

Understanding High School Teachers' Perceptions of the Factors Influencing  
Academic Success of Learners in Rural KwaZulu-Natal

by

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Submitted on August 22, 2013, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for Psychology

Masters

Discipline of Psychology

School of Applied Human Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

South Africa

Unless specifically indicated to the contrary, this project is the result of my own work.

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# COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has been my Everest and I could not have made it without the support of many people. Firstly, I have to say thank you to my husband, Ryan, for your emotional support as well as for reading and re-reading drafts and giving your honest opinion. Although I may resist admitting you are right, you usually are, and your insights have been invaluable. A parents' work is never done, so thank you Mom and Dad for your support over the last 27 years but especially during Masters!

To the Pietermaritzburg CCE Masters Class of 2012, it has been so encouraging knowing there are nine other people in exactly the same position as me! We have complained together, laughed together and been very close to crying together. However, we have made it through and I will always look back on our year together with fondness. Zorbe strong!

Then to Nana, my supervisor, I have learnt much from your experience in education. Thank you for your patience and guidance this last year.

Finally, to the real heroes, the teachers who participated in this study. Your commitment to your jobs and your determination to making a difference is inspiring. My hope is that more people will come to realise the courage with which you approach each day and gains will be made in understanding how learners in your school can be assisted.

## ABSTRACT

The value of schools as systems for encouraging positive adaptation and development has gained recognition in resilience research. As key role players in the school environment, teachers play a central role in fostering resilience among learners. Further, the context of the school environment provides understanding into the many systems in which learners are situated which encourage or hinder the development of resilience strategies. Learners in South Africa face many barriers in attempting to access education. These challenges are especially prevalent in rural areas, where poverty, unemployment and poor health add an extra burden on learners and teachers. Despite this, there are learners who are able to achieve academic success. They are in essence resilient. This study aimed to understand the perceptions of teachers of the factors which influence learner success in South Africa from a strengths perspective. A qualitative approach and purposive sampling were employed to conduct two focus groups with teachers from two rural high schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The Participatory method was used to conduct the focus groups as it allowed the groups' control over organising main themes and ideas. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and concepts from resilience theory and the Bio-ecological Systems Theory were used to organise and understand the findings. The results indicated that the teachers have a contextual view of the factors influencing learner success and they underemphasise the role of the individual. The key role of the teacher and the school as a site for fostering resilience was also evident. Suggestions for further research include exploring the effectiveness of reactive strategies developed by the participants and encouraging the development of characteristics found in resilient schools.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Schools have been recognised as important sites for mobilising resilience strategies (Brooks, 2006; Masten, 2001, 2003). Although the family environment has the most direct impact on development, intervening at this level is often difficult (Brooks, 2006). In contrast, the school environment provides good opportunities to influence the development of a large number of children who spend many hours a day within the school premises. Interventions at a school level filter out into the family and wider community, and the school is often able to mobilise resources at a larger societal level for the benefit of learners, family and the community (Brooks, 2006). Masten (2003) emphasises the importance of schools in encouraging positive adaptation in learners when she says that “schools have considerable potential as a context for interventions to steer development along more positive pathways rather than troubled roads” (p. 172).

Considering the importance of schools in creating opportunities for positive development, it follows that school role players, such as teachers, have a central role in encouraging this development. Research has shown that teachers play an instrumental role in fostering resilience among learners (see Ghaffer, Rizvi, Asdaque & Bilal, 2011; Moloji, Dzvimbo, Potgieter, Wolhunter & van der Walt, 2010; Rak & Patterson, 1996). They encourage individual characteristics such as problem solving ability and through acting as role models have a buffering effect on learners from challenging backgrounds (Rak & Patterson, 1996). A teacher’s role is therefore multi-faceted, in that they provide a space to develop positive, caring relationships with learners, they teach skills necessary for the development of competence and they can mobilise opportunities and resources for the learners (Brooks, 2006). To this end, Brooks (2006) refers to teachers as “brokers of resources” for learners facing adversity (p. 76). Due to the key role of teachers in encouraging academic success and positive adaptation, it is important to involve educators when seeking an understanding of learner resilience.

The school is a dynamic system that is embedded in and influenced by larger systems, such as provincial and national education departments and family systems (Masten, 2003). Therefore understanding the particular context in which the school is located is important in order to provide insight into the systems in which learners and teachers are embedded and by which they are inevitably influenced (Ringeisen, Henderson & Hoagwood, 2003). In South

Africa, learners face many barriers to leaning in their attempt to access education. These include death of parents, HIV/AIDS and poverty (Department of Basic Education [DoBE], 2010c). In addition, teachers in South Africa work within a difficult context which impacts on the services they render to learners. Teachers negotiate poor resources, poor compensation and they have to also deal with barriers that face the learners they teach such as poverty, unemployment in the family and the death of parents (Books & Ndlalane, 2011). This creates a difficult environment in which to provide quality education (DoBE, 2010c). KwaZulu-Natal carries a higher burden than most other provinces, with a high HIV prevalence (Department of Health [DoH], 2012), poor resources in schools and overcrowding in classrooms (Moloi & Chetty, 2010).

The current education system in South Africa is in part a product of the historical context of the country. The previous system of education during apartheid was racially divided into nineteen separate departments with different standards for each department (DoBE, 2011). Schools were divided by race and government spending was unequally divided, with one-fifth of what was spent on a white child, apportioned to an African child (DoBE, 2010a). There was therefore inequality in access to education and the quality of education between different education departments. At the onset of the new democracy in South Africa, these departments were unified into one (Books & Ndlalane, 2011; DoBE, 2011). Along with this came many other changes so that today schools are much more racially representative, there is more or less equal government spending on every child and the curriculum has been tailored to the context of South Africa and encourages critical thinking (DoBE, 2010a). However, there is a general consensus that South Africa still has far to go in providing quality education (Bloch, 2009; DoBE, 2010a; Department of Education [DoE], 2008).

South Africa has had a poor track record with regard to its performance in international studies measuring academic success among learners (DoBE, 2010b; DoE, 2008). In 1999, the Monitoring Learning Achievement Project was conducted among 12 African countries to measure numeracy, literacy and life skills among Grade Four learners (DoE, 2008). South Africa scored 30.2% in numeracy (the lowest out of all the participating countries), 48.1% for literacy (the fifth lowest) and 47.1% for life skills (the third lowest average in all) (DoE, 2008). Similarly, South Africa achieved poorly in the 2000-2002 Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality Project (SACMEQII), with countries such as Kenya, Mozambique and Mauritius scoring higher than South Africa in both reading and

Mathematics (DoE, 2008). Likewise, in two Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study's (TIMSS), South Africa achieved dismal results (DoE, 2008). South Africa's average score in both the 1999 and 2003 TIMSS studies were far below the international averages (DoE, 2008).

These trends are also reflected in national assessments of learner achievement in South Africa. The Annual National Assessment (ANA) programme was introduced in a trial run phase in 2008 and 2009 and run yearly (DoBE, 2010d). Each year, all children from Grades 2-7 write tests in numeracy and literacy based on the previous year's work. These results are collated into a national database to provide information on the level of learner performance across South Africa (DoBE, 2010d). In an analysis of the 2011 ANA results from a sample of schools, the average percentage scores for Grade 3 Literacy and Numeracy was 35% and 28% respectively and for Grade 6, 28% and 30% respectively (DoBE, 2010d). A glance at these results makes it understandable that the provision of quality education is a national priority (DoBE, 2010d).

Rural communities have been most acutely affected by the challenges in South Africa, with KwaZulu-Natal having one of the biggest rural populations in the country (Gardiner, 2008). Seroto's (2004) multi-disciplinary understanding of the concept rural will be used to define a rural area in this study. According to Seroto (2004), a rural area is one with a low population density, it has a "...poor economic base resulting in poor resources; geographical and political isolation; and poverty" (p. 38). However it must be acknowledged that due to settlement policies during apartheid, many rural areas in South Africa are densely populated (DoE, 2005b). It is also evident that poverty seems to be one of the defining characteristics of rural areas in South Africa, largely due to the oppressive historical context (DoE, 2005b). Poverty is known to influence access to education (Van der Berg, 2008). The very definition of a rural area implies some of the challenges that will undoubtedly influence teaching and learning in these areas, such as poor resources, poverty and isolation. In addition, rural populations have only recently been recognised as requiring a unique approach in the implementation of policies and provision of education (DoE, 2005b; Seroto, 2004; Surty, 2011). Previously the rural context has not been taken into account when implementing educational policies (DoE, 2005b). What has resulted is that in an attempt to maintain equal treatment of all schools, rural schools have been further disadvantaged.

