Project, township high schools did not have access to computers (Oyedemi & Mogano, 2018). Due to the importance of computer skills in students' future job searches, certain townships are currently collaborating with outside organizations to include computer literacy into their kids' curriculum. For example, the OLICO Youth initiative was created in Diepsloot, a Johannesburg township, by the Khan Academy, a non-profit organization that provides free online education. The program which began in 2012 is still going strong and uses computers to help pupils improve their skills.

Another case worth mentioning is that the education department at the University of the Free State observed an upsurge in teacher bullying by learners in South African schools in 2014. Sikhakhane, Muthukrishna and Martin (2018) noted that bullying is not unique to township schools; rather, it exacerbates already-existing problems and poses additional obstacles for teachers and learners in township schools. Teachers who worked at township schools were more stressed, making them more vulnerable to bullying (Sikhakhane, Muthukrishna & Martin, 2018). Jones, Andres and Denoon-Stevens et al. (2021) argue that apartheid posed significant barriers to education in townships and those learners and teachers must rely on outside programs to supplement township education systems until national policy recognises these barriers.

Gartushka (2019) sheds light by mentioning that Panyasa Lesufi, the Gauteng MEC for Education in 2016 said that the province's schools would be reclassified to eliminate the "Township" School Tag that had been linked with the previous government. According to Monyooe (2019), the reclassification is based on three-tier of school performance: a) Matric pass rates, b) Math and Science passes, and c) Bachelor pass rates. The new categorization is arbitrarily divided into four categories: 1) poor schools with a performance of 0% to 40%; 2) fair schools with a performance of 41% to 60%; 3) good schools with a performance of 61% to 80%, and 4) great schools with a performance of 81 percent to 100%.

The three-tier classification standards, lacks theoretical rigour and explanation to clarify the policy's credibility and implement ability. It goes on to say that "township schools" exist in real geo-spaces, and that removing their name tag won't make them disappear. Makoelle and Burmistrova (2020) caution that categorising schools based on performance may have unforeseen consequences. For example, schools labelled as "poor" may naturally close as parents will not want their children to attend schools that the state considers dysfunctional.

The failure of both "Poor" and "Fair" schools in the three-tier system to enrol sufficient students' increases the strain on the remaining schools to accommodate extra students. Rapeta (2019) insists that when a large number of students transfer to urban schooling environments, it creates a logistical challenge that has the potential to undermine educational provisioning procedures and systems in general. In summary, Du Plessis (2019) reports that the Gauteng Department of Education's proposed reclassification of schools is incorrect and unsustainable since it reduces systemic difficulties to a simple act of reordering schools based on sectorial student performance rather than a holistic and research-based form of logic. Du Plessis (2019) further suggests that, that sectorial in viewpoint, fails to establish *modus operandi* to institutionalise teacher efficacy and organisational performance, fails to probe a suite of interrelated elements that drive educational provisioning in its whole, obfuscates tenets for robust participation on creative whole-school improvement paths solidly based in good science. He further reiterates that it will not promote learner performance and quality education and is a fruitless political tinkering expedition with no long-term benefit.

Schools do not suddenly deteriorate and underperform. Salter (2019) reveals that a cocktail of operational problems, such as gaps in school leadership and governance; insufficient infrastructural capacities; teacher credentials, experience, and classroom efficacy; and inconsistent governmental directives and curricular praxis, have all contributed to this seismic process, learner quality, performance, and monitoring, as well as school culture and educational ethos, are all important considerations. Looking at views from Backstrom (2019),

dysfunctional schools and poor learner performance and success across grades are the results of ineffective coordination and management of remedial measures.

Even though the national government sets the criteria and guidelines for policy execution, Mouton (2021) confirms that provincial entities respond to educational difficulties differently depending on their locus of control and operational responsibilities. It was his prerogative when Gauteng MEC for Education Panyasa Lesufi declared in 2016 that the province's schools would be categorized into four schooling categories to eradicate negative narratives and historical baggage linked with "Township" Schools. Due to historical circumstances, the term 'township school' has a bad connotation.

Due to political battles and turbulence of the time, "Townships" were particularly unstable during the apartheid system. Similar to the points made by Thomas (2018), when the 1976 youth uprisings erupted, "Township" Schools were the epicentre of a student campaign to liberate South Africa's educational sector. Most schools were dysfunctional as a result of frequent police raids, and students considered enrolling in metropolitan schools.

Similar to the views of Bouranta, Psomas and Antony (2021), it can be argued that beyond the country's first democratic elections in 1994, the fight for decent education continues in other countries as well. After twenty-two years of democracy, substantial development and improvements in learner performance have been recorded. Overall, the performance is still lagging behind that of the best-performing countries (Kirsnan, 2017). The proposed reclassification is based on three different categories of school performance: Matric pass rates, Maths and Science passes and Bachelor pass rates.

In accordance with Maddock and Maroun (2018), utilising aggregate execution rates, schools are "self-assertively" renamed into four unmistakable classifications: a) Poor schools with 0% to 40% execution, b) Fair schools with 41% to 60% execution, c) Good schools with 61% to 80% execution and d) Great schools with 81% to 100% execution. The chosen school performance criteria are arbitrary, and there is no theoretical rigour or explanation to support the policy's credibility and the technique used (Michel, Evans & McIntyre, 2021). The three parameters chosen are just a small part of a complex mix of factors and indicators that affect school efficacy and overall system performance.

It is unclear, as revealed by Hompashe (2018) why certain key performance measures, such as Matric pass rates, Maths and Science passes, and Bachelor pass rates were emphasised above others, such as teacher profiles, learner profiles, infrastructure capabilities, qualifications, curriculum, leadership and governance structures. In essence, a reclassification policy lacks sufficient justification to support its judgment. Rapeta (2019) comments that it's

enough to say that inference, rather than rigorous research-based methods, appears to be the favoured method.

Mokoena and Siziba (2020) also argue that that in many ways, the choice of Matric and Bachelor passes contributes to theoretical conceptualisation conundrums and praxis. For example, the quality of matric and Bachelors' entry passes remains highly contestable due to low-performance criteria that are not comparable to international performance regimes and the best community of practice. South Africa has institutionalised a very low pass mark criterion for Grade 12 learners; for example, a learner must score 40 percent in the home language, 40 percent in two other subjects, and 30 percent in the remaining three subjects, as stated previously. When compared to independent schools, Knuttson (2020) believes that South Africa's learning ecologies remain unequal and highly differentiated. Van Dyk and White (2019) argue that public and rural schools are disproportionately poorly resourced, and as a result, the reclassification model overlooks historical inequities as well as other significant drivers that limit unequal resourcing and providing of educational services and activities. It could result in an avalanche of unforeseen schooling issues if not appropriately managed.

2.7 PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE KINGDOM OF ESWATINI

The purpose of this section is to compare and contrast the educational context under study to the equivalent context in the Kingdom of Eswatini formerly Swaziland, a neighbouring country to South Africa. In South Africa, the term 'township' has a deeper connotation than elsewhere in the world as it refers to an underdeveloped racially segregated urban area that is inhabited by non-whites and predominantly black people. Townships were initially designed by the apartheid regime as dormitory towns for the labour required to serve the needs of mining and other industries. In spite of townships being long established, most of them still have several challenges in common including the lack of social and economic facilities required to build sustainable communities (Philip 2014). Therefore, in this section literature focuses on public schools in urban Kingdom of Eswatini as equivalent to township schools in South Africa. The Kingdom of Eswatini is a former British colony and resultantly, its education system is informed by the English colonial system. Similar to South Africa, the Swaziland colonial education system resulted in segregated and differentiated education standards depending on location (Hamid, Bisschoff and Botha, 2015). Since the country's independence and self-regulation of the education system, several efforts have been made to improve the quality of education for all.

The Ministry of Education and Training's third quarter Performance report 2012/2013 cites that, in 2012, a total of 7% of primary school going-aged children still do not have access to primary education, particularly those from rural areas and from the peri-urban. The Kingdom

of Eswatini education system is still affected by the historical inequalities and poor access. Over the years, the Swazi government has been trying to address the education needs of society within the context of the historical baggage because of a colonial education that was not aligned to Swazi life. The number of schools and their proximity to the people were limited and far away from communities (Hamid, Bisschoff and Botha, 2015).

In post-colonial Kingdom of Eswatini, the Swazi monarchy government made a policy decision to make primary education universal and free in an endeavour to correct and compensate for the colonial injustices. In spite of the free education system, an estimated 74% of children of eligible age are not enrolled in junior secondary school and 88% are not enrolled in senior secondary school (UNESCO, 2010/11). The Constitution of 2005 of Swaziland, as ratified by the Swazi monarch in February 2006, provides that every child has a right to free education in all public schools, at least up to the end of primary school level (Constitution 2005: section 29 (6)). Du Plessis (2020:3) states that public education policies have been developed to increase the fraction of children who attend school and to improve the quality of education offered. To understand the decision-making process concerning public education, it is necessary to appreciate that public schools are in a way a monopoly. In the business sense, this term means an exclusive ownership through legal privilege, command of supply or concerted action. Most countries, including Eswatini, have an absolute or monopolistic control over the service of education. The Ministry of Education of Eswatini determines all the policies relating to education in the country. This means that a decision taken by the Ministry will apply uniformly to all public schools in the country (Hoffmann & Marcus 2011). Although learners from poor backgrounds benefitted from the free education in that they have the same quality of education irrespective of their families' social standing. There are however consequences of increased learner enrolment. The lack of individual attention to diverse students regrettably adversely affects learners with special needs: resulting in a decline in quality education.

Comparing schools in South Africa and those in the Kingdom of Eswatini, it is apparent that the free education in the Kingdom of Eswatini has endeavoured to be an equaliser in terms of the socio-economic status quo of households. From the education literature on Eswatini schools, it is also clear that the spatial classes are not as ostensible as they are in South Africa in the present day. In South Africa, there is still a huge disparity in the education received by learners in rural areas, townships and urban areas and this is something that is not emphasized on in the Kingdom of Eswatini education studies.

2.8 ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF GRADE SEVEN LEARNERS

2.8.1 Criteria for academic success

Buskist and Groccia (2018) suggest that despite or because of its ambiguity, the phrase "academic success" is one of the most commonly used terms in educational research and assessment in education. The term is increasingly being used as a catchall phrase to describe a variety of student outcomes. The term academic success is only marginally narrower, with the nuanced descriptor academic meant to confine the term's applicability to educational outcomes. The growth of studies aimed at discovering variables that enhance academic achievement is most likely linked to the overall assessment movement and growing requirements on institutions to demonstrate student learning and development (Joosten & Cusatis, 2019). Assessing the psychological and psychosocial processes of learning and development has always been tough; however, when the desired end is uncertain, it becomes even more difficult. Arguably, a precise articulation of what one is trying to measure is a key aspect of an excellent assessment. One could also argue, following Care, et al (2018) that the word academic success is today an unclear construct that encompasses a wide variety of educational outcomes such as moral development.

The intrinsically perspectival aspect of academic accomplishment contributes to the ambiguity connected with its definition (He et al., 2019). According to Boonk et al. (2018) achievement and academic success are viewed differently by various elements. A director of career services, for example, would almost certainly consider using alumni's job promotion histories as an indicator of academic performance, although the chair of an English department might not. In this case, the professor might argue that academic achievement relates to the acquisition of specific information and abilities evidenced by course completion. Chinzer and Russo (2018) assume that academic achievement (according to the administrator) relates to learners' capacity to secure and advance in employment within or linked to their fields of study. Both points are fair in light of the existing imprecise definition of academic achievement and the necessity of applying the word to departmental goals for students. This broad definition of the term inhibits teachers and administrators' ability to assess academic accomplishment in detail and, as a result, prioritise activities aimed at improving institutional effectiveness.

In other words, the question one could ask is how teachers make difficult judgments about where to invest precious financial, human and temporal resources when everything is focused on student success. The attainment of learning objectives and the acquisition of skills and competencies are among the most often measured characteristics of academic success. Furthermore, Cachia, Lynam and Stock (2018) argue that academic achievement is the most measured of all. It is nearly entirely judged in terms of grades. This is unsurprising, given that

the view that grades and GPA metrics are by far the most accessible assessments for educational institutions are also expressed in a study by York, Gibson and Rankin (2015). Regarding courses and programs at institutional levels, learning objectives, skills acquisition and competencies can be assessed. Assignments and course evaluations are usually the major means of measuring these things.

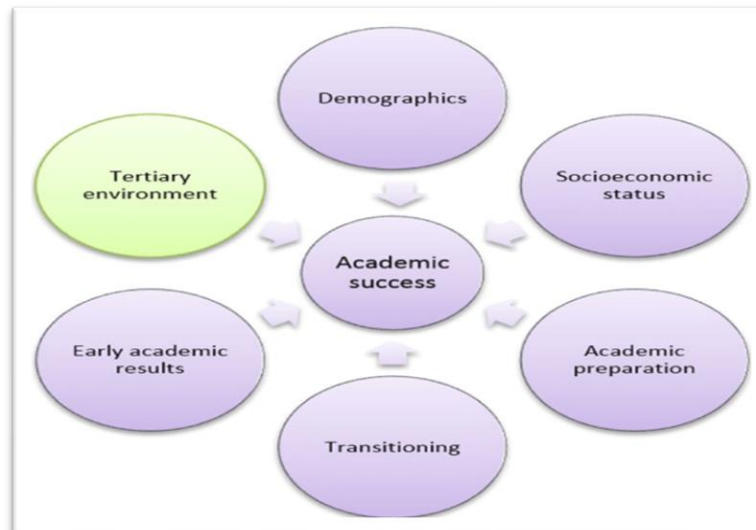


Figure 2.2: Academic success (This figure illustrates the factors that affect academic success).

