



WITS SCHOOL OF EDUCATION (WSOE)

**LEARNER LEADERS' VOICES ON THE MALE DROPOUT IN SECONDARY
SCHOOLS IN MOGALE CITY: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY**

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Education degree in the discipline of Education Leadership and Policy Skills (ELPS).

Johannesburg, 2025

DECLARATION

I, **Mpho Sahula**, declare that:

- I. The research presented in this report is my work unless otherwise noted.
- II. This report has not been submitted for any academic degree or examination at any other university.
- III. This report contains no data, images, charts, or additional information from individuals unless adequately referenced.
- IV. This report includes writing from other researchers only if properly cited. If other sources were quoted, their information was rephrased but attributed to them.
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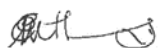
17 March 2025

Mpho Sahula

STATEMENT BY SUPERVISOR

I hereby confirm that I have reviewed and approved the submission of the research report titled **Learner Leaders' Voices On The Male Dropout In Secondary Schools In Mogale City: A Qualitative Case Study**.

Signature:



Dr P.E. Mthembu

Date:

17 March 2025

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research report to my resilient and inspiring brothers, Sipho Sahula, Lesedi Tyakathe, and Tlhompho Mokgwisi. Their educational struggles as Black boys in South Africa have deeply touched my heart. May this research contribute to a brighter future for them and others facing similar challenges.

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Firstly, I would like to express my immense gratitude to my mother, **Prudence Sahula**, who took on every other responsibility to enable me to apply myself to this degree. I appreciate your support, belief in me, and unending love and kindness. I owe my success to you.

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Moreover, I would like to thank my partner, **Musawenkosi Mabena**. Your unending, selfless support has sustained me through it all. You believed in me when I did not believe in myself; you pushed me beyond the limits and set the bar high for me. You have led me with your actions and encouraged me. Our countless conversations have been a source of inspiration. I appreciate your patience and support.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the views of learner leaders on challenges and solutions to male learner dropout in secondary schools in Mogale City, South Africa. With the input of those learner leaders who serve on the Representative Council of Learners (RCL), the objectives of the study are to investigate the complex challenges male learners face, which contribute to their dropping out. Further, the study aims to identify strategies that learner leaders propose to enhance inclusivity and reduce dropout rates. The premise of these objectives is to give learners a voice in identifying and providing solutions to the problems they encounter, as this is something that is missing in the literature. The study was informed by two theoretical frameworks: Critical Theory and Empowerment theory.

The study used an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative approach, as it used a case-study design. Data generation relied on semi-structured interviews with 11 participants in two schools that were purposefully sampled. Subsequently, critical thematic analysis, using a hybrid of inductive and deductive approaches, was employed to identify data patterns and themes, resulting in 10 main themes and 20 subthemes. Participant's anonymity and confidentiality were addressed as each participant was given a pseudonym. Besides, ethical considerations were observed in this study.

The findings suggest that male learners encounter several challenges that propel their dropout, and the system must provide more support to validate their dispositions and experiences. Furthermore, the findings reveal that learners hold the solutions to their challenges but require a platform to implement them, given that the RCL platform is undermined by other stakeholders in school governance. These interventions may lead to reduced dropout rates and enhance inclusivity in the education system.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CA	Creative Arts
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
COSAS	Congress of South African Students
DBE	Department of Basic Education
EFA	Education For All
FET	Further Education and Training
GCIS	Government Communication and Information System
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
GEC	General Education Certificate
GET	General Education and Training
GHS	General Household Survey
IQMS	Integrated Quality Management System
LOLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
MLCM	Mogale City Local Municipality
N4PR	National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements
NDP	National Development Plan
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSC	National Senior Certificate
NSNP	National School Nutrition Programme
PE	Physical Education
RCL	Representative Council of Learners
SACE	South African Council of Educators
SASA	South African Schools Act
SBA	School-Based Assessment
SBST	School-Based Support Team
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SGB	School Governing Body
SSIP	Secondary Schools Improvement Programme
TLO	Teacher Liaison Officer

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CHAPTER 1: THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction and Background to the Study

The National Development Plan (NDP) (National Planning Commission, 2023, p. 1) emphasises the critical role of education, training, and innovation in South Africa's long-term development. These factors are essential in establishing an equitable society and reducing inequality. Similarly, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, Target 4.1, emphasises that education must ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2023a). Despite such policies, adolescent school dropout remains prevalent in the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Statistics South Africa (Statistics SA), 2021; UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2019), where over half of out-of-school youth live (UNESCO, 2022). In 2018, around 258 million youth globally had never started or left school early, with 24 million at risk of not returning due to COVID-19 disruptions, including 232,000 of South Africa's 11.6 million youth in 2018 - a rate that has more than tripled during the pandemic (Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021, p. 2; UNESCO, 2020).

While 232,000 out of 11.6 million youth were not enrolled in 2018 in South Africa, this number surged during the pandemic due to school closures and economic hardships to an estimated 750,000 learners in 2021 (Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021, p. 2). Additionally, South Africa has the world's highest unemployment rate among major emerging markets and within the G20 countries), with youth accounting for 63.9% of the unemployed population and only 36.5% having completed secondary education (Statistics SA, 2022, p. 16; Statistics SA, 2021;; The Global Economy, n.d.; Reuters, 2025; The World Bank, n.d.). Completing school offers numerous benefits, such as increased employment opportunities and skills development (Pologeorgis, 2023), reduced criminal and risky behaviours and improved health (Sillamaa et al., 2022), and a greater sense of self-worth (Park et al., 2019). However, in low-to-middle-income countries like South Africa, school dropout is closely tied to poverty and inequality (Desai et al., 2024; Branson, Hofmeyr, & Lam, 2014, p. 117), which pose threats to both current and future generations.

Moreover, Black male learners in South Africa continue to encounter significant challenges within the education system that hinder their progress and frequently lead to dropout (Grant, 2015; Sayed & Motala, 2012; Dieltiens & Meny-Gibert, 2013). These challenges are

multifaceted, ranging from socioeconomic disparities and limited access to educational resources to inadequate support structures (Geldenhuys, 2016). As a result, many of them choose to discontinue their education prematurely, causing pervasive dropout rates among Black male learners in South African public high schools (Bäckman, 2017). Furthermore, the people concerned and tasked with mitigating and solving the problems faced by learners in the education system do not value the voices, opinions and contributions of learners, so researchers often overlook the perspective of learners as they typically focus on educators and schools (Grant, 2015). The lack of representation of learners' perspectives regarding dropout results in the creation of ineffective prevention strategies, which hinders the Representative Councils of Learners' (RCL) ability to challenge the status quo and defend the learners effectively, as well as sustain power dynamics within schools.

In addition, Black male learners specifically are more likely to drop out of school as compared to their peers since their needs and preferences were often overlooked (Smyth, 2006; Angus, 2006). Research studies have revealed that Black male learners are at a greater risk of dropping out of school as compared to their peers (see, for instance, Long, 2012; Ortlepp et al., 2002) because their positionalities are often disregarded, as per research studies conducted by Smyth (2006) and Angus (2006). Furthermore, while the Department of Education in South Africa has been making efforts to ensure gender equality in enrolment rates across all education levels and establish a fair and inclusive education system in a democratic setup, it is worth mentioning that these endeavours alone may not suffice to achieve the goals outlined in the constitution. As Grant (2015) has noted, the ongoing exclusionary practices of those in power over marginalised groups continue to pose a significant challenge to realising a just education system.

The Department of Education in South Africa has emphasised the need for an education system suitable for the 21st century (Department of Basic Education, 2021a, emphasis added). To achieve this, learners must possess various skills, including technological, digital, critical thinking, problem-solving, and information literacy (Okogbaa, 2017). Today, learners have the agency to create their own paths and voice their opinions, as evidenced by the recent trends of protests led by learners against the schools, for instance, the hair policy protest by Zulaikha Patel or the Equal Education-supported protests (Mncube, 2008). However, a vertical, bureaucratic approach to governance has made the South African education system and its

structures unresponsive to the learners' needs, resulting in a high dropout rate (Shmidt & Mestry, 2019; Shushu, Jacobs, & Teise, 2013; Mncube, 2008).

To provide South Africans with access to lifelong learning opportunities and realise the education department's vision, listening to learners' voices and involving them in decision-making processes is essential (Shmidt & Mestry, 2019; Shushu, Jacobs, & Teise, 2013; Mncube, 2008). As such, this study investigated the potential role of learner leader voices in developing an inclusive education system that could effectively address male learner dropout rates at two secondary schools in Mogale City. The study's central premise was that the lack of learner engagement in conceptualising an inclusive education system may contribute to the high dropout rate. Therefore, the study underscored the importance of learner participation in devising strategies and policies to improve the education system and reduce dropout rates.

1.2. Personal and Professional Motivations

Considering the provided context that indicates a decline in the schooling culture within townships, there has been a notable rise in high school dropouts, particularly among Black males. The overall conditions in the townships are worsening significantly compared to their original state due to various socio-economic challenges. These include issues such as crime rates and gang activity (Backman, 2017), substance abuse, bullying, male suicide, disparities in higher education admissions between genders, unemployment, and gender-based violence, high rates of teenage pregnancy, a culture of toxic masculinity, and an overarching sense of hopelessness (Statistics SA, 2015).

I believe that Black males are more likely to drop out of school (see, for instance, Long, 2012; Ortlepp et al., 2002) because the schooling conditions they are subjected to in the townships often disregard their specific needs. I can confirm that the conditions of Black male learners in South Africa, specifically in Mogale City's rural and township areas, have not changed. Male learners are subjected to a system of education that adultifies them, denying them the support they require to develop into responsible members of society. Instead of providing the correct disciplinary and support measures, it ostracises and excludes them. As a result, male learners become frustrated in school and society, thereby resorting to gross misconduct or dropping out.

Left unchecked, corners of townships are filled with boys and young men who are out of school. I feel deeply that this situation has become a norm and a generational curse. More so, because I am the firstborn sibling to three boys in the South African Education system, without action to change it, it could lead to a point where my brothers, or males, in general, turn into unequal members of society, oppressed and left behind me. I prefer a world where we are all empowered to be our best selves. I recognise my privilege as a woman in the present age, where movements like #thefutureisfemale #femaleempowerment #blackgirlmagic thrive. My ease comes at the cost of my peers' struggles.

1.3. Location of the Study

According to the 2022 Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) of South Africa, Gauteng Province is the smallest region, consisting of five municipality districts, including West Rand District. This district has three local municipalities, Rand West City, Mogale City and Merafong City, both facing significant educational challenges, with many individuals over 20 only completing primary school. In 2017, statistics indicated that a high percentage of the population in these municipalities had not advanced beyond primary education, highlighting a concerning dropout rate. The 2022/23 Mogale City Integrated Development Plan anticipates a population of approximately 434,188, mainly composed of young individuals aged 15 to 34. The area, predominantly rural with an urban core, features 182 schools, including 22 secondary schools in Mogale City, yet dropout rates remain troubling, especially between Grades 10-11. The development plan emphasises the importance of education for economic growth, advocating for improvements to meet global economic demands.

1.4. Problem Statement

The above discussion is that educational systems must ensure that every learner, irrespective of their identity and background, has equal access to quality education and receives individualised support from the beginning to the end of their academic journey (Letseka, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Understanding the reasons behind learner dropout is a global priority, as envisioned in SDG 4, and previous studies conducted in South Africa identified various factors contributing to dropout, including poverty, substance abuse, bullying, and school-related issues (Branson, Hofmeyr, & Lam, 2014; Townsend et al., 2008). These studies are

towards inclusion efforts and are crucial for achieving equality in education in South Africa, especially for Black male learners who, historically, have faced numerous obstacles to completing their academic journey successfully.

Moreover, participatory democracy in South Africa mandates that learners' voices be central to any educational change through the RCLs, which should be at the forefront of educational development (Mabovula, 2009; Linington et al., 2011). However, researchers often overlook learners' perspective as they typically focus on educators and schools (Grant, 2015). The lack of representation of learners' perspectives regarding dropout results in the creation of ineffective prevention strategies, which hinders the RCLs' ability to challenge the status quo, defend the learners effectively and sustain power dynamics within schools. While studies have been valuable in identifying at-risk youth and the extent of the dropout problem, it is crucial to investigate these issues through the lens of the adolescents themselves, as their voices can inform public discourse and draw attention to this often overlooked population (Townsend et al., 2008; Grant, 2015). As Grant (2015) and Shushu et al. (2013) note, learners should be treated as individuals whose ideas matter, especially when they can contribute meaningfully to the matter at hand.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore the experiences of male adolescent dropouts from learner leaders' perspectives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of learner leaders within the South African education system. These individuals, who serve as representatives of their peers on the RCL, are uniquely positioned to shed light on Black male learners' challenges and propose strategies to enhance inclusivity and reduce dropout rates.

1.5. Objectives of the Study

The study explored the learner leaders' views of an education system that enables male learners to have a successful educational journey in an inclusive South African education system. Thus, the following objectives were set:

- a) Explore the views of learner leaders regarding the experiences and challenges male learners face in the current education system, which may contribute to their decision to drop out.
- b) Identify strategies and recommendations proposed by learner leaders to enhance inclusivity in education and mitigate dropout rates.

1.6. Research Questions

The study, following from the above objectives, attempted to answer the following questions:

- a) What are the learner leaders' views on the factors (experiences and challenges) that contribute to male learners' decision to drop out of school?
- b) What strategies and recommendations do learner leaders propose to enhance inclusivity in education and effectively mitigate male learner dropout rates?

1.7. Significance of the Study

Education is a crucial factor in the growth and development of any country. It serves as the foundation for sustained growth, and better-performing economies and regions invest more time, resources, and finances into developing a stable and quality education system to safeguard their futures (Patrinos, 2016). However, in South Africa, there has been a consistent trend of learners from rural and township areas exhibiting increasing dropout rates (Statistics SA, 2021), indicating poor management and addressing of education issues. Most of these schools in rural and township areas are managed by the national government and provincial and regional public sector authorities, highlighting a low capacity of government departments to address the increasing dropout trend. This trend has left a significant portion of school-going learners in a disadvantaged position, potentially impacting the future of the country in both the short and long run.

To preserve the future of the Republic of South Africa, it is crucial to provide all learners with equal opportunities to receive an education that is inclusive and equalising in line with the Education for All (EFA) mandate (Department of Basic Education, 2010) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (Statistics SA, 2019). This project aimed to address a portion of the 2.3% of male learners dropping out of school (Statistics SA, 2021). The project provided a platform for learners in the RCL to express their views, which could help governing bodies, schools, educators, families, and communities understand the reasons behind male learner dropout, which have been identified as personal, biographical, and institutional issues (Ramrathan, 2013). By identifying the factors contributing to male learner dropout, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive educational system, which can help promote equitable access to quality education.

Moreover, this study can inform the development of evidence-based strategies to reduce dropout rates among male learners. Teachers and school leadership teams can implement strategies to improve educational outcomes and increase retention rates. To create a more inclusive education system that effectively addresses the dropout rates among male learners, it is crucial to prioritise these learners' opinions and insights. By including their perspectives in research processes, South Africa can work towards creating a more equitable and supportive environment for male learners in the education system.

The study also sheds light on gender disparities within the education system. By understanding how feminist arguments impact Black male learners, we can contribute to efforts aimed at promoting gender equality in education and challenging gender stereotypes. Furthermore, practical strategies to support male learners can increase school completion rates and provide better educational experiences (McDaniel & Phillips, 2018). Overall, the significance of this study lies in its potential to challenge dominant discourses on learner dropout and inform strategies, and practices that address male learner dropout, promote gender equality, and improve educational outcomes for all learners.

1.8. Clarification of Concepts

This section clarifies the various conceptualisations of key concepts in the study, such as Learner Dropout, Learner Voice, and Learner Leadership, to alleviate misconceptions, as many writers interpret these terms differently. Therefore, this section informs the reader of the study's conceptual understanding of these concepts.

1.8.1. *Learner dropout*

Learner dropout also referred to as “early school leaving” (Witte et al., 2013, p. 16), has been defined in several ways, such as (1) “leaving education without obtaining a **minimal** credential (most often a higher secondary education diploma).” Moreover, according to Potberg and Chetty (2017), as cited in Sing and Maringe (2021, p.459), learner dropout refers to (2) “learners that have left school before the final year of the **educational cycle** in which they are enrolled, without having completed an exit exam. Furthermore, according to Gul et al. (2013, p.120), learner dropout refers to (3) “students who leave their schools without **completion of their secondary school**”. These definitions emphasise important differences regarding how learner dropout is conceptualised. The first definition emphasises the acquiring of a minimal

credential. So, what is a minimal credential? The second definition focuses on completing an educational cycle, which could be viewed as the phase a learner is enrolled in (General Education and Training (GET) and Further Education and Training (FET)). The last one focuses on the completion of secondary school, which refers to attaining the South African National Senior Certificate (NSC, also known as the “matric”), which is taken at the end of Grade 12 (Hartnack, 2017). This latter definition is subscribed to by many authors writing about learner dropout and was used to conceptualise dropout in this study.

1.8.2. *Learner Voice*

Fielding (2001) and Mitra and Gross (2009) concur that learner voice refers to “the range of ways in which learners can share in decision-making in schools.” (as cited in Grant, 2015, p. 95). The concept of learner's voice is a crucial aspect of education, encompassing the ability of learners to express their opinions and influence policies that affect their learning and well-being. The Oxford Languages Dictionary defines voice as “a particular opinion or attitude expressed.” (Oxford Languages, n.d). In this study, learner voice is conceptualised as the ability of learners to express their views and inform decision-making without restraint or fear within the school environment.

1.8.3. *Learner Leaders*

Before conceptualising learner leadership, it is essential to define leadership in generic terms: leadership is to influence the actions of a group of people to reach a set target or common goal (Bush, 2007). Leadership is now recognised as no longer centralised and limited to formal authority figures such as the school principal (Grant & Nekondo, 2018). Leadership is viewed as being able to emanate from the learners themselves or even their parents, hence the development of platforms such as the RCL and the School Governing Body (SGB). Based on the definition of leadership provided by Bush (2007), it can be deduced that learner leadership refers to the influence learners can exert over other learners, teachers, structures and processes in the school to propel a common agenda, such as learner discipline or school safety. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has long recognised the power of learner leadership with the creation of the RCL platform. They further developed a programme intended at capacitating learners with leadership skills in which they explain that learner leadership must “provide training to other learners in order to prepare them to manage their learning and progress in school, and their overall success in school and life” (Department of Basic

Education, n.d.). Furthermore, a learner leader's responsibility includes modelling good behaviour, providing guidance and advice to other learners, being a source of information, assisting others in times of need, teaching other learners skills to succeed in school, and volunteering to help the school community. Hence, this paper defines a learner leader as a learner who forms part of the RCL executive committee and the class representative subcommittee. The DBE has long recognised the power of learner leadership with the creation of the RCL structure. It also developed a programme intended at capacitating learners with leadership skills in which they explain that learner leadership must "provide training to other learners in order to prepare them to manage their own learning and progress in school, and their overall success in school and life", (Department of Basic Education, n.d.). Furthermore, a learner leader's responsibility includes modelling good behaviour, providing guidance and advice to other learners, being a source of information, assisting others in times of need, teaching other learners skills to succeed in school, and volunteering to help the school community. On the basis of this, this paper defined a learner leader as a learner who forms part of the RCL executive committee and the class representative subcommittee; this is one who exercises agency and exerts influence over other learners and processes in the school in an attempt to contribute positively towards the school's development.

1.9. Overview of the Chapters

This paper consists of five chapters, which are summarised below:

Chapter One introduces and gives context to the study by providing its foundations and explaining the rationale and background that informed it. It further presents the study's problems, objectives, research questions, and significance. Lastly, it clarifies key concepts relating to the study.

Chapter Two provides a comprehensive analysis of the complex relationship between male learner dropouts, learner voices in decision-making, inclusive education, and strategies to reduce dropout by synthesising existing literature. This chapter underscored the interconnectedness of male learner dropout, learner voices, learner leadership and inclusive education, as well as strategies to counter dropouts, highlighting gaps in existing literature related to learner leaders' views on the male learner dropout in secondary schools in South

Africa. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the theoretical frameworks that inform the study.

Chapter Three presents and discusses the research methodology and design used in the study. It begins with a detailed presentation of the research design covering the research paradigm, approach, methodology, sampling, data generation method, data analysis strategy, quality assurance criteria, limitations and delimitations of the study.

Chapter Four presents and analyses the data collected, essentially discussing the quotations from the interviews with participants, discussing their meanings and supporting them with the relevant literature.

Chapter Five concludes the study, providing the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings and the researcher's recommendations based on them. It further details the study's implications for future research.

1.10. Conclusion

This chapter provides a context for the study. It discussed an overview of the historical context and challenges in the South African education system, focusing on dropout rates among Black male learners. It discusses a rationale, objectives and research questions as well as the significance of the study.

The subsequent chapter provides the literature review and the theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Introduction

This section provides a critical analysis of the existing literature on male learner dropout, learner voices, learner leadership, inclusive education, and strategies to counter dropouts. The ultimate goal is to create a conceptual framework that establishes a clear relationship between these phenomena and situate the research within existing knowledge. Firstly, this section delves into the literature on male learner dropouts in South African townships or rural schools. Secondly, it examines learner voice and learner leadership in school decision-making processes. Lastly, it explores using learners' voices to create an inclusive education system and curb male learner dropout rates.

These interconnected phenomena are explored through two significant theoretical lenses, Critical Theory and Empowerment Theory, which reveal systemic injustices and power dynamics in education and are frameworks for fostering learner agency as Critical Theory scrutinises power structures and social injustices within educational systems, advocating for transformative education to address systemic inequalities. On the other hand, Empowerment Theory emphasises the agency of marginalised groups, aiming to provide them with the tools to challenge oppressive systems and effect meaningful change.

Although there is substantial research on school dropout globally and in South Africa, limited attention has been paid to how learners themselves make sense of and respond to dropping out, particularly in contexts such as Mogale City. This study addresses this gap by centring learner leaders' voices to deepen understanding and inform interventions.

2.2. Male Learner Dropout in Secondary School

Dropout refers to leaving school before completing a qualification. While a global concern (UNESCO, 2023c), dropout patterns vary according to gender, socio-economic status, and locality. In South Africa, boys increasingly drop out due to intersecting factors such as academic failure, poverty, family obligations, emotional distress, and punitive disciplinary measures (Spaull et al., 2021; Desai et al., 2024). Critical Theory interprets dropout as a manifestation of structural oppression, where the education system fails to accommodate or affirm certain learners, particularly working-class boys. This marginalisation is perpetuated

through curricula, pedagogy, and discipline that reflect dominant norms while silencing alternative experiences and identities (Burns & Kehler, 2014). For instance, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital explains how schools valorise the knowledge, language, and behaviours of dominant groups, which positions working-class learners at a disadvantage (Farkas, 2018). This leads to symbolic violence where marginalised learners internalise feelings of inadequacy, contributing to disengagement and increased dropout (Burns & Kehler, 2014).

Scholars highlight how dominant masculinities may discourage academic engagement, favouring risk-taking or independence over compliance (Plummer, 2010). Yet, studies often fail to capture male learners' interpretations of disengagement or how they negotiate exclusion. Research that includes male learners' voices in unpacking dropout remains limited—constituting a central gap this study addresses.

Research has been conducted to investigate the reasons for, consequences, and solutions for learners dropping out of school (Sing & Maringe, 2021; Runhare et al., 2021; Gul et al., 2013). Several factors can lead to learners leaving school before completing their education, for example, historical family backgrounds, socioeconomic challenges, and bullying (Townsend et al., 2008), inadequate infrastructure, limited access to resources, language barriers, curriculum relevance, and social issues such as increasing academic pressures, subject specialisation, and the challenges of transitioning into higher education or the workforce (Statistics SA, 2021; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Furthermore, the effects of learner dropout are negative for the learners themselves, their immediate community, and the country as a whole. The economic implications are significant as “the progress of a nation is highly dependent on the education of its citizens” (Latif et al., 2015, p. 1511).

