

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LESOTHO**



**FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

**Exploring academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in  
primary schools in the Mafeteng district**

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## **Declaration**

I, 'Malira Rebecca Khutlane, hereby declare that this research titled, **“Exploring academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary school in the Mafeteng”** is my own work. It has not been previously submitted, as a whole or in part at National University of Lesotho or any other university. All sources of information used have been specifically acknowledged, cited and referenced throughout this work. All errors and omissions in this work are my own.

## **Dedication**

I wholeheartedly dedicate this work to God, for the unending and unwavering grace and strength he has bestowed upon me throughout this journey. To my beloved parents, though you cheer from a distance, your silent applause and unwavering support and faith in me is deeply felt. This is also dedicated to my siblings, especially my sisters, whose constant cheers and heartfelt encouragements have been a source of immense motivation. And to my incredible husband and son, who have been my number one supporters, I would like to thank you for your endless understanding, boundless patience and comforting embraces. Your love has been the quite force that made this journey possible.

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## **Abstract**

This study explored the complex relationship between poverty, academic risks, and resilient factors among primary school learners in the Mafeteng district, Lesotho. By adopting a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological design, the study utilised a constructivist paradigm to fully understand participants' lived experiences. The study further identified specific academic challenges faced by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as limited resources, truancy, and limited access to quality instruction. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with three principals, three teachers, and five learners from grades five, six, and seven of participating schools, this research investigated key resilient factors that helped learners from low-income families overcome adversity. Some of the key resilient factors identified in this study were strong intrinsic motivation, strong community-based programs such as safe homes, food parcels, and the availability of mentors, as well as support from teachers, family, and friends. By analysing these intertwined elements, the study sought to offer valuable insights to inform the development of targeted educational interventions and policies to improve academic outcomes and foster resilience among vulnerable learners in the Mafeteng district in Lesotho.

Lastly, the findings revealed that financial constraints displayed a rather major challenge for smooth learning, which often led to a lack of essentials and created an environment where the disadvantaged are abused and exploited through child labour and sexual abuse. Regardless, the study also found that a number of these learners still achieved excellence. This success was mainly due to support from the community, and safe homes for those who needed a place to stay. Therefore, there should be more ways in which the learners from disadvantaged homes can be protected and kept away from those taking advantage of their needs and family status.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **1.0 Introduction**

Poverty appears to negatively affect children's academic performance, with research showing that children from low-income backgrounds face various challenges that can hinder their educational progress (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Sharkey & Sosa, 2014). Such challenges include poor health, inadequate nutrition, limited access to quality education, and other factors that can contribute to lower academic achievement compared to their more affluent peers. Poverty and academic performance are intricately connected, with research highlighting several factors that contribute to this relation (Sameroff, 2009).

Further studies demonstrate that children living in poverty in other countries can be resilient, with some achieving academic success despite challenging circumstances (Salva et al., 2019; Mokoena and Motshega, 2016). As such, the current chapter introduces the study by outlining its background. This background provides the context and the rationale of the study, by providing an overview of relevant literature and theory, while also establishing gaps that exist in literature. This research aims to improve understanding of the complex interplay between poverty and academic achievement and to promote systematic change (I feel like you need to spell out what change is; you may say, systematic change of...) in the Mafeteng district and beyond.

### **1.1 Background to the study**

Poverty remains one of the major challenges facing Lesotho today. According to the World Bank (2019), the country has a high poverty rate, with an estimated 59% of the population living below the poverty line. This suggests that almost two-thirds of the Lesotho population has an income below the minimum required to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare. The country has also faced a high unemployment rate for some time now (World Bank, 2023). Unemployment is considered a major factor in poverty, as it limits the ability of individuals to earn an income and meet basic needs. It also makes it difficult for an individual to improve their circumstances and break the poverty cycle (World Bank, 2023).

Living in poverty exposes one to adverse health, physical and socio-economic outcomes (Peter, 2013). Children from poor families may experience physical health problems as a result of poor nutrition and poor living conditions, leaving them exposed to a number of diseases, such as tuberculosis, which can occur due to overcrowded housing and unsanitary conditions. Such children can also be exposed to cholera, which is caused by poor sanitation and lack of access to clean water. These diseases, poor nutrition, and poor sanitation are risks that those poor children face on a day-to-day basis. With such exposure, these children might not be able to attend school properly, as they may be too weak, sick, or even overwhelmed to do so. Again, if a child's family cannot afford healthcare, the child might have to stay home, missing school while their health needs go unattended. Also, even if they were to attend school while sick, they may not be able to fully concentrate in class. All these factors may have a serious impact on the children's education.

Poverty also exposes children to stress, as well as stress-related problems such as depression, if they are constantly worried about what they are going to eat. According to Noble et al (2019), children who experience food insecurity and come from poor families may have difficulty concentrating in class and are more likely to experience poor brain development and cognitive functioning in comparison to their more affluent peers, which can bring about anxiety and depression (Beegle et al., 2016). Such children themselves worry about their parents and their ability to provide basic needs. They also take on strain, as they sometimes have to care for younger siblings when their parents are away or working. These events can negatively impact children and their academic performance. In addition, children from poor families may not have the same access to education as their peers because those from poor families may not have the ability to pay for education related expenses such as tuition fees, uniforms and books, leading to children from poor families missing out on important educational opportunities which include educational trips, school club participation as well as some educational competition, putting them at the disadvantage. Nartjie (2019) further explains that exposure to stress or stressful conditions is often prolonged and painful, resulting in negative impacts on academic and social lives.

In many developing countries, poverty is a significant obstacle to educational attainment. As Harker (2024) puts it, children from poor families can be affected in a number of ways in their education. Firstly, due to the lack of financial resources, the majority of poor children cannot afford

to attend school regularly because, at times, they do not have transportation to school. There is also child labour, where poor children are forced to work to support their families financially. Some, due to unstable living conditions, have to move frequently, thereby disrupting their schooling and education, as it might be difficult to maintain consistent attendance. This can lead to lower levels of literacy and numeracy, as well as a lack of opportunities for further studying. Discrimination and social exclusion can also be barriers to a good education. This is because children can be mean and mistreat others because of their lower standard of living. This treatment can cause them to avoid attending school properly. The aforementioned, and others like them, may lead to fewer opportunities or less success later in life.

Despite facing significant challenges due to poverty, some primary school children continue to show great resilience. Hlalele et al (2020) clarify that it was discovered that there are factors that contribute to the resilience of Basotho youth, revealing the importance of family support, which can be said to be a strong family bond, a sense of belonging and stability, which can act as a protection against risks such as substance abuse and mental health. There are cultural values as well, which in Basotho culture emphasise respect for elders, hard work, and communal responsibilities, fostering a sense of purpose and responsibility in young people and personal aspirations that promote positive outcomes in the face of adversity. This resilience highlights the potential for Lesotho's children to overcome the obstacles posed by poverty and underscores the need for policies and interventions that build upon these strengths to foster a brighter future for the country's young people (Hlalele et al., 2020).

Resilience plays a vital role in fostering academic excellence among children, particularly those facing challenges such as poverty or other adverse circumstances. Greshan (2018) maintains that resilience contributes significantly to academic success by helping children overcome setbacks, maintain motivation, and develop adaptive coping mechanisms. Children who are resilient, do not just show up at school, but they excel in their academics. Resilience is evident in their high attendance rates and academic achievement year after year. When children are resilient, they can persist in difficult times, face setbacks and overcome them. These children are also not easily discouraged. Resilient children can also adapt to new situations and learn from their experiences.

Lastly, they are able to identify and address problems effectively and are not afraid to ask for help when needed (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Poverty is associated with higher rates of malnutrition in children, particularly in low-income countries (Arsenault et al., 2016). Lesotho is no exception. Beegle et al. (2016) revealed that poverty is strongly associated with children's health and nutrition, and that children from low-income families are more likely to suffer from chronic health problems, which are likely to affect their physical and mental well-being. While Chanphengxay et al. (2018) focused on the impact of poverty on children's educational attainment particularly children from poor families. These children are also less likely to engage in school activities, these is because the majority of them juggle school work with part-time jobs, caring for younger siblings and helping with household responsibilities, leaving them with little to no time for extracurricular activities. These children may also be less likely to complete their homework, because they, like other children might need parental involvement in their homework but may not have it due to their parent's long working hours that might lead to little or no energy for helping them. Johnson (2016) found that poverty is associated with increased rates of school dropouts, which can perpetuate a cycle of poverty and limit opportunities of completing school.

Furthermore, Morojele et al., (2015), adds that children living in poverty experience a range of emotional and behavioural challenges, including low self-esteem, depression, and aggression. These challenges often lead to social isolation, family violence, and lack of social support. Morojele further says hat poverty can lead to behavioural issues such as aggression, defiance, and withdrawal, as children may lack the emotional support and guidance needed to cope with stress and adversity. There is a need for more research on exploring academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in Lesotho, this is because Moitheri and Mosia (2014), explored children from low-income household and came to conclude that these children are at risk of academic difficulties due to malnutrition, and inadequate educational resources. According to Lehlokoe (2016), it is noted that children from poor households in Lesotho are more likely to experience academic risks such as high dropout rates, poor school attendance, and lower levels of academic achievement. Regardless of this growing body of research on the poverty and education in Lesotho, the specific academic risks and resilient factors in primary schools remains

understudied, as well as exploring how educational policies in Lesotho can be reformed to better support children from poor families and promote educational equity.

The current study therefore aims to identify specific barriers to educational success of the children. Additionally, Nziramasanga (2006) reiterates that, with more families headed by children, it becomes difficult for such children to get the support they need to do well in school, these children may not have an adult figure or parent to provide support and guidance, which can impact their academic performance. Finally, there is lack of research on the risks and resilience factors associated with poverty among primary school children in Lesotho (Karabela et al., 2016). This study is deemed important, as interventions based on these specific factors could be more effective in improving educational outcomes in Lesotho.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

The problem being explored in this research is the impact of poverty on academic performance and well-being in primary schools in the Mafeteng district. Poverty can create significant barriers to academic success, such as lack of resources, limited parental involvement, as well as poor nutrition, all of which can negatively impact students' ability to learn and succeed. A person's inability to complete school has far-reaching effects for both the individual and the community they live in (Angrist & Lang, 1993). The majority of those without education have a significant decrease in lifetime earnings, and limited opportunities in accessing good jobs, due to higher levels of unemployment. Children living in poverty may find it difficult to succeed in school thereby increasing to the struggle and poverty existing. However, some rise beyond expectations and turn their tests into testimonies, they come out on top or become a success regardless of the background they come from, especially if they come from a poor background. That ability to overcome their setbacks and challenges adapting well in the face of adversity is said to be resilience (American Psychology Association, n.d.). The resilient people are the ones that no matter how much they fall, they rise, and they adapt and make it to the successful end. Their success is determined by how they make use of their time, finding those they can look up to and holding on the hope that one day they as well will make it.

Despite the resilience demonstrated by many children living in poverty in Lesotho, various academic risks still persist, such as little to no access to resources that support language development, such as books or exposure to diverse vocabulary, as well as chronic stress for children living in poverty, which can interfere with their ability to learn and focusing in school, posing significant challenges to their educational success. This research therefore aims to identify the specific academic risks associated with poverty in this context as well as examining and discovering resilient factors that may mitigate these risks and promote educational equity in primary schools in the Mafeteng district, Lesotho.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

**The main research question of this study reads:**

- What are the academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district?

From the main research question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- What academic risk factors are associated with poverty in the Mafeteng district?
- How do the risk factors associated with poverty influence students' academic performance?
- What are resilient factors that influence learners' academic performance within the context of poverty?
- What support systems are used in the community to mitigate the negative effects of poverty on learners?

### **1.4 Purpose of the study**

- The purpose of this study is to explore academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district.

**This purpose is divided into the following objectives:**

- To determine the risk factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district.
- To examine ways in which the risk factors associated with poverty influence students' academic performance.
- To explore resilient factors that influence learners' academic performance within the context of poverty?

- To explore support systems used in the community to mitigate the negative effects of poverty on students.

### **1.5 Significance of the study**

The current study might provide the school administration with a clear understanding of the unique needs of students from poor families. With the information gathered from the study, school administrators may design programmes and policies that can best support children from poor families. These policies can be those that target the students from poor families, by landscaping the school context to accommodate learners from poor families in building their resilience.

The study may also inform teachers of the risk factors faced by learners from poor families. Understanding such risk factors may enable teachers to understand the level of vulnerability of such learners as well as ways of addressing such risks and vulnerabilities. Equipped with such information, teachers might be in a position to provide different forms of support required by such students. The provision of support services may also include classroom instructions and expectations which will be tailored such that they meet poor students' capacity, be it financial or material.

The education department will also be provided with ways in which they can offer support to these children. Firstly, the education department can ensure that the schools are adequately funded so that children from poor families are not bothered with school fees or any school activity that requires funds as well as finding donors for free feeding schemes for not only lunch but also for all meals when necessary. Secondly, securing textbooks teaching and learning materials can be provided by the education department. Lastly, in schools, the education department may also ensure that assistance with transportation and school uniforms is provided for students from poor families so that they look a part of the school and are never left out due to lack.

### **1.6 Research Methodology**

Research, methodology refers to the overall plan and procedures for conducting a study. It includes design, methods, and procedures that can be beneficial in answering the research questions. Research methodology also outlines how data will be collected analysed and interpreted. It is in

methodology that the study provides how ethical considerations will be ensured. The following paragraphs detail the methodological issues of the current study.

### **1.7 Research paradigm**

Research paradigm refers to a set of underlying beliefs and assumptions on the nature of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Research paradigm guides the way a study is conducted. The current study followed the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is based on the idea that knowledge is socially constructed also that there is no single objective reality, instead as reality is shaped by the perspectives of individuals and groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Constructivism focuses on understanding the social and cultural contexts in which a person comes from, while also admitting that even when people have gone through the same experience their interpretation of that experience may differ. Therefore, constructivism is suitable for this study because the current study looks into poverty as a social factor that determines the primary schools learners' risk. Through constructivism a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants will be obtained concerning poverty of the primary school learners at Mafeteng District Lesotho.

### **1.8 Research Design**

Research design refers to the specific plan or strategy that is followed in a study. It involves deciding on the research questions, the methods of data collection, and the procedures for analysing and interpreting the data. This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design, which aims to understand individuals' subjective experiences. It also allows researchers to gain a rich understanding of individuals' subjective experiences. Giorgi (2018) explains that phenomenology is a method that involves interviewing individuals in an effort to understand the individual's subjective experience, hence its applicability in the current study. Phenomenology enables deep understanding of students' lived experiences.

### **1.9 Research approach**

The current study followed the qualitative approach, which focuses on gaining meaning and understanding of social problems by collecting and interpreting rich narrative data (American Psychological Association, 2020). The qualitative approach aims at building a clear picture by

reporting detailed views of participants. It observes how individuals build their lives and how they create meaning out of it. This approach is appropriate because it aims at understanding a problem from the participants' perspectives. To understand the risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district, the qualitative approach was found to be suitable since this study dealt with poverty as a social factor.

### **1.10 Research participants**

Research participants refer to people who contribute to the generation of data (Bryman 2016). Participants can be individuals or groups of people who take part in a research study. The participants in this study were 10 public primary school learners from low-income families, aged 8 to 12 years. This age group was selected because I believed they could articulate their understanding and experiences without shying away from the reality of the situation. As such, they could be in a position to describe their experiences of poverty and what enables them to thrive despite these factors. This age group is still in the primary school system, making them the relevant group for the current study. This particular age group enables a focus on children's agency and their ability to construct meaning and develop resilience, which are key components of this topic.

### **1.11 Selection of participants**

The participants were selected using purposive sampling, which can be said to be a selective sampling technique; it is a non-probabilistic sampling that is widely used in qualitative research and involves an intentional selection of participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The selection is based on the characteristics, knowledge, experiences and expertise in the phenomenon under study. Participants were all primary school students living in villages around Mafeteng. These participants had the experience of living in poverty, which is what the researcher was looking for. Purposive sampling is suitable because it allows the researcher to purposefully select participants who are able to provide rich and in-depth data regarding the topic. The researcher sought to get information from a diverse group which was inclusive of both boys and girls in different ages from poor families.

### **1.12 Data collection**

Creswell (2013) outlines five different approaches to qualitative data collection, including interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. In a qualitative study, data collection is the process of gathering information about a topic or phenomenon. This current study generated data through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews are a data collection method that involves asking open-ended questions, with a balance between structure and flexibility (Harper, 2018). Semi-structured interviews are appropriate for the current study, as they are more flexible, allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and probe for more information when needed. Creswell (2013) defines document analysis as the process of reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic. Learners' attendance registers will be used as well as their academic records, to determine if they attend school regularly as their well-off schoolmates.

### **1.13 Data processing**

In a qualitative study, data processing is the systematic process of searching for and organising interview transcripts or other non-textual material collected during the research. As noted by Patton (2015), the process of analysing data predominantly includes coding or categorising the data. In other words, it means making sense of large amounts of data by packaging them into manageable packages. This is followed by identifying important patterns and finally drawing meaning while creating a logical chain of evidence.

### **1.14 Data analysis**

Data analysis is a process of systematically looking into data to discover patterns, relationships, and trends. In this study, thematic data analysis will be used. According to Maguire & Delahunt (2017), thematic data analysis is used to reveal patterns found in data. The steps involved in thematic data analysis include getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, finding themes, and reviewing and examining the data closely by re-reading and re-examining documents.

