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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG
SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

An exploratory study of Soweto matriculants lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Non-medical clearance: MEDPSYC/22/07

A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Educational Psychology) in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2024

Declaration

I affirm that this Master's thesis is solely my own, independent effort. I am submitting it to obtain a Masters in Education in Educational Psychology from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This thesis has not been previously submitted for any other degree or examination at this university or any other institution.

Signed: 

Date: 22 February 2023

Abstract

A few articles have been published on the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies suggest that COVID-19 might perpetuate and intensify current vulnerabilities among learners in South African schools. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of learners in South Africa, Gauteng, Soweto, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological system's theory was used to frame this study. Following the researcher's goal to immerse herself in the participants' unfiltered experiences, a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study. The researcher utilized non-probability sampling with a predetermined criterion for the characteristics of the learners she wished to sample. Nine matriculants from a school in Soweto who matriculated in 2021 were included in the sample. Open-ended questions were used in a semi-structured interview with an interview schedule to elicit information about the participants' experiences of their 2021 matric year. Following the Wits Research Committee's approval and ethical clearance, ethical issues were carefully considered. After the interviews were conducted, the recurring results were analyzed by looking for common themes among all nine participants. The final findings of the study compromised of the unique, yet similar experiences of the participants. It was further established that most participants remain optimistic of the future, despite the unfavourable experiences encountered during their matric year. The principal research question that guided this study was '**What were the experiences of the 2021 matriculants in Soweto during the COVID-19 pandemic?'**

List of key terms: COVID-19, Pandemic, Matriculants, Experiences, Gauteng

COVID-19- A coronavirus-based acute human disease that is primarily characterized by fever and cough but has the potential to progress to severe symptoms and, in some cases, death, particularly in elderly people and those with underlying medical conditions. It was first discovered in China in 2019, and it spread to other countries in 2020 (*WHO,* 2019).

Pandemic- A disease outbreak that occurs over a large geographical area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population (Rogers, 2023).

Matriculants- Learners in their final year of high school are referred to as "matriculants" or more colloquially, "matrics". Matric (matriculation) is the final year of high school and the qualification received upon graduation from high school, as well as the minimum university entrance requirements in South Africa (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

Gauteng- Gauteng is one of South Africa's nine provinces. Gauteng, located on the Highveld, is South Africa's smallest province in terms of land area. Despite accounting for only 1.5% of the country's land area, Gauteng is home to more than a quarter of the population. The province is highly urbanized and contains the country's largest city, Johannesburg, which is also one of the world's largest cities (South African History Online, 2021).

Experiences- Experiences are moments where someone has personally encountered or undergone something; they can also relate to information and abilities that have been acquired over time (Waite, 2012). In this study it refers to the experiences of 2021 matriculants in Soweto.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The global impact of the 2019 Corona virus disease forced many changes to the way in which people live. Within the South African context, already having such a vulnerable education system, the situation seems to have worsened during these unprecedented times. When we look back to the existing inequalities of the apartheid system which was not of advantage to many schools and learners (Gallo, 2020) we are faced with the fact that, whilst the changes were essential for health protocols, it is still questionable whether the system supported every individual and community equally. This study aimed to look at the implications of the pandemic and its regulations in 2021 matriculants' schooling and experiences. The study also explored the experiences of high school learners during such a critical period, which further provided insight on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning and the development of adolescents. Moreover, the study sought to understand the impact this has had on different individuals and discovered how these experiences have impacted the learners' relationships with parents/primary caregivers, their mental health and the level and quality of the support they received during this time. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa seems to have caused a significant shift within the education system, this statement was supported by literature while looking at the historical context of education in South Africa to the current system now.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework acts as a foundation for the theory that sheds light on the reasons behind the research problem that is being studied. It includes various concepts, definitions, established theories, and relevant literature that have been consulted throughout the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). This study adopted Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory which describes human development as a social process.

Ecological Systems Theory

According to Bronfenbrenner, human development is the result of interactions between the growing human organism and its environment, with the developing person viewed as being

able to adapt within his or her surrounding's social milieu (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This model is most suitable as the learner is centered as a primary factor, surrounded by systems that range from the most intimate, to the broadest. Regardless of the occurrence of the pandemic, these systems and their interactions with learners' experiences remain crucial. The framework's holistic approach emphasizes the importance of understanding all aspects of a person's environment in order to learn the complex, interconnected factors that influence their development.

The Microsystem

The individual's immediate surroundings consist of a system of influences known as the *microsystem*. Bronfenbrenner described the *microsystem* as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships that a developing person encounters throughout time in each setting, with unique physical and material qualities (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The home, local community and school environment are also considered as primary factors of the *microsystem*. This system assisted the Researcher with exploring the immediate environment of the learner. It further assisted with understanding the influence that this system has on the individual.

The Mesosystem

The *mesosystem* is made up of interconnections between a person's many *microsystem*s. In other words, a *mesosystem* is formed when the school and the home interact. As stated previously, Bronfenbrenner envisioned many systems that may interact (or not) in an individual's life (Crawford, 2020). This phenomenon is highly profitable due to the fact that an individual cannot be perceived in isolation, given the multitude of interactive forces that shape their experiences. Different systems were forced to come together during this time in support of a learner. The school and its teachers had to be in communication with parents and guardians to ensure effective communication. Teachers can provide information and learning material that will contribute to the child's educational progress, through parents. Literature supports the idea that strong fostering connections between *microsystems* have a positive impact on how learners develop. When parents interact with teachers, their children are more likely to succeed in school (Hill & Tyson, 2009). *Mesosystems* identified in this study are relationships between the school and parents/guardians that were formed, and the joint support from family and friends shown towards the participants. In this study, the researcher closely examines the interactions among these groups and views them as the primary institutions of the participants. This will further be supported by the findings of this study.

The Exosystem

The *exosystem* represents the outermost level and consists of the *microsystems* in which individuals are involved but not directly embedded (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). It exerts its influence on development through the other individuals who are connected to the individual's life. Moreover, the *exosystem* is similar to the *mesosystem* in that it is composed of *Microsystems* that interact with one another; even so, at least one of the *microsystems* in the *exosystem* cannot include the person at its core. A parent's workplace is a basic illustration. The child is not a component of the working system; but, if the parent is compelled to work long hours, maybe miss school activities, or just come home frustrated from work, the child may be impacted by it (Neal & Neal, 2013). District-level decisions may not directly involve teachers, parents, and learners as active participants in the process; however, district-level decisions impact individuals' development in a multitude of ways. The continual changes in between lockdown levels announced by government officials had unique restrictions that had to be adhered to. The restrictions consisted of school closures, enforcing non-attendance of school.

The Macrosystem

The *macrosystem* is described as the culture at large as well as the notion that several systems impact a person. Additionally, it encompasses culture, beliefs, ideologies, as well as the political and economic framework (Ravindran & Myers, 2012). The COVID-19 Pandemic resulted in job losses and created financial constraints. With reference to this study, we can assume that the participants' perception of death-related attitudes can be influenced by their cultural values and geographical location. As an example, individuals often turn to their culturally prescribed religious rituals to deal with the fear caused by the existential danger of a pandemic (Victor & Ahmed, 2019).

The Chronosystem

Bronfenbrenner did not account for time as a concept in human development when he initially established the Ecological Systems Theory. Later, after seeing that numerous human developmental theorists had only looked at time in connection with the aging process, he added this system. The COVID-19 Pandemic can be established as one of the most recent profound life-impacting events. These events often change an individual's surroundings as well as their

behaviours or nature, entwining themselves with the other layers of their life (Van der Berg & Spaull, 2020). In this study, *time* encompasses both transformation and stability within an individual's physical and social surroundings, including their family, neighbourhood, country, culture, and historical era. Furthermore, we looked at the development of teachers, parents, and learners in response to the non-normative event of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study is timely and offers valuable information about the experiences of the 2021 matriculants, including the difficulties they faced, the support they received, and how they adapted during the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic, all in line with the Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner expanded upon the model by placing a stronger emphasis on processes and the role of the biological individual. The Process-Person-Context-Time Model (PPCT) has subsequently emerged as the foundation of the Bioecological Model. PPCT encompasses four key concepts, and the interplay between these concepts serves as the fundamental framework for the theory (Siraj & Huang, 2020).

Proximal Process

Proximal processes refer to specific types of interactions between an organism and its surroundings that occur continuously and are considered the main factor in shaping human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Research indicated that alterations in *proximal processes* had an influence on formal assessments, the teacher-student rapport, the confidence of learners, and all the components that influence student achievement (Idrus et al., 2021). Different types of formative assessment methods include classroom discussions, informal conversations, unstructured observations, and assignments completed by learners. Learner's benefit from these methods of learning as they have been a traditional way of learning for the longest time (Alber, 2014). We would also assume that teachers faced challenges in ensuring that learners comprehended the material, and that they grasped new ideas and concepts. This had an equal impact on learners, who greatly benefited from attending classes in person as it allowed them to interact with their teachers as much as they needed.

Context

The study being conducted at a school in the Soweto Township, with participants that formed a part of a local youth empowerment organisation (TOTIES ORG), [1]forms part of the context.

[1] TOTIES ORG is pseudonym for the youth organisation in Soweto, where the data was collected. This organization aims to support young people of colour to reach their full potential through innovative education and community service.

Most household that form part of this community are affected by socio-economic issues. Previous and existing inequalities and shortcomings of South African schools located in marginalized communities are outlined later in the literature review. These misfortunes ascertain how the COVID-19 pandemic had an influence on exacerbating conditions in vulnerable educational institutions. It is further justified in the literature that the lack of resources and schooling conditions prior to the pandemic, have only made schooling difficult during this unprecedented time. Context, like the *exosystem*, is an important system that has the potential to determine how an individual's experience is experienced. The portrayal of rural communities in media and research often highlights a perceived lack of importance placed on education and emphasizes their disproportionate struggles, during the pandemic due to limited resources (Idrus et al., 2021). In contrast, schools falling under privileged communities were able to offer the essential tools and devices needed for an enhanced learning experience. On the premise of *context*, the shift of teaching and learning from traditional schooling to homes required a revaluation of the power dynamics that existed before COVID-19. Parents now had a greater role in their children's education at home (Shao et al., 2022).

Persons

The capacity of an individual to participate in *proximal processes*, which involve increasingly intricate interactions over a prolonged period, is influenced by various personal attributes such as ability, disability, skill development, temperament, responsiveness, experience, impulsiveness, and illness (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

Parents and caregivers play a crucial role in the development and learning of their children. It is important to carefully examine their characteristics as they are an integral part of the *microsystem*, which directly impacts the educational progress of the child. Parent-characteristics affecting learning were likely revealed during the pandemic and not caused by the pandemic (Shao et al., 2022). As an illustration, parents mostly perceived as unresponsive may have been working multiple jobs, struggling with mental health issues, caring for multiple children, or lacking skill development to help with homework (Shao et al., 2022). It is widely supported by literature that learners who have adaptive parents are more inclined to achieve academic success compared to their peers who have maladaptive parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009). This implies that the transition to remote learning during the pandemic worsened the already existing disparities (Shao et al., 2022). This particular component of the model possesses the

ability to impact all other systems, as attitude and temperament play a significant role in shaping one's experiences.

1.2 Summary of the theoretical framework

The researcher applied this theory to attempt to illustrate how environmental systems influenced the matriculants in different ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. This theory assisted the researcher to not consider a learner in isolation, but all the underlying systems relevant to the learner too. It was noted that different systems immensely contribute to the understanding of the overall experiences of the learner, as per the aim of this study. Ultimately, the use of this framework aimed to explain the purpose of the study on the experiences of learners that did their matric year during the COVID-19 pandemic. Elements of the framework informed the analysis of this study and will be further elaborated on in Chapter Four (Discussion and Results).

1.3 Problem statement

It goes without saying that there have been pre-existing difficulties within the South African educational system. Various governments across the globe implemented lockdowns in order to effectively deal with the unusual pandemic. Lockdowns, with their strict laws, resulted in school closures. The closure of schools resulted in far-reaching consequences.

With the matric year being such an important and determining year within South Africa's education system, exploring experiences of different learners during this period aids in distinguishing learning pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19. This study aimed to provide an understanding of the experiences faced by learners during such a critical period. It not only provided insight into how the pandemic impacted on learning, but it could also guide interventions if a life-impacting event had to recur in the future. Understanding the challenges and the implications that learners faced, whilst also determining how to possibly make the system more supportive and stable would be beneficial.

Following the interests of this study, a primary research question was formulated:

What were the experiences of the 2021 matriculants during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.4 The aim of the study:

To explore the experiences of the High school learners (Matriculants) during COVID-19 pandemic in Gauteng, Soweto.

Objectives were formulated with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive overview of the research topic:

- To contextualize High school learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To understand the challenges that were faced by the learners.
- To ascertain the learners' support structure during this time.
- To determine the learners' views on how learning could have been better during this time.
- To understand the learners' future aspirations, post the pandemic adversities they encountered.

1.5 Overview of research methods:

Because the researcher wanted to gain a new understanding of former matriculants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research was exploratory (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The researcher wanted to understand the learners' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic based on their daily routines, roles, and expectations, and therefore the research paradigm used for this study is the Interpretivist Framework. This paradigm assisted the researcher by understanding the participants' reality through their own articulation of their reality.

The qualitative research approach was implemented in this study because the researcher sought to explore the personal experiences of learners in order to gain a better understanding of their unique experiences. Following that there is little known about the phenomenon being studied, the qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study, "An exploratory study of Soweto matriculants lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic", it also allowed the researcher to gain a clearer understanding of the learners' perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fouché & Delport, 2011). In addition, exploratory open-ended questions were asked, with the interview schedule and voice recorder having served as the primary data collection tools (Teherani et al., 2015; Fouché & Delport, 2011; Nieuwenhuis, 2016a).

The 2021 matriculants over the age of 18 who attended school in Gauteng, Soweto, formed part of the population for this study. The researcher only selected learners who specifically attended high school in a South African Township located in Gauteng (Soweto). From this study population, a sample of 9 learners who attended school in Soweto was used (Neuman, 2011). This study solely focused on former high school learners who matriculated in 2021. As a result, this population unit is a specific population, which is one of the qualitative research guidelines (Garbarino & Holland, 2009).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

It suffices to say that the COVID-19 had a significant impact on South African education. It is critical to first revisit the history of South African schooling and its inequalities in order to connect them to the current inequalities, which could have been exacerbated by the unexpected pandemic outbreak. This chapter will also support the empirical findings of this study by drawing on existing literature that relates to the respondents' experiences. The importance of family support and the fluctuations in mental health amongst the youth during this unprecedented time will help to contextualize the learner's individual experiences.

2.1 History of Schooling in South Africa

This section – the history of schooling in South Africa - aims to outline the transitions within South Africa's education system. It explains how educational policies have evolved over the years.

Apartheid was a colonial governing system in South Africa that established racial segregation and white supremacy. It legislated and executed racial groups that were ultimately stratified in terms of social structural interactions. This racial classification ensured the continuation of white supremacy, while Black, Indian, and Coloured people were treated as second-class citizens. This was the primary creation and perpetuation of deep-seated socioeconomic inequities among communities (Ndimande, 2016). This extreme racial segregation, which began in 1948 and only ended in 1994 included restrictions on where people of certain races could live, who was able to own land and it also dictated which jobs they could do. Education played a huge role in the creation of socio-economic inequality and poverty in black communities during apartheid. In 1953 the Bantu Education Act was introduced, bringing an end to the missionary control of the education black people received (Amersfoort legacy, 2011). This system of education was a repressive education system which perpetuated the segregation and oppression of the apartheid regime (Christie & Collins, 1984). It proposed that all black schools would be required to register with the government, and that registration would be at the Minister's discretion. This provision allowed the government to close any educational programs that did not meet its goals. The Minister of Bantu Education was given broad responsibilities under the act, including control over educators, curriculum and any other matters relating to the establishment, maintenance, management, and control of government Bantu schools (Giliomee, 2009).

One of the main reasons these schools were established was to meet the need for cheap labour. Children were taught to read and write only for employment. According to Amersfoort legacy (2011), this kind of education was inferior and constructed by apartheid's ethnic identities until the beginning of the great youth revolt in 1976. The revolution started in Soweto motivated by the frustrations caused by the inferior education they received. As the youth began with the process of rejecting the apartheid education, formal education was interrupted in most parts of South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC) was striving to build unique and alternative ways to education at the time, in the hopes of guiding the newly founded youth revolt (Amersfoort legacy, 2011).