Dropout rates continue to be a persistent issue in many education systems, and researchers have extensively explored the dropout phenomenon in South Africa and globally (Hartnack, 2017; Witte et al., 2013; Patrinos, 2016). The amount of literature published on this issue suggests that education departments have recognised a significant and worrying increase in learner dropout rates (UNESCO, 2022). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to develop “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2023b, p.21), has been crucial in highlighting the causes of learner dropout rates.

Researchers have discovered that, in addition to the traditional reasons such as family commitments and disability, there are newly found reasons for dropout among the born-free generation of South Africans who grow up in a globalised, digital, multi-sensory, stimulating, and liberal society. According to Statistics SA (2021), male learners drop out of school because they find it boring and useless, which are interesting and outlying reasons that vary with gender.

There are limited studies that focus on learner dropouts from learners' perspectives. One recent critical study was conducted by Desai et al. (2024), which identified three key factors behind school dropout in South Africa: academic performance and career aspirations, social interactions, and family-related issues. Poor educational achievement was a significant reason, especially for females, while some males left due to feeling too old for their grades. Gender differences emerged, with males more likely to drop out due to school-related factors like conflicts with teachers or peers. At the same time, females were more impacted by family-related challenges such as financial difficulties, pregnancy, and a lack of support. Many participants initially felt relieved but later expressed regret over limited job prospects and social isolation. The study recommends multi-level interventions targeting schools, families, and policies to address the complex issue of school dropout and improve opportunities for youth in South Africa (Desai et al., 2024).

Noteworthy, Statistics SA (2021) states that the main reasons given by both males and females aged 7-18 for not attending any educational institution are illness and disability (22.7%), poor academic performance (21.2%), a lack of money for fees (19.5%), and family commitments (7.8%), such as getting married, minding children, and pregnancy. Females were more likely to cite these reasons than males (13.4% compared to 0.5%). Additionally, approximately 2.3% of individuals reported dropping out because they found education boring and useless. Males were more likely to feel this way than females.

A study conducted supports that the reason for school dropouts is sometimes the belief that education is boring and useless. The study shows that the factor of “not liking school” (Doll et al., 2013, p. 3) was also significant in causing dropouts, with a percentage of 26.4%. Notably, this reason was more common among males than females. Although this reason is not as popular as the aforementioned reasons, it is essential to acknowledge and address all reasons that lead to dropouts, as the EFA initiative’s mandate deems every statistic equally important because neglecting unpopular reasons can worsen the problem. It is also equally important to

consider learners' opinions when designing an inclusive education system, as ignoring their voices can hinder progress towards achieving the goals set in the NDP 2030.

According to the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996, chapter 2(3)(1) on compulsory attendance, it is mandatory for every parent to ensure that their child attends school from the age of seven until they reach the age of 15 or complete Grade 9, whichever comes first. This implies that education is compulsory up to Grade 9. Therefore, learners can *choose* whether to proceed to the next phase or cycle of Grades 10-12. Furthermore, learners who decide to leave school after completing Grade 9 have technically "finished school" (Branson et al., 2014, p. 114), especially now that the South African education department has announced the introduction of a General Education Certificate (GEC) at Grade 9 (Department of Basic Education, 2022). According to the Deputy Minister of Education, Dr Reginah Mhaule, the GEC is not to provide an exit point for learners but to "recognise a more holistic dashboard of learner capabilities and to support learner inclinations that are more fit for the purpose towards career pathing and self-knowledge linked to expanded educational tracks" (Mhlanga, 2021). Therefore, learners who leave school after completing Grade 9 have effectively completed their education up to that level. However, learners who drop out before completing Grade 9 may be considered dropouts.

Furthermore, the basic education system is divided into two phases: General Education and Training (GET) covering Grades R-9 and Further Education and Training (FET) covering Grades 10-12. This division means that learners have two educational cycles, which are continuous but separate. It is mandatory for learners to attend the whole course and attain the GEC in the first phase, which is compulsory. Additionally, if learners decide to start the second phase (FET), they must remain in the course until Grade 12. Those who do not complete the FET may be considered dropouts. This framing of learner dropout is significant, as it helps us understand where most dropouts come from in the system and enables us to implement measures that ease learners' transition into different phases of education. It also allows schools to make informed decisions regarding learners' readiness for FET. By doing this, retention rates may improve, and dropout rates may decrease, particularly if a learner who chooses to leave school at Grade 9 is given similar opportunities for skills development and training as those who reach Grade 12.

There is a significant amount of international literature that discusses why learners drop out of school. Maringe (2016), cited in Sing and Maringe (2021, p. 462), identified ten causes of school dropout in Mpumalanga, some of which are relevant to male learners in the sample. These reasons include academic failure, grade retention, absenteeism, family responsibilities, drug use, poor reading skills, traditional practices, overage, and poor teaching. The most common reason given by male learners (23%) is their inability to afford to stay in school. They are also most likely to have attended no-fee schools in rural areas in 2008 and live in households where the average per-capita household income is R450 per month, as compared to other dropouts whose average income is R600 per month (Branson et al., 2014, p. 113). According to Branson et al. (2014), dropout rates are higher for male learners than for female learners starting from Grade 6. By the time learners reached Grade 11 in 2008, nearly 40% of males and females had dropped out of the schooling system without completing matric by 2010. This gendered aspect of learner dropout is related to the reasons behind it. As research data shows, the focus is usually on the most common reason, which marginalises those with uncommon reasons for dropping out. The General Household Survey (GHS) (Statistics South Africa Statistics SA, 2021) can support the validity of these statistics.

According to Statistics SA (2021), learners do not complete their high school education due to factors such as financial constraints, family responsibilities, a lack of support, and disengagement with the curriculum. Dropout rates, however, are not the same across different demographics and regions. Historically disadvantaged groups, including learners from low-income backgrounds, rural areas, and marginalised communities (Gul et al., 2013), tend to have higher dropout rates. Moreover, males often exhibit higher dropout rates than females, indicating gender disparities. The causes of dropout may be intersectional (Gul et al., 2013). Comprehensive strategies, including targeted interventions and policy changes, are necessary to address these issues. However, experts argue that implementing these strategies is challenging in South Africa. According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), the country has a problem with implementing inclusive education due to the policy's vertical, top-down approach, which is not consultative with critical stakeholders like learners.

2.3. Learner Voices in Decision-making

Fielding (2001) and Mitra and Gross (2009) concur that learner voice refers to “the range of ways in which learners can share in decision-making in schools” (as cited in Grant, 2015, p.95).

The concept of learner voice is a crucial aspect of education; it encompasses the ability of learners to express their opinions and influence policies that affect their learning and well-being. According to Fielding (2001) authentic engagement in school governance improves learner agency, school responsiveness, and learning outcomes. The Oxford Languages Dictionary defines voice as “a particular opinion or attitude expressed” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). However, the concept of voice is not without its complexities and challenges. The idea of voice can be linked to power dynamics. Having a voice, therefore, implies having the ability or capacity to express it or the power to express it if necessary. This means that voice is intricately linked to power, and both may vary depending on the context. The concept of voice can conjure up feelings of confidence, assertiveness, and standing up for oneself, but it can also be associated with fear, shame, oppression, repression, and silence. This duality suggests that having a voice requires the ability or power to express oneself. Therefore, voice is closely linked to power, although both may be context-dependent. For example, an individual may possess power in one context and have a voice but be entirely powerless and voiceless in another. A learner may feel confident expressing their thoughts and ideas among peers or friends, but they may feel completely silenced in the presence of a teacher or any other figure of authority. This power dynamic is known as “modes of student voice,” (Batchelor, 2006, p.789). While some may argue that learner voicelessness is a sign of respect, it is more often a reflection of the unequal power dynamics of the relationship and may be used to marginalise learners. In the learner’s relationship with anyone of a “higher rank” than them, the learner is primarily powerless - silent, shameful, fearful, oppressed, and repressed. However, in an ideal educational context, learners should be able to participate, negotiate, and exercise their agency freely and equally with anyone in the school environment, without fear or shame. Given the learner’s vulnerability in the presence of ‘those who already possess the power’, “giving the vulnerable or at-risk students a voice has to be combined with meaningful hearing, listening and doing” (Sing, 2015, p.35). Simply indicating that learners should express themselves is not enough; the environment must also be enabling (Mabovula, 2009).

Senge (1990) defines an ideal learning organisation as a place where people continually expand their capacity to create desired results and learn to see the whole together. Furthermore, in a learning environment, leadership is described as “relational, a dialectic process which engages the human agency of all members of the organisation” (Gunter, 2005; Angus, 2006; Grant, 2015, p.95). RCLs provide a space for legitimate struggle and are the only vehicle for learners to drive change in the learning environment; RCLs are, therefore, a platform for learners'

voices. Despite policies mandating learner representation, such as through RCLs, practice often limits voice to superficial consultation (Mncube, 2012; 2008). Learners are frequently excluded from shaping curricula, discipline policies, or school priorities. From a Critical Theory perspective, this exclusion stems from hierarchical power relations that frame learners as passive recipients of knowledge (Rausch, 2012). For boys who already feel marginalised, such exclusion reinforces alienation. Gendered experiences of voice remain under-explored in South African scholarship—a gap this study tackles by focusing on how male learners experience and enact voice in school governance.

2.4. Learner Leadership

The concept of learner leadership is developing in education, particularly in Africa (Grant & Nekondo, 2018). In South Africa, learner leadership is framed by formal, legally mandated structures, such as School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and RCL based on policy provisions that aim to democratise education by including parents and learners in school governance (Duma, 2014; Grant & Kajee, 2023). For instance, the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, subsection 11(1) states that:

“A Representative Council of learners (RCL) at the school must be established at every public school enrolling learners in the eighth grade or higher, and such council is the only recognised and legitimate representative learner body at the school.”

Based on this provision, learners have the right to participate fairly in school affairs and make decisions as stakeholders through RCLs. This provision aims to democratise education by promoting cooperative and participatory school governance. Accordingly, Hunt (2014) states that the RCLs are learner-led councils representing learners and their school concerns; as such, three RCL members will sit alongside parents and staff on the SGB (Department of Education, 2014). Furthermore, prefect systems may operate in schools as subcommittees of the RCL. This framework enables the establishment of learner leadership and serves as a basis for amplifying learner voices in schools. Regarding this, Grant (2015, p.105) argues that “the development of learners' voice is the first step in developing their leadership”, locating the discussion of learner leadership in the context of learner's voice.

Other researchers frame it in the discussion of democratic education and participatory democracy (Mncube, 2008; Mncube, 2012) and distributed and transformative leadership (Duma, 2014; Grant & Kajee, 2023). Many studies thus base their conceptualisations of learner

leadership on these structures and the policies that mandate them (Grant & Kajee, 2023; Duma, 2014; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021a), with some referring to it as “Learner Governorship” (Duma, 2014, p.1811). It is widely understood as the collaboration of learners in the RCL with other agents in the school in pursuit of change (Grant & Kajee, 2023). Interestingly, very few studies conceptualise learner leadership outside of the RCL framework. For example, they do not address the phenomenon of learners leading their peers and collaborating with other bodies even if they are not in formal positions or do not hold titles because the concept is developing (Grant & Nekondo, 2018).

Research studies focus on the limitations hindering learner leadership development (Mncube, 2012; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021a; Grant & Nekondo, 2018). According to Mncube (2012), while policy stipulations are clear, there are many discrepancies surrounding the implementation, as learners do not always play their full role in school decision-making because principals and teachers maintain hierarchical, top-down leadership styles, rendering this idea impotent because learners are seen as subjects to be instructed, not as agents that can contribute to change. Duma (2014) identifies barriers such as a lack of support from teachers, interference in learner activities, and a general lack of understanding of learner roles, suggesting that there should be a greater focus on the implementation of RCL policies in research studies focusing on learners’ participation in school governing bodies in South Africa (Hunt, 2014; Grant, 2015; Whitehead, 2009) as well as on the expanding notion of learner leadership.

South African education policy encourages learner leadership, yet implementation tends to reinforce adult control and symbolic participation (Grant, 2014). Christie (2008) asserts that symbolic policies may present unattainable ideals, which is significant because RCLs are meant to drive change and promote learner rights, but in reality, they are not. This is supported by Kadjengo and Shakalepo (2021b), who found that policy limitations hinder learner leadership, such as insufficient policy frameworks and guidelines that direct the development of learner leadership capacity. Moreover, Kadjengo and Shakalepo (2021b) found that learner confidence, peer pressure and language barriers hinder learner leadership development. Furthermore, power dynamics between learners and “adults” (Grant & Kajee, 2023) have hindered this progress towards learner leadership development (Mncube, 2008), and these dynamics need to be addressed to enable the idea of learners equally participating in school decision-making. Clearly, simply including the RCL in the SGB but not valuing their voice

and vision is futile. To empower learners and address pressing issues like male learner dropout, schools must embrace a learning organisation approach where collective aspirations are set free and new thinking patterns are nurtured.

Empowerment Theory reframes leadership as the process of becoming capable of initiating change within one's environment (Praszkier, 2016). It encourages recognising informal leadership forms and supporting all learners—not just elite representatives, in exercising influence. Researchers are venturing into designing leadership development tools for learners to address the gap. Grant and Kajee (2023) describe the 'Learners Lead' intervention, which aims to develop learner voice and leadership through school change projects and provides structured opportunities for learners to exercise agency. Grant and Nekondo (2018) highlight the potential of leadership clubs, arguing that given appropriate forums, learners can articulate what matters to them and develop a voice. These studies support the aims of this study as both approaches emphasise the importance of empowering learners to express their voices and take on leadership roles within their educational settings. These leadership development tools illustrate how fostering learner agency can facilitate meaningful change and enhance the overall educational experience.

While literature acknowledges formal leadership structures, less attention is given to how boys lead informally, especially when perceived as disruptive or apathetic. This study explores how learners navigate, challenge, and reshape dominant narratives through leadership.

2.5. Inclusive education

In recent years, there has been a significant shift from special education towards inclusive education (Engelbrecht, 2006), which aims to address the problems associated with segregated schooling systems that exclude individuals with disabilities. The move towards inclusive education is seen as a necessary response to the changing needs of the education system, politics, and the economy. Moreover, it highlights the nuances of exclusion, showing that exclusion from education is multifaceted and can occur in various ways (Kearney, 2011). Inclusive education is intended to promote participation and success for all learners, regardless of background or ability (Engelbrecht, 2006). In practice, however, there is ignorance of the

exclusion experienced by other marginalised groups, including boys. Many male learners face exclusion not due to special educational needs, but because of socio-economic pressures, behavioural issues, or emotional distress—factors often pathologised rather than addressed holistically (Walton & Bekker, 2016).

Exclusion can be overt or subtle, resulting in what Lewin (2009) and Walton and Bekker (2016) describe as "zones of exclusion." These zones range from Zones 0 to 6 and illustrate the complexity of educational exclusion. For example:

“Zone 5 includes those children who enter lower secondary but who failed to progress to the end of the cycle... reasons for dropout include poor performance, affordability, loss of motivation... zone 6 contains lower secondary children at risk of dropout... some will be silently excluded though enrolled and at risk as a result of poor attendance and low achievement.” (Lewin, 2009, p.157)

Understanding these zones is critical to ensure that inclusive education policies are implemented to the fullest extent possible. Doing so is essential in ensuring that inclusive education remains true to its purpose and that all learners have equal opportunities to learn and succeed (Slee, 2018).

Due to the extent of exclusion in education, as illustrated above through the zones of exclusion, recent policy developments have pushed for a deeper understanding and implementation of the inclusion policy (du Plessis, 2013). There is now a reverberating call for EFA that emphasises the need to recognise that learners may face various barriers to learning; some may be easy to identify, and some may be hidden. Regardless, education must provide support for all of them. Thus, inclusive education can be defined differently; one prominent definition comes from Goransson and Niholm (2014), the Community Definition, which recognises that inclusive education is not just about structurally including those excluded due to various factors but about creating communities that prioritise equity, care, justice, and diversity to ensure the successful participation of all learners. This approach can play a crucial role in addressing male learner dropout rates by valuing the supportive community, which is particularly important for male learners who may face unique challenges.

Inclusive education is an effective way to reduce male learner dropout rates and improve academic achievement. By creating an environment that values and supports all learners, inclusive policies can lead to greater success for everyone. However, according to Kern (2022), South Africa struggles to implement inclusive policies effectively. Despite efforts to promote inclusion, there are feelings of exclusion, high dropout rates, and other indicators that suggest the education system is failing. Sayed and Soudien (2005) argue that the decentralisation of education policy has created various forms of inclusion and exclusion, leading to a disjuncture between policy intent and effect. Walton and Engelbrecht (2022) argue that our education system needs re-examination to identify path dependencies and emergencies hindering our transformation. This study contends that inclusion must consider intersecting factors like gender, class, and culture. A truly inclusive approach recognises boys' lived realities, challenges deficit narratives, and cultivates environments where all learners can belong and succeed. The literature seldom links male learner dropout with inclusive education, especially through learners' voices—a gap this research addresses.

2.6. Inclusive education strategies to counter dropout rates

Strategies for making education more inclusive to lower dropout rates are diverse. Research shows that financial aid and scholarships help ease economic pressures that often lead to dropouts, particularly for girls in developing countries (Yadav, 2023). Furthermore, improving school infrastructure, ensuring safe transportation, creating inclusive curricula, enhancing teacher training, and encouraging community participation all foster supportive learning environments (Yadav, 2023; Farooq, 2013). Also, addressing parental factors, such as neglect and low literacy levels, is equally important (Farooq, 2013). Others indicate that achieving spatial equity in resource distribution and providing paramedical services for inclusive education is essential to minimise dropout risks (Ibourk & Raoui, 2024). However, funding mechanisms can impact dropout rates; budget cuts may lead to higher dropout levels in areas with increasing learner populations (Gubbels et al., 2019). When applied collectively, these strategies can facilitate equal access to quality education and reduce dropout rates across diverse student groups.

In South Africa, a number of initiatives have been launched to minimise school dropouts. These encompass differentiated instruction, teacher training, and stakeholder collaboration (Mankgele, 2024). Nevertheless, challenges in implementation arise from limited resources and enduring historical inequalities (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Although some progress has

been made in removing barriers to learning for many learners, the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education still falls short of policy expectations (Maher, 2009). To foster a successful educational approach, the establishment of full-service schools and a transition from a dual-system mindset to an inclusive framework are essential (Naicker, 2017). Information and advocacy initiatives are vital yet often neglected elements in reaching inclusive education objectives (Maher, 2009).

Moreover, as outlined in Runhare et al.'s (2021, p.591) study, schools have adopted several strategies to prevent learner dropout, including the implementation of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), establishing a "no-fee school" system, providing personal and family counselling, offering engaging extra- or co-curricular activities, promoting parental involvement in school affairs, and fostering collaboration between the community and school administration to monitor learners. The authors argue that a strengthened partnership between schools and the community is necessary to ensure equal access to education for all children. Creating an inclusive education system requires shared responsibility between schools and communities. This community-focused approach supports involving learner voices to develop new forms of 'learner leadership', where students bridge the gap with school leaders and support their peers. Such learner leadership could help address issues like bullying, truancy, and suicide. Considering learner opinions is crucial to ensure the credibility and value of their education. However, despite optimistic policies, bridging the gap between vision and practice in South African schools remains a complex challenge, necessitating systemic solutions and a deep understanding of learning obstacles (Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Naicker, 2017).

2.7. Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks were applied in this study to examine male learner dropouts and the usefulness of RCLs in understanding and challenging structures that cause this in South African public high schools. The first one is the Critical Theory, followed by the Empowerment Theory.

2.7.1 *Critical Theory*

Critical Theory focuses on analysing power structures, social injustices, and transformation, as per Morrow and Brown (2012). It expands from Marxist thought by challenging social reproduction and power dynamics based on economic activity. It is a unique theory

encompassing “a vision for realising certain values ” (Morrow & Brown, 2012, p. 5), such as transformation and justice. According to Kellner (2003), “a critical theory of education involves conceiving what education could be and seeing how radicalising education could help change society”. This framework can help transform education by understanding how societal inequalities, gender norms, and cultural biases affect male learners’ educational experiences, leading to dropout from the learners' perspective. It encourages questioning and challenging oppressive systems by looking at how educational structures reproduce social inequality through curriculum, pedagogy, and discipline (Lamsal, 2024). Hence, it is useful for centring learner leaders’ voices in the critical analysis of educational dynamics that lead to male learner dropout.

2.7.2 *Empowerment Theory*

The second theory is the Empowerment theory. According to Cairns (1994, p.9), “empowerment is a multifaceted concept, and the assumption that it deals with emancipating the marginalised depends largely on how the concept is given meaning.” In our analysis of the concept of empowerment, we must first understand power (Inglis, 1997). A *powerful* description of this notion is found in Gross (1985 cited in Cairns, 1994, p. 5), who stated that “power is to be able,” and thus, all people must *be able* to pursue their desires without barriers. Naturally, this has its limitations depending on contexts and negotiations with other agents of power, as we all exercise it in various ways. Accordingly, Cairns (1994, p. 9) states that “power cannot be created nor destroyed—merely redistributed or reallocated.” This refers to the reality that power precedes us; like energy, it cannot and need not be transferred to another; it comes from within. This highlights that all individuals have the potential *to be*; the challenge lies in creating environments that enable them. Thus, the concept of empowerment and its theories become complex. Empowerment fundamentally involves ensuring that those groups typically marginalised and oppressed have the opportunity to *be* without hindrances. Empowerment Theory, therefore, serves as a framework for understanding and promoting the process of enablement.

According to Cairns (1994, p.2), empowerment in education is a move into a more “learner-managed and controlled paradigm”, meaning rather than sticking to a deficit model that views learners as objects to be acted upon, empowerment refers to an approach where learners take charge of their learning processes, and are not just passive recipients of information. Instead,

they actively manage their learning environment, set their own goals, and engage with the material in a way that suits their individual needs and preferences. Empowerment theory provides a valuable framework for understanding learner leaders' perspectives on addressing male learner dropout. It emphasises autonomy, self-directed learning, and personal responsibility in the educational experience. This approach advocates for a bottom-up method, with learner leaders actively engaged in seeking solutions and advocating for change within the education system. It can help elucidate learner leaders' perceived solutions, the resources and support they possess, and how their perspectives can influence educational policies. It informs this study's focus on how learners can exercise leadership and contribute to transforming school culture.

2.8 Conclusion

By synthesising existing literature, this chapter included various identified factors contributing to male learner dropout rates, including socioeconomic challenges, curriculum relevance, and gender disparities. It also highlighted that it is important to address the common reasons for dropout and less conventional ones, such as perceptions of education as boring or useless. This chapter also provided a framework for exploring the intricate issues surrounding male learner dropout rates in South African public high schools. Through the lenses of Critical Theory and Empowerment Theory, this chapter illuminated the systemic challenges and transformative possibilities within educational settings by analysing the complex relationship between male learner dropouts, learner voices in decision-making, and inclusive education. By interweaving *Critical Theory* and *Empowerment Theory*, the study offers a dual-lens approach to educational exclusion: one that diagnoses power imbalances and systemic inequalities (critical lens), and another that highlights pathways for agency, inclusion, and transformation (empowerment lens). This dual framework strengthens the argument that dropout is not merely a learner's personal choice but a systemic failure that leadership must urgently address through participatory, learner-informed interventions.

The next chapter discusses the methodology and the research design.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Introduction

This section delves into the theoretical frameworks, research design, and methodologies employed in examining male learner dropout rates in South African public high schools, with a particular focus on the views of learner leaders in RCL structures. This chapter also outlines the research paradigm, approach, methodology, participant sampling, data generation method, data analysis strategy, quality criteria, research ethics, and anticipated limitations of the study, setting the stage for a comprehensive investigation into male learner dropout phenomena.

