
Exploring the Effectiveness of Psychoeducational Support in Enhancing Student Resilience

Sandile Xaba¹, Richard Moloele², Maseeeng Papashane³

^{1, 2, 3} Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa

Abstract. Studies have unearthed a plethora of factors negatively impacting the academic performance of schools, districts, and provinces in South Africa. Amongst these factors, psychosocial factors have been prevalent, and the department of education have heeded the call, recommended in many studies, to mitigate the implications of these factors. According to Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2024), the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), amongst other psychosocial support targeted programmes, was allocated R9.798 billion, an increase of 5.6% from the 2023/24 allocation. However, the effectiveness of the psychosocial support provided by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) remains a question of concern. This article reports on a study that explored the viewpoints of teachers, principals and SESs regarding the prolonged NSC matric academic underperformance in Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati (Dr RSM) in the North-West Province. Emerging from this study as one of the key contributing factors to underperformance in Dr RSM education district were psychosocial factors. This finding necessitated this article which explores the effectiveness of psychosocial support provided by Dr RSM Education District to the secondary school learners. This research report adopted a qualitative research methodology, purposively sampling twelve participants from Dr RSM – eight human participant (SESs, principals and teachers) and four institutional participants (three secondary schools and one district office). The findings revealed that most factors contributing to Dr RSM's underperformance are rooted in district-level challenges. Amongst these factors are slow paced-psychosocial support, insufficient curriculum streams, insufficient support from the district, district leadership issues influenced by political interference and corruption, and others. Thus, the report under consideration aims to explore the effectiveness of psychosocial support provided by Dr RSM Education District to the secondary school learners.

Keywords: Department of Basic Education, Psychoeducational Support, Psychosocial Factors, Resilience, South Africa, Student Resilience

Introduction

Learners' academic performance can be negatively impacted by many factors. Amongst these factors are psychosocial factors that are a combination of both societal struggles and psychological battles learners face, that ultimately impact their academic performance. Many studies have established that psychosocial factors affect learners' academic progress. Beharu (2018), Zwane and Mukuna (2023), and Ngozi et al., (2024) share the observation that psychosocial factors play a significant role in negatively impacting learner academic performance. This fact calls on the various education stakeholders to account for their provision

Corresponding author Maseeeng Papashane, E-mail: maseeeng.papashane@spu.ac.za

ORCID

Sandile Xaba <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6622-6970>

Richard Moloele <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2390-6310>

Maseeeng Papashane <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5138-000X>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). Published by RTU Press

Under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)) license, the author(s) and users are free to share this work (copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format giving appropriate credit, providing a link to the license).

of support to mitigate the impact of psychosocial factors on learner performance. The district office is the most relevant stakeholder in this case as it is capacitated to provide support to schools that related to psychosocial support for the learners. In this regard, the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2021) highlights that psychosocial support (PSS) focuses on equipping schools with necessary skills to address the psychosocial and mental wellbeing needs of learners.

Kirkbride et al. (2024) identify psychosocial factors as including limited parental involvement, child-headed households, low socioeconomic status, psychological stress and anxiety, exposure to violence and trauma, and unhealthy domestic relationships. When learners are subjected to these challenges, their academic progress is inevitably impacted. To mitigate the potential negative effects on learner performance, counselling and therapy may serve as essential interventions. When learners experience adverse psychosocial conditions, schools and districts are obliged to provide the necessary psychosocial support (PSS) from the DBE as per Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme. According to the CSTL Programme and the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) (DBE, 2021), the District Based Support Team (DBST) should establish the kind of support needed by the School Based Support Team (SBST) to support the learners, assess what the strength of the SBST is, and explore ways in which additional support can be provided and/or sought from external sources. In addition, the DBST should assist the SBST to identify additional community-based support and facilitate collaboration through the learning support coordinators.

The SBST and DBST are tasked by the DBE to work collaboratively to ensure effective provision of psychosocial support to the learners. The CSTL Programme and the Policy on SIAS require that support be provided collaboratively through the various support structures such as the District Based Support Team; the School Based Support Team; the School Management Team; and the School Governing Body (DBE, 2020). The support is provided to vulnerable learners, that is, who:

have no surviving parent, guardian or alternative caregiver; abandoned e.g. by parent/s, other primary caregivers, or by extended family; in households where there are sick persons and where children due to ignorance do not practice universal precautions; infected with HIV; whose parent or primary caregiver is terminally ill and this affects children in a variety of ways before and after the death of their parent/s; in households that care for orphans and/or abandoned children and which often experience increased poverty as a result; experience high levels of mobility between households and multiple bereavements and the trauma of death; in households where they are faced with significant physical, mental, social and emotional harm or neglect; vulnerable to HIV infection, including those who are HIV exposed e.g. peri-natal exposure, sexual abuse, sexually active or engaged in transactional sex; in need of legal protection and alternative family care; and Children who are undocumented minors and/or refugees (DBE, 2024, p.15).

The existence of such learners in schools, begs the research question: How effective does the Dr. RSM district provide psychosocial support to the secondary school learners? Thus, the objective of this research was to establish the effectiveness of the psychosocial support provision by Dr RSM district to secondary school learners.