As apartheid structures were gradually crumbling in the early 1990s, the new democracy came into power and schools in affluent areas became less segregated (Jansen, 2001). Over the years children of different races could then attend school in areas they weren't permitted to during the apartheid era. Between 1994 and 2011, this period established a new historical period in school education (Grade 1-12) in South Africa namely Outcomes-based Education (OBE). The key rationale for using this technique was to shift away from apartheid curriculum and address skills, knowledge, and values in correlation with the democratic South Africa (Mouton et al., 2012). However, this new initiative posed many new challenges and issues that needed to be addressed. Most of the political thinking in 1994, comprised of a plan to abandon all of the old practices that had been systematically associated with apartheid and to implement new policies in various areas of South Africa. More especially in school education considering it had been in a disastrous state for many years.

This approach had been implemented in some first-world countries, but it failed dismally. However, there was hope for this to be effective in South Africa even though it is a developing country. During the OBE implementation process, the South African past was examined, and the findings concluded that in terms of racial and political injustice and supremacy, liberal historians needed a new educational dispensation (Hartshorne, 1999). It was evident said the new curriculum for a new arrangement was welcomed and almost indispensable, but that the key feature was the consideration of diverse cultures, extreme backgrounds of learners, and educational principles as Curriculum 2005/OBE was introduced. The implementation of this curriculum was unfortunately unsuccessful, according to Harley & Wedekin (2004), a complicated curriculum strategy, poor coordination and administration, insufficient personnel, financial capacity, inadequate teacher development and restricted curriculum development for teachers were the major implementation issues. Even though education pre-1994 consisted of

its own pitfalls, educators reported that the OBE approach was problematic and had to be phased out (Mouton et al., 2012). On the 6th of July 2010, Angie Motshekga the Minister of Education, unveiled a new curriculum reform approach with radical changes planned for 2012-2014 (Mouton et al., 2012). The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) replaced the preceding National Curriculum Statement (NCS). CAPS offers educators with grade-by-grade and subject-by-subject guidelines for what to teach and how to assess pupils. The primary goal of CAPS is to reduce administrative burdens on educators while also ensuring consistency and direction for teachers when teaching (Khuzwayo & Mncube, 2017). It is apparent that the history of education in South Africa continues to be impacted by the socio-historical context. The challenges of curriculum and pedagogy continue to face the department of education and are further exacerbated by the socio-economic challenges that impact the nation.

2.2 Inequalities in Schooling

Social class contributes to educational inequities rooted in money, property ownership, parents' job and education, and children's access to free school meals, all are used to measure a child's social class status (Strand, 2014). In the book Learning for Living Baatjies (2018), a young man from the Eastern Cape comments on the quality of their education in the township, arguing that it is not their fault that they failed, but that the system has rather failed them as learners. He goes on to say that their teachers are mainly exhausted and dejected due to a lack of resources such as computer and science laboratories, sporting codes, and having no career guidance provided for the learners.

Inequalities and segregation continue to plague many South African communities. For instance, by 2019 Soweto township had 1.8 million people, or one-third of the city of Johannesburg's population, but like most other townships in South Africa, it is almost entirely black and poor in comparison to the northern suburbs (Ballard & Hamann, 2021). Black residents are no longer legally prohibited from residing in former white suburbs; however, the country's poorer residents are financially excluded from affluent areas. Public Schools in certain parts of the country are still faced with poor infrastructure including sanitation which leads to many factors that may affect the pupils (Mohammed, 2021). Some communities continue to attend school in non-formal spaces of learning and some learners still struggle with getting to school, forcing them to walk many kilometres from their homes (Baatjies, 2018). The right to quality education comprises of having a school where learners feel safe to learn, where they are provided with the sufficient setting and facilities to do so, but this still does not seem to be the case in South

Africa. Many schools and communities are still dealing with the repercussions of political and economic decisions made during the apartheid era, which included people being geographically separated based on race.

Unfortunately, a child's experiences of education in South Africa are still largely determined by where they are born and how fortunate they are (Mohammed, 2021). Shenilla Mohamed, executive director of amnesty.org, stated that many knowledgeable teachers and practitioners have agreed that the educational system is in a state of chronic crisis and the "solutions" to the crisis are based on very different analyses and diagnoses (Alexandra, 2013). Between 1993 and 1998, significant conceptual, strategic, and political-pedagogical errors were made in the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid education and some components that should have allowed for a smooth transition to the new system unfortunately did not take place (Alexandra, 2013).

Inequalities in the labour market reflect inequalities in the education system, where educational results continue to reflect historical patterns of exclusion and privilege, and where early learning outcomes are significantly predictive of matric outcomes, which are greatly predictive of higher education access and success (Taylor, 2019). After accounting for matric achievement, it is discovered that university access and completion are not prejudiced against black youths or those from disadvantaged schools. In other words, while there are huge racial disparities in access to and completion of university, such disparities do not occur among individuals of different race groups with equivalent matric marks. As a result, differences in educational results in South Africa are primarily due to prior inequities in early life development and fundamental learning in school (Taylor, 2019). Affordability is an important consideration for parents when selecting a school. Private schools are largely out of reach for most families also considering the socio- economic status of majority South Africans (Hill, 2019). Furthermore, parents consider location because transportation issues may limit their ability to get to school, and distance will affect extra-curricular activities and lift arrangements. Schools provide a limited range of sports or cultural activities, and some provide none, which may exclude those that highlight a student's strength. A child can always attend outsourcing clubs for sports and cultural programs, but these usually come at an additional fee which most families cannot afford (Lemon, 2004).

2.3 South African Schooling Today

Even after 27 years of democracy, the South African education system is still plagued with deteriorating infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, low educational outcomes, and inequality, all of which contribute to the failure of far too many of the country's children. As a result of Bantu Education and its legacy in South Africa, many black South Africans have historically and continue to be denied access to quality education, depriving them of jobs and other socioeconomic prospects (Gallo, 2020). The socio-economic situation and the segregated way in which we continue to live remains unstable in South Africa. The rate of unemployment is high and it continues to surge.

There are 13 grades in the post- apartheid South African education system, R-12 (Dept. of Basic Education RSA, 2019). The entire national curriculum for all grades is designed to equip pupils with the knowledge, values, and skills they need to succeed in society, as well as to help them transition from school to work (Dept. of Basic Education RSA, 2019).

Post-apartheid, South African education continues to be of poor quality, resulting in a lack of fair employment opportunities for black South Africans (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, 2011). According to media sources, over 20% of primary and secondary school learners did not pass their last year-end school exams in 2015, and only about half of all learners who started with primary school passed the final school-leaving examination 12 years later (Nel & Kistner 2009). Graduation is determined by a final exam, known as the National Senior Certificate or "matric" administered at the end of grade 12. Many contextual factors contribute to a high number of learners who do not complete high school adequately in South Africa which automatically decreases most young people's chances of finding work or earning a reasonable salary. A few contributing factors are, academic challenges, dropping out and losing motivation because their studies were too difficult, discouraging them from progressing from one grade to the next; teenage pregnancy, many girls fall pregnant and leave school because they are usually treated different than before due to the stigma around pregnancy; Poverty, children facing poverty usually don't have much support towards their schooling at home and are unable afford certain resources that are required for schooling; alcohol and substance abuse, learners who use substances are often absent from school and lack motivation to study leading to poor academic performance (Mokoena and Van Breda, 2021).

The National Senior Certificate (NSC), mostly known as "matric" is a standardized national test that serves as the last exit qualification after Grade 12. The NSC took the place of the Senior

Certificate. When undertaking matric, learners can obtain one of four levels of pass. The test qualifies them for higher education if their scores are good enough (Nel & Kistner, 2009). The contextualization of the different levels of passing will support the importance of the matric year in South Africa. It is evident that one's performance in their matric year may impose what they can and cannot do in higher education. Whilst a lot of emphasis is placed on higher education in South Africa, it has closely been associated with job security although it is not the reality for all South Africans. From lowest to highest, the four levels include**: A certificate pass**: Per the South African Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training (Umalusi), the NSC pass is a "baseline" that provides little value other than to provide the learner with a high school diploma and perhaps to signal to employers that a basic level of home language and numeracy has been reached. **A higher certificate pass:** This second tier of pass does not qualify learners for all sorts of post-secondary education, but it does allow them to enroll in certification programs that would prepare them for the workforce, as well as academic "bridge programs" offered by approved establishments. **A diploma pass:** The third tier of NSC passes is a diploma pass. It is the entry criteria for diploma-granting programs rather than complete degrees at the post-secondary level. **A bachelor's pass:** The highest level of NSC pass is a bachelor's degree. It is the bare minimum for admission to bachelor's degree programs at South African institutions. However, universities have the authority to impose minimum pass requirements that are higher than the statutory minimum for certain programs. Those who pass the second level or "higher certificate" exam but did not achieve enough to move on to diploma or degree-granting institutes of higher education, may enroll in a bridging year at a recognized institution (Nel & Kistner, 2009). South Africa is a diverse country, and the youth is faced with many challenges that can easily prohibit them from reaching their full potential (Mokoena et al., 2021).

With all the standards set for South Africa's educational system, from the year 2020 a lot has changed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread destruction, this destruction significantly affected our lives, and posed new and old existential and educational concerns.

2.4 Schooling During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the past two years, the education system has had many changes as a result of the of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. On March 5, 2020, the first officially recognized COVID-19 case in South Africa was recorded. A year later, on April 28th, 2021, the total

number of infections had risen to 1,577,200 (Turner et al., 2021). The pandemic has had a profound impact on people's lives all around the world and has also manifested as a multifaceted crisis. Many countries' health systems collapsed during this time, which resulted in deaths. Furthermore, the global economy has entered a slump leading to governments having restricted citizens' freedoms, and most communities having to close schools and higher education institutions during the lockdown period (Facer & Sandford, 2010). The challenges of South African society in general were furthermore exposed by the pandemic and more especially the country's education system. It has exposed the massive inequalities that are the legacy of apartheid and the effects of neoliberal capitalism (Le Grange, 2021).

At the start of the national lockdown, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which is responsible for the administration of all public schools announced that, schools will close on March 18 and reopen on April 14, 2020, according to the President's statement on the 15th of March 20220. The National Institute of Communicable Diseases and the World Health Organization also issued warnings, indicating an alarming increase in infections inside the country over the course of three days. While school children are at home, provincial education departments, districts, and schools were encouraged to make the most of this time by ensuring that learners participate in newly founded stimulating programs and constructive holiday assignments, all while being monitored and guided by parents and the broader community. The plan was to facilitate these strategies, among other things, by the availability of workbooks and worksheets.

The DBE was expected to plan and raise public awareness about the procedures that would be taken to ensure that the schooling system continue to function once it was closed, with the assistance of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), a multi-party civil society stakeholder (Soudien et al., 2021).

COVID-19 arrived at an extremely difficult time in world history, when major concerns were already being expressed that the fourth (and impending fifth) industrial revolutions would widen the gap between those with poor access to adequate support structures and resources (Merton, 1968). Speculation that humans' jobs (especially technical, repetitive work) would be taken over by machines overwhelmed particularly those in the first category (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). People were left devastated more than ever about the purpose and sense of employment (Sharp et al., 2020).

Schools were closed during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the education of 62.3 percent of the world's 1.09 billion learners. According to a research study done in England about the impact of COVID-19 (Martin-Villares, 2021), the majority of the teachers (98 percent) expressed that their learners were behind compared to where they would normally anticipate them to be in their curriculum learning at the conclusion of the 2019 and 2020 school year COVID-19. Teachers estimated that their pupils were three months behind, on average. During the 2019 and 2020 school year, teachers reported covering only 66 percent of the typical curriculum on average (Sharp et al., 2020).

In comparison to teachers in the least unprivileged schools, teachers in the most underprivileged schools were over three times more likely to report that their learners were four months or more behind in their curriculum-related learning in July (53 percent compared to 15 percent) (Hoadley, 2021). The pandemic's educational influence in South Africa and around the world, includes the following: Learning losses due to the constant closures of schools, the expansion of pre-existing education al gaps, and long-term learning gains to fade (Dorn et al., 2020). During the Level 5 lockdown in March 2020, within the South African context, there were two ways to continue learning and those were through online learning or self-learning with parental and sibling assistance. Several variables affected online learning's success, even for privileged schools and learners who could afford it. (Doukakis & Alexopoulos, 2020). Many low- income schools, on the other hand, lacked the resources to provide adequate online learning opportunities. Many children in disadvantaged households lacked a conducive workspace such as a desk, a computer, access to the internet, as well as parents who had the time to trail as an educator at home (Soudien et al).

2.5 The Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic has unavoidably resulted in an increase in the use of digital technologies due to social distancing norms and global lockdowns. People and organizations across the world have had to adapt to new ways of working and living (Daly & Robinson, 2021). Most individuals took to the internet and internet-based technology to communicate, connect, and continue their work from home because of the lockdown. When compared to pre-lockdown levels, internet usage has surged from a lower percentage to a much higher percentage. Zoom, a video conferencing service, has seen a tenfold rise in usage (Serhan, 2020). The pandemic has brought the world to a point where those who are not connected to the internet are completely disadvantaged. With stringent social and physical barriers in place, new

patterns necessitate using the internet for most services, as result, those on the wrong side of the digital divide are completely cut off from the digital world. Unaffordable device access, unaffordable internet access, content relevance, access skills, or government-ordered Internet shutdowns are just a few of the reasons for the divide (Ambrecht, 2016). COVID-19 has made internet connectivity relevant and appears to be important for the current way of living for most communities. As a few studies have revealed, having access to, or not having access to information and communication technologies might worsen societal inequities, so it's critical to understand how the digital divide affects social equality (Ragnedda, 2017).

The learning experiences at home were similarly distinct due to disparities in social capital and resources. While all learners suffered learning during this time, many children from low-income families lost learning due to a lack of educational resources (Soudien et al., 2021). Ndimande (2021) underlined the necessity of increasing education societies' capacity to innovate and digitalize development systems that encourage learners' online learning and technology-enhanced learning (TEL) abilities developed during the pandemic (Businesstech, 2021a). The minister of higher education and training noted that:

> Throughout the previous 18 months, I've participated in a range of digital communication and conferencing platforms, as well as radio and television shows. I've also had private conversations with coworkers, educators, parents, and postgraduate learners from around the country and throughout the world. What has become clear is that private schools and schools in more affluent regions have successfully adapted to mixing in-person, hybrid online, and digital teaching and learning styles. (Singhet al., 2021, para. 5).

WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, YouTube, and Blackboard were utilized to interact and share information with learners via digital communication platforms and conferencing services (Maree, 2020). Virtual platforms, which perform well and use relatively little data, were utilized (and are still used) by schools. Most teachers were given extensive training on how to use these platforms. Unfortunately, many schools in under- resourced areas have struggled to transition from in-person teaching to learning online (Grage &Brooks, 2021).

Olivier et al. (2020) added that during these discussions, it became clear that online education should be made available at all levels of schooling. The pandemic has exposed the inequalities in the resources required to achieve adequate online learning from home namely, finances, digital devices and data, and proper nutrition as well as the disparities in how effectively educators, pupils, and caregivers have been prepared to do so. Even though many nations face division, the South African experience is unique in terms of the fragility of its educational system and its capacity to cope with shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Soudien et al., 2021).

2.6 Adolescence

Adolescence is classified as a phase of emotional growth and the ability to adapt to a changing circumstance in which a young person is presented with puberty's changes (Meyerson, 2015). In relation to this study, adolescent identity is linked to the notion of youth. The goal of this phase is to achieve adulthood in all its aspects, which would include physical, cognitive, and social attributes. Erick Erikson's (1902-1994) psychosocial development stages that expand on Freud's psychosexual theory. He proposed that we are motivated by the desire to excel in certain areas of our lives. According to his psychosocial theory, we go through eight stages of development from infancy to late adulthood (McLeod, 2013). Adolescence falls under the fifth stage and is categorized as “Identity versus role confusion” between the ages of 12 and 18. During this time, adolescents are developing a sense of self and attempting to figure out who they are, those who manage through this stage have quite a positive sense of identity and are able to stay genuine to their beliefs and principles in the face of obstacles and differing viewpoints from other people (Widick et al., 1978).