3.2. Research Design and Methodology

This section gives an account of the research paradigm, approach and methodological choices underpinning this research.

3.2.1 Research Paradigm: Interpretivism

The research paradigm that underpinned this research was interpretivism. Ontologically and epistemologically, interpretivism assumes that our realities are varied, socially constructed and limited or enabled by the language, symbols and power dynamics at our disposal in a particular space and time (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Saunders et al., 2019). It, therefore, becomes significant to constantly question and negotiate meanings. This interpretive position requires the researcher to understand and interpret the participant's meaning in the context. In other words, the researcher must consider the social, political, economic, and moral contexts when analysing deconstructions and voices (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Moreover, Saunders et al. (2019, p.150) indicate that this could be through challenging and or representing participants' narratives in "texts, images, conversations, voices...". However, Packwood and Sikes (1996) pinpoint a danger in simply providing narratives of people as research, as it may lead to a lack of enhanced accounts that provide profound and valuable ways of seeing the world and understanding phenomena; this is what they call the "cycle of eternal relativity" (Packwood & Sikes, 1996, p. 335). Cautiously, the realities of male learners are sought through the stories learner leaders have to tell about their experiences, their views, and their perspectives of learner dropout, which are real, valid and legitimate knowledge (Packwood & Sikes, 1996).

3.2.2 Research Approach: Qualitative

The research approach choices made must be coherent and consistent with the philosophical paradigm of interpretivism. According to Mertens (2007), this choice is about more than simply choosing between quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. It also is about “how do I collect data about the reality of human experiences in such a way that I can feel confident that I have indeed captured that reality” (Mertens, 2007, p. 215). This qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings and interpretations surrounding the phenomenon of male learner dropout, as well as its relationship with the underrepresentation of learner voices in leadership and management. The exploratory approach enabled the researcher to explore the subjective and socially constructed perspectives of learner leaders on the issue within their school context (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.2.3 Methodology: Case Study

According to Mertens (2007), the assumptions regarding methodology pertain to choosing a suitable methodological design for conducting a research study. This study adopted a case study methodology. A case study “is an in-depth inquiry into a topic or phenomenon within its real-life setting” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 196). In a case study, the goal is to understand the dynamics of the topic by exploring the interactions between the participants and their context; achieving this could be done using semi-structured interviews because they foreground participants’ narratives. Due to the contextual grounding of this study, the case in question was the male learner dropouts in the school.

3.2.4 Participant Sampling: Purposive

The selection of schools follows a specific and purposeful process rather than just for the convenience of the researcher. Purposive selection selects participants “that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information” (Kelly, 2010, as cited in Campbell et al., 2020, p.654). Therefore, learners’ opinions must be included in every educational conversation, and their voices should be valued equally if not more than those of other stakeholders. The criteria for selection were that the schools that were experiencing high levels of learner dropout consistently and they were based in Mogale City. Moreover, because of the composition of Mogale City, one school from the urban and another one from the rural areas were selected for deeper insights. Recommendations from district officials were solicited to guide the specific

selection of schools. Schools such as School B, which is in the rural region, and School A, in one of the urban areas of Mogale City, fit the criteria.

Deciding on RCL members as participants was crucial as they offered first-hand insights into the challenges learners face, which teachers or adults may not fully perceive. RCL helps bridge communication gaps, making it easier for students to share honest reasons for dropping out without fear of judgment. As learner leaders, they can identify school-level issues while also representing diverse learner voices from different backgrounds. I believed that their participation in this study would ensure learner-centred and practical recommendations effective in addressing dropout risks.

The study initially aimed to select five male learners from each school who were part of the RCL and prefect system. I selected those who served as learner representatives in the SGB. The rationale was that these learners would have somewhat been part of disciplinary hearings. Due to a lack of male representation in these roles, the sample was adjusted to include any RCL and prefect members, regardless of gender. The final sample consisted of five females and six males. I requested that the Teacher Liaison Officer (TLO) help identify and recruit the participants, all of whom were informed about the research and given the opportunity to express interest. The choice to participate came from the learners themselves after partaking in an information-sharing session where the research was explained thoroughly, and each was handed a Participant Information Sheet, Learner Assent and Parent Consent Form (See Appendices 3 and 4)

3.2.5 Data Generation Method: Open-ended, Semi-structured Interviews

The study used open-ended, semi-structured interviews that allowed participants flexibility and freedom in the research process. Although the questions were predetermined, the interview guide allowed for the flexibility to probe and review the interview questions (Saunders et al., 2019). In-depth interviews were viewed as a suitable method for data generation, as they enable researchers to delve deeper into participants' perspectives and elicit rich data (Berg, 2007, cited in Alshenqeeti, 2014). Interviews were conducted at the schools and scheduled for the participants' convenience. Each participant was interviewed once, with durations ranging from 20 to 70 minutes. At the start, participants were reminded of their rights to withdraw or omit responses, and they presented consent forms before the interviews proceeded (see

Appendix 6: Schedule of interview questions). Where needed, the interviews were adapted and conducted in the participants' home languages of isiXhosa and Setswana, which were then transcribed and translated into English.

3.2.6 Data Analysis Strategy: Thematic Analysis

In this research project, data analysis was guided by the principles of thematic analysis, which is in line with qualitative approaches. Thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic approach for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, Nowell et al. (2017, p.2) elaborate that thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes found within a data set”. Because this study's primary data generation method is open-ended, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, chosen for their ability to elicit rich narrative data and provide insights into participants' perspectives (Alshenqeeti, 2014), a thematic analysis seemed suited. This section outlines the data analysis process, including transcription, coding, theme development, and interpretation.

The data analysis followed a systematic approach, and this study used iterative steps suggested by Gibson (2003):

3.2.6.1. Transcription: Strict Verbatim Transcription

Firstly, the data was transcribed verbatim from the recordings to avoid tampering with it (see supplementary file 1, Transcriptions). The interviews were recorded using a laptop and transcribed using Otter.ai. Each transcription was then manually verified by listening to the recordings and correcting any transcription errors. All transcripts were printed, organised, and manually annotated.

3.2.6.2. Thematic Organisation: Hybrid

The data was organised using both deductive and inductive (hybrid) thematic organisation. According to Proudfoot (2023), “this combined approach helps to ensure that the voices of the participants are valued while simultaneously allowing for more theory-led analysis.” In this study, a deductive coding was applied based on the structure of the interview schedule, which

had be developed to align with the research questions, while inductive coding allowed for emergent themes from the data itself.

The first stage of data organisation involved grouping participants responses according to interview questions they answered- particularly those aligned with the two central research questions. (see Appendix 6, Interview Schedule, Body;). Responses to each interview question were arranged in a matrix format, with each question forming a row and each participant occupying a column. Three separate tables were developed based on the sections of the interview schedule: one for icebreaker questions, one aligned with Research Question 1, and one aligned with Research Question 2.

3.2.6.3. *Coding: Thematic*

According to Naeem et al. (2023), “thematic analysis is a research method used to identify and interpret patterns or themes in a data set; it often leads to new insights and understanding.” It involves transcribing and analysing the interview data and identifying recurring themes, patterns, and categories that emerge from the data more organised. This allows for a deep understanding of the experiences of male learners at risk of dropping out and how the learner leaders mitigate this.

In this study, the coding included sorting and categorising the data into clusters or themes. The process began with colour coding each participants response. This visual strategy allowed for quick identification of response patterns and maintained participant clarity. Then, this was printed and analysed manually to highlight potential themes that emerged, annotation was done on the printed matrix using handwriting and sticky notes. Key words, ideas or recurring sentiments were tagged, oftne creating codes for a single response. These codes were then compiled in a notebook and refined using conceptual maps, visual clustering, and word clouds (via Mentimeter) to visualise dominante responses. From this, a list of 36 emergent themes came, and by association, they were grouped into umbrella themes, refined through consultation with the supervisor and iteratively reviewed during the data presentation phase. The final thematic structure included 10 overarching themes with 20 subthemes.

A refined Theme Coding Matrix was created in Word, named Matching Data to Themes and Themes to Data, where similar verbatim quotes were put together under one column in a table. Because each participant's quotes were coloured differently, it was easier to track and see the relationships between the data. Moreover, this helped to find meanings in the data that tied all the stories together despite language and context.

A detailed table capturing all participant responses aligned with theme was developed to organise the data thematically. Due to its length (51 pages), it will be availed upon request.

In addition to digital matrices created in Microsoft Word, the initial coding, highlighting, and theme development were carried out manually on printed transcripts. These included the use of sticky notes, colour coding, handwritten memos, and mind maps to trace and refine emerging themes. Scanned images of these manual analysis steps may be provided if requested as evidence of the analytic rigour applied during the thematic analysis process.

3.2.7 Data Interpretation: Critical Thematic Analysis

The interpretation phase involved synthesising the identified themes to answer the research questions and provide meaningful insights. Interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives, allowing them to "speak in their own voice" (Berg, 2007, in Alshenqeeti, 2014). This enabled a deeper look into the perceptions of learners and the culture of the school. Interpretations were critical of the power structure, systemic issues and marginalisation that came through the data. The interpretations were further backed up by literature to strengthen them. These steps assisted in ensuring upholding quality, finding possible and plausible explanations for the findings and reviewing the work. Throughout the data analysis process, ethical considerations were paramount. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were preserved, and their contributions were respected.

3.2.8 Quality Criteria

The quality criteria for qualitative research include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 217). Moreover, researcher reflexivity is a significant aspect of ensuring transparency and the quality of qualitative research. The practical measures to ensure quality, as elaborated on by Korstjens and Moser (2017), were rigorously followed.

3.2.8.1. Credibility

I ensured credibility during data analysis through a process of reflecting, sifting, exploring, judging relevance and meaning and developing themes that accurately depicted the experiences of the participants. I provided verbatim quotes as far as possible to maintain the originality of the data. The translated texts were proofed by confirming their meaning with participants. Furthermore, the findings were supported by literature to reinforce

3.2.8.2. Dependability

To ensure dependability, researchers must demonstrate that others can replicate their findings (Saunders et al., 2019). To do this, I maintained a thorough audit trail that documented my research process, from data collection to analysis. This included detailed notes, audio recordings, transcripts, and coding activities so that others could replicate the findings as noted above.

3.2.8.3. Transferability

To ensure the transferability of the findings, I provided rich, detailed descriptions of my research context, participants, and the research process. This helped readers evaluate the applicability of my findings to their own contexts. I provided a clear explanation of my sampling strategy and rationale, allowing readers to assess whether my sample is similar to the population they are interested in.

3.2.8.4. Confirmability

Lastly, to ensure confirmability, a copy of the 11 transcriptions of all interviews is available for scrutiny. This helped establish transparency in my research process. Furthermore, the process of member-checking assisted in determining the accuracy of the transcriptions, as wherever there was confusion, I went back to clarify.

3.2.9 Research Ethics

Axiology pertains to values and ethics in research. Under interpretivism, axiology is about how much a researcher recognises the influence of their values and beliefs on their research, as well as the set of rules that dictate how researchers should behave when interacting with participants

(Saunders et al., 2019). The researcher must be reflexive in the research process by being aware of their position of power and its influence on the research. This requires the researcher to answer these questions, “What role do I play as the researcher? Am I a co-creator of knowledge or simply an observer?” and “Should I be close to or at a distance from the participants to understand their experience?”. Of course, answering these questions required an enquiry into what being close to the participants means, especially considering that they are minors.

I viewed myself as a co-creator of knowledge and thus should be close to the participants to understand and capture their experiences meaningfully. Closeness means being accessible and trustworthy to them without compromising on boundaries, much like a therapist would behave. Both the researcher and research would be embedded in power relations, so I portrayed high levels of reflexivity when making any choices and conclusions. Thus, a balanced axiology was assumed (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Fundamentally, ethical considerations are to ensure that the participants are in no way harmed. For this, the researcher has to consider, “What is considered ethical or moral behaviours? How do I address ethics when conducting research in culturally complex communities? How do I address the ethical dilemmas that arise in the research context?” (Mertens, 2007, p. 215). This research prioritised ethical considerations to protect the rights and well-being of participants. Informed consent and assent were obtained, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured during data collection, analysis, and reporting. Ethical approval was sought from the Wits Ethics Committee, and permission to conduct research was sought from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) as well as the local education district.

Data reporting ensured participant confidentiality and anonymity and adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Moreover, before disseminating the report, I shared the findings with the participants to validate and verify the interpretations made from their perspectives, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Furthermore, The ethical considerations for this study included cultivating mutual respect between the researcher and participants by setting ground rules early on. The research involved risks, such as potential emotional implications for learners due to the sensitive nature of the probing. To mitigate this, voluntary participation was promoted, and all harm was minimised. Additionally, participants and their parents were assured of confidentiality, anonymity,

informed consent, and assent. Other maintained ethical values were “integrity, fairness, and open-mindedness” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 257). This involves being honest and transparent in your actions and promoting accuracy. The researcher complied with the ethical recommendations of the Wits School of Education Ethics Committee and participated in an ethics course for competency.

3.2.10 Limitations of the study

Recognising the subjectivity inherent in qualitative research, this section acknowledges this study’s limitations. Limitations refer to “the matters and occurrences that arise in a study which are out of the researcher’s control. They limit the extent to which a study can go” (Simon & Goes, 2013). According to Simon and Goes (2013), qualitative studies face limitations related to validity, amongst other things. This study had several limitations. The small sample size of 11 participants from two schools limits the ability to generalise the findings. The purposive sampling of schools with high dropout rates may not reflect perspectives from schools with lower dropout rates. Additionally, the voices of learner leaders were not fully representative, as there were fewer male than female participants in the RCL. Further, some learners struggled with English, requiring translation, which could affect the credibility of the data. Despite these limitations, the researcher sought to ensure an accurate capture of participants’ accounts by probing deeply and sending transcripts for confirmation.

3.2.11 Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations refer to “the limitations consciously set by the authors themselves... concerned with the boundaries or limits of their work so the study’s aims and objectives do not become impossible to achieve” (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The study was delimited to explore the dropout of male learners in secondary schools; it excluded the experiences of females because of the sentiment that male learners’ voices and experiences are underrepresented, and it excluded those males who dropped out of primary schools. This was done to ensure that the study targeted the stage where most male learners drop out—high school. Lastly, it focused on the learner leaders' views due to the limited scope of the study.

3.3. Conclusion

Chapter 3, discussing an interpretive paradigm, employing qualitative research methods, and emphasising participant voices, sought to uncover the nuanced experiences and perspectives of learner leaders. Ethical considerations are paramount, ensuring the protection of participants and the integrity of the research process. While the study anticipated certain limitations inherent in qualitative research, it offered valuable insights into male learner dropout phenomena and the potential of RCLs in mitigating these challenges. Ultimately, this research contributed to the advancement of inclusive and empowering educational practices, fostering environments where all learners can thrive.

CHAPTER 4: DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, the research design and methodology used to gather the data were detailed. In this section, the data derived from semi-structured interviews with 11 members of the Representative Council of Learners from two secondary schools in Gauteng West District is presented and analysed. The data collected resulted in the identification of nine key themes. These themes are thoroughly presented and analysed in alignment with the following primary research questions of the study:

- a) What are the learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school?
- b) What strategies and recommendations do learner leaders propose for creating an inclusive education system that effectively counters dropout rates?

4.2. Profiling the Participants

The interviews were conducted with 11 RCL members in two secondary schools in Gauteng West District. The participants' experiences in the RCL varied. Still, their perceptions of challenges leading to male learner dropout and recommendations were informed by their profound experiences as learners who had been in the system for ten or more. The information about the participants is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Profiling the Participants

Participant	Pseudonym	School	Role in RCL	Gender	Grade
1	Likhona	A	Secretary	Female	11
2	Thato	A	President	Male	11
3	Siphamandla	A	Prefect	Male	11
4	Amber	A	Prefect	Male	10
			Former		
5	Musawenkosi	A	President	Female	12
6	Siphokazi	B	President	Female	11
7	Nikita	B	Prefect	Male	10

8	Sipho	B	Deputy President	Male	11
9	Prudence	B	Treasurer	Female	10
10	Bulelwa	B	Deputy Secretary	Female	10
11	Owami	B	Secretary	Male	10

The table presents a thorough overview of the individuals involved in the study, outlining their pseudonyms, school affiliations, roles within the RCL, gender, and grade levels. It illustrates a diverse set of learner leaders from two different schools, referred to as School A and School B, who hold a range of leadership positions, including President, Deputy President, Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Treasurer, and Prefect. The participants encompass both male and female learners across Grades 10 to 12, allowing for an examination of learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school and recommendations across various educational levels. Through the use of pseudonyms, the data safeguards the confidentiality of the participants, facilitating an exploration of the research questions while respecting their privacy.

4.3. Themes

Ten themes were derived from the data obtained through semi-structured interviews with participants. The interviews aimed to explore the challenges experienced by male learners in schools, leading to dropouts, as well as the recommendations provided by RCL members to address these challenges. This chapter presents the discussions structured around the following themes and sub-themes:

Table 2: Themes and Subthemes

	THEMES	SUBTHEMES
What are the learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school?	1. Toxic School Culture: Educational Dynamics, Authority Structures	- Teacher-learner dynamics - Learner indiscipline and Autonomy Vs Teacher authority

		• Academic pressures and Barriers to learning • Gender issues
	2. Social Pressures: Substance Abuse, Peer Pressure, Bullying and Violence	• Peer pressure • Substance abuse • Bullying • Violence
	3. Dysfunctional Family Institution	• Lack of parental support for academics • Poverty and family responsibility
	4. Alternative Paths and Opportunities	• Lack of value from education • Work opportunities
What strategies and recommendations do learner leaders propose for creating an inclusive education system that effectively counters dropout rates?	5. Recognition of Representative Council of Learners	
	6. Holistic Learner Support and Well-being	• Gender equity: Remembering the boy child • Mental health support • Collaboration with family institution
	7. Inclusive Educational Curriculum and Instruction	• Learner centred Pedagogical Content Knowledge

		• Curriculum integration of art stream and sports • Refining existing educational programmes
	8. Enhanced School Environment and Safety	• Abolition of corporal punishment • Environmental safety and infrastructure
	9. Effective School Governance and Learner Leadership	• Recognition of RCL bodies • Collaborative policymaking
	10. Teacher Emotional Intelligence Training	

4.4.Learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school

The theme of learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school encompasses four sub-themes. These include Toxic School Culture: Educational Dynamics and Authority Structures; Social Pressures: Substance abuse, peer pressure, Bullying and Violence; Dysfunctional Family Institution and Opportunity Cost of Education. Below is a discussion of each sub-theme, exploring how they interplay and contribute to the overall issue of school dropout among male learners.

4.4.1 Toxic School Culture: Educational Dynamics and Authority Structures

From the interviews, participants highlighted multiple aspects of the school culture that contribute to male learners' decision to drop out of school, including instances of strained interactions between teachers and learners, unmet expectations, a lack of academic support, poor academic performance, unhealthy power dynamics and even gender discrimination. These diverse elements of the classroom environment are interwoven into the school culture through its norms, values and routines (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002, p.6) and are a source of frustration for many learners; hence, they emanate strongly from the data.

4.4.1.1. Teacher-Learner Dynamics

When asked about the factors contributing to male learners dropping out, the participants' responses revealed negative interactions between teachers and learners, wherein, in most instances, learners were at the receiving end due to the power held by teachers in the classroom context. This is sensible because the teacher's role includes mediating classroom dynamics (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002, p.7). Therefore, how the teacher mediates the classroom dynamics sets the tone for the class, determining whether it becomes a supportive, inclusive and democratic social environment or a site of suppression, humiliation, shame, intimidation and confrontation. An example of negative interactions between teachers and learners leading to dropout is shared by Thato, thus: *"how the teachers interact with them"*. Other participants edified this view, stating:

Musawenkosi

"This guy was repeating a grade... We found him in Grade 11. Then, ma'am kept on reminding him, saying, 'We did this work last year; you can't tell me that you don't

understand'. The teacher used to tease the guy just out of nowhere... It was those kinds of things that would have hurt me too because, I mean, I would see the guy's reaction towards that. I could see that he's hurt, but he was acting strong."

Thato

"The teacher wanted something to wipe the board with, so the guy did not have the boner (a cloth used to shine shoes) that the teacher was asking for. So, the teacher was like to him, 'Don't forget that I gave you my money to help you buy the school jersey; I gave you my R30.' And then the guy was so down... You could see that that didn't sit well with him right."

Likhona

Teachers will say,

"You are so forward, and then I know I get angry easily, and I will say it's bullying. When I answer back, they say that it's disrespectful and improper. So, and you know boys are stubborn. They will want to answer back, maybe if the teacher will slap him."

These quotes above suggest that teachers interact with learners in ways that shame them, lower their confidence and create a negative self-concept. This emphasises the role teachers play in determining the dynamics of the class and either creating an environment of ridicule or support. Unfortunately, "Schools have become places where a certain rigidity of patterns and habits have set in, without much thought given as to why we are doing such things" (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002, p.8). Teachers can say what they want with little to no consequences, ultimately, they have no drive to account for and correct their actions. Learners must endure this treatment with little to no support to process the interactions' impact or to correct the behaviour that may have caused the teacher's reaction. These negative interactions between teachers and learners can impact learners' emotional well-being, motivation, and interest in learning (Zheng, 2022) because they not only diminish learners' confidence but also create feelings of resentment towards school (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006), leading to dropout (Breda, 2014).

It is also evident that sometimes, learners who experience negative interactions with teachers may respond negatively. As Likhona shares, "*When I answer back, they say that it's disrespect, it's improper*". This suggests that learners are silenced in the face of harsh and unnecessary criticism from teachers because when they speak up for themselves, it is viewed as disrespect (Hanna, 2021). In addition, Musawenkosi's statement, "*The teacher used to tease the guy just*

out of nowhere”, illustrates the uneven power dynamics in the class and school context that further contributes to the toxic culture of criticism, conflict and confrontation in the class (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974). Furthermore, this misuse of authority by teachers may result in defiance from male learners, which could result in ill-discipline, acting out and disruptive behaviour by the learners. Motseke (2020) suggests that the use of illegal methods of disciplining learners, such as swearing, reinforces resistant behaviours in learners. However, in a class mediated by a teacher that upholds values of support, inclusion and positivity, the result could be the learner being referred to a support structure in the school (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2006), such as the School Based Support Team (SBST) and the behaviour being deemed as a “cry for help”, while, a negative teacher will declare the learner as “problematic” (Cefai & Cooper, 2010), centring the issue on the learner rather than attempting to understand its root (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002). In this regard, Siphon opines:

“It happens mostly when teachers try to teach, and the class clowns make funny noises. They laugh, and the teachers may chase him out of the classroom, but the learner refuses, so they get into a verbal fight. Yeah, so maybe the child says something, and the teacher retaliates, and it goes somewhere deeper. They both say things.”

This quote suggests that the negative interactions exacerbate the issue of toxic school culture and male learner dropout when teachers resort to the exclusion of learners. According to Lewin (2009, p.158), “Zone 3 of exclusion includes those in school but at risk of dropping out”. This includes “children who remain formally enrolled in school but may be silently excluded... by being discriminated against for social-cultural reasons”. From Siphon’s words, “*When teachers try to teach, and the class clowns make funny noises... The teachers may chase him out of the classroom*”, it is evident that teachers hold a one-dimensional view of learners and schooling. Anything that strays from their traditional views is unacceptable and must be thwarted. It also illustrates teachers’ inability to deal effectively with learner indiscipline (Motseke, 2020).