However, despite all these barriers to learning, there are some learners who attend rural schools and are able to achieve academic success in the face of adversity (Moloi et al., 2010). For the purposes of this study, academic success will refer to a Grade 12 (Matric) pass. The Matric certificate is one of the most important achievements in South Africa, representing "...an entrance into the world of work" (Seroto, 2004, p. 211) and therefore is a good measure of academic success. It is known that academic achievement at school is a good predictor of future success and competence as an adult (Brooks, 2006). The ability to pass Matric, thereby achieving academic success, therefore acts in a protective manner to enhance resilience.

Traditionally, research in rural areas has focussed on challenges and has been essentially deficit-focussed (DoE, 2005b; Gardiner, 2008). However, a shift in thinking has recently emerged which is critical of this approach in that it fails to recognise the strengths and capacities of rural communities and individuals (DoE, 2005b; Gardiner, 2008). This is consistent with the emerging field of positive psychology, which seeks a similar goal of recognition of strengths and positive adaptation (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2012). Therefore, in light of this, it is important to focus on those learners who have been able to achieve academic success despite having faced adversity.

This study does not aim to verify or test any specific theory but rather benefits from insights and concepts from various theoretical stances. To conceptualise the factors within and outside an individual at all spheres of society that influence success, the framework outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his Ecological Systems Theory is useful in providing a coherent perspective. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines different layers of society which directly and indirectly impact on individual development and capacity. Foundational to this theory is the idea that the individual is connected and influenced by many factors outside of the immediate environment. Considering the barriers to learning in all levels of society that are faced by learners in South Africa, this theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding the South African context.

Resilience theory is valuable in providing an explanation for those learners who achieve success against overwhelming odds. Resilience is said to be an ordinary adaptive capacity that should exist when systems of society (such as family or school) are functioning effectively (Masten, 2001). Resilience researchers argue that when there is a breakdown in

one of these systems, protective factors (such as problem-solving skills and supportive family relationships) seem to be able to buffer children from the risks they face to encourage resilience (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers & Reed, 2009; Rak & Patterson, 1996). Resilience theory is essentially a positive psychology approach in that it focuses on ordinary, adaptive processes of human development (Masten et al., 2009). Resilience is a strengths perspective in that it is based on the assumption that everyone has the potential to become resilient despite challenging circumstances (Pulla, 2013). It represents a shift from focussing on risk to identifying possibilities and strengths (Pulla, 2013).

Numerous studies have investigated resilience among children, however many have been conducted outside of South Africa (see Ghaffer et al., 2011; McCoach et al., 2010; Onderi & Makori, 2012; Rak & Patterson, 1996). An exploration of resilience in South Africa is therefore necessary. The context of rural schooling has recently been emphasised (DoE, 2005b) and an exploration of factors outside of the individual will be helpful in providing a holistic view of resilience in South Africa, particularly within rural contexts. In this regard, KwaZulu-Natal has one of the largest rural populations in the country (Meintjes & Hall, 2010), and thus is a potential source of key information regarding academic success in rural schools. To date, South African studies exploring resilience have not been situated in rural KwaZulu-Natal (see Moloï, 2010; Moloï et al., 2010; Ward, Martin, Theron & Distiller, 2007). Furthermore, with regards to learner resilience and challenges, studies exploring resilience have often not considered the teachers' perceptions but have rather used the learners or principals of the school as the informants (see Ghaffer et al., 2011; Moloï et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2007). As critical role players in the school system, teachers are argued to be key informants, hence their inclusion as participants in this study.

This study's main objective was to understand high school teachers' perceptions of the factors influencing learner success. The participants in this study were teachers from rural high schools in KwaZulu-Natal and were key informants in providing an understanding of academic success or resilience behaviour among learners in these schools. The focus on the academic success rather than failure of learners is consistent with recent trends in resilience research and positive psychology (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 2012) and can be termed a strengths-based approach (Clay, 2005, April). It is hoped that the teachers' insights will be instructive for future interventions aimed at improving the quality of education in rural areas.

The three aims of the study were as follows:

- To establish the factors that are perceived to foster the success of learners in the schools under study.
- To explore the factors that hinder these learners in their attempt to achieve academic success.
- To ascertain some of the proactive strategies employed by the participants and the schools to assist learners to achieve academic success.

To achieve these aims, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What factors are perceived to influence learners' academic success?
- What challenges do learners face in achieving academic success?
- How can the school system respond to the needs of high school learners so that they can achieve academic success?

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

### **The School System: The Focus for Intervention**

Resilience, the ability to cope better than expected in the face of adversity, is developed through interactions within particular environments (Brooks, 2006). These environments include the family, school and community (Brooks, 2006). It is often difficult to intervene effectively in the family, despite the fact that this is the system that has the most immediate impact on development. An alternative system, the school, is therefore often favoured as a context in which positive adaptation can be fostered (Brooks, 2006). Not only are schools well positioned to encourage resilience due to the large number of contact hours spent with many learners, but their work with learners inevitably results in contact with families and the wider community (Brooks, 2006). Learners, families and the local community are also able to benefit from resources which the school is able to activate due to its connections to larger systems in society, such as provincial or national departments (Brooks, 2006; DoE, 2005b).

Brooks (2006), in her review of resilience literature, discusses six strategies that can be adopted in a school environment to strengthen the resilience of learners. Through the development of skills, such as problem solving and decision making, learners develop social competence, an important component of future success (Brooks, 2006). Similarly, Moloï et al. (2010) found that the development of these skills through interactions with teachers or families was important in encouraging resilience. In addition, through their supportive and caring interactions with learners, teachers are also able to act in a protective manner to encourage resilience (Brooks, 2006). In practice, this involves knowing learners' names, paying attention to their needs and communicating respect (Brooks, 2006). This is consistent with other recent resilience research (see Christie & Potterton, 1997; Moloï et al., 2010; Rak & Patterson, 1996).

Research has also shown that on an academic level, having high expectations for learner achievement is an important factor in encouraging learner success (Brooks, 2006; Ghaffar et al., 2011; McCoach et al., 2010). This is related to the content of the curriculum, the teachers' engagement of learners in the classroom, having a progressive view of learning which takes into consideration many learning styles and maintaining discipline (Brooks, 2006).

Participation that is meaningful and which encourages peer interactions has been found to encourage the development of resilience (Brooks, 2006; Ghaffar et al., 2011). For example,

opportunities to participate in leadership bodies, after school activities and peer group work (Brooks, 2006). Brooks (2006) also found that school resources should also focus on the support and training of teachers in order for them to be effective in their jobs (Brooks, 2006). Due to the other environments to which learners are exposed and influenced, research has shown that schools that included families and communities in programmes and interventions had more success in encouraging resilience (Brooks, 2006; Christie & Potterton, 1997; McCoach et al., 2010). While the findings from Brooks' (2006) research emphasises the importance of the school system as a place for developing skills that promote resilience, many of these strategies rely on teachers to facilitate this development.

### **Teachers as Key Role Players**

Teachers, as key role players in a school system, have an inevitable influence on the development of learners. As evident in Brooks' (2006) review of resilience literature, the role of teachers extends beyond knowledge transfer. They in fact exert considerable influence on the development of resilience. Other literature has also shown the key role teachers play in the academic success of learners (see Bloch, 2009; Ghaffar et al., 2011; McCoach et al., 2010; Moloji et al., 2010; Rak & Patterson, 1996). McCoach et al. (2010), in a quantitative study among schools in Connecticut, identified the essential role of teachers in influencing learner achievement. Teachers in successful schools were found to spend most of their time on direct teaching rather than on issues around discipline, they were able to explain concepts in multiple ways to learners and would consult with other teachers or parents if necessary (McCoach et al., 2010). The teachers also felt valued and supported by the management in the school (McCoach et al., 2010). Similarly, Rak and Patterson (1996) also identified the place of teachers as role models for children from difficult backgrounds. Teachers in these circumstances acted as buffers and allowed learners to succeed despite their circumstances (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Teachers in this sense acted as one of the environmental supports to encourage resilience in children from at-risk backgrounds. Both the study by McCoach et al. (2010) and the studies reviewed by Rak and Patterson (1996) were conducted outside of South Africa and therefore do not necessarily apply directly to the South African context. Therefore research that explores the role of teachers in a South African context would be useful.