2.7 Youth and Schooling

Adolescents require transitional experiences away from their families to help them discover and establish their separate identities (Meyerson, 2015), they dedicate more of their daily hours to school than to any otheractivity (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). School, being a space where adolescents spend a significant amount of time, is an important context in which their identity development might be supported.Teachers can help adolescents explore the significance of new ideas, activities, or opportunities provided at school on their identities (Verhoevenet al., 2019).

School life can be described as complicated and multi-faceted. Classrooms are viewed as social contexts in the school community where adolescents engage in a variety of interactions (Gizir and Uslu, 2016). Adolescents' social and emotional adjustment, engagement, academic motivation, and learning are all influenced by their interactions with teachers and peers in these social contexts (Corso et al., 2013). According to research, positive teacher-adolescent relationships predict changes in motivation, sense of belonging, school interest, achievement expectations, and values (Giani and O'Guinn, 2010). Peer relationships, in addition to teacher–student relationships, play a significant role in an adolescent's sense of school belonging. It has been indicated that high quality of peer relationships or supportive friendships satisfies the need to belong in adolescents by allowing them to connect with others (Martin & Collie, 2016).

Adolescent school affiliation in addition to individual influences on quality-of-life measurements and social contextual factors have a contribution to school connectedness being notably important for learners. A student's sense of belonging to school and emotional proximity with classmates and educators are regarded as school connectedness (Libbey, 2004).This is supported by positive relationships formed at school, feeling part of the school and safein school and lastly feeling content at school. Few studies have looked at the factors that influence school connectedness, with a focus on the beneficial outcomes associated with highlevels of school connectedness (Libbey, 2004). Individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and feelings are influenced by personality and positive psychological orientations, which can affect assessments and attitudes about social contexts. Factors such as positive teacher support and thanksgiving events have been associated to improved school connectedness (Martin & Collie, 2016), this was linked to higher levels of life satisfaction, academic accomplishment, and fewer internalizing and externalizing difficulties (Joyce & Early, 2014).

School is an important factor in personality traits and positive psychological orientations in adolescents' everyday life, and their sense of belonging at school has an impact on their overall quality of life (Kim et al., 2019). Adolescents with diverse personalities and/or positive psychological orientations may react to and evaluate similar environmental stimuli differently, resulting in varying levels of life satisfaction. For example, learners in grades 5 to12 who scored high on a measure of hope, were more likely to feel connected to their school and content with their life

(Kim., 2019). Additionally, individuals with a low level of school connectedness were more likely to be reported as experiencing negative effects (Joyce & Early, 2014).

2.8 Youth and Family Support

From home to school, learners should have access to an environment that allows them to be free, study, and grow in a healthy manner. A good learning environment is not only vital for student achievement, but it is also important for the morale, functionality, and efficacy of teachers (Dreyer & Nel, 2003). Many parents are confronted with overwhelming and irregular schedules and responsibilities making it difficult to be of any assistance in their children's lives (Swap, 1993). As per research statistics, involvement of parents is more beneficial than financial class, ethnicity, race, or an educational background for children's academic achievement (Amatea & West, 2007).

Academic intervention is defined as the process of improving a learner's educational life by involving the educator, child, and parent. For a child to master writing and reading, the child must be motivated to learn, the parent must be willing to assist their children, and the educator must be well trained to teach the child with love, dedication, and passion (Clark, 2007). Each role is crucial in a child's academic life; if they do not operate properly, there will be no change in a learner's academic life or educational development, resulting in academic difficulties (Clark, 2007).

The academic problem may be caused by the lack of parental support, behavioural, and written expression challenges that include children to be unable to read and write (Jensen, 2009). Some barriers to parental involvement arise because of today's parents' preoccupation with the distractions and demands of daily life. Some parents are unable to consistently attend school activities or engage in their children's education due to limited income, restrictive work hours, and language challenges (Ho, 2009). During the intense period of the COVID-19 pandemic, most parents and caregivers were faced with their own personal stressors e.g., financial constraints, losing jobs, and trying to protect themselves from contracting virus, making it hard for them to fully pay attention of their children's demanding academics. Indeed, parents who have high stress levels as well as anxiety and depression symptoms have

been shown to be less responsive to their children's needs during the time (Brown et al., 2020).

Parents' involvement in their children's lives is extremely important, and the quality of their involvement in their children's lives has a significant impact on their academic achievement, requiring them to participate in their children's learning process (Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010). Family involvement in learners' learning has been linked to better school performance from pre-school to high school, and it is emphasized that adolescents require their parents' full support to achieve their full potential in school (Osterman, 2000).

Parental participation in learners' education starts at home, with parents providing a safe and healthy environment, suitable learning opportunities, a support structure, and a positive attitude towards their school life. Several studies found that learners who have involved parents perform better academically. (Bunijevac & Durisic, 2017). Haley & Bradbury (2015) contend that the AIDS epidemic has placed the weight of home responsibility on children in the absence of adult caregivers, fundamentally altering the structure of childhood. It is unfortunate that in the South African context many children are without parents and many households are child-headed. In most cases you get that the eldest sibling needs to take full responsibility for the younger siblings when they themselves haven't fully developed either, taking on household chores and making sure that everyone is taken care of. Children that are head of the house frequently cannot afford to complete their education and must spend their days trying to make a living. If they are able to attend school, they are often unable to perform to the best of their abilities due to economic strains on households, the changes in family structure, new obligations, and the lack of parental guidance (Van Breda, 2010). When considering families within the South African context, extended families are very prominent. These usually consist of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Africa as a collective, families can sometimes be simply categorized as large extended networks. These networks support one another whilst fulfilling important responsibilities like raising children and caring for the most vulnerable members of society (Rabe & Kumswa, 2022).

Apart from the youth being supported within the family, most adolescents within the South African context hold the responsibility of dedicated chores within the

household, regardless of the family structure. In 1981, psychologist Sandra Bem introduced the gender schema theory, which posited that children acquire knowledge about gender roles based on the cultural context they are exposed to (Bem, 1981). According to this theory, from the earliest stages of development, children adapt their behaviour to conform to the gender norms prevalent in their respective cultures. Consequently, it argues that a child's cognitive development, in conjunction with societal influences, plays a significant role in shaping the characteristics that define masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1981). The self-identification of individuals as either male or female is typically established during childhood, as this is the period when attitudes, ideas, and interests are formed. This can also be supported by research studies that demonstrate how parents tend to treat boys and girls differently. Consequently, gender roles are perceived as societal expectations that dictate appropriate behavior for each gender (Eagly, 1983). Culture and communication play a crucial role in the development and learning of gender roles. Cultural gender roles are conveyed through different aspects of society such as families, neighborhoods, and communities (Davidson & Gordon, 1979). For context and a better understanding of this study's findings, in a highly traditional culture, a child is raised to believe that a woman's duties solely revolve around caregiving and managing the household (Wood, 1995). The communication and preservation of cultural norms through child-rearing practices, kin relations, courtship, cooking, and household routines are primarily facilitated by the family (Davidson & Gordon, 1979). Different cultures promote the concept of gender differentiation, leading children to understand the importance of gender within their respective cultures from a young age. Consequently, they start to emulate gender-specific behaviors and roles (Eagly, 1983). This concludes that, as individuals mature, they gradually realize that society assigns distinct roles to men and women, often with unequal values, and expects them to conform to these roles, leading to feelings of frustration (Wood, 1995). The Gender Schema Theory, although quite ancient, remains a subject of frequent citation even after several years (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017). Starr & Zurbriggen (2017) review of its influence over the course of 34 years validates the profound significance and pertinence of the social construct of gender roles.

2.9 Youth and Mental Health

Mental health issues in childhood and adolescence are a major public health concern. According to epidemiological studies conducted in high-, middle-, and low-income countries, one out of every five children and adolescents suffers from a mental disorder (Schmidtke et al., 2012). Young people of colour in South Africa are faced with a daily attack on their mental health, anxiety disorders, which are linked to poverty and violence are common in low-income areas. According to some studies, up to 70% of at-risk youth are not receiving the help they require (Gibbs & Mkhwanazi, 2021). It's also concerning that in South Africa, one out of every ten teen deaths are due to suicide. Suicide is the second leading and "fastest-growing" cause of death among people aged 15 to 24 (Flisher et al., 2012). Violence affects many South African children and adolescents, within communities, schools, and at home. With the information acquired from various studies conducted in South Africa, exposure is linked to psychological disorders in children and adolescents (Ensink et al., 1997).

The mental health of young people has been drastically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even when the economy reopened, the level of anxiety and depression symptoms among young people increased considerably and remains higher than pre-crisis levels when compared to other age groups (Isumi et al., 2020). The insufficient mental health support during this time, the constant school closures, and the crisis that the economy is faced with are the most common contributing factors to the unstable state of the youth's mental health. However, studies show that young people can recover from this instability and return to their normal state with efficient intervention and support (Kassegn & Endris, 2021). This would necessitate the expansion of current mental health services in schools and in workplaces, healthcare systems, as well as extensive steps to assist young people in remaining in school (Moreno et al., 2020). Children and adolescents are in the best position to express their fears and concerns about COVID-19's terrible influence on their mental health and future, as well as its subtle impact on their families and communities (Bullo et al., 2021). According to Brewer et al. (2020), not everyone is able to react appropriately in a catastrophic event, like COVID-19. Resilience is a concept that is frequently used in the social sciences to analyse success in trying circumstances or

environments (Gallagher et al., 2020). People who are more hopeful and optimistic feel better when they work toward their goals and react less negatively when they run into difficulties, which is most of what the participants embodied (Bandura, 1982). On the contrary, resilience should not always be celebrated, as it typically emerges from challenging situations that not everyone can navigate successfully. A misconception regarding resilience is that if one cannot swiftly adjust and adapt, there must be a flaw within them. The notion that you ought to possess greater strength, resilience, or any other quality might not serve as the encouraging self-dialogue required for building resilience, for many (Mahdiani & Ungar, 2021).

2.11 Summary of Literature Review:

This literature entailed the history of South African learning and its shortcomings, followed with a contrast of South African schooling today. These served as a basis to contextualize learning within the context. The focus on inequalities in learning fed onto learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced the challenges encountered such as the digital divide. The literature review was summed up by looking into the mental health of the youth and the importance of support between their structures.

The following chapter looks at the methodologies implemented by this study.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter's primary goal is to describe the research methodology used in this study to qualitatively examine the experiences of 2021 matriculants in Soweto. The research approach, research design, research methodologies, and type of research are the key themes of this chapter. It goes on to describe the study population and the sampling techniques used to select study participants. The way in which data was collected will also be discussed in this chapter.

3.1 Aims and Objectives

Aim:

To explore the experiences of the High school learners (Matriculants) during COVID-19 pandemic in Soweto.

Objectives:

Objectives were formulated with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive overview of the research topic:

- To contextualize High school learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To understand the challenges that were faced by the learners.
- To ascertain the learners' support structure during this time.
- To determine the learners' views on how learning could have been better during this time.
- To understand the learners' future aspirations, post the pandemic adversities they encountered.

3.2 Research Approach and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research approach, according to Beins (2009), enables the researcher to examine social phenomena in their natural settings. The researcher was able to immerse herself in the activities of a limited number of participants in attempt to acquire an intimate understanding of their social and educational

worlds while identifying patterns in the participants' lives, worlds, and actions in the context of the topic (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). Given that the researcher sought to explore learners' individual experiences in order to better understand their particular experiences, the qualitative research approach was pertinent to this study. In addition, exploratory open-ended questions were asked, with the interview schedule and voice recorder serving as the primary data collection tools (Teherani et al., 2015; Fouché & Delport, 2011; Nieuwenhuis, 2016a). These approaches are centered on research that evokes a participant's account of meaning and generates descriptive data in the participant's own written or spoken words. As a result, it identifies the beliefs and values that underpin the phenomenon (Durrheim & Painter, 2006; Fouché & Delport, 2011; Neuman, 2011; Punch, 2005; Teherani et al., 2015; Tewsksburg, 2009).

3.3 Research Paradigm

The Hermeneutic Phenomenological framework is based on the investigation of life events related to an event from the subject's point of view. This method is focused on an evaluation of the most profound aspects of human life, those that go beyond the quantifiable, it is a paradigm that attempts to explain the nature of things, as well as the essence and truthfulness of phenomena (Fuster Gullien, 2019). This specific framework was selected because it supports this study as it aims to look at in-depth experiences and will also offer interpretations, and in this way, interviews were co-constructed. The researcher sought to explore the personal experiences of learners to gain a better understanding of their unique experiences and because there is little known about the phenomenon being studied, the qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to gain a clear understanding of the learners' perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fouché & Delport, 2011). This easily enabled the researcher to acquire an understanding of the learners' perspectives of their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fouché & Delport, 2011). In addition, open-ended questions from the interview schedule (Appendix A) were asked. In many circumstances, theories are established to explain, forecast, and grasp facts, as well as to challenge and extend present knowledge within the boundaries of important restricting assumptions. The research paradigm can either hold or support a research study's theory (Grant & Osanloo, 2016).

3.4 Research Methods

The following research methods are discussed: study population, sampling method/technique, data collection method, data collection instrument, and data analysis and verification.

Research Participants

All the research participants were members of a youth organization, namely, (TOTIES ORG). The gatekeepers of the NGO who permitted the study to be conducted using their members gave their written consent for using the aforementioned participants. The Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC, Non-Medical) approved the research study after receiving the letters of request and approval, which were submitted with the research proposal.

Study Population

The 2021 matriculants over the age of 18 who attended school in Gauteng, formed part of the population for this study. The researcher only selected learners who specifically attended high school in Gauteng, from this study population, a sample of 9 learners who attended school in Gauteng was used (Neuman, 2011). This study will focus specifically on former high school learners who matriculated in 2021. As a result, this population unit is a specific population, which is one of the qualitative research guidelines (Garbarino & Holland, 2009). The learner's all attended a school in South Africa, Gauteng province, Soweto Township.

Sample

The sample consisted of 9 matriculants who attended school in Soweto and matriculated in 2021. A sample size of approximately 9-12 is seen as adequate to achieve data saturation in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher recruited her participants through an NGO in Soweto that works with youth who have recently matriculated. The Researcher sought permission from the organisation, permission was granted in a form of a letter attached as an appendix (Appendix B). Once ethical approval was acquired from the institution, she attempted to make use of the organisation's database. After the first few participants had been selected, the researched made use of the Snowball Sampling Method. This is a non-probability sampling technique; research participants were asked to refer the

researcher to other potential participants among their peers (Neuman, 2011). Two of the nine participants that were selected were interviewed online, due to being enrolled in a higher education institution, away from the organisation. They were sent out the letter of informed consent and asked to sign it and email it back to the researcher. The remaining seven participants were physically interviewed at the place of the organisation, where they were thoroughly taken through the process and thereafter signed the consent form.

Sampling Method

Non-probability sampling was used by the researcher, with a specified criterion for the features of the learners that she desired to sample (Maree & Pietersen, 2016). Purposive sampling is a method of non-probability sampling that was implemented in this research study, it corresponds to when the researcher chooses a sample with a specific goal in mind (Maree & Pietersen, 2016). The researcher defined the sample based on the characteristics, age, race, culture, and socioeconomic status of all research participants. In this particular township school, Sepedi and Sesotho are the home languages that are offered and thus most learners are Sepedi and Sesotho speaking. The intended study had a particular aim to explore the experiences of the 2021 matriculants during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, only the selected former learners participated in this study (Babbie, 2011).

The inclusion criteria for participants were inclusive of:

- Adolescents who are 18 years of age and above.
- Adolescents who matriculated in 2021.
- Adolescents who attended school in the Soweto Township.
- Adolescents representing any gender and culture.

3.5 Data Collection

The researcher gathered data using the following methods for this study:

Data collection involved conducting extensive one-on-one semi-structured interviews. This is a qualitative data collection technique that allows the researcher to profoundly analyze a respondent's point of view, feelings, experiences, and perspectives while still accommodating the small number of respondents. To ascertain

the views of former high school learners and their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher used a self-designed interview schedule (Appendix A), as well as existing literature to develop the interview schedule. Open-ended questions were asked first, then follow-up questions were asked to elicit more information and clarification (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The interview was conducted in English, although sometimes participants would add in additional words from their mother tongue. The interview schedule served as a guide and was also used to elicit the participants' nuanced experiences in order to learn more about their experiences in-depth (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). The interview was voice recorded using an audio recorder following the participants' permission. Instead of taking copious notes, the researcher was able to pay close attention to the person being interviewed and, if necessary, seek out additional clarification. The accuracy of the transcription of the recorded interviews allowed for accountability and cross-checking by the supervisor. This enabled the supervisor to be able to confirm the accuracy of the transcripts (Clausen, 2012). None of the participants declined to have their interview voice recorded, this would have forced the researcher to rely on comprehensive field notes. Furthermore, because the data is not entirely reliant on the researcher's memory or selective attention, the audio recording increased the data collection's reliability (Bloor & Wood, 2011). The research made use of open-ended questions in order to obtain information in detail pertaining to the respondents' personal experiences and perspectives (Levenson, 2009).

