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## Comprehending Secondary School Underperformance from The Perspective of Psychosocial Factors

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### *Abstract*

*This paper examines the underperformance of secondary schools through a psychosocial lens within a qualitative, empirical framework grounded in Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Using a case study design, data were collected through interviews and observations from five persistently underperforming secondary schools in the Vhembe District. Participants included principals, educators, learners (RCL members), and parents (SGB members). Thematic content analysis and the constant comparative method were used to interpret the data. Findings reveal three key psychosocial contributors to poor performance: street-hawking, which distracts learners; an unclean schooling environment, which hampers focus; and initiation rites, which delay academic progress. The study concludes that psychosocial factors play a significant role in school underperformance and should not be overlooked. It recommends that schools adopt proactive measures to identify and mitigate these factors to enhance academic outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Learners, Perspective, Psychosocial factors, Secondary schools, Underperformance.

### Introduction

The underperformance of secondary schools has been intensively studied. However, an attempt to comprehend underperformance from the point of view of psychosocial factors is a fertile ground for research. This article explores how psychosocial factors contribute to the poor performance of numerous secondary schools in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Therefore, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of factors that hinder learners in secondary schools from achieving educational excellence. Studies by Farooq *et al.* (2020) and Yinusa and Akanle (2008) showed that various psychosocial factors have a significant influence on learners' academic performance in secondary schools in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. Another study by Kirui and Kaluyu (2018) indicates that psychological and social factors may contribute to poor learning and low academic performance in secondary schools (Lamb & Warton, 2017; Ramos, Zincke & Valenzuela, 2022). Approaching this paper from a psychosocial perspective is admission that the underperformance of secondary schools is not as simple as it looks (Mabena, Mokgosi & Ramapela, 2021). Psychosocial factors are possible threats to learners' academic performance. Various factors could influence the poor performance of secondary schools ranging from psychological to social factors (Lamb & Warton, 2017; Ramos Zincke & Valenzuela, 2022). One of the conservative social factors is street hawking by secondary school learners, which makes them arrive home too tired to carry on with their studies (Nawaz, Liaqat, Rasheed & Fatima, 2020; Hako & Shikongo, 2019). Further, street hawking might result in numerous psychosocial atrocities that may result in risky behaviour which is likely to influence

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underperformance (Gang, Han & Bansa, 2019; Maala & Mkandawire, 2022).

Various stakeholders involved in the education terrain are concerned with the problem of underachievement in secondary schools around the area of study. Considering that annually, Limpopo Province struggles to make it to the top three in terms of performance in grade 12 results, there is a need to study the problem of underperformance from a peculiar perspective (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). For the past five years, the performance of learners in the province has not been impressive. In 2020, the grade 12 pass percentage was 68.2%, 66.7% in 2021, 72.1% in 2022, 79.5% in 2023 and 85.01% in 2024 (Limpopo Department of Education, 2024). The poor performance of secondary schools in Vhembe District is possibly attributed to numerous psychosocial factors affecting learners. However, a survey of the available literature indicates that how these factors influence poor performance has not yet been determined. In conclusion, this study sought to explore how psychosocial factors influence the academic underperformance of learners in secondary schools in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province (Kreifels & Warton, 2018; Harris & Jones, 2020; Aleem, 2016; Rahman et al., 2020).

## **Literature Review**

This section discusses psychosocial factors contributing to secondary school learners' underperformance in the study area. It focuses on violence in schools, street hawking by learners and initiation rites as some of the key contributors to underperformance. The literature indicates that psychosocial factors experienced in institutions of learning in Vhembe District could lead to underperformance in secondary schools. The implication is that schools that are serious about overturning the problem need to prioritise the removal of psychosocial threats in their terrain. This could be accomplished through remedial interventions aimed at identifying and mitigating psychosocial factors that bring about underperformance.

### **Learners' underperformance**

Underperformance is a grave issue in the South African secondary education system, and can be attributed to numerous psychosocial factors. Heystek (2015) states that the greatest challenge faced by South African school principals is to improve academic results. Legislation such as the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) requires that principals of underperforming schools should develop a school academic improvement plan aimed at addressing the problem. Learners at the selected secondary schools in Vhembe District face significant psychosocial challenges that negatively affect both their wellness and that of the educators, ultimately resulting in low quality teaching and learning (Modisaotsile, 2012; Spaul, 2013). Schools in Vhembe District are underperforming, seemingly due to various psychosocial stressors that affect the wellbeing of both educators and learners (Setlhare, Wood & Meyer, 2016; Mzobe & Chinaka, 2024). The most pertinent psychosocial variables learners face include concerns with substance and drug abuse, socio-economic status, separation and divorce, domestic violence, and conflict-driven dysfunctional families (Stats SA, 2018). They also include negative environmental factors such as gangsterism, bullying and stigmatisation (Setlhare et al., 2016); personal factors such as teenage pregnancies and substance abuse (Department of Basic Education [DoE] 2013); and personal mental health factors such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), learning disorders (Grosser, 2016), depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Strydom, Pretorius & Joubert, 2012). As a response to the need to support schools to improve the overall well-being of their children and the community around them, the South African government initiated the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) in 2012 (South Africa, 2012).