Source: [BMC Medical Education](#)

School performance is an issue that deeply concerns students, parents, teachers and authorities beyond South African borders (Gough, 2021). The notion of academic performance is where the complexity of the performance begins. It is also known as school preparation, academic accomplishment, and school performance, although the differences between the ideas are mostly explained by semantics because they are used interchangeably. Academic performance should be used in university populations, and school performance in traditional and alternative basic education populations (Colvard & Watson, 2018).

Perhaps one could agree with Howe et al. (2019), that academic achievement is the consequence of learning, which is prompted by the teacher's teaching activity and created by the student. Academic performance is defined by Nuamah (2021) as a measure of a person's indicative and responsive abilities that convey, in an estimated way, what he or she has learned as a result of an educational or training process. Ejubovic and Puska (2019) state that academic performance refers to a learner's ability to meet the program' or course's goals, achievements and objectives. These are expressed in grades, which are the result of an evaluation that includes passing or failing particular tests, subjects, or courses. Academic

performance is defined as the level of knowledge demonstrated in a subject or area relative to the norm and it is typically measured using the grade point average.

The purpose of the school or academic performance is to achieve an educational goal. In this regard, there are several components of the complex unit called performance. Verger, Parcerisa and Fontdevila (2019) indicate that they are learning processes promoted by the school that involve the transformation of a given state, into a new state, and they are achieved with integrity in a different unit with cognitive and structural elements. Sigmundsson et al. (2017) state that circumstances, organic, and environmental variables all influence performance, as do skills and experiences. Chilca (2017) believes that intellectual level, personality, motivation, abilities, interests, study habits, self-esteem and the teacher-student connection all have a role in academic performance. Diverging performance happens when there is a discrepancy between academic performance and the student's predicted performance. One can consider the Ebele and Olofu's (2017) view that a below-average academic achievement is considered disappointing. It's sometimes linked to the way students are taught.

Walker and Mathebula (2020) argue that to date, the increase of educational opportunities in South Africa has not been able to compensate for social and cultural inequities. Although, indeed, today millions of children and young people who were previously excluded from education enter the educational process which includes preschool, primary, and secondary education, on average, half of them do not complete it, and the other half follow very different educational paths (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). In reality, at age 15, half of those who complete secondary education - a requirement to prevent slipping below the poverty line in South Africa - have failed to reach basic proficiency in learning abilities (ibid).

2.7.2 Academic success in a township school



Figure 2.3: Determinants of academic success in a township school

According to Meneghel, White and Martinez (2019), academic resilience improves students' ability to cope with a variety of stressors that arise during their studies. The argument could be that if learners are not robust to setbacks, study pressure and stress in the classroom, their academic accomplishments could be lost. Resilience appears in the context of both risk and protective factors that aid in the achievement of a positive outcome or the reduction and avoidance of a negative consequence (Meneghel, White & Martinez, 2019).

Schools have a significant impact on the lives of learners, parents and communities. A caring and supportive school atmosphere can allow learners to learn in a safe and caring environment. Inclusive school environments provide protection. Commun et al. (2020) believe that it is critical for the development of educational resilience in students, particularly those who live in challenging environments, such as those found in most township schools.

In view of Pit-ten Cate et al. (2018), one could agree that inclusionary teaching and learning practices and attitudes are promoted through the implementation of inclusive education policies in mainstream schools. According to Aasheim et al. (2018), when educators confront learners who appear with challenging behavioural and socioemotional problems that they are not qualified to handle, a poorly implemented inclusive education policy has the potential to

cause problems for them. Cohen, Spillane and Peurach (2018) insist that schools with limited resources are more likely to appear with poorly executed inclusive education policies.

Supporting learners' academic resilience in the classroom has a major impact on vulnerable learners' academic achievements. Mfuthwana and Dreyer (2018) insist that in South Africa, there is a critical need for the successful implementation of inclusive education in township schools and a significant policy in the implementation of inclusive education is White Paper 6 (2001). Mfuthwana and Dreyer (2018) further maintain that the execution of the inclusive education strategy requires access to educational resources such as facilities, skilled teachers, and other experts. Tapala, van Niekerk and Mentz (2020) believe that the South African education system, on the other hand, faces numerous obstacles in terms of resourcing schools, which has hampered the successful implementation of inclusive education in many township schools. One could perhaps argue that even in the face of adversity, many township students thrive and achieve academic success.

Even in the most trying circumstances some children manage to survive and thrive. Murphy (2019) reveals that learners that display the ability to overcome and survive in the face of severe contextual stressors and developmental hazards outperform their peers in terms of resilience and require special attention to improve access to additional support, which is critical to their success. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) comment that when schools are unable to provide the necessary support, learners in township schools can discover, access, and utilise available community services. Learners in township schools rely on community resources to supplement and improve their educational and support needs. Murphy (2019) state that it is worth mentioning that in township schools, there is a lack of stability and bad management, which has a negative impact on students.

Learners from low socioeconomic backgrounds lack financial resources to seek remedial support to help them with their learning problems. Salmi and D'Addio (2021) argue that this happens especially when access to specialist services in their schools is not provided due to poor implementation of inclusive education or additional educational support. The lack of supplementary lessons to assist learners experiencing learning hurdles or backlog may be a source of concern for learners. Du Plessis and Mestry (2019) imply that township schools learners demand more attention from schools and teachers through additional classes.

Most schools in South Africa's townships still bear the scars of apartheid and the battle for freedom and equality, resulting in poor academic performance. However, according to Buchel and Frantzeskaki (2015), it is imperative to indicate that some township secondary schools consistently performed remarkably well over the last five-year period despite these political challenges. Arguably Mkhazibe, Mbokazi and Buthelezi (2021) when they imply that many

South Africans and education officials are concerned about school academic outcomes since every parent wants his or her child to attend a high-performing school.

Furthermore, education officials must verify that all schools function properly according to the government's educational budget. This is why academic achievement is such an important topic. The academic achievement of students in Grade 12 examinations is used to determine a school's efficacy or performance and thus Raja (2017) advocates that teachers are entrusted with the vital task of ensuring that schools run smoothly and consequently improve academic attainment. As a result, school managers should develop into leaders that promote creativity and higher achievement. Teachers should be consistently motivated and developed by school managers by providing opportunities to grow and learn from others.

Effective school management methods may be found in some of the country's schools, which foster high-quality teaching and learning environments, as well as academic performance. South African Schools Act (SASA) specifies that school managers and School Management Teams (SMTs) are accountable for the successful management and provision of quality teaching and learning in schools (Mutekwe, 2020). School managers have the unique role of overseeing all aspects of the school's operations to guarantee that academic progress is not jeopardised. Academic effectiveness is the result of school improvement by school administrators (Mutekwe, 2020). Schools that consistently improve their academic performance acquire confidence, are more self-critical and understand how learners learn.

Mutekwe (2020) further claims that successful school managers, in support of the above statement, are those who are open, confident and effective in collaborating with the communities they serve to guarantee that their schools achieve academic achievement. School teachers play a key part in all of the school's programmes and Carswell (2021) points out that they have an impact on the creation of a positive tone and ethos that promotes outstanding education. Teachers also required for a well-functioning educational system that responds to high-quality teaching and learning.

The democratization of the education system in South Africa has evolved from the advent of democratic processes. As a result, schools are now managed in a completely positive approach and Christie (2021) argues that a school is no longer the state machinery through which the government propagates its divide and rule agenda, as formerly held. The SASA invites parents to participate in the management of their children's schools. This statement finds support in an observation made by Mohapi and Netshitangani (2018) when they state that parents are given the responsibility and ability to ensure that their children's education is improved through their participation in school governing bodies.

2.7.3 Possible barriers to academic success

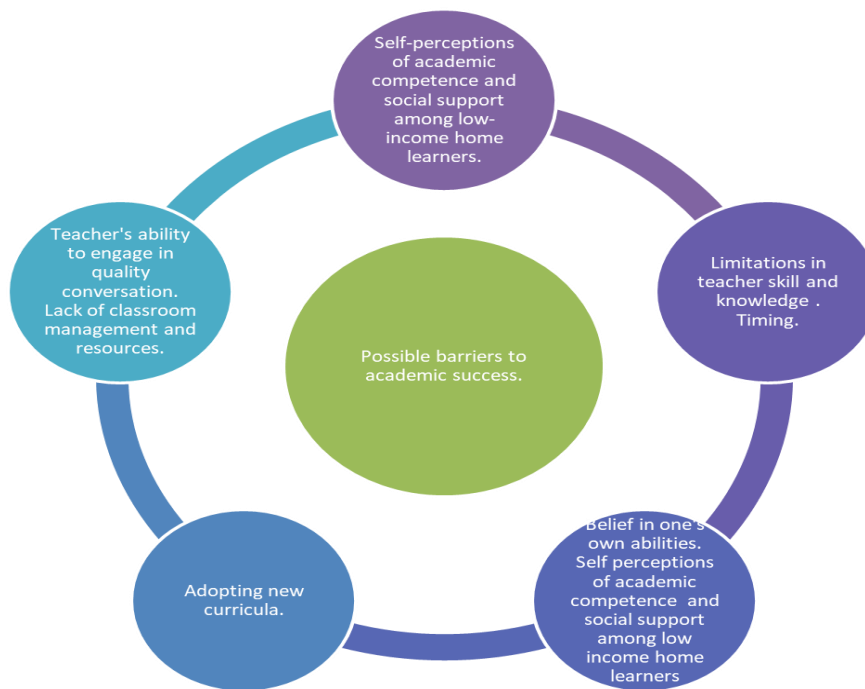


Figure 2.4: The possible barriers to academic success

Mann et al. (2021) argue that experts are increasingly stating that curricula might be an effective way to transform education. When evidence-based curriculum is supplied, however, instructors may not always execute them as intended in their classrooms (Mann et al., 2021). Seemingly there is disconnect between what curriculum authors intend and what classroom teachers do with pupils, or there are individual or school factors at play. Similarly, Lindahl, Folkesson and Zeidler (2019) insist that a classroom curriculum may be beneficial in one set of conditions but not in another; hence, recognizing and addressing implementation issues is critical to maximise classroom curricula benefits.

Glaeser (2020) argue that the first challenge to adoption of evidence-based curriculum is timing and resources within the educational setting and notably finding time to fit in the curriculum among competing instructional demands. Register, Stephan and Pugalee (2021) also argue that instructors do not always receive clear advice from school and district authorities regarding which curriculum items are required and which are optional. The quality of supplemental curriculum implementation is linked to higher levels of administrative assistance. Adiyarta et al. (2018) suggest that some studies have used readiness ratings to determine if a school system is ready to adopt changes because of these and other factors of the bigger school system (beyond the classroom).

Adopting new curricula presents several issues for South Africa. Abadie and Bista (2018) insist that even if an evidence-based curriculum is supplied, it is difficult to ensure that teachers will have the time to execute it. Limitations in teacher skill and knowledge emerge as significant impediments. Klette, Blikstad-Balas and Rea (2017) imply that previous research has linked teachers' disciplinary expertise to the possibilities for language development that they provide their students. Haslip and Gullo (2018) insist that it is critical to ensure that teachers have the skills and knowledge necessary to implement curriculum based on studies that show these areas are significantly linked to children's language development. Teachers' capacity to scaffold language and expose children to sophisticated language models, according to Mattron, Ostrolenk and Gagnon (2021) for example, are thought to be essential mechanisms through which children's language aptitude improves.

Although studies show that teachers' ability to engage in quality conversations with children varies widely, Langeloo et al. (2019) suggest that academic language curricula should encourage teachers to act as facilitators of classroom conversations that span multiple turns on a single topic. Similar to other language curriculum studies, teachers at my school had difficulty going 'off-script' to employ scaffolding tactics to extend dialogues and adapt speaking to meet individual students' needs (i.e. making a question easier or more difficult).

The lack of classroom management skills by some teachers could also hamper implementation. Indeed, the effectiveness of a shared book-reading curriculum for children's language development may be influenced by classroom management. Goh et al. (2020) explain that for some learners, the teachers' language and reading ability appears to be a barrier (e.g., teachers who were not fluent in English) especially in township schools.

A considerable proportion of teachers have trouble adjusting their behaviours and remembering how to implement the new developing curriculum. Knezovic (2020) insists that these obstacles are surprising, since that the goal of scripted techniques is to reduce teacher workload. Sandilos et al. (2018) suggest that when implementing new curricula, some teachers may encounter attention or stress issues. However, it is perhaps worth mentioning that memory/attention and behaviour modification concerns are not common among all teachers. Fox et al. (2020) give insight by stating that similar teacher-reported stressors – ranging from specific opposition to new teaching approaches to general emotional weariness, burnout, and low self-efficacy – are linked to more difficulties integrating curricular supplements in other implementation studies.

A small proportion of teachers' negative beliefs regarding the effects of adopting the curriculum reveal that the materials need to be improved further (Fox et al. 2020). As a result, Cummings (2020) observes that changes have been made to include: (a) a better explanation of the

developmental skill progressions upon which the lessons were built; (b) who the curriculum is designed for, including foundational language skills that should be supported when targeting academic level language; and (c) the development of a bilingual Home language/English version (rather than only English or Home language).

Zucker, Jacobs and Cabell (2021) state that more study is probably needed to evaluate progressions for teaching academic vocabulary words, as current best practices rely on data from decades ago and professional judgment. Other options for overcoming this obstacle include enhancing the core curriculum rather than using a supplemental academic language curriculum to ensure challenging classroom conversation (Zucker et al., 2021).

Centeio et al. (2020) argue that self-perceptions of academic competence and social support are much lower among low-income home learners, and on the other hand learners from higher-income families, have higher self-esteem and confidence in their social skills. De lannoy, et al. (2018) also argue that in their schools, low-income South African students are not socially integrated, teachers regard them as loners, and they indicate a wish to establish friendships outside of class. Social surroundings have varying effects on children depending on their developmental stage and whatever transitions they are going through. Sperry, Sperry and Miller (2019) also argue that schools, like families, are social contexts that surround children and have a direct role in their efficient functioning, in part because these surroundings, to varying degrees, respond to the unique features that children bring to the environment.