3.6 Data Analysis

The researcher completed the data analysis process in stages. The process involved familiarization, coding, theme searching, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015). For the intended study, the researcher used thematic analysis to examine the participants data. The data was analyzed using the following steps for thematic analysis:

Familiarisation

Braun and Clarke (2015) define this stage as the point at which the researcher begins transcribing the data after conducting the interviews. This entails reading and revisiting the data as well as making preliminary notes (Braun & Clarke, 2015). The data from the recorded

interviews were transcribed during this stage. It is important to note that some participants made use of some words in their Nguni languages, this required some transcripts to be translated into English.

Generating codes

The researcher coded the data by looking for similar responses across the transcripts and highlighting them with different text colours to clearly differentiate the themes. Coding is the systematic identification and classification of relevant data features and patterns (Clarke et al., 2015). Each participant was assigned a code to facilitate referencing when quoting the responses that elicited the identified themes and comparing the obtained results to the findings from the literature.

Searching for themes

By grouping similar codes together and cutting and pasting similar codes to create themes, the researcher created a plausible and cohesive mapping of the data (Clarke et al., 2015). When comparing the similarities and differences between the collected data, specific headings were chosen to serve as themes and sub-themes.

Reviewing themes

In order to review the study themes, the researcher paused the theme generation process and read through the data once more. She then proceeded to check if the generated themes fit with the codes and data set as a whole (Clark et al., 2015). After developing themes, the data was compared to those from the literature review to identify similarities and differences. This was done to facilitate the development of themes based on the information gathered during the data collection process.

Identifying and naming themes

Writing theme definitions and choosing theme names were required when identifying and naming themes (Clark et al., 2015). Themes that had emerged in this research study were combined after the data had been gathered using both interviews and the literature review. The transcripts of the interviews and the literature review were used to create themes.

Writing the report

The report or dissertation, according to Bran and Clarke (2015), is the final component of a research project, an academic report of the findings and analysis is produced during this

process (Clark et al., 2015). The themes were compiled by the researcher, who also used additional literature to support the findings which aided in reaching analytical conclusions about the themes as a whole. This stage involved gathering and editing previously published explanatory writing.

3.7 Data quality

Since the study used thematic data analysis as a qualitative method, the researcher ensured data quality in the following areas to establish reliability. The following constructs were used to ensure trustworthiness:

Credibility

The researcher collected data using a variety of methods, including an interview schedule, observation, audio recording, and proceeded to prioritize that the subject is clearly described (Schurink, Fouché & DeVos, 2011). With the aim of establishing credibility, the researcher attempted to collect dense, detailed data which she was able to disclose to her supervisor.

Transferability

All findings were reported in a well-structured research document, with the close consideration of previous findings relative to the research topic. Transferability, also known as external validity in quantitative data verification, examines whether the research findings can be transferred from one specific case to another (Schurink, Fouché & DeVos, 2011). The chosen theoretical framework, which served as a guide for the data collection and analysis procedure, was given careful consideration.

Dependability

Dependability is achieved through detailed and in-depth explanations that demonstrate how specific behaviours and attitudes are ingrained in and deduced from circumstantial relationships (Schurink, Fouche & De Vos, 2011). Field notes, informed consent forms, interview transcripts, and a written account of the research process, including what happened throughout the research, were all saved on Microsoft Word by the researcher as part of an audit trail to ensure auditability.

Confirmability

The researcher kept records of the recordings of each interview, the transcripts, the informed consent forms, and the gatekeepers' letters from organization in this study. This was done to ensure that the evidence was safe and that the results could be approved or sanctioned after external review. Schurink et al. (2011) emphasise the importance of demonstrating that the conclusions and interpretations were accurately derived from the data.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethics in research are fundamental moral concepts that assist researchers in conducting and publishing research without dishonesty or the intent to harm study participants or members of the public, whether deliberately or unconsciously. Following ethical norms when conducting and reporting research is critical for establishing the validity of your findings (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

The researcher attempted to comply with the guidelines for conducting ethical research as outlined in (Babbie, 2011). The listed research ethical considerations were be adhered to:

Informed consent and voluntary participation

Participants were all given the opportunity to give their informed consent. Participants all received signed informed consent documents (Appendix C). This letter provided the participants with the opportunity to make a decision, fully aware of the potential risks and benefits associated with the study, as to whether they wished to voluntarily engage in the study (Neuman, 2011). The researcher provided an information letter (Appendix D) that includes information on the study's purpose, the procedure of the interview,and, with their permission, the recording of the interview. Moreover, it is noteworthy that individuals possess the entitlement to refuse or retract their involvement in the study at any point subsequent to its commencement. Lastly, it is essential to highlight that they possess the option to engage in the study willingly and that the data will be conserved for a specified duration in accordance with the stipulated criteria of the academic degree. Data captured electronically was password protected. The researcher also ensured that all individuals that will be participating in

the study, provide written consent (Strydom, 2011) by signing the form before the commencement of the interview. Two of the nine participants that were selected were interviewed online, were sent a copy of (Appendix C) beforehand. Once all of these were gathered, they were stored safely in a research file following the compilation of the report.

Confidentiality and anonymity

The confidentiality of the records was guaranteed in the sense that the participants' real names were not revealed, but pseudonyms such as fictitious names and codes were created in order to maintain confidentiality and protect identities. Due to the fact that the participants underwent both in-person and online interviews, the assurance of anonymity could not be fully ensured, nevertheless their identities were safeguarded. The confidentiality of the information was upheld, and precautionary steps were implemented to shield the personal data of the participants from unauthorized access (Strydom, 2011).

Debriefing and avoidance of harm

It was important to guarantee that no harm or possible risks exist to participants, it that all possible physical, psychological, and legal risks were considered (Neuman, 2011). Although the level of stringency in COVID-19 regulations and restrictions had diminished, it remained imperative to comply with certain established protocols that had become standard in the preceding year. In this regard, the foremost consideration was to employ the prescribed COVID-19 protocols by maintaining a safe physical distance, utilizing sanitization measures when necessary, and wearing facemasks. The subject matter's level of sensitivity incited certain participants to become emotionally stimulated as they recounted their personal experiences. The researcher arranged for a short post-interview debriefing session in instances where it was deemed necessary. The participants were able to talk through their emotional experiences with the hope of minimizing possible harm which may have been caused unintentionally during the interview process. The researcher proceeded to suggest free counselling services that the participants can use to access counselling support when the participants were either noticeably distressed or when they had expressed that they require further support.

Competence of researcher

The researcher had an ethical obligation to ensure that she is qualified and competent to conduct the proposed study (Strydom, 2011). In contrast to the experience of conducting research during

undergraduate studies, the researcher opted to participate in a postgraduate theoretical module focused on research methodology. This decision allowed her to acquire new skills and improve upon her existing research abilities. Additionally, the study was conducted with meticulous care and under the guidance of a competent supervisor. When the researcher encountered certain confusion during the investigation, her concerns were quickly revealed and referred to the supervisor for further guidance.

The importance of effectively communicating research findings to the general public through formal writing was emphasized by Strydom (2011). Researchers collaborate to organize research data and produce a report that accurately and impartially presents the outcomes of the study (Strydom, 2011). The researcher compiled a report in the form of a mini dissertation, which will be accessible in the library of the academic institution. This report will encompass all the systematically and objectively collected data from the respondents.

3.9 Reflexivity

As a master's in educational psychology student, what drew me to this profession is simply my interest in behavioural sciences and thus my curiosity of understanding why we do what we do and why we are the way that we are. At a tender age I have always more than anything aspired to be many things but mostly humane in any kind of environment I am in. I understand that we all experience distress at some point in our lives as I personally experience it at times thus making me more empathetic.

Upon deciding on a research topic, I believed that this research study will invite different individuals who will bring their own set of circumstances which will require me to think outside of the box. Starting off, I had my anxieties around some barriers such as language and cultural differences. I was hopeful that a common way of communicating between the participants, and I was going to be established, and indeed it was a success. Having almost reached the end of it, I appreciate all that the participants have taught me through sharing their own experiences. From them, I learnt the significance of how people can be 'one', yet be distinctively different, and have different backgrounds and unique experiences as well. I believed that my personal characteristics are perfectly compatible with this research topic thus by the genuine empathy I have always had for people and persistently trying to understand notions from their perspective, of which I was granted. More than anything I have great interest in working with communities and learners as I have been one for the longest time, I am aware of some of the challenges that are encountered along the journey.

Learning about the experiences of adolescents during the COVID-19 has invited new perspectives and has fed into my existing knowledge. In 2020 during my honour's degree year, I experienced learning during the pandemic for the first time and online learning was something I had never experienced before. Adjusting to the course and the methods of learning was not easy and there were a lot of technological aspects to get used to during this time, this system required me to have steady internet connection at home in order for my learning to be fully supported. Online learning, as I was enrolled in the master's degree course was still applicable as it was not 100% phased out as yet. From my own experiences, I encountered some difficulties now and again. Having mentioned this, I ensured that my own experiences do not interfere with my research process as I understood that the learner's experiences are very different to my own. I was and continue to be comfortable with not always being the expert and this allowed me to learn from my participants.

3.10 Summary of Chapter

The approach that was outlined in this section adhered to the procedures for a qualitative research design. The different techniques utilized for data collection and analysis were explained with reference to academic principles in written publications. Considerations such as data credibility following the reliability, validity and the trustworthiness of the study and their implementation, were outlined. This chapter was then followed by ethical considerations and some insight on how these were taken into account for the purpose of this study. Lastly, the researcher incorporated reflexivity. Through this she was able to reflect on her own attitudes, opinions, and behaviours during the research process, and link how they could have influenced the research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Chapter Four: Discussion and Results

Introduction

A qualitative research design was used to develop this research study. The researcher attempted to acquire an intimate understanding of social and educational worlds of the participants' while identifying patterns in their lives, worlds, and actions in the context of the topic (Fouché & Schurink, 2011). The results findings obtained during the interviews are presented in this chapter. The findings are discussed by examining the similarities and variances in the participants' perspectives and by contrasting them with those of other studies that have been reported in the literature. In an effort to address the research objectives and provide answers to the research questions (Chapter one), the analytical process is also guided by the theoretical fr amework.

Themes and Sub-themes

Table 1:

Themes	**Sub-Themes**
Theme 1 The individual's background	
Theme 2 Everyday routine as a matric learner	• Early mornings and late nights • Family responsibilities
Theme 3 Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic	• School attendance • Academic pressure • Mental health and general health • Lack of resources • Loss and Grief
Theme 4 Holistic support	• Community/organizational support • Peer and family support • Teacher and school support
Theme 5	• General support

Thoughts on how situations could have been made better	• Learning resources and school attendance • Better results
Theme 6 Hope beyond the pandemic	

Participants are denoted by pseudonyms**; t**his protects participant confidentiality and the privacy of the participants' identities. The researcher interviewed 3 females and 6 males, listed according to their gender below:

Table 2:

Male	**Female**
Lelo	Dimpho
Nelly	Malebo
Kagiso	Khosazana
Kabelo	
Kamoso	
Khanya	

4.1 Theme 1 :The individual's background

The purpose of this theme was for the researcher to gain an understanding of the individual's background before getting a feel of their experiences. The researcher hoped that this background information would aid her in understanding the context of their experiences better at a later stage. The researcher also aimed to explore the individual's overall family structure, more especially during the year 2021.

From the below findings, it is evident that most participants family structure was not that of a nuclear family, but mostly those that contrast a nuclear family such as a single-parent family and an extended family.

As highlighted in this study's literature review and justified by the findings, within the South African context many children are without parents and many households are child- headed. The restructuring of family systems can also be linked to the AIDS epidemic, which has burdened

children with the responsibility of managing household affairs in the absence of adult caregivers. This has fundamentally transformed the dynamics of childhood and the overall structure of families (Haley & Bradbury, 2015). Influence of uncontrollable circumstances in the past has led to a significant impact on the composition of South African families today.

> *Kabelo: "Well my family is separated, I am raised by a single parent my dad was not around and then I have two siblings, there's three of us, so the two of us the dad was not around and the last born his dad died in 2017 in a car accident but his dad was around".*
>
> *Kabelo*: *"I don't want to say this, but it was kind of better than living with my mom because I realised, she couldn't do as much because there was three of us and she's a single parent."*
>
> *Kagiso: "I have 4 other siblings, and then we live with my mom she's a single parent now. I also live with my grandma, so I commute from time to time, so here in Dobsonville I live with my grandma and then in Naledi I live with my mom and my two other siblings…"*
>
> *Lelo:"Okay yes, my family-I lived with my mother, my grandparents. And- I think my uncle and my aunt."*
>
> *Khanya: "Last year I was living with my grandfather".*
>
> *Malebo: "I live with my aunt and her husband. Uhm and my siblings, three siblings.."*

With close consideration of the above responses, it is important to consider the nature of a family setting as this has the possibility of impacting all the other areas of functioning. Bunijevac & Durisic (2017), stated that parental participation in learners' education starts at home, with parents providing a safe and healthy environment, suitable learning opportunities, a support structure, and a positive attitude towards their school life. The importance of highlighting this fundamental concept is to support the idealization that a healthy home environment feeds onto one's ability to excel within their academic functioning. It is critical to note that not only nuclear families have the ability to support a child. Therefore, both joint and nuclear family structures have distinct responsibilities and roles in ensuring the academic and social achievements of their children (Bilal, 2013). The educational progress, along with the role of fostering and assistance, implies that the structure and atmosphere within a family can instil in children the essential confidence required for achieving academic excellence. Based

on the study's findings, it is evident that support was significant regardless of the structure. Rabe & Kumswa (2022) further support this by stating that families in Africa can sometimes be simply categorized as large extended networks. These networks support one another whilst fulfilling important responsibilities like raising children and caring for the most vulnerable members of society.

Following the guidance of the Biological Systems Theory, we associate the family as the learner's immediate environment falling under the *microsystem*. The shift from attending school in person to learning from home required caregivers to provide support in vast ways. Caregivers had to acquire new skills to utilize technology for their child's education at home and to communicate with teachers without meeting them in person. Understanding the participant's background and structure in this study was necessary bearing that caregivers were responsible for creating a suitable learning environment for learners at home.

4.2 Theme 2: Everyday routine as a matric learner

The objective of this theme is to concentrate on the regular tasks and events that occur throughout the learner's day. The intention behind the questions that led to the development of this theme was to gain insight into the factors that may have either impeded or enhanced the overall quality of their daily experiences. Moreover, the Ecological Systems Theory has assisted the researcher in knowing the importance of avoiding the isolation of various components that constitute our experiences. The reviewed literature looked at the history of schooling in South Africa contrary to schooling and its inequalities to today. The findings of this study imply that mostly because of the context, learners had to put in extra efforts to attend morning classes which contributed to the completion and better understanding of the curriculum. Mohammed (2021) further outlined how a child's experiences of education in South Africa are still distinguished on where they are born, how fortunate they are. This is also supported by the excerpts below.

Subtheme 2.1: Early mornings and late nights.

This theme derived from the question that aimed to understand the learner's everyday routine and how their routine made up their overall experiences.

> *Kagiso: "I would wake up at 04:00 am and then I bath for 30 minutes, then I would study from 04:30 until 06:00 and then get dressed and I would come to school for the morning class which starts at 07:00."*

Dimpho: "So, I would go-I would wake up early, it would depend on if we have a morning session, because we also attended morning sessions. So, I had morning session, I would go to school, attend the morning session and then after the morning session school starts officially around 8."

Malebo: "Okay so I would wake up at uhm 2:30…midnight. Studying geography, for instance history. I love history, history is one of my favourite subjects. So, I would wake up at 2, and then I would study for 1 hour."

Nelly: "I was already late for school. So, I would leave in a hurry get dressed go bath, get dressed, catch a taxi, come to school then study in [inaudible] then when I get home I get home I'm tired I have to sleep…"

Although we see the importance of the morning classes, and how most learners would prepare towards these, Khanya partially differs from the majority:

Khanya: "It was…I don't even know how to explain it, so I was that kind of person that woke up early in the morning and arrived late, I don't know why I had that thing of arriving late but fine, I arrived late I was one of those kids that bunked classes but knowing that I would get home and study, I would attend the ones that are important, one thing I would never attend was LO and home language."