The literature revealed that psychosocial problems occur in a wide variety of settings and often hurt learners' psychological health and academic performance (Kraak et al., 2016; Kolo et al., 2017; Buthelezi, 2018; Badenhorst & Radile, 2018). Hako and Shikongo (2019) aver that every learner suffers from psychological and social difficulties not because of physical challenges, but due to human nature, characterised by limited capabilities, expectations and interpretations of prevailing situations. The most pertinent psychosocial factors faced by learners include poverty, absent parents, domestic violence, parents' physical and mental health (Stats SA, 2018); negative environmental factors such as gangsterism, bullying and stigmatisation (Setlhare et al., 2016); individual factors such as teenage pregnancies and substance abuse (DoE, 2013); and lastly, personal mental health factors such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and learning disorders such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Grosser, 2016; Strydom, Pretorius & Joubert, 2012; Yefeni et al., 2021; Balis & Dura, 2016; Bytamaret et al., 2017; Sohrab, Gracia & Paixão, 2020; Yefei, Han & Chang, 2021).

#### Violence as a psychosocial factor

The literature revealed that violence in secondary schools is a persistent psychosocial factor in the South African education system, which also affects performance in secondary schools. Underperforming schools are faced with the challenge of improving their performance (DoE, 2016). Violence in schools causes learners to underperform (Setlhodi & Lebeloane, 2014). The current state of violence in schools has a lengthy history, and cannot be understood without reference to the legacy of apartheid in South Africa, which is also connected to the Bantu education system. Designed in 1953, the Bantu Education Act encouraged segregation, not only in schools, but also in teacher preparation programmes and resource distribution. The Act worsened the learning environment in Black schools by ensuring that it was not conducive to effective learning. This psychosocial factor affected Black learners' academic performance and ultimately contributed to underperformance in schools. The persistent psychosocial legacy of apartheid, segregation, inequitable resource distribution to schools, current governmental incompetence and teachers who lacked adequate training caused schools to underperform (Vally, 2013; Quality Assurance Directorate Report, 2018; Spaull, 2013; Bayat, Louw & Rena, 2014; Govindarajov, Selvarajoo & Ali, 2020).

Most South African schools are characterised by violence, a condition that can be traced back to the nation's violent past. The often-violent and oppressive apartheid government in South Africa equally encountered street violence by demonstrators, protestors and marchers alike. For instance, the 1976 Soweto uprisings were part of nationwide violence. The uprisings began when Afrikaans was introduced as an official language of teaching in all Black South African schools (Boddy & Evans, 2021). The implementation of the language policy had significant psychosocial implications as it triggered widespread and enduring violence across the country. Mdhull and Zwane (1994) claim that learners experienced psychological atrocities such as rape, murder, shootings and riots. Both learners and educators were encouraged to employ violent coping mechanisms, such as bullying and the carrying of dangerous weapons. Today, the legacy of street violence continues to manifest itself in secondary schools, jeopardising their effective functioning and contributing to underperformance. As a result, school violence continues to have a detrimental impact on learners' achievement (Louw & Rena, 2014).

#### Learners' street hawking as a psychosocial factor

The review of literature attests that street hawking by learners is a serious and persistent psychosocial variable affecting many nations in the world and influences their academic performance. It is critical for the underperforming secondary schools to comprehend the

psychosocial factors that contribute to street hawking by learners and their impact on their academic success. Learner street hawking is influenced mostly by family background, where the learner comes from a home of unemployed parents, low levels of education and poor economic conditions. In addition, the literature shows that poverty serves as a key motivating psychosocial factor for parents to force their children to embark on street hawking, with rural areas experiencing high prevalence because of their poor living standards and rampant inflation (Aijehi, 2020). Farooq et al. (2020) affirm that parents' educational attainment, socio-economic status and insufficient family income have a significant impact on learners' learning outcomes (Mulaa, 2018; Mwoma & Pillay, 2016). This situation affects their schooling, especially their academic performance (Pillay, 2016). It goes without saying that the primary motivator for parents to send their children to hawk is the need for money to make ends meet. Some learners attend school specifically to engage in hawking. At the end of day of selling, the learner is weak and exhausted and is unable to focus on class, participate in class discussions, and do an independent study (Farooq et al., 2020; Mulaa, 2018).