### **1.15 Research integrity**

Research integrity refers to the accuracy, trustworthiness, and transparency of the research process (American Psychology, 2020). It is through research integrity that adhering to ethical principles,

including honesty and transparency in handling data, is vital. It is important that proper data acquisition, management, and interpretation are presented (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009). Without integrity, research can be seen as flawed or biased, undermining its validity (Fanelli, 2009).

Flick (2006) discusses the importance of trustworthiness in research, noting that integrity is measured by the degree to which research findings are credible. This is done by employing rigorous data collection methods that use valid and reliable data sources, such as interviews, and by using methods and resources to enhance the credibility of my findings. It is worth noting that engaging in continuous self-reflection to identify and address potential biases leads to trustworthiness, which can be achieved through reliability, validity through checking that data is accurate and reflects the phenomena under study, also the authenticity that can be achieved by ensuring participants in the study are accurately represented and that their perspectives are given due weight. The last one is transparency, which was achieved by being open and honest about the research process, including any limitations and biases that may have influenced the findings. Lastly, a detailed description will provide thorough context for readers, ensuring that the findings are transferable and can support other findings (Charmza, 2014).

### ***1.15.1 Ethical considerations***

Ethical considerations refer to the principles that guide the research process to ensure it is conducted ethically. These ethical issues include permission, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and beneficence. Each of these considerations is discussed in the subsequent sections.

### ***1.15.2 Request for permission to conduct the study***

Letters requesting permission to conduct the study were written to the Ministry of Education and Training. Having been granted permission to conduct the study, letters were written to the principals requesting access to the school's premises and permission to conduct the study. In this study, participants were underage students, and consent forms were obtained from their parents via signed consent forms. As Kvale (2015) states, it is vital to obtain consent forms and permission before conducting the study.

### ***1.15.3 Anonymity and Confidentiality***

Anonymity refers to the protection and disguising of participants' identities in research (Fortin et al., 2014). Protection is achieved through the use of pseudonyms or other methods to conceal participants' identities. It aims to protect participants from any harm arising from their involvement in the study. Anonymity also helps to ensure that participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives without fear of judgment or reprisal (Fortin et al., 2014). As such, the participants' names and those of their schools will be replaced by pseudonyms. Confidentiality is another key ethical consideration in research. It refers to protecting participants' information by ensuring it is not shared with anyone outside the research team. Confidentiality is important for maintaining participants' trust and ensuring they feel safe and comfortable participating in the research (Ward & Kennedy, 2014). Similarly, Weisberge (2005) emphasises that, through confidentiality, data collected remains secure, ensuring the maintenance of credibility and integrity.

### ***1.15.4 Beneficence***

This is an ethical issue involving one's religion; it requires researchers to ensure their research does not harm participants. Levy (2013) defines beneficence as a researcher's obligation to protect participants from harm while also promoting their interests. This includes respecting participants' religious beliefs and practices. For example, if the research involves data on sensitive topics such as poverty, the researchers should be sensitive to each participant's beliefs. Lastly, the researcher should ensure that, when collecting data, no participant's religious taboos or cultural norms are violated, and that participants' beliefs and values are safeguarded (Breetzke, 2021).

### ***1.15.5 Voluntary participation***

In research integrity, voluntary participation refers to the principle that all participants in a research study should give their consent to participate and should not be coerced in any way (Denzin, 2010). Voluntary participation suggests that participants are not compelled to participate in the study and are free to withdraw at any time. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study through consent forms, which they were requested to fill out if they agreed to participate in the study. This is so that if at any point they feel uncomfortable, they can withdraw without providing a reason, as there will be no negative consequences.

### ***1.15.6 Honesty***

Fienstein (2013) emphasises that honesty is a vital part of a research study, particularly in qualitative research, where the researcher needs to be honest about their research methods, findings, and potential biases that could affect the study. Honesty includes being transparent about any potential conflicts of interest that the researcher may have. Morrow (2016) highlights the significance of honesty in research towards building trust, credibility, and transparency. The current study ensured honesty by reporting any limitations and uncertainties as well as disclosing any potential conflicts of interest, such as personal biases that could influence the research.

## **1.16 Definition of terms**

This section of the study defines terms, which is an important part because it ensures readers share a common understanding of the concepts under investigation. By providing clear, concise definitions, researchers can avoid confusion, ambiguity, and misinterpretation and ensure their findings are reliable and replicable. Using consistent definitions throughout a study allows comparisons across studies and contexts, helping build a stronger body of knowledge in a given field. The following terms are defined in the subsequent sub-sections: academic risks, resilient factors and poverty.

### ***1.16.1 Academic risks***

Academic risks refer to factors that have the potential to negatively impact a student's ability to learn, achieve and succeed academically. These risks may include poor school climate, inappropriate teaching methods and materials, limited access to resources, and insufficient support from teachers and parents (Hernandez et al., 2020). Martinez and Magana (2021) state that academic risks refer to various factors that can interfere with students' ability to learn and succeed in school. These risks may be related to individual characteristics such as low socio-economic status and learning disabilities. There could also be environmental factors such as a lack of school resources, poor teacher-student relationships or a combination of both. Academic risks can have long-term consequences, including lower educational attainment, limited career opportunities, and negative health outcomes (An et al., 2019). Identifying and addressing academic risks is essential for promoting educational equity and improving students' outcomes (Martinez & Magana, 2021).

### ***1.16.2 Resilience factors***

Resilience factors are individual characteristics and environmental influences that help individuals adapt to adversity and stress in healthy ways, thereby promoting positive outcomes. According to Cicchetti and Rogosch (1997), resilient factors include ‘individual characteristics such as intelligence, social competence, and coping skills, as well as social and contextual factors such as family support, school connectedness, and community resources.’ These factors work hand in hand to mitigate the negative effects of risk factors, such as abuse, poverty, or trauma, and bring about a healthy development and adjustment. On the other hand, Rutter (2012) maintains that resilience reflects the capacity to successfully adapt and thrive despite adversity.

### ***1.16.3 Poverty***

Poverty is a multifaceted concept that refers to the lack of economic and social resources needed for a person or community to meet basic needs and participate fully in society. It involves a combination of factors, including low income, limited access to education, insufficient food and housing, and social isolation (World Bank, 2019). Sen (2009) claims that poverty is a deprivation of basic capabilities, where these capabilities reflect people's real opportunities to do things they have reason to value, such as being well-fed, being healthy, having adequate shelter, and obtaining quality education. These capabilities are necessary for a dignified life and for people to develop and exercise their fundamental freedoms.

## **1.17 Organisation of the study**

**Chapter one** in the current study provides a brief overview of the research topic, highlighting its importance and relevance. It is in this chapter that the significance of the study is outlined, the objectives are made known, and the research questions and the problem statement are defined. It is vital to note that there is also a brief summary and overview of the methodologies used in the investigations.

**Chapter two** comprises the literature review and the theoretical framework. The literature review presents a comprehensive overview of existing scholarship on the current topic, prior findings, and gaps in the literature. The theoretical framework used in the current study showcases concepts, assumptions, and principles that guide the study.

**Chapter three** is rich with methods adopted to enrich the study. It contains the chosen design, the selection of participants, data collection, data processing, the analysis of the data, and the theoretical underpinning of the study.

**Chapter four** presents the study's findings in a systematic and organised manner. It is in this chapter that patterns are unveiled, along with their implications and insights, and their connection to the previous theory.

**Chapter five** contains discussions, conclusions and recommendations. This is the final chapter of the study, in which the findings are discussed and their significance established. Recommendations that provide practical solutions and strategies are presented, along with suggestions for further actions and the possibility of further study.

### **1.18 Chapter Summary**

This study explored the academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district. Through interviews with students, the study identified specific barriers to educational success and factors that help mitigate these risks. The findings of this study provided insights into how poverty affects academic achievement and can inform targeted interventions to promote educational equity and support positive student outcomes in the Mafeteng district. By examining academic risks and resilience factors in primary schools, this research may contribute to the growing body of literature on poverty and education in Lesotho. The study also provides practical recommendations for educators, policymakers and community members to promote and support positive outcomes for children from poor families.

The next chapter builds on the research proposal by reviewing existing literature on poverty and education, with a particular focus on academic risks and resilient factors in primary schools.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

The previous chapter introduced the study by exploring its background and context, and it also addressed the research questions and objectives that guided the study. Additionally, the problem statement was presented along with the research methodology adopted for this study. The chapter covers various academic risk factors associated with poverty, their influence on students' academic performance, and factors that may contribute to resilience and success amid economic adversity. In addition, the literature review examines various measures schools have adopted to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on students' education. Finally, the chapter explores the theoretical framework that underpins this study. The preceding paragraphs focus on poverty and its impact on academic performance.

#### **2.1 Poverty and its impact on academic performance**

Poverty is a complex, multifaceted issue defined by Shipler (2004) as a state or condition where individuals or a community lack. It could be a lack of financial resources and essentials for a minimum standard of living. Similarly, the United Nations (2018) views poverty as a lack of basic human needs, including food, water, sanitation, healthcare, shelter, education and information. Additionally, Borman et al. (2007) view poverty as an economic and social condition characterised by limited resources, reduced opportunities, and diminished well-being.

Poverty can significantly impact students' academic performance (Payen, 2023). Poverty or economic disadvantages can interfere with learners' ability to focus on their studies. This is because some children from low-income families come to school without eating. When a child has not eaten, hunger can become a barrier to proper learning. Gleason (2017) also notes that hunger is a significant consequence of poverty. Shipler (2004) explains that households living in poverty often face inconsistent access to nutritious food, leading to malnutrition and increased vulnerability to disease. Weismann (2014) highlights how this cycle of poverty and hunger can be difficult to break, as the lack of financial resources limits poor households' ability to access the healthy foods necessary for proper development and well-being. These challenges can contribute to a perception

that these children are “slow” or “unable to achieve” compared to their peers, even though the root cause may be poverty-related factors rather than inherent abilities or motivation (Shipler, 2004). This reinforces the need for interventions that address the root cause of poverty and provide resources to support the development of children living in poverty.

Most children from poor households also have difficulty obtaining resources and materials. This is the result of a lack of funds to access necessary tools. Shipler (2004) suggests that children from low-income families may struggle to access project supplies such as poster boards, construction paper, glue, and scissors, which can limit their ability to participate fully in class projects and thereby limit their involvement in some projects. Poor households may also struggle to access computers, have no internet access, or lack educational software, which can hinder children’s ability to engage in digital learning and complete some homework assignments (Shipler, 2004). Poverty can, therefore, create an uneven playing field in education, leading to disadvantaged low-income students being perceived as inadequate in comparison to their wealthier peers (Shipler, 2004).

The lack of resources and materials can result in these children struggling academically. Poor academic performance may lead to negative stereotypes and reinforce societal inequalities, such as social stigmatisation and marginalisation (Borman et al., 2007). Consequently, low-income students may experience feelings of shame, inferiority, and exclusion. This situation underscores the necessity for targeted support and resources to address the inequalities that poverty creates in the educational experiences of low-income students.

Furthermore, poverty can significantly hinder the development of children’s talents and abilities due to their families' lack of financial resources to purchase necessary equipment and resources (Borman et al., 2007). Families living in poverty may struggle to provide access to musical instruments, sports equipment, or educational tools such as their own computers and books, which are often critical for children to explore their talents and abilities (Bowman & Watanabe, 2016). Without these resources, children may miss out on the opportunities to discover and nurture their unique skills and interests, limiting their potential to excel in these areas.

Williams (2020) further emphasises that unequal access to extracurricular activities is another way poverty can limit children's development. Children from low-income families may face barriers to participating in activities such as after-school clubs, music lessons, or sports teams due to the cost of equipment, high transport costs or participation fees (Williams, 2020). The lack of opportunities for children living in poverty to participate in extracurricular activities can lead to harmful assumptions by both the children and their peers. This limited access may result in a mistaken belief that these children are unmotivated or untalented, rather than recognising the barriers they face due to poverty (Dos Santos & Reiner, 2021). Such beliefs can lead to low self-esteem and missed opportunities for children to discover and develop their natural abilities, perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage.

Despite poverty's challenges to children's education, it can also foster resilience and creativity in some individuals. Many children from low-income households learn to improvise and innovate with limited resources, which can cultivate important problem-solving skills and adaptive strategies (Datta, 2018). These children develop resourcefulness and ingenuity by repurposing and recycling materials, which can translate into successful and entrepreneurial thinking later in life (Bozzato et al., 2016). This means that, while poverty can certainly create significant challenges for learners, it does not mean that low-income students are inherently unable to succeed academically. Many low-income learners have demonstrated remarkable resilience, creativity, and resourcefulness in overcoming these challenges.

Poverty can increase the likelihood of poor health among children from low-income families. This is because most low-income families may live in substandard housing conditions. This occurs due to a family's limited income, which makes it almost impossible for such families to afford high-quality housing in safe and desirable neighbourhoods (Currie et al., 2016). Most of these families live in concentrated neighbourhoods with inferior living conditions, including close proximity to waste sites and untreated sewage (Currie et al., 2016). Children growing up in such environments are likely to be exposed to toxins, which can increase their risk of environmental hazards and infectious diseases, such as respiratory disease, neurological disorders, and developmental disabilities, resulting from exposure to air pollution and chemical waste (Currie et al., 2016). This

health scare can lead to absenteeism and hinder the children's ability to attend school as often as they should, creating an educational gap that they might be unable to close.

Chavan and Kalamdad (2020) add that there can also be little or no access to clean water and proper sanitation, which can provide a breeding ground for germs for children living in poverty; this may lead to the spread of disease and illness. When children from low-income families become ill, they may miss significant amounts of school days. This is because they may not have the financial muscle to go to the hospital. Without seeing health practitioners, these children may not receive the medical care and dietary support they need to fully recover. The lack of medical care can exacerbate their health problems and potentially cause long-term physical and emotional issues, leading to prolonged recovery times and eventually missing school for more extended periods (Shipler, 2004). Children from poor families may develop learning gaps when away from school due to illness. Such learning gaps are always evident in the failure to master certain concepts, as they may have begun in their absence. Gaps in knowledge might become a real problem if the concepts were a foundation for the missed learning outcomes, as the learner might have difficulty catching up. The consequences of such gaps include poor grades and, subsequently, a lack of educational opportunities, which can lead to academic underachievement and long-term challenges.

Economic stress and uncertainty can significantly impact children's academic performance, as they may experience anxiety and worry over their families' finances (Shipler, 2004). The negative impact can occur when children worry about their parents' struggles rather than learning and focusing on their schoolwork. These struggles include putting food on the table, paying bills, and meeting basic needs. Growing up in such conditions may cause anxiety and stress, as children might find themselves continuously thinking about their parents' inability to afford basic necessities. These children may constantly worry about where their next meal will come from and what they will wear, leading to emotional distress that may interfere with their academic focus. All these struggles may significantly reduce schoolwork (Currie et al., 2016).

Poor communities often lack positive role models for children in school due to a combination of systemic and socioeconomic factors. According to Sharkey (2013), persistent economic

segregation in schools has profound implications for children from low-income neighbourhoods. He specifically found that disadvantaged students, due to high concentrations and overpopulation, often lack opportunities and face a scarcity of successful professionals and community leaders who could serve as role models. This isolation is exacerbated by the ‘spatial mismatch’ hypothesis, which suggests that the physical distance between economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods and areas with better job opportunities limits exposure to potential role models (Anderson et al., 2018). Furthermore, schools in low-income areas often struggle with chronic underfunding and high teacher turnover, leading to a lack of stable, inspiring educators (Kraft et al., 2016). The absence of these role models can significantly impact the students’ academic and career aspirations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limited opportunities

Exposure to successful role models is crucial to children's development, significantly influencing their aspirations and their ability to envision a future beyond their immediate surroundings. For impoverished children, the absence of such role models can contribute to a lack of motivation and limited opportunities. Turner (2003) reiterates that children who grow up in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have limited to low expectations from society and the educational system. This lack of exposure can perpetuate a cycle of poverty, as these children may not see viable paths to success or believe that upward mobility is achievable. The presence of role models and increased expectations in society and the educational system can inspire and motivate these children, providing tangible examples of what is possible and encouraging them to pursue education and career opportunities that might otherwise seem out of reach (Lent et al., 2000).

Even without positive role models or external encouragement, some individuals have the innate drive and resilience to overcome adversity and pursue success (Duckworth & Gross, 2014). This inner motivation, often referred to as “grit,” involves a sustained commitment to long-term goals, passion, and perseverance in the face of obstacles. Those with grit can channel their energy and determination to achieve their goals, regardless of their circumstances or lack of external support. Indeed, the power of personal motivation and determination cannot be underestimated. Despite adversity and limited opportunities, individuals with strong internal drive and a growth mind-set can break through barriers and achieve remarkable things (Dweck, 2006). The potential for personal transformation and success is within everyone’s reach, regardless of their socioeconomic

background or life circumstances. With resilience, grit, and a willingness to work hard, anyone can transcend their current situation and reach their full potential.

Despite possessing innate skills or potential, children from low-income families may feel reluctant to fully reveal or explore their abilities, fearing negative reactions from others. According to Dettling et al. (2018), children from poor families may purposely underperform even in activities they are really good at to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Due to fear of being judged or ridiculed, such learners may also intentionally avoid mentioning their talents or interests. This is because Bartell et al. (2019) express that poverty can lead to internalised limiting beliefs about one's ability and aspiration through learned helplessness. The learned helplessness occurs when an individual from a poor family repeatedly experiences negative factors in their environment. Stressors such as the cruelty of those around them, telling them they will not amount to anything, and limited opportunities due to financial limitations can slowly erode one's self-esteem and belief in their own capabilities (Carver & Scheier, 2016). All these can hinder academic success and overall well-being. It can also lead to underachievement, missed opportunities, and a diminished sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Similarly, Diaz-Quijada et al. (2023) revealed that low-income children are more likely to experience social isolation and stigmatisation in the school setting, leading to decreased motivation and engagement in academic pursuits. These findings underscore the urgent need for interventions to address the social, emotional and educational barriers faced by low-income children.