The researcher links this finding to the *person characteristics*, where attitude has influence on one's overall experience. Khanya did not take much advantage of these measures when compared to most of the respondents. In his reply, it is evident that he assigns varying degrees of importance to different subjects. Notably, the findings of this study predominantly emphasize the value participants placed on attending in person and the advantages they derived from it. Nevertheless, Khanya, on the other hand, prefers to study in the comfort of their own home.

Learners reflect on their daily experiences when they were able to physically attend school. The transition from going into school, to learning from home reflects as a factor of *proximal processes*. It can be concluded that most learners started their day early with the aim of making it on time for their morning classes. Learners did not only have early mornings but they presented to have late nights as well. Kamoso reflects on how exhausting this routine was for them:

> *Kamoso: "It was a tiring year, where every day, like I mentioned the many extra classes, the cross-nighting, [2]and the morning classes. Basically, I would be at school from 7am and I would go home at half past 5pm or 6pm as if I was closing the school".*

Based on this extract and numerous other related ones, the researcher gained insights into the fact that despite the limitations of the education system, educators in this particular institution adopted strategies to ensure that learning occurs, irrespective of the time lost as a result of school closures. The narrative presented by the media regarding marginalized communities and their supposed disinterest in education is contradicted by this (Idrus et al., 2021). By placing this finding within the *exosystem*, the decision made at the district level to incorporate certain changes into the curriculum had an impact on the learners' capacity to navigate the physical and emotional constraints accompanied with these modifications.

It can be concluded from the above quotations that the night-time was mostly reserved for studying. Within the South African context, the Grade 12 year (matric) is deemed as the most important as it contributes as a deciding factor to one's future. The National Senior Certificate (NSC), mostly known as "matric" is a standardized national test that serves as the last exit qualification after Grade 12. When undertaking matric, learners can obtain one of four levels of pass. The test qualifies them for higher education if their scores are good enough (Nel & Kistner, 2009).This theme was derived from an exploration of the participants' demands and efforts in their lives during their Matric year. The early mornings and late night can be affiliated with the participants eagerness to do well in order to attain a successful academic year. It seems as though most learners understood the importance of making some sacrifices and adjustments around their lives, to feed into their academic performance.

Subtheme 2.2: Family Responsibilities

This subtheme gave an outline of the individual's controversial roles, versus the demanding expectations mentioned under the previous subtheme (Early mornings and late nights).

> *Malebo: "And then when I get home I have to cook, I have to clean, I have to take care of my little sister and then rest a little bit, sleep, and then 2:30 again wake up [inaudible]."*

[2] A concept where one will sacrifice their sleep to spend the entire night studying, until the next day. This could happen individually or in a group.

> *Khosazana: "I was waking up at 5:00 AM, I have a little niece that goes to crèche' so I have to wake her because my mom is not around, she is at work all the time, so I have to wake up at 5:00 to help her get ready and the other guy helps her get ready for school and I also have to get ready for school and then I would come to school maybe by 07:30."*

The above quotations outline how some participants did not only have the responsibility to take care of themselves, but their respective family members as well.

> *Dimpho: "Sometimes I would run errands, because my mom would send me out a lot, I would run errands."*
>
> *Malebo: ": [interjects] But at home I didn't get enough support because I felt like I am doing the chores, and again I have to study."*
>
> *Khosazana: "...Most of the time we would finish school around 16:30 and then I would walk with my friends and get home around 17:00 which was late and then I was the one who did the cooking so I'd get there at 17:00 and cook and then after cooking I would go sleep just to relax my mind and the after that I would wake up at about 21:00 and start studying."*

It is evident from the above-mentioned quotations that most participants had responsibilities at home. The researcher associated these excerpts with gender roles and culture, which is also outlined in the literature. Following traditional gender norms, young girls can be groomed to have the responsibility of ensuring that the cleaning of the household and the cooking is solely their responsibility. Bearing that this has become a standard practice, it does not exempt them in times where they cannot afford to fully delegate themselves to these practices as they normally would. Literature ascertains that gender roles are perceived as societal expectations that dictate appropriate behavior for each gender (Burn, 1996). Furthermore, culture and communication play a crucial role in the development and learning of gender roles, they are conveyed through different aspects of society such as families, neighbourhoods, and communities (Davidson, 1979). Moreover, we can assume that these practices that seem to be prevalent within this community derive from traditionally established cultural norms.

In relation to our framework, this subtheme can be linked to the *macrosystem* which also ascertains that child development is shaped by interlocking social forces and their interrelationships, which can be seen as "blueprints" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This

system encompasses concepts, values, and customs that mould an individual's growth. In relation to this aspect, the entities of the *macrosystem* in conjunction with literature was employed to gain deeper insights into the prevalence of these behaviours, aiding our understanding that cultural background can impact one's experiences.

> *Kamoso: "It was hard to cope because it was school and home that you needed to focus on. You had to make sure that both were above board because even if you needed to focus on school, you still had responsibility at home and take care of yourself as well."*

The quotation above from Kamoso affirms the responses from most of the aforementioned participants. Kamoso outlines the difficulties of adhering to responsibilities at home whilst still trying to take care of oneself and focus on academics. Outside of being learners holding the responsibility to study to achieve good grades, some individuals still had family responsibilities assigned to them amid a demanding academic year. Tentatively, we can establish that in some cultures, there is a centering of the collective and an individual is seen as part of the collective. The chosen theoretical framework being Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System's theory outlines the important of a system and how an individual can be influenced by the different systems that they form a part of. With reference to the literature, Haley & Bradbury (2015) outlined the misfortunes of the eldest sibling needing to take full responsibility for the younger siblings when they themselves have not fully developed either, taking on household chores and making sure that everyone is taken care of. From these findings and with reference to the literature, most girls held the responsibility of caregiving, cooking, and cleaning. The male participants involved in this research exhibited limited discourse regarding their family responsibilities, with the exception of Kamoso, who also refrained from elaborating on the specific nature of the responsibilities he held.

4.3 Theme 3: Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic

This theme is one that is central to the research question and it closely relates to the research aims. It derived from wanting to explore the participants challenges experienced being a learner, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides us with a wide overview of different challenges experienced by different individuals.

Subtheme 3.1: School attendance

When participants were asked to outline some of the most significant challenges they encountered as a matriculant during the COVID-19 pandemic, the negative implications of school attendance were prominent.

> *Kagiso: " Well there was a time where we were at home and I didn't really study because there was no motivation, so if there was no Covid I would be in school 24/7 and my results would be better, but then I still didn't know what I want to do so I would probably still take a gap year and think about it."*

> *Kabelo: "Okay if it's like that then, they gave us a lot of work and a lot of homework and noted and then when we get home all we think about is, I already have these many days, what will I do, instead of thinking about all the work they gave us at school I'm thinking about hanging out with my friends, calling them, sneaking out of the house while the police are not around just thinking about those things like that. Four or three days before schools open that's when I start studying, that's when I start doing my homework and I realise that it's too much to cover in these three or four days."*

The above quotations insinuate that it was hard staying motivated whilst being away from school. Kabelo and Kagiso outline the difficulties of staying focused whilst being at home. Kagiso supports their statement by adding that he believes that being in school would have provided him better results as opposed to being at home, and how this misfortune interfered with the plans he had set. Kabelo goes onto adding that he would rather do something else more appealing, than staying at home to get work done. In school, a variety of domains are involved inclusive of social and learning dynamics. Classrooms are viewed as social contexts in the school community where adolescents engage in a variety of interactions (Gizir and Uslu, 2016). Adolescents' social and emotional adjustment, engagement, academic motivation, and learning are all influenced by their interactions with teachers and peers in these social contexts (Corso et al., 2013). The disruption in the *exosystem* caused by the pandemic has had a negative impact on learners, as the implementation of lockdown measures has limited their chances to engage in extracurricular activities and traditional celebratory events i.e. matric dance. These activities often serve as a valuable outlet for many learners, helping them cope with various challenges. It is thereby supported by literature that schooling is associated with motivation, this will also be justified in Theme 4 (Holistic support) where participants expand on their different support structures.

Dimpho: "So, grade 11 we only stopped going to school after term one. So, from the beginning of June, we did not attend school and our teachers had to make a plan to give us assignments so that we could be assessed."

Khanya: "It was when we couldn't come to school and teachers would be at home and learners would be at home we would have like group chats where they would give us work, but nobody's explaining anything to you, that's when reality kicks in and you see that life is so hard. You're forced to focus by yourself it's more like you're in university."

Malebo: "So sometimes you have to learn alone. Sometimes you need guidance from your teacher but you don't have it because you are home."

Khosazana: "The thing is I would always get too tired, to the point where I would think of not coming to school and then they would start doing something new cause they were trying by all means to not even though…you know that during the pandemic there was a time where we wouldn't come to school for like 3 months so we tried pushing in order to cover everything before the end of the year."

While school children are at home, provincial education departments, districts, and schools were encouraged to make the most of this time by ensuring that learners participate in newly founded stimulating programs and constructive holiday assignments, all while being monitored and guided by parents and the broader community. The plan was to facilitate these strategies among other things, by the availability of workbooks and worksheets (Soudien et al., 2021). Although this may have seemed to be beneficial prior to implementation, the above quotes outline the difficulties encountered with not having access to teacher support. Literature supports that the pandemic's educational influence in South Africa and around the world, includes the learning losses due to the constant closures of schools and the expansion of pre-existing educational gaps (Dorn et al., 2020). Although packets of assignments were given out to learners to complete during the lockdown periods, there was an adjustment around the pace and ability of each individual having to learn without teacher input. The alterations made to *proximal processes* unintentionally impeded teachers' capacity to assess learners' skills and understanding of the subject matter. Not attending school also influenced the relationship between the learner and the teacher.

Kamoso: "Most youth in the community smoked Crystal Meth so they would be very hyper. More people got hooked to it due to COVID and cancelled classes."

Kamoso outlined that most youth in his community began to engage in other activities because of non-attendance. According to the literature, school, being a space where adolescents spend a significant amount of time, is an important context in which their identity development might be supported (Verhoeven et al., 2019). This statement supports that adolescent being away from school increases the likelihood of them engaging in disruptive behaviours. With the guidance of our theoretical framework, we can establish that the disruption caused by the pandemic in the e*xosystem* has had a negative impact on children, as the implementation of lockdown measures has significantly limited their chances to engage in extracurricular activities. These activities often act as a valuable coping mechanism for many children.

Kagiso noted the impact that school attendance had on nutritional support:

> *Kagiso: "I usually go to the kitchen and then they would serve you food…"*
>
> *Kagiso: "I missed the morning porridge…*
> *It was like powder porridge with a lot of milk, and you don't have the luxury of putting a lot of milk at home so yeah that's why."*

As mentioned in the literature, most learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and schools rely on meals that they have at school supported by the circumstances at home. School feeding programs (SFP) improve children's health outcomes in terms of treating illness, and children's education outcomes in terms of minimizing illness- related absenteeism (Mostert, 2021). The South African government has recognized that the SFP, which targets low-income households, has the potential to improve children's development and break the cycle of intergenerational hunger and poverty. Most learners benefited from these meals, as they relied on these nutritional programs. Moreover, learners' home environments might not have been conducive to learning at home, they were anticipated to be more negatively affected by the closure of the schools. The above excerpts assist us in understanding how some learners were appreciative of the nutritional provisions made by the school and expressed to have witnessed the noticeable gap when they were not at the school. The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closure did not allow for these programs to continue, which was a disadvantage to many (Mostert, 2021).

Subtheme 3.2: Academic Pressure

Participants also listed pressure as one of the most challenging aspects they encountered during their Matric year in 2021. According to the literature reviewed , the challenges of South African society in general were furthermore exposed by the pandemic and more especially the country's

education system (Le Grange, 2021). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, one's matric year in South Africa has always been of importance. The moderating effects of learners' *person characteristics*, such as their ability level, special learning needs, and socioeconomic level, on the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic were also highlighted during this time. The academic pressure that most respondents possessed was further exacerbated by their *macrosystem*, which contends that where you were born and the kind of education system one has access to will have either elevate or hinder their quality of experiences. It has been gathered from this study that lack of resources was also a prominent factor, this misfortune added on the shortcomings as this made it hard for some learners to adjust to the new way of schooling.

> *Lelo: "Yoh! The demand was high, the demand was high. You had to come in almost every day for school. Even sometimes on Sundays, they would call us to come in and get loads of schoolwork and it being matric, we'd have to finish the syllabus around just-just around September or before."*

> *Lelo: "So, everything was done very quickly. So, I felt like it was just a pressure. It was a lot of pressure compared to previous years."*

Lelo mentions the contrast in demand between their previous years of schooling, and their matric year. He outlines the pace in which they were learning and how this added onto the pressure, accompanied by other contributing factors. The importance of the matric year has been outlined by the literature. This however can be identified as a misfortune when taking into consideration that such a demanding academic year has to be completed in the midst of a pandemic. The researcher observed that their anxiety levels were already high due to the fast-changing settings and schedules, as well as the lack of control over decisions being made. The *chronosystem* can refer to the impact of the passage of time on developing *persons* in two capacities, those internal to the developing person and those external to the developing person (Brigandi et al., 2022). The *chronosystem* encompasses normative age-related events that are shared by all or most individuals, as well as non-normative experiences that are linked to a particular historical period (Brigandi et al., 2022). In relation to this research, the participants underwent an unconventional encounter that impacted the course of their individual experiences, enabling them to make a comparison across the years.

> *Kagiso: "Having self-discipline as covid would disturb us in general, and the relationships you build through high school, leaving them behind was really hard and it still is hard… I would say school in general was hard, because you know that if you*

did not study-… plus there was pressure at school too because they were number one in Gauteng the previous year so there was pressure to become number one again."

Nelly: "They are good in what they do, I have a very strict principal who is, who is sure about what he wants. Like he used to tell us, 'I want 100% pass rate.'

Khanya: "It was…it is a good school because I feel like you get to feel the pressure because it's one of those schools that's well known in Soweto, Johannesburg Gauteng, so it's one of the best schools I guess so the pressure lies on us mostly, and then the education…"

It is evident from the participants responses that most of their pressure was also influenced by the reputation of their school. Participants mentioned how their school was deemed to be one of the best within their region, and how this put pressure on them to try their best despite their current learning circumstances as opposed to previous years.

Based on the above excerpts, it can be established that these learners were still expected to excel regardless of the state of their school and what it can offer. These external factors are out of the learner's control. Literature reviewed confirms that the South African education system is still plagued with deteriorating infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, low educational outcomes, and inequality, all of which contribute to the failure of far too many of the country's children. It is unfortunate that when considering the *context* employed in this study, these participants fall victim to this kind of system. Plenty of schools and communities are still dealing with the repercussions of political and economic decisions made during the apartheid era, yet these learners are still expected to perform exceptionally. The instructional changes during the pandemic had a significant impact on the *macrosystem* of this community, primarily due to the restricted availability of a reliable internet connection and other necessary equipment. This limitation resulted in disrupted virtual learning and communication processes, the subtheme 3.4. (Lack of resources) will involve a critical analysis of this finding.

It is evident from the findings of this study that some learners' general well-being and motivation was adversely affected by the COVID-19 conditions. The anxiety and uncertainty also showed to have influenced some learner's performance. According to literature, when pupils are anxious, they sometimes become sidetracked or preoccupied with other pressures that weigh them down (Huberty, 2009). Having previously mentioned the pressure of one being a matriculant and their performance acting as a deciding factor, it should be noted that most participants also incurred pressure based on their school's high expectations. Teachers

estimated that their pupils were three months behind, on average. During the 2019 and 2020 school year, teachers further reported covering only 66% of the typical curriculum on average (Sharp et al., 2020). These figures extracted from the literature provides an approximate indication of how much the curriculum was affected by the pandemic and school attendance.