Likhona shares the sentiment as she notes, “*That’s one thing teachers want- learners to come to learn.*” This implies that teachers value the institutional use (E₂) of education over the sociological use (E₁) (Hamm, 1989). According to Hamm (1989), the notion of being educated is complex in that, in some contexts, an educated person is a well-aculturated member of society who is equipped with virtues and upholds them (E₁). In other contexts, a person who holds certificates and degrees and has achieved in the traditional sense of schooling is educated (E₂). From this theory, it can be deduced that some teachers value academic achievement over

the social and emotional needs of learners, and they expect learners to show up objectively as learners and nothing else. This means that a learner who dares to make a joke, express themselves freely, speak up for themselves, or even request additional support from a teacher – basically a learner with a voice is viewed by the teachers as a ‘difficult learner’, more so if the learner has academic challenges, performs poorly, and experiences barriers to learning (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). As a result, these learners may experience silent exclusion to the extent that their achievement becomes so poor that they cannot follow the curriculum, and teachers discriminate against them (Lewin, 2009, p. 157). Needless to say, this may lead to dropout.

Logically, when teachers have a framework of who is a difficult learner, they also have a framework of who is a good learner. Siphamandla asserts the following regarding this:

“They choose. They love the learners who are clever in class. And they don’t care... for instance, even in rural areas, some schools focus on the learners who are passing. If you’re failing, they don’t care about you.”

The quote above suggests that some teachers favour those learners who conform to traditional academic standards of behaviour and performance, emphasising the point that they value the institutional use of education because they do not find value in providing emotional and social development opportunities and support for struggling learners. Davidoff and Lazarus (2002, p.7) explain that this is because “if we recognise the importance of schools as socialising agents, we must acknowledge the responsibility to provide opportunities for personal development, provide a place of learning which is safe yet exciting and challenging, a place where the confidence of young people can be developed”. This implies that teachers must adjust their practices and dispositions to be inclusive and democratic in order to alter the existing culture of exclusion, domination and silencing that pushes male learners out of the schools, but many are resistant to change.

Furthermore, teachers may, in some cases, attempt to provide *support* to ‘difficult learners’- and, as authority figures in the school, they make decisions regarding necessary interventions to support the learners without having to consult with the learners themselves. According to Davidoff and Lazarus (2002, p.3), this is because the culture of authoritarianism is entrenched in our schools because “the ways in which schools were structured and functioned reproduced through heavy-handed disciplinary and approach of the apartheid regime.” Likhona shares an account illustrating the severity of authoritarianism in teacher-learner interactions:

“There was this boy that I used to learn with... when we were in Grade 9. You know, he was old. He was smoking. He was a bully... Now, the teacher was always on his case... the teacher started patrolling around the school for the smokers... [The teacher] he'll be following him around even before school starts and always coming to the class checking if he's in the class. And if he's not in the class, obviously you will know that he is smoking. He will go around the school looking for him, and if he finds him smoking, and he hits him with a belt... so after that, he [the learner] just said books are not doing any good for him and that he wanted to be a metalworker... This teacher is involved because you know as a person when someone is always on your case because of doing something that you want to do and that you love and you always want to do at all times. Sometimes, it creates anger, and then you end up wanting to be away from that person. So maybe some teachers are involved in the dropouts of other learners.”

This quote illustrates the role of the teacher in the dropouts of male learners, showing that negative interactions and authoritarianism, characterised in this case by constant monitoring, patrolling, reprimanding and intimidation, may exacerbate rather than de-escalate learners' behaviour, increasing the potential for dropout as male learners tend to respond to harsh disciplinary measures by harbouring feelings of resentment, not only towards the teacher but to the school environment in its entirety.

Due to the extent of autonomy that teachers exercise in the privacy of their classrooms and the comfort of protection by colleagues over learners, authoritarianism can sometimes get to extreme levels, bypassing the law and regulations of the South African Council of Educators (SACE). For instance, the SACE Code of Professional Ethics states that an educator “exercises authority with compassion, avoids any form of humiliation, and refrains from any form of abuse, physical or psychological” (*The Code of Professional Ethics*, n.d.). Despite these clear regulations, teachers have autonomy and are able to push the boundaries without accountability (Mthiyane & Mudadigwa, 2021). Regarding this, Likhona describes the following:

“The principal was there; she was even aware of what was happening. She and the other teachers who were here in school knew what the boy was doing, but I saw them in the staffroom, and then they moved to the computer lab... So, I don't know, maybe they were beating him or what because you wouldn't just be angered by a small thing like having teachers sit around you, maybe they're beating him. I don't know. But he was very angry. And then the next day, I asked him what happened. He said, “Don't

worry, mate, I will tell you”... And then, when the schools reopened, he stopped coming.”

This quote highlights the emotional pressure that male learners face when they are targeted and treated as problematic by teachers. Such experiences make them perceive school as a negative and unwelcoming environment where they feel they do not belong. (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). This is often exacerbated by teachers who use harsh measures like corporal punishment, which can have significant psychosocial effects and may lead to learners dropping out (Motseke, 2020). Lastly, the toxic school culture goes against the values of participatory democracy (Mncube, 2008), creating instead a culture of a rigid culture of a top-down approach where teachers do “uniform and hair inspections” over learners and give “chains of reaction to ‘crimes’ and ‘punishments’ (Davidoff & Lazarus, 2002, p.7) to learners. This also promotes a culture of control and authoritarianism in policies and practices where teachers essentially ‘control’ learners. Likhona argues:

“Well, there are policies now, okay. Let me just say that there are rules that we have to follow as learners in the school. That's obvious. I don't really agree with the Code of Conduct because most of the learners here in school don't agree with it. The school does not agree with the White Socks, but white is in our school uniform. And others are complaining about it... But there's this teacher who takes care of that. If you even wear white socks, he will take them and put them in his office. If you want them, you pay R5.”

“And then the hairstyles... The braids are not allowed. It would be better if they maybe allowed them, but not with long lengths. At least a medium or a short one... They cut them at school, which is not allowed. You're not supposed to cut anyone's hair here in school. But the teacher does that. Like she doesn't mind going all day, missing all her periods, going class to class to look for those that have braided singles.”

These quotes reveal the impact of rigid school policies and practices on learners' perceptions of authority and their experiences of school. Most learners feel oppressed and burdened by these policies rather than supported, which leads to feelings of alienation. Likhona's account illustrates a culture of policing and exclusion in the school environment through the use of the Code of Conduct, which should instead be negotiated with learners before implementation to ensure they do not find themselves in an environment that suppresses their true selves (Steinmann, 2013). The imposition of this Code on learners, as Likhona admits, “*the Code of*

Conduct, I don't really agree with it because most of the learners here in school don't agree with it,” generates discontent, stifles learners' expression and freedom, endangers their well-being especially when teachers misuse their authority to miss classes to find learners with braids and cut their hair, infringes on personal boundaries, and suppresses individual expression. These negative interactions clearly contribute to learner dropout.

4.4.1.2. Learner Indiscipline and Autonomy Vs Teacher Authority

While the previous subtheme highlighted the impact of teacher behaviour on male learner dropout, this subtheme highlights that it is equally important to consider how learners' attitudes and actions towards their teachers can impact their educational journeys and contribute to dropout. What emerged from the interviews is that there is a culture of indiscipline, confrontation, and violence in schools, to which learners contribute significantly (Zondo & Mncube, 2022). This toxic culture exacerbates feelings of alienation and leads to male learner dropout. Participants alluded to this.

Sipho:

“They can even fight with teachers; teachers end up saying things they shouldn't, and children get mad.”

This sentiment is shared by **Owami**, who notes:

“Maybe they don't like the teacher or something. So, when the teacher speaks or talks, maybe they don't want to listen. They fight with the teacher.”

Bulelwa provides a telling example:

“There was a teacher and a learner here in the school. The teacher is gone now. I don't know if they had a grudge or what. This was two years ago. One day, the teacher came in and asked for his homework, but the boy didn't write it; he didn't want to write. So, the teacher and learner came face-to-face. And this boy felt like he was a man, so he hit the teacher in front of all of us. And we were all shocked because we were all afraid of that teacher. After that, the learner dropped out.”

From these quotes, participants shared that learners portray negative attitudes towards teachers and express them through verbal and physical fights. According to Naidoo (2023), this can be classified as learner indiscipline. This is echoed by Maphosa and Mammen (2011, p.186), who

note that “the issue of violence by learners is a disciplinary cause for concern”. Furthermore, Robertson (1989) states, “there are forms of indiscipline, one of which is the type that violates the interests of the school or community, for example, challenging the authority of an educator”. From this view, learner indiscipline is indeed a reflection of the learners’ attitude towards their educators or education, and it may result in learner dropout because “violence and indiscipline severely impeded the culture of teaching and learning” (Maphosa & Mammen, 2011, p.186).

Learner’s attitudes towards educators and their education can be best understood in context. From a socio-cultural and social-constructionist view, “social context exerts a direct influence on the formation of any given emotional reaction” (Griffin & Mascolo, 1998, p.11). According to Griffin and Mascolo (1998, p.11), emotions refer to socially constructed interpretive structures and discursive practices that reflect larger social, cultural and political orders and meaning systems. They add that emotional reactions serve different functions in different interpersonal relationships and environments. Presumably, learners in high school are of higher ages and presumably higher reasoning capacity; thus, they may be able to think critically, show self-restraint and become responsible citizens. Therefore, if learners express negative attitudes towards teachers, it may be indicative of the influence they are exposed to.

The school culture harbouring a culture of authoritarianism encapsulated by instances of emotional and physical abuse from the teachers, infringing on the autonomy of learners is a reflection of the culture of South African society, which also harbours violence and stigma around mental and emotional health for Black males, perpetuating ideas of toxic masculinity rather than encouraging a culture of support. This culture can be attributed to the legacies of apartheid (Ramphela, 2008, p.76). However, Vally et al. (2002) acknowledge that while the past contributes to violence and stigma around mental and emotional health for Black males, there are also contributing recent stresses - on individual, school and community levels. Many male learners experience significant challenges in navigating the established authority structures of their school as their desire for autonomy clashes with institutional practices. Nikita notes,

“Like the learners want to make their own rules and then, the school doesn't allow that... They like to make their own decisions, saying that the schools will go out around

half past one; just after they eat, they want to go. So, I think that is the other thing that makes learners drop out of school.”

Siphokazi echoes the same sentiment:

“I think mostly it is because of manners and discipline. They don't want to be told to do certain things. They think they are in charge, and they have to rule.”

Siphamandla observes:

“There is this thing they do at the gate; they search us when we enter to check if we didn't bring weed or other things. So, the boys will say if a person searches them, they will rather not go to school at all.”

Likhona remarks:

“In schools, they don't want learners to smoke around the school premises... They take what they are smoking, call their parents, and if their parents come, they'll be dealing with that situation. And then he (said learner) said that was annoying him. That's why he decided that he wanted to smoke, he wanted to be a smoker, and then he's going to leave the school because he wants no one to tell him what to do.”

Male learners' desire for self-governance in a highly authoritarian and structured environment is a significant contributor to dropout (Aliverning & Lucidi, 2011). When learners perceive the school as an oppressive environment that limits their autonomy, the likelihood of indiscipline and rebellion increases, leading to dropout. Therefore, there is a need for mutual respect and understanding between learners and teachers if any meaningful learning is to take place. This sentiment is reflected in Bulelwa's words:

“I think they disrespect the teachers. So, when the teachers come in, they get irritated and end up quitting school. Most of them are boys who drop out and end up gallivanting the streets, and they say it is because they don't like the teachers.”

“...this boy felt like he was a man, so he hit the teacher in front of all of us. And we were all shocked because we were all afraid of that teacher.”

These quotes reflect a culture of disrespect infused in learner interactions with authority figures in the school, which worsens feelings of exclusion, leading to dropout. Furthermore, these quotes show that when authority structures become punitive rather than supportive, they foster this culture of an unwelcoming school environment. Thus, the way learners interact with

teachers is not just a reflection of individual behaviour; it is also a critical indicator of the school environment, which needs to be tended to in order to curb dropout rates (Fall & Roberts, 2012).

4.4.1.3. Academic Pressures and Barriers to Learning

What emerged from the data is that learners are dropping out of school because of the pressure to meet the stringent academic demands of the school environment (Desai et al., 2024). The schools in question implement Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which stipulates subject content, teaching hours, a programme of assessment, an annual teaching plan, and examination guidelines. CAPS is hailed for its promotion of consistency and standardisation of education. It encourages the adaptation of teaching methods to accommodate the diverse needs of learners. However, it is criticised for being too content-heavy, limiting the time for in-depth exploration of topics and its emphasis on assessment, which leads to “teaching to the test” (Ojo & Mathabathe, 2021). This is coupled with the stipulations of the National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements (N4PR), which details the conditions for grade progression, leading to retention when unmet. Learners must meet promotion requirements, which vary by phase, and possess thorough language, literacy and comprehension skills for subject competence (Erasmus & Fourie, 2024). All these weigh heavily on male learners, especially those who are facing learning barriers without support. Hence, male learners find themselves stressed, anxious, overwhelmed, demotivated, disengaged, exhausted and frustrated; hence, they drop out. Owami expounds on this as follows:

“I think it is a challenge that can lead to dropping out because if you don’t know how to write your own name, then you won’t cope. When you don’t even know your own name, then what about the rest of the questions.”

Musawenkosi shares one male learner’s experience:

“Then, he starts telling me that it is all the same. I asked him what he meant, and he said, ‘it’s all the same because I come to school, but I do not understand the teachers and what they are saying, so what am I going to write in the exam?’. So that was the story I got from him. I think he had academic challenges.”

These quotes show that learners facing barriers to learning, such as illiteracy and language barriers, struggle to engage meaningfully with the curriculum, as they lack comprehension and support. Furthermore, these learners seem to require teachers to use differentiated methods or to create alternative methods of teaching to accommodate them so that they can cope with school (Mogale & Malatji, 2022), but the lack of support worsens their barriers and leads to dropouts. The prescripts of CAPS limit teacher creativity and make it so that teachers are more concerned with assessments rather than the holistic development of learners. Thato reveals:

“He quit school, and he was doing his Grade 9. Then, he was like, he was tired of being here because it brought a lot of work, it took a lot of hard work to do it, and he feels like school was just not for him because he stopped doing good academically, he kept on failing and failing. So, he felt like, you know, this was not for him.”

The content-heaviness of the curriculum can be very frustrating for learners, as they are sometimes unable to cope with all subjects simultaneously. Yet, there is not enough flexibility in the curriculum to enable learners to learn at their own pace and to repeat what they have failed. Furthermore, because the purpose of schooling is largely for academic achievement (E₁), it is sensible that learners feel demotivated to attend school if they fail repeatedly. There are no interventions to guarantee improvement. Furthermore, due to the N4PR policy, learners progress from one grade to the next with knowledge gaps, and the support structures that must intervene, such as the SBST, are ineffective (Munje & Maarman, 2016). The lack of support is also clearly a significant contributor to dropout rates. Musawenkosi observes:

“This guy was repeating a grade; this was last year, and we found him in Grade 11. Then, ma’am kept on reminding him, saying, ‘We did this work last year; you can’t tell me that you don’t understand.’ The teacher used to tease the guy just out of nowhere. So, you will find that when we were studying the book, Sophiatown, the guy was raising his hand. Then, ma’am was like: you want to tell me that I didn’t tell you last year? I did. It was those kinds of things that would have hurt me too because, I mean, I would see the guy’s reaction towards that. I could see that he’s hurt, but he was acting strong.”

The learners repeated failures, even coupled with a lack of support, perpetuate the belief that school is only for certain learners and not others and that barriers to learning are an inherent aspect of the person rather than an external factor that can be removed or reduced. This demoralises and affects learners’ self-esteem, leading them to drop out. Hence, Musawenkosi observes,

“The problem was his performance. So, he thought he wasn't confident enough that he could do this, that he could go to the finals.”

These quotes illustrate the complex interplay of issues that intersect and intensify the emotional burden on learners facing academic challenges. They highlight the interaction of overwhelming academic demands, repeated failures, and a lack of support that contribute to the emotional distress of learners struggling with feelings of inadequacy. The school culture shifts from being supportive and inclusive to becoming a source of pressure, leading to dropout.

4.4.1.4. Gender Discrimination

Since schools are microcosms of societies, they reflect and sometimes reinforce societal cultures and norms (Kurt, 2015), including gender roles and expectations. Participants in the study noted that negative gender norms manifest in schools, impacting male learners' identities, their interactions with fellow students and authority figures, and their overall experience of schooling. The data revealed that rigid and damaging gender norms and stereotypes perpetuate a toxic culture that contributes to learner disengagement (Smith et al., 2017), increasing dropout rates among male learners.

Participants explained that there is a strong adherence to traditional gender norms in schools, which puts limitations on male learners, mainly regarding which activities they may participate in (Larsson et al., 2021). Usually, limitations are placed on activities that are culturally associated with females. Thato explains:

“...in this school, there is a lot of saying girls should do this and boys should do this....male people are not allowed to participate in some of the things that they want to, like sports... Maybe if you want to play netball as a male person, you're not given a chance to express that. You're not given a chance to do what you want, like what your heart wants.”

He further explains that teachers uphold these ideals by making comments such as,

“Since boys are more masculine, they are the ones who will lift the textbooks, and girls will just issue out papers. Many teachers will be like, No, I want a girl to go get me water. Boys are dirty, they are not clean, and they don't wash their hands after using the toilet.”

These quotes illustrate that the reinforcement of traditional gender norms perpetuates stereotypes that stifle learners' expression and interests (Larsson et al., 2021), promote a culture of shame, and alienate male learners who do not fit traditional moulds (Theunissen et al., 2014). Furthermore, the notion that boys must adhere to fostering a culture where they feel silenced, suppressed, and coerced into embodying traditional expressions of masculinity: toughness, violence, emotional suppression, and avoidance of help—toxic behaviours, is highlighted. The reinforcement of toxic masculinity negatively shapes their experiences. Those who do not adhere to this type of masculinity become victims of it unless they adapt to it. Bulelwa notes:

“Okay, in school, there are some boys who are bossy, and some boys can't stand up for themselves, and they are given names and are called gay or slow. And boys are negative; boys are boys.”

Musawenkosi supports this, stating:

“You know, male learners believe that as a boy, you must not cry, or worse, you must not even report something bad that is being done to you, so they suffer from that, whilst many girls don't suffer from that.”

Siphokazi adds:

“Boys, they don't want to talk to an adult about what they are going through. They think they're man enough to face whatever they are going through alone.”

These quotes show that boys suffer in silence and do not have clear avenues of support because of the view that male vulnerability and expression are socially unacceptable (Evans, 2017). As a result of this view, many male learners tend to become bullies, adopt toxic behaviours such as violence and gangsterism or commit suicide in an attempt to cope with the toxicity of the school culture. Schools are less intentional about seeing these behaviours as an indicator of the school culture and a significant marker of a need for change. Instead, they continue to perpetuate the notion that the problem lies in individuals rather than the system (Welsh & Little, 2018).

Musawenkosi highlights:

“I believe we now have an empowerment imbalance in our communities and our schools. I feel like this apartheid thing and women's oppression led to a community

forgetting about the boy child because each time you go to a school or a community, you find a women empowerment, girl child this, but what about the boy child?”

These quotes illustrate that a school culture that marginalises the needs and experiences of male learners—who are frequently overlooked in the discourse of empowerment and support—exacerbates the challenges they face (Evans, 2017) and contributes to the factors leading to their dropout. This is particularly concerning when the teachers expected to protect and support learners in loco parentis often contribute to the toxic culture as well.

4.4.2 Social Pressures: Substance Abuse, Peer Pressure, Bullying and Violence

Social pressures play a crucial role in shaping the educational experiences of male learners. Social pressures refer to the intersection of “societal influences” on our choices and decisions (Hepworth et al., 2016). Schools reflect the societies in which they are embedded (Harris, 1993). Thus, some school environments can become difficult for male learners due to the use of substances, violence in the school and society, peer pressure, societal expectations, the desire to fit in, and bullying. Participants highlighted that social pressures and their broader social environments could lead to disengagement from school and dropout as they shape male learners’ attitudes towards school, especially in the township (Elsaesser et al., 2020).

Musawenkosi points out how the community directly shapes the school environment, leading to societal pressures filtering into the school:

“Before we come to the schooling environment, we must understand that it is formed by the community. So, whatever norms exist in the community affect the schooling environment.”

4.4.2.1. Peer Pressure

The impact of peer pressure on male learners, particularly as a social force contributing to dropout rates, is critical. Participants emphasised that peer pressure is a major factor driving dropout, as it serves as a conduit for nearly all social pressures (Paraman & Hussain, 2022). Defined as the influence exerted by peers or individuals regarded as equals, peer pressure can lead to both positive and, more frequently, negative behaviours. It can fuel substance abuse, violence, and bullying—issues also identified as significant contributors to dropout (Bhujbal & Verma, 2024). Therefore, understanding peer pressure is essential for addressing dropout

rates. Participants highlighted the various manifestations of peer pressure. Siphamandla explains:

“Some of them, when they hang out with their friends, influence each other to quit school saying, ‘Quit school and find work, you will make money, there’s nothing of value there’. Just because he has dropped out.”

Thato adds:

“I think it's peer pressure. The pressure they get from their friends, they ask, ‘Why are you going to school? It is a waste of time. Look at me; I am unemployed. I sit around and do nothing.’ Yeah, because I am going to school. I don't get paid at school.”

The quotes indicate that peer pressure plays a significant role in the dropout rates of male learners. Those who have dropped out and those considering dropping out tend to undervalue education by promoting the belief that "education is useless" because they believe that education should yield financial gain; thus, they influence their peers to leave school and seek a lifestyle that prioritises instant gratification. In other instances, the learners' goals and desires for themselves are different from what the schools offer; hence, it is easier for them to be pressured to drop out. Additionally, the availability of alternative opportunities towards financial gain serves as a motivating factor, leading many boys to leave school in search of employment (Mohlouoa & Tlale, 2020). This is illustrated in the following:

Prudence:

“I think boys, mainly their peer pressure, is based on their clothes and stuff like that.”

Bulelwa

“Some of them leave because they feel pressure from people who live a fast lifestyle; they see their friends partying and all that, so they decide to live that lifestyle and are unable to balance that with school. They are always galivanting. And this is the lifestyle we live as the 2000 generation. When our parents talk to us, we tell them we have the right to it.”

These quotes illustrate that the aspiration to live a flashy lifestyle renders learners susceptible to peer influences, even when such influences may be detrimental to their well-being in the long run (Mohlouoa & Tlale, 2020). Furthermore, considering learners' developmental stage at this point, it becomes challenging for them to recognise the nuances of their own backgrounds

or home situations and to make decisions that could help them out of those circumstances. Instead, they pursue a fast and flashy lifestyle by any means necessary, often disregarding the consequences that accompany it, such as dropping out of school, lacking qualifications, being unable to seize employment or higher education opportunities, striving for independence, and missing out on the simple joy of being an upstanding member of society who contributes positively.

Other participants' assertions emphasise how peer pressure can contribute to drug use and result in the dropout of male learners, which is a factor that is explored under the theme of Substance Abuse.

Nikita illustrates,

"Many boys are taking drugs such as weed and other stuff. So, I think they have been influenced by their friends. I think peer pressure is affecting them a lot."

Musawenkosi asserts:

"And so since they are on drugs, they try all means to recruit others."

Sipho adds,

"He left school because of substance abuse. His friends... He was always with his friends. So, his friends... Yeah, got him into substance abuse."

These quotes highlight how peer pressure may also influence male learners to use substances, ultimately dropping out of school (Watts et al., 2024). Many male learners tend to form groups for various reasons, but typically, these groups do not include positive influences. This may be due to a lack of good role models, the portrayal of negative masculinity as "cool", or mere experimentation. Regardless, many of them end up encouraging one another to use substances. This occurs despite their exposure to several other boys who have become drug addicts and wreak havoc in the communities through crime. Clearly, then, peer influences play a significant role in persuading male learners to engage in such behaviours.