One should perhaps consider the idea that learners with great academic potential exist at all income levels of their parents, yet low-income parents' learners consistently outperform their higher-income peers. Although dropout rates among kids from low-income families have reduced by half over the last two decades, Cross, et al. (2018) claim that they were five times more likely to drop out of high school in 2010 than their high-income classmates in township schools.

These figures are a cause for concern in the township education community, as data suggests that gifted and talented children are among those from low-income homes who are not realising their full potential or even dropping out (Centeio et al. 2020). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is used as a foundation for explaining how schools affect student development. Kranzler et al. (2020) give a good illustration of schools by stating that schools are a multi-level, hierarchical and contextualised system that includes the classroom, teacher-student interactions (including classroom activities and instructional methods), the school and its impact on teachers and the impact of particular schools.

The impact of a school on a learner is decided by how well the complex academic milieu's developmental appropriateness matches the child's needs — his or her fit with the environment (Kranzler et al. 2020). According to Kern and Wehmeyer (2021), autonomy (perceiving oneself as the source of one's behaviour), competence (being effective in one's surroundings), and relatedness (to interact with, care for, and be connected to others) are all desires that humans have. A setting that provides kids a degree of autonomy, with the freedom to make choices and engage in work that is meaningful to them, as well as a way of growing their competence with visible proof of their achievement, would be a good fit for middle-school children, where children feel linked to adults at school as well as to one another (Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021). Usher et al. (2019) agree that belief in one's abilities is essential for motivation and is both a precursor to and a result of academic achievement. When learners are given opportunities to succeed at more difficult activities, they will gain confidence in their talents. Peers' self-efficacy views are contagious, and peers' modelling can improve or diminish pupils' confidence in their own abilities (Usher et al., 2019).

In conclusion, teachers who are confident in their teaching abilities and who plan activities so that expectations, guidance, and feedback are communicated clearly, encourage competence attitudes. Cheon, Reeve and Song (2019) argue that competence perceptions and positive attitude towards school can only be correct among high-ability pupils if they have had sufficient opportunities to work at a high level.

2.9 THE ROLE OF A LEARNER'S PERSONALITY TRAITS ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Academic achievement is a major issue among students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and the community at large. Attempts have been made by researchers to unravel the complexities surrounding academic performance. Psychologists have put forward a lot of reasons why these disparities in performance exist (Colman, 2013). A lot of attention has been paid on external factors such as type of school, teaching methods, school location, instructional materials, teachers experience, and so on as reasons for disparities in Academic Performance of students (Dennis and Onu, 2023). Although academic motivation is one of the effective factors on learners' achievement. Learners need to be interested in learning, otherwise all efforts of the educational system would fail. Although ability and intelligence are considered as predictors of academic achievement, there is evidence that personality variables play a crucial role Hazrati-Viari *et al.* (2012). This section therefore focuses on the psychological element of academic achievement – which is personality traits. Personality is innate or inborn. It comes from within, and it is the dynamic organization within the individual

of those psychological systems that determine learner's unique adjustment to their environment.

Personality traits are the patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that people have, and they are the strong predictors of better academic performance (Dong, et al. 2022). Sigmund Freud, a famous psychiatrist, established the psychoanalytic personality theory. A person's personality, according to Freud, is the sum of their intrinsic inclinations and familial influences (ibid). Gatzka and Hell (2018) postulate that it is a pragmatic fact that academic performance is influenced by the personality traits. Therefore, Students and learners who have emotional abilities are more likely to perform well in their academics (Dong, et al. 2022). Dennis and Onu (2023) argue that learners have distinctive personality characteristics which makes them prepared for having different worldviews, and thus for behaving differently in various social and educational settings. Taking these differences into account can help educators recognize their students' individual differences. Predictors of academic performance often lay on a continuum with cognitive measures, intelligence and mental abilities at one extreme and non-cognitive variables (such as personality characteristics, socioeconomic status, etc.)

Hazrati-Viari, *et al.* (2012) conducted a study on the effect of personality on academic motivation and performance amongst college students and results showed that conscientiousness predicted both of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The academic motivation mediated the relationship between openness to experience and consciousness with academic performance. In the same vein, Shafaat, et al. (2023) conducted a study to investigate the role of personality traits in the academic performance of undergraduate students in Pakistan and the study concluded that high achievers have high levels of consciousness. These two studies provide evidence that that personality traits can predict academic motivation and achievement. Therefore, personality traits and academic performance are directly related (Dong, *et al.* 2022), personality traits affect the academic motivation and performance (Hazrati-Viari, *et al.* 2012).

Aarti (2023) highlights that students' performance in academic settings, to a great extent, is an outcome of personal determinants of individuals. So, it becomes necessary to understand the role of personality traits in gaining desired academic outcomes. The continuity of the effect of childhood personality on performance criteria is worthy of attention, because school adjustment and academic performance are believed to have cumulative effects in the course of time. Dennis and Onu (2023) state that students differ in their personal values or intellectual content, they receive and process information differently. Understanding individual differences in academic performance is critical to meeting the needs of today's diverse learners' challenges. In the light of this, the third research question of the study determines the role of

Grade seven top achievers' personality traits on their academic success in the South African township context.

2.10 THE ROLES OF THE TEACHER IN THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF LEARNERS

The first role of a teacher is to interact with learners. That is the role deemed to be essential to a teacher (Van Den Branden, 2016). The teacher is the one who initiates the course of action in class and for the service to be as professional as possible the teacher has to be well organised. On the part of the teacher, a lot of planning goes into preparing for a lesson. A teacher taps into the potentials of learners on the grounds of making them knowledgeable. The learning process naturally takes place to develop the abilities of learners (Michalos, 2017).

There are certain qualities that a person should have when becoming a teacher. A teacher should have the ability to establish and enforce rules (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015). A teacher must be able to demonstrate in one or more subjects, be able to establish clear objectives for lessons and know how to prepare materials and classrooms. A teacher should prepare learners for later grades (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015). The use of interactive teaching is worth experiencing (Kutbiddinova, Eromasoya & Romanova, 2018). Perhaps one can imply as a possibility that traditional methods in teaching and learning are evolving, merely because of the evolution of such pedagogical thoughts and because the utilisation of interactive teaching inside a class likewise directs a difference in the educator's job (Xhemaji, 2016, p. 31).

When such a transformation is in process, the requirement is that the teacher should be knowledgeable, an associate to many, organised, and inclined to support, in other words, competent in many areas (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harey, 2018). In interactive teaching, the teacher ought to be active both in school and outside of school. Interaction could indeed have many meanings by its definition. Rilling (2017) defines interaction as "people communicating face to face" (Rilling, 2017, p. 8).

At a secondary school level, a physical science teacher is required to have majored in physics (Reddy & Panacharoensawad, 2017). The teacher must also be able to transit between theory and practical work, which comes with experience (Wei, 2018). A decent physical science educator is somebody who understands that among the most esteemed and noteworthy jobs of a science educator is to enable learners to comprehend a group of data and the procedures of scientific investigation (AAPT, 2009, p. 12).

Physics in its makeup is a subject pursued by its practitioners by adhering to the principles and methods used in science, and physical science learners for instance need to learn to provide empirical treatment to a study when such action is needed (Lehan & Eylon, 2018).

The teacher has to know how to develop scientific literacy and some of the ways to facilitate this development is to associate learners with scientists outside of the classroom, through trips and workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

The teacher could also bring scientific news in the classroom that will enable interesting conversations to take place. As learners learn, the teacher should also develop. According to Li-ping (2017), the development of a teacher plays a significant role in the quality of teacher-learner interaction. Due to the ever-changing combination of circumstances in the world, a certain set of skills is required to meet the needs of politics, business, and other various economic factors (Fayolle, 2018). The roles of the society are predominantly those of workers, consumers, citizens and parents. However, this all begins at school and curriculum developers should bear in mind that as the leaders of education, they should bear in mind that as the leaders of education, they should establish a curriculum that teaches learners the skills to solve problems, to think critically, and the act of working jointly (Neuhaus, 2019).

The approach to learning should not only exhibit careful thought but should be considerate of the well-being of others. Neuhaus (2019) says that learners need a supportive teacher that is also sensitive to their experiences. Of course, the key issue could be whether these skills can form part of the already daunting syllabus? Also, if one was to imagine such areas, how would that be?

Having said this, all learners need to be given the opportunity to develop. Learners do not develop at the same rate. Some learn faster while others take time to grasp. An educational system should be set in place to help them develop those competencies (Taylor et al. 2017). An academic subject is found in the context of activities involving educating or instructing and this should be where the above-mentioned skills are developed.

Any teacher would perhaps suggest that when they consider learning to have taken place, it is when a learner can take what has been taught farther along with rote learning to an extent where they can figure out how to implement what they have learned (Vansteenkiste et al. 2018). For instance, learners can learn facts about the respiratory system and if they can apply these facts to a new situation they could potentially end up saving someone from drowning or choking to death. They would have discerned that the new circumstance is related to what they have studied and as a result can apply their skills to solve the matter.

A learner that cannot store knowledge and does not possess problem-solving techniques will probably fail to notice meaningful perceptual structures (Loibl, Roll & Rummel, 2017). Also what this means is that there is no link to the basic truth in the similarity of the newly found situation and what the learner knows. The National Research Council of the National

Academics (2013) emphasised the process of deeper learning as a means of developing 21st-century competencies. Deeper learning entails becoming an expert in a subject (Johnson, 2019). One has to acquire a significant amount of knowledge as well as skills in the subject matter that leads to a particular course of action that involves solving a problem pertinent to that subject. In essence, knowledge should be promptly available.

The norm is that the teacher controls the learning outcomes (Alexander, 2017); however, one could perhaps argue that these actions might not be a sincere reflection of the teacher, but a mere rendering of accepted activities from different authorities. Teachers should perhaps form their own standards that may stem from learning strategies developed from their personal experiences (Kennedy, 2016). The teacher passes information, and that forms the generic part of the job (Amadi & Kufre, 2017). The teacher should bear in mind that the instructive process is a transitory job and the attempt is to allow the subject to suit the learner and vice versa, resulting in the learner adapting self-instructional skills. According to Cotton (1995), learners develop a lasting phenomenon on memory through self-discovery.

The role of the teacher or educator will always remain important in the global world, especially in countries where the medium of teaching is not English (Darling-Hammond, 2017). English language teachers are essential in teaching good communication skills to communicate on a global level (Srinivas Rao, 2019). Having said this, before a teacher can assume the duties of evaluator, manager, assessor, and facilitator, they first need to ensure that learners develop interest in the subject that they are teaching. Learners pay more attention to the subject or teacher that they find interesting (Bakhsh, 2016).

It is said that a teacher is a life-long learner (Demirel & Akkoyunlu, 2017); therefore teaching and learning should be a process that never stops. There are many existing teaching strategies and some of them may differ from generation to generation. The education system across the globe has seen many changes however the role that the teacher plays has been the same over the years (Pitzer & Skinner, 2017). Some goals need to be achieved when learners attend school and the work of the teacher is to help learners achieve those goals (Le, Janssen & Wubbels, 2018). In doing so, a teacher needs to persuade learners that getting an education will enhance their opportunities in life (Limeri et al., 2020).

Learners should get a strong foundation, especially for their personal growth. It is common knowledge in the teaching profession that learners sense whether or not their educator is concerned about their well-being (Sadeghi & Abolfazli Khonbi, 2020). Building a foundation for learners starts with showing concern for their development, and facilitating this support also allows learners to explore ideas on their own (Fischer et al., 2018). Giving a lesson in class ought to be accompanied by some form of assessment because learners need to receive

feedback frequently (Topping & Keith, 2017). Assessing is effective in that it firstly helps improve the learner's results and secondly, it helps the teacher to develop other teaching and assessing methods and instruments (Zepeda, 2015).

Every teacher is a manager by virtue of managing a class (Ducator, 2018). Each class that an educator teaches could be different, seeing that the learners are different and grades could be different as well (Hodges et al., 2020). Therefore, interpersonal skills would be imperative at this stage. There are other things to consider, such as the given time for each lesson period, the amount of work that needs to be covered, and the outcome of results. One would with less doubt assume that a teacher with experience would strive with all the factors mentioned above. Arguably, less experienced teachers would be competent in managing a class given the use of proper mechanisms (Schussler et al., 2016).

2.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter described literature relating to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, explaining at length the five systems namely; the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. Vygotsky's socio-cultural cognitive theory was explained as the main theoretical framework from which the study leans on. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems' theory is built on Vygotsky's theory of child development hence is deemed important for this study. The chapter further provides literature of education in South Africa which, for the purpose of this study, paints a vivid picture of history in the education system thereby affecting even learners under study that reside and learn at a township school. The context of township schools is explained at length in this chapter. The study focuses on academic top-achievers at a township school, hence it was befitting to explore literature on academic success as well as the criteria for academic success. Child development is central to both Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's socio-cultural cognitive theory; hence it is explained at length in this chapter. The chapter concluded with outlining the role of teachers in the development of children and their academic success.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

A research methodology is an outline and plan of approaches to be used to get answers to the research questions of the study. It is a perceived plan of action and an outline of how that plan of action is to be implemented (Mupindu, 2011). The thrust of this chapter is to provide a critical description of the research paradigm, methodology, sampling techniques, the data collection method, the data analysis technique as well as reporting procedures implemented in addressing the study's research questions. The interpretive paradigm was adopted and the A qualitative research approach was chosen. Intezari, Taskin and Pauleen (2017) postulate that the purposes of the research aims and questions are inter-related with the methodological decisions. The chapter justifies the appropriateness of the methods while acknowledging their strengths and the potential limitations of the study.