In addition, low expectations and stereotyping for low-income children regarding school and good performance refer to the detrimental beliefs and assumptions that educators, peers, and society may hold about the academic potential of children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These biases often result in diminished expectations for these learners' educational achievements and can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which students internalise negative perceptions and perform accordingly (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Stereotyping can manifest in various forms, such as assuming that low-income students are less capable, less motivated, or less likely to succeed academically compared to their more affluent peers (Rattan et al., 2012). These preconceived notions can negatively impact the educational experiences and outcomes of low-income children, perpetuating cycles of poverty and underachievement (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). To

counteract these harmful effects, educators and policymakers must challenge and change stereotypes, set high expectations for all students, and provide the support and resources needed to help low-income children reach their full academic potential.

Poverty can severely affect children's health and nutrition. Food insecurity, which refers to limited access to adequate food because of financial constraints, can bring about insufficient caloric intake. Insufficient caloric intake results in microdeficiency and weight loss, which result in malnutrition and health complications (Karakochuk et al., 2021). Families experiencing poverty may have limited access to healthy, affordable foods, bringing about an environment of food insecurity, which results in suboptimal nutrition (Nunnally et al., 2023). Malnutrition, caused by poverty-related factors, has the potential to bring about poor academic performance (Pillai et al., 2020). Malnutrition can impair cognitive development, leading to decreased attention, memory, and decision-making abilities in school-aged children (DoSantos et al., 2021). Poor nutrition can also be a cause for behavioural issues, such as aggression, anxiety and hyperactivity. These can be a reason for disruptive classroom learning and therefore create additional academic challenges (McCann et al., 2017).

Hunger can be a significant obstacle to learning. Graham et al. (2014) suggest that it can also serve as a source of motivation for some low-income children. In some cases, children from impoverished backgrounds may be driven to work hard and achieve excellence to escape poverty and provide a better life for themselves and their families. Furthermore, hunger can act as a “push factor”, enforcing a strong incentive for these children to succeed. Thus, providing a strong motivation for children to work harder, creating a desire to become better. In such cases, such learners strive to improve their economic circumstances and eventually change their families' circumstances (Graham et al., 2014). Again, children from low-income families may develop greater capacity for perseverance and resilience, which can help them overcome obstacles and achieve academic success (Mortensen et al., 2016).

## **2.2 Academic risk factors associated with poverty**

Academic risk factors are defined as conditions, characteristics, environmental influences or situations that increase the likelihood of poor academic outcomes, such as low grades, high school

dropout or limited educational attainment (Borman et al., 2007). Poverty has also been associated with a range of risk factors that can negatively impact academic performance, including truancy, disruptive behaviour, and low grades (Sriram & Miller, 2019). Children from low-income families are often at higher risk of poor academic outcomes, as poverty-related stressors can interfere with their learning and engagement in school (Grissom & Redding, 2012). Poverty, as one of the examples of academic risk factors, can limit access to educational resources, create financial struggles and lead to even poorer living conditions. Furthermore, negative school experiences can lead to increased absenteeism, lack of interest, and disruptive behaviour, creating a cycle of underperformance and disengagement that reinforces the cycle of poverty (Sriram & Miller, 2019).

### ***2.2.1 Low grades***

Low grades refer to consistently poor academic performance in school, such as receiving failing or near-failing grades on tests, quizzes, or assignments (McNeill & Parker, 2007). Low grades are considered an academic risk factor associated with poverty because poverty-related stressors can negatively impact a student's ability to perform well in school (Levin et al., 2013). Some of the factors that lead to children from low-income families' low grades include environmental toxins and pollutants, which can lead to impaired cognitive function and development (Bellinger, 2012). Limited cognitive function and development can significantly impact a child's academic performance, particularly for children living in poverty (Van Lieshout et al., 2012). Poverty-related stress, lack of stimulation, and nutritional deficiencies can hinder the development of critical cognitive abilities such as memory, attention, and executive functioning (Ananth et al., 2007). This can lead to academic difficulties in academic tasks such as understanding and retaining information, organising and competing assignments, and maintaining focus in the classroom, all of which can result in lower grades (Cooper et al., 2017).

Early education programs, such as pre-school and pre-kindergarten, provide critical foundations for later academic success, especially in terms of language, social and cognitive development (O'Connor et al., 2012). However, children from low-income families may face barriers to accessing these programmes due to financial constraints or lack of transportation (Smith et al., 2012). Limited access to early education can result in developmental delays that persist throughout elementary and secondary school, making it more difficult for these children to catch up and

achieve grade level performance (Wolke et al., 2003) Finally, implicit biases or unconscious assumptions that educators may hold about the abilities of children from low-income backgrounds, can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which these children receive less support and encouragement to explore their academic potential (Walker & Ayscue, 2017). Teachers may hold lower expectations for these children's performance, which can translate into less engaging classrooms experiences, less challenging assignments, and fewer opportunities for growth and advancement (Yeager et al., 2012). Over time, these factors can contribute to a cycles of low academic engagement and performance, reinforcing the negative stereotypes and biases that initially perpetuated the inequality.

### ***2.2.2 High dropout rates***

Children from low-income families often experience high dropout rates in primary school due to a variety of interconnected factors. One primary reason is lack of access to essential educational resources, such as quality teaching and learning materials, school supplies, such as calculators, text books even stationary and other school supplies. These can push children out of school out of fear of being a burden to their families (UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, economic pressure may force children to quit school to find work to support their families, leading to irregular attendance and eventual dropout (World Bank, 2018). Moreover, malnutrition and health issues, which are prevalent among low-income families, can impair cognitive development and academic performance, further increasing the likelihood of dropping out (Bowman & Batanaba, 2016). Nutritional deficiencies and chronic health problems, such as anaemia or asthma, can affect children's concentration, memory, and problem-solving skills, hindering their ability to perform well academically and further increasing the likelihood of dropping out (Drewnowski & Darmon, 2005).

### ***2.2.3 Truancy***

Truancy is defined as the act of being absent from school without a valid reason, is an academic risk factor associated with poverty. This association occurs because children from low-income families may face numerous challenges that contribute to their absence from school, such as inadequate access to transportation, unstable housing, and the need to work to support their families (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Additionally, schools in impoverished areas may lack the resources and support systems necessary to engage students and encourage regular attendance

(Henry & Thornberry, 2010). To address truancy among students living in poverty, schools and communities can implement several strategies. These include providing transportation assistance, offering free or reduced-price meals, establishing mentorship programmes, and implementing early intervention and prevention programmes that focus on identifying the root causes of absenteeism (Sutphen et al., 2010). By taking comprehensive approach to supporting students and their families, schools can help reduce truancy rates and improve academic outcomes for students living in poverty.

#### ***2.2.4 Environmental Stressors***

Children living in poverty are often faced with various environmental stressors that adversely affect their development and well-being. These include unsafe neighbourhoods, overcrowding, housing instability and exposure to violence. Most low-income neighbourhoods experience higher levels of crime, violence and conflict. These results of systematic poverty led to fear and anxiety among children, which can interfere with their ability to focus and learn (Shipler, 2024). The reason for such neighbourhoods dates back to history, due to systematic segregation, which in most cases restricted mortgage lending to certain areas based on race or ethnicity, creating segregated neighbourhoods that were often economically and socially disadvantaged (Massey & Denton, 1993).

The migration of wealthier residents from unsafe neighbourhoods to safer areas can lead to low-income families and their children being even more vulnerable to academic challenges and other adverse outcomes (Massey & Denton, 1993). As wealthier families relocate to areas with better schools, greater resources, and reduced crime, they often take funding and support for public services with them, leading to further decline in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Shipler, 2004). This process creates a vicious cycle in which low-income families face increasingly limited opportunities and resources, which further exacerbate the negative impacts of poverty on their children's academic success. Poverty-related conditions such as crime and domestic instability create chronic stress and trauma for children, resulting in increased feelings of hopelessness and insecurity (Currie et al., 2016).

Nelson (2014) confirms that with chronic stress and anxiety experienced by children living in poverty, there is an increased chance of mental health issues, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. These can further hinder the academic performance of affected children. The mental health issues can also create additional cognitive impairments, disrupt sleep patterns, and exacerbate behavioural problems, all of which can increase the negative impact of poverty on educational outcomes (Miller et al., 2010).

Overcrowding in poor families is a situation in which the number of occupants in a dwelling exceeds the available space, leading to cramped living conditions (Evans, 2006). This issue is a significant risk factor associated with poverty because it can have detrimental effects on both mental and physical performance. Overcrowded living conditions often result in increased stress levels, greater susceptibility to infectious diseases due to proximity and reduced privacy, which, in turn, can strain family relations and contribute to behavioural issues (Evans, 2006; Solary & Mare, 2012). Additionally, children living in overcrowded homes may struggle to find a quiet space to study, which can negatively impact their educational outcomes (Leventhal & Newman, 2010). Therefore, overcrowding exacerbates the challenges faced by low-income families, perpetuating the cycle of poverty by hindering the well-being and academic success of children.

Housing instability, including frequent moves and homelessness, is a prevalent issue among low-income families. Such instability disrupts children's education by causing them to change schools frequently, miss classes, and struggle to form stable social connections. Research has shown that housing instability is associated with lower academic achievement and increased behavioural problems (Cutts et al., 2011). The constant upheaval can lead to chronic stress, which can affect children's ability to concentrate and perform academically.

Exposure to violence is said to be a direct or indirect experience of physical harm or threat; it is recognised as a significant environmental stressor that profoundly impacts individuals' psychological and physical well-being (Fowler et al., 2009). Violence can manifest in various forms, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, as well as exposure to community and domestic violence. These experiences can result in post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, physical injuries, and other adverse outcomes (McLaughling, 2012). The repeated

exposure to violence can affect learners' ability to perform well in class, as the trauma can also lead to memory loss and emotional irregularities (Gorma-Smith et al., 2015).

## **2.3 Resilient Factors Associated with Poverty**

Despite numerous risks associated with poverty, several resilient factors can help students overcome these challenges and succeed academically. Resilience factors are critical protective mechanisms that help individuals overcome adversity and achieve academic success, even in the face of poverty-related challenges. Self-efficacy, for example, is a belief in one's abilities to buffer against the adverse effects of poverty on academic achievement (Bandura, 2006). Similarly, school-based interventions that promote resilience among low-income students have been found to improve academic performance, attendance, and social engagement (Evanns & Resch, 2017). Some of these resilient factors include supportive relationships, strong family support, educational opportunities, positive school climate, access to technology and individual characteristics such as optimism and self-efficacy.

### ***2.3.1 Supportive Relationship***

Strong, supportive relationships, particularly those with teachers, mentors, and peers, can provide a crucial buffer against the adverse effects of poverty on academic achievement (Evans & Resch, 2017). These relationships provide emotional support, role modelling, and guidance, which can help low-income students develop coping strategies, avoid negative behaviours, and maintain motivation in school (Dettling et al., 2018). Teachers who believe in their students' potential can significantly enhance their self-esteem by implementing supportive and encouraging educational practices (Bandura, 1997). These educators often set high expectations and provide constructive feedback that fosters a growth mind-set, allowing students to view challenges as opportunities for learning rather than insurmountable obstacles (Dweck, 2006). By celebrating small achievements and providing personalised attention, teachers help students recognise their own capabilities and build confidence in their academic and personal endeavours (Hattie, 2009). Such positive reinforcement and belief in students' abilities contribute significantly to a nurturing classroom environment that bolsters self-esteem and motivates students to strive for continuous improvement (Marzano, 2003).

Furthermore, a nurturing teacher-student relationship, characterised by high levels of warmth, trust, and respect, fosters an inclusive classroom environment that particularly benefits low-income students. Such a relationship creates a safe space where these students feel valued and motivated to achieve academic success (Hill & Harris, 2016). When teachers exhibit genuine care and high expectations, they help to dismantle the barriers that low-income students might face, encouraging them to engage more fully in their education (Roorda et al., 2011). This supportive atmosphere not only enhances students' sense of belonging but also empowers them to overcome socio-economic challenges and strive for excellence (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

Bemanand & Bornstein (2015) confirm that when teachers have high expectations and offer consistent, personalised support. Low-income students are more likely to internalise a sense of academic competence and develop positive attitudes towards learning. This shows that with appropriate support, low-income students have significant opportunities to excel and reach the highest levels of achievement. The nurturing relationships and inclusive environment fostered by dedicated educators can be transformative, breaking down socio-economic barriers and enabling these students to thrive academically and beyond.

Mentors and mentorship programs can also provide low-income children with valuable support, guidance, and role modelling (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Mentors can serve as trusted confidants and offer low-income children valuable support by providing emotional support, motivation, and practical advice, helping them navigate the various challenges that arise in school, at home, and in their social life (Horwitz et al., 2020). Furthermore, Schartz et al. (2014) attest that mentorship programs match low-income children with adult volunteers or older students who provide emotional support, academic guidance, and positive role modelling. This mentorship relationship can foster a sense of hope, resilience and self-efficacy among low-income children, leading to improved academic performance, social skills, and long-term outcomes (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2013).

According to Dettling et al. (2018), peer groups can sometimes exacerbate the challenges faced by low-income children by reinforcing negative behaviours and limiting exposure to positive influences. In low-income communities, children often form peer groups with others facing similar

economic hardships, fostering a shared sense of limited opportunities and aspirations. These peer groups may engage in activities that are detrimental to their academic and personal development, such as truancy, substance abuse, and involvement in gangs, as a way to cope with their circumstances. The absence of peers who are focused on education and future success can further entrench these negative patterns, making it harder for low-income children to break out of the cycle of poverty. This phenomenon highlights the importance of interventions that introduce diverse and positive role models and opportunities to disrupt these harmful peer dynamics.

There are, however, instances in which children from more advantaged backgrounds can serve as valuable supporters and allies. Such supportive peers may share resources and tools, provide emotional support, or offer opportunities for academic and extracurricular collaboration. This can be achieved by allowing those from low-income families to use their gadgets, join their groups without making much tangible contribution, and even access the internet (Greenhow & Gleason, 2006). These positive peer interactions can mitigate some of the negative impacts of poverty on low-income children's academic performance, social engagement, and overall well-being, fostering a sense of belonging and community.

### ***2.3.2 Educational opportunities***

Educational opportunities refer to the access and availability of learning resources and programmes that enable individuals to acquire knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for personal and professional development (UNESCO, 2020). These opportunities are a resilient factor associated with poverty because they empower individuals to break the cycle of economic disadvantage by enhancing their employability, income potential, and social mobility (World Bank, 2018). Also, these opportunities help combat poverty by enabling participants to improve their socioeconomic status and break the cycle of deprivation (Chetty et al., 2016). These educational opportunities, when available, encompass a range of accessible learning experiences and resources, including formal schooling, vocational training, online courses, and community-based programs, which facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills essential for personal and career advancement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Furthermore, access to early childhood education can lay a strong foundation for future learning and success, while scholarships and financial aid programs can remove economic barriers to higher education (Heckman, 2013). Equally important,

adult education and lifelong learning initiatives enable continuous skill development, enhancing employability and resilience against economic downturns (Desjardins, 2017).

### ***2.3.3 Individual characteristics***

Inborn individual characteristics, or innate traits, can play a critical role in shaping a person's life outcomes, including their academic success and career trajectory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). These traits or characteristics include creativity, intelligence, and even a growth mind-set; they can provide an inherent advantage for specific individuals, helping them navigate obstacles and achieve their goals (Dweck, 2006). In addition, there are those with self-efficacy, or the belief in one's own ability to achieve a desired outcome, which, when possessed, acts as a powerful driving tool in facing adversity and obstacles (Bandura, 1997). Individuals with strong self-efficacy are more likely to persist in the face of setbacks, persevere despite challenges, and embrace opportunities for learning and growth (Gully et al., 2016). This innate sense of confidence and determination can enable individuals to overcome poverty-related barriers and achieve remarkable feats despite their circumstances (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, some are optimistic, those who possess an unshakable belief that things always work out well in the future (Carver et al., 2010). Optimism can therefore be a significant factor in helping individuals overcome difficult circumstances. Individuals who are optimistic tend to view setbacks as temporary, attribute successes to their own abilities, and expect good things to happen in the future (Shah & Mahie, 2008). These beliefs and attributes can be powerful motivators for individuals facing poverty-related difficulties, providing hope and a sense of agency that can drive them towards greater achievement and success in life (Carver et al., 2010).

### ***2.3.4 Access to Technology***

Bridging the digital gap can serve as an essential support system for children from low-income families. These would help them access digital technologies and resources that can enhance their educational opportunities, or ensure equal access to technology and internet connectivity, which is crucial for supporting students from low-income families (Anderson & Faulkner, 2014). Establishing community centres that provide access to digital resources, funded by non-profit-making organisations or government initiatives, could prove invaluable in supporting low-income communities (Fong et al., 2019). These centres can provide computers, internet access, and computer literacy training, creating a welcoming and accessible environment where children can

engage in digital learning and exploration (Zerger et al., 2016). This type of programme can help reduce the digital divide, providing disadvantaged learners with the resources and skills they need to succeed in the digital world (Smahel et al., 2021).