Contextualisation and Background

A study in the North-West Province by Kolobe, Idemudia, and Kgokong (2013) sought to investigate the social experiences of street children in Mafikeng. The results of the study revealed three major themes: various psychosocial reasons for abandoning home; life in the

streets, and the desire to go back home. In addition to these major themes, sub themes were developed such as risks and challenges encountered, regrets, and the desire for rehabilitation and schooling. The participants in the study were learners who wanted to go back to school but were unable to due to a plague of various psychosocial factors. These participants were at school before running to the streets, which suggests that they were learners whose psychosocial challenges were not effectively dealt with while they were in school. The exit of these learners from the school system had an impact on the throughput of the overall matric results in a trend that continues to date.

Dr RSM has consistently ranked fourth out of four districts in matric results for the past fifteen years, with the exception of 2020 when they temporarily moved to third place, only to revert to their usual fourth position the following year—where they have remained in the annual NSC provincial results in the North-West province (North-West Department of Education, 2020; DBE, 2024). Notably, DBE (2024:88) and the North-West Provincial Government (2024) identify the worst-performing school in the 2023 NSC matric results as being located within Dr RSM District. Since the DBE introduced its top-performing district criterion in 2015, Dr RSM has never ranked among the top-performing districts nationwide (DBE, 2018 and 2024). In these ten years, Dr RSM briefly moved to third place in 2020 but returned to the fourth position in 2021, 2022, and 2023 (North-West Department of Education, 2023).

The consistent placement of Dr RSM at the bottom of the provincial rankings raises concerns about the effectiveness of the psychosocial support provided by schools and the district to secondary school learners. This study examines how psychosocial factors influence academic performance in Dr RSM and contribute to the district's ranking outcomes.

Literature Review

Psychosocial factors' effect on academic achievement

Various studies, including the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020) reveals that learners with mental health challenges often experience decreased academic performance, emphasising the importance of addressing these issues within educational settings. The mental state of learners facing such social challenges is also affected, as they constantly worry about the problems they are experiencing. Ultimately, both the social factors and the resulting mental distress contribute to the development of psychosocial factors that impact their overall well-being and academic performance. Raghunathan et al. (2021) and Monit (2021) both indicate that social challenges such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, severe illness, and poverty can significantly impact learners' mental health, leading to psychosocial factors that adversely affect academic performance.

Studies on psychosocial factors as negative contributors to learner academic performance by Zwane (2023) and Sommar and Dumont (2024) both found that psychosocial factors contribute to low academic performance. Additionally, Mzobe and Chinaka (2024) study investigated the implications of psychosocial factors (PSFs) in KwaZulu-Natal found that learners studying physical sciences in grade 12 encountered major obstacles due to psychosocial variables, which negatively impacted their academic performance.

Child-headed households is a social factor that has a negative impact on academic performance. Children who act as parents at home are stretched to take the parental role in the household which leave them with less time for their own academic journey. Venter (2022) argues that in South Africa, many children live in low-income households where they are required to take on adult roles, such as caring for siblings or managing household tasks. These added responsibilities can lead to increased stress and reduced time for academic pursuits, ultimately hindering their educational progress. That is why Makuya's (2022) study identified

challenges such poor socio-economic background, child abuse, stigmatisation, exclusion, psychological and emotional abuses that were faced by children in child-headed families which and observed that they affected learners academically, socially, emotionally, physically and psychologically. Psychosocial factors are a major challenge impacting on learner academic performance and Dr RSM learners are not immune to these factors.

The government policy mandate on psychosocial support

Given the negative effect of psychosocial factor on learner academic performance, it is justifiable to scope into the policy mandate to address psychosocial challenges learners face in South Africa. The effects of psychosocial factors have robbed learners of an opportunity to successful academic journey. Some amongst the effects of psychosocial factors are found from Khumalo (2021) where many participants described their homes as lacking sufficient space to allow them to mentally and physically focus on their schoolwork. This was because of overcrowding due to poor socio-economic status of the families which constitutes the essence of psychosocial factors. From the same study, it was found that psychological and emotional effects (i.e., depression, suicidal thoughts, feeling worthless, hopelessness) were caused by the challenges that they experience at home and at school and they were negatively impacting on their academic journey.

Khumalo's (2021) study focused on *experiences of grade 10-12 learners on their psychosocial challenges in two schools in Johannesburg South, Gauteng*, this study revealed that learners were experiencing some form of psychological problems while at home. These included feelings of loneliness, stress, depression, and low self-esteem. Learners in grades 10-12 are within the adolescence stage and are usually at a high risk of experiencing self-esteem impairment and developing depression which, Fiorilli, Capitello, Barni, Buonomo and Gentile (2019) suggested that may be stimulated by their interpersonal relationships, changes in life events and their failure to manage negative emotions. These experiences negatively impacted on their academic performance, and this bags the question: what is the policy position in providing the necessary support for learners faced with various psychosocial challenges?

In order to mitigate and combat these effects, the department of basic education promulgated a policy on psychosocial support (PSS). According to DBE (2021) the psychosocial support "focuses on equipping schools with necessary skills to address the psychosocial and mental wellbeing needs of learners. This includes creating a supportive learning environment that safeguards the social, emotional, and mental wellbeing of teachers and learners" (p.13). This means that the South African government in conjunction with the Department of health and social work care for the learners and want to intervene and support learners to still achieve their academic goals despite unfortunate psychosocial challenges they may face. This fixation on addressing learner psychosocial challenges for better individual academic achievement emanates from the constitutional right for all children, the right to education as embedded in terms of Section 29 of the *Constitution* (1996). It is for such reasons that the department of basic education promulgated CSTL as an underpinning policy to guide and determine the process of addressing the psychosocial challenges faced by learners in schools.