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which produces results that cannot be arrived at by means of statistical techniques or quantification (Walia, 2015). Qualitative research seeks to analyse subjective meaning and the social production of issues, practices and events (Mupindu 2011). Qualitative research is primarily explorative and inductive in its procedures, focusing on people's lives, behaviours, lived experiences, emotions, feelings, cultural phenomena as well as interactional experiences therefore incorporating multiple realities (Rahman, 2016). In their study of accountability in research, Haven and Van Grootel (2019) argue that qualitative research answers unique inquiries than quantitative investigations; the intricate, comprehensive discoveries that rise out of this sort of information creation can develop a comprehension of people's encounters in life. The qualitative approach understands how people make sense of the world by seeking to ask questions such as 'the what', 'the why' and 'the how', understanding research phenomena from the involved population. Qualitative research has the ability to provide intricate textual description of the topic under study compared to statistical ways of doing research (Hashemnezhad, 2015).

3.2.1 Benefits of using qualitative research

The benefits of qualitative research are as follows:

- It allows uncontrolled observation; it is rich and deep in data and can be expressed in different wording (Hashemnezhad, 2015).
- It produces a rich and detailed description of research participants' opinions, beliefs, experiences and feelings (Rahman, 2016).

- It offers a flexible way of conducting research as it gives the researcher a chance to observe and identify other elements that were not initially planned at the inception stage. This allows a research to change direction in its process, hence improving the quality of the study (Mwita, 2022).
- It has a human touch in that researchers get to interact with participants and understand their actual feelings. The extent of problem can be easily comprehended through participants' responses.
- It allows researchers to understand how participants make sense of the world and how meanings are shaped through culture (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
- It explains and simplifies complex phenomena that cannot be explored in quantitative analysis (Rahman, 2016).
- It cuts across different disciplinary fields which encompass a wide range of epistemological viewpoints, research methods and interpretative techniques of comprehending people's lived realities (Hashemnezhad, 2015).
- It has the ability to use a wide range of methods in one study (Rahman, 2016).
- Qualitative research provides a minimal chance of missing data as it is difficult for a respondent to dodge a question especially with regards to interviews (Mwita, 2022).

Qualitative research is therefore perfectly suited for this study that particularly focuses on Grade seven learners who are predominantly 13 years old. The qualitative element of the study gave the researcher an opportunity to understand the influence of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory on top achievers through the lens of the learners. This study employs semi-structured interviews as a data collection method which is explained below.

3.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM

3.3.1 Interpretivism

Ryan (2018) states that the philosophy of research is what the researcher perceives as the truth, reality and knowledge as it establishes the beliefs and values that guide the design, collection and analysis of data in research and these options complement the philosophical principles. This study utilised interpretivism which is a way for comprehending and analysing societal events founded on a specific value system of the culture or society they take place in (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Van Der Walt (2020) argues that in interpretivism, truth and wisdom are contextually, culturally and historically placed, and dependent on people's perceptions of them. Interpretivism accepts that the truth is not equitably resolved, yet is socially developed. Moreover, Murphy et al. (2020) argue that putting individuals in their social settings increases the chances of comprehending their insights of their daily exercises and this is the very reason why the study is embedded in interpretivism. Furthermore, another reason why interpretivism

is relevant in the context of this study is that the researcher can never be fully detached from the learners' values and convictions. Interpretive researchers interpret reality through a sense-making process rather than a hypothesis testing process because social reality is embedded within and difficult to abstract from their social settings.

All personal experiences are socially constructed and for an individual to have a full understanding of the whole, they need to understand all the components (Creswell et al., 2019) because people have different experiences from diverse realities. Creswell et al. (2018) provide assumptions to describe the interpretive paradigm. They suggest that human behaviour is understood from within. Reality cannot be observed externally (Livari, 2018). Interpretivists study a topic using research techniques that help them make sense of how individuals translate and act within their social environment (Rapley, 2018). The assumption is that a person's social life is quintessentially produced. However, the main assumption is that this reality is socially constructed, and people need to be observed in their own social circumstances (Manstead, 2018), this will provide a greater understanding of their perceptions.

The source of meaning is the mind (Sirajul-Husain, 2016), thus, interpretivists believe that meaning is formulated as people contribute their perceptions from the context of their social and communal activities. According to Carter and Pulla (2018), interpretivism has a worldview that is related to qualitative research. A convention of interpretivism can be connected to the ethnographies of non-western people groups in the nineteenth century and proceeds to be a mainstream approach to clarify human conduct and social research today (Ruibal, 2017). Interpretivism welcomes the researcher to interpret the significance behind the comprehension of human conduct, co-operations, and society. This includes the researcher's endeavouring to build up a top to bottom abstract comprehension of individuals' lives. By taking this interpretation into consideration, the researcher argues that even though he appreciates through the eyes of others, his knowledge could be filtered into the work produced. Interpretivism is commonly associated with the employment of qualitative methods, therefore this study utilises a qualitative research methodology.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design is an overall plan or strategy that the researcher chooses to integrate the different components of the study in a coherent and logical way, thereby ensuring to effectively address the research problem. The research design constitutes of the blueprint for the collection, measurement and analysis of data. The research design includes the methods and procedures to be used to collect and analyse data as well as the steps taken to ensure the

validity and reliability of the findings. A well-designed research study is essential for obtaining accurate and meaningful results. The section below highlights the research's design.

3.4.1 Data collection strategies

3.4.1.1 *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Interviews are the most common method of data collection in qualitative research and in children research as well. Interviews encompass the collection of data through conversations between the researcher and the respondent (Mwita, 2022). In this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from Grade seven top achievers at a township school in Gauteng to understand the effect of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems on their academic performance. Although top achievers are generally located on the basis of their academic performance in Grade seven, in this study, these learners' achievements were traced from the time they were in Grade five. Therefore, in this study, for a learner to be regarded as a grade seven top achiever, he/she would have surpassed other learners academically and consecutively from grade five to seven. Out of 45, Grade seven learners, five were chosen as top-achievers and were interviewed using semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are a more powerful type of interview in qualitative research as they allow interviewers to solicit detailed information from participants without diverting from the focus of the study (Ruslin et al., 2022). They allow for adaptability and flexibility as compared to an unstructured interview where direction is not entirely controlled (Mupindu, 2011). Semi-structured interviews are conducted conversationally with one participant at a time and blend both open- and close- ended questions and often has follow-up/probing questions (Adam, 2015). The semi-structured interviews I conducted with the selected grade seven academic achievers in my study contained a balance of main questions and follow-up questions as mentioned by (Ruslin et al., 2022).

This kind of data collection method is ideal for this particular study because it has a number of open-ended questions which necessitate follow-up questions. Utilising open-ended questions encourages participants, particularly grade 7 learners in this case to reflect intensely about their circumstances and express their ideas (Ponizobsky-Bergelson, 2019). The open-ended nature of questions explores the topic under investigation and also provides an opportunity for both the interviewer and the interviewee to discuss topics in-depth.

The next step in the interview preparation stage was for the researcher was to set pre-determined questions (interview guide) that guided what to ask during the interviews. The interview guide gives an outline of planned questions to be addressed, organized in order

(Adams, 2015). Developing an interview guide meant outlining the topics that need to be included in the study (ibid). In preparation of this study, the questions were broken down into sub-sets of questions that were deemed as understandable by learners under study and simple language was used for learners to comprehend easily.

The researcher then re-visited the research topic, the aim of the study, research questions and objectives to determine if the interview questions were in alignment with what the study sought to achieve. Since the kind of interview chosen was semi-structured, the researcher ensured that the interview had leading questions and asked extra questions to saturate the question explored.

Although interviews have become the most common form of data collection on studies that involve children in recent years, they are very complex to conduct especially when the researcher has no form of training in teaching or interaction with children in general. Children were previously regarded as objects rather than subjects or participants in research; they were seen as incompetent or passive objects of study. Eden (2013) states that children were also considered as dependent on other social role players such as parents and teachers, and therefore incapable of being research participants, but there has been a turnaround on how research is viewed; children are now perceived important social actors able to express their views when probed with care and understanding (Elden, 2013). The researcher paid attention to learners during the interviews, listened to their opinions and experiences without tokenizing them or looking down on them. The setting was calm as learners already knew the interviewer.

One of the common challenges of adult-child interviews is that in most cases, the interviewer often wants to assume the parental role control the child's behaviour (Elden, 2013), which is what the researcher avoided in this study. He made sure that learners were free to express themselves no matter how silly they feel that their responses are. This study positions the Grade seven learners as capable and valuable experts in their own lives. What gives the study weight is the fact that the researcher in this case is a qualified teacher by profession with vast experience in interacting with learners and probing them. The researcher made sure that the interview is dialogical and reduced the influence of the power-submissive relationship to ensure a child-friendly environment where learners are able to express themselves.

As the researcher, I chose a serene interview location with minimised disruptions in an attempt to build trust with the participants and convey the extent of anticipated disruptions since the interview was conducted at school. I ensured that the site chosen for a sit down interview did not raise power dynamics, the environment made learners to feel at ease and the interaction seemed like a peer-to-peer one. The researcher also ensured to use specific guidelines for interviewing children such as developing rapport (relationship) with them and ensuring that

the interview is a safe space for them to express themselves; using clear, simple and understandable questions and attentive listening (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019). I addressed the issue of confidentiality with each participant and assured them pseudonyms would be used instead of their real names.

Interviewers are expected to find ways of establishing a positive first impression (Adams 2015). Some of the prompts the researcher adopted to ensure full and free participation of learners was to use introductory lines such as “Tell me about...”, “I’m really looking forward to hear your point of view”, “Your point of view is never wrong” (*ibid*). The semi-structured interviews involved a series of open-ended questions based on the topic areas. With the permission of the learners, the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and notes were written by the interviewer during the interview process. The purpose of taking down notes even when the recorder was in use was to incorporate some non-verbal signals in the transcript that may signify something important for the research. Non-verbal cues are as important as verbal cues in research. Silence may convey humiliation or enthusiastic trouble, or a respite for thought.

A small portable recorder allows the researcher to be more actively engaged in the interview and do follow-questioning without having to focus solely on writing down responses. As the researcher, I had a portable recorder, he also recorded using a cell phone in case one object malfunctions or runs out of memory mid-way the interview. Once the interview process was complete, interviews were imported to a computer and saved on Google drive to avoid loss.

3.4.1.2 Participant observation

While interviews help us understand how people make sense of their world, participant observation helps understand how they act and behave. Participant observation involves the researcher immersing themselves in the social setting or group they are studying and observing participants’ behaviour in a natural setting (Jamshed, 2014). The goal of participant observation is to understand the participants’ perspectives and experiences from their own point of view (Kawulich, 2005). The researcher typically takes detailed notes about what they observe. In this study, participant observation was used in conjunction and as complementary to interviews to provide a more complete understanding of the participants’ experiences and perspectives. Participant observation was suitable for this study since the researcher is a teacher and spends a lot of time at school, which is the setting where learners also spend quality time and engage in their academic activities.

My position as a teacher gives this method an advantage and observing learners comes as a natural phenomenon I was trained to do. I was able to observe the learners in a natural setting,

rather than in an artificial environment. So, while the interviews provided more in-depth information on grade 7 learners' experiences, participant observation provided insight into the actual notable behaviours and interactions whether complementary or contradicting to what they said during the interviews. Grade 7 learners are young and may not necessarily provide or respond to interview questions in a way that is anticipated due to factors such as discomforts or past traumas, therefore, observation may allow the researcher to note other non-spoken cues. By using both the interviews and participant observation, I gained a more comprehensive understanding of the grade 7 learners' experiences. Participant observation particularly helped in observing top achievers' personality traits that also enable them to perform well at school. The researcher particularly observed the following:

- Top achievers' interaction with other learners.
- Top achievers' interaction with teachers.
- Their engagement in sporting activities and extra mural activities such as poetry, drama, public speaking and debate.
- How they generally conduct themselves.
- Their body language.
- Their communication style.
- Listening habits.
- Their relationship with others.
- Consistency.

Although there are many elements that feed into someone's personality, the researcher believes that the above mentioned are sufficient to study the top achievers' personality traits vis-à-vis their academic performance. The findings are anticipated to add value to data solicited through interviews.

3.4.2 Sampling

Dunwoodie, Macaulay and Newman (2023) indicate that the majority of survey and interview-based research is sample-based. A sample is a subset of people chosen from a larger group to represent the entire population (Lehdontvirta et al., 2023), and sampling is the process of choosing a portion of the general population or a subset of social phenomena to be researched. Sharma (2017) defines sampling as a procedure used by the researcher to select a smaller number of participants from a pre-defined population to serve as a data source for research. The researcher sampled the population to make assumptions about the bigger group based on data collected from the smaller group. Choosing a representative sample is the key to achieving this. All the population's variables should be present in a good

representative sample. Non-probability sampling approaches were employed in the study to gain an early understanding of a tiny or under-researched community, rather than to test a theory about a large population.

Purposive sampling, also referred to as selective, subjective or judgemental sampling was utilised in this study. Elhami and Khoshnevisan (2022) stated that based on the characteristics of the participants, purposive sampling is the most common method used by qualitative researchers as they are not interested in generalising statistical levels. The advantage of purposive sampling is that it saves time and money and the participants always have a shared set of characteristics (Dunwoodie, Macaulay & Newman, 2023). In this study, the similarity amongst participants involves academic excellence, same school, same level of study and same township dwelling. The other advantage of purposive sampling is that it has low margin errors as information is solicited straight from the source or relevant participant.

Therefore, purposive sampling was chosen based on the judgement of the researcher who deemed the small group of participants as the ideal candidates to fulfil the objectives of the study. Five Grade seven learners were purposefully selected for the study from a township school in Tshwane. The school itself was selected based on convenience in the Soshanguve Township where the researcher based. As mentioned in chapter 1, the criteria for selecting the learners was based on their academic performance from previous years, and also based on the positive references that were made by their class educators.