The literature shows that learners who spend their school time in street hawking are always late for school and are bound to slack in their schoolwork due to poor studying habits, lack of skills, low self-esteem and low performance in class, which results in failure and dropping out of school (The Guardian, 2013; Tafashiya et al., 2024). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) claims that street hawking by learners is an additional form of child/learner abuse that puts their health at risk, impedes their ability to receive education, and prevents them from living normal lives (ILO, 2013). Depriving a child of the right to a normal life could lead to behavioural problems, including social maladjustment, moral defects, emotional reactions and insecurity. Contrary to the above, learners from wealthy families or backgrounds do not engage in street hawking since their parents attained higher education, secured stable professions, and have a greater capacity to provide their children with academic and social support compared to those with a lower socio-economic status. Learners from poor backgrounds are compelled to participate in street hawking instead of focusing on their studies. Due to their poor background, it is difficult for their parents to fully cater for their educational needs (Banerjee, 2016; Godfrey & Wonder, 2015). When those from well-to-do families see their classmates from poor families selling products on the street for survival, they sometimes ridicule them, which affects the latter's well-being, which itself constitutes a psychosocial problem (Akiti, 2024).

### **Initiation rites as psychosocial factors**

The persistent psychosocial factor of initiation rites emanating from cultural practices is a serious issue that has influenced learners' poor performance in secondary schools. Initiation is a common rite of passage among various communities (Mosothwane, 1999; Kangwa, 2011; Pemba, 2012; Markstrom, 2011; Ramokgopa, 2001; Siweya, Sodi & Douglas, 2018; Skinner et al., 2013). The phenomenon marks a transition from one stage of life to another (Deborah et al., 2015; Presente et al., 2019). It involves circumcision for males and prepares youngsters for their future roles in life. It also promotes a sense of belonging. There are initiation rites for boys and for girls, which are conducted separately (Hill & Varona, 2012). Mpateni and Kang'ethe (2020) state that the cultural practices of the ethnic groups living in Vhembe District have been preserved, with initiation practices still given much respect, among other cultural practices. Young boys and girls are sent for initiation away from the communities with or without permission from their parents. This customary practice presently occurs in conjunction with formal schooling in the upbringing of both boys and girls. This clearly means that they are subjected to initiation curriculum and a formal education curriculum in schools as they grow. The initiates are taught manhood and

womanhood (Seweya et al., 2018).

During initiation rituals, the initiates are taught various rules, most of which are centred on psychosocial threats through myths and taboos of society (Mkandawire et al., 2017). The initiation ceremonies for boys are associated with circumcision, that is, the removal of the foreskin from the penis. Girls do not undergo female genital mutilation. Usually, circumcision is not an optional procedure. It is done because of cultural values and as a way of reducing HIV infections and other sexually transmitted diseases. In the process, the initiator psychosocially and consciously opens the wounds of the initiate and leaves it open for weeks without covering it from infections. That act constitutes a psychosocial factor in that it would take time to heal since the initiate is not properly taken care of (Tikkoko, 2021). The infliction of pain is often a common characteristic of boys' ceremonies with pressure to endure it without complaint as a way of showing masculinity. The initiation school can last for weeks to allow the wounds to heal (Mahloloka et al., 2016). Boys who are circumcised at a hospital are not considered real men because they did not learn to tolerate pain. Boys who undergo the traditional route of circumcision are seen as dominant over women and uncircumcised men (Barker & Ricardo, 2015; Banwari, 2015). The initiation rites contribute significantly to the learners' academic performance. This includes, *inter alia*, the initiation process resulting in the discontinuation of schooling among initiates. The initiates are riddled with psychosocial elements of harassment and abuse in the process. For instance, the use of vulgar language, the naked dancing of girls, and the touching of girls' breasts by boys and eating their vomit. Since initiation ceremonies in Vhembe District often coincide with the school calendar, one may argue that this has a bearing on the initiates' academic performance as they will miss some classes while at the rite. Hyde and Kadzamira (1994) assert that the initiates look forward to the ceremonies because of the social hype around them and the attention they get. During this period, learners do not attend lessons at school. The other challenge posed by the traditional men's circumcision is the psychosocial death of the initiate during the initiation process, caused by the initiator. The challenge is caused by the lack of proper training from the initiator site. Initiators are not well-trained to perform surgery and therefore cannot render professional care to the initiates in treating the wounds after surgery. As a result, initiates may lose their lives. The psychosocial variable of unsanitary and unsafe conditions resulting in botched circumcision or death may affect the initiates and their performance in school. In addition, learner and educator absenteeism during the period of initiation influences deficient performance in secondary schools.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper has adopted Albert Bandura's social learning theory. The theory is used because its tenets align with the problem of the study, and was adopted to understand and explain how learners and educators are influenced by various models, either to enhance or deal with school underperformance. The theory explains the ways in which people learn behaviour through modelling or direct reinforcement (Higson-Smith, 2006). Bandura contends that most human behaviour is learnt observationally through modelling. Individuals are influenced by motivation to model a particular behaviour and as such, it may either be a direct or an indirect reinforcement and punishment (Eysenck, 2003). This indicates that social learning is about socialisation and the attendant influence on people's behaviour. For any secondary school to overcome underperformance, learners must observe educators teaching well for them to learn and perform. In terms of this notion, biological variables can encourage violence. Learning through modelling consists of four phases, namely, the attentional phase, the retention phase, the reproduction phase and the motivational phase (Slavian, 2009). For one to comprehend the dynamics of psychosocial