> *Khanya: "The hardest part is when you get pressure, pressure from the teacher. We all know that we don't perform the same in class so it's more likely that if you and me are sitting in the same desk in class you can pass more than me and I'm lacking, so that was one of the difficult things and if you get those teachers who would tell you that you're failing and you're a failure or you're stupid, you wouldn't focus it would be [a] tough year."*

Khanya rather stated that teachers also fed onto their existing pressure by comparing the learner's learning abilities. According to Hoadley (2021), over half of educators (61%) reported the disparity in learning between disadvantaged learners and their counterparts in the past year, while the rest believe it has remained the same (32%) or narrowed (7%). Furthermore, with close reference to teacher estimations, the gap between disadvantaged learners and their peers had grown by 46% on average (Sharp et al., 2020). It is evident by this literature that the pandemic and its disparities made it difficult for all learners to perform on the same level. The pressure applied by educators is deemed as a challenge, considering the implications this may have on an individual's self-efficacy. Literature supports that individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and feelings are influenced by personality and positive psychological orientations, which can affect assessments and attitudes about social contexts (Libbey, 2004).

Subtheme 3.3: Mental Health and General Health

Over 1.5 billion learners worldwide have been impacted by the shutdown of schools due to COVID-19. Social isolation, lack of access to common treatments and activities, and family stress connected to disease and finances have all been linked to negative mental health effects (Radesky and Jenny, 2020).

> *Dimpho: "It wasn't the best, mainly for me personally because I was going through some mental difficulties. So mentally, I wasn't okay. Because I experienced a lot of*

emotional torture. Yeah, and I constantly had like-I been always on my tears, I cried all the time…"

Nelly: "Take a break for about 2 hours and then when I wake up I have to study again you know. I sort of lost ; I lost too much weight when I was in matric because of the schedule that I had."

Literature supports that the mental health of young people has been drastically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Isumi et al., 2021). Even with the economy partially reopened, the level of anxiety and depression symptoms among young people had increased considerably and it remained higher than pre-crisis levels when compared to other age groups (Isumi et al., 2020). Dimpho shared that the year was particularly not good for her, in terms of her general mental health. Whilst Dimpho outlined this, Nelly mentioned how this had an impact on his general health, which influenced weight loss. Bullo et al. (2021) outlined that children and adolescents were in the best position to express their fears and concerns about COVID-19's terrible influence on their mental health and future, as well as its subtle impact on their families and communities. With close consideration to a systemic review and the findings of this study, it is evident that different individuals exhibited various challenges that had an overall impact on their well-being.

Nelly: "Yes, and then, okay the pandemic sort of helped me because of uhm - before the pandemic I was in a class of about 50 people… And then during the pandemic we were only 18 in our class."

However, despite the challenges, Nelly talks about how the pandemic assisted with their learning environment, as the precautionary measures that were put in place, resulted in smaller classes compared to what they are used to. Some communities continue to attend school in non-formal spaces of learning (Baatjies, 2018). The practicing of social distancing allowed rotational attendance for learners. This arrangement was beneficial to some learners as it supported better one-on-one support, being something that was previously rare for most learners. This quote further supports the contextualization of South African schooling and its pre-existing inequalities mentioned in the literature.

While Nelly appreciated social distancing and found the smaller classes to be beneficial, Kamoso holds a different view, one that is contrary to Nelly's:

Kamoso: "adjusting to sitting alone in a desk whereas we would sit in threes in a two-seating table. It was really hard."

Kamoso found the adaptation as somewhat lonely and perhaps isolating as well. The contrast further supports the uniqueness of the individual's experiences.

Kamoso: "It was quite hard. Just to adjust to the idea of COVID-19, the masks would sometimes make it really hard to breathe."

Malebo: "Writing with a mask on…"

"[deep sigh] It was hot on top of that the mask is hot, and we don't attend as normal."

With the COVID-19 pandemic enforcing readjustments and a 'new normal', this required individuals to adjust from their normal way of living. Kamoso and Malebo indicate how this was a disadvantage for them and how it affected their learning. A midst trying to keep up the curriculum and its demands, this further supports that the pandemic came with a lot of learning and unlearning to do. Under the *exosystem*, we have safety protocols which were a key factor that had to strictly be adhered to following the decision made on going back to school. The changes in these *proximal processes* included protocols such as mask-wearing, assigned seating plans and social distancing. Although these measures were intended to ensure learner safety, they hindered effective teaching instruction, this also being justified by the participants of this study.

Kamoso also noted stigmatization, this response is one that is unique, yet very prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Labelling and a difference in treatment is generally normalized in the presence of an outbreak and people who are usually succumbed to a condition, are out casted.

Kamoso: "I think COVID affected us badly in terms of suspecting possible transmission every time someone coughs, even if it was just a random cough."

According to Kamoso, the COVID-19 pandemic brought with its stigma and discriminatory behaviour toward those who were assumed to have been infected by the virus. This reinforces the idea that learners who had a negative association with the virus were shunned and stigmatize (UNICEF, 2020). All learners experienced academic and emotional hardships in various ways. The already challenging task was further complicated by heightened levels of anxiety regarding safety concerns. Their concerns extended not only to their own well-being but also to that of

their families. Moreover, media plays a vital role in the *exosystem.* The constant reporting of death tolls every day, along with daily exposure to statistics can induce anxiety in many people. We can assume that this exposure had an influence on the way in which the learners interacted with one another.

Subtheme 3.4: Lack of resources

The COVID-19 pandemic unavoidably resulted in an increase in the use of digital technologies due to social distancing norms and global lockdowns. People and organizations across the world had to adapt to new ways of working and living, but this was not beneficial for everyone.

> *Dimpho: "And then also issues like not having enough resources, especially when we were away from school. So, for example let's say school is called off on a Monday, and we know that Monday morning we've got a maths lesson, we've got this, we've got this after that and some teachers would want to conduct online lessons, but not all of us had the resources to access that so it would be a challenge. Because now there wouldn't be any progress with our schoolwork, everything else would just stop. And then in terms of the communication as well, as I'm saying most people didn't have access to like phones, or the school group chats."*
>
> *Malebo: "And sometimes if you don't attend you don't get notes."*

Dimpho talks about the difficulties endured as a result of resources. The limited access of resources and technology of learners further contributed to communication difficulties between the teachers and the learners. This results in a digital divide, explained in the literature. Literature supports that the COVID-19 pandemic has unavoidably resulted in an increase in the use of digital technologies due to social distancing norms and global lockdowns. People and organizations across the world have had to adapt to new ways of working and living (Daly & Robinson, 2021). The learning experiences at home were similarly distinct due to disparities in social capital and resources. While all learners struggled during this time, many children from low- income families lost learning due to a lack of educational resources (Soudien et al., 2021). These inequalities were further supported by not having access to unaffordable devices, expensive internet access, and not having the necessary skills to navigate devices (Ambrecht, 2016).

The district-level decisions that also form part of the *exosystem* can be held accountable for the lack of resources. Teachers observed the necessity for increased internet accessibility in order

to effectively cater to their learners' requirements, a rarity in marginalized communities (Brigandi, 2022). Governing boards were responsible for making decisions about these resources and finding innovative solutions to COVID-related instructional problems. One of these solutions was the establishment of mobile hotspots, which provided free Wi-Fi access to parents and learners. It is unfortunate that the participants in this study did not have access to courtesy devices, unlike schools that had the necessary resources and finances to provide them. This limitation highlights the existing inequalities and reinforces the findings from the literature review on service delivery.

Subtheme 3.5: Loss and grief

This subtheme briefly outlines the adversities experienced within the learner's families/home(s), as these could have easily affected them. Grief was a subtheme that occurred amongst participants. Participants experienced a loss of caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had an impact on them. Within the context of the *microsystem* a sudden loss of a parent due to COVID-19 can have a significant impact on children who are grieving. Thus, it increases their vulnerability to traumatic grief, mood and anxiety disorders, negative educational outcomes, accidental death or suicide, and long-lasting consequences that may extend into adulthood (Bergman et al., 2017). This misfortune instantly affects the family structure as the prevailing family structure is disrupted as a result of alterations in daily schedules and the implementation of remote learning.

Kamoso outlines how the passing of his grandmother influenced his overall studies. This linkage proves how events in one system can influence functioning in another:

> *Kamoso: "Well like I said, my grandmother died of covid. So, it's sad because we are all now researching and preaching about COVID-19. My grandmother was our everything to everyone. We all went to her in times of need. I really felt different after my grandmother passed away. Things were no longer the same as before at home when*

she was there. Her absence was felt and it would make me overthink a lot and it would affect my studies."

Kamoso links his views and perceptions on how things would have been better if not for the passing of his primary caregiver, his grandmother. Kamoso believes that if his grandmother had not passed away, things would have been different for him. It is evident from Kamoso's response that grief got in the way of his studies and his ability to focus. The insufficient mental health support during this time, the constant school closures, and the crisis that the economy was faced with were the most common contributing factors to the unstable state of the youth's mental health (Kassegn & Endris, 2021). This ascertains that it would have been difficult to support the mental health needs of individual's during this time.

Kagiso: "Throughout my matric year I used to live with my grandmother and grandfather and then my grandfather died last year June….
Interviewer: "While you were in matric?"
Kagiso: "Yes while I was in matric."

Kagiso: "It was tough because when I was alone and when I was studying my mind would go to other places or like stick in one spot, and having to fill his shoes after was really hard cause- I had to like take up some of his responsibilities, they may seem simple but they have a great effect per se, because on a daily basis around 6:00 o'clock he would always wake me up and say something like go lock the gate. Just those little things, I didn't think of them as a big deal but now that he's gone I can see now cause I should always remember to lock the gate."

Nelly: " At home? During the… so, okay last year uhmm on the 10th of May I lost my stepdad. I stayed with him so… and December then I lost my grandmother."

Kamoso: " I lived with my grandmother and two older siblings"

Interviewer: "Your grandmother?"

Kamoso "Yes, she unfortunately passed on due to COVID."

Interviewer: "I am so sorry. When was this?"

Kamoso: " 2020- Since my grandmother passed away my mother came back to live with us. It was always fun, even though my grandmother wasn't around because she always took care of me, ironing for me, and sometimes I feel like I was spoilt since I am the last

born and I would always run to her for anything. She used to give me lunch money but then, things started changing, hence I started selling cigarettes in school so that I could have a bit of lunch money. I felt really bad because I felt like I was killing the community and teaching kids who didn't smoke about smoking."

It can be established from the above quotes that some participants endured loss at first hand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants expressed the changes that these losses came with in their lives, and somehow it had affected them. Literature notes that during the intense period of the COVID-19 pandemic, most parents and caregivers were faced with their own personal stressors e.g., financial constraints, losing jobs, and trying to protect themselves from contracting virus, making it hard for them to fully pay attention of their children's demanding academics. Indeed, parents who have high stress levels as well as anxiety and depression symptoms have been shown to be less responsive to their children's needs during the time (Brown et al., 2020). It is unfortunate that despite some caregivers trying to take care themselves, they still happened to lose the battle to COVID-19. While Kagiso outlined the responsibilities that fell on him after the passing of his grandfather, Kamoso describes the void that he was left with after the passing of his grandmother who was responsible for most parts of his life. Whilst still trying to process the demanding academic year, some participants were dealing with bereavement that could have possibly subjected them to feelings of loneliness. Loneliness was added to the DSM-5-TR as an additional symptom of prolonged grief disorder (APA, 2022). Furthermore, loneliness was a primary symptom following loss, which could activate other grief or depression-related symptoms from a network point of view (Zou et al., 2022).

Parents and caregivers all form part of an individual's *microsystem*, therefore the unexpected loss of a parent due to COVID-19 can have a deep impact on children who are grieving, increasing their vulnerability to traumatic grief, mood and anxiety disorders, negative educational outcomes, accidental death, or even suicide (Bergman et al., 2017). During this time, there becomes a shift in the *context*, the individual not only copes with the death of someone but also concerns themselves with the necessary changes in different areas of life; the process of adjusting to the loss entails reestablishing harmony in the individual's life story (Bergman et al., 2017). This is justified by Kagiso's excerpt, who did not only bear the responsibility to heal but also assumed additional duties.

4.4 Theme 4: Holistic support

As a result of one of the objectives of this study, the researcher sought to explore what factors provided support to the learners during their difficult periods after learning the foundation of their experiences and challenges.

The *microsystem* of the Ecological Systems Theory provides the foundation for this theme and all its subthemes. As defined previously, within this context, it compromises of the individuals' closest proximity being the school and home environment which also include their activities, roles, and relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). From the findings of this study, these systems have uniquely adapted to meet the needs of learners and the changing organizational structures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interaction between *microsystems* has led to the introduction of *mesosystems*. An example of this is the establishment of a connection between the school and home, which aimed to improve communication and serve the best interests of the learner. As examples of a *mesosystem* in support of the learner, parents were enabled to play a crucial role in supporting their child's learning by communicating with teachers about any events at home that may have impacted their child's education during the time. In return, teachers were able to send through valuable learning materials and information to assist them in monitoring their child's academic development while they were fully under their care.

Subtheme 4.1: Community and organizational support

> *Kagiso: "Where I felt most supported was at TOTIES ORG, I'm going to mention TOTIES ORG, TOTIES ORG has done so many things for people, it has been supportive through thick and thin so that's when I felt supported, when you need someone, 'TOTIES ORG Facilitator' was there to like…not to push you harder but to just guide you through everything, so that's when I felt the most support, the support was mostly from them."*
>
> *Kamoso: "Yes. In matric I felt supported because TOTIES ORG is my home, everybody knows it. I found most of my support there as they build the youth from when they attend high school, like if they had an interest in going to varsity and all that. Last year I felt that I was not going to varsity and I would be told by friends that I could go in my own time. However, when the friends I used to hang out with all went to varsity, I felt bad as I had all the time and access to apply since we had Wi-Fi passwords and all that, including TOTIES ORG facilities."*

Participants were asked to define what/who had been serving as their support structure during their matric year in 2021. Responses from Kagiso and Kamoso outline the impact of the organisation that they were part of. Kagiso feels like it provided him with a sense of meaning and the kind of support that was received aided him in his matric year. While Kamoso holds similar sentiments, he was able to gain a sense of community within the organisation, he further outlines the opportunities that the organisation provided, that could potentially have a positive impact on one's social and educational development. The importance of organisations such as TOTIES ORG is emphasised. Literature supports that when young people are exposed to inspiring ideas and opportunities, as well as the tools to build their confidence, they can take on anything. A young person who is empowered recognizes their own abilities, self-determination, and value. They are at ease with trying new things ((Mac Intosh, Martin & Ewing, 2019). It can be concluded by the above excerpts that this organisation was allowing of this, when closely considering their provisions.

Subtheme 4.2: Peer support

Family and peers were prominent factors that appeared when participants were asked to provide a sense of their support structure.

> *Kagiso: "It felt really nice like-… oh and I would also get support from my friends cause like we would procrastinate a lot, so that's what the gang was about, so sometimes they would be like 'okay I'm studying today and stuff and we would all agree that we would study, and then we would probably sit and concentrate for a few minutes and our minds are gone to other things, those are the times I felt really supported."*
>
> *Khosazana: "Yes, I had friends who would literally cross night just for us to be on the safe side."*
>
> *Kagiso: "I really enjoyed the class I was in because that's where I got most of my motivation, from my classmates."*

The above excerpts ascertain the importance of having shared goals and values between friend groups and peers. Participants outline the moral support obtained from their classmates and their friends. Participants formed study groups and they further motivated one another when needed.

> *Lelo: "Uhh, I guess talking with my friends, because they would relate with what I was going through…"*

Kabelo: "Waking up, first thing in my mind is, did I finish the homework, did I study and then the last thing would be what am I going to do at school, because every day there's something. At school you never go home disappointed because at school you find things to do, things to laugh at and your friends are always there."

In addition to academic pursuits, participants affirm the presence of their peers for casual conversations, providing a source of comfort and emotional support. Literature confirms that adolescents' social and emotional adjustment, engagement, academic motivation, and learning are all influenced by their interactions with teachers and peers in their social contexts (Corso et al., 2013). Furthermore, peer relationships, in addition to teacher–student relationships, play a significant role in an adolescent's sense of school belonging. It has been indicated that high quality of peer relationships or supportive friendships satisfies the need to belong in adolescents by allowing them to connect with others (Martin & Collie, 2016).

Subtheme 4.3: Family Support

Respectively, although the participants emphasized the significance of peers as a prominent theme, the majority of them expressed feeling supported by their family members and the nurturing home environment they provided.

Kagiso:"I felt fully supported throughout my matric year, when I would study they would give me the time and they would turn down the noise, so I didn't-... It's only now that I don't feel supported."
Lelo: "...and even at home because they understood what was happening. So as lenient as the previous years, they would give me a break to like study or have time to myself. Yeah, that's how I coped."