Findings of the Moloji et al. (2010) study in Mpumalanga province highlighted the important part teachers played in learners' success. Dialogue and communication between teachers and

learners was found to be very important. In fact, this became the main finding of the Moloji et al. (2010) study. Moloji et al. (2010) referred to the communication between teachers and learners that facilitated strong, supportive relationships as a “pedagogical dialogue” (p. 481). This dialogue requires a willing speaker and listener and creates connections between the teachers and learners (Moloji et al., 2010). Other studies have also emphasised the importance of a caring, supportive teacher-learner relationship (see Brooks, 2006; Christie & Potterton, 1997; Rak & Patterson, 1996). All the themes in the findings of the Moloji et al. (2010) study related to this fundamental dialogue in that the connectedness it created encouraged other beneficial qualities in the learners, such as motivation, and therefore served to create a conducive learning environment in the classroom. The pedagogical dialogue perceived by the learners was the foundational quality that predicted success in the schools (Moloji et al., 2010). This illustrates the importance of the teaching relationship between teachers and learners in influencing academic success. Moloji et al. (2010) also found that teachers, parents and community members encourage the development of social skills and critical thinking in the learners which led to their success. Therefore other important role players outside of the immediate school environment also have an influence on the development of academic success.

### **The Family System**

Parents have a very important role to play in facilitating children’s access to education and in supporting learners throughout their schooling years. In a very practical way, parental education and employment impacts on the financial and academic support that learners receive (Bloch, 2009; Ghaffer et al., 2011; Moloji & Chetty, 2010). McCoach et al. (2010) found parental involvement and collaboration with teachers to be crucial in predicting success among schools. Similarly, results from Ghaffar et al. (2011) showed a critical factor contributing to academic performance to be the high expectations of parents for their children and communication about these expectations to the learners. McMillan and Reed (1994) argue that parental education, strong caregiver-child relationships, family support and high academic expectations increase resilience among children. Where these supports are lacking, resilient learners often look to the school environment for support (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

A recent quantitative study was conducted by Onderi and Makori (2012) in the Gucha district of the Nyanza province in Kenya with heads of School Governing Bodies (SGB), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) and school principals to understand the roles and challenges

faced by these bodies. The Gucha district faces similar issues to South Africa such as a lack of resources and many poorly qualified teachers (Onderi & Makori, 2012). This study was grounded on the accepted understanding that parental involvement in schools impacts on the quality of education provided. This is because parental membership on these bodies results in mobilising resources, empowering community members, strengthening connections between home and school and creating greater accountability of school leaders and decision-makers (Onderi & Makori, 2012, p. 18). This study highlighted the importance of formal parent involvement in schools and the positive outcomes that follow, which is especially relevant to South Africa, where School Governing Bodies are legislated entities run by parents (DoE, 2008; Moloi & Chetty, 2010). Similarly, a review of literature by Potter, Reynolds and Chapman (2002) on successful schools found that one of the factors that characterised a successful school in a disadvantaged community was good relationships between the school and parents. The Kenyan study found conflicts and tensions that existed between the School Governing Bodies and Parent Teacher Associations in terms of their assumed roles and also found that further training of members is required (Onderi & Makori, 2012). Similarly, a lack of relevant skills among parent members of School Governing Bodies in South Africa, especially in rural schools, is an issue that needs to be addressed and which impacts on the school environment (Moloi & Chetty, 2010).

### **A Challenging Educational Context**

Challenges in the South African educational context make accessing quality education difficult for many learners. The SACMEQIII project conducted in 2007 reveals the conditions of schools in South Africa (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). Access to physical resources like textbooks and classroom resources such as furniture and stationery affects learner performance (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). The SACMEQIII study found that while nationally there was a general increase in access to resources, KwaZulu-Natal showed a decrease in the proportion of learners who have their own textbooks (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). Similarly, while the rest of the country showed generally good condition of buildings, KwaZulu-Natal was one of the provinces where there was a notable decline in the condition of school buildings (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). High population density in KwaZulu-Natal, especially in rural areas (Meintjes & Hall, 2010) possibly places a higher burden on schools to provide resources and maintain buildings. In 2008, there were over four million children living in KwaZulu-Natal, an increase of 6.8% since 2002 (Statistics South Africa, 2003; 2009, cited in Meintjes & Hall, 2010).

Besides the physical resources in a school, the human resources, that is the teaching staff, also impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. A lack of quality teachers has a direct impact on the provision of quality education to learners (Bloch, 2009; DoE, 2008). Generally it is not the shortage in the number of teachers available but rather the quality of their training and instruction (DoE, 2008). Rural areas, being less desirable places to teach, are especially affected by lack of quality teachers (DoE, 2008). There has also been a decrease in the number of students choosing to pursue a career in teaching and a large proportion of newly qualified teachers who choose to teach outside of South Africa (DoE, 2008). Initiatives aimed at increasing the quality of teaching and that encourage careers in teaching are needed. The SACMEQIII study found that in KwaZulu-Natal there was a decrease in the proportion of schools with a sufficiently qualified head teacher and a prevalence of high teacher absenteeism (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). Class sizes average at 40 learners per class in South Africa (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). In KwaZulu-Natal, however, it was found that only 35.5% of schools had class sizes of 40 or less, highlighting the overcrowding in many KwaZulu-Natal schools which has an impact on the quality of education (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). These results show the extra burden that teachers in KwaZulu-Natal endure in providing quality education for learners.

In addition to the challenges present in the school environment, learners attending school face their own difficulties. Many children in South Africa face challenges every day which impact on their ability to access education. These challenges can be termed barriers to learning, which are defined by the Department of Education (2005a) as “difficulties that arise in the education system as a whole, the learning site or within learner him/herself which prevent both the system and learner needs from being met” (p. 5). These barriers can include physical or learning disabilities but can also refer to socio-economic disadvantage and poor parental involvement. Death of one or both parents, teenage pregnancy, high HIV prevalence and poverty are some of the social factors that indirectly affect many learners’ ability to access education (DoBE, 2010c). In a more direct way, transport costs to get to school, poor resources and facilities at school, large class sizes, multi-grade classes and insufficiently qualified teachers compromise the quality of education provided to learners (DoBE, 2010c). For example, large class size decreases the amount of individual attention a teacher can devote to each learner and may result in a teacher overlooking learners who need specialised instruction (Shisana et al., 2005).

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is another factor which impacts negatively on learners (DoE, 2008). It is common to see increased absenteeism among learners due to the illness (Shisana et al., 2005). In addition, deaths from HIV/AIDS result in an increased number of orphaned children in schools (Books & Ndlalane, 2011; DoBE, 2010b). The 2011 National Antenatal Sentinel HIV and Syphilis Prevalence Survey conducted by the Department of Health estimated that KwaZulu-Natal had the highest HIV prevalence among the general population at 24,7% in 2011, a slight increase from 24.59% in 2010 (DoH, 2012). Mpumalanga province was estimated to have the next highest HIV prevalence of 24.11% in 2011 with the Northern Cape and Western Cape estimated to have the lowest HIV prevalence rates at 9.23% and 4.75% respectively (DoH, 2012). The national average HIV prevalence is 17.3% (DoH, 2012). Infants are a high risk group for vertical transmission of HIV from infected mothers (DoH, 2012). The SACMEQIII study conducted in 2007 showed high levels of HIV/AIDS knowledge among teachers in South Africa however, an alarmingly low proportion of learners had this same level of knowledge (Moloi & Chetty, 2010).

Teachers are also affected by HIV/AIDS resulting in increased absenteeism (Shisana et al., 2005) and less available teachers due to mortality from the illness (Books & Ndlalane, 2011; DoBE, 2010b). Teachers themselves have recently become a focus of study in other Southern African countries as a group with a high HIV prevalence (Shisana et al., 2005). A 2004/2005 HIV prevalence survey among teachers from 1766 public schools in South Africa found a HIV prevalence rate of 12.7% among educators (Shisana et al., 2005). HIV prevalence was highest among African teachers and teachers in the 25-34 year age group (Shisana et al., 2005). It was also found that educators with a lower level of education and educators with lower incomes had higher HIV prevalence rates (Shisana et al., 2005). Teachers in KwaZulu-Natal had the highest HIV prevalence in the country at 21.8% (Shisana et al., 2005). This is consistent with KwaZulu-Natal having one of the highest prevalence rates among the general population. Teachers are possibly a higher risk group for HIV due to some teachers being placed in jobs away from their families (a form of migrant work) and teachers having higher salaries than the general population in some areas (Shisana et al., 2005). These studies emphasise the issue of HIV and its impact on the school context in the lives of teachers, learners and their families.

Teachers in South Africa face a number of challenges in their pursuit of providing quality education for learners. Books and Ndlalane (2011) interviewed 29 teachers from a range of contexts and backgrounds in South Africa about their aims as teachers and their feelings about education in South Africa. Their findings highlight the struggles teachers face and reveal the general low morale of teachers in light of the difficult contexts in which instruction takes place. Almost all of the teachers had a concern about the low salaries they are paid that was not felt to compensate sufficiently for the importance of their job (Books & Ndlalane, 2011). Mainly Black teachers in more rural areas voiced concern about a lack of resources, financial as well as social and emotional resources, that impact on the provision of quality education (Books & Ndlalane, 2011). Social difficulties in the community like poverty, increasing number of orphans and unemployment in families affect the state of the children who attend school (Books & Ndlalane, 2011). This places an increased burden on teachers to meet the individual needs of learners.