factors, one must first consider all systems that enable its occurrence (Charmaz, 2014). Thus, underperformance behaviour in secondary schools entails interconnection among learners, educators and other contextual psychosocial variables within and outside the school context (Martin, Mackenzie & Healy, 2013).

### **Objectives and the research question**

The objective of this paper is to explore psychosocial factors that contribute to the underperformance of secondary schools. The second objective delves into attempts and mechanisms made by underperforming secondary schools to reverse the unpleasant condition in Vhembe District. Based on the objectives of the study, the research question raised is: *how do psychosocial factors contribute to the underperformance of secondary schools in Vhembe district?* These factors, whether from educators or learners, should not be allowed to overwhelm practitioners, as they can potentially prevent the attainment of good academic results. The danger of ignoring the existence of psychosocial factors in institutions of learning could trigger underperformance by secondary schools (Park et al., 2021; Rofiqi & Mansyur, 2023).

### **Research design and methodology**

This study was qualitative in nature and located within the interpretive paradigm, which provides a framework for researchers to study and understand people's beliefs, values, meanings and experiences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). This method is characterised by its emphasis in gathering detailed data through techniques such as interviews, observations and document reviews (Boboyi, 2024a). The problem addressed in this paper concerns the persistent underperformance of secondary schools, which is attributed to psychosocial factors. In addition, the objective of the paper is to explore psychosocial factors contributing to the underperformance of secondary schools in Vhembe District, which necessitated the use of the qualitative paradigm as opposed to the quantitative approach. To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher followed the route of constructivism and interpretivism as the underlying philosophies, which adhere to the constructivist philosophy, epistemology and reality as subjective (Cohen et al., 2018; Pfister & Oteley, 2023). Psychosocial factors such as street hawking by learners, bullying and violence prompted the researcher to adopt the qualitative research approach. The paradigm allows for the understanding of context-specific and subjective meanings regarding perspectives about psychosocial factors leading to the underperformance of secondary schools in Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using an interpretive paradigm, the researcher endeavoured to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of research participants in schools that underperformed seemingly due to psychosocial factors (Creswell, 2014; Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021).

All public secondary schools in Vhembe Education District were selected as research sites. The study population comprised principals, teachers, learners and parents who met the criteria for inclusion in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study employed simple random sampling to select secondary schools in the study area and convenient purposive sampling to select the research participants (Cresswell, 2017). Purposive sampling was chosen because the researcher sought to discover and understand psychosocial factors contributing to the underperformance of secondary schools. The method ensure that the sample included research participants who could provide relevant and in-depth insights into the underperformance of secondary schools from a psychosocial perspective. This approach aligns with qualitative methods and interpretive paradigms as it prioritises the richness and relevance of the data over generalisability. As a result,

the researcher needed to choose a sample from which much could be learnt about the topic (Harrison, Birks, Franklin & Mills, 2017; Merriam, 2016). The researcher sampled five school principals from five schools in one circuit in Vhembe District. In each sampled secondary school, one teacher, one learner and one parent who served in the school governing body were part of the research participants (De Vos, 2014). Altogether, a total of twenty (20) research participants assisted in the provision of information about psychosocial factors that contribute to the underperformance of secondary schools in the district (Punch, 2013). Data was gathered through interviews, document reviews and observation (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Two data analysis methods were applied: thematic content analysis and the constant comparative method. The two data analysis methods are related to the way data in the study were generated (Rossman & Numan, 2016). The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed guided by Braun and Clarke's (2012) model of qualitative data analysis, which encapsulates a step-by-step guide to the analysis of data. To observe research ethics, the researcher first applied for an ethical clearance certificate from the University of Limpopo's Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC). Once permission was granted to conduct the study, the researcher wrote a letter to the Department of Basic Education in Limpopo Province seeking permission to conduct the study in their respective schools. Furthermore, a letter of permission was sent to the principals, educators, learners and parents serving as members of the school governing body to seek permission to conduct the study at their schools with them as participants.