4.4.2.2. Substance Abuse

What emerged from participants' responses is that male learners drop out of school due to substance abuse, which impairs their ability to cope with school demands (Okari, 2018; Rees, 2019). Substance use is identified as a factor that renders the learner persona non-grata in the school, resulting in exclusion and ostracism, leading to dropout. This phenomenon is facilitated by the normalisation of substance use within communities, where learners can easily access and consume substances but cannot do so freely in schools. Furthermore, Musawenkosi noted that community norms filter into schools through learners' values and behaviours. However, the community's normalisation of drug use conflicts with the expected conduct of learners in school, leading to frustration and dropout (Pagey et al., 2010). Musawenkosi shares:

"So we have this township. Where people are selling more than just marijuana. They sell... what is this thing? It's crystal meth. When learners come from that kind of environment, they are convinced that it is okay, and they bring it to school."

This quote illustrates the power of normalising certain behaviours within communities and their impact on learners' actions in school. It demonstrates that community values and norms can conflict with school values and standards. Communities that reject substance abuse, particularly among learners, are likely to implement measures to limit their access to these substances and collaborate with schools to create an environment conducive to learners thriving through the alignment of values and expected conduct, especially since such behaviours are regarded as unacceptable in the school setting. However, suppose these issues are not addressed within communities. In that case, learners may come to perceive schools as inhospitable places that contradict their lifestyles, resulting in feelings of alienation and potential dropout. Thato notes:

"I think drug abuse as well because they smoke in the school. When they get caught, they're basically suspended. Some of them were suspended from the first week of school. And then, after suspension, they don't pitch again. They don't come back."

This shows the link between the use of drugs and school dropout rates. It shows that due to the prescripts of the learner code of conduct, learners are suspended for substance usage in school. Afterwards, some learners do not return, either due to the tension between lifestyle and school expectations or due to drug addiction. There are several drugs that participants mentioned as the cause of drug addiction, which results in male learners dropping out of school. Data show

that the habitual use of substances impacts learners' educational journeys and their ability to complete school. Moreover, the school's disciplinary measure of suspending learners is shown to be ineffective, as it leads to learners dropping out of the system entirely rather than rehabilitating them and making them suitable to be in the school environment (Swanson et al., 2019).

Siphamandla also noted that addiction to substances could infiltrate the classroom by affecting learners' ability to cope with academic demands. This is, of course, compounded by the already existing academic pressures that learners seem unable to manage (as highlighted in *Academic Pressures and Barriers to Learning*). Siphamandla observes:

“Yeah, they smoke within the school. So, they become addicted. They find that when they are in class with the teacher, nothing makes sense, so they would rather quit school, get money and smoke.”

This quote illustrates a dynamic in which, as substance abuse diminishes learners' ability to engage meaningfully in school (Abdulaal et al., 2023), they tend to prioritise and choose substances over their education. This is compounded by the need to use the school for financial gain, resulting in some learners perceiving dependence on drugs as an economic opportunity (Fairlie, 2002). They can monopolise within a school environment. Musawenkosi explains that some learners capitalise on the demand for drugs and prioritise them over school:

“... some of them feel like actually there are a lot of people who smoke these drugs, meaning that if I sell them, I can make money, so I don't see the need for school because if I sell drugs, I can actually make money for myself.”

For some of these boys, the only reason they attend school is to be exposed to a community of learners who rely on substances. For others, being in school is to access these substances in the company of their peers, where they can find a sense of belonging. However, this often results in conflicts between learners and teachers who seek to eliminate such situations (Zhong et al., 2020). Consequently, this adds another layer to the impact of substances on the education of male learners, showing that it can lead to instances of violence:

Nikita reveals:

“When the teacher is in for a certain time to see the learners, you can find out that someone just entered the class. He is from there taking his drugs, and he is smelling

weed and cigarettes. And when the teacher tells him to sit down or something and concentrate, they start fighting.”

Clearly, substance abuse has a profound impact on learner retention and dropout rates. Even when schools try to enforce effective laws to prevent substance abuse and dropout, learners may be compelled to leave. Therefore, it is essential for schools to adopt a proactive approach rather than a reactive one and to align their values with those of the community to ensure congruence.

4.4.2.3. *Bullying*

Bullying has been identified as a significant factor contributing to the social pressures faced by male learners in schools. It refers to the act of causing harm or intimidation to someone perceived as vulnerable. Participants indicate that bullying leads to numerous adverse effects, including low self-esteem, poor mental health, and diminished academic engagement, leading to learner dropout (Hysing et al., 2019; Asif, 2016). They observed that bullying occurs in various forms, such as name-calling, ridicule, coercion, and physical abuse. This issue is exacerbated by the societal expectation that *“boys don’t cry,”* creating a vicious cycle where *“hurt people, hurt people”*, meaning that those who are victims of bullying, due to a lack of outlets, go on to victimise others (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). In other instances, they drop out of school.

Firstly, participants indicated that certain types of learners are more susceptible to bullying. Those who are perceived as abnormal, vulnerable, or considered "others" due to their intellectual abilities, physical appearance, or other factors that make them different often become the targets of bullying.

Sipho explains:

“If they see that you are humble and quiet, they just come to you and bully you, and they take it out on you (anger).”

Likhona elucidates:

“Some boys are being bullied here in school, you know, the shy ones. Maybe it’s a challenge for them because you’ll end up being afraid to come to school, and that will make you drop out.”

Nikita clarifies:

“So, on the matter of bullying... Like you see the Grade 8, most of the Grade 8 learners are being bullied by the toilets, so, when they have to go in there, they find those boys—like the old boys, and they ask them if they have their lunch boxes, and they ask them to pay R2 to enter the toilets.”

Victims of bullying often include boys who do not display the typical masculine traits tied to aggression and violence (Theunissen et al., 2014). Their demeanour and age can become vulnerabilities in the school setting, forcing them to either adopt the very masculinity that targets them or to seek an escape. For some, this means becoming a bully or dropping out, while others see no alternative but suicide. Ultimately, neither path offers a solution, especially as participants note that male learners do not report being bullied. Instead, they suppress their emotions, or they drop out.

“Another thing that happens is the abuse. They bully each other. They abuse each other a lot. And others don’t seek help. They keep quiet. It’s just that they can’t persevere with the pain and the feeling of being abused by school learners. So, they decide that rather than to live like that every day or to live like that at school, I’d rather quit.”

The participant's use of the word “abuse” highlights the severity of the bullying, indicating that it is both brutal and unforgiving. Furthermore, this quote underscores a crucial aspect of bullying. Thus, the fact that it often goes unreported by victims, possibly due to uncertainties about whether effective intervention from school authorities will occur, and the fear that if such intervention does not happen, reporting the incident may lead to increased bullying for the victim. Additionally, some victims may believe that self- and emotional expression is synonymous with weakness, leading male learners to feel compelled to suppress their emotions and appear unaffected by pain. Indeed, this suppression of emotions is what leads many boys to act out and become violent themselves eventually or to drop out. Musawenkosi explains this as follows:

“... bullying, you know, with male learners, they believe that as a boy, you must not cry, or worse, you must not even report something terrible that is being done to you, so they suffer from that.”

Sipho asserts:

“Like being bullied, being teased...So, most of them take that out of their anger towards other learners.”

Clearly, bullying can be self-perpetuating if left unaddressed. One participant noted that, at times, teachers who are otherwise responsible for intervening in bullying cases can be implicated in bullying learners (Strohmeier et al., 2024). As Siphamandla shares:

“He was being bullied at school, being laughed at, calling him names. I felt for him because that was not okay for him. Even the teachers would say to him, ‘You know nothing anyway; I don’t know why you are still coming to school.’ So, he ended up quitting. You know when people mock you and always judge you, you feel like, like, why me? Why am I always being treated like this? It means this place isn’t suitable for me, so I might as well leave.”

This quote indicates that bullying may be perpetuated by both peers and educators, targeting a learner who is considered "other" due to their intellectual capabilities. Consequently, this may prompt the learner to question their place within the school. The continuous torment experienced by learners can result in their withdrawal from school (Townsend et al., 2008), as illustrated in the account mentioned above, where the learner withdrew under the impression that he did not belong to the school. Sipho asserts:

“Being bullied in school tends to leave a mark on you. Yeah. It makes you scared to go to school and can make you scared to tell people because you're going to get bullied again.”

Clearly, the lack of adequate structures for tackling bullying is intensifying its prevalence and, in turn, increasing male learner dropout rates, and in extreme cases, it leads to increased male learner suicide rates. The data reveals certain distinct behaviours exhibited by those who bully (Taliaferro et al., 2019). Many bullies display aggression and often grapple with their internal struggles, whether related to academic challenges or personal issues, using bullying as a means of venting their frustrations. For instance, Bulelwa elucidates:

“... He was failing; he failed Grade 8 so many times. And there was another boy who was focused and passing well; he would often say that he came to school to excel, and that’s it. Anyway, one day, we were fetching food from the kitchen, but the one who loved school did not eat from the school kitchen; he brought his own lunch box. The bossy

one wanted the lunchbox, and then he punched him. The one who loved books didn't fight back as he was being punched. But after 3 days, we got a letter that the bookworm had committed suicide."

The quote indicates that factors such as being over-aged for a year, substance use, past experiences of bullying, difficult home environments, and feelings of envy contribute to bullying behaviour. These instances reveal that the lack of support for learners who struggle academically and face social challenges leads them to project their negative experiences onto their peers, resulting in bullying and school dropouts (Lee et al., 2015). Conversely, the absence of support and effective interventions for the victims may lead to emotional suppression and even suicide.

4.4.2.4. Violence

This subtheme shows how social pressures, like peer pressure, drug use, and bullying, are usually not isolated phenomena (Johnson, 2009). Instead, they exist in reciprocal relationships with others, such as violence, which also seems to be pervasive in township communities and schools. Violence refers to "physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm. Violence can also be categorised according to its motivation. Reactive or emotional violence typically involves the expression of anger—a hostile desire to hurt someone—that arises in response to a perceived provocation. Proactive, or instrumental, violence is more calculated and is often performed in anticipation of some reward" (Jacquin, 2025). Participants suggest that learners are prone to aggressive behaviours towards each other and the teachers (as indicated in Learner Indiscipline and Autonomy and Teacher Authority). The data reveals that learners engage in both reactive and proactive violence, deeming the schools as places of violent encounters where male learners regularly find themselves in fights.

Nikita shares an experience of a violent encounter between a male learner and the teacher that the use of substances may have fuelled:

"Because these learners are a problem. When the teacher is in for a certain time to see the learners, you can find out that someone enters the class. He is there to take his drugs, and he is smelling weed and cigarettes. And when the teacher tells him to sit down or something and concentrate, they start fighting."

This quote reveals that other social pressures, such as the use of substances, fuel violent behaviour among learners as they become defiant and combative towards authority figures (Kinyua, 2011). When under the influence of substances, learners become rebellious, disregarding instructions and engaging in violent confrontations with teachers because substances provide a boldness, false sense of confidence or bravery that makes them act out violently, even when it is uncalled for. Teachers, as representatives of authority, often become the focus of the violence because the altered mental state of the learners- marked by feelings of invincibility- encourages them to assert dominance over the most visible sources of power in their environment: the teacher. Owami observes:

“Maybe they fight with teachers. They smoke at school. They stab each other at school when they fight. Yeah, that’s one of the challenges I see at schools.”

This quote reiterates the violent tendencies of learners who use substances towards teachers, further illustrating the relationship between substance use and violence in schools. It also emphasises that this violence creates a school environment in which authority is continuously challenged, and discipline and respect among learners wane. As a result, violence is normalised as a coping mechanism, perpetuating a hostile schooling environment where violence becomes the dominant form of expression. Moreover, this quote adds a new element to the violence, where it spills over into the interactions between learners themselves and escalates to stabbings and gangsterism (Khoja-Moolji, 2012). This alludes to the view that learners are unable to cope with social pressures; thus, they use violence as a form of coping and expression of emotional distress. The creation of gangs provides them with surrogate communities to feel a sense of belonging founded on unhealthy relations, leading to extreme group violence. Musawenkosi explains:

“What I know about people who use drugs is that they have gangs. They have gangs, and those gangs are dangerous because they have weapons.”

This quote shows that the presence of gangs exacerbates violence in schools, contributing to school dropout among male learners (Mathews et al., 2009). The creation of gangs by male learners, as noted by Musawenkosi, shows that they seek camaraderie with each other in order to cope with social pressures, primarily if schools and families do not provide the needed emotional support. However, these groups often escalate disagreements that would otherwise be minor and intensify them by bringing weapons into the schools. Thus, gangsterism becomes not only a means for community and protection but also a way to assert male dominance in

spaces that do not feel safe for male learners' vulnerabilities. This reflects a gendered dimension of violence, which essentially becomes a marker of masculinity (Mguzulwa & Gxubane, 2019). Siphokazi asserts:

"As you know, boys fight all the time. Every time there is a fight in school, it's boys, and I don't remember when, but it was last year. They stabbed each other. And there are a few who dropped out because of that situation."

This quote foregrounds the interaction of social pressures and gender norms, showing that males are socially conditioned to suppress their emotions and not show vulnerability. In the absence of healthy outlets for their feelings, they resort to violent outbursts (Kokko et al., 2006). In contrast, females are socially conditioned and encouraged to express their vulnerabilities more openly, which may reduce the likelihood of engaging in violent acts. Furthermore, Bulelwa and Siphokazi highlight this by explaining that male learners tend to fight over trivial matters, such as girls and food. This indicates that males resort to violence as an outlet for being overwhelmed by social pressures or to defend honour and gain status within peer groups. These conflicts sometimes originate from the township communities and bleed into the school, making it a stage for fights that have little to do with academics.

Siphokazi shares

"Boys do many stupid things here in school. They even fight over food. I think it's greediness and everything. Not thinking about what others will eat—because the staff at the kitchen will make sure that each learner gets a plate, a fruit or something."

"Most of the things I know that they are fighting about that leads them to drop out are things that don't even concern with school, from their locations and everything. So, they bring those fights to school. Because those fights don't include maybe boys from the same location, it is either a boy from a certain location with another one from a different location fighting each other all the time."

Bulelwa

"I think it is the fighting. There was once a fight that made one learner drop out of school. There were two gangs, and a fight happened outside of school, but all of the boys involved went to this school. So, a kid was stabbed during the fight. Then, the other

gang retaliated, and they would come to the school to revenge for the stabbing of that one kid. They were fighting for something useless- a girl."

The repercussions of these violent tendencies are felt most harshly by the perpetrators of the violence, as some end up hospitalised, living in fear and shame, and facing legal consequences, such as criminal records, suspension from school or other disciplinary measures (Swanson et al., 2019). Participants explain that the implications of the violence also push male learners out of the school:

Owami remarks

"... Maybe there is someone who starts a fight and promises to bring weapons. So, they drop out because they are afraid that they will get stabbed."

Amber elucidates

"In the school, they start a fight and then outside, this one gets their gang, and the other gets a gang as well. And they come to fight. Then, when one of them is harmed, they spend time in the hospital, and when they recover, they never return to school. They stay home and never come back."

While **Siphokazi** reflects on a specific case:

"I know that a few boys dropped out last year. One of them was in Grade 10. He was, I think, even old for Grade 10, but he was willing to study and everything, and then he got into that fight. He stabbed someone ... a criminal record. The school punished him by requiring him to clean the school garden only for a week or two. Then he decided to drop out because he didn't want to clean the school. Maybe he thought that that was some embarrassment or something, and he dropped out on his own. No one forced him and everything. I think even teachers tried to talk him out of that, but he didn't listen. He decided to stay at home."

These quotes highlight the intricacies between violence and male learner dropout. They demonstrate that violent behaviours stem from deeper issues within the school and social environments, often leading to severe repercussions that could alter the lives of the perpetrators (Swanson et al., 2019). For instance, Siphokazi and Prudence explain that the roots of this violence lie in the fact that *"... learners from townships are full of anger or are upset with themselves. So, most of them take out their anger on other learners."* Others might be *"... coming from difficult situations trying to get away from it by fighting with others or something. Maybe they*

have too many responsibilities, or they have been dealing with challenges in their lives...". Clearly, violence among male learners is a profoundly entrenched issue that extends beyond mere indiscipline. It is linked to substance abuse, gender norms, and various social pressures prevalent in township communities (Inglis, 2009). Male learners often resort to violence as a means of alleviating emotional distress and managing the pressures of school and society. However, this frequently results in their exclusion from school, whether due to fear, humiliation, or disciplinary measures.

In conclusion, the social pressures that emerged from the data- peer pressure, violence, substance use and bullying are the factors that contribute to male learner dropout rates and addressing them will require a multifaceted approach that fosters inclusivity by recognising the complex intersection of dynamics in both the learners and social environments.

4.4.3 Dysfunctional Family Institution

The family institution plays a critical role in shaping learners' educational journey. This theme delves into the complex interactions between male learners and their families, as well as the influence of authority figures such as parents, guardians, and community members. Learner leaders highlight how family dynamics, expectations, and the degree of support or pressure from authority figures can significantly impact a male learner's decision to remain in or drop out of school (Inglis, 2009). By exploring these relationships, this section aims to uncover the underlying familial factors that contribute to dropout rates, providing insights into how family structures can support male learners.

Lack of Parental Support For Academics

Learner leaders indicated that male learners often lack the motivation to pursue their studies or to stay in school because of the absence of supportive parents or guardians who encourage them to prioritise their education (Rumberger et al., 1990). They suggest that fathers are primary role models in male children's identity formation and choices, and their absence has a significant impact on them and their education (Ishida, 2009). Participants alluded that the absence of fathers manifests in two ways: some fathers may be entirely disengaged, providing no encouragement or motivation for their children to attend school and excel academically, thus leaving the boys to learn the values of whoever is able to make an impression on them. In other instances, fathers may be physically present but fail to exemplify positive role modelling.

Consequently, their presence does not foster motivation for the learners to continue their education (Rumberger et al., 1990). For instance, Musawenkosi admits:

“One thing I've noticed is that the first role model of a male child is his father. And now, in the community that we live in lately, most dads are absent... and those that are present, most of them do wrong things. So when fathers do wrong things, and are role models to male children, the children grow up with the picture in mind that ‘I want to be like my dad; I want to be like my dad. If my dad is a gangster, why not me?’. He sees his father as a king and himself as a prince by virtue of that he must follow in his father’s footsteps.”

This observation demonstrates that learners frequently regard their parents as role models, with boys, in particular, predisposed to emulate their fathers (Sylvester & Bojuwoye, 2011). They internalise their parents' actions as acceptable or aspirational, especially during their formative years. While Musawenkosi's observation relies on the assumption that male learners blindly adopt their parents' behaviours without considering what is right and wrong, it highlights that a child's imitation of behaviour is less about its inherent goodness and more about the identity of the person they are emulating, particularly at a young age. It also illustrates the impact of role modelling in communities where positive male figures are scarce (Matshabane, 2016). In many township communities, fathers themselves often lacked strong paternal guidance (Mavungu, 2013), resulting in the development of their masculinities in unregulated ways through engagement with peers or other males who might not be positive influences (Bester, 2007). Consequently, they may inadvertently teach their children behaviours that were simply effective for them, regardless of their moral or ethical values, as they might struggle to be positive examples for their children. This dynamic can either exacerbate or alleviate dropout rates among male learners, as those whose fathers place a high value on education tend to adopt similar attitudes and vice versa (Rumberger et al., 1990), indicating that parental values can significantly influence children's outcomes.

Moreover, learner leaders explained that the lack of family support and motivation can have adverse effects on the well-being of learners both academically and socially. They indicate that without motivation from the family, many learners fall into a state of apathy and indifference and are pushed onto the streets, where they are more likely to make harmful choices (Inglis, 2009), leading to dropouts. Sipho explains:

“I think it's because they're not properly motivated to do their schoolwork. Probably because most of the parents are not always home because they have to work... So they are not properly motivated or helped... not being properly motivated can make you become a person who doesn't care about anything...So mostly you are in the streets, with your friends, then you tend to make wrong decisions, getting into substances...”

The quote indicates that socioeconomic pressures may cause the absence of parental support and motivation, as many parents are subject to long work hours or even multiple jobs so that they can provide for their families (Elder et al., 1995). This usually comes at the expense of being available to motivate and support their children with schoolwork, despite the usual belief in the township that an educated child is a solution to poverty. This shows that the issue is not merely the absence of parents but also the results of systemic pressures that keep parents away from their children (Elder et al., 1995). Furthermore, the disconnection between parents and their children's academics can have adverse effects on learners' well-being, as it can lead to helplessness, frustration and isolation, leading to dropout.

The absence of parents places the child-rearing responsibility in the hands of teachers who, instead of imparting specialised knowledge, must dedicate time to teaching morals, ethics, and social and emotional skills (Broomhead, 2013). This results in parents either deferring their children's education, trusting that they will somehow learn what is right and wrong, or remaining oblivious to their children's needs, concentrating solely on providing necessities without recognising their emotional and academic requirements. This lack of support from parents may also contribute to dropout rates (Elder et al., 1995). Sipho explains this:

“You know how parents can be sometimes... when a teacher says something, they believe the teacher. They will believe the teacher more than the child. Because maybe sometimes the teacher is the one who did something wrong, and the child defended himself, but when it gets to the parents, the teacher says something, and the parents believe it.”

In conclusion, the dynamic interplay of absent parents and lack of parental support for academics contribute to their decision to drop out. This theme shows the urgent need for interventions that not only address academic needs but also their familial and emotional well-being.

Poverty and Familial Responsibility

Participants emphasised that the socio-economic conditions of families contribute to male learner dropouts. Learner leaders pointed out that poverty is a pervasive issue, leading to various factors that influence dropouts, including a lack, family dysfunction, financial strain, and the pressure to find work to support the family (Elder et al., 1995; Dieltiens & Meny-Gibert, 2013). Musawenkosi notes,

“So because I live in the township, I can see that a lot of families are suffering like we have issues of poverty and all of that. So, where the father is absent, the male child feels like I must step in... I have to fill in those shoes and then provide for my family... But then, now we are talking about providing for a family... Then, they drop out of school, go and look for work, and all of that.”

This quote highlights that male learners who drop out often take on adult responsibilities at a young age due to poverty and dysfunction within their families. The experience of poverty, or “not having much,” does not always motivate learners; instead, it can become a barrier to completing their education arising from the stress of uncertainty concerning their basic needs, such as food, casual clothing or uniform, additional stationery required by schools, or transportation, in addition to typical academic demands like homework and projects (Naven et al., 2019). All these challenges emerge while they grapple with the same academic workload as peers who benefit from stable homes with sanitation, family support, tutors, and internet access.

The absence of fathers adds extra pressure, as these young men often feel obligated to care for and provide for their families, frequently being seen as the “man of the house” (Mavungu, 2013). Consequently, they prioritise employment or finding means of income over education. This pressure is intensified by societal expectations that “indoda must,” loosely translated as “a man must”, indicating that men must conform to specific standards and cultural norms to be regarded as genuinely masculine. For example, a man must provide financially and must have a plan (Mavungu, 2013). Gender identity and its associated roles become a significant factor influencing a male learner's decision to prioritise earning over schooling.

In some cases, driven by a desire not to emulate their fathers, these young men believe it better to seek employment rather than remain in school, as they want to be useful and present. According to Enderstein and Boonizaier (2015), this is seen as their attempt at redefining

masculinity. Many, having been raised by single mothers, feel a compelling need to help support their families, which leads them to drop out of school. Consequently, participants highlighted that some learners turn to gambling as a means of earning an income, especially in child-headed households and homes led by single parents, as well as in situations where both parents are unemployed or irresponsible or where the teenage boys have fathered children (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). As noted by Likhona:

“I think gambling is also involved. That is also a thing that makes learners drop out of school because they will be saying they are trying to be responsible. They want to provide for themselves because you wouldn't be doing that for free... Maybe it's because of the home situation or something. Because some boys live with their siblings only, they have to provide for their siblings.”