### ***2.3.5 Positive School Climate***

Schools can play a crucial role in fostering resilience among students from low-income backgrounds by fostering a positive, inclusive school climate (Masten & Coatsworth, 2007). A school climate characterised by safety, mutual respect, and high expectations for all students can counterbalance some of the negative impacts of poverty on academic achievement and personal development (Dettling et al., 2018). Schools that prioritise these qualities in their culture and daily operations create an environment where students feel valued and supported, enhancing self-esteem, social relationships, and learning outcomes for low-income children (Hills & Harris, 2016). Additionally, schools can promote a positive school climate by implementing anti-bullying programmes, diversity and inclusion initiatives, and social-emotional learning curricula (Powers et al., 2018). By addressing negative behaviour such as bullying, promoting acceptance and appreciation of diversity, and teaching emotional regulation and conflict-resolution skills, schools can create an environment where all students feel safe and accepted, fostering a culture of positivity and resilience (Dettling et al., 2018).

### ***2.3.6 Parental Involvement***

Parental involvement is a critical factor in a child's education. However, poverty-related conditions, such as long working hours and multiple jobs, can limit parents' ability to be involved in their children's schooling (Muniz & Gill, 2017). Due to the nature of their jobs, low-income parents may struggle to attend their children's school events, volunteer in classrooms or even help their children with homework. These can result from time constraints and physical demands of their jobs (Shipler, 2004). This lack of parental involvement can further exacerbate the negative impacts of poverty on children's education, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of disadvantage. This lack of involvement can also lead to missed opportunities for support and guidance, which are essential to academic success.

Moreover, parents with limited education themselves may struggle to provide the necessary academic support at home (Allard et al., 2011). The lack of education among low-income parents

perpetuates a cycle of poverty that limits their ability to assist their children with schoolwork. This leads to poor academic outcomes that replicate intergenerational patterns of educational disadvantage (Bowman & Watanable, 2016). Parents with low levels of education may struggle to provide the necessary support, guidance, or role modelling for their children's education. These might be part of a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty that limits the opportunities and life outcomes of the next generation (Long et al., 2019).

Encouraging and facilitating parental engagement is vital to supporting the academic success of low-income students (Hill & Harris, 2016). Schools can provide a range of resources and workshops for parents, emphasising the significant impact of their involvement on their children's education (Allard et al., 2011). These initiatives can help parents understand how to support their children's learning, offer strategies for effective communication and goal-setting, and foster a sense of empowerment in their parenting roles (Hills & Harris, 2016). To accommodate the busy schedules of low-income parents, schools can offer flexible meeting times for conferences and workshops (Allard et al., 2011). By scheduling events outside traditional working hours, or even on weekends, schools can make it easier for parents to attend and stay informed about their children's progress and needs (Rosen et al., 2012). Furthermore, utilising technology for communication and scheduling can help parents stay connected and involved with their children's education, even when they cannot be physically present (Hills & Harris, 2016).

## **2.4 Theoretical framework**

A theoretical framework is a structured set of concepts, assumptions, and propositions that provides a foundation for understanding and analysing a research problem (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). It serves as a lens through which researchers can interpret their findings and draw meaningful conclusions. The importance of a theoretical framework in research lies in its ability to guide the study's design, data collection, and analysis, ensuring coherence and methodological soundness (Grand & Osanloo, 2014). By situating the research within a broader context of existing theories and literature, the theoretical framework helps establish the study's relevance and significance and aids in developing assumptions and research questions (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Furthermore, a well-articulated theoretical framework enhances the credibility of the research findings, facilitating their application to real-world settings and future studies (Maxwell, 2013).

The Bio-ecological Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1986), emphasises the dynamic interactions between a person and their environment that shape human development across the lifespan (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This theory views individuals as both actively shaping and being shaped by their environment, including immediate contexts which is the micro-system, then comes the relationships between contexts namely the mesosystem, thereafter there is the exo-system which is defined by organisational, institutional, and community factors. There is also the macro-system which embodies the cultural and historical factors, and lastly the chronosystem that refer to the temporal or developmental aspects of the system, such as historical events, cultural changes or personal events that occur overtime.

#### ***2.4.1 Microsystem***

According to the Bioecological Theory, the microsystem is the immediate context in which a person operates (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). It encompasses the interpersonal environments that an individual interacts with directly, such as family, school, peers, and community. The microsystem is where the individual's beliefs, behaviours, and development are most influenced, as it is the most immediate and proximal level of social interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). At the microsystem level, the quality of family interactions and educational resources directly impacts academic performance. Lee (2018), instigates the various factors contributing to low academic performance among children living in poverty. Her research found that these children often face significant stress and instability at home, which can affect their mental health and academic achievement. Furthermore, the neighbourhoods where these children reside can be impoverished and unsafe, exposing them to violence and limiting their access to educational resources and opportunities. On the other hand, a supportive and engaging family environment, in which parents or caregivers provide emotional support, monitor the child's educational progress, and actively communicate with school staff, can facilitate academic success (Evans et al., 2004). Similarly, educational resources within the home, such as text books, computers, and opportunities for parental involvement in learning activities, can positively influence a child's cognitive and academic development (Datta, 2018).

### ***2.4.2 The mesosystem***

The mesosystem refers to the interrelationships and interactions between different Microsystems, such as the connections between a child's home and school environment. It also encompasses the interaction between the Microsystems thereby leading or shaping a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem represents how these environments interact and overlap. In the context of poverty, supportive relationships between home and school can provide a powerful buffer against academic risks, such as low grades, school absenteeism, and low motivation (Maughan et al., 2002). When the mesosystem is not supportive and conducive to a child's development, it can have negative effects on their academic and social well-being (McLoyd & Grigorenko, 2013). For example, when a child's home environment lacks educational resources or positive reinforcement for academic achievement and the school environment is also lacking in effective teaching practices or adequate support for struggling learners, the child can experience a compounding effect of multiple challenges to their academic progress (Eccles et al., 2010)

### ***2.4.3 The exosystem***

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory defines the exosystem as the social environments that do not involve the individual directly, but nonetheless influence their development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). It encompasses external factors such as parental employment and community resources, and economic conditions, which can indirectly influence a child's academic performance and overall wellbeing (Evans et al., 2016). The exosystem affects children's development by providing access to positive role models and community resources (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For example, community-based organisations, such as aftercare-school programs or youth mentorships initiatives, can expose children achievement and motivate them to pursue higher education (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

There are however negative ways that children can be impacted negatively, when communities lack resources such libraries, parks, or safe public spaces, that can limit children's access to positive learning experiences and recreational activities, contributing to social isolation and reduced motivation for academic achievement (Evans et al., 2016). In continuation, family financial stress, particularly when parents are working multiple jobs or experiencing unemployment, can also negatively affect children's mental health and academic performance, as

they may feel a burden to contribute financially or experience significant family instability (Miller et al., 2013)

#### ***2.4.4 The macrosystem***

The macrosystem refers to the overarching culture, political, and economical context that shapes an individual's development, such as culture norms, religious beliefs, and political institutions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The macrosystem represents the broad, societal-level influences that can affect an individual's life trajectory, including educational policies, economic opportunities, and social attitudes (Harkeness & Super, 2016). The macrosystem can have positive influences on children's development in several ways such as a strong work ethic, respect for education, or emphasis on family relationships, can provide a supportive framework for children's academic and social development (Sama & Schem, 2007). Also, government policies that promote access to quality education, healthcare, and social welfare programs can improve children's overall well-being and opportunities for academic success (Levine & Dockett, 2012).

The macrosystem, when shaped by poverty, can have negative impacts on children's development as limited opportunities can lead to limited access to quality education, healthcare, and other resources, resulting in children facing significant barriers to academic achievement and social mobility (Gimpel & Fournier, 2016). There could also be discrimination and stereotyping in schools and in workplaces for those living in poverty. This can result in reduced opportunities for advancement, which can limit children's motivation and self-efficacy (Rosales & Morales, 2017).

#### ***2.4.5 The chronosystem***

The chronosystem refers to the temporal dimension of human development, which includes the changes and transitions that occur throughout an individual's life (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). It encompasses historical events, cultural shifts, life transitions, and other temporal factors that can impact an individual's development over time, both positively and negatively (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Chronosystem can positively impact development by providing opportunities for growth and adaptation (Elman et al., 2008). This could happen through historical events such as Civil Rights Movement or feminist activism which can open doors for marginalized groups, improving access to education, employment, and other opportunities (Leonard, 2007). There is also transitions, such as starting a new school or beginning a career which can provide

opportunities for personal growth and development, fostering resilience and self-efficacy when utilised (Siegler & Epstein, 2019). Furthermore, the chronosystem can have negative impacts on development when is characterised by instability or adversity (Crnic et al., 2007). Finally, the traumatic events if not addressed, such as natural disasters or armed conflicts which can lead to significant disruptions on children's development, including emotional distress, academic setbacks, and long-term psychological (Alisic et al., 2012).

## **2.5 Chapter Summary**

Poverty presents significant academic risks for students, impacting their access to resources, health, and overall well-being. However, resilient factors such as supportive relationships, school and community programs, access to technology, a positive school climate, and parental engagement can help mitigate these challenges and support students in achieving academic success. By addressing both the risks and resilience factors associated with poverty in schools, educators, policymakers, and communities can work together to create a more equitable and supportive educational environment for all students.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.0 Introduction

The previous chapter extensively scrutinised the body of literature on poverty and its effects on academic performance, with a focus on the numerous theoretical understandings of poverty and the factors that contribute to the academic risk factors associated with it. Additionally, the chapter examined existing resilience factors that can help individuals manage the challenges of poverty and succeed academically. The current chapter deeply explored the methodological framework adopted for this qualitative research study, providing further explanation of the theoretical underpinnings, research design, participant selection, data collection and analysis strategies, as well as the ethical considerations that ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. This chapter aims to outline the research methodology and the design adopted. The qualitative research method was used, as well as the use of the constructivist paradigm, which helped guide this study

#### 3.1 Research paradigm

According to Saunders et al. (2009), a research paradigm is a philosophical framework that coordinates or controls the design, execution, and analysis of research and also serves as a lens through which the researcher understands and interprets the world. It gathers the underlying assumptions and beliefs about the essence of reality, the researcher's responsibilities, and the approach to generating knowledge (Trotter, 2011). In qualitative studies, the research paradigm guides the entire research process (Bhasker, 1997). It contains the philosophical assumptions and beliefs about how humans understand and acquire knowledge, the world, and the role of researchers (Mason, 2002). The selection of a constructivist paradigm for this study was appropriate, given that, for constructivism, reality is subjective and shaped by how each person sees or gives meaning to lived experiences and perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Constructivists also acknowledged the very important role that poverty can have on different aspects of a person's life in influencing the everyday experiences and perceptions of low-income students. This approach gave an opportunity for a clear, thorough and well-rounded understanding of how poverty affects their academic journey. This also influences them by providing a nuanced and multifaceted examination of the shortcomings and challenges these students face, how they cope, and how they build resilience, while offering a more holistic view of the interaction between

poverty and education (Berkson, 2018). This study looked into bringing about the interpretations and lived realities of students growing up in poverty, while also getting a clearer meaning to that, these realities are not universal, but rather unique and individualised.

Constructivism emphasises the importance of the socio-cultural context in shaping people's views, appraisals, and experiences (Hennink et al., 2011). Acknowledging that each person brings their own meaning and responds differently in different circumstances, regardless of the challenges they face, a constructivist approach allows for a deeper understanding of the diverse and subjective realities of people living in poverty (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By embracing this paradigm, the study aimed to fully understand and interpret the complexities and nuances of the academic risks and resilience factors experienced by low-income students, while also examining the relationships among personal, social, and cultural factors in shaping their perceptions, choices, and outcomes.

Furthermore, constructivism takes into account all interconnected aspects while taking note of the participants' subjective experiences and understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This paradigm drew more attention to participants' voices and stories, while acknowledging that they are active agents in shaping their experiences rather than passive objects of the study (Cresswell & Poth, 2017).

### **3.2 Research design**

Leedy & Ormrod (2014) define research design as a detailed plan for conducting a study, including the research questions, data collection methods, and analysis techniques. The study at hand used a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach that focuses on getting the substance of an individual's lived experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2015). Phenomenological research offers an opportunity for a rich, deep, subjective understanding of human experiences, while placing its primary focus on meaning and experience rather than seeking to establish general patterns (Creswell, 2014).

Giorgio (2018) argues that phenomenology is an appropriate method for fully capturing participants' subjective experiences. The phenomenological design includes interviewing individuals to draw precise meanings of their lived experiences and the meaning they connect to those experiences. This approach was particularly well-suited to obtaining rich, nuanced, and contextually specific data that may not be readily available through other research methods.

Giorgio (2018) states that by capturing these interviews, researchers can obtain an in-depth understanding of individuals' distinctive lived experiences and perceptions, thereby providing deeper insight into the phenomena being studied.

### **3.3 Research approach**

A research approach is an overall strategy or plan that researchers use to conduct their investigation (Giddings, 2000). It includes the philosophical assumptions, research methods, and data analysis techniques used to address the research question or problem. It is through the research approach that the guidelines and parameters for the research process are established, assisting researchers in making informed decisions about the type of methodology and methods to use, enabling them to collect accurate data sufficient to address the research questions. The current study used a qualitative research approach, commonly used in the social sciences, to gather data (Mahjan, 2019). This method involves gathering rich, descriptive information to reach targets and interpret the meanings and experiences of participants, rather than relying solely on quantifiable data (Cresswell, 2014). The interest in descriptive information stems from the qualitative approach's aim to fully capture the complexity of human experiences, which cannot be adequately represented by numerical data alone (Gubrium & Holstein, 2015).

The information included participants' stories, observations, interactions, and behaviours, as well as the cultural and social contexts in which they live, while also providing researchers with a rich and detailed understanding of the phenomena under study. This information was useful in contextualising and explaining participants' experiences and attitudes, exposing insights that traditional quantitative approaches might miss (Yin, 2009). In qualitative studies, researchers focus primarily on fully capturing people's understandings, experiences, beliefs, and perceptions, seeking to realise the complexities and diversities of human experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2015). This approach gives researchers essential tools to uncover deeper insights into the phenomena under study and to develop rich, detailed narratives that capture the essence of human experience.

According to Sutton and Austin (2015), qualitative research offers researchers the opportunity to delve into participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences, thereby gaining their unique

perspectives and interpretations of their lives. By scrutinising participants' narratives and stories, researchers can easily grasp the meanings participants attach to their experiences and gain insights that may be overlooked or difficult to fully grasp in quantitative research (Sutton & Austin, 2015). This very close understanding of participants' subjective realities provides a rich, unique portrait of their worlds, allowing researchers to develop a more holistic and empathetic view of the phenomena under study.

Through a qualitative research approach, a great deal of clarity is attained regarding human experiences, including the richness of the data and the ability to examine subjectivity (Gubrium & Holstein, 2015). Furthermore, through observations and open-ended questions, a qualitative researcher can gather a wide range of data, including participants' stories, observations of behaviours, and their views of the world, providing a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences. While qualitative research offers numerous benefits, it also has shortcomings and is susceptible to bias (Sarantakos, 2013). Due to its subjective nature, a qualitative research approach can be biased when analysing data, as researchers' pre-existing beliefs and assumptions may influence how they interpret participants' responses. The bias, according to Miles & Huberman (1994), can also be seen in participants, who may withhold some information to present themselves in a positive light, leading to incomplete or inaccurate data. There is, however, a way to mitigate this limitation. To overcome bias, the researcher should use multiple sources of data to cross-check the validity of findings and confirm the truth (Saldana, 2009). Wertz and Flynn (2009) suggest that the researcher should be able to identify their own biases and how those biases may influence the entire process, and to find ways to clearly work towards minimising them. Conversely, Wertz and Flynn (2009) contend that researchers must identify their biases, acknowledge their potential influence, and take steps to mitigate them.

### **3.4 Research participants**

Research participants are individuals or collectives involved in generating data for a study (Bryman, 2016). Research participants play a significant role by being involved in research activities designed to collect information pertinent to the study's objective. The research involved twelve participants in each of three schools, of which 10 were learners at a public primary school, one principal and one teacher. The learners came from Grades 6 and 7. The decision to focus on

this age range was driven by the recognition that children in this group can express their thoughts and experiences clearly. They are at the developmental stage and do not shy away from openly discussing the challenges they see as arising from poverty; they shared insights into the factors that enable those living in poverty to flourish despite these adversities (Bryman, 2016). As primary school students, these children were considered highly relevant to the study's objectives, which aimed to explore the experiences of poverty among young learners and identify the factors that contribute to their resilience.

It was equally important to include the children's teachers and principals since they have the advantage of interacting with these learners on a day-to-day basis, making them ideal to shed light on what factors may contribute to their resilience. These educators, due to the fact that they are with them daily in classes and interact with them, are best in observing elements that push learners from poor households to achieve their very best, as well as the strategies and support they utilise to overcome adversity (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). It was crucial for the study that the teacher's perspectives be considered to truly understand the learners' lived experiences and mechanisms for coping with the the effects of poverty on their academic and social well-being (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

### **3.5 Selection of participants**

Babbie (2014) states that participant selection is the process of locating and choosing individuals who are well-suited for the research study at hand. The selection process is influenced by certain research questions, objectives, and theoretical frameworks, as well as by realistic considerations such as accessibility, relevance, and diversity of perspectives (Bloor, 2001). Using purposive sampling, the participants were selected. Purposive sampling was a choice method because of how it enables the selection based on the knowledge, experiences and expertise deemed relevant to the study (Bryman, 2016). Learners were selected from public primary schools in Mafeteng. With purposive sampling the researcher was able to become intentional and selected participants suitable for the study (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, the principals and teachers participating in the study were selected through purposive sampling, as they were considered to possess vital information about learners from low-income families, as they worked with them day in and day out.