### **Findings**

This section presents the data analysis and discusses the research participants' comprehension of the underperformance of secondary schools in terms of psychosocial factors in Vhembe District in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The findings of the study pertain to the research topic, which is about comprehending the underperformance of secondary schools from the viewpoint of psychosocial aspects. The data, which were generated through the interview technique, document review and observation form the basis of the findings. Thematic content analysis and constant comparative analysis were used to examine the data. The relevant research participants were assessed based on their comprehension of the mediocre performance of secondary schools from the viewpoints of psychosocial factors. The study adopted the qualitative research design and was located within the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the integration of human experiences and perspectives (Yin, 2018). This approach provides an opportunity to explore participants' wealth of experience, their intentions, values and reasons for doing what they do, and making meaning from them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004; Merriam, 1998). Twenty (20) research participants who are referred to as participants A, B, C and D, as well as Schools One, Two, Three, Four, and Five took part in the study. The principal of each of the five public secondary schools in the sample is represented by Participant A, teachers by Participant B, learners by Participant C, and parents by Participant D, who serve as members of the school governing body.

All relevant research participants mentioned above were interviewed about their perceptions of the underperformance of the schools from in terms of psychosocial factors in each of the sampled secondary schools. The literature review and the three environmental theories, namely, the ecology system theory, the social learning theory, and the social control theory, as well as the qualitative research methodology, have all played a significant role in supporting the data analysis that led to these findings. The findings and the discussion in this paper include, amongst others, the following: common comprehension of the underperformance of secondary schools in terms of psychosocial factors. Street hawking, substance and social media abuse, academic

procrastination and teenage pregnancy by learners trigger underperformance in secondary schools.

## **DISCUSSION**

One of the findings of this paper relates to the shared perceptions expressed by participants regarding the underperformance of secondary schools from a psychosocial perspective. This will enable the schools to recognise the influence of psychosocial factors in poor academic performance in learning environments. The research participants shared a common understanding of the underperformance of secondary schools from psychosocial perspectives. They shared a common understanding of underperformance in secondary schools from psychosocial perspectives. Their views were captured as follows:

Principal B from School 3:

*“Psychosocial factors are facets that influence an individual psychologically and socially, such factors can describe individuals in relation to their social environment and how these affects physical and mental health.”*

Educator C from School 4:

*“These are psychological and relational elements that can impact students' academic performance?” “These factors may include low self-esteem, stress, or poor concentration brought on by issues in the home or social life.”*

Learner C from School 5:

*“Psychosocial issues frequently have detrimental effects on learners' mental health, causing stress that damages learners' physical and mental well-being. These are the factors that cause learners to be anxious, which hinder their capacity to learn and succeed.”*

Participant 4 from School 4 proffered:

*“Psychosocial factors are experiences that cause learners not to perform well academically, such as being absent from school with or without reasons, loss of concentration during teaching and learning as a result of social experiences such as family rivalry, street hawking, violence etc. all these may cause learners to underperform.”*

The findings established that most research participants indicated that psychosocial factors influence learners' academic performance negatively, causing them to underperform. The explanation relating to psychosocial factors was generally similar among the research participants. The interviews then focused on psychosocial factors that contributed to underperformance by the learners. In their responses, the participants mentioned substance abuse, chronic use of social media, academic procrastination, street hawking by learners and peer influence as psychosocial factors that contributed to their underperformance.

### **Street hawking by learners triggering secondary school underperformance**

The study found that learners' involvement in street hawking in Vhembe District was linked to numerous psychosocial factors, including poverty, unstable family structures, peer influence and unemployment. Ogunweru (2023) confirms that learners who engaged in street hawking often struggle with tardiness, which ultimately leads to academic failure or school dropout. Most participants highlighted poverty as the main cause of learners' engagement in street hawking (Fafashiya et al., 2024; Ogunweru, 2023).

Principal C from School 3 explained:

*“Sometimes, learners go on hawking in the street because their parents cannot provide*

*enough for their children, like buying them extra study materials or paying for extra classes. Others are involved in street vending because they want to contribute to enhancing their family income. Parents who mostly involve their children in street hawking are not aware that they are abusing them and their right to education.”*

Oluwagbohunmi (2019) and Senna (2022) argue that learners’ involvement in street hawking constitutes a violation of their right to education, as provided for in the South African Constitution, the International Convention of the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Similarly, Modiba (2023) contends that learners’ participation in street hawking is mostly influenced by their families’ socio-economic background, particularly high parental unemployment rates and poor household economic circumstances.

Educator B from School 2 said:

*“Parents’ unemployment and poverty in our community have forced learners to go to the street and sell products such as mealies, nuts, etc. Sometimes, they sell in class. After school, learners go around the village carrying bowls, trading or selling house after house, and sometimes, they go around asking for work, such as cleaning yards or domestic work to support themselves and their families. When they are done selling, they go home tired and have no time to focus on their studies, which affects their study patterns, and they completely forget about their studies. As a result of being tired, they tend to perform poorly in their studies.”*

Bulu (2016) and Onuekwe (2015) found that learners who engaged in street hawking tend to have poor study habits, which result in low academic performance. In most cases, learners who are engaged in street hawking do not have much time to study, prepare for their assessment activities, and attend classes regularly. They always play truant, do not have a study timetable or plan, and fail to prepare enough for their assessments. Due to exhaustion, they find it difficult to pay attention in class, resulting in poor academic performance (Ebele & Olofu, 2017; Senna, 2022).