Dimpho: "So I think it tested their faith, but they were also anxious along with us, you know, even though they couldn't help us with studying and all of that, but they were as anxious as us and they- me at home they would actually give me time to do my work, and all of that, you know, and study if I wanted to study, but my mom would always encourage me to take breaks."

From Kamoso's response, we gained insight into the potential conflict between family support and one's personal aspirations:

Kamoso: "Basically, in my matric life, my family had channelled me to live or go into a certain direction and support me so that I could go to school the following year. They

would give me books like prospectuses and I would rather give them to some other person who needed them, in my head, I was only going to go in after 2 years, you know I still had that township mentality."

The Matric year and future aspirations of Kamoso were met with complete support from his family, who made every effort to support his development. This passage highlights the high expectations they had for Kamoso's future. Despite the family's endeavours to ensure Kamoso's enrolment in university the following year, Kamoso had a distinct vision for his own path. According to Kamoso, his mentality is intricately connected to the *macrosystem* in which he was born. It can be established from Kamoso's perspective that pursuing higher education immediately after high school is not a customary practice within his m*acrosystem.* With perception bring on of the important elements of the *macrosystem,* this extract reinforces the findings from the literature review. It highlights the significant impact of the m*acrosystem* on an individual's experiences and future outcomes within the context of this study.

As previously discussed in this paper, learners should have access to an environment that allows them to be free, study, and grow in a healthy manner. Participants expressed how family members were willing to work with them, by supporting their learning needs indicating knowing the importance of their matric year. These responses are slightly contrary to those noted under Theme 2 (Everyday routine as a matric learner) where some participants voiced that they did not feel supported by their family members. As per research statistics, involvement of parents is more beneficial than financial class, ethnicity, race, or an educational background for children's academic achievement (Amatea & West, 2007). With the efficient support from their caregivers, tentatively, the participants were more likely to acquire whole academic achievement. Literature further illustrates that parental participation in learners' education starts at home, with parents providing a safe and healthy environment, suitable learning opportunities, a support structure, and a positive attitude towards their school life. Several studies found that learners who have involved parents perform better academically (Bunijevac & Durisic, 2017). Participants responses reflecting home support is a positive element towards their overall learning development.

Khosazana: "So there was a time where I had to stay a whole month without seeing her, she's my…I don't even know how to explain her but she was the person who gave me most support even though she wasn't around, but she was there emotionally and physically."

Khosazana expressed that although her mother was away for work, she was still supportive of her academics. The participant's idealized conception of support is emphasized, revealing that her support system was not physically present, yet she still felt its presence. In her response, she broadened the understanding of support by acknowledging its diverse interpretations among individuals. Some barriers to parental involvement arise because of today's parents' preoccupation with the distractions and demands of daily life. Literature confirms that some parents are unable to consistently attend school activities or engage in their children's education due to limited income, restrictive work hours, and language challenges (Ho, 2009).

Subtheme 4.4: Teacher and School support

This subtheme aims to look at the measures provided by the school and by the teachers in order to ensure that their learners are supported.

> *Kabelo: "I experienced a lot of things, doing an all-nighter I've done it before alone at home but this one was different because I had my friends and my classmates and then on some of those cross nights there were teachers that came to teach us and then left at around midnight."*
>
> *Malebo: "Then 7 o'clock I attend geography morning class, and after morning class uhm quarter to eight I eat breakfast, and then 8 o'clock normal classes are starting…*
>
> *Yes, and then 12 o'clock I'm on lunch until 1 o'clock, after 1 o'clock I attend maths, and then I attend uhm English or Setswana. Then afterschool, we attend again, extra classes."*
>
> *Kabelo: "Yeah, they were okay because as a matric, you don't go out as normal learners, if the school knocks out at 15:00 you knock out at 16:00, an hour later so it was okay."*
>
> *Nelly: "[inaudible] I was in school on Sundays."*

The above quotations tell us that the school together with the teachers put in measures when they could, to ensure that their matric learners cover the curriculum. It is evident that teachers put in extra hours such as implementing classes early in the morning, and later in the afternoons. When matric learners engaged in 'cross-nighting,' a joint effort between learners where they spend the night studying, teachers would also take their time to provide insight. According to literature, teachers can help adolescents explore the significance of new ideas, activities, or

opportunities provided at school on their identities (Verhoevenet al., 2019). Literature further supports that positive teacher-adolescent relationships predict changes in motivation, sense of belonging, school interest, achievement expectations, values, engagement, effort, and performance (Giani and O'Guinn, 2010).

> *Kabelo: "Grade 11 he stopped teaching us, but we still talked enough he used to go by meetings do not go to his car and fetch him things and he used to help me out sometimes with transport money and then other teachers came along and then Miss Tee, the same thing like give me lifts."*
>
> *Malebo: "Three, and my Tourism teacher and my English teacher. Those are the people that supported me. From day one when I was doing matric, those are the people that were pushing me to do this, don't do that. So, I felt that support and that yah- I'm in matric."*

Malebo and Kabelo make reference to the kind of support they received directly from specific teachers. Kabelo adds that he also received monetary support, assisting him in commuting to and from school.

At a time of grief, Nelly felt supported by the school:

> *Nelly: "So I felt supported from both the school and home, like uhm when I got back from the funeral…hai they prepared me all the work they did during schooling time…"*

Khosazana recalls the time the school gave her another chance to try again:

> *Khosazana: "It was amazing let me say that because I really enjoyed my last year even though it was hectic times, The school was amazing as well they always supported us giving us chances to try again but yeah it was nice."*
> *Khosazana: "I will speak from my site so I failed my second term and they gave me a chance to try again they really believed in me and I passed my prelims."*

While majority of the participants expressed that they received support from the school and their teachers, Lelo opposes this and feels like the school was not supportive enough. There could have been various factors that contributed to the idea Lelo holds relative to the other participants. Lelo supports one of the objectives of this study, which is to understand the experiences of different learners, which are not bound to be the same:

Lelo: "Yeah, I feel like the schools, the schools weren't, like, supportive enough….

Yeah uhm, they didn't- I wouldn't say they didn't care, but they didn't offer like a sort of support structure for us."

Overall, adolescent school affiliation in addition to individual influences on quality-of-life measurements and social contextual factors have a contribution to school connectedness being notably important for learners. A student's sense of belonging to school and emotional proximity with classmates and educators are regarded as school connectedness (Libbey, 2004). The various support received from the school's side, in collaboration with the teachers positively contributes to the achievement of their learners. This is supported by positive relationships formed at school, feeling part of the school and safe in school, and lastly feeling content at school. Few studies have looked at the factors that influence school connectedness, with a focus on the beneficial outcomes associated with high levels of school connectedness (Libbey, 2004). Factors such as positive teacher support and thanksgiving events have been associated to improve school connectedness (Martin & Collie,2016), this was linked to higher levels of life satisfaction, academic accomplishment, and fewer internalizing and externalizing difficulties (Joyce & Early, 2014).

4.5 Theme 5 : Thoughts on how situations could have been made better

This theme derived from general reflections of participants when they had to look at their 2021 year, after having shared the most profound parts of their experiences. Participants have varying yet remarkably similar perspectives on what could have enhanced their year, particularly their learning. The majority of these deficiencies are closely tied to Theme 3 (Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic), which focuses on the difficulties faced by learners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subtheme 5.1. General support

Kagiso: " Having the same pressure they apply at school at home, I think that would have made my matric results better."

Khosazana: "It was in my last-, I felt as if I would have done better if I had gotten that support from the start, but I did get it and it was amazing."

These views are contrary to those observed under them Theme 3 (Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic). Most participants in this study felt the support from home, but Kagiso expresses that it wasn't enough to assist him in achieving his anticipated results.

Kagiso believes that if he had gotten the same pressure at home, like they did at school, he could have done better. Kagiso seems to not have been supported fully, or at least as much as he would have needed to be supported at home during that time. Literature ascertains that family involvement in learners' learning has been linked to better school performance from pre-school to high school, and it is emphasized that adolescents require their parents' full support to achieve their full potential in school (Osterman, 2000). Khosazana holds the idea that if she had received support from the beginning of her academic year, she would have done better. However, Khosazana seems to appreciate the kind of support that she received towards the end.

Subtheme 5.2. Learning resources and school attendance

This subcategory originates from the difficulties observed in subthemes 3.1. (School attendance) and 3.4. (Lack of resources). The participants emphasized that these challenges were among the most significant ones they faced. Learners within this subtheme delve deeper by elaborating on how these obstacles impeded their learning and continue to imagine alternative scenarios that could have been. These findings back up the research mentioned about how *proximal processes* can disrupt how learners learn, how they are evaluated, and their relationships with teachers. The participants felt that these negative experiences affected their overall academic performance. The researcher is informed by this discovery, along with the support of the findings, that there are numerous factors that contribute to the quality of experiences for learners. Furthermore, this finding is congruent to the literature on educational disparities, raising the question of whether the lack of resources still impacts academic performance beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

> *Dimpho: " No, but you know, what I think I wish I knew, or what I think I wish people would tell me is that-cause people will tell you that in matric you need- in terms of school supplies, they will tell you that you need a lot of books, and all of that. But like, I wish I had someone who would tell me would you need a phone in matric, like a proper phone, you need space, you need- yeah, you need space on your phone, because we download a lot of PDFs."*

Dimpho: "We download a lot of yeah-, just a lot of resources on the phone, and I wish someone would have told me that you need as much space as you can."

Kabelo: "Because what I remember is the 2017 or 2016 I think it was 2016 matrics, they gave them the tablets, it's a laptop that can remove the keyboard, so they gave them the tablets and they used them for the whole year and they didn't have to return them".

Kabelo: "Yeah, because we could have used them during lockdown, they could have contacted us and say they are going to set up a Zoom call and send out the meeting IDs and everything then we would attend."

Dimpho wishes that they were told that they would need working devices and space because of the amount of material that was received due to remote learning. Kabelo goes on to compare their matric group to the matrics of previous years who benefited from tablets. Kabelo further emphasizes that these devices would have aided them in online learning, and in this way classes would commence, although virtually. The quotations confirm the disadvantages that came with the digital divide, which were also explained in the literature. The digital divide also came up as one of the prominent challenges faced by learners. According to literature, the learning experiences at home were similarly distinct due to disparities in social capital and resources. While all learners suffered learning during this time, many children from low- income families lost learning due to a lack of educational resources (Soudien et al., 2021). Within the context of this study, The *exosystem* was framed by the school setting, technologies, and the inconsistencies of schedules. The researcher observed that the rapid fluctuations in settings and schedules, coupled with the absence of control over decisions and outcomes, were identified as factors exacerbating the learners pre-existing anxiety levels. This further justifies the influence of one system on an individual

Malebo: "I think so. I think so, if maybe like we were given a chance to attend, us matrics, and not considering uhm grade 11 and stuff but us matrics because we matter the most. So, if we were given a chance to come to school…"

Kamoso: "I wish there were more classes and carried on with learning."

Khanya: "For me it was a big disadvantage because I'm not that type of person who can study on their own, I could try but I also need to be explained to, I need things to be explained to me in order for me to understand. So, my marks started to drop and

that's when I saw that it's hard and I need to pick up, and that's when I began to ask teachers if I wouldn't be able to come to school without people noticing at least attend for two hours and then leave."

The topic of school attendance and the loss of school days was covered in Theme 3 (Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic). While this was a challenge for most learners, the above excerpts support that this impacted the participants negatively, bearing that they wish they had been able to attend school. Khanya justifies this by further explaining the difficulties she encountered with having to learn at home without teacher guidance, as an individual who benefits from teacher demonstrations.

Subtheme 5.3. Better results

Most participants believed that if it wasn't for the pandemic and the style of learning, they would have achieved better academic achievement.

Kagiso: "Well my results would be better I guess."
Khanya: "I feel like I would have done better than I did, I went out with a bachelor's but I feel like I would have had more distinctions if it wasn't for the pandemic, but at the same time I don't blame the pandemic because it's up to you."

Dimpho: "Well, I think in terms of my results, yes, things would have been different. But in terms of my career choice, no, it would still be the same."

Kamoso: "Yes most definitely but due to the fact that my APS score and what I want to study aren't correlating, I knew this guy who is at the University of Johannesburg who told me that I needed to upgrade some of my subjects, especially Maths and Geography."

Kabelo: "So, if everything was different, I believe my final marks from our matric results would have been different and I would have qualified to go to an aviation school and fulfill my dreams."

It is evident from these responses that most learners associated their final academic performance with their experiences of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some participants went as far as sharing how their results have had an impact on their future plans and their prospective careers.

> *Khosazana: "I feel like if the pandemic was not there they would take time just to make us realise all the things that we had to know, cause literally we would just learn one thing throughout the whole year from the start until the end and the on your final exam, you're going to write the same thing you did first term until the end, so I think we just needed more time."*

Khosazana reflects on the amount of content they had to take in, which also occurred as a challenge in Theme 3 (Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Khosazana further concluded that more time would have made things better for them .

> *Malebo: "We didn't get matric dance, any trip, nothing. Like there was really nothing for us. So, I think this year would be like a very different year if I didn't do my matric last year."*

To conclude, matric is usually a very exciting year for many, considering that it is the final year of High school and this milestone can be celebrated in diverse ways. Malebo outlines the deprivations that they were subjected to because of the social restrictions that were put in place. Malebo further expressed that if she had not done her Matric in 2021, her life would be different . These concluding thoughts on educational experiences confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted learning, and in certain cases, it has worsened pre-existing disparities.

4.6 Theme 6: Hope beyond the pandemic

This theme was derived from wanting to understand the participants future plans and goals after they have shared their experiences. Most participants appeared to be hopeful and sure about what they wanted for themselves. From these excerpts, a pattern of resilience was identified from participants. Resilience is defined as a concept that is frequently used in the social sciences to analyse success in trying circumstances or environments (Gallagher et al., 2020). Having learned the challenges faced by the participants, it could be inferred that a sense of hopelessness has been developed throughout their journey, hopelessness being a severe state that intensifies feelings of disappointment and sadness, characterized by a lack of joy in life (Khosrobeigi et al., 2022). However, in addition to their resilience, participants exhibited characteristics of hope. Hope entails the process of planning for a positive and meaningful future is characterized by uncertain expectations and requires individuals to have confidence in their plans (Hedayati & Khazaei, 2014). The literature reviewed speaks on the significance of possessing these traits, within the context of this study.

Lelo: "Uhm yeah, outside of uhm obviously getting my degree, I'd like to- like get myself a bunch of skills like, that I could use in the real world. Like, as I said, graphic design, things for music production. Yeah, I want to chase those things uhm maybe like, like, just get more skills in the hobbies that I'm doing like chess and skateboarding."

Khanya: "I guess I don't have much but my goal is just to see me fulfilling my dreams, just to see me have what I've wished for, just like I told you I want to have a business for transport and logistics, so that's where I want to see myself, and I guess- I also want to have an organisation like TOTIES ORG, giving out to the youth and people who don't have much.so that's what I want to do."

Kamoso: "This year showed me my whole life after matric, and it's hard. So, it taught me that I want to be a doctor one day and be called Doctor too. If it takes 14 years that's okay too because I also want to get into logistics because I Love cars, and everything to do with transportation and be able to give back to my community. Also, people need an activist so that's why I want to go back to school and pursue the logistics path and I think I would do great."

Kamoso: "I want to create an island where everything is what it's supposed to be if I can put it that way, with a drug free place. People and parents want a certain environment for their children which is a life without abuse, rape, GBV and so forth. Even in homosexuality, a place where there will be no judgement based on sexuality. I don't want to just raise awareness but I want to do something in someone's life."

Malebo: "Yes. Uhm, I see myself living in France the next coming years. Those are goals, very very big goals…I want to make a difference, and uhm, my goals? I want to see myself wearing that gown."

Malebo: "Mm... So, to study , and to make a difference where I am from."

Participants present as very hopeful for the future despite the adversities they have encountered along their journey. According to the literature, it can be established that an elevated level of anxiety and fear may be one risk factor for COVID-19's effects on mental health. It is astounding that participants are able to remain resilient and optimistic about their future and

their plans. Vos et al. (2020), suggests that not everyone has the same degree of elevated fears and related negative mental health effects. In general, most people display resilience in the face of difficulty. Positive personality traits such as optimism, mindfulness, and resilience may be associated with this. Optimism is the tendency to anticipate positive outcomes in the face of uncertainty (Vos et al., 2020). These participants are indicative of this when considering the aspirations, they have for themselves. Despite the danger posed by COVID-19, the learners are encouraged to further their studies by their desire to obtain educational benefits that will benefit their future in a positive way.