Table 3.1: Sampling criteria / selection criteria

PARTICIPANT	GRADE	AGE	GENDER	COMMUNITY
1	7	13	Male	Soshanguve
2	7	13	Male	Soshanguve
3	7	13	Female	Soshanguve
4	7	13	Female	Soshanguve
5	7	13	Female	Soshanguve

The criteria for selecting the learners was based on their academic performance from previous years, and also based on the positive references that were made by their class educators.

3.4.3 Data analysis

In this study, data analysis adapts an inductive procedure to help demonstrate its patterns. Skinner, Ryan and Chin (2022) state that data analysis includes a procedure whereby one moves to and from between information assortment, and information investigation to gather rich information and intriguing findings. One may imagine data collection as a progression of interrelated exercises pointed toward social occasion to address developing exploration questions (Gauche et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. The first step in thematic analysis was to transcribe data solicited from interview recordings. I utilised an assistant for transcription services. The transcribe was briefed on the best way to do the verbatim transcriptions from the recordings. Words such as "well", "err" are significant components of a discussion and ought not to be overlooked, while giggling or motions may likewise give added significance to the expressed word (Wong, 2018). It is note-worthy to review outline notes from sound recordings, as the researcher's predisposition has in all likelihood brought about just those areas that appear to be significant or intriguing. Sound accounts were interpreted verbatim, those that were recorded in the same words. As a researcher, I also read through transcripts and verified them.

The second step was to explore the results to make sense of the data and to answer the research questions (Nowel et al., 2017). The transcriptions were typed on a word-for-word basis and read thoroughly to get a complete sense of the sentiments and views of the research participants.

The third step was data preparation whereby the transcribed data/raw data were worked clean to put them in an arrangement that is easy to work with. Preparing information for analysis is a significant advance in the qualitative data analysis process (Lester, Cho & Lochmiller, 2020), because according to Haven and Grootel (2019), the checking and inspecting of all means of the investigation is a characteristic piece of qualitative research. Any investigation of qualitative data must be precise and composed, so that the researcher can easily access collected data (Mandran et al., 2018).

The fourth step was re-organising data. This allows researchers to work easily with the data at a later stage (Ruslin et al., 2022). Re-organising data according to its properties makes it easy for the researcher to track where materials came from, from which participant and from which interview question (ibid).

After data re-organisation took place, the next step was to summarise the results. A form of data filtering was then done to select data deemed useful, a list of topics was noted and those that had the same characteristics were grouped together.

To make sense of the data, the next step was to organise data into categories (Vaismoradi, et al., 2016). Categories are built when the data is inductively organised into building blocks of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inductive procedure allowed the researcher to work within the categories and the database without interruption, ultimately this yielded a broad band of themes. Categories were then created from the descriptive words to start the process of coding, splitting the text or transcript into discrete categories of information, looking for

evidence supporting the code in the text, and then assigning a label to the code are all steps in the coding process (Venter et al., 2016).

The next step was to consolidate themes found in multiple answers. The themes that emerged from the codes led to the interpretation of data. Making themes is the centre element of qualitative research (Moses & Korstjens, 2018). A theme is a gathering of substances that shares a shared characteristic. The age of themes for the most part finishes with a characterisation that depicts and deciphers the entire research as it was contained in the assembled data (Mubin et al., 2019). Even though the classification of data utilises interpretive systems, one ought to not mistake this for the understanding and conversation of the findings, which is done as a different part in one's research report after the discoveries are introduced (Amiri & Tabrizi, 2017).

Qualitative data analysis is basically about detection; that is the art of defining, categorising, theorising, explaining, exploring and mapping data. Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate data analysis technique for the research design and approach of this study merely because it offers a wide strategy for making deductions by impartially and methodically recognising explicit attributes of messages (Vaismoradi, et al., 2016). Thematic analysis has been characterized as a methodical, replicable procedure to compact numerous expressions of text into fewer substance classifications dependent on definitive principles of coding (Graneheim et al., 2017).

3.4.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics are an important component of research that ranges from the selection of a research subject to data collection and analysis, and finally to the dissemination of study findings. Vakil (2018) states that modern science researchers are confronted with increasingly complex ethical issues every day. Therefore, the POPIA Act (2021) was observed in the study. The University of South Africa (UNISA) promotes values, principles, norms and standards to guide and conduct its activities, internal relations and relationships with external parties. The researcher firstly sought permission to undertake this research from the University of South Africa (UNISA) College of Education Research Ethics through applying for an ethical clearance. In addition, ethical concerns in qualitative studies involving humans as study subjects are often contextual, situational, and evolving (Hennell, Piacentini & Limmer, 2020). Furthermore, as new questions are raised, new approaches are used, and new types of data are analysed, completely new ethical questions arise.

There are two distinct pillars for research ethics. The ethical standards that seek to protect the study subject and those that focus on ethical science professional standards, intending to

ensure good scientific practice and publicly accountable research. It is perhaps expected that those involved in education, be it teachers, or school managers to be held accountable, not only for their practices but also for their attitudes and values that directly or indirectly shape their involvement with children, parents, and community in content related to education (Donald et al, 2017). This research was conducted under the regulation of four ethical principles, namely the permission to conduct research and approach participants, informed consent, assent, confidentiality, and anonymity as well as protection from harm. Following these four ethical principles ensures that the research task remains ethically sound.

Evans and Lewis (2017) state that participants have the right to withdraw at any time without affecting their participation in future services or the current program, as well as their relationships with any of the researchers or research bodies involved. It can be difficult to persuade high-risk adolescents to participate in a program, and it is much more difficult when they decide not to. Therefore, in this study, participants had the freedom to quit from participating at any time. Therefore, no pressure was applied to those who did not wish to participate.

According to Moore (2018), confidentiality is a stringent type of privacy than anonymity. Since participants in social research are commonly exposed to other research assistants or research stakeholders, anonymity is more difficult to obtain than secrecy. Anyone other than the researcher may have access to any personally identifiable information. Chauvette, Schick-Makaroff & Molzahn (2019) in their study on open data in qualitative research support the affirmation that confidentiality also guarantees that such personal information is not used in any reports or records that are released. Given the limited number of people involved in peer-to-peer projects, it is important to think about how reports are written to ensure that no one can be recognised even though names are not mentioned. In this study, pseudonyms were used to conceal participants' identities. Key ethical considerations for this study were: a) Informed consent, b) Beneficence – Do not harm, c) Respect for anonymity and confidentiality, and d) Respect for privacy. The validity of the research was observed by asking interview questions that relate to the research questions stipulated in this paper.

In research, harm may be physical or psychological and may take the form of tension, discomfort, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, or a violation of privacy. Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) assert that it is important that the assessment process does not affect participants in any way, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, the researcher avoided sensitive and potentially traumatizing topics like sexual abuse and torture. Every effort was made to keep the amount of harm minimum.

As part of the ethical considerations in data analysis, the researcher avoided siding with participants and disclosing only positive results by reporting multiple perspectives and also reporting contrary findings. According to Twining et al. (2017), the key to quality research is guaranteeing that the information is gathered fittingly, and that the data collection is orderly and efficient, thus the researcher avoided falsifying authorship, evidence, data, findings, and conclusions by reporting every bit of information honestly. The researcher avoided disclosing information that would harm participants by using composite stories so that individuals cannot be identified (Burles & Bally, 2018). The researcher used clear, straightforward appropriate language; the language used in the study was appropriate for audiences of the research.

The researcher did not in any way deceive the participants and a discussion of the purpose and use of data took place. The researcher made an attempt to avoid leading questions, withholding sharing personal information, and avoided disclosing sensitive information. This was done to ensure that participants are not exploited (Fisher, 2017). Data and materials were eventually stored at a secure location.

3.4.5 Quality criteria

Rules for quality in qualitative research are critical to outline basic contrasts between quantitative and qualitative research (McMahon & Winch, 2018). Specifically, validity and reliability have restricted an incentive for qualitative researchers. Validity expects that researchers are attempting to quantify something by corresponding factors that can be estimated through evaluation (Mohajan, 2017). Reliability accepts that results should hold steady if the state of the examination is held consistent, which accepts the concept under investigation is generally static (Walby & Luscombe, 2017). There is substantially more to these standards, however, the researcher was aware that such rough outlines are adequate to come to meaningful conclusion (Yarkoni, 2019), while these measures are found to be appropriate for research in the common sciences and in quantitative social research, they are not appropriate for the objectives and strategies for qualitative research (Walby & Luscombe, 2017). The quality criteria explored below are credibility, transferability, dependability, validation and confirmability.

3.4.5.1 Credibility

Credibility manages the inquiries like; how compatible are the discoveries with the real world? One asks themselves the question, 'How would I guarantee that the examiner will accept my discoveries?' (Wood, Sebar & Vecchio, 2020). In the case of this research, various factors were put into play to guarantee the credibility of the research. These incorporate the selection of entrenched research strategies, a research plan that fits the research question, a hypothetical supporting that is lined up with the research question and techniques (Webley,

2016). Credibility is likewise improved through the advancement of an early commonality with the participants and the partaking associations, yet in addition through very much characterised, purposive sampling, and data collection methods.

According to Webley (2016), different measures to guarantee credibility may incorporate incessant questioning meetings between the researcher and their supervisor, the researcher's intelligent notes, and participant checks. Participant checks suggest that one presents one's records or documented notes to the supervisors to address blunders or realities (Williams & Allia, 2013). On the other hand, during resulting interviews, the researcher had requested that participants confirm the information assembled before interviews, or during casual discussions with the participants (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018). The researcher had expresses his underlying understandings with the participants to check whether the researcher's translation of what the participants have imparted to the researcher is recalled. Credibility was additionally improved using a thick description of the findings in the research (Cagani, 2019).

3.4.5.2 *Transferability*

Qualitative research rejects speculation as an objective as it once in a while plans to draw haphazardly chosen tests (Berg & Lune, 2017). One can advance the case that transferability ought to be the development utilised in qualitative research (Moutinho-Abdalla, 2017). In contrast to generalisability, transferability does not include summed up claims, however, it welcomes researchers to make associations between components of an investigation and their understanding or exploration (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020).

To build transferability, the researcher concentrated on how distinctive the participants are to the setting being considered, and the context to which the findings apply (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). In the initial thought, the participants were regular of the wonder being studied. The other thought was concerned with giving a total comprehension of the setting being examined. It is from here that readers can investigate the research report and decide whether the findings can be moved to their settings or condition. Korstjens and Moser (2018) further state that it is the researcher's duty to illustrate the unique situation and afterward permit the reader to decide whether the exploration is adaptable to their specific situation.

Qualitative researchers have two methodologies open to them to expand the transferability of a study. The first is through thick depictions which imply that the researcher gives the reader a full and intentional record of the unique circumstance, participants, and research design with the goal that the readers can settle on their own choices about transferability. The other is through purposeful sampling, on the grounds that cautious idea ought to be given to choosing the participants with the characteristic thought that they by one way or another speak to the whole populace regarding the marvel or setting being contemplated (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016).

This being the situation, researchers and readers would then be able to start to make associations from the uncovered information to both nearby and whole network level conduct and practice. These contemplations are applied to qualitative techniques through a procedure called transferability (Valsiner, 2020).

3.4.5.3 Dependability

In qualitative research, the idea of dependability is utilised in inclination to reliability (Ore, 2019). Practically speaking, a showing of credibility goes some separation in guaranteeing dependability. Dependability is shown through the research design and its execution; the operational confine of data gathering and the intelligent examination of the venture. According to Ore (2019), the researcher's underlying research design may change as the researcher leads their investigation, and new information sources and information gathering methods are fused to fortify one's examination.

The researcher kept notes of their choices during the research procedure, particularly to the extent of data collection and analysis process is concerned. According to Levitt (2017), this helps other people to follow the researcher's thinking. Reporting the category labels one makes, the updates one mentions to categories, and any objective facts one notes concerning the information as one works with the content is additionally important (Prana et al., 2019). The analysis process was reported with the goal that someone else can see the choices that one made, how one approached the analysis, and how one showed up at the understandings.

3.4.5.4 Validation

The way to validation lied in the open and straightforward nature of the examination methodology, and in leaving an unmistakable review trail of choices and understandings made throughout the exploration procedure (Sharma, 2018). Validation thus permits one's reader to follow one's procedure to set up if the procedure met the prerequisites of substantial research (Fusch, Fusch & Ness, 2018). The researcher understood that the instruments and procedures that the researcher has utilised for data collection should be remembered for the last record and promptly accessible and open for examination (Coughlan, Ullmann & Lister, 2017). This by itself goes far towards guaranteeing the uprightness and dependability of one's study and the investigation and understanding of one's information. The review trail was not left to empower others to evaluate the interpretive choices made, however, to make straightforward the strategy and to show the sensibility of the analysis.

3.4.5.5 Confirmability

Confirmability is the level of lack of bias or the degree to which the discoveries of an investigation are formed by the participants and not the researcher's inclination, inspiration, or

interests (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016). Procedures to build confirmability incorporate triangulation and, in this unique circumstance, diminish the impact of the researcher's bias (Plaven, 2020). To decrease research bias, the researcher needed to concede their inclinations. The more I became engaged with the research participants and with the investigation, the more prominent the danger of inclination crawling into the investigation (Alexander, 2018). Since researcher created associations with the participants, they are enticed to perceive what they need to see and truly miss things that do not adjust to their desires.

Following the means laid out for participant checking and including others in the manners demonstrated can cure the issue of inclination. Alexander (2018) states that basic to this procedure is the review trail which permits any onlooker to follow the course of the examination bit by bit using the choices made and methodology depicted. While utilising statements can loan important help to information understanding, researchers regularly use cites that just by implication bolster the contention or that show their interpretation of the issue (McCormick, 2018). This can prompt utilising participants' words outside of any relevant connection to the issue at hand or altering statements to delineate a point.