In addition, despite the efforts of the new democratic government, most teachers could identify that a divide between the previously rich, white schools and the previously black, under-resourced schools still exists (Books & Ndlalane, 2011). While there may be a better racial mix of learners, especially in city schools, the unequal provision of resources and quality of education still exists (Books & Ndlalane, 2011). For many teachers in rural schools, they did not feel that much has changed for their contexts since the abolishment of apartheid. They still only mix with black learners and teachers and the disparity between poor rural schools and wealthier city schools still exists (Books & Ndlalane, 2011). Ultimately, the difficult contexts in which teachers work impacts on their ability to provide quality education to learners.

### **Rural Schools as Unique Settings**

Teachers working in rural areas experience a unique set of challenges that impact on their ability to provide quality instruction to learners. Many teachers are under-qualified, they work in schools with poor resources and facilities and they may live outside the community and commute to work every day, making them feel like outsiders (DoE, 2005b). Being in a rural area affects a teacher's ability to participate in professional development programmes that are far away and female teachers may feel unsafe in remote areas (DoE, 2005b). In addition, policy and curriculum changes within the education system are other challenges teachers' face (Moloi, 2010). These factors combined result in many teachers feeling

demoralised (Bloch, 2009; DoE, 2005b). In addition, teachers have to keep in mind the diversity of contexts within which learners live.

Learners in rural areas may experience the effects of obstacles to learning most acutely (Bloch, 2009; Gardiner, 2008; Seroto, 2004). In 2007, KwaZulu-Natal had over one million children in 2 348 rural schools, with the Eastern Cape and Limpopo province following closely behind (Gardiner, 2008). KwaZulu-Natal's rural communities are also one of the most poverty stricken and underdeveloped in the country (Gardiner, 2008). In 2008, 70.9% of children in KwaZulu-Natal were living in households with a monthly income below R350, which is below the poverty line (Hall, 2010). This is similar to the percentage of children living below the poverty line in the Eastern Cape (71.5%), Limpopo Province (83.3%), North West Province (70.2%) and the Northern Cape (70%), however KwaZulu-Natal has the highest number of children living below the poverty line at 2 902 000 (Hall, 2010). In 2008, the Western Cape had the lowest percentage of children living below the poverty line, at 36.7% (Hall, 2010). In addition, in 2008, 42.7% of children in KwaZulu-Natal lived in households where no one was employed (Hall, 2010). It follows then that KwaZulu-Natal is the province where the most Child Support Grants are given (over two million in 2009), with the Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo Province following close behind at over one million in each province (DoBE, 2010c).

In many situations, poverty and scarce resources (as found in rural areas) mean that families have to prioritise meeting basic needs (such as food and shelter) over supporting their children's educational needs for stationery and books (Seroto, 2004). In addition, it is often found that parents who have a poor education themselves are less able to provide academic support for their children (Surty, 2011). It has also been found that in rural areas, children carry many responsibilities at home and this competes with the demands of school (DoE, 2005b). Additionally, high absenteeism, teenage pregnancy, poor nutrition and high HIV/AIDS prevalence are challenges commonly found in rural schools (DoE, 2005b, p. 20). It is clear that the challenges facing learners in South Africa, especially in rural areas, are significant and create an extremely difficult learning context for learners and place a higher burden on teachers to provide quality instruction.

The Ministerial Committee on Rural Education (MCRE) was established in 2004 to develop strategies for improving education in rural schools (DoE, 2005b). The Ministerial Report on

Rural Education (DoE, 2005b) emphasised the uniqueness of rural schooling when it stated that “the challenges facing rural schooling are complex, intractable and interdependent” (p. 2). With the onset of democracy in South Africa in 2004, there was an earnest attempt to ensure equal treatment of schools, regardless of location, resources or other contextual factors, thereby resulting in urban and rural schools receiving equitable treatment (DoE, 2005b). The context of rural areas was not taken into account in the development and implementation of educational policies, which were largely based on the demographics and variables of urban areas (DoE, 2005b). Unfortunately, this negated the context of rural schools and resulted in very little progress in rural schools a decade after the onset of the South African democracy (DoE, 2005b). The MCRE concedes that the state of rural schooling is in crisis (DoE, 2005b).

Rural schools have now been recognised as unique settings requiring specific management and intervention that takes into consideration contextual factors (DoE, 2005b; Gardiner, 2008). The new approach to rural schooling aims to recognise the assets of rural communities and the importance of partnering with and involving the local community (DoE, 2005b). Part of this approach involves the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum (DoE, 2005b). It is especially in rural areas where schools become important systems for mobilising interventions initiated by government (DoE, 2005b). The involvement of community members has been found to be crucial for schools and programmes to be successful (DoE, 2005b). The Ministerial Report on Rural Education states that schools, as systems, are “intimately interwoven with their communities and environments” (DoE, 2005b, p. 12). Deficit views of rural areas have been criticised for their failure to recognise the strengths and achievements of rural individuals and communities (DoE, 2005b; Gardiner, 2008). It is therefore important to pay attention to instances where learners have achieved success despite facing many challenges.

### **Evidence of Resilience in the Face of Adversity**

There is much evidence to show that there are learners who are able to achieve academic success despite the many obstacles they face. Moloi et al. (2010) focussed their study on three rural schools in Mpumalanga province and explored learners’ perceptions of what encouraged academic success. Despite the difficult circumstances of the community in the area (poverty, unemployment, large class sizes and child-headed households), these schools had been able to achieve excellent Matric pass rates in the previous few years. One may refer

to this trend as resilience, the ability to achieve success despite being exposed to difficult or traumatic circumstances (Masten, 2001; Rak & Patterson, 1996). While certain factors such as poverty, family problems, violence and illness can place children at risk, there are protective factors that have been found to act as buffers to allow normal development and success (Rak & Patterson, 1996).

In their review of many longitudinal studies conducted in Hawaii, the United States and Great Britain, Rak and Patterson (1996) identified individual characteristics (such as problem-solving ability), family conditions (such as a nurturing infancy) and environmental supports (such as role models) as protective factors in fostering resilience among children.

In a quantitative study in Massachusetts among Grade Three and Four learners, Malecki and Elliott (2002) found that social behaviour was related to academic achievement. Children who had good social skills had more favourable academic results and the opposite was true for children with poor social behaviour. Poor social behaviour impacted on academic achievement negatively (Malecki & Elliott, 2002).

In their study on violence and resiliency among Grade Six learners in Cape Town, Ward et al. (2007) found that a supportive school environment, involvement in after-school activities and peer groups play a role in fostering resilience. Similarly, in a study on exposure to violence among 625 black South African children, it was found that family life and access to social resources acted to foster resilience among children (Barbarin, Richter & de Wet, 2001).

Masten (2001) cautions against viewing resilience as a special or unique ability. It has been found to be a rather common response to difficult life circumstances, when sufficient protective factors are in place (Masten, 2001). In general, resilience has been found to be influenced by family and community relationships and certain individual characteristics (Masten, 2001).

### **Resilient School Environments**

As the school environment provides so many opportunities for positive development, many studies have sought to understand the characteristics of resilient schools. A study conducted by Ghaffar et al. (2011) of the top 25 high schools in Pakistan found critical success factors that contributed to making schools successful. Many of the critical success factors related to

the content of the academic programme at the school and the teachers' competency in teaching the curriculum. In general, they also found that learners and teachers were rewarded for achievement and teachers had high expectations for learner achievement (Ghaffar et al., 2011). However this study was quantitative and lacked richer explanations of each of these success factors. Further exploration into the perceptions of teachers on the academic success of learners in schools, as set out in this current study, is necessary.

A similar study conducted in South Africa also sought to explore the factors which contribute to school success. Christie and Potterton (1997) focussed their study on South African schools that have functioned effectively in their environment despite facing many challenges. They found that these "resilient" schools had certain characteristics in common. These factors include schools that take responsibility for the school environment, effective leadership by the principal and management team, teachers who are committed to teaching and learning, schools that are well organised and that create a safe and disciplined environment for the learners, good relationships among staff and learners, functioning governing bodies and good relationships and connections to families, the community and the education department (Christie & Potterton, 1997). Many of these characteristics are consistent with the results of studies presented by Brooks (2006). These insights provide useful information that could inform interventions looking to foster resilience in schools.