Thato adds:

“Sometimes I feel like it can be a home situation. Like your parents are dependent on you and then you have nothing to give to them. The only thing that you can think of as a male learner is that okay, let me go and work so that I can provide for my family.”

Prudence remarks:

“A friend of mine that I told you about, mainly because of home situations. He had siblings; the mom was a drunkard. So, he had to take care of the siblings.”

Nikita describes:

“They are taking care of their younger ones. Yeah, I think that's where the dropouts come from.”

These quotes illustrate the desperate measures learners undertake to secure a source of income to meet familial expectations. Additionally, the burden of being part of a child-headed household exacerbates the pressure that compels male learners to seek employment, as they feel the need to support their siblings (Shava et al., 2016). According to Prudence's observation, in the presence of an irresponsible, substance-abusing parent, male learners assume a leadership role within their families, which makes it difficult for them to continue their education (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). This highlights the urgency of earning money over spending years completing basic education and subsequently requiring even more years to obtain a qualification that could facilitate access to a better standard of living, hence the

dropouts. In some instances, as noted in Nikita's comment, male learners may be dropping out to take care of their younger ones, referring to the children they fathered during their teenage years. Siphon concurred with this, stating:

"...impregnating a girl, and then you have to work so you can feed your baby. That is what makes them leave school."

This highlights the impact of teenage pregnancy on male learners, along with the associated parental responsibilities. For these young men, leaving school often becomes a necessity rather than a choice, heavily influenced by their home circumstances (Swartz & Bhana, 2009). The cycle of poverty linked to teenage pregnancy arises from a lack of family structure that fails to provide age-appropriate activities, such as sports and opportunities to pursue interests and talents during their adolescent years (Boulton & Cunningham, 1992). Additionally, many families struggle to deliver constructive sexual education, resulting in some male learners engaging in unprotected sex as a means to assert their masculinity, fit in with peers, or seek amusement (Naven et al., 2019). Consequently, this behaviour often leads to teenage pregnancy, placing the burden of responsibility squarely on the young learners' shoulders.

Male learners endure an emotional burden from these familial difficulties, which affects their self-esteem and motivation to pursue their education. There exists a stigma surrounding poverty, particularly for males, compelling them to seek employment. Learners may even face ridicule in school due to their family situations, resulting in male students feeling isolated (Naven et al., 2019). As illustrated by Siphonandla:

"Maybe some other learners will laugh or call him names because of his situation. He didn't have a uniform and other things, so he quit school to go find work."

Overall, this theme highlights how the interplay of poverty, family dysfunction, and societal pressures can lead male learners to prioritise immediate survival over long-term academic success. The pervasive challenges faced in their home environments significantly contribute to their decisions to drop out of school, underscoring the urgent need for interventions that tackle these complex familial issues.

4.4.4 Opportunity Cost of Education

The term 'Opportunity Cost', borrowed from economics, refers to the loss of other alternatives when one alternative is chosen or the value of what is given up to make a particular choice.

(Johannesson, 1991) In this case, the opportunity cost of education refers to the trade-offs involved when learners decide whether to pursue or drop out of school. It considers the sacrifices that learners might face when choosing to stay in or leave school. Learner leaders share insights into the factors that drive male learners to pursue alternative avenues such as employment, vocational training, and even non-academic pursuits. The data reveals that the educational system must adapt to be more rewarding in a shorter timeframe in order to retain them, as the comparative value of education diminishes in light of appealing alternatives that contribute to rising dropout rates.

4.4.4.1. Disillusionment with Education

With the increasing educational challenges and barriers, male learners opt to explore alternatives and opportunities outside the traditional schooling system as they confront the reality that education does not guarantee employment or success. Consequently, male learners face the dilemma of whether to continue with their education, sacrifice an early search for work and immediate income, or leave school at the expense of potential long-term opportunities that higher education may offer.

Likhona clarifies:

“Some (boys) will be saying, ‘so and so have teaching certificates but don’t have work, so what’s the point?... Well, you know, most of the boys have this mentality of education is not doing anything for me, they will just say ‘they want to hustle... He just said screw... and actually, books, books, they’re not doing any good for him. He wants to go be a metalworker.’”

Prudence adds:

“Nowadays, some boys think that school is just a waste of time... So, the thinking is that it will be okay to drop out of school and go work at farms. Who does that?”

These quotes illustrate that learners do not recognise the value of education, primarily because it does not yield immediate results or success. Completing the full educational cycle, which can take a minimum of 9 years to reach the first level of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF 1) to 12 years (NQF 4), is essential before one can obtain a certificate, enabling them to seek employment or pursue higher education, which may also require considerable time.

Furthermore, these quotes clearly indicate that learners often drop out of school in pursuit of work opportunities due to economic pressures. Therefore, when education fails to provide monetary success within a set period, learners look for other ways to earn money (Barker et al., 2024). Consequently, they believe that education is futile and a waste of time. As a result, some learners decide to drop out of school to pursue opportunities to earn money.

4.4.4.2. Alternative Pathways

In their pursuit of alternatives, learners explore different pathways to earning. Likhona shares:

“Some will tell you that. I don't want school. I'll be a forex trader. Just like this friend of mine, he finished his Matric, and he just said he won't go to tertiary school. He's a forex trader. And I think it's working for him. Trading is working for him because he has his apartment right now. Yoh, he is making money, Yoh.”

This quote indicates that learners are increasingly turning to speculative economic ventures, such as engaging in forex trading as a career. What is imminent is that the purpose of education is seemingly tied to its potential to yield success as characterised by material gains such as owning an apartment (Barker et al., 2024). It also suggests that the belief that “education is the key to success” is gradually losing its significance as learners explore alternative paths to success, as illustrated in Likhona’s account above. Moreover, participants indicated that learners also resort to exploring their talents for potential to monetise them. Siphho and Thato explain:

Siphho

“But boys go work, or find something they can do. Most of the time, they pursue their dreams of playing football because our village is mostly filled with people who play football.”

“Most of them are able to pursue their dreams because maybe five learners from this school who come from our village were taken to another school in Soweto to play football.”

“Music. Because music needs a long time and attention. When you DJ, for example, you can be booked for a lot of vacations, and sometimes it can be during the year. And sometimes children do not actually find time between school and their gigs. So most of the time, they just want to make money and become famous.”

Thato

“The only excuse that he would give is that he believes in sports. Not academics. He said he is becoming very successful in soccer, so he doesn’t see the need for school.”

These quotes illustrate that sports, particularly football, have become a vital avenue for male learners seeking rewarding financial opportunities in a short time (Barker et al., 2024). It has evolved into a community culture where sports are not only highly valued for their enjoyment but also regarded as a potential path to success. What is emphasised is that a career in sports often overshadows the importance of formal education, as learners encounter numerous individuals who have quickly “made it” in sports; consequently, they feel motivated to transition away from academics. Moreover, the pursuit of music and other creative endeavours also signifies a desire to escape the confines of the academic system (Barker et al., 2024). Learners who immerse themselves in creative activities frequently struggle to balance these with school responsibilities, which can lead them to prioritise their artistic passions over their educational obligations, particularly as their creativity is not cultivated in schools in ways that could facilitate success. Clearly, the education system does not fully accommodate the diverse aspirations of learners and lacks flexibility and support for non-traditional careers. This absence of alignment and support can lead learners to feel that in order to pursue their dreams and goals, they have to sacrifice their education.

In conclusion, this theme reveals a bleak era when education lost its promise, resulting in a complex relationship between ambition and disillusionment. The quest for alternative paths often stems from a desire for independence and success. Yet, this highlights a broader systemic issue concerning how male learners view the value of education. Without adequate support and mentorship, these young boys may be tempted to pursue risky alternatives, which could exacerbate dropout rates and diminish their future opportunities.

4.5.Learner leaders' views on the strategies and recommendations that effectively address dropout rates

Building an inclusive education that can counter dropout rates requires the active involvement and input of those central to the education system- learners (Messiou, 2019). Therefore, this section shares the inputs and insights of the Representative Council for Learners (RCL) on the strategies and recommendations they shared to address the challenges they identified as leading causes of male learner dropout. With reference to their own experiences and observations, learner leaders advocate for a holistic approach spanning the provision of academic support, collaboration with other social institutions, and improvement of school environments (Farineau, 2014). Their suggestions highlight the importance of fostering a sense of belonging (Perez et al., 2020), providing targeted interventions and promoting proactiveness towards the diverse needs of learners. It is their view that these strategies can reduce dropout rates and promote an inclusive, supportive educational landscape.

4.5.1. Collaborative School Governance

Learner leaders suggest that to address the challenges learners face in the school effectively, it is essential to provide them with a platform to express their grievances. The DBE recognises this. Thus, it offered the RCL platform to ensure that learners have representatives and their voices are heard. However, in many schools, these RCLs are suppressed by other bodies (Strydom, 2017; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021b) on the basis of ageism (Shekupakela-Nelulu, 2008; Grant & Kajee, 2023) and authoritarianism. As such, learner leaders indicate that they are generally not required to develop initiatives to address learner challenges or to help with school development. Thato explains:

“...in this school, RCLs are not that much recognised... We sometimes come up with strategies, as RCL members, on how to help the students, but then when it has to come to the management team, everything breaks down. So, we're never given the opportunity to implement the solutions that we bring.” ...

This quote underscores that although Representative Councils of Learners (RCL) exist, they may lack efficacy, possess insufficient power to effect change, and can be rendered voiceless (Mncube, 2008; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021b). According to Thato's assertion, RCLs frequently exhibit apathy due to an awareness that the school management is likely to disregard their concerns and initiatives (Grant & Kajee, 2023). This observation suggests that while

RCLs are duly constituted according to policy standards, they are nonetheless subjected to relegation and suppression by other school governance structures (Strydom, 2017; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021b).

Furthermore, this quotation highlights a significant aspect of learner representation: the issue of disunity. The RCL committee in each school seems isolated and ineffective despite the existence of departmental leadership capacity-building conferences that bring together RCLs from all schools (Kandjengo & Shikalepo, 2021a) and organisations, such as the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), which coordinates the RCL to ensure that learners' voices are heard and their concerns addressed. Clearly, RCLs are unable to leverage their collective power to bargain with other governing bodies in the school (Strydom, 2017).

Participants further highlight the importance of collaboration between the RCL and other school bodies as a mechanism to reduce dropout rates. They indicate the following:

Bulelwa

"I want to say about RCL in school is that we must be visible and distinguished from other learners. Because all the learners, when they see us, don't respect us. They undermine us because of our age."

Thato

"I think they should be given recognition as the RCL. As learners we can come up with ideas on how to deal with the male dropout issue. We become solutions on how to make them realise that school is important because we are also learners. We can put ourselves in their shoes... So, we, as learners, could find a way to deal with them, like to help them deal with it... We haven't been given a chance to, or an opportunity to do that."

Learner leaders emphasise the importance of ensuring the RCL committee is well-structured and respected. This entails both learners and teachers recognising its significance so that learner leaders are not seen merely as ordinary learners but rather as dependable and esteemed leaders whom their peers can rely on when facing challenges (Gqeba, 2021). The badges, the honour, and the forms of address all play a part in assuring that these RCLs are properly acknowledged and treated. Consequently, other learners will not feel so powerless in school that they consider dropping out.

Furthermore, learner leaders expressed that the undermining of RCLs originates not only from learners (Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021b); it is also evident in how the SGB and school management do not take their issues seriously (Gqeba, 2021; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021b). Thato, Musawenkosi, and Sipho remarked,

“The only challenge we face is approval. What we do as the RCL is suggest things to the SGB. They must talk to the principals or anyone about it to be able to fix that problem.”

The notion that they face a challenge with approval indicates that their input is not well received and infused into the school development plan, rendering them impotent (Jamieson & Thomas, 1974; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021b). This implies that learners' grievances are never addressed, making the school environment seem hostile. The recognition and respect of RCLs may address this factor. Another aspect of recognising and respecting learner leadership is the allowance to lead their initiatives and granting them the funds and support to do so well (Gqeba, 2021). Thus, Siphamandla says,

“There are learners who know about how to lead; they must also participate in RCLs and give us advice on how we can change the schools.”

Allowing learners to take leadership of their education as a whole will enable them to feel seen in school (Perez et al., 2020), thus reducing dropout rates. To do this, Likhona states,

“...there must be a budget for RCL to enable the RCL to do their things. In the RCL top 10, we appoint people we see as having potential, people who will be able to work with us as learners.”

Currently, the DBE maintains that a budget should be allocated for the RCLs. However, the control that principals exert over school finances through their influence on SGBs means that the effectiveness of the RCL is shaped by the principal's perception of the value RCLs can bring to the school (Mncube, 2008; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021b).

While many external factors hinder the efficacy of RCLs, Musawenkosi highlighted a different view on why RCLs are ineffective in schools, thus:

“RCLs think they want to instil discipline in schools, not knowing what the cause of this is. If we say, we want to discipline learners who smoke without knowing the cause... it's like, oh, you take Panado for a headache each time, but you don't know what causes the headache. So I'd advise RCLs to just pull up their socks and be more active and observant.”

This perspective suggests that, although there are other structures that may hinder the effectiveness of RCL, the RCL itself sometimes lacks depth and foresight when it comes to addressing the issues learners encounter. Instead of tackling the problems, they tend to focus on the person, thereby making them the problem. This highlights the deficiency in leadership development for learners (Gqeba, 2021; Kadjengo & Shakalepo, 2021a), which is prevalent in many public schools. The DBE does attempt to provide training; however, there is nothing specifically tailored to the precise needs of each RCL, resulting in a superficial approach. Therefore, the DBE must invest in grassroots agents to reform education.

Learner leaders highlighted how school governance structures influence learners' learning experiences and decisions to drop out or remain in school. They looked into how the active involvement of learners in their learning through the RCL and SGB can foster inclusive decision-making and give learners a voice to inform school policies and practices (Mathebula et al., 2021).

Some learner leaders held the view that dropout rates may be reduced if learners are allowed to have a say in the creation of policies that impact them. They shared the following views:

Nikita

“... Before they create the rules, they must talk to the learners first. When they place those rules, they should see whether the learners are cooperative or not. I think they just have to write on a ballot paper and throw it in a box. Then, see whether what the learners have written on those ballots is a good thing. If it's a good thing, it can be done, and they could feel appreciated here in the school.”

Likhona

“And then the Code of Conduct, I don't really agree with it. Most of the learners here in school don't agree with it because the school does not agree with the White Socks because white is our school uniform. And others are complaining about it. And then the hairstyles. You can't just come to school, and maybe you have money to do the braids, you know, the straightbacks. The braids are not allowed. It would be better if they maybe allowed them, but not with long lengths. At least a medium or short one.”

When learners have a say in the rules of the school, they will feel a sense of responsibility to uphold them; thus, they will feel included and seen, eliminating learner dropout. As Nikita

indicated, *“They could feel appreciated here in the school.”* Suggestions included using ballot papers to gather learners’ opinions, allowing learners to voice their preferences, and ensuring that any new policies are collaboratively developed.

Participants also criticised existing codes of conduct, particularly regarding uniform policies, hairstyles, and other regulations that do not align with learner preferences (Steinmann, 2013). Teachers usually develop a code of conduct, even though policy dictates that collaboration should be encouraged. Learners feel it is imposed upon them and sometimes not implemented consistently (Steinmann, 2013). This leads to unfairness towards learners; however, if schools ensure that there is collaboration in designing the code of conduct and other policies and that they are regularly reviewed and any updates shared with everyone, then a system of fairness can be established (Zondo & Mncube, 2024).

4.5.2. Holistic Learner Support and Well-being

Learner leaders' insights alluded to a desire for a holistic approach to learner support. Their views show that a multidimensional intervention strategy is needed to address the academic, emotional, and social needs of learners and reduce dropout rates. Learner leaders suggest different forms of support that are essential to fostering a conducive learning atmosphere, such as boy-child empowerment and the fostering of a nurturing school culture, mental health support and counselling services, and collaboration with the family institution through social work. These are elaborated on below:

4.5.2.1. Gender Equity: Remembering the Boy Child

Due to historical injustices and the lack of access to economic opportunities for women, reforms have focused on advocating for female empowerment through affirmative action, employment initiatives, and various feminist movements supported by activist programmes calling for gender equality. While these efforts aim to address inequalities by levelling the playing field, they inadvertently neglect the boy child, often assuming that males are inherently more capable, strong and driven because of the patriarchal system that “empowers” them (Morrell, 2020). This assumption creates disparities in support and resources given to boys and girls and ignores the reality that patriarchy does not benefit all men equally. The impact of this oversight is most evident in townships, where girls consistently outperform boys academically and socially- today, girls are more likely to finish school, get admission to university, secure

employment, and progress well in life (Spaull & Makaluza, 2019). In contrast, boys often face challenges such as increased substance abuse, increasing dropout rates, and a concerning prevalence of early mortality (Graham et al., 2020). Clearly, there must be interventions that address the boy child and their needs. Musawenkosi notes the importance of this:

“So my idea is that we should bring men who used to be learners at this school here, especially those from this community. Who come from the same or similar backgrounds as these male learners, to try to guide and talk to them. I think they'd relate more with them because they've been in the situation; they have walked the same journey, and yet, they are successful already. In our communities, we don't really have good role models, especially when it comes to males, you understand... So at least they must be exposed to environments that are different... they will actually see that, okay, actually, as a boy child, I can do better.”

Musawenkosi emphasised the importance of mentorship and role models for male learners, suggesting that inviting successful former students and other male figures to share their experiences could inspire male learners to believe in their own potential. Additionally, Musawenkosi highlighted the importance of providing male learners with diverse experiential learning opportunities, similar to initiatives focused on female learners. By organising such opportunities, male learners will be exposed to better neighbourhoods, workplaces, and prospects, broadening their horizons and inspiring them to aspire for more, as this exposure can be transformative to their current paradigms. This assertion aligns with Vygotsky (1978), who argued that children's cognitive development is profoundly influenced by their interactions with others, particularly those considered more knowledgeable within their social environment.

The study highlighted the tendency to downplay the challenges faced by male learners, while prioritising issues related to female students. For instance, South African education policies, namely, the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy in Schools, actively support pregnant learners, providing a non-discriminatory and supportive environment, including counselling and professional advice, which helps minimise bullying, exclusion, and dropout rates among female learners.(Department of Basic Education, 2021). Additionally, while hygiene initiatives are in place to support female learners, male learners often lack similar attention and support. For instance, if a male learner struggles with drug addiction, they may face ostracisation and judgement from schools, reducing the likelihood of obtaining necessary

assistance.(Mokwena & Morojele, 2022). This highlights the neglect of the boy child and the need for interventions targeted at ameliorating male learners' issues and their experience in school. Siphon explains the significance of this, noting that :

“... male learner's problems shouldn't be taken lightly. Because we all know we need male people- male businessmen, engineers, doctors, nurses, and all that- everyone should have an opportunity. So if their problems are taken lightly, they won't be able to achieve their dreams or have a good career.”

Therefore, it is sensible to reform the system to ensure equitable access regardless of gender. This would involve focusing on individual needs and addressing those specifics rather than generalising and assuming that males are empowered solely based on gender. The current approach is biased and causes what Musawenkosi refers to as an “*empowerment imbalance*,” which hinders our society's development.

4.5.2.2.Mental Health Support

Learner leaders proposed a range of interventions that seemed to venture outside of just academic support. Their suggestions varied and covered the psychological, emotional, and social aspects. They note:

Musawenkosi:

“A person is not only supposed to be focused on academics... but there's also the psychological part. You have your emotions and all of that. And so they (schools) focus only on the academic part so much that they forget they also have to make sure that the psychological well-being is taken care of.”

Siphamandla:

“We need school-based counsellors. We have that a bit; the LO teacher does that. But we need more people who have knowledge and expertise, who know why people think the way they think, or how to change people's minds, so they can influence them to continue with school...talk to the boys who smoke and find out why they smoke; some do it because they want relief from their pain. Maybe they are being abused at home or by other learners. So, something like counselling so that they can remove that pain so that they can stop smoking and just become proper school learners.”

Prudence:

“I would suggest that they organise a therapist for them. Most of them tend to bottle up some things. So they will get to talk about their stuff.”

The psychological well-being of learners was identified as a key aspect of ensuring they remain in school (Ratele, 2013), as learner leaders suggested that the education system must not only focus on academics but also acknowledge that for learners to manage school effectively, their mental health needs to be well cared for. Learner leaders recognise the importance of creating safe emotional spaces for male learners in schools as a means of retaining them. Many of them recommended that schools provide on-site counsellors and therapists to offer counselling services. Furthermore, learner leaders advocate for collaboration between teachers and mental health providers, as they believe that teachers can identify learners who require these support services. As Sipho states,

“class teachers are the ones who know their learners... the school can help them with a therapist.”

Learner leaders also emphasise the importance of understanding the root causes of issues and addressing them fundamentally. Siphamandla noted that schools must view drug use as a symptom of profound emotional or psychological pain and support learners through this, enabling them to cope better with their academic responsibilities. Hence, some participants added the potential of sports as a mechanism for stress relief that the DBE can utilise to alleviate the psychological challenges faced by male learners in schools. Prudence notes:

“Lastly, even sports can help them reduce their stress. We do have sports, but they don't get to practice that much, and we don't have a sports ground and stuff.”

This quotation acknowledges the existence of sports programmes and their invaluable impact in alleviating mental and psychological issues. However, it highlights significant obstacles that learner leaders believe the DBE could address to reduce dropout rates: facilities and time. The DBE is urged to enhance facilities for sports activities and allocate time for a sports allowance in the school timetable.

4.5.2.3. Collaboration with Family Institution

Learner leaders also noted the critical aspect of partnerships between schools and family units. These two institutions have a common goal and may better reach it through collaboration, albeit

the benefits of this are different for each institution. For both institutions, the goal is for the learner to succeed at school and become an upright and socially responsible member of society (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Research has shown that parental involvement in a learner's educational journey is a crucial indicator of their achievements (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Therefore, schools should create opportunities for parents to engage meaningfully in their children's education, and parents should actively seek to participate in this process. By doing so, they can collectively address any barriers to learning. Participants express similar sentiments:

Musawenkosi:

“We also need parents to be involved in the lives of their children in general. Parents need to be involved.”

Prudence:

“Maybe they (the DBE) should do something about the situation at home. Maybe if there is a situation, they should buy some food, package it, and give it to some of them.”

These quotations stress the importance of connecting the school and the home to support learners in their journeys. Prudence's recommendation highlights the impact of socioeconomic factors on education and the potential of schools to bridge that gap by responding to learners' home situations. Meanwhile, Musawenkosi's quotation highlights the significance of parental involvement. While these may seem outside of the scope of the DBE, the department may be able to collaborate with the Department of Social Development in an attempt to uphold learner well-being by ensuring familial health.

In summary, the subtheme of Holistic Learner Support and Well-being depicts the intersectionality of issues that need to be addressed to ensure educational success. These issues include emotional and social support systems that must intertwine with the education system to cater to male learners' needs through mentorship programmes, psychological support, and enhanced parental involvement. The recommendations have shown that addressing these dimensions holistically ensures that male learners not only remain in school but also succeed academically and personally.

4.5.3. Inclusive Educational Curriculum and Instruction

The educational curriculum design and delivery play a significant role in engaging and motivating learners to remain in school (Taylor, 2014). The educational curriculum refers to a set of coordinated and orchestrated lessons on different subjects and skills (Karakuş, 2021) that teachers must confer on learners. Learner leaders have called for adjustments to be made to the current curriculum. Their recommendations range from restructuring it to make room for extracurricular activities to modifying its prescribed instructional methods (Tomlinson et al., 2003) to meet the diverse needs of learners, especially those who are at risk of dropping out. They examined the relevance of the curriculum content and teachers' pedagogy regarding how they deliver the material. This is explored below:

4.5.3.1. Learner-centred Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Learner leaders believe that adapting the curriculum can significantly prevent disengagement and dropout. Participants shared the following:

Amber:

“The government has to realise the potential that schools have because... There are many talents, and as I said earlier, we can't focus only on one thing. The school has to improve in such a way that we... We must do something new each single day so that the drugs don't come to mind, cigarettes and all. Even if we go home, we know that I'm going to practise this thing, and I have to be perfect by tomorrow... Give people the programmes for them to lead. When they manage them, they will have a lot of pressure. When you have pressure, you won't think about anything else. You will think about that thing.”