Learner 3 from School C said:

*“I lost my parents through the Covid-19 pandemic; life became more difficult since there was no one to support or provide for us. As the older one, I had to take care of my siblings who were in primary school by involving myself in street hawking to support them. I decided to start hawking after observing my friends, who had also lost their parents, coming to school with lots of money for lunch; that experience motivated me to start a small business so that I could earn some extra pocket money. As a result, however, my studies suffered, leading to my poor performance in class because I spent most of my study time on the street hawking.”*

Parent E from School 5 said:

*“Learners opt for street hawking because both parents are not working and are failing to support them with the basic needs and on academic issues, such as failing to pay for their extra classes during winter school time.”*

The underperformance of secondary schools in Vhembe District could be attributed, in part, to learners’ involvement in street hawking, which is linked to their poor scholastic achievement due to irregular attendance at school. Ekpenyong and Sibiri (2011) say that learners who are constantly absent from school may not benefit from schooling, which may lead to poor scholastic attainment in examinations and final schooling outcomes (Faroog et al., 2020; Akiti, 2024).

### **Initiation rites of passage lead to lagging behind with schoolwork and underperformance**

Modiba (2024) emphasises that the underperformance of secondary schools cannot be effectively addressed until schools learn how to manage cultural practices such as initiation rites, which often contribute to poor academic performance. For one thing, the trauma that learners are exposed to during initiation causes them to underachieve in their academic activities (Siweya et al., 2018; Skinner et al., 2013; Mavundla et al., 2019). Mohlaloka et al. (2016) highlight that many educators in formal schools find it difficult to manage the misbehaviour of boys returning from initiation schools. Initiation rites are a common practice in Vhembe District, and can affect school performance, primarily due to learners' absenteeism and the aggressive behaviour exhibited by those who have undergone initiation. Initiation rites mark learners' transition from adolescence to manhood. One of the findings of this study is that falling behind with schoolwork due to initiation rites of passage contributes to academic underperformance.

Learners miss significant classroom hours and valuable learning time while attending initiation schools, which negatively affects their academic achievement (Lianyu & Msafiri, 2022, WHO, 2023).

Participant D, a principal from School 4 admitted:

*“Our learners are disturbed strongly during wintertime because of wanting to participate in the sessions there. If you can check the registers of all schools now, the level of absenteeism is very high for both boys' learners and girls since the ceremony involves them. Let alone educators who are chronic to such events, they are absent from school, especially those from royal families.”*

Educator A from School 1 added thus:

*“There is a high rate of learner absenteeism during the winter school session as a result of learners attending initiation schools. Many learners miss many school hours and learning time while they are away. Initiation school has an adverse effect on learner academic performance. Some of the earners who didn't go for initiation practices or school are subjected to psychological stress; they are now isolated, ill- treated, humiliated and called names. Such kind of treatment is likely to result in their underperformance.”*

Learner B from School 2 said:

*“I went for initiation practice or school a week before schools closed. I spent another two weeks nursing the open wound at home after the initiation school was closed. The three weeks that I spent away from school and the month at the initiation school without studying affected my school performance negatively. After I came back from initiation school, my life changed completely. I developed a negative attitude towards education. I started seeing education as a waste of time; other people are millionaires, but they did not complete even grade 10, my schoolwork suffers as a result, I repeated the grade.”*

Participant E (a parent) from school 5 maintained that:

*“So, absenteeism is very high during wintertime and is not because of learners catching colds as a result of attending classes in the dilapidated classrooms with broken window, but because of initiation ceremonies. In the situation where absenteeism is high, educators find it difficult and demotivating to continue with their teaching programmes, since it turns the whole environment. Learners who failed to attend initiation school are mistreated by the initiates; they call them names like, 'xivuri', 'papa', and they make*

*derogatory remarks about other learners. As a result of that, learners who are ill-treated no longer concentrate on their studies; they tend to perform poorly in the classroom because they no longer feel safe and protected.”*

The researchers support the idea that initiation ceremonies influence learners' academic performance negatively due to clashes with the school calendar. Learners abandon their study material during the initiation periods since they are not allowed to take it with them to the ceremony, and being absent from school results in their poor performance. They are bound to underperform in their academic activities since there are no catchup programmes to cover the lost time (Schroeder et al., 2022; Idahemuka & Kayirangwa, 2023; Abbey et al., 2021).

### **Dealing with psychosocial factors**

The findings of this paper point out that secondary schools should deal with psychosocial factors prevalent in institutions of learning as a matter of priority. Addressing these factors would help prevent and mitigate circumstances that lead to underperformance, thereby creating a supportive school environment free of threats that hinder academic performance among learners. These objectives could be achieved through diverse efforts, which include the establishment of a committee within the school to analyse the performance of both educators and learners, which is one of the findings of this paper. The participants voice their views in diverse ways.