### **Macrolevel Influences: Policies and Initiatives of the Department of Education**

There is an awareness of the need to address problems in the education system and the Department of Education has made efforts in this regard. Draft guidelines were provided for inclusive education that makes recommendations for schools to compensate for some of the barriers learners face in accessing education (DoE, 2005a). These guidelines are in line with the 2001 Inclusive Education Policy (DoE, 2001) and provide more specific strategies for schools on how to better accommodate learners facing challenges in the classroom (DoE, 2005a). Furthermore, School Governing Bodies have the power, in terms of the South African Schools Act of 1996, to charge school fees (Books & Ndlalane, 2011; DoE, 2008). It was hoped that this legislative intervention would allow the Education Department to focus its efforts and resources on the poorer schools. However, under certain circumstances, fee remissions for poorer families may also be granted in fee-paying schools (Books & Ndlalane, 2011; DoE, 2008). In addition, in recognition of the financial burden school fees can be to

some parents, no-fee schools have been created in some areas (Books & Ndlalane, 2011; DoE, 2008).

Poverty among learners in schools is high and those who arrive at school hungry may find it difficult to concentrate and focus in class (DoBE, 2010b). To compensate for this, all South African public schools are ranked according to a quintile, which is a measure of the poverty in the school (Giese, Zide, Koch & Hall, 2009). A school poverty score, which determines the quintile ranking of the school, is calculated with statistics on the income, unemployment and level of education of individuals in the geographical area in which the school is situated (Giese et al., 2009). There are five quintiles, with the first quintile representing the poorest schools.

The quintile ranking of the school determines the amount of funding and assistance the school receives from the Department of Education and therefore it is very important that these rankings are accurate (Giese et al., 2009). In their study on the implementation of funding policies in South African schools, Giese et al. (2009) collected qualitative information from schools in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Limpopo Provinces as well as quantitative information from Limpopo, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. They found that there is much criticism of the way in which schools are ranked as the quintile ranking score is based largely on the poverty in the area in which the schools are geographical situated and not on the demographics of the learners in the school itself (Giese et al., 2009). This results in schools with high levels of poverty gaining a higher quintile status when in fact they require financial assistance from the department (Giese et al., 2009).

For example, in an effort to address the poverty of learners, the National School Nutrition Programme was developed in 2010 which provides meals to about eight million of the poorest learners in the country (DoBE, 2010/2011). The quintile ranking of the school affects whether it receives meals as part of the School Nutrition Programme. Quintile one to three primary and secondary schools are a priority for the School Nutrition Programme (DoBE, 2010/2011). Therefore schools with a higher quintile ranking are excluded from the feeding scheme.

Poor health, resulting from illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, is another barrier to learning faced by many learners in South Africa (DoBE, 2010c). HIV/AIDS education is therefore an

important part of the school curriculum and falls into the Life Orientation learning area (DoE, 2008). Education has been described as a “social vaccine” against HIV/AIDS in that it has positive effects such as greater knowledge and safer behavioural practices (Jellema & Phillips, 2004). The provision of basic education to all children is said to decrease the number of cases of HIV each year (Jellema & Phillips, 2004). Peer education programmes and programmes targeting parents and teachers have also been implemented (DoE, 2008). The SACMEQIII study showed high levels of HIV/AIDS knowledge among teachers; however a low proportion of Grade 6 learners in the country had sufficient HIV/AIDS knowledge (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). The 2008 HIV prevalence survey found similar results in older age groups, with a general decrease in HIV/AIDS knowledge among youth, aged 15-24 years (Shisana et al., 2009). Clearly a focus in both primary and high schools needs to be on education around HIV/AIDS, especially in KwaZulu-Natal, where the prevalence rates of HIV are so high.

The Department of Education has implemented programmes to improve teachers’ qualifications and professional development within schools is aimed to improve the quality of instruction (DoE, 2008). The SACMEQIII study found a high proportion of teachers participating in professional development across the country (Moloi & Chetty, 2010). Bursaries have also been provided to students pursuing a teaching career in an attempt to increase the number of qualified teachers in the future, particularly in Learning Areas such as Mathematics and Natural Sciences (DoE, 2008). Other initiatives include plans to improve teachers’ salaries and career growth plans for teachers (DoE, 2008).

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Embedded Systems: The Bioecological Systems Theory**

It is clear that learners in South African face many challenges to learning, many of which are situated outside of the individual and in many different systems of society. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a broad framework for situating the different influences that impact on individual development at different spheres of society. While this study does not seek to prove any theory, the Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework to understand both challenges and strengths in a coherent manner. Bronfenbrenner proposes four layers of the environment that exist as “nested structures” within each other, much like concentric circles (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). These different levels of influence or embedded systems in the environment provide the context within which a child develops

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Crucial to his theory is the recognition that the individual is influenced by far more than what is immediately connected to him or her (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, the individual's perception of the environment is what has the greatest influence on development, which is not necessarily an objective account of reality (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The microsystem is the immediate level influencing the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This involves connections between role players in the child's immediate environment, such as interactions between parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Connections between these microsystems in which the child is directly involved is called the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This could involve, for example, connections between the child's school and parents. The exosystem is similar to the mesosystem in that it also refers to connections between settings, however these settings do not involve the child directly, but do impact on the child in one way or another (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this regard, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that the parents' work conditions have a profound impact on the child. The widest level of the environment is the macrosystem. This refers to the activities and decisions made at a wider level of society that filter down to impact on the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In fact, Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that the macrosystems of a society result in defining the character of the exosystems, mesosystems and microsystems of that society. They provide the context within which individual development takes place (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore Bronfenbrenner (1979) places emphasis on the importance of understanding and studying the public policy of a society. In this study, policy affecting schools is important to be aware of, as it provides the context within which an individual in the South African society can develop academically.

Within this ecological model, Bronfenbrenner (1979) takes a systems approach to understanding relationships between individuals. He argues that as much as a two-person system is crucial for development (such as a caregiver-child or husband-wife system), so are other wider interpersonal relationships. Supportive relationships with people outside the immediate family, such as friends or other relatives are just as important for healthy development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, connections between settings in the mesosystem and exosystem are also important for development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner's model has been revised over the years and is now referred to as the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This revised model includes the addition of two aspects seen as important in human development. The first aspect states that human development takes place through proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). These are frequent interactions between an individual and the environment, which can come from within the individual or can be imposed on the individual from the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). These proximal processes can either produce competence in the individual through mastery or achievement of skills and knowledge, or it can produce dysfunction, where this mastery is not achieved (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) cite a list of criteria that predict whether an interaction will produce competence or dysfunction. The second proposition argues that developmental outcomes (competence or dysfunction) will differ based on a variety of factors, namely the individual's unique characteristics, the context in which the interaction takes place and the period in time of the interaction (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 119).

A trend that the authors have identified is the disorganisation and chaos in different settings, such as school, work and family, that have a particular impact on the social development of children and youth (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). This has caused them to revise the theoretical model even further, to make allowances for this trend in society. Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) refer to chaos in a system as caused by disruptions in the connections in microsystems and in mesosystems. The consequence of these chaotic and disorganised systems is its interference with proximal processes, possibly preventing competence as a developmental outcome and encouraging dysfunction (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) therefore tentatively propose that strong ties and attachments with an individual (within or outside of the family) are necessary for social development. They predict that the disruption of systems by chaos is the main challenge facing societies in this century (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory accounts for the many factors in the environment that influence a child's overall development. It provides a contextual understanding of development and success which is very relevant in understanding resilience in the South African context. In light of the concerns raised by Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) about the chaotic nature of society that disrupt individual development, resilience theory becomes useful.

## **Resilience Theory**

Despite the challenges facing many learners in South Africa, there are those who are able to overcome adversity and achieve success. They are resilient. Resilience theory provides a way of understanding how it is that these learners are able to succeed. Broadly, resilience can be described as an individual's ability to adapt and succeed despite facing adversity or challenging circumstances (Masten, 2001; Masten & Obradović, 2006). However, such a broad definition can be unhelpful and neglects to provide information about individuals in different societies and contexts who employ unique methods of coping and resilience based on the specific set of adversities facing them (Pulla, 2013). Pulla (2013) therefore argues for an understanding of resilience that takes into account the culture and context in which the individual is embedded. From this perspective, resilience can then be understood as:

*the opportunity and capacity of individuals to navigate their way to psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that may pull together during crises and provide them with an opportunity and capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for life following adversity in appropriate and culturally meaningful ways.*  
(Pulla, 2013, p. 14)

This definition shifts focus away from understanding resilience as a static attribute or personal characteristic, but rather as a dynamic process that involves the individual's interaction with many factors to cope or adapt favourably (Pulla, 2013). There have been many developments in resilience theory over the years, with what is known as the second wave of resilience focussing on the variables implicated in resilience being situated across the many systems underpinning and influencing individual development (O'Dougherty Wright, Masten & Narayan, 2013). This provides an integration of two approaches to understanding human development and adaptation and is consistent with the Bioecological Systems Theory discussed above. Understanding resilience from a systems approach also represents a more contextual approach to understanding development (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). Therefore increasing attention is being given to the context in which these factors occur and the way in which the individual can negotiate in his/her environment as a way of understanding resilience.