For one to show the distinctions in individuals' remarks, to give instances of a regular reaction comparative with a specific theme, or represent a specific comprehension or discernment, the researcher needed to be completely clear in their mind why they had picked each cite and gave a contextualized comprehension of why one has included it (Kim, Reinecke & Hullman, 2017). In this study, the researcher duplicated enough of the content to permit the reader to choose what the respondent is attempting to pass on. Regularly researchers imagine that as long as they do not refer to the names or places of the participants, they have accomplished confidentiality and secrecy (Canosa, Graham & Wilson, 2018). Each research has its constraints and researchers frequently experience issues in gathering and breaking down their information. Expressing these forthright encourages the reader to more readily see how they come to their end result.

3.5 POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations by definition are principles that restrict the point or degree to which something goes. One cannot have complete control over what occurs in research, it is therefore of great significance that one express recognition of these limits. The study is fundamentally based on the top-performing learners at a Township School in the Gauteng Province and is dependent on the learner's constant performance. Therefore, if those learners start dropping marks then the study, by its very nature will not be a true reflection. There was also a possibility

participants' parents could pull their children out of the study due to fears of the children revealing certain things that are only confidential to their families.

The researcher is a teacher at the school under study, therefore there could be potential biases in that learners may provide responses they believe the teacher wants to hear instead of true opinions and experiences. The bias could occur due to a desire to please the teacher or avoid perceived consequences for providing honest feedback. Another bias could be in the form of the teacher-student power dynamic which may influence the learners' responses. Learners may feel the pressure to conform to the teacher's expectations or may hesitate to express dissenting views. With a dual teacher-researcher position, I could possibly have pre-conceived notions, beliefs or biases about the learners, or the research topic may unconsciously influence the framing of questions and interpretation of responses. This may therefore potentially affect the objectivity of the research findings. In order to mitigate these biases, it was important for me as a teacher-researcher to maintain awareness of my biases, strive for neutrality and objectivity in data collection and analysis. The involvement of my supervisor in the research process also helped neutralise potential biases.

The second data collection method employed in this study is participant observation which was used to observe the personality traits of learners. However, personalities are complex and can shift over time depending on circumstances. At some point the researcher attended Grade seven classes as a guest teacher to observe them at their classroom settings. The potential limitation to this is that the presence of an observer may alter the behaviour of learners, leading to reactivity bias. Learners may modify their actions or interactions in response to being observed, either consciously or unconsciously, which can distort the authenticity of the observed behaviours. Although participants' parents and guardians consented to their children being interviewed and observed, during observation participants were not entirely aware of the observation taking place to avoid them altering their interactions and behaviours. In hindsight, this could methodology could arguably have ethical implications as participants were alerted at every moment they were observed.

3.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter gives an outline of the methods used in this study. It begins with an explanation of interpretivism as the most suitable paradigm and details why the study deserves to be explored by qualitative means. The study employed semi-structured interviews to understand Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in the perspective of Grade seven learners at a Township school in the Gauteng Province. Semi-structured interviews were befitting in this study because most previous qualitative studies undermined the opinions of children in research, they were regarded as incompetent or passive objects of study, and therefore

unable to contribute sensibly. Thus, this study fills a literature gap on children studies. Purposive sampling was used to select the learners who participated in the study as they already had a shared set of characteristics suitable for the study. The school chosen for the study was selected using convenient sampling because the researcher is based there. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate data analysis technique for the research design and approach of this study merely because it offers a wide strategy for making deductions by impartially and methodically recognising explicit attributes of messages. An ethical clearance certificate was sought from UNISA and consent to conduct interviews was also granted by the school authorities, learners' parents/guardians and participants granted assent. Other ethical considerations such as respect to confidentiality and respect for privacy were adhered to. The quality criterion put in place in this study are credibility, transferability, dependability, validation and confirmability. The possible limitation of the study is that the study is focuses on top-achievers at a Township School and it is dependent on the learner's constant performance. Should the learners start under-performing; the findings cease to be a true reflection.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

The study aims to explore how the Grade 7 top learners at a township school's academic achievements are shaped by their ecosystems vis-à-vis Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. These systems may be things or persons with direct or indirect contact with the learner such as parents, family members, teachers, the school, peers, neighbourhoods, churches, parents' workplaces, cultural elements as well as environmental changes that happen overtime. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2017), these ecosystems influence learners' perceptions towards child development and subsequently academic achievement. The theory acknowledges that a learner cannot exist in isolation from his/her surrounding systems such as parents/families, teachers, schools, the community and many others. One system affects and is effected by other systems, therefore it is important for all systems to work together for the development of the learner. Conversely, the learner can also have a direct and indirect influence to those close to him or her. Thus, the relationship can be binary in that the learner can be influenced and also influence others in the process. This chapter therefore focuses on data presentation and analysis. Data presentation will be guided by the study's major research questions.

4.2 THEME 1: THE EFFECT OF A TOWNSHIP SCHOOL ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS

This section explores the research objective two which reads: *To explore the implications of a school location (township) on academic success of Grade seven top achievers.* Although participants were all top achievers, they had different experiences at school. When asked how learning in a township influenced their academic success, some learners indicated that they experienced negative things at school, but it did not influence their academic performance in anyway. Participant 1 said:

Although I have no worst memory at school, at some point I was bullied at school but that did not affect my performance much although I dreaded going to school sometimes.

Some learners experienced the school in a positive light. Participant 2 who joined the school at an advanced grade said:

At first, I was scared to get into this school here at Soshanguve Township, but I eventually got used to it. It's quite a nice school.

Participant 3 highlighted some specific problems of learners in the school such as learners smoking at school and others being rebellious towards their teachers and authority. Another

participant indicated that it is convenient to stay close to the school, but the neighbourhood is quite unsafe during weekends.

Township schools exist in real geospaces and their geographic presence matters (Monyoe, 2017). Research has it that the type and location of a school is significant and has a huge impact on the development of a child. The geographic neighbourhood a school is located in influences the quality of the education provided by the school. A study conducted by Pienaar and McKay (2014) concluded that schools located in low socio-economic areas (such as townships) are less likely to have sufficient resources or modern infrastructure.

Monyoe (2017) states that township schools have negative connotations because of their historical circumstances. During the apartheid regime in South Africa, "Townships" were warzones because of political struggles and unrest of the time. In fact, when the 1976 youth uprisings exploded, "Township Schools" were hubs of student movement to foster educational liberation. There were endless police raids which rendered most schools dysfunctional. Even post 1994 in South Africa, the neighbourhoods remained racially defined, as a result, and most learners' school enrolment is determined by the geographical neighbourhood they reside in (Pienaar & McKay, 2014). Almost two decades since the demise of apartheid, there is still a strong relationship between the old 'apartheid' geographical zoning, where the right to reside in an area was previously designated by race, and resourced schooling in the South African province of Gauteng (Pienaar & McKay 2014) where this study was conducted. Therefore, the onslaught for quality education continues beyond the country's first democratic elections in 1994 (Monyoe, 2017).

Other than the plight of under-resourced township schools and the unequal education system, South African townships are crime hotspot areas (Manaliyo, 2014) where violence undoubtedly spreads to township schools as schools do not exist in a vacuum. Four participants indicated their concerns about both the school and its location. One indicated that they were bullied at school, one who probably moved from another location said they were scared at school at first and eventually got used to the school and the other participant indicated that other learners smoke at school and talk back at their teachers. Another participant indicated that the neighbourhood where she resides and where the school is located is dangerous during weekends. Therefore, the nature of the school and the neighbourhood it exists in, largely co-relates with the behaviour of most learners. Zoch (2017) states that microsystem factors such as family, neighbourhood and the quality of schooling can explain differences in socio-economic outcomes. South Africa provides an interesting setting to observe neighbourhood and school effects, due to its unique history and sharp differences between wealth and school quality in different neighbourhoods, which were

shaped under the apartheid regime. Due to the strong correlation between family, school choice, neighbourhood and schooling outcomes, it is very difficult to disentangle the relative importance of each factor (ibid).

However, although township schools are mostly located in violent areas, The Economist (2016) in an article entitled 'Must try harder' states that top achievers usually focus their time and effort on what goes on in the classroom, rather than other negative factors in and outside the school system. They usually have a sense of discipline in spite of different odds. Therefore, although Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory indicates that the microsystem (in the form of a school and neighbourhood in the first research question) influences learners' perceptions towards academic achievement, there are exceptional cases where learners excel in spite of the negative circumstances or devise ways of avoiding trouble. One participant indicated that they stay indoors during the weekends when there is violence in the neighbourhood. This study focused on five top achievers; however, the results could be far-reaching had it focused on any learner or many learners.

4.3 THEME 2: THE ROLE OF THE LEARNER TO ENSURE THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

While environmental factors play a crucial and significant role in promoting learners' academic achievements, learners also contribute immensely to their own achievements through other factors such as personality traits (Jensen, 2015) and cognitive abilities. This section answers research question 3 which reads "What is the role of Grade seven top achievers' personality traits on academic success". When asked about the role of the learner to ensure academic achievement. Participant 1 indicated that he contributes to his academic success by studying hard and by having a positive attitude towards the teachers and the Principal. The Participant said:

I study hard. While other learners take teachers as bad people, I really don't take them (teachers) as bad people but I really love them, all the teachers. Even the ones that I don't know their names but I love them and I think they can help us as learners here at schools to achieve more things that we want to do, and teach us about what we want to do. And about the Principal, she is well disciplined. She can discipline learners, and I think most of the learners don't like the Principal because they say she is abusing children but that's not what she is trying to do. She is disciplining us to be better people in future.

Participant 2 noted that she is a dedicated individual with self-discipline. She said:

I have a study timetable in my bedroom. I write all things down; if I am not going to school I set myself to read certain staff. And afterschool I change

my uniform, do my chores, then I start with my schoolwork. I cannot spend the whole day without reading and writing.

Participant 3 also indicated personal dedication as a recipe for academic success as she said that she studies on her own at school even in the absence of her teachers.

Participant 5 indicated good study methods, obedience and time management as her keys to academic success. She said:

Okay I have study methods. I prepare a lot for exams... I really sleep late at night, yeah. I also focus on my schoolwork and follow my parents' instructions.

When asked about when they started being top achievers, Participant 4 said that she does all the work required and respected the teachers. She also indicated good behaviour and said:

Since I started primary school, I was getting awards for Mathematics and English. I was doing homework and any other schoolwork on time. I was not making noise in class; I was quiet and I didn't talk much. That's how I am. I respect my teachers, when they tell me to do something, I do it. Even when they reprimand me, I respond respectfully.

Participants' responses on their individual roles in academic achievements indicate that they each exert a level of effort and hard work in their studies, and they show good attitude and effective self-management. All participants seem to have an effective and spare time for studying, regularly do their homework and perform house chores. A sense of self-discipline is also visible in their responses. One participant indicated that they do not make noise in class, and they respect teachers even if they are reprimanded, they follow instructions accordingly. Adding to the results obtained through interview, participants were also observed by the researcher for a period of one month. Elements that were observed include their interaction with other learners and teachers, their engagement in extra mural activities, their general conduct, body language, relationship with others and their consistency.

While learners contribute an individual role in their own achievements due to their unique personalities and different cognitive abilities, this research question does not expose the covert role of different ecosystems in the learners' performances, behaviours and the routines they follow to be top achievers. While the study acknowledges the learners' roles in their own achievements as indicated in the interviews, these routines they follow to study may also have been learnt at school, taught by teachers or enforced by family members and so on. Ceka and Murati (2016) argue that it has been proved that children acquire various experiences through

performing various activities and constantly being exposed to a range of influence and expectations from people in environments around them.

Although a child's sense of discipline for instance may be an inborn trait, it may also be internalised and socialised by external factors such as family members, teachers and the school systems. Therefore, it is arguable that environmental factors also play a role in shaping a learner's individual behaviour and attitudes towards something or towards learning.

4.4 THEME 3: LEARNER PERFORMANCE AND SUCCESS' DEPENDENCE ON THE ECOSYSTEM SUPPORT IN A TOWNSHIP SCHOOL

Durisic and Bunijevac (2017) indicates that different stakeholders in the development of a child such as teachers, schools, homes and communities, if co-operating well can facilitate academic achievements for learners as well as improve educational reforms. This section explores research objective one which reads: *To explore the role of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems on the academic success of Grade seven top achievers at a township school.* In this study, when participants were asked about the kind of support they receive from various ecosystems, participants indicated that they sought support from different ecological systems such as parents, teachers, siblings, community and the church. Therefore, their responses will thus be thematically categorized for a logical flow.

4.4.1 Sub theme 1: Parental, family and sibling support

Naseri (2014) states that parents and families are the primary agents of the socialisation, growth and development of their children. After learners reach the school going stage, parents' disposition becomes that of ensuring that their children acquire formal education by sending them to schools and ensure that learning takes place both at school and at home. Children that have a strong and nurturing relationship with their parents are likely to be academic achievers whereas unaffectionate and distant parents are likely to have a negative effect on the child's development (Ceka & Murati, 2016). When asked about the role played by parents and family members to anchor their academic achievements, Participant 1 referred to the excellent support she receives from his mother and extended family:

My mother provides everything for us. Everything we want, we do and we get everything we want... I have a good relationship with my mother and we talk all the time. She always tells me that I have to read so that I can get position 1. At first I did not stay with my mother, I stayed with her from Grade 5 and that's when she showed me some love. She always tells me how good I am and that I behave really well... Generally, in my family we support each other, physically and emotionally. We don't fight; we are just a happy family.

Participant 2 also mentioned the positive family support and said:

My family and I support each other every time. When they send me to go somewhere I go and when I tell them that there's a school meeting they also come. Yeah, nothing stops them.

Participant 3 also included the sibling in the family support she receives and said:

At home we help each other, we do things together. We do homework together and things like that. It's mostly my sister who assists me.