The DBE (2001) promulgated White Paper 6: Special Needs Education to recognise and accommodate the diverse range of learning needs. The White Paper 6 recognises that barriers to teaching and learning are brought about by societal, systemic and intrinsic conditions. It thus recognises the need to pursue the holistic development of centres of learning to ensure a barrier-free physical environment and a supportive and inclusive psycho-social learning environment, developing a flexible curriculum to ensure access to all learners, developing a community-based support system which includes a preventative and developmental approach to support. In addition to White Paper 6, the DBE (2008) adopted the CSTL Programme to specifically outline

the process of supporting learners faced with psychosocial challenges. This adoption was in alignment with the international law on special needs education following the Southern African Development Community (SADC) initiative. According to DBE (2020), the CSTL

Programme, governed by the SADC CSTL Policy framework, is intended to coordinate and harmonise the delivery of a seamless package of support services at school level. CSTL aims to realise the educational rights of all children, including those who are most vulnerable, through schools becoming inclusive centres of learning, care and support. Figure 1 below illustrates the process CSTL proposes to admit and complete the vulnerability assessment of the learner.

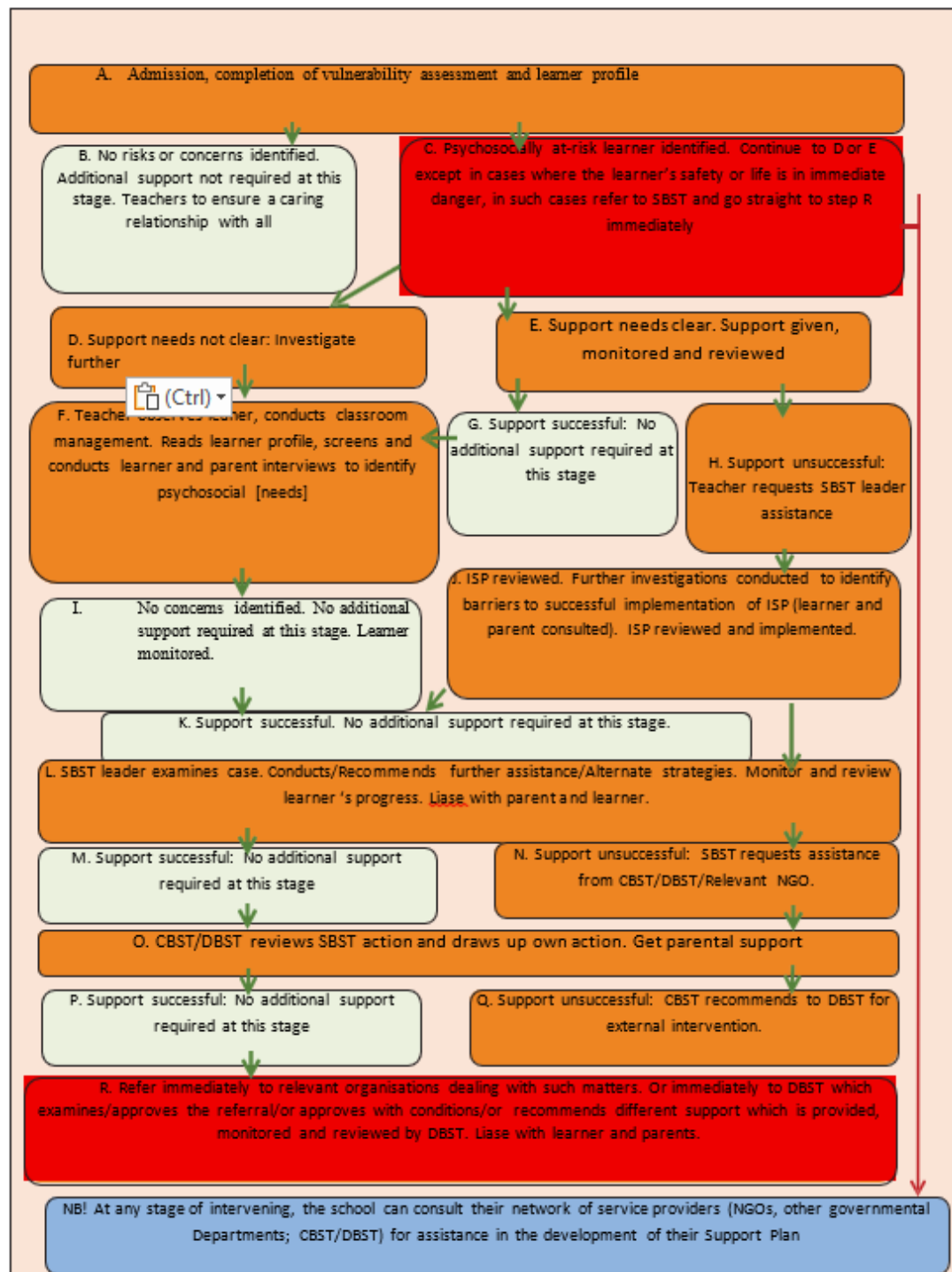


Figure 1 The Process of Supporting Learners (Adapted from DBE, 2020:34)

The DBE has identified ten priority areas of CSTL programme including Nutritional Support; Infrastructure, Water and Sanitation; Psychological Support; Co-curricular Support; Material Support; Curriculum Support; Safety and Protection; Social Welfare Services; and Health Promotion (DBE, 2020:10). Psychosocial Support is one of the priority areas to deal with the various barriers to learning. The inclusion of psychosocial support to these focus areas justifies the significance and existence of the learners in schools who need this form of support. This inclusion further indicates that psychosocial factors contain serious effects on the academic performance of learners across South Africa and the diaspora. That is why the DBE (2020) argues that:

Psychosocial support is thus not limited to counselling as many seem to misunderstand; it includes changing the environment of the school, the policies and practices that are not conducive for teaching and learning. Psychosocial support in the context of the DBE is meant firstly as a preventive measure, by creating an enabling environment for psychosocially 'healthy' schools; accomplished through training, skills and providing resources to educators and other school staff (p.10).

Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in the concept of Bronfenbrenner's 1974 Ecological Systems Theory, described by Boison and Dzidonu (2017) as a theory that looks at a child's development within the context of the system of relationships that form the child's environment. Bronfenbrenner's theory defines complex various "layers" of environment that directly impact on a child's development. Recently the theory has been named "bioecological systems theory" to confirm that a child's own biology is a primary environment fuelling the child's development.

The application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in this article allows the analysis of Dr RSM academic underperformance issue from multiple perspectives, considering the interplay between various levels of influence. It also provides a holistic understanding of the context in which educators and learners operate, which can inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations to address the challenges faced by the Dr RSM District in the North-West Province. Figure 2 below depicts all the stages the learners encounter as they develop, some of these stages depicts the psychosocial challenges learners face in their lives.

Figure 2 explains the complexity of ecological systems theory, it illustrates that a learner development is affected by their social relationships and the world around them, described from the microsystem at the individual level to the chronosystem operating at broadest level. Bronfenbrenner believed that learners are affected by everything in their surrounding environment (Brown and Strommen, 2018). There are layers of environmental influence on a learner's development, and the theory is structured into five interconnected systems, namely microsystem, mesosystems, macrosystem, and chronosystems.

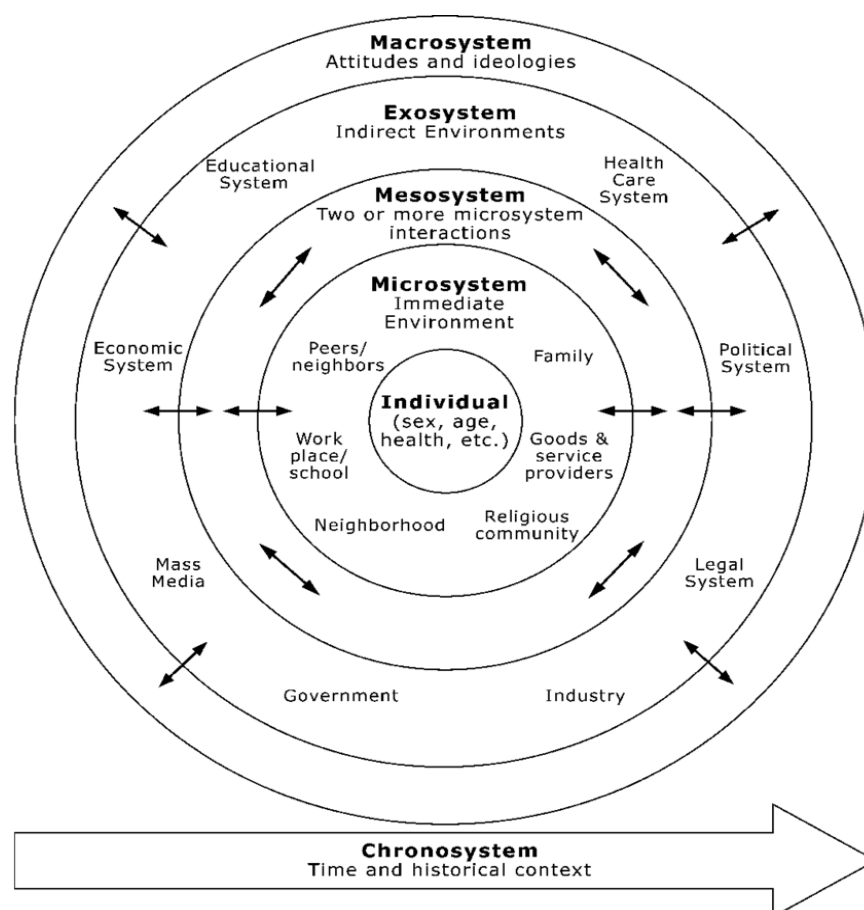


Figure 2 *Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory implications for educational practice*
(Adapted from Brown and Strommen, 2018:15)

Microsystem

Ettekal and Mahoney (2017) explain that the microsystem level focuses on the immediate environment where the individual interacts directly. This interaction encompasses the classroom setting, relationships between educators and learners, teaching methods, and the overall learning environment in the Dr RSM District schools. These immediate environment factors within Dr RSM District schools have a major influence on the academic experiences and performance of learners. Factors such as teacher-learner relationships, peer interactions, and community support may be fundamental in establishing factors contributing to academic underperformance in this district. These interactions and relationships, Lane and Bowmann (2021) argues that, if they are negative, they may influence the psychosocial status of the child as the child is shaped by what he consumes from everyday interactions.