### **3.6 Data collection**

According to Bryman (2016), data collection is an in-depth process of collecting rich, meaningful and contextual data that portrays participants' understandings, experiences and perspectives. This is done through various methods, such as document analyses, interviews, focus groups and observations (Holloway & Todres, 2003). The aim of data collection in qualitative research is to secure dimensions and nuances of human experiences, emotions, and perspectives, which cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measures (Krauss & Kelly, 1998).

#### ***3.6.1 Interviews***

Creswell (2007), states that an interview is a form of data collection whereby a researcher asks questions of a participant. The current study employed semi-structured interviews, which Merriam and Tisdell (2016), defined as a qualitative research method that has a combination of elements of both structured and unstructured interviews. Semi-structured interviews also have a set of open-ended questions which allows for guidance of the conversation while also allows for much needed flexibility and exploration of ideas as they emerge (Adams, 2015). In an effort to gather comprehensive, contextually grounded clarity and meaning about the phenomenon being studied, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three principals from schools A, B, and C. Through this research method the researcher was able to probe for additional information, get clearer responses and explored themes as they emerged. All this led to a much richer, much detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

#### ***3.6.2 Focus groups***

Krueger and Casey (2015), focus groups are defined as a qualitative research method that entails the guided and moderated discussions with small groups or diverse groups in an effort to collect deep insights on specific topic or issues. Through focus groups, the researcher is able to explore attitudes, perceptions, and even experiences within a social context, allowing for rich contextual data. Focus group offers a clear interaction amongst participants, as they are able to offer dynamic and rich data, giving the researcher an understanding of how participants shape their perspectives in their responses to the topic under investigation (Cresswell, 2007). The participants in the focus

groups were grade 5, 6, and 7 learners from schools A, B, and C. In an effort to ensure accurate data collection, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Furthermore, audio recording and transcription of interviews are vital to ensuring that nothing is missed or misinterpreted during the process (Lee & Ark, 2015). When this is done, it enables the researcher to carefully review materials while keeping the originality of participants' responses. Through these steps, the researcher can be confident that they will be able to interpret and analyse data and be faithful to the original interviews (Lee & Ark, 2015). This process of transcription and analysis enabled a thorough examination of the participants' lived experiences and insights into the extent to which poverty impacted their academic performance (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, the interviews were particularly useful in qualitative research, as they gave participants an opportunity to express themselves freely and to give voice to their unique experiences (Maxwell, 2013). What follows is the table of participants and their details.

**Table 1: Participants' details**

Participants Group	Role	Number	School	Qualification	Gender
Principal	School Principal	1	School A	Degree Holder	Female
Principal	School Principal	1	School B	Degree Holder	Male
Principal	School Principal	1	School C	Degree Holder	Female
Teacher	Class teacher	1	School A	Diploma	Female
Teacher	Class teacher	1	School B	Diploma	Female
Teacher	Class teacher	1	School C	Diploma	Female
Grade 5 learners	Learner	5	Schools A, B, and C	N/A	Males And Females

Grade learners	6	Learner	6	Schools A, B, and C	N/A	Males And Females
Grade learners	7	Learner	5	Schools A, B, and C	N/A	Males And Females

**3.6.3 Piloting**

Piloting, which can also be called pilot testing, is a before-study phase in qualitative research using a small sample of data, whereby it is collected and analysed in an effort to refine the research methodology (Schreier & Stern, 2008). Through pilot testing, the researcher can assess the effectiveness of their proposed data collection methods (Schreier & Stern, 2008). Two primary schools were used to pilot the data, with a principal, a teacher, and two focus groups of Grades 6 and 7 learners utilised in each school. For each group, a relevant tool was used, with the questions in the study answering the objectives of the study. Therefore, the tools were deemed valid and no changes were made to them.

**3.7 Data processing**

Data processing refers to the systematic, interactive steps taken to transform raw data collected through interviews, observations, or other methods into an organised, meaningful format for analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These steps include transcribing audio recordings, annotating transcripts, coding the data, categorising and identifying themes or patterns. The primary goal of data processing is to reduce the vast amount of collected data into a more manageable and interpretable form, allowing researchers to extract insights and answer research questions (Gale, 2015). The qualitative study also entails systematically organising and analysing the data collected through interviews or other non-textual sources (Charmaz, 2014). During the analysis of qualitative data collected from interviews, a logical chain of events and patterns emerged, which helped provide a clearer understanding of the complicated and diverse nature of social phenomena (O’Byrne & Staunton, 2014). With the gathered chain of insights, conclusions and observations, whether interdependent or interconnected, assisted the researcher to come to conclusions and made sense of data, and also realised patterns or trends that were not visible at first glance.

Developing logical chains of evidence in qualitative research is a complex, recursive, and interpretive process (O'Byrne & Staunton, 2014). Systematic examination is involved as well as cross-referencing and interpreting multiple sources of data, such as interviews, observations and document analysis, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. By engaging in a process of interpretive reasoning, which involves critically examining the data from various perspectives and considering different possible interpretations, researchers can identify and challenge potential biases or preconceptions that may influence their interpretation of the data (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) according to Saldana (2016), the process assist researchers to distil essential ideas or patterns from the data, which were then be used to develop a deeper understanding of the study

### ***3.7.1 Transcribing***

It involves changing recorded data, obtained from either interviews or focus group discussions, into written text (Kuzel, 2007). This process entails listening to recorded interview data and typing the participants' words as they are, often using specialised software or hiring transcription services. Transcription is essential, as it provides a permanent record of the data to be analysed, referenced, and shared with other researchers to thoroughly examine the distinctions in participants' tone, language, and inflexion, which can yield important insights and findings.

### ***3.7.2 Annotating***

Saldana (2016) states that in a qualitative study, annotating is a crucial and important step, done through adding notes or comments to raw data. It is through this process that researchers highlight important themes, patterns, and insights, which in turn enable them to identify patterns in the data, providing understanding of the data. Gubrium and Holstein (2020) state that annotating is a procedure or mode in which researchers can engage with data on multiple levels, questioning the implications and meanings of the text, while forming a more profound clarity of the phenomenon being studied.

### ***3.7.3 Coding***

Coding in a qualitative study involves assigning meaningful groupings and labels to segments of other texts or data (Saldana, 2016). Saldana (2016) further clarifies that it is through this process that the researchers structure and organise the data to assist interpretation and understanding. There

are two ways of coding, which are breaking it down into smaller units and putting descriptive codes to reflect the content of the data. The other one is grouping data codes into higher-level categories or themes, which most times involve the usage of coding relationships to come up with patterns or connections between codes.

#### ***3.7.4 Categorising***

Categorising is a process that involves grouping codes or themes into higher-order categories that showcase the range of patterns and relationships (Cresswell, 2018). It is in categorising that broader themes capture and transform the main ideas and patterns into data (Saldana, 2016). Categorising offers much-needed clarity by enabling the researcher to identify and label key concepts and themes, which help define relationships among different codes, thereby improving the interpretability of data. Furthermore, efficiency is achieved by grouping higher-level themes, allowing the researcher to identify and explore the most important aspects of the data rather than getting lost in the details of individual codes. Creswell (2018) further states that, through categorisation, the researcher can structure and organise data into meaningful units that reveal underlying patterns and themes that emerge from the analysis.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

According to Miles and Huberman (2017), data analysis is a process of recognising relationships, themes and patterns found in the collected data. Data analysis aims to find and develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. In a qualitative study, the analysis involves an interpretive approach that aims to unfold participants' perspectives, meanings, and experiences. There are several stages and techniques in the process, such as analysing the content, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis, all of which assist the researcher in organising and interpreting data.

Thematic analysis is easily recognised by its adaptability and flexibility, allowing a researcher to use a range of strategies and techniques on the data. These techniques can include note-taking, coding, and even constant comparative analysis, which assists the researchers to be aware of the themes as they surface from the collected data (Clarke, 2010). (Maruyama, 2015) states that thematic analysis provides a valuable tool for exploring the experiences and perceptions of low-

income students regarding their academic journey, allowing for the identification of key themes and patterns that could inform future research and interventions.

### **3.9 Research integrity**

Research integrity refers to its trustworthiness, precision, and transparency, which are very important for ensuring the credibility and validity of the findings (Galvin & Orr, 2006). This includes ensuring that the research process does not contain errors or biases; it also aims to prove that the data collected are correct and can be trusted, and that the conclusions drawn from the data are supported by the evidence (Coughlan, 2013). Moreover, there must be transparency in the process, including any potential limitations or biases, which will assist in enhancing the integrity of the research and instil trust in the findings (Kaplan et al., 2019). In a qualitative study, research integrity also means the acknowledgement and respect towards others' work, not only the collection and analysis of data with accuracy and impartiality (Searle & Cronin, 2020).

Trustworthiness, as a key aspect of research integrity, refers to the degree to which data can be trusted and relied on to make decisions. It is crucial that data is accurate and reliable as that confirms that it can be trusted (Kalbach & Liker, 2022). Kalbach and Liker (2022) further state that, the trustworthiness of data is important towards its integrity, as it helps to ensure that the conclusions and findings of such a study are placed on the accuracy of such. When data lacks trustworthiness, it becomes hard to ensure its conclusions are valid. Furthermore, Pilot and Back (2014) state that trustworthiness is quite important or essential for a qualitative study as it enables researchers to establish its credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability, which are the four aspects as outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1985).

#### **3.9.1 Credibility**

According to Jonson (2019), credibility is the extent to which qualitative research findings can be believed and how convincing they are. Jonson (2019) further states that it is an essential aspect of trustworthiness because it makes sure that the findings are accurate in showing the experiences and perspectives of participants. It is like credibility that a range of methods, including triangulation, which combines different sources or methods to examine the same topic from different perspectives (Creswell, 2013). There is also debriefing, which works to ensure that participants have clarity about purpose, procedures and potential implications of the research (Barry & Elmes, 2011).

### ***3.9.2 Dependability***

Dependability refers to the extent to which the research findings can be constant or stable over time (Alsgaard, 2017). Dependability is an important aspect of trustworthiness; through it, the findings are deemed replicable and reproducible, making room for validation and verification of the research. Through various methods, including detailed documentation of the research process, discussions with colleagues for verification, and the provision of detailed descriptions of the research process, dependability can be established (Alsgaard, 2017).

### ***3.9.3 Confirmability***

According to Alsgaard (2017), conformability is another key aspect of trustworthiness. Conformability is concerned with the extent to which the researcher's assumptions and biases are made neutral and are minimised, in an effort to ensure that the researcher does not unduly influence the findings towards personal perspectives. There are several ways to achieve confirmability, by acknowledging and looking into the role the researcher has towards influencing the research process, by putting in place multiple perspectives and methods to reduce bias, and by requesting participants to confirm the findings' accuracy.

### ***3.9.4 Transferability***

Transferability is defined as the extent to which qualitative research findings can be applied or generalized to other contexts (Patton, 2015). Its importance is evident through its ability to allow the researcher to understand to what length their findings can be conducted beyond the specific context. Patton (2015) emphasises that transferability is mainly concerned with discovering conditions under which the findings might apply to other contexts instead of generalising in the traditional sense. This can only be achieved through carefully describing the context in which the research was made, its data processes and analysis, and participants involved.

## **3.10 Ethical considerations**

Ethical considerations encompass the standards that direct the research process to guarantee that it is carried out ethically. These ethical concerns involve obtaining permission, securing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, ensuring anonymity, and upholding beneficence (Smith, 2020). In order to uphold anonymity pseudonyms were used and are displayed in table 3.

### ***3.10.1 Request for permission to conduct the study***

To proceed with the study, formal letters were submitted to various authorities to obtain necessary permissions. With the permission letter obtained from the National University of Lesotho, the initial request was sent to the Ministry of Education and Training Mafeteng (Appendix 1). Upon receiving approval from the Ministry of Education and Training letters were dispatched to the school teachers (Appendix 2) requesting their consent to participate in research. A letter for learners to take part (Appendix 3) was issued as well as a consent form for learners as they were minors (Appendix 4) were required from parents or guardians.

### ***3.10.2 Anonymity and confidentiality***

The assurance of confidentiality is crucial for building trust between the researcher and participants (Finch, 2001). In this research, participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality because the researcher could not control their actions outside the study. Nonetheless, the researcher committed to maintaining confidentiality in reporting the study's findings. This was achieved by concealing the participants' real identities in the results; instead, the researcher used letters to distinguish between participants.

### ***3.10.3 Beneficence***

The researcher clearly stated to the participants and those responsible for them, as they are minors, that this study was not for their benefit and that no incentive would be given in exchange for their participation (Jelsma & Clow, 2005).

In research integrity, voluntary participation refers to the principle that all participants in the research. Study participants should consent to participate and should not be coerced (Denzin, 2010). Voluntary participation suggests that participants are not compelled to participate in the study and are free to withdraw at any time. Participants were informed of the study's purpose through consent forms, which they were asked to complete if they agreed to participate. This was so that, if at any point they felt uncomfortable, they could withdraw without providing a reason, as there would be no adverse consequences.

### ***3.10.5 Honesty***

Creswell (2018) defines honesty as a fundamental principle in a qualitative study, requiring transparency about methodologies and forthcoming, authentic interaction with participants. This transparency is fundamental for maintaining integrity and trustworthiness, as Wiseman and

Harrison (2007) emphasise, by showing any bias, personal interests, and funding sources that could influence the research process. In the present study, we commit to honesty by openly discussing any limitations and uncertainties, as well as revealing any personal biases or conflicts of interest that could affect the research outcomes, with appropriate paraphrasing and referencing where necessary.

### **3.11 Chapter summary**

Chapter three described the research methods and procedures used in this study. After exploring various paradigmatic perspectives and data collection methods, the chapter discussed the data collection methods and the analysis procedures employed. The chapter concluded by highlighting the integrity criteria that guided the researcher throughout the research process, including transparency and trustworthiness of the findings

The next chapter will focus on the findings and results of the study after having considered data analysis. It is also in the same chapter where the researcher will present patterns and themes that surfaced from data.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DATA PRESENTATION**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

The preceding chapter discussed the research methodology used in this study including research design, data collection and analysis techniques ethical considerations and measures used to ensure trustworthiness. This study used qualitative research methodology, which enabled the researcher to explore and gain deeper understanding of the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants. The current chapter expands on the previous one by presenting the data generated on exploring academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in Primary Schools in the Mafeteng district. To achieve the mission, this chapter presents data in line with the study's research objectives as follows:

- The risk factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district.
- Ways in which the risk factors associated with poverty influence students' academic performance.
- Resilient factors that influence learners' academic performance within the context of poverty.
- Support systems used in the community to mitigate the negative effects of poverty on learners

#### **4.1 Summary of Findings**

This section summarises the data collected in interviews with principals and teachers and focus group discussions with learners from three primary schools. This analysis is drawn from data collected from multiple stakeholders, including Grades 5, 6 and 7 learners from Schools A, B, and C, as well as principals and teachers from the same schools. The data collected explores the academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools within the Mafeteng district. The extent in which learners' education is affected, and how the support from the school and community help such learners to persevere.

The data tabulated in Table 4.1 is in line with the objectives of the study.

**Table 4.1: Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data collected**

Objectives	Themes	Sub-themes
<p>To determine risk factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district</p>	<p>Financial Barriers</p>	<p>Inability to pay for contributions/ fees registration, computer fees, school fund raising activities</p>
	<p>Lack of basic needs required at school</p> <p>Social and emotional Challenges</p> <p>Responsibilities at home</p>	<p>Insufficient school supplies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of stationary and school uniform</li> <li>• Lack of food</li> <li>• Lack of hygiene products</li> </ul> <p>Bullying and teasing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced confidence, feeling embossed)</li> <li>• Feeling scared, unsafe</li> <li>• Social isolation</li> </ul> <p>Staying away from school due to lack of necessities</p> <p>Working to find ways to provide for siblings or family</p>

<p>To determine ways in which the risk factors associated with poverty influence students' academic performance.</p>	<p>Exploitation of learners</p> <p>Perceptions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Falling pregnant and eventually dropping out</li> </ul> <p>Negative self-perception and hopelessness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers presuming they are not capable, de-motivated and believing they have no future</li> </ul>
<p>To explore resilient factors that influence learners' academic performance.</p>	<p>Internal motivation and aspirations</p> <p>External motivation</p>	<p>Desire for better future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working hard to change their family situation or provide better life</li> </ul> <p>Teachers support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers encouraging them others to share, making them feel loved</li> </ul> <p>Peer support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends providing support</li> </ul>

<p>To explore support systems used in the community to mitigate the negative effects of poverty on learners</p>	<p>Provision of basic needs</p>	<p>Food and School supplies assistance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food parcels from village and neighbours social development</li> <li>• Giving school stuff</li> </ul> <p>Shelter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing places to stay for some</li> </ul> <p>Financial support</p> <p>Social development paying school fees</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial aid from social development for food and supplies</li> </ul>
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**4.2 Academic risk factors associated with poverty**

This section outlines the themes that emerged when the participants were asked about challenges faced by learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in primary schools in the Mafeteng district. With data from diverse groups, a robust, triangulated view of the phenomenon was obtained. The data obtained, therefore, showed that there is a negative relationship between poverty and academic achievement. As the living conditions of a poor learner worsen, their academic performance is directly impacted due to an inability to access learning essentials and always being at the mercy of others. This lack leads to a cascade of negative consequences for their educational outcomes. The themes that emerged from the first interview item that read, “what risk factors are associated with poverty”, are financial constraints, lack of basic needs required at

school, social and emotional challenges and engagement and responsibilities at home. Each of these themes is discussed in the sections which follow.