Musawenkosi:

“Can we have less theory, please? Honestly, they just don't get it. Can we have less theory and have more practicals because practical opens up your mind, you understand?”

These quotations suggest that learner leaders attribute drug use, disengagement and dropout to the curriculum and how it is delivered. High schools and primary schools are different in that primary school teachers know that learners learn better when the manner of teaching stimulates multiple senses and captivates learners' attention. Therefore, these teachers deliver their

content in creative ways, such as incorporating songs, colours, shapes and the like. Thus, their pedagogy involves reworking the content and delivering it in fun ways that keep learners engaged (Gazioğlu & Karakuş, 2023).

However, in high schools, the assumption is that learners are mature and should be able to work independently to consume mono-medium content, even though many of the subjects are content-heavy (Meyer et al., 2008). This leads to lecture-type classrooms where the teacher talks and instructs learners to complete tasks with very minimal stimulation of their senses to ensure they remain engaged (Freeman et al., 2014)). To put it bluntly, high school teaching bores the learners. Hence, the quotation above, “*We can’t focus only on one thing,*” indicates that learners want to experience a curriculum that considers and incorporates their capabilities in the delivery. Amber also states, “*We must do something new each single day,*” suggesting that the learners desire to be stimulated and engaged. To do this, the content must be refreshing, planned, and creative to give newness to the work rather than writing notes, listening to the teacher explain them and writing tests every day (Khurshid & Ansari, 2012). Musawenkosi adds, “*Can we have less theory and have more of practicals...*,” indicating that learners need to be actively engaged in the work rather than being passive bystanders (Patel & Patel, 2024).

Clearly, learner leaders are advocating for a learner-centred approach to teaching. They suggest that to keep learners engaged, the curriculum must allow them to take leadership of their learning and its associated programmes. As Amber suggests, learner-centred teaching gives learners positive stress, which they need to remain occupied with school and not be tempted to indulge in toxic behaviours to keep busy.

4.5.3.2. Curriculum Integration of Art Stream and Sports

Another recurring recommendation from learner leaders is expanding the curriculum to include the art stream equal to commerce and science. To curb dropout rates, learner leaders desire a curriculum that recognises learners' diverse talents and interests. They emphasise the potential of music, drama, visual arts, and sports to engage learners who do not cope with academia. Participants share:

Amber:

“... bring the art streams because it’s very important. Even I am not gifted academically. I’m an artist. It (school) must be fun. We mustn’t always stress about math and studying. We should go back to talent shows. They should bring the piano, guitar because there are kids who are gifted... [with] the talent of drawing, mindset for colouring... Even acting... and, like, bring teachers that will help them learn how to use those kinds of instruments to keep the learners in the school... There must not be any discrimination, even to say that these ones will be loud and all... for us to always stay focused, we have to be active in whatever that we do.”

Siphamandla:

“... Like people must not learn something they don’t want to because it is being offered in that school.”

The current public school system is structured so that in the GET Phase, learners undertake Creative Arts (CA), which encompasses four art forms: drama, music, visual arts, which includes design and crafts, and dance (Department of Basic Education, 2011c). Learners select two in the GET Phase for specialisation, and in the FET Phase, they choose one or more art forms based on the school’s resources and expertise. Learners often select specialisations based on those factors rather than their personal interests, echoing Siphamandla’s assertion above. Additionally, as Tsikati (2019) noted, factors such as resource availability, teacher expertise, and school infrastructure play a significant role in shaping learners’ subject choices. As a result, learners frequently pursue whatever is on offer at their school rather than following their true artistic passion (Tsikati, 2019).

Furthermore, most public schools do not value the art stream, often viewing it as “playtime” and “simply making noise”, failing to recognise the potential for success in this area (Smith, 2019). Instead, greater importance is placed on commerce and science streams, as statistically, communities are more familiar with success through traditional routes such as academia (Tsikati, 2019). Research suggests that arts education is often deprioritised due to a belief that it lacks economic value, leading to reduced funding and support in schools (Tsikati, 2019). Additionally, there are numerous stereotypes surrounding the arts; for instance, people often believe that DJs are promiscuous, and musicians and performers are associated with drug and alcohol abuse, leading communities to dismiss them as viable career paths (Tsikati, 2019).

Learner leaders advocate for this to change in order to accommodate those who are not interested in academia.

Similarly, learner leaders indicate that the curriculum must make room for sports, as it makes room for arts. Sports must not be an extra-curricular activity but an equally recognised aspect of it.

Siphamandla states:

“Some other learners are not good at school stuff; they are gifted in sports. There are coaches at school who encourage people to join sports, such as netball, soccer, rugby and cricket, but I think the government should partner with people who are already in high places in sports. For example, if a learner loves something, maybe soccer, and you see that they want to go far, they should consider how they can help those people in their passion, because we are not all gifted in academics. For example, to see the learners when they play and say okay, you can pick that one... like where I stay, every December, there is a soccer player who hosts tournaments.”

Siphamandla suggests that sports should be incorporated into the curriculum. The South African curriculum provides Physical Education (PE) classes that promote physical fitness, teamwork, discipline, and overall well-being (Department of Basic Education, 2011a). However, learner leaders advocate for an expansion beyond PE, proposing a collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture to establish pathways for learners who are not academically inclined, enabling them to achieve success and a future through sports in school rather than relying on luck after leaving school (Stipanovic et al., 2017). This indicates that learners wish to be part of a school system that accommodates their needs and abilities, valuing each individual equally (Stipanovic et al., 2017). Moreover, they recognise the importance of sports in helping learners maintain focus in school, aligning with their desire for stimulation within the educational environment (Stipanovic et al., 2017)

4.5.3.3. Refining Existing Educational Programmes

Learner leaders also suggested how the DBE can improve its existing programmes to support learners. For example, the DBE has implemented measures such as the N4PR and the Secondary Schools Improvement Programme (SSIP) (Department of Basic Education, 2012;

2015a). Learner leaders investigated the progression policy, language policy, and intervention programmes and highlighted their possible unintended consequences:

Owami:

“I speak for the repeaters. They must come back to school and ask us to assist them in their studies, tasks, and assessment... for the repeaters... they can make progression to come to school and then go to another grade.”

“Maybe languages—to include more languages. So, they must at least include more languages so that there are other languages in school.”

Siphamandla:

“Maybe if I can’t understand my teacher, bring someone who can help me understand.”

Learner leaders spoke of the learners who drop out because of consistently repeating a grade due to not meeting specific requirements. The requirements for progression are such that the education standard is acceptable (Department of Basic Education, 2011b). Some individuals argue that the current pass mark is unacceptably low. Political figures, including Mmusi Maimane, have expressed concerns, suggesting that a 30% minimum threshold is inadequate for ensuring quality education and competency (Dispatch Live, 2022). The requirements at the FET level are as follows:

According to the Department of Basic Education (2011b), a learner must meet the following criteria to progress to the next grade:

- Achieve 40% in their Home Language.
- Achieve at least 30% in two other subjects.
- Achieve at least 30% in three additional subjects (excluding Life Orientation).
- Must have completed all School-Based Assessments (SBAs).

If learners do not meet these requirements, they may progress rather than be promoted under certain conditions.

- A learner cannot fail the same grade more than once.
- If a learner has already repeated a grade and fails again, they may progress to the next grade to prevent them from being stuck in the system.

- However, progressed learners must receive specific support and intervention measures to help them cope with the next grade.

The progression policy stipulates that learners who do not meet the necessary requirements must repeat a grade only once and cannot spend more than four years in a particular phase (Department of Basic Education, 2011b). Additionally, learners who repeat a grade in public schools are entitled to support to address their learning gaps (Department of Basic Education, 2011b). Unfortunately, many School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) are dysfunctional, leading to a lack of specialised attention for failing learners (García-Pérez et al., 2014). Consequently, these learners often find themselves stuck in the same grade without adequate assistance, which fosters frustration within the school environment, especially as they grow older, because this frequently results in mockery and discouragement, pushing many to drop out (García-Pérez et al., 2014).

In response to these challenges, learner leaders propose additional support strategies, including peer-to-peer teaching, tutoring, and the involvement of language assistants, as seen in Owami's suggestion. This approach promotes a tutoring model where academically stronger learners help their peers in a structured manner (García-Pérez et al., 2014). Moreover, learners emphasise the importance of exposure to various teachers and teaching methods, as they sometimes struggle to understand their primary instructor (García-Pérez et al., 2014). In university settings, students are encouraged to participate in tutorial groups led by more advanced students, where attendance contributes to their Due Performance marks (Khurshid & Ansari, 2012). Implementing a similar model in high schools could prove beneficial.

Additionally, Owami suggests that improving the criteria for grade progression, as the current policy creates different realities for learners who repeatedly fail and those who are progressing. They also highlight the need to expand the languages used within the Department of Education to foster greater inclusivity. Currently, schools offer various Indigenous languages alongside English as a compulsory language (Department of Basic Education, 2011c). Assessments are conducted in English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT). Moreover, some Matric examinations are also available in Afrikaans (Anderson, 2018). This is more beneficial to learners who speak both English and Afrikaans, as they can understand and respond to the assessments more effectively, given that they are presented in their home languages (García-Pérez et al., 2014). In contrast, those who speak indigenous South African languages and take

English as an additional language do not receive the same consideration (Anderson, 2018). This is a disadvantage that has serious implications for academic performance and, thus, retention in schools (Anderson, 2018).

4.5.4. Teacher Emotional Intelligence Training

Teachers are at the forefront of delivering quality education, and their ongoing professional development is essential for adapting to the changing needs of learners (Kubacka & D'Addio, 2020; Florian & Camedda, 2019). Teacher development programmes and collaborative practices can enhance the educational experience for male learners at risk of dropping out by clarifying the acceptable “display rules” of teacher emotions in the schooling environment, as well as providing training for positive emotional expression (Cribbs, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to encourage continuous training, peer support, and interdisciplinary collaboration in equipping teachers with the skills and knowledge needed to address the diverse challenges faced by their learners while managing their emotions effectively (Dolev & Leshem, 2017). By fostering a culture of collaboration and professional growth, schools can create a more supportive and effective learning environment. Learner leaders recognise this aspect and highlight the significance of emotional intelligence training for teachers:

Thato

“I think teachers should be taught how to treat learners, they know, I feel like sometimes... I don't know. But then there should be a way of speaking to learners. Even though we know that learners sometimes can be... can make you angry or anything, but then there should be a certain way to deal with, not to hurt them emotionally.”

Typically, professional development programmes for teachers focus on subject content and methodology. They seldom explore teachers’ emotional capabilities and resilience in challenging circumstances, leading educators to alter their professional behaviours to cope with specific contexts, which makes their conduct reliant on individual capacity and emotional intelligence (Yoo & Carter, 2017). Consequently, learner leaders propose that professional development should empower teachers with strategies to discipline and cope with challenging situations where learners may be disobedient and defiant. The assertion that *“teachers should be taught how to treat learners”* underscores the necessity for teachers’ emotional growth, enabling them to maintain professionalism while dealing with “difficult learners” (Valente et al., 2018) and fulfilling their responsibility to ensure that these learners receive the necessary

support despite instances of defiance. If teachers are not supported in addressing these challenges, they may resort to harsh disciplinary measures (Jeloudar et al., 2011), such as corporal punishment. One participant explains the extremity of teachers' chosen disciplinary measures:

Likhona

"... the teacher does that. Like she doesn't mind going all day, missing all her periods, going class to class to look for those that have braided and... let me not say artificial nails. You know some people grow their nails long, especially girls. She will be cutting their nails with a scissor. So, imagine if she cuts a person's skin, what will happen? It's a case. It's a case."

This quote emphasises the importance of teachers adopting positive behavioural management strategies instead of relying on severe disciplinary actions that arise from emotion and may result in legal repercussions (Mthanti & Mncube, 2014). Such an approach not only compromises the safety of learners but also hinders their ability to express themselves, transforming the school into a conveyor-belt-like environment that uniformly produces learners who are timid, uncreative and inexpressive. This has repercussions in the classroom setting as it fosters fear and anxiety in learners to the extent that they may even drop out of school (Muhammad et al., 2024).

4.5.5. Enhanced School Environment and Safety

The importance of a conducive school environment and safety cannot be overstated. Learner leaders emphasise these two factors as essential elements for learner retention, especially for those at risk of dropping out. In this section, learner leaders suggest various ways to foster a secure and welcoming school environment by reassessing policies, infrastructure, and the overall school climate to ensure that learners feel protected and valued. In this section, they stress the need for a positive school atmosphere that prevents bullying, encourages healthy conflict resolution, and lowers dropout rates:

4.5.5.1. Abolition of Corporal Punishment

Learner leaders highlighted that an important factor that can make male learners stay in school is the abolition of corporal punishment. Likhona stated:

“... the learners must not be beaten by the teacher. If a teacher touches you, just report it to the office. Teachers who lay hands on learners must stop because they will find that, maybe, they try to reprimand a boy learner, especially the overage ones...Then, you will try to slap him, and he will return it. Then what?”

This quotation indicates that, while policies are in place to stop this practice, corporal punishment continues to affect learners (Harber, 2004). Corporal punishment refers to any physical punishment inflicted on a learner, such as flogging, spanking, frog jumps, pinching, and other inflictions of physical or emotional discomfort (Mthanti & Mncube, 2014). Due to its nature, teachers can find subtle ways to carry it out without leaving evidence (Morrell, 2001). In other instances, teachers do it publicly, hoping that their colleagues and unions will back them (Burchell, 2018). Despite this, Likhona’s assertion, *“If a teacher touches you, just report it to the office,”* suggests that learners still have faith in “the office” as a place of refuge. This may imply that not all members of the school community advocate for corporal punishment through their actions and that perhaps “the office” (referring to the principal’s office or the district office) offers alternative forms of discipline or safeguards learners from harm. Therefore, learner leaders advocate for teachers to implement genuine changes in their disciplinary methods to ensure that learners remain in school. Experiencing violence in school makes learners feel unsafe, prompting them to leave (Harber, 2004). Hence, the DBE must enforce strict accountability measures to eradicate corporal punishment.

4.5.5.2.Environmental Safety and Infrastructure

Learner leaders highlighted the significance of enhanced security and infrastructure in schools as a measure to reduce dropout rates. They indicate how a healthy and safe environment becomes attractive to learners and encourages them to desire to be in that environment. Participants note the following:

Siphokazi:

“I think they would need a few people to just patrol the school and make sure everyone is safe and secure.”

Bulelwa:

“In our school, for boys to stay in, there must be security at the gate. Security. Not someone from the community. Security with qualification. All the boys must be

searched, and all things must be done accordingly. The gates must be functional and enough. There mustn't be any knives and other dangerous weapons."

Owami:

"They must renovate the school. They must put in pavements, as you can see there is no paving. They must rebuild other classes that are dilapidated; some windows are broken, the paints... even the toilets need to be fixed... Maybe a wall—a huge wall. And at the top, they must put a razor fence. The gate must be an electric fence. So, when someone wants to go out, he or she must stop because of things that he sees."

Prudence:

"Everything. Like the ground, we don't have water."

A key aspect of safety within educational institutions is the physical safety and security of learners (Department of Basic Education, 2015b). Learners desire a sense of safety at school, as its absence is represented by feelings of pain, fear, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Anthony et al., 2022), which can lead to high dropout rates. However, many schools fail to adhere to the norms and standards set by the Department of Education, particularly those outlined in the National School Safety Framework (Department of Basic Education, 2015b).

Recognising this critical issue, learner leaders have passionately emphasised the urgent need for comprehensive security measures to be implemented across all school premises. According to the quotations above, these measures include, but are unlimited to, regular patrols of the school grounds during operational hours and the strategic deployment of qualified security personnel (Anthony et al., 2022). Such trained individuals are essential for monitoring the school environment, effectively searching learners for dangerous weapons, and ensuring the overall safety and well-being of every student present. The lack of consistent and vigilant supervision can lead to an environment where learners may engage in risky and potentially harmful behaviours, ultimately rendering the school atmosphere unsafe for everyone involved (Anthony et al., 2022).

Alongside concerns about security, learners have also raised urgent issues related to the overall school infrastructure. Many have pointed out deficiencies such as overcrowded classrooms, broken windows, inadequate sanitation facilities, and the troubling absence of a secure boundary wall to ensure learners' safety while on school grounds. It is widely recognised that

the physical environment of a school significantly influences learners' behaviours and attitudes towards their educational experience (Anthony et al., 2022). Consequently, addressing these infrastructural concerns is essential.

In conclusion, by improving these conditions, schools not only create a more conducive learning environment but also have the potential to positively affect and reduce student dropout rates, underscoring the importance of a safe and supportive educational setting.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter presented and analysed data collected in response to the research questions of this study. It outlined the study's setting, which took place in two schools in Mogale City in 2024. The chapter explored insights from 11 participants of varying ages and genders, who discussed factors contributing to male learner dropout and proposed strategies to address these issues. In this chapter, the issues driving male learners away were explored from the perspective of the learners and revealed factors such as toxic school dynamics, social pressures, dysfunctional family institutions, and disillusionment as key push-out factors. Furthermore, the chapter presented strategies and recommendations provided by learner leaders, such as giving voice and agency to RCLs, promoting collaboration between school bodies, and adopting a holistic approach to learner support rather than solely academic support by encouraging inclusive education, enhancing teacher emotional capacity, and improving school safety and infrastructure.

Upon these findings, the study's conclusions and recommendations are made in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1.Introduction

This chapter intends to provide the conclusions reached based on the findings of the study, as well as to present the researcher's recommendations. To do so, this chapter is structured as follows: firstly, a comprehensive summary of the study is provided, including its guiding research objectives and questions. Secondly, a summary of the research methodology and frameworks utilised are detailed, focusing on the features that defined the research. Thirdly, a summary of the overall research findings is provided, together with a conclusion reached based on them. Fourthly, the study recommendations are provided, which also cover implications for further research. Lastly, a conclusion of the chapter is provided.

5.2.Summary of overall research

To begin with, this study provided a thorough overview of the historical context in juxtaposition with the current issues facing the South African system. The significance of this was to set the scene for exploring the dropout rates among Black male learners. The study highlighted that many challenges faced today stem from the legacies of apartheid, which affect educational opportunities and outcomes for marginalised groups, perpetuating inequality and obstructing the formation of a fair and inclusive society. It underscored the necessity for a major transformation in educational governance, emphasising that learners' voices should not only be heard but recognised as essential in developing policies and strategies aimed at reducing dropout rates and enhancing inclusivity. Furthermore, this study stressed that empowering learner leaders within the RCL to engage in decision-making processes could provide valuable avenues to address systemic issues and implement targeted interventions that meet the specific needs of male learners.

The study's guiding research objectives and questions were as follows:

- a) What are the learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school?
- b) What strategies and recommendations do learner leaders propose for creating an inclusive education system that effectively counters dropout rates?

These questions underscored the importance of understanding the factors contributing to dropout rates and identifying effective strategies for creating an inclusive education system and

further explored the potential of centring the experiences and perspectives of male learners to inform evidence-based policies and interventions that can mitigate dropout rates and promote equitable access to quality education for all by challenging gender disparities within the education system and advocating for gender equality. The study was rooted in gaps highlighted in existing literature. It foregrounded the importance of addressing not only the common reasons for dropout but also less conventional ones, such as perceptions of education as useless.

To achieve this, the study employed an interpretivist paradigm along with a qualitative approach to conduct semi-structured interviews with 11 learner leaders of varying ages, genders, and roles in the RCL at two public schools in Mogale City Local Municipality (MLCM). The theoretical frameworks that guided the choices in the study are Critical Theory and Empowerment Theory, which helped to highlight the systemic challenges and transformative opportunities within the educational environments of the schools. By adopting an interpretivist paradigm, utilising qualitative research methods, and emphasising participant voices, this study revealed the nuanced experiences and perspectives of learner leaders regarding male learners' dropout rates.

Due to these choices, data collection process involved a conversation-like style between the individual participants and the researcher, allowing them to express themselves freely. In some instances, considering language barriers, participants code-switched to communicate their points more clearly. The interviews were recorded on the researcher's laptop and later transcribed using Otter. The editing process was thorough, as it involved reviewing the recordings while cross-checking with the transcriptions to ensure accuracy. This facilitated more precise data organisation and analysis. Throughout this, ethical considerations were paramount, ensuring the protection of participants and the integrity of the research process by providing pseudonyms and colour coding for the participants' quotations. The key findings of this study were organised according to the following themes (see Chapter 4 or Table 2). The findings are discussed below.

Table 2: Themes and Subthemes

	THEMES	SUBTHEMES
What are the learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school?	1. Toxic School Culture: Educational Dynamics, Authority Structures	• Teacher-Learner dynamics • Learner indiscipline and Autonomy Vs Teacher authority • Academic pressures and Barriers to learning • Gender issues
	2. Social Pressures: Substance Abuse, Peer Pressure, Bullying and Violence	• Peer pressure • Substance abuse • Bullying • Violence
	3. Dysfunctional Family Institution	• Lack of parental support for academics • Poverty and family responsibility
	4. Alternative Paths and Opportunities	• Lack of value from education • Work opportunities
What strategies and recommendations do learner leaders propose for creating an inclusive education system that effectively counters dropout rates?	5. Recognition of Representative Council of Learner	
	6. Holistic Learner Support and Well-being	• Gender Equity: Remembering the boy child • Mental health support

		• Collaboration with family institution
	7. Inclusive Educational Curriculum and Instruction	• Learner Centred Pedagogical Content Knowledge • Curriculum integration of art Stream and sports • Refining existing educational programmes
	8. Enhanced School Environment and Safety	• Abolition of corporal punishment • Environmental safety and infrastructure
	9. Effective School Governance and Learner Leadership	• Recognition of RCL Bodies • Collaborative policy making
	10. Teacher Emotional Intelligence Training	

5.3.Conclusions

This section presents the conclusions drawn from the findings. It is organised according to the study's objectives and research questions and aligns with the theoretical frameworks of the study. Firstly, the Critical Theory is used to challenge the dominant practices in educational settings in order to uncover the obstacles faced by male learners. This is done from the perspective that, through Critical Theory, education can be perceived through the lens of marginalised groups, questioning and opposing oppressive systems while promoting inclusive and empowering educational practices. Furthermore, through the Empowerment Theory, the study is capable of redistributing power by enabling learners to become part of the solution to their problems by proposing strategies and recommendations that they consider potentially able to address the male learner dropout phenomenon.

5.3.1) What are the learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school?

Learner leaders are the elected representatives of all learners in school; thus, their views are significant to understanding the factors that lead male learners to drop out, particularly as the literature suggests that there is a gradual increase in male learner dropout compared to female drop out, but provides reasons more commonly cited by females rather than male. As such, this research was motivated by this gap identified in the literature on reasons for male learners dropping out from the learners' perspectives.

The findings reveal that several interrelated factors contribute to male learners dropping out. Firstly, these factors are corroborated by existing literature, which indicates that male learners drop out because they consider education to be useless and boring (see Statistics South Africa 2021 and 4.3.1.1.a & 4.3.2.4.a). Furthermore, this study's findings are validated by conclusions drawn from international literature, suggesting that academic failure, grade retention, being overage (see 4.3.1.1.c), family responsibilities, drug use (see 4.3.1.3.b), traditional practices, and poor teaching (see 4.3.1.1.a) contribute to male learners' dropout rates.