As outlined in the literature, resilience is not linear and it is contested with regards to being a strategy that is beneficial to one's mental well-being. Research on resilience challenges us to delve deeper into our thinking, such as considering whether there are external factors that demand resilience from an individual. This can be confirmed by a statement made by Enomoto & Umeya (2022) on how it is important to understand that well-being is not about being invulnerable or acting as if we are impervious to adversities. Instead, we should focus on reshaping our environments in a way that reduces the need for individuals to constantly cope with significant and ongoing challenges. Moreover, after enduring hardships, 'bouncing back' does not have to be rushed. This study only speaks of a select few learners, tentatively, there are some learners who did not come out as resilient. Thus, it challenges their 'ability' within the context of normative resilience. Interestingly, these participants also showed similar interests in wanting to give back to their respective communities. It is common for some individuals who would have been part of a community to have experienced it and decide further that they want to be a part of its philanthropy.

The study's conclusions and recommendations are included in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and recommendations based on findings, guided by the objectives of the study

Introduction

Research findings were attained through the implementation of a qualitative research approach, which was reviewed under Chapter 3(Research methodology). The scope to which each of the research objectives was met and the research question was answered, will be covered in this chapter. The chapter will also discuss the study's limitations, conclusions, and recommendations.

5.1 Limitations of the study

The sample of this study is indicative of a limitation. Data was only gathered from individuals from one region, namely Gauteng, Soweto Township. This is also a small sample consisting of only 9 learners, in one particular year, 2021. When considering the year, it then becomes questionable if the same results would have been attained if the sample was extracted from the matriculants of 2020. This limits the chances of getting a broad viewpoint of experiences from different learners, from assorted backgrounds. With this being a significant limitation, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the township population being 'Soweto,' as illustrated in the research topic. Relatively, there are few, if any, studies that appear to have been done in South Africa to scrutinize the experiences of the learners in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To reduce the study's limitations, upcoming research should investigate how the pandemic affects different groups of learners in various settings, such as rural, urban, and suburban areas. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the COVID-19 phenomenon, it is imperative for future research to take into account the viewpoints of parents, teachers, and policy makers. This broader perspective will enable a deeper analysis of the impact of changes in *proximal processes* and their effects on the development of learners.

5.2 Summary of theme findings and recommendations

Theme 1:The individual's background

This theme aimed to understand the learner's backgrounds and home settings. It was found that most participants aren't part of a nuclear family, but they rather form part of extended families and sing-parent households. It was later established that this is not uncommon within the South African context. Despite the setting of family structures, individuals can still be supported by their respective family members. This was confirmed by Theme 4 (Holistic support) of the analysis that revealed different kinds of support systems.

Recommendations:

Extended families allow for extensive support between family members, and this could be done in a form of unity. Within a family system, it is important to create an environment where stresses, anxieties and responsibilities are shared with other family members. This would enable a strong family support system, which alleviates individual stress and increases happiness.

Theme 2:Everyday routine as a matric learner

This theme revealed that learners had very early mornings and late nights when they could attend school. These were all around sacrifices made towards academic success. It was found that learners woke up early to attend morning extra classes, and they stayed up late in order to study. In the midst of their routine, it was established that these learners also had family responsibilities that were assigned to them, which often led to exhaustion. Individuals' experiences in this regard were closely linked to their *microsystems*. Bronfenbrenner described these systems as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships that a developing person encounters throughout time in each setting with unique physical and material qualities (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Recommendations:

When learners are faced with curriculum demands, family members and caregivers should be cognisant of learner's capabilities. Family members should work together with overwhelmed learners within their home and attempt to find a way of being lenient with assigned responsibilities in a way that would better support them and their learning.

Theme 3:Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This theme served as a basis of understanding the learners' whole experiences. It was found that participants exhibited a wide range of challenges as opposed to positive experiences. Challenges that were identified were associated with not going into school for physical classes, the academic pressure endured, and some mental health difficulties encountered. The continual changes in-between lockdown levels announced by government officials had unique restrictions that had to be adhered to , these were indicative of the *exosystem*. The limitations included forced absence from school and closures of the schools. The participants in this study identified adjusting to these amendments as one of the most difficult challenges they faced during their matric year.

Moreover, a number of participants suffered loss within their homes. These losses ranged from losing primary caregivers to respective family members. Participants encountered difficulties within their grieving process, as they were expected to show up in all other demanding areas of their lives. Learners had to adjust to a different way of living without their family members, whilst also trying to deal with their emotions.

Recommendations:

It is recommended for schools to utilise psycho-social services which will enable learners to acquire coping mechanisms suited for time management and dealing with pressure and stress. Learners acquiring these skills will aid them in unprecedented circumstances such as those of the COVID-19 pandemic. Government, together with the Department of Education in South Africa should revise their document for Emergency Operations Plans, that will be more accommodative of schools in different settings.

It is further recommended that learners receive psychoeducation on the topic of grief, where they will be taken through the process of grieving and managing depressive symptoms and bereavement. Learners around the country continue to experience grief within their families, outside of disease outbreaks. This theme further puts emphasis on the need for accessible psychological services within schools and communities.

Theme 4:Holistic support

This theme revealed the participants support structures. Participants felt supported by their peers and family members, their teachers and school, and the community organisations that

they formed part of. However, one participant expressed that they did not feel so supported. The importance of being part of a community and the perks that it comes with was outlined in this theme. During this time, various systems had to work together to support a learner. To ensure effective communication, the school and its teachers needed to be in contact with parents and guardians. According to the literature, strong fostering connections between *microsystems* have a positive impact on how learners develop. Children are more likely to succeed in school when their parents interact with teachers. It was evident that without the various support received from the participants' respective systems, they would have immensely suffered in their matric year.

Recommendations:

Findings have clearly shown the positive impact teacher-student relationships, peer, and family relationships have on attaining holistic support. It is recommended for schools and teachers to continue supporting the learner's needs in the best way possible, by always keeping learners' best interests in mind. Within communities, youth development programmes should continue being instilled as it has been shown by the results, to have a positive impact on their social and academic development.

Theme 5:Thoughts on how situations could have been made better

Participants shared distinct but very similar idealisations of how they could have achieved better experiences. Individuals spoke on how they could have benefited from support during their Matric year. The disparities in learning resources were also outlined. Learner's felt that if they had devices that would have allowed them to continue with learning virtually, it would have better supported their learning needs and experiences. Findings also reported the learning gaps created by lack of school attendance, and further elaborated on what being in school entailed for them. Participants associated the mentioned challenges with their overall academic performance. Learner's felt that if it wasn't for the circumstances that they were subjected to, they would have achieved better results.

Recommendations:

These idealizations stem from the challenges that the participants faced. Specific recommendations have previously been made for each area; it is critical to follow through on them as they were established based on empirical findings of this study.

Theme 6: Hope beyond the pandemic

This theme concluded the study in a very positive light, reflecting on the participants' resilience in the face of adversity and challenges.

Recommendations:

Following the participant's eagerness towards their future, it is important for communities to have role models that the younger generation can look up to and learn from. Having role models form apart of communities easily contributes to their motivation and provides them with positive life experiences.

5.4 Conclusion

Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of the High school learners (matriculants) during the COVID-19 pandemic in Soweto. The study was guided by objectives which were met; thus, the study's goal was achieved.

Following that, each objective will be discussed in terms of how it was met in this study:

- **Objective one - To contextualize High school learning during the COVID-19 pandemic:**

When considering this objective, it is important to note that at the time of the study, not many studies had been conducted around this topic. The primary basis of the study was to have this answered, in a form of learning the individuals' unique experiences and finding similarities in their experiences. This study was inclusive of an in-depth literature study that aimed to explore the history of South African schooling, and South African schooling pre-COVID-19 Pandemic. The aim of this was to understand the impact that the pandemic has had on specifically high school learning during the pandemic. This was done by the researcher immersing herself in the participant's experiences. Participants gave responses to questions that contextualized learning. Theme 2 (Everyday routine as a Matric learner) of the analysis aimed to understand the

learner's everyday routine as a matric learner, this together with the challenges encountered provided insight into this objective.

- **Objective two -To understand the challenges that were faced by the learners:**

The questionnaire was designed in a way that would allow the researcher to understand the participants' negative and positive experiences. It is without a doubt that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic consisted of challenges. Participants assisted the researcher in understanding the challenges that they encountered by providing and sharing the most raw and sensitive parts of their experiences. The researcher provided in-depth literature on the digital divide, the youth and mental health, and the youth and family support. These studies supported the most prominent responses that were given by the participants around their learning, and these were grouped into subthemes. Responses around school attendance and lack of resources, academic pressure and, general/mental health were the most recurrent, which influenced the establishment of the subthemes entailed under Theme 3 (Challenges of being a learner during the COVID-19 pandemic) of the analysis.

- **Objective three – To ascertain learner's support structure during this time:**

In accordance with the research topic, the researcher attempted to provide an in-depth literature review attempting to underpin the importance of support amongst adolescents. This topic was covered under the subheading 'Youth and Family Support,' entailed in the study's literature review. Participants were asked to recall times where they felt supported and unsupported, and by who, during their adverse times. This objective was also further supported by Theme 4 (Holistic support) of the analysis of results. This theme entailed subthemes that derived from majority of the participants' responses. According to the findings of this study, it can be established that participants felt supported by community organisations, their school and its teacher's, and family together with peers. The responses provided by the participants were rich, they further elaborated on how support was shown and how they made meaning of it.

- **Objective four - To determine the learners' views on how learning could have been better during this time:**

This objective was met by having the participants reflect on their journey and experiences. The most accurate way that this objective could have been met is by having participants contextualize their experiences holistically and have them thoroughly think about how things could have been different. The interview schedule entailed a question that aimed to answer this

objective. Theme 5 (Thoughts on how situations could have been made better) of the analysis solely focused on this objective, having three most important areas that were established into subthemes. Learner's felt they could have benefit more from general support, more school attendance, and learning material. Lastly, according to this study's findings, most participants hold that there would have been a difference in their academic performance if they had not been subjected to their then learning conditions.

- **Objective five - To understand the learners' future aspirations, post the pandemic adversities they encountered:**

The researcher felt that it was important to gain an understanding of the view's participants have after being subjected to unfavourable circumstances. The researcher asked participants what their dreams, hopes and aspirations were for the future. After such inimical learning and unlearning, adjustments, and compromises, one would assume that these participants would have acquired a circumstantial negative outlook. It was evident from the findings of this study that most participants remain hopeful and positive about their future. This objective was supported by the findings attained by Theme 6 (Hope beyond the pandemic) of the analysis.

In closing, this research has managed to achieve its goals and objectives with the assistant of the participants raw and rich data they provided. The experiences of the 2021 Matriculants in Soweto during the COVID-19 pandemic were explored at various levels. With close consideration of the challenges and shortcomings encountered, it is with great hope that this study will serve as a blueprint for the adversities encountered and assist in closing gaps and ensuring inclusivity if ever the need arises again. The findings and recommendations of this study should be closely considered, as they derive from integrated lived experiences of individuals.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

If there is a dire interest in this particular area of research, it is recommended for it to be explored in a wider context. Future studies can aim to contextualize high school experiences not just in the Gauteng province, Soweto township, but across the nation as well. This will allow for a better representation of experiences encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic at a greater level.

It is further recommended that future research seeks to explore experiences in a different setting, with individuals from various backgrounds. This will assist in exploring the differences in experiences from a point of privilege or more pleasurable circumstances.

The main focus of this study was placed on learner's experiences, future research can further develop this study by exploring the experiences of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, as teachers.

Future research can also aim to explore the current standing of individuals who endured significant adversities subject to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it has impacted their lives after a few years.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. Please tell me about yourself, feel free to share your interests, about your family lifeand what you like to do for fun?
2. Please can you tell me more about the community and the kind of school you went to?
3. Could you share with me what a typical day would be like when you were in matric?
4. Can you share experiences or aspects that you enjoyed being in matric in 2021?
5. Could I ask you to share some of the hardest parts of being in matric in 2021?
6. What are some of the challenges you faced as a learner during the COVID-19pandemic?
7. Please tell me a little about what you did to cope with the challenges.
8. In your opinion, is there anything that can be done to make these hard times feeleasier? Please share these.
9. Can you please tell me a little more about your family?
10. Can you please tell me a little about your support structure?
11. Can you share how your family coped during the pandemic, are there any specificexperiences that stood out for you?
12. Can you share any experiences or times when you felt supported during your matricyear?

13. Have there ever been times when you haven't felt supported? If yes, can you tell meabout it?
14. Could you share some of your goals and aspirations for the future?
15. What are your thoughts about the future?
16. Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to share regarding your experiences as a matriculant during the pandemic?

Appendix B: Permission Letter



NPO Number: 134-136 NPO

Xxxxxx
Xxxxx Gauteng 1865
South Africa

Phone: xxxxxxxx
Mobile: xxxxxxx
xxxxxxm

03/04/2022

Permission to conduct research

This letter serves to confirm that Nolwazi Mthembu has been give permission to reach out to Youth of the South members as possible participants in her research study. The project has been explained to me and I understand that the youths' participation in this study is completely voluntary and that all details will be kept confidential at all times.

Regards,



Xxxxxxxx
Co founder

Appendix C: Participants Consent Form

Title of project: **An exploratory study of Soweto matriculants lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Researcher: Nolwazi Mthembu I agree to the following:

I_____consent to participate in the research project.

(Please circle your answer)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about YES NO

I understand that I can volunteer to take part in the study YES NO

I agree that the interview/focus group/other activity may be audio recorded YES NO

I agree that direct quotations from my interview/focus group/other activity may be used by the researcher in their research report/ manuscript/book chapter YES NO

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name will not be used by the researcher in their research report/manuscript/book chapter) YES NO

I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview/focus group/other activity (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained) but my name

and no personal information will not be used or passed on. YES NO

…….(Signature)

…….(Name of participant)

…….....(Date)

…….... (Signature)

…….....(Name of researcher)

……(Date)

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND,
SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

Appendix D: Participation Information sheet

Dear Sir / Madam,

My name is Nolwazi Mthembu, and I am currently completing my Master's in Educational Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. As part of my course, I am required to complete a research project. The title of my research is 'An exploratory study of Soweto matriculants lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic'. The research aims to experiences of the High School learners during COVID-19 pandemic in Gauteng and to contextualize High school learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. I would like to invite you to participate in this research project. Participation will involve taking part in an interview, which will be approximately an hour or less in length and will involve answering a set of questions. The interviews will be conducted in English, with your permission, I would also like to audio record the interviews using a digital device. This recording will be stored in a password protected folder on my computer.

Participation is completely voluntary and there are no material benefits to taking part in the study. You have the right to withdraw at any time and to not answer any questions if you do not want to. The interview will be confidential and the information you share with me during the interview will not be shared with anyone else. Nothing you share with me will be shared with the organization. Whilst I will remove any identifying information from the final report, you may be recognizable by the information that you share. However, you will be kept anonymous as I will be using a false name to represent you in my final report. This report may be published in the form of a journal article or book chapter. If you experience any distress or discomfort, we will stop the interview and you can decide if you want to continue at another time. If you need some support or counselling services after the interview, I will provide you with contacts of the free counselling services.

If you have any question, please contact me on the details below. If you wish to receive a summary of the findings, I will be happy to provide this to you. If you have any ethical concerns

or complaints regarding the research, please feel free to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnonmedical@wits.ac.za

Nolwazi Researcher:

Name: Nolwazi Mthembu

Email address: 2571284@students.wits.ac.za

Contact Number: 0728876569

Supervisor:

Name: Hayley Haynes-Ronaldo

Email address: Hayley.haynes-rolando@wits.ac.za

Contact Number: 082 816 854

Appendix E: Distress Protocol

If the participant exhibits signs of distress the researcher will:

1) Terminate the interview.
2) Make every effort to contain the participant. This will be done by asking them about their thoughts and feelings as well as whether they would like to continue with the interview or if they wish to terminate.
3) In the event that the participant does not wish to continue, the interview will be terminated.
4) The participant will be removed from the interview room. In the event that COVID 19 restrictions do not allow for in person interviews, the researcher will have an individual from the managing organization on call in order to remove the participant from the interview room.
5) Once the participant has been contained, the researcher will refer the participant for counselling.
6) A follow up call will be made with the participant.