In order for the individual to be considered resilient, s/he has to have faced adversity. This requires a value-judgment (Masten & Obradović, 2006). The researcher needs to clearly define the nature of the adaptive behaviour as well as describe the circumstances that are seen to be adverse (Masten et al., 2009). Risk factors, that which creates an adverse environment and is a threat to adaptive development, are many, but include situations of poverty, parental illness, exposure to violence and homelessness (Masten et al., 2009). It is important to note that risk factors do not always occur in isolation, but there may be a few that occur together and pose a threat to the individual's adaptive ability (Masten et al., 2009).

In adverse conditions, when one or more risk factors make an individual vulnerable to maladaptive development, protective factors can act as buffers to foster resilience and healthy development (Masten et al., 2009). While in all circumstances, these protective factors would encourage adaptive development, they are argued to be especially vital for individual's facing adversity (Masten et al., 2009). Masten et al. (2009) differentiate protective factors from promotive factors. Promotive factors or assets seem to be those elements or resources that encourage resilience or adaptive coping in all situations, while protective factors play an important role in buffering individuals in situations of high risk (Masten et al., 2009).

There has been much debate on the distinction between promotive and protective factors as the contexts and relationships in which they develop are complex (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). It is helpful to think of risk, promotive and protective factors as existing on a continuum. They are in essence "continuous variables" and are therefore difficult to clearly define (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013, p. 20). O'Dougherty Wright et al. (2013) give the example of competent parenting which is known to be a promotive factor in encouraging adaptive development. However, in situations of high risk, the competent parent may well adapt their responses to the situation, thereby acting in a protective way (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). This illustrates how at one end of the continuum is a risk (poor parenting) which further along the continuum is competent parenting (a promotive factor) and at the other end of the continuum is parenting that acts in a protective manner.

O'Dougherty Wright et al. (2013) provide a list of promotive and protective factors that represent common findings from many studies. Depending on the level of risk and the adaptation of these factors along the continuum, they can be viewed as either promotive or protective factors. These include individual characteristics such as problem solving ability,

cognitive ability and self-confidence; family characteristics such as a supportive home life, parental involvement in the children's education, good socioeconomic status, parental education and a supportive extended family; community characteristics such as safety, low violence, effective schools and extra-curricular programmes; and societal characteristics such as resources for education, value placed on education and the prevention of oppression and political violence (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013, p. 21). It is evident from this list that promotive and protective factors exist across many systems in society: within the individual, family, community and wider society (Masten et al., 2009; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013).

This illustrates the location of promotive and protective factors at all levels of society as described in the Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Ringeisen et al. (2003) make use of a systems perspective to understand schools as dynamic contexts that are influenced not only by the people in the immediate surroundings but also by the wider community and education departments, both locally and nationally. It has been found that academic achievement in itself is a protective factor in buffering children against the challenges they face (Masten, 2003). Schools in fact are important sites for fostering many protective factors, such as academic achievement, role modelling healthy relationships between teachers and learners, and the development of mental skills (Masten, 2001, 2003).

The Swiss Cheese Model, developed by James Reason, is used to understand human error in systems and is often used in medical settings (Reason, 2000). Layers of defences in a system are in place to prevent the breakdown of the system. However, these layers resemble layers of Swiss cheese, with many holes or potential weaknesses in each layer (Reason, 2000). Having these holes in one layer does not necessarily mean the failure of the entire system as the absence of holes in adjacent layers compensates for this. The problem arises when many holes in adjacent layers line up to allow a "trajectory of accidental opportunity" (Reason, 2000, p. 769). In addition, the position of these holes is not static, but they are "continually opening, shutting, and shifting their location" (Reason, 2000, p. 769). This theory can be applied to understanding human resilience from a systems perspective. The Swiss cheese model provides a good illustration of resilience when understood in conjunction with concepts from resilience theory and the Bioecological Systems Theory forming the "layers" of the cheese. While many risk factors may exist as holes or potential weaknesses in the layers of the system, they do not necessarily mean a failure of the system as long as adjacent layers can buffer the system from breakdown. Protective factors play this role and explain

how individuals can become resilient and succeed despite facing adversity or being exposed to risk. Breakdown in the system occurs when too many risk factors line up across many levels of the system which results in nothing acting in a protective way to buffer the individual.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The current study used a descriptive, qualitative research design in order to gain meaningful, in-depth descriptions and understand the unique perspectives and experiences of the participants (Durrheim, 2006; Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). This in-depth description is partially gained as a consequence of the involvement of the researcher in developing rapport with the participants, possibly making them more relaxed and willing to share their thoughts and experiences (Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). This study fits into the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning that individuals attach to their everyday lives and actions (Neuman, 2006, p. 88; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). The interpretivist paradigm is a useful approach for exploring the subjective experiences of individuals, which is essential in the context of this study (Neuman, 2006; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). A qualitative research design is used to understand and describe the phenomenon from the perspective of the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2005, p. 270). In recent studies conducted by Moloï (2010) and Moloï et al. (2010) on similar topics, a qualitative research design was used. In order to gain in-depth descriptions and understandings of the teachers' perceptions of factors contributing to academic success, a qualitative research design is appropriate and necessary for this study.

### **Research Participants**

The participants in this study were 15 black African high school teachers from two rural high schools in KwaZulu-Natal that have experienced inconsistencies in the Matric pass rates of learners in their schools recently. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants.

TABLE 1: *Profile of Participants*

Number of Participants	15
Number of years teaching experience	
5 years or less	2
Between 5 and 10 years	2
More than 10 years	11
Number of years teaching at current school	
5 years or less	7
Between 5 and 10 years	3
More than 10 years	5
Grades taught	
Only Senior Phase Grades (8-9)	0
Only FET Grades (10-12)	7
Multiple grades from Grade 8-12	8

Most of the participants have been in the teaching profession for over 10 years, however, almost half of the participants have been in their current school for less than five years. More than half of the participants teach multiple grades between Grade 8 and 12.

Since qualitative research is primarily concerned with an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (rather than trying to produce generalisable results), smaller samples are selected (Durrheim, 2006; Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). Although the sample may be small, each participant provided the researcher with detailed and valuable information. Qualitative research does not seek to generalise findings across a whole population as quantitative research often does, but rather recognises the uniqueness of each individual experience and tries to adequately explore and describe such experience (Gavin, 2008). This does not mean qualitative research is less credible. Rather than aiming at generalisability, qualitative research aims at transferability as a measure of credibility, where the results from the study can be used to understand similar situations with participants with similar characteristics (Durrheim, 2006; Gavin, 2008). Therefore the use of a smaller sample does not make the research any less credible and it was hoped that a sample of this size is sufficient to gain an understanding of the perceptions of teachers regarding academic success among their learners.

### **Type of Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used for this study. Participants were selected based on their suitability for the study through the use of certain criteria (Davies, 2010; Durrheim, 2006; Gavin, 2008; Silverman, 2000). The criterion for selecting participants for this study was that the participants must be teachers from one of the two schools that were approached. Ghaffar et al. (2011), Moloi (2010) and Moloi et al. (2010) all used this method of sampling in their school-based studies relating to learner achievement.

### **Data Collection**

Focus groups of between 6 and 10 high school teachers were used to facilitate discussion about teachers' perception of factors influencing academic success. Two focus groups were conducted with two rural high schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The discussion was facilitated by the researcher using the Participlan method (Institute for Social Development Studies [ISDS] & International Centre for Research on Women [ICRW], 2011). The discussion related to factors that promote or hinder academic success.

The advantage of using focus groups is that in a group setting, the participants can interact and engage with each other, providing insightful information for the researcher (Gavin, 2008; Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). These conversations and interactions between the participants are crucial in providing an understanding of how the teachers, as a group, feel about the topic (Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). In addition, rapport between group members is important and the teachers might respond better if among colleagues; this may help them feel more comfortable to participate and volunteer their ideas and opinions (Gavin, 2008; Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010).

Careful facilitation of the group was important to make sure the group discussion had a purpose and direction. The researcher needed to carefully consider the number of questions asked and be able to probe participants to encourage in-depth responses (Gavin, 2008). Rather than asking too many questions or interrupting, the group was allowed to feel they had control over the discussion (Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). At the same time, however, the researcher needed to be aware of the group dynamics at play and create opportunities for all participants to contribute. Having only a few participants dominate the discussion was avoided (Kelly, 2006; Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). These points were taken into consideration when deciding on the size of each focus group.