#### ***4.2.1 Financial constraints***

Financial constraints significantly impact learners' daily schooling in the Mafeteng district, particularly concerning various payments. Teachers and principals asserted that the majority of learners from low-income families face challenges with expenses such as registration and computer fees. The inability to pay these fees can have severe consequences for learners from low-income families, as they are often excluded from attending lessons such as the computer skills lessons. In some cases, these learners may even be barred from attending school altogether, with cascading effects on their entire educational experience. This exclusion deprives low-income learners of crucial opportunities for academic development and skills acquisition, hindering their ability to compete with their more affluent peers and gain the knowledge and skills necessary for success. Teacher Two from school B noted that, *“Some of these learners do not have money for registration and computer fees, so they do not come to school at times.”*

This implies that, even though primary education is technically free in Lesotho, many learners from low-income families still face significant hurdles in the form of “hidden” fees and expenses. These additional costs, which may include registration fees and computer levy, can present a substantial barrier for children from poorer families, preventing them from fully accessing the educational resources and opportunities available to their peers.

Most schools also often organise fundraising activities that can be financially challenging for children from poor households. These activities include special days where learners wear their casual clothes instead of their school uniform and pay a fee to raise funds. As a result, children from poorer backgrounds are unable to participate due to a lack of suitable clothing and the required fees. Unable to meet the financial demands of their school, these learners are often absent, missing crucial learning opportunities that could otherwise enhance their academic performance.

*At times, there are contributions made at school, such as M5.00 and M2.00. These children cannot afford to pay such amounts, leading them to intentionally stay home during collection times intentionally to avoid being expected to pay, Principal A added.*

The above implies that financial constraints, particularly the inability to pay the expected school contributions, may lead to absenteeism and exclusion from essential learning experiences for some children. Due to these financial barriers, these children are not regularly at school and do not participate in all school activities. Consequently, this hampers their academic progress and overall educational development. Since these learners are excluded due to financial constraints, schools unintentionally deny them the opportunity to engage in these school activities. The economic instability faced by children from impoverished families is a real problem that affects learners' academic journey, social life and their right to education.

#### ***4.2.2 Lack of school essentials***

Financial constraints for low-income learners extend beyond payments and fees, permeating every aspect of their educational experience. The principals, teachers, and learners from all three schools — A, B, and C — agreed that learners from low-income families lack essential school supplies, such as pens, books, pencils, and textbooks. This lack of school supplies leaves disadvantaged learners at the mercy of their classmates, as learners from low-income families are forced to wait for their peers to finish their assigned work, hoping someone will lend them the supplies they need to complete their task. This not only leaves them behind as their peers move on to the next task, but also gives them limited time to complete their work, creating a vicious cycle in which they struggle to keep up, especially if no one is willing to lend them the utensils they need. Suppose the teacher is not aware of the learner's struggles. In that case, the situation can worsen, with the learner falling further behind and potentially losing interest in the lesson altogether, and eventually their entire academic career. Principal Three from school C mentioned:

*They also lack learning materials,, as the government sometimes delays distributing stationery to schools, making it impossible for learners who cannot afford to buy it to keep up with their studies.*

The aforementioned challenges suggest that, despite government efforts to provide free stationery for primary school learners, a significant gap persists between low-income learners and their more privileged counterparts. While the government aims to offer equitable educational opportunities,

the reality is that delays in distributing stationery and inadequate supplies place low-income learners at a significant disadvantage. This gap is compounded by other learners' unwillingness to share their resources, leaving low-income learners often forced to rely on others' generosity, with limited success.

#### ***4.2.3 Lack of school uniform***

Financial constraints do not just hinder low-income learners' access to school essentials and fees; they also affect their attire and uniforms. The majority of low-income learners do not have a school uniform because they cannot afford one; in most cases, their families' limited resources must be allocated to food and housing. For those with uniforms, it is often worn out and torn, making these learners targets for ridicule and mockery. This mistreatment can lead to loss of confidence and a sense of belonging within the school community, as they may have to wear their private clothes to school. This further sets them apart, leaving them feeling inferior and excluded. There is also the issue of torn shoes, which make them targets of ridicule, as their worn-out shoes become a source of amusement for other children from better families. This entire experience with shabby attire can lead to anger, frustration, and resentment toward their peers for always making fun of them. This frustration can spark conflict, leading to quarrels and eventually fights between some low-income learners and their tormentors. Furthermore, some frustration can be directed at parents who do not have the means to provide the same schooling and daily lives as other children and unknowingly leave their children at the mercy of bullies. This constant taunting and bullying can cause such learners to feel embarrassed, unsafe and isolated, leading to their eventual absence. Principal B added that.

*They do not have a school uniform, when they have a torn school uniform, they get angry and lash out at other learners, because they tease them and laugh at them. They are also angry and disappointed at their parents for failing to afford proper uniforms.*

The tendency of low-income learners to lash out at their peers when teased about torn school uniforms suggests a complex emotional response to the stress and stigma associated with poverty. This suggests that these learners may feel shame and humiliation about the state of their family, and that their anger may be a form of self-protection or a defence mechanism against mockery.

This can also underscore the pressing need to address the social and emotional effects of poverty on children's educational experiences.

#### ***4.2.4 Lack of food***

Many of these learners from disadvantaged families' homes also come to school hungry, as their families may not have enough money to provide them with everyday meals. Indicating yet another challenge perpetuated by financial constraints. These children usually have low energy early in the morning during lessons, they have a problem paying attention and are normally the first to run to the school kitchen during lunch breaks. The children seem more interested in food than they are concerned about their education. Some of these learners are absent at least a day or two each week, and when asked they claim they had no food so they decided to go out looking for food instead of attending school. Without education, they are stuck in poverty's grip, unable to access better-paying jobs and break free from financial struggles. Principal C further stated:

*With the challenge of coming to school without food, they cannot focus, failing even at things quite easily, as their full potential is not always realised, also because they miss school so much.*

The foregoing, therefore, implies that hunger profoundly affects these children's state in class, creating a significant learning barrier. The affected children are described as "tired" and preoccupied with "thinking about food," rather than participating in or engaging with the material being taught. This lack of proper meals prevents their full potential from being realised. Ultimately, the pervasive issue of hunger undermines these children's ability to learn. Not only that, but it also limits their ability to reach their full potential. This happens because when a child is hungry, their focus shifts from exploring and learning to survival. Therefore, this becomes a hindrance to the absorption of new information and to creative thinking.

#### ***4.2.5 Lack of hygiene products***

There are many more financial implications beyond the above-mentioned financial constraints, such as lack of educational resources, lack of food and uniforms. Families of low-income learners often lack the funds to purchase essential hygiene products, such as soap, toothpaste, and deodorant. This can lead to poor hygiene, which has numerous adverse consequences for their

health and social well-being. With a bad body odor, other learners look down upon them, talk about them, and laugh at them. These unclean learners often face social stigma, intimidation, and isolation, which further exacerbate their learning difficulties. In the classroom, classmates may purposely exclude these children from discussion groups and collaborative assignments. This exclusion can worsen the affected child's feelings of shame and inadequacy, adding to the emotional toll of living in poverty. Learner E from school A mentioned, "*At times they do not have cosmetics, and they smell bad.*"

The issue of poor hygiene suggests that unsanitary conditions can be a direct consequence of poverty, and a lack of access to cosmetics and products can create a significant social and emotional barrier for such learners. Due to the foul smell, other children may refuse to play with them, avoid sitting with them during resting times or select them as group members or study partners. It becomes worse when no one chooses them to join their study group. These fears manifest in learners who worry about smelling bad or appearing unclean, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation. Such social stigma and distress can lead to a loss of trust and an unwillingness to be among other learners.

#### ***4.2.6 Responsibilities at home***

The majority of learners from poor households often carry significant responsibilities at home that interfere with their schooling. The lack of financial stability often forces children from low-income backgrounds to take on the role of caregiver for their younger siblings. This responsibility can be overwhelming for these children, especially when their parents are away seeking employment opportunities elsewhere. This responsibility not only disrupts lives but also causes them to constantly worry about what to sell to earn a living each day, hindering their focus on their studies. In severe situations, these learners become heads of families, a heavy load that impacts their ability to excel academically. The role of head of household is a demanding one; from caring for siblings to running a household can be heavy. So for these children to juggle all these responsibilities and still do well in school could be a challenge. Some even drop out of school to care for their siblings. Additionally, some individuals in the community misuse these children due to poverty, sending them on errands at any time, even during school hours, in exchange for food and favours. This

exploitation can lead to vulnerable children falling into traps of abusers who pretend to help them, while in fact they are abusing them. Principal C expressed;

*These children are vulnerable to abuse, sometimes by the people who were meant to protect them, promising them food in exchange for favours, so these children, being heads of families at times they fall into traps of abusers who pretend to help.*

This extract suggests that poverty may force many learners into premature adulthood, and they find themselves having to care for their younger siblings, worrying about what they will eat and wear. This significant responsibility conflicts with their daily school attendance, as no one is there to ensure they attend every day. If they continue that way of life, they might even drop out of school to fulfil their family obligations. Another indication of how poverty fundamentally disrupts a child's educational journey is that a poverty-stricken child, unlike others, may not have a chance to attend certain educational activities done after school. They may have to tarry at home to find ways to feed and care for their younger siblings. This is also going to limit their opportunity to make friends and to engage in childhood experiences.

#### **4.2.7 Social and emotional Problems**

Some primary school learners in the Mafeteng district face significant social and emotional challenges due to poverty. These children are stigmatised and discriminated against. When stigmatised, these children end up detached and disinterested in their academic work, as they may feel less valued by their teachers and peers. Stigmatisation can also damage a learner's belief in their abilities, leading them to doubt their academic potential and give up on their educational goals. In extreme cases, learners may become withdrawn, refusing to speak to others. They might resort to using drugs to cope and escape their reality, or drop out of school entirely. The cumulative effect of these social and emotional burdens is a significant hindrance to their academic performance. Teacher A stated that, *"There is a clear segregation against those who are poor; they get sidelined, pushed around and bullied by some teachers and learners."*

The foregoing extract suggests that poverty impacts even the mental well-being of learners from low-income families. There is constant exclusion from school activities, such as class discussions,

which leads poor children to often miss valuable learning experiences and opportunities to engage with their friends, potentially limiting their educational progress. This experience leaves these learners with hurt and uncertainty; they may conclude they are never going to be good enough for anyone. The social and emotional consequences of poverty are as detrimental to a child's education as the direct lack of resources.

### **4.3 Ways in which the risk factors associated with poverty influence students' academic performance**

This section presents the data derived from participants' responses to questions about how risk factors associated with poverty influence learners' academic performance in primary schools in the Mafeteng district. The data generated revealed that the risk factors associated with poverty influence learners' academic performance in three ways, namely exploitation of learners, negative teachers' perceptions, and low-income learners' perceptions.

#### ***4.3.1 Exploitation of learners***

The collected data revealed that some low-income learners are exploited and taken advantage of through exploitation done mostly by opportunistic individuals who take advantage of the vulnerability of these children to achieve their selfish goals. Such individuals, promise and manipulate these children into working for them, making this children believe they are being allowed to better themselves, while in fact they are being used because they are underpaid or get no pay at all for the work done. Some individuals go to the extent of sexually abusing these children, convincing them that they will take care of them. However, as soon as they become pregnant, they are left to fend for themselves and carry more burdens of raising children alone. These not only perpetuate the cycle of poverty, but also hinder these children from furthering their studies because those who become pregnant already live in poverty, so their children are born in the same poverty, and the cycle of poverty continues. Principal B noted;

*Some learners from low-income families are vulnerable to abuse by the people who were meant to protect them, such as teachers, by promising them food in exchange for favours, including sexual intercourse.*

Principal C reiterated, *“At times those who are sexually abused and become pregnant, eventually drop out of school, meaning their academic future stops there and then.”*

The findings from the two principals suggest that, the majority of the low-income learners are vulnerable to exploitation, where predators pretend to care and offer resources as they know these children need help, so they pretend to help while they in actual fact use these children for their benefit. These often leads to child labour, unplanned pregnancies and subsequently school dropout, thus underscoring how economic desperation can ultimately lead to, and expose these children to harmful situations and derail their educational prospects. These children are timid to report the abuse they suffer at the hands of their teachers as they may think no one will believe them.

#### ***4.3.2 Negative teachers' perception***

The data collected revealed that teachers develop biased presumptions against low-income learners and their potential based on their families' status. This creates a challenging environment for these learners, as the teachers undermine their academic abilities and thereby hinder their opportunities for advancement. The injustice often shows as reduced support from educators, who may not provide additional resources or attention to these learners, assuming that they lack the necessary aptitude and motivation. When learners are overwhelmed by social pressures and material deprivation, they struggle to perform well academically. Their difficulties may be mistaken for inherent intellectual limitations rather than consequences of their challenging family environment. Such presumptions, whether conscious or not, create a pattern of poor performance in which learners' true potential remains unrecognised and underdeveloped, eventually impeding their educational attainment and diminishing their future prospects. Principal B firmly noted;

*When learners from low-income families perform poorly in class, their teachers often presume they are incapable of performing well, whereas what they need is support and encouragement to realise their potential.*

This information indicates that teachers' views and perceptions of learners from low-income families, presents obstacles for these learners' academic work. Their teachers fail to see beyond their families' status and believe that they have low intellectual abilities, are unmotivated and lazy. Such teachers are reluctant to support learners from low-income families by providing the

materials they need for their work. This injustice continues to be revealed in the apparent denial of teachers to treat all learners equally.

#### ***4.3.3 Low-income negative perception***

From the data collected, another impediment to academic achievement is a profound negative self-perception found among impoverished learners. The feeling is brought about by the negative treatment they suffer at the hands of peers and teachers who constantly look down upon them, stigmatise and discriminate against them. In most cases, these learners experience discomfort and embarrassment because they come from poor households. In most cases they are left feeling inadequate and therefore look down upon themselves as their peers do, leading to a struggle with sense of belonging. This emotional distress can intensify into depression when they realise that their classmate's possess items they lack, items that simplifies their learning, when they realise they may never possess such items. Furthermore, the diminished self-worth can be associated with emotional burdens which significantly impair their ability to engage and focus in learning, ultimately contributing to poor academic performance.

Learner E stated, *“When children from low-income families continue to live in poverty, they end up believing that they do not have any chance for a better future.”*

These assertions suggest that some learners from low-income families can get to a point in their lives where they do not believe that they are good enough. They are accustomed to so much negativity around them and have started to believe that they are not capable. The disbelief is perpetuated by the realisation that they might never have the possessions their peers have, such as the latest gadgets that support their education, so the low-income learners end up discouraged and therefore stop trying altogether.

#### ***4.3.4 Exploring resilient factors that influence learners' academic performance.***

While poverty presents significant challenges for some low-income learners, most children demonstrate notable resilience in overcoming these obstacles and achieving academic success. Examining the protective factors that contribute to these children's resilience can offer valuable insight into potential interventions and support systems that can mitigate the negative impact of

poverty on educational outcomes. So, below, there are resilient factors associated with poverty, which are internal motivation, aspirations, and external support.

#### ***4.3.5 Internal motivation and aspiration***

Some low-income learners, despite facing several challenges associated with poverty, demonstrate exceptional determination, drive and perseverance in overcoming their day-to-day challenges. These learners are self-driven, motivated and determined to create a brighter future for themselves, a desire fuelled by a deep-rooted need to prove others wrong and display their abilities and capabilities regardless of their challenging circumstances. Another stimulus for hard work is a desire to be happy and able to afford to buy things they need and to support their families in a way that they become agents of change for their families. As they overcome these obstacles brought about by poverty, their resilience helps them act as role models and become an inspiration to others to set goals pursue, education and go after every available opportunity, teacher A added that

*Some of them work hard due to their intentional goals, they are self-motivated and want to buy things for themselves, they get self-motivated so that one day they are also able to get things for their families things like food, clothes and cars.*

The presence of self-motivation and goal-oriented behaviour among some low-income learners implies that some of these learners are focused and driven to overcome their families' lack. Their inspiration and determination is drawn from a desire and a longing to succeed. Therefore, they get inspiration from their negative home situation and determine to make a success of their lives. They perceive their lack as an opportunity to work hard, showing others that there is something they can do to better their lives and change their family situation. Their longing for a chance to afford things for themselves and their families is a driving force to excellence.

#### ***4.3.6 Support***

Teacher and peer support are significant resilient factors contributing and influencing learners from poor house-holds to succeed. Through acknowledging learners' efforts, by clapping and praising even small achievements teachers offer their support for their learners from low-income families, this support becomes a source of motivation for some of these learners. The teachers further encourage these learners, by inspiring other learners to share with them as much as they can. This

fosters a sense of belonging boost confidence and creates a sense of acceptance for children from low-income families. Peer support is also noticeable, when friends voluntarily share their school supplies offer friendship and encouragement. Having these kind of support, with people around them who believe in their abilities and capabilities, plays a vital role in motivating these learners to work hard and achieve success said teacher B

*With my experience working with little ones, I have realised that children from poorer families get motivated when the teacher is aware of their circumstances and helps them as much as possible. It helps them know that someone cares. There are also children who see needs for other children and are always willing to help.*

The extract implies that it is of benefit to the learners from low-income to have teachers and friends who are aware of their family situation, and are able to offer much needed support and care. This plays a vital role of motivating those from impoverished homes by assuring them that they matter. Also, giving learners individualised attention and some emotional support works significantly well to boost their confidence. This further serves as an encouragement for educational engagement and excellence. This clearly suggests that a loving, caring teacher towards their learners is a key factor in fostering motivation and self-worth among low-income learners.