Pertaining to the findings above, school Principal B from School 5 argued:

*“We assess learners' attendance registers. The attendance will tell how often the learner skips classes. When learners fail to attend classes on a regular basis, they tend to perform poorly in their schoolwork. We interview learners who are underperforming with the aim of establishing the cause why they are not performing to the expected standard as some of the situations are far beyond their control. The participant further indicated that they invite social workers and psychologists to engage with learners who are underperforming, since other learners are afraid to share their home situations with the person they know well. Lastly, in our school, we organise school camps wherein learners get assistance from their educators. We usually hold these once per quarter as a way to address poor performance.”* Educator B from School 4 said:

*“We interview learners who are underperforming to determine whether there are psychosocial problems affecting their education from the homeside. Many learners experience challenges at home, such as parental conflict, poverty, and low socio-economic status. We offer support where necessary, and sometimes we involve a social worker.”*

Learner C from School 2 said:

*“The school had saved me from not attending school by helping resolve the problems that were affecting my studies since I was not attending class regularly, which resulted in poor performance due to personal and family problems. They organised counselling for me, which has helped bring my confidence back, and underperformance is a thing of the past.”*

Parent D from School 5 said:

*“We look at the teacher lesson preparations and the standard of the assessment tasks if it is in line with the syllabus, look at the pass rate (performance) of learners in each subject at school, and see how the educator relates with learners in class.”*

Clearly, psychosocial factors such as poverty and socio-economic background experienced by learners in secondary schools affect their scholastic performance (Fotoh, 2021). The involvement

of professional social workers, counsellors and psychological support services can help address the underperformance of learners and secondary schools (Protivnak, Mechling & Smrek, 2016). The researchers concur that establishing a committee in the school to analyse the performance of both educators and learners is a valuable strategy for ameliorating the worsening underperformance of the schools.

### **Uncleansed schooling environment as a psychosocial factor**

Mkwanazi and Rogers (2022) emphasise that achieving a safe and secure schooling environment should be a key concern in every educational institution. This could be accomplished through collaborative efforts, including cleansing the school environment in instances where a life has been lost. Selvarajoo (2020) emphasises that when the schooling environment is adversely affected by violence, and security threats are beyond control, resulting in the loss of life, the school cannot create an inspiring schooling environment conducive to academic excellence. One of the findings of this study relates to the uncleansed secondary schooling environment that contributes to the underperformance. Learners who are continually traumatised by witnessing deaths in school premises experience psychosocial distress that can lead to deficient performance if not properly addressed. Such learners may struggle to concentrate due to mental disturbance, and both learners and teaching staff may resort to truancy out of fear for their safety. Consequently, their academic performance may deteriorate (Modiba, 2024). The researcher concurs that school cleansing could be employed as a strategy to mitigate underperformance. A dead person was found within the premises of one of the sampled schools, which traumatised learners, educators and support staff. The incident affected their concentration, a sense of safety, and attendance, leading some to play truant or even drop out of school. To prevent the prevalence of the above psychosocial factor in institutions of learning, cleansing rituals should be conducted when such incidents occur (Modiba, 2024).

Principal A from School 1 confirmed:

*“A dead body was found dumped within the school premises. That incident traumatised learners to such that a psychologist had to be called in to provide counselling and moral support.”*

Educator A from School 1 said:

*“The easy accessibility of dangerous weapons such as guns, scissors, pangas and sharp knives within the community is a cause for concern, as some learners bring these weapons to school. When educators attempt to enforce discipline in the classroom and the learners react violently, there is a risk that such weapons may be used against the educators. This kind of behaviour negatively affects both the morale of the educators and the emotional well-being of learners who witness these incidents. Consequently, educators may concentrate on their duties due to fear of their safety. As a result, their performance suffers, which in turn impacts learner’s academic performance in the classroom.”*

Participant C, a learner from School 3, said:

*“I bunk Mr X’s class because is boring, he teaches very slowly and often leaves to go gamble. One day, during one of the gambling sessions, a fight broke out when one of the gamblers pulled out the knife and stabbed another to death after realising he had been cheated. The matter was reported to the police, and the perpetrator was arrested after the principal informed both sets of parents about the incident.”*

Parent D from School 4 confirmed this:

*“School violence is escalating in most of the schools around the area, the problem of*

*violence in schools is getting worse. I was called to rush to the school when a boy was stabbed to death, and on the same day, the safety officers were seriously attacked. The violence was caused by gang fights originating from the surrounding community. The perpetrators entered the school by climbing over the fence to commit the attack. Learners often imitate the immoral acts they observe in their neighbourhoods within the school community. Such deviant behaviour hinders effective teaching and learning, resulting in poor performance among both learners and educators.’ This kind of situation is highly demotivating for teaching staff and learners, as it prevents them from concentrating on their studies and on executing their professional duties.”*