Participant 5 highlighted that she gets words of affirmation from her mother and that keeps her motivated. She said:

"My mother always tells me how good I am at school, and she tells me that I am well behaved. This motivates me a lot and I want to remain like that".

Participant 4 indicated that her family supports her family gave him specific support and assistance with schoolwork and advice. Participant 5 also indicated how her family supports her by providing for her needs and her sibling supports her when she has to study. She said:

Well, my family supports me, like they give me everything I want. Not necessarily everything I want but everything I need and I also do what they expect of me. They help me with my homework and buy me what I need. They give me everything I need for school e.g. stationary etc. My brother helps me with studying because I study first and then he asks me questions.

A number of researchers acknowledge the importance of a strong and positive bond between homes and schools in the development and education of a child (Richardson, 2009; Sheldon, 2009). Parental or family involvement refers a situation whereby parents or guardians are directly involved in the learning process of their children and accomplish their duties as parents in ensuring that learners are assisted in their learning process in every possible way. It also involves parents/guardians enquiring about their child' school performance and constant communicating with the child and having a healthy relationship with him/her to promote a genuine process of mentoring, encouraging, inspiring and leading (Clinton & Hattie, 2013).

With regards to parental and family support, Durisic and Bunijevac (2017) indicate that parents/families need to build partnerships with the schools where their children learn. This enables parental involvement in their children's education and successes and directly exerts a positive impact to a successful education system. Research also indicates that successful learners have strong academic support from their parents/families that monitor their studies (Sheldon, 2009). This current study correlates with Sheldon (2009) in that all participants indicated that they have supportive parents/families and various family members assist them with homework and amidst home chores, they have time to study.

In the present day and with the emancipation of the education system, Ceka & Murati (2016) indicate that the family has a huge and a tough responsibility in the general development of a child, particularly their education, the development of their intellectual affinities, fostering moral values, attitudes and convictions and habits. Therefore, the family, as a microsystem plays a vital role in learner achievements through assisting with homework, words of affirmation and giving learners time to study generally which might not be the case with other learners. Other than the direct teachings by parents or family members to children, the family environment itself plays a vital role in a child's growth and intellectual growth. Most participants of this study (who are top achievers) indicated that they come from families characterised by love and support which has a direct relationship with learner achievements. Therefore, family involvement in children's education helps in improving their performance, reduce absenteeism and restore parents' confidence in the education of their children (Gracia & Thornton, 2014). Learners become more focused on their schoolwork and they get motivated not to give up easily when they do not understand certain concepts and will not miss classes because they know that their parents are monitoring their attendance and efforts.

4.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Teachers and school support

Although parents and families are said to be the first agents of socialisation in the development of a child, the formal form of education takes place at school and involves teachers primarily (Naseri, 2014). Teachers are largely the drivers of education and teaching has been historically noted as the noblest profession in the world with so many responsibilities even outside the obvious scope of work. It is largely done with passion, patience and understanding especially in basic education. With each and every day they report to work, teachers have the opportunity to impact a child and possibly shape their future. Research confirms that teachers have substantial impacts on their learners' academic and life-long success (David, 2016). Characteristics of effective classroom environments are also embedded on teachers' organisation skills and their interaction with learners (ibid). With regards to the teacher and school support, when interviewed, Participant 1 indicated that teachers have supported him throughout his school career. He said:

From Grade 1, my teachers loved me and supported me in everything I do... My teachers are like my parents at school. My current class teacher always tells us to focus on our schoolwork and I take her advice all the time.

Participant 2 mentioned that teachers support him by saying positive things and this makes him happy and motivated. He said:

The teacher always asks me to tell others to keep quiet and they listen to me most of the times and that makes me feel happy. I sometimes go for a sleep over at ma'am's (teacher) place. She sometimes takes me to buy

clothes and this encourages me to pass... The way teachers talk about me, motivates me. When I go to the staff room, I would find them talking about me saying, 'she is one of the smart kids here'. I get excited.

With regards to teachers and school support and realising top achievement, Participant 4 said that being selected to represent the school made him feel supported and special.

When I was in Grader 3, I was chosen by my teachers to do a 30 second quiz and represent the school. So, I was the only kid chosen. And even at the spelling bee, I was the only kid chosen in my school. I was very happy about it and that is when I realised that I was a top achiever... The school itself is also very supportive I should say... Our school is very strict and the teachers help us and there are a lot of things that they help us with, for instance to encourage us and in helping us becoming better people. If it wasn't for this school, I wasn't going to know anything about education and how to live; I would end up like other people smoking drugs. But now I am not because they help me.

Participant 5 said:

My class teacher always tells us to focus on our schoolwork and I take her advice all the time and I'm working on that.

Existing literature indicates that regular appraisals by teachers lead to progress in learner educational achievements (Nyakundi, 2018). A significant number of participants in this study indicated that their teachers constantly motivate them, encourage them and give them affirmations of their excellence. Other than learner appraisals, teacher inputs also include their qualifications, characteristics such as attitudes, beliefs and self-efficacy. This involves in and out-of-class activities and practices such as planning, classroom management, pedagogy and interactions with their students (ibid).

The responsibilities that teachers entrust their learners with, such as containing classroom noise, representing the school in quizzes, games and spelling bees highly motivate them and encourage them to be top achievers. They seem to ignite and elevate the learners' self-esteem.

4.4.3 Sub-theme 3: Community support

The community or society at large plays a significant role in the academic success of learners. (Maunah, 2019) states that the influence of the environment in which a child grows up in, indirectly impacts his/her life and eventually their future. School educational programs cannot be fully achieved if they are not supported by both families and communities. When asked about the possible role of different ecosystems in their academic achievements, Participant 2 indicated that the support of all community members is very important and said:

My teachers, parents, family and the community members are happy for me, they always support me. Some even give me some gifts such as sweets on the street since I started receiving awards... Sometimes when I'm done cleaning, doing homework and watching TV, I call other kids in my street and assist them with their schoolwork, those in lower Grades.

Participant 4 reiterated that the community supports and encourages him by saying:

The community at large feels great about me and they also give me advice on how to do better in what I have already achieved. They also say that I'm a good kid because I always listen and I don't backchat elders, so they support me every time.

Participant 3 mentioned that the community celebrates his achievements with him.

My teachers always tell me that I'm doing well. My teachers, parents and the community at large are always happy for me and they always congratulate me.

A number of participants (top achievers) in this study indicated that they are applauded, congratulated and encouraged by community members for being top achievers. Although township locations and township schools in South Africa are characterised by high crime rates and notorious inhabitants, the areas inhibit a sense of socio-cultural-community where everyone knows who is who, their social status and their achievements, hence it becomes easy to celebrate top achievers. There are no picket fences like in the suburbs where dwellers keep to themselves and mind their businesses.

Their geographical location and spatial arrangement allows for community interaction. Studies state that about 40% of South African households reside in Townships (Stats SA 2005) and many households in townships live in informal settlements. Informal settlement dwellers spend their time roaming the streets in search for employment and walk distances in search for water and in some instances use communal ablutions. Hence the environment encourages interaction and forces dwellers to know each other.

4.4.4 Sub-theme 4: Church teachings and religious support

Scholarship has offered no direct answer to the question of whether religion facilitates or undermines the psychological development and social adjustment to children (Bartkowski, Xu and Levin 2008). However, various studies have been conducted vis-à-vis religious variations in parenting, child raising methods and so on (ibid). Naseri (2014) argues that the role of the church in socialising, shaping character and instilling moral obligations in children is of equal importance akin to the role played by parents and teachers. The church has always been an educator and trains its congregants and or followers in the manner of Jesus (ibid). Its role lies

in both schools and homes. Although families may not be religious and churchgoing, most South African schools are inclined to various church denominations where religious teachings and prayer takes place. In this regard, Participant 4 indicated that there are a lot of teachings they get from their church. The participant said:

At church they also teach us a lot. Things like the dangers of substance abuse and obedience in general.

The church's major function is to promote, foster and ensure the presence of a Christ-like mentality in the society, particularly amongst children who are still in the process of growth. In Christian theology for instance, the moral character of human beings and their actions is basically motivated by how they conform to the will of God. Parents' religiosity and the religious environment of the family are said to manifest in children's growth, behaviour and characteristics (Bartkowski, Xu & Levin 2008). Therefore, although not all South African households are believers, the church plays a significant role in shaping the morals of children in particular. A juxtaposition of Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems and the findings

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory places emphasis on the importance of a wider environment where child development is concerned and acknowledges that a child cannot exist in isolation from his/her surrounding systems/contexts (Filander, 2015). The American psychologist contended that human development cannot be explored outside the environment where the child exists in. A child is born without any knowledge of how to behave in society, as a result, behaviour is learnt from the environment in which the child exists in. Learning comes in many forms and from different societal sources such as parents/family, teachers, schools, communities etc. This theory is relevant to this study as it explains the relationship between learners' academic achievements and the social contexts surrounding them. The theory postulates that the environment or contexts of child growth come in different levels namely microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. These levels are explained below in juxtaposition with the findings of this study.

4.4.5 Microsystem

The microsystem comprises of systems or child growth enhancers such as parents, family, schools, teachers, the community/neighbourhood, churches and others (Morrison, 2012). Their involvement in a child's life is believed to play a crucial role in shaping many aspects such as cognitive, emotional, social, moral and spiritual development in a child's life (Filander, 2015). Participants in this study strongly commended the role played by their parents/family, school, teachers, community and the church in enhancing their academic achievements. Parents/families in particular play the most solid role in the child's development. Under usual circumstances, families are the first human group where children are raised, looked after and

educated (Binh, 2012). Children learn mostly through observing everyday life and since children spend more time with their families in their early lives, their learning and socialisation are influenced by their family as the primary foundation to their development. A study conducted by Iqbal (2010) which explored the relationship between parenting styles and the risky behaviours of adolescents concluded that there is a relationship between parents' parenting styles and children behaviours. Therefore parents/family's teachings play a crucial role in the upbringing and socialisation of children. All participants of the study who are top achievers indicated to have a healthy relationship with their parents or family members who are supportive in their studies as they assist with homework, motivate them constantly and utter words of affirmation to them to inspire them to keep achieving their goals.

After the family/parents, a teacher plays the second most important role in the socialisation and development of a child. A school is a place where children spend most of their time as soon as they reach the school-going-stage and thus learn a lot from their teachers. This study also proved that indeed teachers are "parents away from home" as indicated by one participant. Building from Vygotsky's work, Rogoff (1990) concluded that children's development is largely embedded in the context of social relationships and children learn from observing and participating with peers and the more skilled members of the society (teachers in this case). Other than their role the intellectual competence development in children, teachers and schools also help develop social competences in children (Katz & McClellan, 1991).

From participants' responses, it is apparent that some learners view teachers as unnecessarily strict and resent being reprimanded. However, all participants, primarily top achievers seem to respect all their teachers and respond positively even when reprimanded by them. Therefore, learners who excel in their studies cooperate well with teachers in the classroom and this positive behaviour manifests in a good academic performance (Rogaten & Moneta, 2017),

Participants indicated that their teachers show love to them, one even said the kind of love shown by teachers is a parental kind of love. Teachers encourage and motivate learners to constantly achieve better results and applaud good behaviour all the time. One participant indicated that her teacher regularly buys her clothes and ask her parents for her to go for sleep overs at her home. Another participant said that their teacher talks positively about them amongst other teachers and that itself is motivation. Therefore,

second to parental socialisation, teachers and schools are crucial in the child's development, socialisation and their desire to perform well and excel.

Participants also indicated that the community at large plays a huge role in motivating them. Considering that the school under study is located in townships where a sense of community prevails, every societal member and every part of the ecosystem is involved in the development of a child. A certain participant said that upon learning that he is an award winner, some members of the community buy them gifts such as sweets to congratulate and motivate them. Other participants indicated that other community members give them constructive advices on how to maintain excellence at school. Therefore, the community also plays a vital role in motivating top achievers, particularly in a township setup. The last microsystem highlighted by one of the participants as playing a role in their life is the church which offers moralistic teachings on how to behave and relate with other human beings. All in all, this study proves that the microsystem, through its agents such as parents/family, school, teachers, community and the church plays a vital role in the development of a child and subsequently their performance at school.

4.4.6 Mesosystem

The second level of the ecosystem in Bronfenbrenner's theory is the mesosystem which comprises of the interaction between two or more settings in the development of a child Hannaway (2012). These interactional settings may include the child's parents, teachers, peers and siblings (largely a set of associated microsystems). In this study, Participant 2 indicated that her family has a positive relationship with her teacher even beyond the school programs in that the teacher sometimes ask for her to go to her house for sleep overs and she occasionally buys her clothes. Parents/families would not allow their child to sleepover at a teacher's home unless there is mutual trust. Thus, this sense of collectivism and somewhat co-parenting between the parents and the teacher motivates the learner to excel in her studies.

4.4.7 Exosystem

The exosystem integrates both formal and informal social structures which may not have a direct effect on the child but an indirect one as they impact some of the microsystems (Hannaway, 2012). These could be the parents' workplaces, parents' friends and even the neighbourhood. In this study, the exosystem did not come out strongly as participant largely focused on ecosystems that directly impact their development and play a role in their educational performance.