#### ***4.3.7 To explore support systems used in the community to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on learners***

The focus of the analysis here is on exploring support systems used in the community to diminish the adverse effects of poverty on primary school learners in the Mafeteng district. The analysis examines the different forms used by organisations and communities to provide assistance to learners from poor households. Ways in which these children are supported are discussed under the provision of basic needs, financial assistance from social development and safe houses for those who need a place to stay.

#### ***4.3.8 Provision for basic needs***

The data gathered from the study reveal different positive ways in which community members support children from low-income families. There is clear evidence that these children receive food parcels from neighbours and do simple chores in exchange for food. Members of the

community also gather clothes and shoes and offer them to needy children. All these alleviate some of the stress, worry, and difficulties these children face, making it much easier for them to attend school and look the part. Additionally, some children receive stationary and other school necessities, which also provide much, need support for the low-income learners so they stop worrying about stationary and can focus on learning. Beyond the tangible items, the community also offers social and emotional support, as there are some individuals from the community who volunteer to encourage, mentor and talk to these children about anything and everything, principal A said that

*There are some community members who volunteer to give them clothes and food for those who have absolutely nothing. They also receive from other parents, motivated by their children to assist them, especially if they are well-behaved and work hard.*

Based on the provided information, the implication is that community support is vital for helping low-income children succeed academically. The donations of clothes, food parcels and school necessities provide these children with the essentials they need to thrive at school, which can have a profound positive effect on their long-term prospects. Furthermore, with the community getting involved in support for these children is a reflection of a deeper commitment to equality and education. This emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts to address the systematic issues that perpetuate poverty and disadvantage. These efforts therefore serve as models for other communities seeking to support vulnerable children and break a cycle of poverty.

#### ***4.3.9 Social development initiative***

The social development also provides assistance in a form of money, this initiative is done to support and help learners from low-income household with moneys they can use to buy school essentials. The initiative, depending on the needs of the chosen children goes as far as paying necessary fees for some of the children. This alleviates some of the stress from these learners and ensures that their day to day schooling is normal. Upon receiving financial aid, these learners can purchase essential school supplies such as pens, pencils, books and text books, which are very important for their academic success. This financial aid helps put poor learners on par with others, empowering them to fully engage in their educational experience without worrying much about their school essentials. In addition, the data reveal that social development initiatives that offer

financial aid to low-income learners contribute to improved attendance and increased academic performance.

Teacher C expressed, *“At times the school suggest vulnerable learners to the social department, which assists by paying necessary fees for the children.”*

By referring some needy children to the social department, the school shows it is aware of the link between poverty and academic success. So, by referring these learners to the proper support systems the school plays a vital part of showing assistance to the poorer children. This suggests that even though schools cannot directly offer financial relief, they are, however, willing to collaborate with different bodies that are able to offer much-needed relief and assistance—opening doors for a collaborative partnership between schools and social welfare sectors for the benefit of those in need. This assistance programs offer crucial support that directly addresses some barriers to low-income learners’ education, enabling them to attend school and access necessary materials.

#### ***4.3.10 Provision of shelter***

In the Mafeteng district, the support network for learners from low-income families goes beyond mere provision of basic necessities and financial assistance, offering a lifeline in a form of safe accommodation for some learners. These safe homes provide a secure environment, allowing learners to focus on their studies and personal growth without worrying about being homeless. When these children have a place they can call home, they feel empowered and less vulnerable, build resilience, and have a chance to unlock their full potential.

Learner B from school A noted, *“The donations come in form of clothes and places to stay for others.”*

This suggests that, the provision of accommodation serves as a critical form of support, addressing a fundamental need for stability and security, giving individuals an access to a safe place that is filled with assistance and opportunities and warmth. This highlights the importance of each one taking responsibility in supporting the poor, and how much little stepping stones can provide needed support and assistance.

#### **4.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The findings of this chapter showcase significant risk factors born from financial hardships, which are evident in the inability for some low-income learners to afford basic essential school necessities, such as books, stationary and proper school uniform leading to social challenges. These are further compounded by psychological burdens in a form of exploitation against the disadvantaged learners' negative teacher and self-perception of some of the affected learners. Regardless of these formidable obstacles, the study highlights key resilient factors that include both internal and external motivation that comes from teachers and peers. Lastly, the study also uncovered the vital role played by the community through their tangible assistance with basic needs, shelter as well as financial aid offered by the social development initiatives. Collectively this data shows a complex reality where systematic barriers are met with personal resilience and communal support.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **5.0 Introduction**

The primary objective of this study was to explore academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district. The previous chapter focused on data presentation, analysis and interpretation. The current chapter discusses the findings of the study. The findings were discussed in line with the research objectives and themes that emerged from the results.

#### **5.1 Discussions**

This part of the study examines the discussions of findings presented in the previous chapter. The discussion employs the theory and related literature discussed in Chapter 2. The study's objectives also guide the discussions, beginning with academic risk factors associated with poverty.

##### **5.1.1 Academic Risk Factors Associated with Poverty**

The findings in this study revealed that there are academic risk factors associated with poverty, which are financial constraints, lack of basic needs required at school, social and emotional challenges, and responsibilities at home. The principals, teachers and learners revealed that financial constraints are a hindrance for the majority of learners from low-income backgrounds. A substantial proportion of these learners are not able to pay the necessary fees and contributions required by their schools, such as registration fees, computer fees and other mandatory expenses. This resulted in several negative consequences, including exclusion from specific lessons or activities and eventually absenteeism.

A lack of basic needs such as food, uniforms and stationery also compounds the financial constraints. The absence of stationery, such as exercise books, pens and textbooks, prevented low-income learners from writing and copying given work on time, as they at times waited at the mercy of their peers to finish and lend them. In cases where that does not happen, their academic performance drops, leaving them unfocused, unmotivated and discouraged. It was found that learners from low-income families are often unable to access school necessities, such as proper

school uniforms and shoes. They often came to school with torn and worn-out clothes and shoes, so the low-income children were laughed at, pointed out and humiliated. This also opened doors for humour among some learners, who ridiculed the needy and mocked their needs and appearance.

The ridicule stole their focus from learning as they were constantly worried about the way others viewed them. These left them feeling unsafe, embarrassed and not part of the school body. All these led to a loss of interest and focus. The inability to focus due to lack was established by Payen (2023), who stated that poverty can have a significant impact on students' ability to focus and concentrate in class. Payen (2023) further states that constant stress and worrying due to poverty can result in activated stress, which in turn leads to difficulty for learners to retain information and do well academically. This also aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory (1979), primarily at the microsystem level. This treatment occurs in the learner's immediate environment, which is the school.

Learners who have face-to-face interaction with learners from poor families ridicule them, making their experience at school negative as learners from poor families do not enjoy themselves at school. The foregoing indicates how the lack of certain school necessities leads to humiliation and ridicule from peers, which is a direct interaction within the microsystem. The resulting stress of being ridiculed makes it difficult for the affected learners to focus, leading to a drop in their academic performance. This is a precise example of how factors within the microsystem influence learners' development and well-being.

The study findings also revealed substantial social and emotional challenges connected to poverty, particularly in terms of stigma and discrimination experienced by some low-income learners. The participants claimed that there were clear patterns of side-lining and marginalisation that the disadvantaged went through, which worsened as some teachers assumed that some of the disadvantaged learners were not able to succeed academically at all. Such teachers assumed these learners were lazy, lacked focus and did not put any effort into their studies. The discrimination was also perpetuated by peers, leading to feelings of isolation, depression, and even substance abuse for some of the low-income learners.

Similar findings were also discussed, as revealed by Dos Santos and Reiner (2021), who emphasised the significant emotional challenges faced by some low-income learners, including feeling frustrated, shameful and hopeless. They further asserted that poverty can have a devastating impact on children's psychological well-being, compromising their ability to thrive academically. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Theory (1979), the school environment (microsystem) is meant to provide a safe, supportive environment for all learners. However, for some low-income learners, this is not the case. These learners are discriminated against side-lined treated differently from their peers, which turn out to be a significant barrier to their education. This different treatment denies them equal opportunities to those their peers receive creating a hostile and unsupportive learning environment that exacerbates the difficulties they already face.

Furthermore, the current study discovered that poor hygiene can lead to social stigma and isolation for some learners from low income. This is because some of them had limited to no hygiene products at all, leaving them with strong, unpleasant body odours. Some peers, therefore, purposefully excluded these learners from low-income backgrounds due to the strong body smells, leading to missed learning and socialising opportunities. This came as a result of their appearance and due to lack of proper hygiene products, which opened doors to feelings of shame, embarrassment and loneliness. Williams (2020) explains that poor hygiene can also be linked with poverty; he mentioned that learners from poor households often lack access to basic hygiene products such as soap, toothpaste and clean clothes, which leads to stigmatisation and exclusion from some school activities, and eventually poor performance. William (2020) further states that poor hygiene among low-income learners can significantly undermine academic performance by adding to social interactions and academic disengagement.

The current study suggests that some peers may exclude these learners from group projects, leaving them with feelings of shame and embarrassment, which may directly distract them from focusing on learning. This also aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological System Theory (1979) within the school environment or the microsystem where poor hygiene may leave the low-income learners to stigmatisation and exclusion where they need to be included in order to fully do well. The disadvantaged robs them of them of the support system they need, which is being part of a group, getting opportunities to socialise and build relationships as well as developing important life skills

as others are constantly choosing to stay away from them. Eventually these unwelcoming tendencies add on to a hostile environment that undermines poor learners' self-esteem and academic engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)

The current study also found that some children from low-income families are burdened with significant responsibilities at home. These children care for their siblings or even do odd jobs to support their families. This interferes with their studies and even leads to absenteeism, dropping out of school entirely. In his study, Shipler (2004) established that some children from low-income families often take on responsibilities in caring for their younger siblings, which impacts their ability to focus on school work and achieve academic success. These children also often miss school to care for their sick siblings or to handle household chores creating more distraction against school work. This can lead to chronic truancy, poorer academics, and in some cases the learners may drop out of school completely as they cannot juggle school work and responsibilities of family. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory (1979), particularly at the microsystem and mesosystem levels.

The child's immediate environment has a direct impact on their education. The children carry burdens of caring responsibilities at home, such as taking care of siblings and doing odd jobs to support families. These family responsibilities are part of the child's microsystem. These family's responsibilities interfere with the children's studies leading to absenteeism and dropping out completely for some. The research finding further demonstrates a breakdown or conflict within the mesosystem. The family's demand for caring for the siblings are a direct conflict with the demands of the school that requires a learner to attend classes, focus on school work and achieve academic excellence. It is indicated that responsibilities at home impact school work indicating a clear conflict between home and school environment, which is the core of the mesosystem. In this case the mesosystem is not functioning effectively to support the child's development as pressure from home negatively affects the child's ability to thrive academically.

### ***5.1.2 Ways in which the risk factors associated with poverty influence students' academic performance***

The findings indicated that there is a clear exploitation of some of the low-income learners. This was evident when participants claimed that certain opportunistic individuals prey on the needs of

the poor learners and take advantage by overworking them for limited or no pay. The odd jobs these children take hinder them from entirely focusing on their studies, because they at times work during school hours, meaning they may never get to catch up on the schoolwork done in their absence. There is also extreme evidence of exploitation, which includes sexual abuse, resulting in unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, which adds to the already burdened families. The worst consequence after pregnancy is when learners who become pregnant have their academic future abruptly halted, resulting in a child growing up to raise yet another child in poverty, thereby creating a cycle of vulnerable children.

These situations demonstrate how exploitation not only affects the individual learner's education and well-being but also contributes to the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Currie et al. (2016) indicate that low-income female learners are disproportionately vulnerable to early pregnancy and eventually dropping out of school. In particular, Currie et al. (2016) realised that the majority of poorer female learners were at high risk of sexual coercion and exploitation by older male partners, as well as those who exchange sex with the poorer females in exchange for material resources. The above findings indicate how the complex, interconnected layers of the environment shape a child's development. The alignment with Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory (1979) is across all levels. At the macrosystem level, it is illustrated how broad societal issues like poverty and lack of social safety nets create chances for exploitation of low-income learners and the perpetuation of intergenerational poverty. The exosystem is made visible by the school system. A setting a child has no control over, yet it fails to offer adequate support to learners who are being exploited. That exploitation later becomes a hindrance to their academic future. The direct abuse and exploitative relationships undergone by some of the vulnerable learners clearly show a breakdown within their microsystem. The negative impact of these traumas on their ability to continue in school reveals an apparent conflict within their mesosystem.

Regarding negative perceptions of teachers toward low-income learners' educational experiences and outcomes, some teachers tend to make biased presumptions about these learners. They assume the low-income learners are unmotivated, lazy and that they lack aptitude simply because of their family's status. The consequences of ill-treatment are a challenging environment where teachers undermine impoverished learners' academic abilities, resulting in reduced support and limited

opportunities for advancement. This eventually becomes a stumbling block to educational attainment and diminished academic goals. Bazzato et al. (2016) found that some teachers hold negative perceptions of low-income learners. These teachers believe that these learners are unmotivated and lack the intelligence and motivation required to succeed academically. This negative perception then influences how they interact with these learners. The main problem with these findings, according to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory (1979), within the microsystem is that, since the school environment plays a critical role in learning and development, teachers' negative attitudes towards low-income learners can significantly impact their educational experiences and outcomes.

The current study also found that negative self-perception played a significant role in hindering the academic success of impoverished learners. Some of these children are overcome with feelings of inadequacy, which is rooted in the negative treatment, discrimination and stigmatisation they experience from their peers and their teachers. The negative treatment is mainly prompted by their family's poor background, which leaves them uncomfortable and embarrassed. These feelings rob them of focus in their studies, as they do with their peers. Furthermore, the findings indicated that the continuation of the emotional distress can be so intense that it leads to depression as they realise that they may never possess some items that their peers have.

Subsequently, the diminished self-worth created emotional burdens that significantly impaired the impoverished learner's ability to focus and engage fully in their academics. As Bazzato et al. (2016) state, the majority of learners from low-income families perceive themselves as incapable towards achieving academic success. This negative self-perception attributes their hardships to personal shortcomings rather than to societal inequality. This negative self-perception can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, undermining impoverished learners' confidence and motivation, which further hampers their educational progress. Negative self-perception among impoverished learners highlights the broader impact society has on children's development. Specifically, the macrosystem of attitudes and culture surrounding poverty and academic achievement can influence the mesosystem — the interaction between the macrosystem and the child's experiences in school. In this case, the school, through teachers and peers, can stigmatise and marginalise

students, thereby reinforcing negative self-perceptions. According to Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), such social processes further entrench these perceptions.

### ***5.1.3 Resilience factors that influence learners from low-income families' academic performance***

The study's findings indicated that, although the majority of low-income learners face risks to their academic performance, they have demonstrated strong internal motivation, determination, and aspiration. Some of these children possess the inner drive to showcase remarkable perseverance, despite coming from limited backgrounds. Their motivation is perpetuated by the desire to prove to themselves, their peers and everyone around them that they are capable of greatness. They also work hard to achieve independence and happiness, enabling them to buy things for themselves and take care of their families. With this desire burning within them, they strive to become agents of change and role models to others. Most of them eagerly seize every opportunity to create a brighter future for themselves. In their study, Dettling et al. (2018) found that some low-income learners possess a crucial intrinsic motivation that helps them overcome significant challenges and achieve remarkable academic success. While nurturing the inner drive that these learners have, their strong self-determination, purpose, and resilience are acknowledged.

This finding emphasises that, although poverty can greatly hinder academic achievement, some learners possess a powerful internal drive that enables them to overcome obstacles and succeed academically. In the context of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), the self-driven, self-defined disadvantaged learners who succeed can be said to have a strong sense of agency within the school environment (microsystem). Despite adverse influences from the family, peers and societal structures and policies, these learners have the ability to create positive niches within their immediate environment to support their academic success.

From the current study, the findings demonstrate how teachers and some peers offer support to some low-income learners. Both are identified as significant resilient factors that offer assistance, enabling disadvantaged learners to perform well academically. Teachers play a crucial role in recognising efforts, applauding achievements, and encouraging these learners to work hard, assuring them that they have what it takes to succeed. According to Evans (2006), receiving support from teachers and peers creates a sense of belonging and safety within the school

environment, with that, positive coping mechanisms are also established which are essential in assisting low-income learners overcome negative effects of poverty on their education as well as their well-being. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) also states that within the microsystem, teachers play an important role towards shaping the experiences and outcomes of lower-income learners. Teachers, as primary agents within the microsystem, play a highly significant role in shaping learners' learning and social experiences, which, in turn, influence academic work. When supportive, inclusive classrooms are created and supported, they promote diversity and command respect for teachers. This support eventually influences other learners to emulate these attitudes and behaviours, further fostering supportive, kind, accepting environments. This, in turn, creates a school microsystem where all learners, regardless of their background, feel loved, accepted and respected, fostering a sense of belonging that adds on to improved academic and social outcomes for all.

The teachers have also taught other children to care and share with the disadvantaged, which gives them a great sense of belonging, boosts their confidence, and fosters motivation. Similarly, peer support is visible when friends volunteer to share school supplies with those in need, offer friendship, and offer encouragement. Dettling et al. (2018) added that caring, supportive relationships of low-income learners that come from teachers and peers can greatly enhance self-efficacy, motivation and resilience of low-income learners, giving them the ability to overcome challenges and reach desired academic success. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological theory (1979) suggests that nurturing, kind and positive relationships within the microsystem can overcome negative influences that disadvantaged learners constantly face, such as discrimination and poverty. The presence of empathetic, understanding, and kind classmates and teachers creates a supportive environment that fosters resilience and self-love among disadvantaged learners, which will be a substantial boost to their academic work.