## **Research Results and Discussion**

Numerous psychosocial factors contributed to the underperformance of secondary schools. The underperformance of secondary schools in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province remains a serious and worrisome problem. It prompted the researchers to conduct this empirical study in the province. Numerous empirical studies have been conducted on factors influencing academic performance, including Muthuuri et al. (2021), who examined the impact of psychological factors, and Wijnsman, Warrens, Saab, Van Driel and Westenberg (2016), who investigated the determinants of learners’ poor performance. Adell argues that a low socio-economic background is the main cause of subpar academic achievement, and Vhembe District is no exception. The results of this study are consistent with a large body of research that has examined variables affecting students’ academic performance in various educational institutions. The results identified psychosocial factors that have a significant impact on learners and the underperformance of secondary schools. The presentation of the psychosocial factors drawn from the analysed data collated from the participants that are linked to parents, learners, schools and the community are thoroughly discussed hereafter (Andrade, 2016). It is recommended that schools create a cooperative prevention programme that is marked by partnerships and common objectives rather than by turf wars and hostility between all stakeholders to guarantee a proper degree of parental involvement (Coleman & Routledge, 2011). Empowering parents from low socio-economic backgrounds to meet their children’s fundamental needs will help to lessen the number of psychosocial factors that contribute to students’ and schools’ mediocre performance. The government, through the Departments of Basic Education and Health should advise educators about the prevalence of psychosocial factors in institutions of learning that are attributed to learners’ and schools’ underperformance. Informing educators about the psychosocial factors can help reduce the underperformance of learners in that it enables educators to deal with these issues early before they escalate. To curb learner street hawking, the government should make sure that the policy that deters child labour is implemented, and parents of learners who are found hawking on the street instead of being in class must be arrested and charged with child abuse. They are breaching the learners’ right to education as provided for in national and international statutes such as the South African constitution, the International Convention of the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Learners who lack parental support and are engaged in street hawking should be eligible for government social grants. This would take them out of street hawking and back to the classroom, where their right to education would be respected, their level of concentration would be restored, and the problem of perennial underperformance as displayed by institutions of learning would be arrested. The community should be encouraged not to support learners who engage in street hawking by funding their businesses. Instead, the community should educate

them and their parents about the importance of education and the dangers of involving children in street hawking.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations emerge that address psychosocial factors contributing to the underperformance of secondary schools. By supporting parents from low socio-economic backgrounds to meet their children's basic needs, many of the psychosocial challenges that negatively affect learners' academic performance can be alleviated. The Department of Education should actively advise educators of the prevalence of psychosocial factors in schools and how they can undermine both learner and school underperformance. Furthermore, policies and interventions targeting learner street hawking, peer support programmes at a school level, and the provision of counselling and psychological support are necessary. Integrating such measures into the curriculum across different grades would help prevent psychosocial issues affecting learners' academic outcomes. Finally, the researcher recommends that secondary schools should be free from any psychosocial factors that could impede teaching and learning, whether arising from learners or educators. This could be actualised through the prioritisation of a safer schooling environment that would provide the conditions necessary for learners to focus on their studies and achieve academic excellence.

### **Conclusion**

This section presents an overview of the research findings, recommendations and conclusions derived from the study, focusing on psychosocial factors contributing to the underperformance of secondary schools. As reflected in the discussion of the results, both the literature and the theoretical framework were instrumental in contextualising the findings. For instance, the three environmental theories undergirding this study, the social control theory, the ecology system theory, and the social learning theory emphasise that once secondary schools recognise the influence of psychosocial factors in underperformance, underachievement can be significantly reduced. Understanding underperformance in secondary schools from a psychosocial perspective is critical, as it equips them to realise the prevalence and impact of these factors on learners' academic outcomes. However, in Vhembe District, many underperforming schools experience adverse psychosocial conditions that disrupt academic performance. It is therefore essential that these schools understand psychosocial factors that contribute to poor performance. Addressing the problem of persistent underperformance requires that teaching staff be trained and sensitised to the psychosocial challenges affecting learners who come from diverse family backgrounds. Additionally, there is a need for extensive orientation programmes targeting parents, teaching staff and support staff to educate them about the influence of psychosocial factors on learners' academic achievement. These measures are crucial towards effectively curbing underperformance in secondary schools in Vhembe District. They enable the schools to identify and address psychosocial factors affecting learners. The findings of the study highlighted the views and experiences of key participants regarding psychosocial factors contributing to underperformance in secondary schools. Based on these findings, the study proposed remedial interventions that could help mitigate the scourge of psychosocial factors that hinder both secondary school teachers and learners from attaining academic excellence.

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