Mesosystem

This level explores the connections between different microsystems (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017). Guy-Evans (2023) concurs with this assertion by positing that mesosystem is where a person's individual microsystems do not function independently but are interconnected and assert influence upon one another. The mesosystem involves interactions between different microsystems in the child's life. For example, open communication between a child's parents and teachers provides consistency across both environments. This depicts how relationships between educators and learners, as well as the connections between school and home environments, contribute to academic outcomes is at play. This help to better understand how communication between teachers and parents and the holistic relationship between school and the community affects students' academic performance, as these communication channels are critical in formulating psychosocial aspects of life for the learners

Exosystem

Crawford (2020) discusses the exosystem as the setting in which there is a link between contexts wherein people have no active role to make decisions yet expected to fully cooperate with decisions, they never partook in. This means that exosystem involves external settings that indirectly influence the learners' psychosocial status. In this article, this could be associated to policies and practices at the district or provincial level that impact the educational system in Dr RSM District. Therefore, in depth analysis of how external factors like educational policies and other promulgations influence academic performance of the learners would be fundamental in answering the research question under consideration.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem represents the broader cultural framework that shapes an individual's experiences. It includes aspects such as personal and family socioeconomic status, ethnicity or race, and the economic conditions of the surrounding environment, whether affluent or impoverished (Joshi, 2017). The macrosystem represents the broader cultural context, including societal values, norms, and ideologies. Dr RSM District being largely rural, this study will observe how cultural values and societal expectations within this district and North-West Province generally influence the educational experiences in schools. Further exploration of how cultural norms may contribute to or challenge academic performance expectations play a role. An investigation on how broader societal issues, such as economic conditions, cultural practices, psychosocial implications, impact the educational ecosystem will be fulfilled.

Chronosystem

Guy-Evans (2023) shares the implications involved with this system that chronosystem relates to shifts and transitions over the child's lifetime. These environmental changes can be predicted, like starting school, or unpredicted, like parental divorce or changing schools when parents relocate for work, which may cause stress. Crawford (2020) describes it as transitions and shifts that occur our lifespan, including socio-historical transitions and shifts that may influence us. It is in this level of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system that learners face psychosocial factors that they may not have control over, such as divorce between parents, loss of parents and forced child headed household role to pay.

Research methodology

Research approach and design, and paradigm

This article reports on a qualitative study that sought to explore the perspectives of teachers, principals, and subject advisors on academic underperformance, making a qualitative research approach the most appropriate choice. Qualitative research is distinguished by methods such as interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and interaction analysis (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). To better understand the psychosocial factors contributing to academic underperformance, the study employed a case study design. This approach enabled in-depth data collection from participants, aligning with Coombs' (2022) definition of a case study as a methodological framework in the social sciences and humanities that facilitates a thorough exploration of a phenomenon through various data collection techniques, including interviews and observations.

The study was grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm, which prioritises individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives while emphasizing choice, free will, and individualism in qualitative research (Putnam & Banghart, 2017). Accordingly, SESs, principals, and teachers from the Dr RSM Education District were engaged, providing them with the opportunity to openly share their insights, experiences, and concerns about the district's persistent academic underperformance over the past fifteen years. To facilitate this, a

conversational space was intentionally created, allowing participants to freely and comprehensively articulate their views on the phenomenon.

Sampling and population

The concept of “population” in research refers to any group that falls within the scope of study (Gill, 2020). Leedy and Ormrod (2010) further elaborate on this, describing a population as the complete set of objects, subjects, or individuals that meet defined criteria for inclusion in a study. The target population of a study is any group that forms the focus of a research study (Majid, 2018). The target population of this study included teachers, principals, and SESs from three consistently underperforming high schools. The research was conducted in the Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati (RSM) District and involved three high schools as the sites of study based on their academic performance from 2021 to 2023.

The study defines underperformance based on a 65% threshold, aligning with the EELC (2022), which states that a school is generally considered underperforming if its pass rate falls below 65%. To qualify, each school had to have been operational for at least fifteen consecutive years. Additionally, their NSC Matric results between 2021 and 2023 had to reflect a pass rate of 65% or lower for all three years or at least for two out of the three years. This benchmark is further supported by Bayat, Louw, and Rena (2014) and Heystek (2015), who affirm that, in South Africa, an underperforming school is one that fails to achieve a Grade 12 pass rate exceeding 65%.

Purposive selection criteria were employed to identify three underperforming high schools within the Dr RSM District. A total of eight participants were selected for the study, using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Two SESs were purposively selected based on their availability and relevance, in line with DBE (2023), which outlines their curriculum monitoring and support role and states that SESs are responsible for “monitoring and supporting the implementation of the curriculum in the relevant subject, as well as guiding and assisting educators in effectively delivering the curriculum in the classroom (p.10)”. The remaining participants, a Grade 12 teacher and one principal from each of the three schools, were selected through convenience sampling, based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. This approach ensured that the study included participants with specific expertise relevant to the research questions while also allowing practical access to readily available participants.

Data collection method

In this study, data collection was primarily conducted through in-depth one-on-one interviews. This type of interview serves as a valuable tool for exploring complex educational issues, including learner engagement, classroom dynamics, and policy implementation and allow for flexibility in probing specific areas of interest, helping to uncover hidden patterns, challenges, and opportunities within the education sector (Sankalaite et al., 2023). Additionally, the primary researcher spent two days at each school, observing interactions among teachers, principals, and SESs during daily school activities. These observations provided crucial contextual insights into the schools' academic environments, in that way enhancing the findings obtained through interviews.