Participlan, sometimes referred to as card storming, actively engages the participants in arranging their ideas and thoughts into themes and groupings and encourages discussion and the extension of ideas (ISDS & ICRW, 2011). The participants were asked to respond to a question posed by the researcher by writing single ideas on cards (see interview schedule in Appendix 1). The cards with the responses were collected and affixed to a large sheet of paper in front of the group. Through the direction and discussion of the group, similar ideas were arranged together under headings or themes (ISDS & ICRW, 2011). Repetitive ideas were noted as representing dominant thoughts of the group. Participants were encouraged to clarify unclear ideas and further discuss other points. Responses that were perceived to be the most important were identified (ISDS & ICRW, 2011). The discussion was recorded and field notes were also taken to capture comments that were made.

Through this process of card storming, it is the participants themselves that have control of the flow and arrangement of ideas into themes. In a focus group situation, it may arise that some participants may not feel comfortable discussing certain issues in front of their colleagues (Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). However, the method of card-storming addresses this issue. Once the participants write their ideas down on cards, the researcher shuffled the cards, making the ideas virtually anonymous. Once the cards were presented on the board, they become the ideas of the group as a whole, rather than one individual. It was explained to the group at the start that they take ownership of the ideas presented, thereby hopefully encouraging honesty and openness amongst group members who would otherwise have been hesitant to share all of their thoughts.

The recorded focus groups were transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions, the field notes and the card arrangements on the paper, acted as the raw data to be analysed. Subsequent to collecting data, the researcher was involved in a community project at one of the schools under study and so observational data was collected in this manner. Additional information that provided an understanding of the contextual setting of both schools was also gained incidentally through informal discussions with the deputy principals of both schools.

## **Study Procedures**

Permission from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education to conduct research in an educational institution as well as an application for ethical clearance through an internal ethics board at the University of KwaZulu-Natal was requested. Once this was granted (see Appendix 2 and 3), two rural high schools in KwaZulu-Natal were identified as suitable for the study and were approached and asked to participate. Following this, teachers within the high schools were approached and introduced to the study. Those who were willing to participate were asked to give their informed consent (Appendix 4). Once sufficient participants were identified, one focus group in each school was conducted in a location convenient for the teachers and in a private and non-threatening environment. The focus groups lasted between one and two hours.

## **Data Analysis**

This study made use of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The flexibility of thematic analysis is one of its advantages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore while the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied in the process of the data analysis, the process was adapted for the uniqueness of this study, which made use of Participan in the data collection stage. Themes are patterns of responses that reflect something important about the data in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Themes in the data that were identified and organised by the participants during the focus groups were used as a starting point for analysis. In this way, themes were generated inductively, allowing for greater credibility of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis began with the researcher becoming familiar with the data through reading through field notes and the card storming pages developed in each focus group (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The contextual setting of the participants also provided valuable information for analysing this data. The broad themes identified by the participants were noted and codes in the data were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were sorted into the relevant broad themes and any sub-themes that emerged were noted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were revised and refined to make sure that the codes contained within them were appropriately related and relevant (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This revision also involved looking at the data as a whole and making sure the themes and sub-themes characterised the data accurately (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The essential meaning of each theme was described. This included how each theme related to the overall research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each theme was named, preferably using the labels generated by the participants themselves and examples of each theme and sub-theme were provided. The researcher decided to structure the information gained from the participants using the Bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) and resilience theory (Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 2009) and the data was written up in a discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The participants in this study were asked to give their informed consent to take part (Appendix 4) (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The extent of their participation, the storing of data and the potential for the use of the study in conferences or publications was explained in this form. They were asked to participate in a focus group with a few of their colleagues. As far as possible, the participants' confidentiality and anonymity was maintained (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Only the researcher and research supervisor have access to the data and the participants' names and the names of the schools in which they work do not appear in the study. In addition, the research is written in such a way that if another person were to read it, besides the participants themselves, they will not be able to identify who the participants were based on the descriptions of responses in the text. Since the method of data collection was a focus group, it was impossible to maintain complete anonymity as each participants is aware of who participated in the same focus group. Prior to the commencement of each focus group, an appeal was made to the participants to not reveal any of the discussions of the focus group to anyone else. Related to this, participants were reminded that their participation is completely voluntary and that they may withdraw from the research at any point (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The participants were able to receive a copy of the final version of the study, if they so wish.

### **Limitations**

Due to time constraints, only two schools were approached to participate in this study. As a result, there may be participants from other high schools who have valuable input who were excluded from the study. Furthermore, it was difficult to find schools that were willing to participate in the study. This is possibly since many teachers catch transport immediately after school closes to their homes far away and since during school hours there are few surplus teachers available to look after the learners while the teachers' participate in the

study. Therefore certain schools that were identified as valuable informants were excluded. In addition, those schools who agreed to participate had limited time and the researcher had to adapt the Participian method to adjust to this. Themes that emerged from the initial question posed to the participants were highlighted and further discussed as a way to adapt to the time constraints. As with all qualitative studies, the findings of the research cannot be generalised, but can only be applied to the unique experience of the sample (Gavin, 2008). However, important insights were still gained into the factors influencing academic success.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Contextual Setting**

The setting of both schools involved in this study is important in understanding the context in which the participants work and some of the challenges that the participants and learners in the schools face each day. This provided additional information for the analysis of the data collected. Both schools are located in remote areas of rural KwaZulu-Natal. Entry into the schools was considerably difficult and highlights the additional difficulties faced by schools in rural areas. Finding schools that were willing to participate was not easy and some of the schools were not willing to participate. This seemed largely due to time constraints and academic pressure on the teachers making it very difficult to allow research to take place. Once two schools were found that suited the study and that were willing to participate, further challenges were faced. Many of the teachers travel long distances to get to work and therefore they have to leave immediately after school closes to catch transport home. Therefore it was not an option to conduct research after school hours. Time spent with the participants was therefore very limited and special arrangements had to be made for the focus groups to be conducted. It was evident that the participants were under a lot of pressure and so not especially cooperative initially in the focus groups. The two schools will be referred to as School A and School B for the purposes of describing their particular setting.

Both schools are classified as Quintile 3 schools and have tarred roads leading up to the school entrance. Despite this classification, the learners in the schools come largely from poor families and both schools are supported by the School Nutrition Programme. Both schools also face similar challenges with overcrowded classrooms, poor resources and social difficulties in the learners' families.

At School A the foyer area outside the principal's office prominently displays the school's achievements. A trophy cabinet boasts of the school's recent achievements, one of which is a trophy for the Best Performing School in the 2011 Matric exams in the district. A graph on the wall also displays the increasing Matric pass rate from 2007 to present. Despite achieving a very high pass rate in 2011, the Matric pass rate has been inconsistent and dropped considerably from 80.6% in 2011 to 57% in 2012 (DoBE, 2012). The school's vision and mission is also on display as well as photographs from the prize giving ceremony the previous year. Discipline seems to be well maintained in School A. During the visit to the

school, the deputy principal could be seen standing outside his office watching the learners after break, ensuring they made their way to class. The teachers of this school seemed to be very motivated; they appeared to get on well with each other and indicated their support for the management staff of the school.

School B has been through a period of great disruption over the last few years, with the introduction of a new principal causing unrest amongst staff and learners alike. Political unrest in the area has filtered into the school, with the learners and community members striking and destroying property in 2011. After an event was interpreted as having a political agenda, teachers were chased off the school property by learners and the school was closed for a few weeks and then reopened once community members restored some of the buildings. However this unrest continued, with a further learner strike in 2012. This affected teaching and learning and has left staff unmotivated. In some classrooms, learners are left unattended and the Grade 12 learners attempt to teach themselves. Observational data seemed to indicate that the teachers in this school may have difficulty instilling discipline as learners wandered in and out of the classrooms and around the school yard much of the time. While School B had previously excelled academically, the Matric results have been inconsistent over the last few years. School B achieved a 32.5% Matric pass rate in 2011, which dropped to 17.5% at the end of 2012 (DoBE, 2012).

Both of these schools have shown inconsistencies in the Matric pass rates over the past few years. However, considering the challenges faced by the learners in the schools, it is remarkable that a percentage of learners have still managed to pass Matric. This makes both of these schools valuable points of focus for this research in attempting to gain an understanding of the factors that have assisted some learners to show resilience by achieving academic success despite the challenges they have faced.

### **Main Findings: A Contextual Understanding of Resilience**

The data presented was gathered from two focus groups comprising of 15 teachers in total who work in two rural schools in KwaZulu-Natal. It was the perception of participants in this study that there are numerous factors influencing learner success. The main themes identified and organised by the participants can be further understood using concepts from resilience theory as well as the Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Masten et al., 2009). At the core is the individual who interacts with the

environment to produce positive or negative outcomes. Factors identified by the participants at an individual level, interpersonal level and school, family and community level fall within Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation of the microsystem. Mesosystem factors are implied and intertwined within these levels as it involves interactions between the microsystems such as links between family and school. Background factors such as the financial status of parents are found within the exosystem as they contain factors that indirectly affect the success of learners. Within the macrosystem, educational policies appear to filter down to affect the rest of the levels. Within each of these systems, risk factors, promotive factors and protective factors were identified.