#### ***5.1.4 Support systems used in the community to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on learners***

The findings regarding the support offered by the community indicate that community members play a significant role in providing necessities to low-income learners. They showed their support by offering food parcels in exchange for simple chores such as picking crops from the garden, cleaning, and helping with household chores. They also collected clothes and shoes and

redistributed them to the children in need. Furthermore, some children received stationery and other school necessities, which significantly reduced their worries and enabled them to focus on their studies. Beyond tangible things, the community also offered emotional and social support through mentors and volunteers, who encouraged and built them up in difficult times.

The foregoing alleviated some pressure on low-income learners, making their lives much easier and giving them confidence that their family situation is not permanent. Evans and Resch (2017) reveal an important role the community plays in providing and supporting low-income learners with essentials. Their study emphasised the importance of community initiatives, such as food banks, clothing drives, and after-school programs, that address basic needs and help reduce some of the challenges associated with poverty. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) highlights the influence of the microsystem (the community) on poorer learners. The theory highlights the importance of ensuring that each child's basic needs are met, enabling them to shift their focus from a lack of basic needs to attaining education. The help also reduces stress, as concerns and worries about necessities are reduced, ensuring the disadvantaged also have a chance to focus on their schoolwork fully. This shows the critical role that receiving support play in empowering children towards their success in their academics and life in general.

The other finding on support is which social development initiative offers. The development offers much needed financial assistance to some low-income learners, these help is a direct monetary aid, which is used to purchase much needed school essentials. It is mentioned how the financial assistance comes in handy and also alleviates some stress brought about by lack, when stress is alleviated these learners get to focus on their academics and stand a chance to do really well. Furthermore, the assistance has proven to really boost academic work as those receiving help are said to attend school better and thereby increasing even the academic performance. The school also plays a vital role as it refers vulnerable learners to the Ministry of Social Development for help with school fees, showcasing an awareness of the link between poverty and academic success. O'Connor and McCartney (2007) highlight the important and significant benefits of social development programs in addressing the needs of disadvantaged learners. Their study found out that the social development programs offer a range of benefits, which include essential resources, and safe inclusive environment and positive friendships which all counter the negative effects of

poverty on learner's development. Regarding Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979), the issuing of financial and material support for disadvantaged learners through social development initiatives can be viewed as a key mesosystem relationship. This kind of support happens at the interface between the microsystem which in this case is a school environment and the exosystem which a community or family, the exchange of resources creates a more equitable environment for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The study also found that the support networks for some disadvantaged children extend beyond financial aid and basic necessities; there are also accommodations or safe houses where these children can stay. The shelter can be said to be a critical lifeline that comes with stability, a safe secure environment and a sense of belonging, when those parts are covered learners can easily focus on their studies and personal growth. It is at the safe houses where some of these learners are provided with a crucial foundation, where they are empowered and offered a chance to realise their full potential. Leventhal and Newman (2010) found a relationship between housing insecurity and poor academic performance. Housing instability can be a hindrance to a child's development and academic performance, suggesting that it is important that vulnerable children are offered stable housing. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory (1979) suggests that at the microsystem level the disadvantaged children receive benefits from the supportive networks that offer not only financial assistance but also made available accommodation and safe houses. The safe houses served as a critical lifeline giving to the disadvantaged the much-needed stability through secure environment, as well as a sense of belonging. When a child has stability, their academic performance is positively affected, shaped, and their full potential can also be fully realised.

## **5.2 Conclusions**

The current study explored academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in Primary Schools in the Mafeteng District. This section concludes the research findings, guided by the research objectives.

### ***5.2.1 Academic risk factors associated with poverty***

When examining academic risk factors associated with poverty, the study concludes that low-income learners face several risk factors, including financial constraints, a lack of necessities, poor hygiene, and increased responsibilities.

Financial constraints represent a significant obstacle to the academic achievement of learners from poorer families. These barriers are a clear indication of a lack of access to basic needs, such as uniforms, food, and stationery, which, in turn, lead to negative outcomes such as exclusion from school activities and truancy. Moreover, without the necessary school essentials such as books and pens, the low-income learners are unable to fully participate in class, resulting in a decline in academic performance. At the end, these obstacles leave low-income learners discouraged, unfocused, and unmotivated, underscoring the need for support that directly addresses the financial difficulties faced by learners from low-income families.

There also seems to be a significant negative impact on low-income learners' psychological well-being and on their academic success. Some low-income learners come across serious social and emotional challenges that include discrimination and stigmatisation from teachers and peers. The aftermath of these is isolation, shame and depression, which can compromise their ability to excel academically.

It seems that poor hygiene among disadvantaged learners can be a source of isolation and social stigma. With a lack of access to hygiene products, the disadvantaged have strong body odours, causing their peers to sideline them purposefully. When excluded, they sometimes miss learning and socialising opportunities, which eventually lead to embarrassment, shame and loneliness.

Furthermore, children from low-income families are burdened with significant family responsibilities, such as caregiving and contributing to family livelihoods by doing odd jobs. These impact their childhood experiences and educational outcomes and could also affect their emotional well-being.

### ***5.2.2 Ways in which the risk factors associated with poverty influence learners' academic performance***

Poverty has far-reaching and clear risk factors that influence low-income learners' lives. There is clear exploitation, negative teacher perceptions and negative self-perceptions.

Participants reported that low-income learners face significant exploitation; those exploiting them add to the vulnerability of the disadvantaged and further perpetuate the cycle of poverty. This is seen as the opportunistic individuals prey on the low-income learners, using them in odd jobs during times they were supposed to be in class, leading to them being behind in their school work. There is also an indication of sexual abuse, which results in unwanted pregnancies, that halt their academic journey. Eventually, the impact is not only felt by the individual learners but also adds to the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Furthermore, participants noted that teachers' negative perceptions of low-income learners impede progress toward their educational success. Most of these teachers, most of the time, hold biased presumptions, viewing and labelling the disadvantaged as unmotivated, lazy and without zeal to work hard, just because of the families they come from. This terrible treatment gives rise to a challenging classroom environment, where teachers do not see beyond the disadvantages of these learners but instead undermine them and their academic abilities. This leads to limited support and limited opportunities for advancement. Ultimately, the negative perceptions act as a stumbling block to obtaining a good education within the school environment, leading to adverse educational outcomes.

Lastly, negative self-perceptions among low-income learners play a major role in impeding their academic success. The feeling of inadequacy is rooted in some of these learners, brought about by the blatant discrimination, stigmatisation, and always being side-lined by both peers and teachers, just because of their family's background. These lead to feelings of discomfort, embarrassment and eventually become a hindrance to good academic work, due to the intense emotional distress, even depression. With the diminished self-worth a profound emotional burden that severely impairs learner's capacity to fully engage effectively in academics is created.

### ***5.2.3 Resilient factors that influence learners from poor families' academic performance***

While poverty-related risks can pose a great challenge for learners, some resilient factors such as internal motivation and teacher and peer support, this have found to be crucial in assisting some low income learners overcome obstacles.

A key conclusion regarding resilient factors among low-income learners is the possession of a strong internal drive and aspiration, which assists them to overcome education risks. These learners showcase an inner drive to push and prove to others that they are capable and have what it takes to succeed academically. Some of these learners are driven by a deep-seated desire to become independent, to be able to provide for their families and to find happiness in the ability to purchase items they want. This motivation transforms them into agents of change and role models, who make use of every opportunity granted to them to build a better future for themselves.

Participants also reported that positive support from both teachers and peers play a significant role in showing support towards their disadvantaged learners and friends. Teachers, through recognising, applauding even the smallest achievement and by encouraging others to work with them and share with the disadvantaged, play a crucial role. There are also peers who support the disadvantaged by sharing with them and including them in activities. These supportive relationships are crucial, as they instil a sense of belonging, boost confidence and motivation. All of these are vital for overcoming disadvantages, improving grades and fostering personal growth.

### ***5.2.4 Support systems used in the community to mitigate the negative effects of poverty on learners***

Participants reported that community support systems are critical in alleviating the negative outcomes of poverty on learners. The community offers tangible items to the needy children, such as clothes, shoes, food parcels and stationery. These directly meet some of the basic needs and therefore promote good attendance in school. The importance of the items offered reduces the needy children's worries and affords them an opportunity to focus on their schoolwork. The support from the community extends beyond tangible items, as there is also emotional and social support through volunteers and mentors. It is through mentorship that confidence for the needy is built, ensuring that they are able to bounce back even after difficult times.

Support for the disadvantaged also comes from the social development and the initiatives within it that are meant to offer support for the needy. It is through the initiatives within social development that direct financial aid is provided, which is highly important as it offers the disadvantaged learners a chance to buy educational necessities they need. With this support, it has been proven to boost academic performance, as learners have very little to worry about, allowing all their attention to be on their learning. Furthermore, the school also plays a vital role in connecting the needy children with the Ministry of Social Development for assistance with school fees, showing just how important it is to have proper links in the way towards reducing poverty's grip and opening ways to academic excellence.

Lastly, support networks for needy children extend beyond providing school necessities and financial aid. They also include accommodation in the form of safe houses or shelters. These safe places offer safety, stability and place for the disadvantaged to belong. The safe houses come with some normality and consistency enabling the children to fully focus on their studies and do well.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made regarding the study's findings and conclusions on the prevalence of academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district.

The findings demonstrated that low-income learners face academic risks daily. These risks burden the learners and ultimately affect their studies. Therefore, to promote equity and foster academic success for all learners, schools must prioritise implementing interventions and support systems aimed at helping learners succeed academically. This could include creating programs that offer additional academic support, such as after-school tutoring and mentorship schemes, while ensuring all learners have access to educational essentials such as stationery, textbooks, and computers. By addressing gaps and inequalities, learners can be empowered to reach their full potential and participate equally in educational opportunities.

Furthermore, implementing anti-bullying and anti-discrimination programs should be a priority to promote good relations among all learners and teachers, as well as among learners regardless of their family background. This will nurture a positive learning environment where everyone feels they belong. Additionally, educators and communities can establish supportive and safe spaces

where those who have been harmed, sexually abused, or taken advantage of can seek help and support, while perpetrators are removed from the school community. Lastly, to gain a clearer understanding of the lived experiences and academic challenges faced by children from needy families, future research should prioritize the voices and perspectives of those learners themselves. Furthermore, researchers can uncover deeper nuances and complexities of how poverty truly impacts a child's educational journey. Valuable recommendations, insights, and strengths can be gathered directly from those affected.

#### 5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter deals with the multifaceted nature of poverty and how learners living in poverty are impacted academically and socially. While poverty-related risks can bring challenges and setbacks, this chapter puts an emphasis on the importance of identifying and nurturing the protective factors that bring about resilience and positive educational outcomes for disadvantaged learners. To have teachers and friends that offer support and assistance, as well as social development initiatives that address the unique needs of disadvantaged learners. All these can bring about the mitigation of negative effects brought about by poverty on their overall wellbeing of the disadvantaged learners and on their educational achievement.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

Mafeteng A.C.E  
P.O. Box 112  
Mafeteng 900  
Lesotho

08<sup>th</sup> May 2025

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Dear Sir/Madam

#### **Re: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY**

I, **Malira Khutlane**, am a Master's student at the National University of Lesotho. One of the requirements of my studies is to complete a dissertation on topical issues in education. In line with this requirement, I am conducting a study on **exploring academic risks and resilient factors**

**associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng District.** A request to collect data for this study was approved by the District Education Manager (Mafeteng) and the school's Principal. I therefore request that you participate in this study voluntarily. The information you provide will be used for academic purposes only, and your name and that of your school will be kept anonymous. Descriptions will also be done in a manner that will not reveal your identity or that of your school.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign in the spaces provided below.

_____	_____
Malira Rebecca Khutlane	Date
_____	_____
Name of the participant	Signature

**Appendix 2**

Mafeteng A.C.E  
P.O. Box 112  
Mafeteng 900  
Lesotho

08<sup>th</sup> May 2025

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY**

I, **Malira Khutlane**, am a Master's student at the National University of Lesotho. One of the requirements of my studies is to complete a dissertation on topical issues in education. In line with this requirement, I am conducting a study on **exploring academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng District.** A request to collect data for this study was approved by the District Education Manager (Mafeteng). As the principal of this school, I therefore request that you participate in this study voluntarily. The information you

provide will be used for academic purposes only, and your name and that of your school will be kept anonymous. Descriptions will also be done in a manner that will not reveal your identity or that of your school.

If you agree to participate in this study, please sign in the spaces provided below.

Malira Rebecca Khutlane	Date
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### Appendix 3

Mafeteng A.C.E  
P.O. Box 112  
Mafeteng 900  
Lesotho

La8- Mots'eanong  
2025

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Mongali /Mofumahali

#### **TABA: KOPO EA HO ETSA BOITHUTO**

'Na, 'Malira Rebecca Khutlane, ke moithuti oa Sekolo se sohoho sa sechaba National University of Lesotho (Roma) ka lengolo la (Masters). E ngoe ea lintho tseo ke lokelang ho li etsa ho phethela lithuto ke ho ngola tokomane sehlohong se reng **Ho hlahloba liqholotso tse amanang le bohloki le bokhoni ba phunyeletso ba bana likolong tsa mathomo seterekeng sa Mafeteng**. Ke kopile tumello ho bookameli ba lekala la thuto Mafeteng le ho Mosuo e hlooho sekolong sa ngoana oa hao, ho fuputsa maikutlo le bophelo ba bana sehlohong se boletsoeng. Ke ea kopa ke hona ka

boikokobetso hore o re lokollele ngoana ka boithaopo ho ba karolo ea boithuto bona. Litaba tsena li ke ke tsa hlalisa mabitso a ngoana kapa sekolo ka ha e le sebakeng sa boithuto feela ho tla sebelisoa mekhoha eohle sebakeng sa tsireletseho ea ngoana le sekolo..

Ha e ba o ananela litaba tsena, kopo ke hore u ngola lebitso la ngoana le la hao le boitekeno bo pakang ka tlasana leqepheng mona.

_____	_____
Mabitso a ngoana	Letsatsi
_____	_____
Mabitso a motsoali	Boitekeno

Ka boikokobetso Malira Rebecca Khutlane.

#### **Appendix 4**

#### **Exploring academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng district.**

#### **Research Questions**

#### **What academic risk factors are associated with poverty in the Mafeteng district?**

##### **Questions for Principals and Teachers**

##### **Questions for learners**

Please describe the academic challenges faced by learners from low-income backgrounds in their day-to-day schooling.

Please describe the academic challenges faced by learners from low-income backgrounds in their day-to-day schooling.

Ke kopa le ntlhalosetse liqholotso tseo bana ba hlokang ba tobaneng le tsona malebana le lithuto tsa bona.

**How do risk factors associated with poverty influence students' academic performance?**

**Questions for teachers and principals**

**Questions for learners**

How do the challenges affect their school work?

How do the challenges affect their school work?

In what way does poverty influence learners' academic work?

Liqholotso tseo li ama joang mosebetsi oa bona oa sekolo?

**What resilient factors in school influence students from poor families to succeed in primary schools in the Mafeteng district?**

**Questions for teachers and principals**

**Questions for learners**

What factors within the school help learners from poor families in their academic work

What factors within the school help learners from low-income families in their academic work

How do learners from poor families build perseverance in their educational pursuits despite their poverty?

Ke lintho li fe tse susumetsang bana ba futsanehileng ho sebetsa ka thata sekolong?

**What support systems are used in the community to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on students?**

**Questions for teachers and principals**

**Questions for learners**

Please explain the support systems in place in communities to help children from low-income families.

Please explain the support systems in place in communities to help children from low-income families.

Ke thuso e fe eo bana ba hlokang ba e fuoang motseng?

Appendix 5

Lesotho

The National University of

Telephone: +266  
22340601/3631

Fax: +266 22340000  
<http://www.nul.ls>



P.O. Roma 180  
Lesotho

Africa

8<sup>th</sup> May 2025

District Education Manager  
Mafeteng  
Lesotho

Dear Sir

**Re: Request to collect data from Primary schools in Mafeteng**

Malira Rebecca Khutlane (Student Number: 201704127) is a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at the National University of Lesotho. One of the requirements of this programme is to conduct a study on topical issues in education. Due to this requirement, she is conducting a study titled "Exploring Academic Risks and Resilient Factors Associated with Poverty in Primary Schools in the Mafeteng District. "

I therefore request that she be allowed to collect data from learners, teachers, and principals in selected schools as shown below:

1. St Gerard Primary
2. Mafeteng LECSA
3. Matholeng Primary

Thank You.



Retšelisitsoe Matheolane (PhD)

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## Appendix 6: Language editing Certificate

### The National University of Lesotho

Telephone: +26622340601  
Fax: +26622340000  
<http://www.nul.ls>



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Lesotho  
Africa

[lgmatee78@gmail.com](mailto:lgmatee78@gmail.com) / [lg.matee@nul.ls](mailto:lg.matee@nul.ls)

Extension number: 3761

### Faculty of Education

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24th August 2025

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Certification of Language Editing**

This is to certify that the Master of Education dissertation entitled “Exploring academic risks and resilient factors associated with poverty in primary schools in the Mafeteng District” by ‘Malira Rebecca Khutlane has been language edited by Lihotetso Gloria Matee, an English Language Education lecturer in the Department of Language and Social Education, Faculty of Education, National University of Lesotho.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink.

Lihotetso Matee  
(Department of Language and Social Education)

# Appendix 7: similarity Index



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