The study employed an inductive thematic analysis approach to examine qualitative data for data analysis, thus aligning with De Vos (2002) who emphasises that inductive thematic analysis refers to the systematic breakdown of data to answer research questions. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by an open coding process to identify recurring themes and categories. Inductive reasoning facilitated the emergence of key themes, such as socio-psychological factors, which were further analysed for patterns and relationships. Thematic analysis was also applied to observational data due to its ability to capture interactions and

contexts in their natural state (Erickson, 2012; Ibrahim, 2015). The researcher engaged in systematic coding, theme development, and interpretation to uncover deeper meanings, ensuring a thorough analysis of behaviours and interactions. By grouping coded segments into broader themes, the study provided a detailed, narrative-driven presentation of findings, supported by direct quotations to emphasise critical insights into the factors contributing to academic underperformance.

To ensure quality of the study, in accordance with deliberations about quality in research by Birt et al., (2016), the study adopted strict procedures to strengthen its credibility and trustworthiness. The measures included verifying data accuracy and minimising bias to enhance credibility, applying the findings in ways that could inform similar research in other South African districts for transferability, documenting all methods and procedures to ensure repeatability and support dependability, and digitally recording and transcribing interviews. Raw data, including verbatim participant voices, were presented in accordance with ethical research standards, ensuring confirmability and transparency in accurately reflecting participants' views.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to ethical considerations outlined by Gajjar (2013), emphasising the safeguarding of participants' rights and well-being, ensuring the validity of the research, and promoting ethical practices. Ethical clearance was granted by both the Sol Plaatjie University Senate Research Ethics Committee and the North-West Department of Basic Education. Participants were fully briefed about the study's purpose, potential risks, and benefits, granting them an opportunity to make informed decisions without fear of negative consequences. Consent was obtained immediately after the briefing, and with some participants, it was obtained after consideration of their participation. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained by using pseudonyms for participants and securely storing the data. Schools were anonymised as School A, B, and C, and participants were referred to with specific identifiers such as [School A, Participant A]. The researcher ensured strict adherence to ethical guidelines, including respect for participants' rights and the minimisation of harm throughout the research process.

In terms of researcher positionality, the researcher, as a former teacher and a current lecturer in the private institution of learning, ensured the credibility of the study despite not having been a principal or SES. Given that researchers with personal experience in the field of study can sometimes introduce biases, the researcher took precautions to maintain the integrity of the research. The data were analysed by the researcher alone. The process began with open coding, which involved categorising excerpts from the raw data to identify themes and patterns, following Saldana's (2009) approach. The data was repeatedly reviewed to achieve clarity before proceeding to axial coding, which helped identify relationships between the emerging codes. This process, referred to as an audit trail, tracked every step from the research questions to the final conclusions, thus allowing for a systematic understanding of the data. The overlapping latent and conceptual coding processes were instrumental in identifying major themes that answered the research questions, ensuring a clear and coherent narrative supported by direct evidence from the data. however,

Trustworthiness was ensured through rigorous and transparent procedures aligned with the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through briefing meetings, pre-interviews, prolonged engagement, and presenting data in its raw, unaltered form. Transferability was supported by providing thick contextual descriptions, allowing the findings to be applicable to other underperforming districts with similar challenges. Dependability was achieved by thoroughly documenting all procedures so the study can be replicated or audited. Confirmability was ensured by digitally recording and

transcribing interviews verbatim and maintaining transparency to minimise researcher bias and ground all interpretations in the evidence.

Results and Discussion

Psychosocial factors are amongst the significant factors contributing to factors underperformance in Dr RSM district. The most frequently emerging psychosocial factor was child-headed households. In answering the research question How effective does the Dr RSM district provide psychosocial support to the secondary school learners? Participant A in School C cited that some learners were leaders of child-headed households which leaves them with no time for full concentration on schoolwork. Furthermore, there is not much done to support learners leading child-headed households. Participant A, in School B suggested the *“appoint [ment of] counsellors, social works etcetera. to avoid a long form filling process [to obtain support] that is tedious.”* This suggestion simply attests to the need for psychosocial support for learner in this district. It further suggests that the form filling system to obtain support is time consuming and may hinder access to the requisite support. These concerns highlight the need to fast-track administration in the district to ensure better access for learner in urgent need of psychosocial support.

Findings also indicate that socio-psychological assistance in this district is slow, and learners remain unattended and ultimately impacted negatively by these factors. Participant A in School A states: *“This morning I heard there’s a girl in grade 10 whose daughter is nine months old. She passed away this morning. The father is also in the school, there’s a court case between them, there’s stress continuously... And it’s affected her academic performance.”* Many learners face psychological and social challenges such as death in families, encountered traumatic events and hinder their progress in school. This suggests it may be the time for South African public schools to have a designated psychologist and/or a social worker appointed. Participant A, in School confirms this need by revealing that *“a large number of learners are faced with psychological and social challenges such as death in families, encountered traumatic events and hinder their progress in school, and teachers are not in a position to diagnose learners.”*

Participants displayed their dissatisfaction about delayed psychological support to learners, pointing out that even though such services are offered by the government, learners suffer various psychosocial issues while waiting for assistance. Ultimately, psychosocial factors such as bereavement, divorce, security, social acceptance among others, contribute to learners’ academic performance. District SES-Participant B, as a representative of the district, who argued that there should be provision of psychosocial support to the learners to realise their purpose for learning. This emphasised a need to revamp the psychosocial support, and more collaboration and better communication between schools and the district ought to take place.