Particularly, toxic school culture emerged as a key driver to learner dropout, as it was highlighted that the school environment is often characterised by rigid authority structures, punitive discipline, and teacher-to-learner interactions that undermine rather than support learners. Many learners experience public humiliation, exclusion, and a lack of meaningful engagement with teachers, leading to emotional detachment from school. The enforcement of strict, often arbitrary policies such as uniform rules and disciplinary measures further alienates learners who feel that their voices are ignored in school governance. Over time, these negative experiences contribute to silent exclusion, where learners remain physically present in school but disengage emotionally and academically before eventually dropping out.

Moreover, social pressures emerged to be a significant contributor to male learner dropout as well, with bullying, peer pressure, substance abuse and gang-related activities highlighted as creating an unsafe learning space for many learners. They struggle with societal expectations that discourage emotional vulnerability and seeking help. Those who do not conform to dominant masculinity norms, such as boys who are perceived as weak or different, are often targeted for bullying, further pushing them towards disengagement. Thus, some resort to alternative social circles, including gangs, for a sense of belonging.

Family-related factors, such as learners carrying financial and caregiving responsibilities without parental support, also came across as contributing to learner dropout.

Learner leaders revealed that considering the lengthy time required to complete school before finally reaping the economic benefits, the opportunity cost of education is becoming excessively high in comparison to the increasing alternatives for financial success.

Overall, the findings suggest that, from the learners' perspectives, there are far more nuanced reasons for male learners to drop out than simply that "education is boring."

5.3.2) What strategies and recommendations do learner leaders propose for creating an inclusive education system that effectively counters dropout rates?

The literature also suggests that RCLs are responsible for understanding learners' grievances and needs and acting as conduits for solutions to these problems. While this is so, strategies and recommendations from the learners themselves are absent from the literature. This section submits the strategies and recommendations learner leaders proposed regarding the male learner dropout phenomenon, demonstrating that they can solve their problems when given the right platform.

The findings reveal that learner leaders propose recognizing the RCL as an essential and equal contributor to school governance. This would ensure learners' grievances are prioritized and addressed. They also recommend a holistic approach to learner support, including academic mentorship, mental health services, and collaboration with social services to meet families' needs. Additionally, they suggest initiatives to empower boys and prevent them from lagging behind girls academically and economically.

Additionally, learner leaders propose refining the inclusive education initiative to create safe spaces for learners to voice their challenges without fear. They advocate for a learner-centered pedagogy, integrating arts and sports into the curriculum, and offering flexible learning pathways like technical and vocational education. Learner leaders also highlight issues with DBE policies, such as the progression policy and SSIP, and suggest reworking these for improved effectiveness, including providing support for progressed learners and employing peer tutors. For instance, learner leaders indicate that the progression policy ought to be

accompanied by stringent interventions to help progressed learners succeed, as they often face retention without support. Regarding the SSIP, employing peer tutors and additional teachers may prove beneficial since learners sometimes struggle to grasp concepts taught by their primary instructor, using the same methods that do not stimulate learners. Furthermore, they propose that extending the language offerings might also be helpful.

Learner leaders also proposed that teacher professional development training should improve emotional intelligence and classroom management strategies, as a lack of it makes teachers add to the problems faced by male learners rather than mitigate them. Lastly, they proposed that schools adhere to school safety norms and standards and ensure the school environment is conducive to learning, as they highlighted that the feeling of safety and order makes learners want to be in school. This, together with a collaboration of schools and communities, can enhance learner retention.

Overall, these suggestions demonstrate that learners are capable of identifying problems and discovering solutions. All they require is acknowledgement and the opportunity to be constructive.

5.4.Implications of the study

Below are the implications of the study:

5.4.1 *Contribution to the field of Education Leadership and Policy Skills*

This study makes a distinct contribution to the fields of educational leadership and policy by foregrounding learner voice—specifically that of learner leaders—as a critical yet underutilized resource in addressing male learner dropout. Through the application of Critical Theory and Empowerment Theory, the study disrupts conventional top-down policy approaches and advocates for a participatory, inclusive governance model that positions learner leaders as active agents of change.

The study repositions learner leaders not merely as representatives, but as policy contributors capable of articulating complex socio-educational challenges and solutions. This challenges the deficit view often associated with learners—especially those at risk of dropping out—and suggests a paradigm shift toward learners as *policy informants* and *co-governors*. It shows how

learner agency, when legitimised within school governance structures, can produce contextually responsive strategies to male learner dropout. The learner leaders in this study moved beyond diagnosis to propose concrete interventions, including emotional intelligence training for teachers, curriculum diversification, and RCL inclusion in policy design. These findings illustrate the potential of empowerment as a leadership tool that redistributes voice and influence toward those most affected by educational inequality.

5.4.2 Strengthen Learner Support Structures through Inclusive Governance and School-Based Support Teams

Learner leaders can provide valuable insights to address issues facing male students, such as indiscipline, truancy, and dropout rates. This implies that schools should recognise the importance of including learners' perspectives to devise effective strategies for a positive and inclusive educational environment. By the way, empowering one group does not necessitate neglecting another, and schools should foster genuine gender equity by addressing educators' biases. Also, mentorship, seminars, and other activities focused on boys can improve their educational experiences. Inclusive education requires effective School-Based Support Teams and incentives for educator participation. Schools also need on-site mental health services and partnerships to support learners.

5.4.3 Diversifying Teaching and Learning Approaches

This study emphasises that learners' motivation stems from an educational curriculum that recognises and capitalises on their diverse talents and abilities, not just academic skills. The introduction of the General Education Certificate and the Three-Stream Model represents a significant step towards addressing varied learner needs. To enhance inclusivity, the Department of Basic Education should establish clear pathways for success in occupational stream subjects, mirroring the opportunities available in the academic stream.

To foster inclusivity, educators should be required to submit detailed lesson plans demonstrating their commitment to diverse learners and addressing gaps in the Integrated Quality Management System. Strengthening accountability in lesson planning will improve teaching quality and learner support.

The South African Council for Educators should collaborate with schools to implement regular ethics training and mentorship programmes, promoting ethical teaching practices. Schools should also empower learners and parents to report misconduct, ensuring adherence to ethical standards and learner protection.

Equipping educators with emotional intelligence through teacher training is crucial for managing diverse classroom dynamics effectively. Schools must uphold educational norms and standards, particularly in learner safety and well-being, with School Governing Bodies enforcing these measures.

5.4.4 Parenting Education

This study highlights the importance of parental involvement in education, as many families face challenges that contribute to disciplinary issues and diminished respect for school structures. School Management Teams (SMTs) and School Governing Bodies (SGBs) can address this by equipping parents with effective discipline strategies, fostering positive learner behavior, and improving retention. Strengthening partnerships with communities and NGOs can further enhance parental support and promote a more structured school environment.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) acknowledges the impact of home environments on learners' well-being and academic performance. While some challenges fall outside its direct control, the DBE can help by identifying obstacles and connecting families to psychological services, material assistance, and other essential resources to mitigate socioeconomic barriers affecting attendance and success.

Additionally, SMTs and SGBs can improve family engagement by providing regular performance reports on academic progress, behaviour, and learner needs. Collaborating with government sectors and NGOs to enhance socio-emotional support will empower parents to better understand the curriculum and actively contribute to their children's education, fostering a more supportive learning environment.

5.5. Suggestions for Further Research

This study suggests the following implications for future research based on its findings and conclusions:

- Expand research to include a larger and more diverse sample of learner leaders across multiple schools, incorporating gender diversity, including the LGBTQIA+ community.
- Conduct a comparative study of schools in different contexts to identify factors influencing dropout rates and learn from schools with lower dropout levels.
- A study that examines the reasons behind higher dropout rates among male learners, as existing literature focuses more on female experiences. Research should explore educational, social, economic, and psychological factors, including the impact of teenage pregnancy on male learners who become fathers.
- Examine teacher-learner dynamics, particularly with learners labelled as “difficult,” to assess their impact on engagement and attendance, including those who have progressed despite academic challenges.
- Explore the effectiveness of learner-centred pedagogy and inclusive education initiatives in reducing male learner dropout rates.

5.6.Conclusion

Male learner dropout is on the rise and requires urgent attention. While it persists without intervention, South Africa might end up with a dire state of inequalities, which it has strived to correct. However, this time, the scales would have tipped to the disadvantage of the boys. Therefore, male learners and their dispositions must be attended to while empowering the girls so that equity can be achieved. The education sector is well placed to spearhead such transformation with initiatives targeted at redress.

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APPENDICES:

APPENDIX 1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION ETHICS COMMITTEE

CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

PROTOCOL NUMBER:2023ECE071M

PROJECT TITLE

Learner leaders' voices on the male dropout in Secondary Schools in Mogale City: A qualitative case study

INVESTIGATOR

Mpho Siphokazi Sahula

SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR

WSoE

DATE CONSIDERED

06 November 2023

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

Approved unconditionally

RISK LEVEL

Minimal Risk

EXPIRY DATE

Date of submission of the Research Report

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE

20 November 2023

CHAIRPERSON

Dr. Batseba Mofolo-Mbokane

cc: Dr. Pinkie Mthembu

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

Date 20 / Nov / 2023

APPENDIX 2: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



GAUTENG PROVINCE

Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	22 January 2024
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2024– 30 September 2024 2024/529
Name of Researcher:	Sehula MSG
Address of Researcher:	326 Jacaranda Street Azaadville Gardens
Telephone Number:	079 737 4841
Email address:	1628297@students.wits.ac.za
Research Topic:	Learner leaders' voices on the male dropout in Secondary Schools in Mogale City: A qualitative case study
Name of University:	Wits
Type of qualification	Masters
Number and type of schools:	2 Secondary Schools
District/s/HO	Gauteng West

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. **Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.**
4. **The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.**
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards



Dr. G. M. Mukatuni
Acting CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 22/01/2024

2

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

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APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (Stellenbosch University, 2017)

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Learner leaders' voices on the male dropout in Secondary Schools in Mogale City: A qualitative case study.

RESEARCHERS' NAME(S):

Mpho Sahula

RESEARCHER'S CONTACT NUMBER:

0797374831



1. WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Research is something we do to find **NEW KNOWLEDGE** about the way things (and people) work. We use research projects or studies to help us find out more about children and teenagers

and the things that affect their lives, their schools, their families, and their health. We do this to try and make the world a better place!

1. WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH PROJECT ALL ABOUT?

This research project is about why some learners, especially boy learners, decide to leave school before completing it. The goal is to understand, from your perspective as a leader in the school, why your schoolmates make this decision and to hear from you what can be done to make them stay in school. This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available on the university's online database. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

2. WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

You have been invited to participate in an interview because you are a leader of learners, and you are also a male learner. The assumption is that you know and understand the struggles of learners in your school and why they choose to dropout. And because you are a leader, you may have suggestions for how we can change the schools so that all learners can be able to stay in school and complete it.

3. WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Mpho Sahula, and I am a Master of Education student in the Education Leadership, Policy Studies Division at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr Pinkie Mthembu. I am conducting a research study about learner leader's views on male learner dropout. The study title is Learner Leaders' voices on the Male Dropout in Secondary Schools in Mogale City: A Qualitative Case Study.

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IN THIS STUDY?

During the study, you will be interviewed for 60-90 minutes. This means you will get a chance to answer a few questions about your experience with boy learners who have dropped out. Your answers will not be told to anyone else, nor will your name be mentioned at any point in the study. The interview will take place within your school, in a private space, from 15:00-16:30 p.m. With your permission, I would like to audio-record the interview. When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you.

5. CAN ANYTHING BAD HAPPEN TO ME?

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life. Some of the questions asked may make you feel sad or upset. If this happens, I will stop the interview and continue another time. If you need some support or counselling services following the interview, these are available free of charge at Westview Clinic. The name of the counsellor is Gift Chauke, and the contact details for the counselling service are 069 222 8171.

You might feel nervous about answering some questions or uncomfortable. If this happens, please know that you are allowed to not answer all the questions or to decide that you no longer participate. Nothing will happen to you.

6. CAN ANYTHING GOOD HAPPEN TO ME?

You could be one of the people who contribute to positive changes in your school to ensure that future learners experience a welcoming and friendly environment that helps them stay in school.

7. WILL ANYONE KNOW I AM IN THE STUDY?

When I share the results of the research study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. Your participation is going to be a secret, nowhere will your name be mentioned. I will give you a false one. Moreover, the details or information you provide will be published in a research report, but the names of the people you mention in your stories will not be mentioned, and they will be given false names. With your permission, the school I come from will read it and keep it safe, and the government will have a copy of it, as well as your school. But they will not know who you are.

8. WHO CAN I TALK TO ABOUT THE STUDY?

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Researcher: Ms Mpho Sahula on 079 737 4831. Supervisor, Dr Pinkie Mthembu on 011 717 3012

9. WHAT IF I DO NOT WANT TO DO THIS?

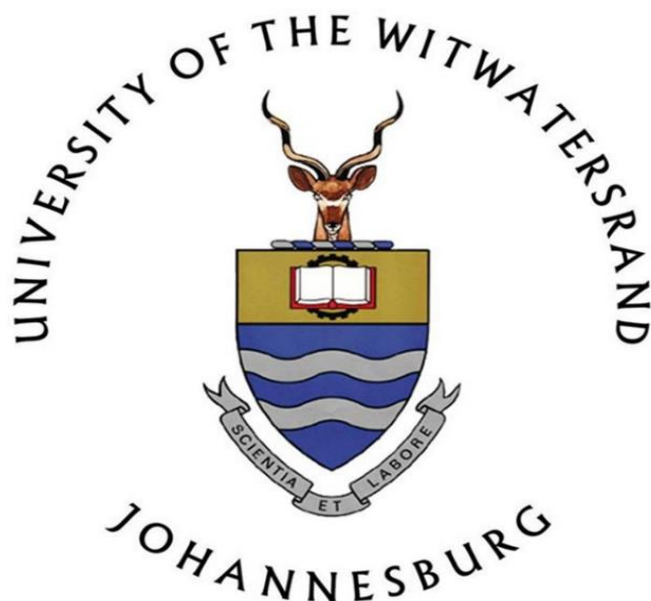
If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you decide not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study. You can decide not to be part of this study, even if your teacher or your parents agree. You can still choose not to be part of it. You will not be in trouble. Even if you have agreed to be part of it but change your mind, you can still decide to withdraw.

Thank you,

Mpho Sahula, 1628297@students.wits.ac.za. 079 737 4831

Dr Pinkie Mthembu, pinkie.mthembu@wits.ac.za. 011 717 3012

APPENDIX 4: INFORMED ASSENT FORM TO PARTICIPANTS



ASSENT

FORM FOR MINORS (Stellenbosch University, 2017)

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Learner leaders' voices on the male dropout in Secondary Schools in Mogale City: A qualitative case study.

RESEARCHERS' NAME(S):

Mpho Sahula

RESEARCHER'S CONTACT NUMBER:

0797374831

What is RESEARCH?

Research is something we do to find **NEW KNOWLEDGE** about the way things (and people) work. We use research projects or studies to help us find out more about children and teenagers and the things that affect their lives, their schools, their families, and their health. We do this to try and make the world a better place!

What is this research project all about?

This research project is about why some learners, especially boy learners, decide to leave school before completing it. the goal is to understand, from your perspective as a leader in the school, why your schoolmates make this decision and to hear from you what can be done to make them stay in school.

Why have I been invited to take part in this research project?

You have been invited to participate because you are a leader of learners, and you are also a male learner. The assumption is that you know and understand the struggles of learners in your school and why they choose to dropout. And because you are a leader, you may have suggestions for how we can change the schools so that all learners can be able to stay in school and complete it.

Who is doing the research?

My name is Mpho Sahula, I am a researcher from the University of the Witwatersrand, and I am doing my master's degree. I am also a resident of Mogale City.

What will happen to me in this study?

During the study, you will be interviewed for 60-90 minutes. This means you will get a chance to answer a few questions about your experience with boy learners who have dropped out. Your answers will not be told to anyone else, nor will your name be mentioned at any point in the study.

Can anything bad happen to me?

You might feel nervous about answering some questions or uncomfortable. If this happens, please know that you are allowed to not answer all the questions or to decide that you no longer participate. Nothing will happen to you.

Can anything good happen to me?

You could be one of the people who contribute to positive changes in your school to ensure that future learners experience a welcoming and friendly environment that helps them stay in school.

Will anyone know I am in the study?

Your participation is going to be a secret, nowhere will your name be mentioned. I will give you a false one. Moreover, the details or information you provide will be published in a research report, the school I come from will read it and keep it safe, and the government will have a copy of it, as well as your school. But they will not know who you are.

Who can I talk to about the study?

If you have any questions, you can talk to me- the researcher: Ms Mpho Sahula on 079 737 4831. Or my supervisor: Ms Pinkie Mthembu on 011 717 3012

What if I do not want to do this?

You can decide not to be part of this study, even if your teacher or your parents agree. You can still choose not to be part of it. You will not be in trouble. Even if you have agreed to be part of it but change your mind, you can still decide not to be part of it.

Do you understand this research study, and are you willing to take part in it?

YES

NO

Has the researcher answered all your questions?

YES

NO

Do you understand that you can STOP being in the study at any time?

YES

NO

Signature of Child

Date

APPENDIX 5: PARENT CONSENT FOR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH



PARENT CONSENT FOR CHILD TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH (Stellenbosch University, 2017)

Your child is invited to take part in a study conducted by Miss Mpho Sahula from the Education Faculty of the University of the Witwatersrand. Said child was approached as a possible participant because of his participation in the Representative Council of Learners. His experience will be useful to the study.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to get the views of male learners in the RCL about learner dropout in the school.

2. WHAT WILL BE ASKED OF THE PARTICIPANT?

If you agree that the child takes part in this study, he will be asked to share his views on why male learners in his school dropout and what he proposes as solutions to this issue. This will be through a one-on-one interview that will last for about 60-90 minutes. The interview will happen on the school premises after school hours to avoid disturbing the learner during class time. With your permission, the child will have to answer questions while being recorded. The information shared will remain confidential, and the learner will be kept anonymous throughout the research.

3. POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no possible risks. However, children may be asked to share stories about learners who have dropped out or their own thoughts and feelings about the issue. These may invoke emotion. The types of questions asked will NOT be personal, and the names of the people they mention will be kept anonymous.

4. POSSIBLE BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO THE SOCIETY

There are no direct benefits for the child's participation. However, the school might benefit from the results of the study in that the recommendations will have implications for the school.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

There is NO payment for participation.

6. PROTECTION OF YOUR INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND IDENTITY

Any information shared with me during this study that could possibly identify the child as a participant will be protected. This will be done by providing a false name for the child in the study and school. There will be no personal information asked. The recordings will be kept in a locked folder and may be given to the markers of my research report, who will also keep it safe. No one will be able to identify the school or the child in the research report.

You have the option to refuse that the recordings be destroyed after use for this research report. They will not be used for future research.

You will have the opportunity to review or edit the voice recordings before they are used for research purposes. Only my lecturers and markers will have access to them.

The findings of the study will be published on the University platform and disseminated to the Gauteng Department of Education and to the schools that helped in the study. As stated already, there will be no mention of the learners' personal information or the school they are in.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Children can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you agree for the child to take part in this study, you may withdraw at any time without any consequence. Children may also refuse to answer any questions they don't want to answer and remain in the study. The researcher may withdraw the child from this study if they act in any disruptive manner.

8. RESEARCHERS' CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please feel free to contact Miss Mpho Sahula at 079 737 4831 and/or the supervisor Dr Pinkie Mthembu at 011 7173012.

9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, feel free to contact the researcher or supervisor mentioned above.

DECLARATION OF CONSENT BY THE PARTICIPANT

(Please circle the relevant options below)

As the parent of the participant, I confirm that:

1.1.

I have read the above information, and it is written in a language that I am comfortable with. The research study was explained to me.

I understand what this study is about.

YES NO

I understand that my child can volunteer to take part in the study.

YES NO

I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.

YES NO

I agree that direct quotations from the interview may be used by the researcher in their research report.

YES

NO

I agree that my child's participation will remain anonymous (my child's name will not be used by the researcher in their research report)

YES

NO

I agree that other researchers may use the information provided by my child in the interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my child's name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

YES

NO

I have had a chance to ask questions, and all my questions have been answered.

YES

NO

All issues related to privacy and the confidentiality and use of the information provided have been explained.

YES

NO

By signing below, I _____ (*name of parent*) agree that _____ (name of child) to take part in this research study as conducted by _____ (*name of Researcher*).

Signature of Parent

Date

APPENDIX 6: SCHEDULE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Schedule



Research Title: Learner leaders' voices on the male dropout in Secondary Schools in Mogale City: A qualitative case study.

Introduction:

1. Introduction and Consent:

Hello, thank you for agreeing to be a part of this interview. My name is Mpho Sahula, and I am a master's student researching male learner dropouts in secondary schools. Your input as a member of the RCL is much needed.

Before we start, may I have the parents' consent and assent forms to ensure we have permission to proceed with this interview?

Please be assured that all the information you share in this interview will remain confidential, and your identity will be kept anonymous.

2. Ice-breaker:

- i) How did you get elected to be part of the Representative Council of Learners?
- ii) What is your role in the RCL?
- iii) What is the most exciting part about it?
- iv) What is the most challenging part?

Body:

3. Addressing Research Question 1: What are the learner leaders' views on the factors contributing to male learners' decision to drop out of school?
 - i) What does the term 'dropout' mean to you?
 - ii) Do you think male learners experience challenges at school that girls do not share? Elaborate.
 - iii) Do you think these challenges contribute to their decision to drop out of school?
 - iv) Do you know anyone who has dropped out of school? Can you tell me about that?
 - v) Based on your interaction with male learners, what are some things that happen within the school that make male learners drop out of school? Can you share a story or stories that illustrate this point?
 - vi) What happens outside the school that makes male learners drop out? Can you share a story or stories that illustrate this point?
 - vii) Are there any consequences for dropping out?
 - viii) Considering male learners' challenges in schools, do you think it is worth it to be in school, or is it better to be out of school? Why?
4. Addressing Research Question 2: What strategies and recommendations do learner leaders propose for creating an inclusive education system that effectively counters dropout rates?
 - i) As a learner leader, are you ever required to develop initiatives to help male learners in the school with whatever challenges they face? Tell me about that.
 - ii) Could you share any success stories or challenges related to these initiatives?
 - iii) As a learner leader, have you (and other RCL leaders) had an idea about how the school can change to make male learners more likely to finish school? Tell me about it.
 - iv) What stops you from implementing these ideas?
 - v) Hypothetically, if the DBE recruited you as an RCL member to suggest a few changes they could introduce to the school system to reduce male learner dropout, what changes would you suggest that could reduce dropout rates among male learners in South African schools?

Conclusion:

- i) Is there anything else you want to add or any key insights you would like to share regarding male learner dropout, RCLs, or the South African education system?

Thank the participants for their valuable insights and contributions. Reiterate the importance of confidentiality and anonymity.

APPENDIX 7: CERTIFICATE FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR



Reference No:1000686

kufazano@gmail.com

+27631434276

15 March 2025

To whom it may concern,

RE: CONFIRMATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

This serves to confirm that I have copy-edited a dissertation written by Mpho Siphokazi Gift Sahula (Student Number 1628297) titled **LEARNER LEADERS' VOICES ON THE MALE DROPOUT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MOGALE CITY: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY**.

The scope of my editing comprised:

- Spelling
- Tense
- Vocabulary
- Punctuation
- Word usage
- Language and sentence structure

If you need any further details, kindly contact me on the details provided above.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kufakunesu Zano", written over a horizontal line.

Kufakunesu Zano

Dr Kufakunesu Zano, PhD (English). A member of the South African Translators' Institute, Ref 1000686

APPENDIX 8: ORIGINALITY REPORT