4.4.8 Macrosystem

The macrosystem includes cultural elements such as social status, wealth or poverty and ethnicity. Although in this particular study, these elements were covert, they undoubtedly affect the development of children and subsequently how they perform. Wealth or poverty for instance is usually a variable of the choice of the school that parents send their children to and the type of neighbourhood they ultimately settle and live in. Learners that come from impoverished households tend to carry many social ills and as a result “learners from impoverished informal settlement communities, prioritize survival-related challenges over those related to academic success” (Bojuwoye et al., 2014, p3). These have a cause and effect relationship with child development. The macrosystem became visible in the study, although to a small extent when a participant indicated that they spend most of their time studying *SePedi*, a challenging language and subject to her and a language of instruction at her school although the language is not her home language. Language can contend as potential motivation or lack thereof with regards to why learners are arriving or not arriving at the normal fundamental learning benchmark (Albaladejo, Coyle & De Larios, 2018). Learners who come from families whose home language is not the same as the language of instruction at school tend to experience barriers to learning (Harvey, Prinsloo & Rogers, 2018). Therefore ethnicity matters and languages affect one’s performance at school. As a result, the particular participant is compelled to spend a lot of time studying a language of instruction that is not their home language in order to pass at school.

4.4.9 Chronosystem

A chronosystem is embedded in developmental timeframes (Hannaway, 2012) and comprises of environmental changes that occur overtime, influencing development. These may include normal life transitions such as starting school, parents getting a divorce, children with a different person, moving to a new house and so on. The chronosystem came out strongly when Participant 1 spoke about the love and support she gets from her mother whom she started staying with from Grade 5. Thus the transition (her moving in with her mother) seems to have played a major role in her learning ecosystem.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory of human development was constantly under development until the theorist died in 2005. He was very self-reflective and frequently updated the changes to his theory overtime. His earlier 1970s publication focused too much on context and environment and had not recognised and credited the role that a person plays in his/her own development (Tudge et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner’s (1989; 1999) publications acknowledged the person’s role in their development and emphasised the interrelatedness of the person and the context/environment. Therefore, this study acknowledges that the person’s natural traits that

they bring to the environment, hereditary or not also play a crucial role in their development, the choices they make and how they eventually turn out to be. Although Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development is relevant in explaining child development, some of its covert systems are not easy to interpret in research especially where the study of children is concerned. The only systems that can be well articulated through research are the microsystems and mesosystems which have obvious impacts on human development.

4.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The study concludes that the academic achievement of grade 7 learners at a specific township school is shaped by their ecosystems such as Bronfenbrenner's microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, macrosystems and chronosystems. The results indicate that some systems appear more prominent than others. It is apparent from this study that families and teachers are the most important role players in the academic success of grade 7 learners who achieve academic success. Other ecosystem factors such as the church, the community and the environment where learners reside in and where the school is located also play an important role. Therefore, to a larger extent, this study agrees with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which views child development as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of environmental factors such as family, schools, broad cultural values, religious denominations. However, this study's context was township schools located mostly in regions characterised with violence, high crime rates and drug abuse.

Participants consciously choose not to engage in these township negativities in order to continue achieving higher grades and they constantly "try harder" despite the odds. Although ecological environments play a vital role in a child's growth as well as their academic achievements, one may notably argue that a child's inborn characteristics also play a role in how they respond to environmental teaching and pressures. Some children may resist the urge to use drugs, not because of parental teachings but because of their inborn traits such as morality and the desire to be constant achievers. The next chapter concludes the study and makes recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

This chapter gives a conclusion to the study and outlines the recommendations for future research as well as recommendations for different role players in the education of learners such as parents, teachers, schools and communities.

5.2 CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the functioning of a person is largely embedded on the impact that their social environment has had on their development although individual factors such as personality, cognitive abilities and character also come to play. Thus, all subjects of the ecosystem play a crucial role in the development and academic performance of a child. However, ecosystem subjects play an indirect role, and their significance may be difficult to unfold and explore through research, particularly on the minors (children). In this study for instance, the exosystems were not mentioned by participants as their effects are covert and do not directly influence their achievements as much as microsystems do for instance.

Although the study was done at a township school, located at an area probably characterised by violence and high crime rates, top achievers proved to try harder and thrive in spite of the social pressures of the environment. This therefore evidences that individuals and the personal choices they make have a role to play in their development and achievements. Top achievers at a school in a township studied hard to excel in their studies and proved to have a sense of discipline where their studies are concerned.

This study was done at a township school and the environment and neighbourhood where the school is situated undoubtedly has an impact on the development of a learner. South African townships are crime hotspot areas (Manaliyo, 2014) where violence certainly spreads to township schools as schools do not exist in a vacuum. The study indicated that the neighbourhood is dangerous especially during weekends and some primary school learners have started using drugs. Almost two decades since the demise of apartheid, there is still a strong relationship between the old 'apartheid' geographical zoning, where the right to reside in an area was previously designated by race, and resourced schooling in the South African province of Gauteng (Pienaar & McKay, 2014) where this study was conducted. Township schools often face the plight of being under-resourced and the unequal education system.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

All subjects of the ecosystem play a crucial role in the development and socialisation of children. These include parents/families, teachers, schools where children attend,

communities where children reside in and neighbourhoods where schools are located in, churches, parental or family relations with teachers, parents workplaces (job satisfaction and motivation), cultural elements and so on. This study's recommendations will be in line with ecosystems that play a vital role in the development of children and subsequently impact their academic achievements.

5.3.1 Recommendations for parents and families

Research and logic correlate with regards to the fact that parents and families are central to children's development although there are other crucial factors, elements and systems that come into play. Parents and families are the first group where children are raised, looked after and educated (Binh, 2012). A parent is said to be a child's best teacher and children learn mainly through observing their parents and family members in their early stages of life. Parents or family as a whole, are one of the direct holder of educational work. This study proved that supportive and present family members play a crucial role in the academic success of a child. This study therefore recommends that parents should try by all means to be present in their children's lives to provide support, encouragement, financial resources and motivate their children in their education and road to excellence.

The study was situated at a township school; therefore, there is certainly a correlation between the school choice and the socio-economic status of households or families who send their children there. Townships are usually underdeveloped residential areas located in the outskirts of towns where its elderly inhabitants largely worked in areas that were designated "white only" during Apartheid. Although formal segregation ended with the new democracy, many of township dwellers are low-income earners or largely people with not much formal education. This surely has a toll on how households and families see education or rather the effort exerted in supporting a child's education.

An educated parent is likely to play a significant role in the choice of a school their child goes to because of their knowledge of elements such as the school's pass rate, the school's extra mural activities and the language of instruction. Wealthy families are also likely to take their children to schools with a better status than those in townships. Although family dynamics also plays an important role in children's academic achievements, top learners at a township school proved that family presence, involvement and support surpass other factors. They continued as top achievers in spite of other factors such as being enrolled at a township school with some learners already smoking drugs at a young age.

The socialisation, development and education of a child are never a one man's job. All the ecosystem support structures play a significant role respectively. However, when these

ecosystems work together, the results are far reaching compared to when they work in silos. Regarding the education of children, teachers cannot work alone without the support of parents for instance. Thus, all the support systems in the education of a child should work together for better results. Other important systems in this regard include the church or religious denominations which also play an educative role to young children and teach and instil morality. Therefore, this study recommends that parents should support their children in every possible way and in spite of all hindrances to ensure that they excel academically.

5.3.2 Recommendations for teachers

The philosophy of education revolves around the agent responsible for communicating the aim of education and that is a teacher. Teachers have an important yet challenging role in education. Chapter 4 has already elaborated on the important role played by teachers in the teaching process. The study's participants also commended the roles played by their teachers in their learners (specifically grade 7 learners in township schools)'s academic achievements.

Changes in society always demand changes in reforms and approaches of teaching. A grade 7 student 20 years ago is different from a grade 7 today. As the world evolves the calibre of learners also transforms. The rise of social media for instance has certainly shaped the behaviour of today's learners and teachers need to adapt to the changes and employ teaching approaches that are relevant and probably more engaging. As a result of learner dynamics and the constant change in the calibre of students regarding behaviours and exposure to toxic environments and platforms such as social media, teachers need to constantly undergo trainings, attend equipping workshops and evaluations to prepare and know how to respond to the needs of the ever-changing student.

Teaching has always been referred to as a mother of all jobs and a calling than just an ordinary job. Therefore, persons who choose the teaching profession, particularly for primary schools should have the heart and patience for teaching and engaging with learners. Some of the participants in the study indicated that some of their teachers are like parents away from home and this is what all teachers should be to their learners. This study also proved that words matter. Astonishingly, top achieving learners did not focus on the curriculum or the pedagogy as facilitating their academic excellence. They focused largely on words of affirmation and the motivations they get from their teachers as key to how they view education and approach it. Therefore, this study also recommends that the appraisal and motivating role of teachers to their learners should be considered as important to facilitate academic excellence.

5.3.3 Recommendations for schools

Schools play a critical role in the socialisation and education of learners and therefore, it is important that they become a safe environment for learning and development of children. Schooling in an environment characterised by fear and danger is a threat to learners and subsequently compel learners to join dangerous groups and take part in dangerous activities in an attempt to belong and feel protected. Township schools are largely situated in areas with high levels of unemployment, substance abuse and widespread violence. In some dangerous areas, learners actually dodge bullets on their way to school. This kind of violence mostly overlaps to schools. As just one example currently on the news in South Africa, a grade 10 learner from Daveyton township shot dead a classmate on their first day of school (January 2022) and turned the gun on himself. Thus, schools in townships have also become as dangerous as the neighbourhoods they exist in. It is also noteworthy that education is a sustainable development tool with a potential of changing the environment/neighbourhood it exists in.

A school should be viewed as a form of hope for communities not warzones and places of drug abuse. This study recommends that all stakeholders of the school such as teachers, school bodies, parents, the community, the government and learners themselves should protect schools, particularly those located in townships from being crime hotspots. This could be done by collectively devising methods of crime prevention such as community and school behaviour change programs, parental and teacher's close monitoring and educating of learners regarding the consequences of criminal activities and employing firm school rules. The study also recommends that microsystems such as parents, families and teachers should teach students environmental adaptation strategies and excel in spite of difficult circumstances. Top achievers in this study proved that excellence is possible in spite of environments that are not conducive.

5.3.4 Recommendations for communities

Naong and Morolong (2011) state that historically disadvantaged schools lack community support, and, in most cases, the community fails to take ownership of schools. This study indicated that the community exerts some form of support to individual learners but did not reveal if the community supports the school in its entirety. Communities have an influence on school activities and sometimes how the school is run. A school is a mirror image of the community within which it is situated; therefore, communities should work closely with schools for the benefit of learners and to play their ecosystemic roles in the society. The involvement of communities at schools and every platform that caters for the wellbeing of children helps in fostering positive relationships between stakeholders and addresses crucial community issues

such as security measures and parental and community roles. Therefore, this study recommends the involvement of the community in schools and other community platforms. This could be made possible or driven by the election of community leaders for accountability reasons.

5.3.5 Recommendation for individual learners

This study recommends that individual learners should take ownership of their own education despite societal pressures. Although environmental systems play an important role in the development of a child and their academics, the buck stops with them in as far as dedication and hard work is concerned. Pelsner (2008) states that most young people in South Africa normalise crime and violence to establish control over their violent neighbourhoods and schools. This adaptive coping mechanism becomes an unconscious shutting out of traumatic events from their memories and feelings. Benjamin (2011) further argues that the child's brain operates in a mode where it gets activated to ensure survival. Therefore, the study recommends that learners should be taught or rather teach themselves survival means especially in environments that they have no control of.

5.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to understand the applicability of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems in child development in the South African context holistically, there is need to apply it to different contexts for instance in rural areas and model C schools which are usually best resourced. Therefore, a similar study should be replicated at a rural setting and also at a model C school at a suburban setting.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 2021/03/10

Ref: **2021/03/10/47561777/07/AM**

Name: Mr TC Sekhothe

Student No.:47561777

Dear Mr TC Sekhothe

Decision: Ethics Approval from
2021/03/10 to 2024/03/10

Researcher(s): Name: Mr TC Sekhothe
E-mail address: thabangsekhothe@gmail.com
Telephone: 0734555709

Supervisor(s): Name: DR H. Olivier
E-mail address: olivih@unisa.ac.za
Telephone: 012 4296753

Title of research:

**ECO-SYSTEMIC SUPPORT OF GRADE 7 ACADEMIC ACHIEVERS IN A JUNIOR
SECONDARY TOWNSHIP SCHOOL.**

Qualification: MEd Psychology of Education

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period 2021/03/10 to 2024/03/10.

*The **medium risk** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on 2021/03/10 in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



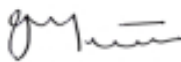
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3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2024/03/10**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

The reference number **2021/03/10/47561777/07/AM** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



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



Prof PM Sebate
EXECUTIVE DEAN
Sebatpm@unisa.ac.za

APPENDIX B: TURNITIN REPORT

ORIGINALITY REPORT

11 %	8 %	1 %	6 %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	www.researchgate.net Internet Source	1 %
2	Submitted to The University of the South Pacific Student Paper	1 %
3	hdl.handle.net Internet Source	<1 %
4	lib.euser.org Internet Source	<1 %
5	docplayer.net Internet Source	<1 %
6	Submitted to University of the Free State Student Paper	<1 %
7	Submitted to University of Pretoria Student Paper	<1 %
8	file.scirp.org Internet Source	<1 %
9	pdfs.semanticscholar.org Internet Source	<1 %

APPENDIX C: EDITING CERTIFICATE



APPENDIX D: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	28 September 2021
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2021– 30 September 2021 2021/290
Name of Researcher:	Sekhothe TC
Address of Researcher:	1777 block BB Soshanguve Pretoria
Telephone Number:	073 4555 709
Email address:	thabangsekhothe@gmail.com
Research Topic:	Eco-system support of Grade 7 academic achievers in a Junior Secondary Township School
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	1 Secondary School
District/s/HO	Tshwane North

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.

[Signature] 29/09/2021

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:

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.

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

3. **Because of COVID 19 pandemic researchers can ONLY collect data online, telephonically 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. The approval letter will then indicate the type of arrangements that have been made with the school.**
4. **The Researchers are advised to make arrangements with the schools via Fax, email or telephonically with the Principal.**
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



 Mr Guman Mukatuni
 Acting CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 29/09/2021