Learners also need to be encouraged to speak out and seek for assistance that the state have made available to their disposal for the enhancement of their academic performance. Participant A, another District SES, explained: *“We provide socio-psychological assistance to learners to motivate them and show that, even if they lack the means to address their challenges, they can always rely on us as the government for support. Yes, our services are not always available when needed, but we are trying.”* This suggests the district is committed to supporting learners through various initiatives, yet its efforts are often constrained by external factors beyond its control.

Due to the psychosocial factors of low economic status and poverty of most families from which learners in public schools come, learners who live far from schools’ struggle to pay for transport, which hinders them from consistent attendance at school. In School C, Participant B (the principal) remarked, *“There are SESs who wish to give us the necessary support, but the*

only challenge they face is that some do not have transport; there isn't enough transport to visit the school often." To further highlight the transportation challenges confronting SESs in this district, District SES Participant B expressed, *"We need mobile support for all stakeholders."* This statement acknowledges that the lack of transportation provision restricts their ability to visit schools. Additionally, when SESs are unable to visit, teachers report a high rate of absenteeism among learners due to transportation issues. In School A the fight for food amongst Grade 12s and Grade 10's was big with learners shouting in Setswana, *"Fa ke sa je fano, ga ke na kwa ke yang go ja teng"* translated: *"If I don't eat here, I have nowhere else to eat."* This emphasises the fact that learners are hungry and come from seriously poverty-stricken areas. In school B, even though there was no battle for food, the learners are ashamed to queue for food, and this also contributes to losing hope and demotivation to perform in class.

The findings of the observation of school visits, were that in School A, a teacher was withdrawn from the morning briefing to rush to her class. The following morning briefing it was reported that she had to go counsel a female learner who is alleged to be constantly witnessing severe domestic violence crimes at home between the parents. The learner was reported feeling scared and unsafe and wished to have someone to talk to about this. The teacher who went out to see her reported that the learner is traumatised, and she has nothing to say to her and asked the principal to call the district to dispatch a social worker to attend to the learner. No social worker arrived at school, and the learner was asked to stay in the staffroom all day. This justifies the claims made by Participant A in School A during the interview, who disclosed that *"This morning I heard there's a girl in grade 10 whose daughter is nine months old. She passed away this morning. The father is also in the school, there's a court case between them, there's stress continuously. That's the extra parental role that you play. Yes. After playing a parental role with your own kids. Do you know how many learners I know and that I must counsel on top of teaching? So, this work of the social workers that you are looking for, you end up playing their role in the lives of these kids because they don't have anyone. And I can't reach everyone. I must teach. I must follow the ATP. I must reach that target. So, while all this, mentally it's stretching me beyond."* Failure to have a social worker available when needed highlighted the need of social workers to be placed at school or close enough in case of emergency.

Conclusion

The study concludes that psychosocial support for Grade 12 learners in the RSM district of North-West province is ineffective, because learners must wait for assistance while due processes are followed before help is provided. Drastic changes are necessary in how the administration and provision of psychosocial matters is handled. The current approach must be reformed urgently to effectively address learners' psychosocial needs with a view to enhancing their academic performance.

This article recommends the following to curb the challenges that lead to ineffective psychosocial support:

- The district should appoint full-time psychologists and/or social workers, and counsellors in schools to provide timely psychosocial support; and initiate the streamlining and efficiency of the form-filling process to reduce delays in accessing psychosocial assistance.
- Intervention programs for learners from child-headed households, including financial aid, food security programs, and mentorship initiatives can be developed by relevant professionals in collaboration with the DBE to attempt to address these problems.
- Schools can facilitate and monitor the establishment of peer support groups and safe spaces where affected learners can share and voice their experiences regarding these challenges and receive guidance thereof.

- Districts and schools should devise a strategy to better and enhance coordination and communication between schools and district officials for the sake of efficient response times for psychosocial support.
- Districts and schools should create awareness to learners of the availability of free psychosocial support services and encourage them to seek help.
- District office should ensure Subject Education Specialists (SEs) have adequate transportation to visit schools regularly and provide necessary academic support. Since schools are community based and they serve communities, an introduction of workshops and awareness programs within communities on mental health and coping strategies for learners, parents, and educators could yield positive results.
- The district should establish a rapid-response team for immediate intervention in cases of trauma, bereavement, or extreme stress affecting learners.
- Districts should regularly assess the effectiveness of psychosocial services through feedback from learners, teachers, and school management and develop data-driven strategies to improve and expand support services based on identified gaps.

References

- Bayat, A., Louw, W., & Rena, R. (2014). Investigating the confluence of factors impacting on underperformance at selected secondary schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Sciences (IJES)*, 7(1), 45–55.
- Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1802–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870>
- Boison, B.T.K. & Dzidonu, C., 2017. *Exploring Technology User Environments in Higher Educational Institutions: A Bioecological Theory Based Framework*. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 5(2), pp.150–154. <https://doi.org/10.12691/education-5-2-7>
- Brown, L., & Strommen, J. (2018). Training younger volunteers to promote technology use among older adults. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, 46(3), 297–313. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcsr.12254>
- Coombs, H. (2022). *Case study research defined*. Southern Utah University. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7604301>
- Crawford, M. (2020). Ecological systems theory: Exploring the development of the theoretical framework as conceived by Bronfenbrenner. *Journal of Public Health Issue & Practice*, 4(2), 170. <https://doi.org/10.33790/jphip1100170>
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2001). *Education White Paper 6: Special needs education – Building an inclusive education and training system* [PDF]. https://www.vvob.org/files/publicaties/rsa_education_white_paper_6.pdf
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2020). *A guide for learner support agents and schools on providing psychosocial support to learners*. <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Psychosocial%20Support/Guide%20for%20LSAs%20and%20Schools%20on%20Providing%20PSS%20to%20Schools.pdf?ver=2024-06-25-130506-400>
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2021). *Psychosocial support services*. <https://www.education.gov.za/Programmes/PsychosocialSupportServices.aspx>
- Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2024). *Minister Siviwe Gwarube: Basic Education Dept Budget Vote 2024/25*. <https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/minister-siviwe-gwarube-basic-education-dept-budget-vote-202425-15-jul-2024>
- De Vos, A. S. (2002). *Research at grass roots: A primer for the social science and human service professions* (2nd ed.). Van Schaik.
- Equal Education Law Centre-EELC. (2022). *Underperforming schools*. <https://eelawcentre.org.za/wp-content/uploads/underperforming-schools-report-1.pdf>
- Erickson, F. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for researchers in education and other fields* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Ettekal, A., & Mahoney, J. (2017). Ecological systems theory. In K. Peppler (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of out-of-school learning* (pp. 239–241). SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483385198.n94>

- Eya, N., Florence, A., Nwoji, H., Christian, S., Okeke, C., Uchekukwu, E., & Ekwueme, U. (2020). Socio-psychological factors as correlates of students' performance in chemistry: Implications for science and engineering education. *International Journal of Mechanical and Production Engineering Research and Development*, 10, 2249–8001. <https://doi.org/10.24247/ijmperdaug202021>
- Gajjar, J. (2013). Ethical considerations in research: Safeguarding the rights and welfare of research participants. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 1(3), 1–12.
- Guy-Evans, O. (2024). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383500583_Bronfenbrenner's_Ecological_Systems_Theory.
- Ibrahim, A. (2015). *Qualitative research methods: A comprehensive guide*. Routledge.
- Joshi, S. C. (2017). *How the students learn*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333176117_How_do_students_learn
- Khumalo, G. (2021). *Experiences of grade 10-12 learners on their psychosocial challenges: The case of two government schools in Johannesburg South, Gauteng* (Master's thesis). University of the Witwatersrand. <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/c8bf200e-864a-4f71-b335-fb6171d833a4/content>
- Kirkbride, J.B., Anglin, D. M., Colman, I., Dykxhoorn, J., Jones, P. B., Patalay, P., Pitman, A., Sonesson, E., Steare, T., Wright, T., & Griffiths, S. L. (2024). The social determinants of mental health and disorder: Evidence, prevention and recommendations. *World Psychiatry*, 23(1), 58-90. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21160>
- Kolobe, P., Idemudia, E., & Kgokong, K. (2013). Street children in Mafikeng, North-West Province: A qualitative study of social experiences. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 28(1), 163-188.
- Lane, J., & Bowman, L. (2021). How children's social tendencies can shape their theory of mind development: Social information. *Developmental Review*, 61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2021.100977>
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2010). *Practical research: Planning and design* (9th ed.). Pearson.
- Majid, U. (2018). Research fundamentals: Study design, population, and sample size. *Undergraduate Research in Natural and Clinical Science and Technology (URNCT) Journal*, 2(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.26685/urnct>
- Makuya, R. V. (2022). *Challenges of learners from child-headed families that affect their educational goals: A case study of three schools in Johannesburg East District, Gauteng Province, South Africa* (Master's thesis). University of Venda. <http://hdl.handle.net/11602/2240>
- Mzobe, N. P., & Chinaka, T. W. (2024). Psycho-social factors as key contributory elements toward the academic performance of Grade 12 physical sciences learners in the Mandeni circuit in KZN. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 13(2), 353–363. <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v13i2.3034>
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2024). Comprehensive School-Based Mental and Behavioral Health Services and School Psychologists. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/mental-and-behavioral-health/additional-resources/comprehensive-school-based-mental-and-behavioral-health-services-and-school-psychologists>.
- Putnam, L., & Banghart, S. (2017). Interpretive approaches. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc118>
- Raghunathan, R., Jeyalakshmi, A., Arulanantham, Z., & Jebakumar, A. (2021). Impact of child mental health on a child's academic success. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 58, 3173-3178.
- Sankalaite, S., Huizinga, M., Pollé, S., Xu, C., De Vries, N., Hens, E., & Baeyens, D. (2023). A qualitative study into teacher–student interaction strategies employed to support primary school children's working memory. *Education Sciences*, 13, 1149. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13111149>
- Sommer, M., & Dumont, K. (2011). Psychosocial factors predicting academic performance of students at a historically disadvantaged university. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 41, 386-395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124631104100312>
- Ugwu, C., & Eze, V. (2023). Qualitative research. *International Digital Organization for Scientific Research*, 8(1), 20-35. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367221023_Qualitative_Research
- Venter, L. (2022). The impact of household responsibilities on children's academic performance. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*. <https://ijcecp.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40723-022-00100-5>
- Zwane, N. P., & Mukuna, K. R. (2023). Psychosocial factors influencing the academic performance of students at a rural college in the Covid-19 era. *International Journal of Studies in Psychology*, 3(1), 6-12. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijspsy.v3i1.897>