Many risk factors or challenges were acknowledged by the participants, occurring largely at a school, family and community level as well as at a policy level. Most notably, the context of a rural environment becomes evident, with remnants of South Africa's political and educational history still having an effect on the education and financial standing of many of the learner's parents and families, indirectly influencing the support learners receive. At a policy level, the participants seem to be facing numerous challenges in their endeavours to educate the learners. This is especially true in a rural context. While educational policies are beginning to compensate for these challenges, the effects are long-standing and will be slow to remediate (Gardiner, 2008).

Factors were identified that can be classified as promotive factors or assets, in that they would seem to have a beneficial effect on all learners, regardless of the level of risk (Masten et al., 2009; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). These were identified at all levels of society: within the microsystem and mesosystem at an individual, interpersonal and school level; within the exosystem and within the macrosystem. The participants identified individual factors on the part of the teacher and learner that influence learner success. It also seems that the interactions that occur between learners, between teachers and between teachers and learners can act to foster academic success. Important factors at the school and family level were also identified as well as background factors within the family. At a wider policy level, the compensation of teachers was highlighted as a promotive factor.

Furthermore, protective factors, those elements that act to buffer learners at risk to produce favourable outcomes (Masten et al., 2009) were identified at an individual, interpersonal, school and family level and background and policy level factors were also noted. Much

importance was placed on the role of the school in buffering learners from difficult backgrounds to encourage success. Many of the participants were quite proactive and could describe actions taken to attempt to compensate for deficits in the learners' environment and which act in a protective manner. In addition, the role of the community in which the school is situated was emphasised as a vehicle for influencing the attitudes and behaviours of learners. Acknowledgement was also given to policy level changes which attempt to compensate for challenges faced in education. It is clear that the context in which the learners exist and interact was given considerable emphasis in its ability to create a system in which learners can achieve success despite adversity.

Table 2 illustrates the main findings of the study as themed by the participants themselves and further classified by relevant theory. These findings provide an understanding of the participants' perceptions of the main factors they feel foster academic success, the challenges the learners face in achieving this success and the many ways in which the school and other supportive environments act to promote learner success.

TABLE 2: Summary of Findings of Factors that Promote or Hinder Academic Success

		Risk Factors or Challenges	Promotive Factors	Protective Factors
Microsystem and Mesosystem	Individual Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learner characteristics <i>e.g. discouraged, withdrawn, frustrated</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher commitment <i>e.g. lesson planning, punctuality, competence.</i></li> <li>- Learner commitment <i>e.g. school attendance, studying</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The role of teachers <i>e.g. passion to teach, being exemplary, being a role model</i></li> <li>- Learners' attitude to learning <i>e.g. love of studying, passion to learn, self-discipline</i></li> <li>- Family transformation <i>e.g. bettering oneself</i></li> </ul>
	Interpersonal Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Negative learner interactions <i>e.g. bullying, being discouraged by poor influences</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher-learner interactions <i>e.g. cooperative relationship, respect</i></li> <li>- Interactions between teachers <i>e.g. united with one goal</i></li> <li>- Interactions between learners <i>e.g. peer help</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collaborative teaching and learning <i>e.g. engaging with learners to solve problems, encourage and supporting learners</i></li> </ul>
	School/Family/Community Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of resources <i>e.g. overcrowding of classes, poor condition of buildings</i></li> <li>- Limitations of rural schooling <i>e.g. lack of exposure to city life</i></li> <li>- Negative community influences <i>e.g. faction fights, negative community attitudes</i></li> <li>- Lack of effective discipline techniques <i>e.g. banning of the shambock</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Availability of resources <i>e.g. books, calculators, buildings, equipment</i></li> <li>- Involvement of stakeholders <i>e.g. parents working with the school</i></li> <li>- School discipline <i>e.g. code of conduct</i></li> <li>- School uniform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Community engagement <i>e.g. Saturday classes</i></li> <li>- Networking &amp; collaboration</li> <li>- Extracurricular activities <i>e.g. excursions, sport</i></li> <li>- Providing support <i>e.g. parents making allowances at home; helping with academic work</i></li> <li>- The Turn-around strategy <i>e.g. winter classes, morning classes</i></li> <li>- Compensating for family breakdown <i>e.g. communication with a guardian</i></li> <li>- School versus home environment</li> </ul>

(continued)

TABLE 2: *Summary of Findings of Factors that Promote or Hinder Academic Success (continued)*

		Risk Factors or Challenges	Promotive Factors	Protective Factors
Exosystem	Background Factors	- Parents' limitations	- Availability of financial resources	- Genetic inheritance - Teachers' background
Macrosystem	Structural/Policy Level	- Poor teacher compensation - Schools measured by Matric results - Policy on condonations	- Teacher compensation	- Support services - Introduction of Annual National Assessments - Corporate identity <i>e.g. vision and mission of the school</i>

## **Risk Factors**

Challenges or risk factors that can act to discourage learner success were identified at the individual, interpersonal level, family or school level and policy level.

### **Learner Characteristics**

Although not explicitly identified, it was evident through the discussions that the participants felt that learner characteristics such as being discouraged, frustrated and withdrawn discourage learners from achieving success. This is often as a result of interactions with other learners or other environmental contexts.

*“Faction fights emanating from the community... makes the learners to...not like to have the tenacity and passion to participate.”*

### **Negative Learner Interactions**

At an interpersonal level, risk factors related to the negative interaction between learners. In this regard, the participants referred to certain learners who exert a negative influence over the more diligent learners and therefore affect their academic pursuits. Bullying is another concern raised by the participants and which discourages effective teaching and learning in the school, therefore negatively impacting on a learner’s potential to succeed.

*“When...the few learners which have an eager[ness] to learn are discouraged...the mob in the class so you find that one learner that is interested to pick up the lesson is discouraged by the crowd and the child will end up being withdrawn.”*

*“...this thing of children bullying each other. It’s a problem.”*

### **Lack of Resources**

At a school and family level, not having sufficient resources is one of the challenges the participants face and which affects their ability to deliver quality instruction. While many of the participants had the enthusiasm and ability to be effective teachers, they felt that being limited by the available resources at a school hampers these efforts.

*“Sometimes when you don’t have enough resources you are...limited somehow to go the extra mile when you are teaching.”*

This is evident in areas out of the teachers’ control such as the number of children in the classrooms. Both of these schools had overcrowded classes, especially in the lower grades.

This puts increasing pressure on the teacher to attend to so many learners. Overcrowded classrooms and poorly maintained buildings affect school attendance and negatively affect teaching and learning. The participants commented that due to the poor condition of some buildings, some children are frequently absent in winter to avoid working in the cold conditions.

*“A class without windows and doors in a very chilly weather condition”*

Some learners have to walk long distances to school as they have no money for transport. This means that learners arrive at school tired, which impacts on their ability to participate as compared to other learners.

*“Little money for transport, learners tired in class.”*

### **Limitations of Rural Schooling**

Many learners in the rural schools under study do not get the opportunity to travel into nearby towns. The participants felt that exposure to city life acts to motivate learners in thinking about their future. Learners who do not experience this are disadvantaged, and this affects their approach to academic work. The participants recognise the value of the environment in which a learner is raised and educated as providing a wider context in which learning occurs. They seemed to have the impression that the rural environment has fewer opportunities for learners to see their education applied in reality. The reason for this stance may relate to the participants own experience as many of them live away from the rural areas in the nearby towns.

*“They are not exposed...to other environments.”*

*“You know when you get a child that is in maybe Pinetown there, they are used to seeing things real than being told. They are able to see certain things and those things they’ll see it encourages them to work hard in school.”*

*“The environment...plays a very huge role...when it comes to the kind of learner we get... But our kids here some of them have never been to town...it discourages them to work hard because it doesn’t motivate them.”*

### **Negative Community Influences**

The participants gave great emphasis to the context in which the learners live as having an impact on the school environment and the learning that takes place.

*“The external environment to which the learners are exposed...can be a good environment and at the same time it can be a bad environment.”*

There were a number of factors within the community that were identified as playing a significant role in influencing the school environment. The participants described how political and violent disagreements in the community filter into the school environment and affect teaching and learning. On this topic, the participants of the one school in particular seemed to feel quite helpless in the face of the community values and politics that were brought into their school by the learners.

*“...the kids come with the attitude they inherit from the community of violence...and they take it to the classroom and disturb other learners while they are learning and the teachers are teaching.”*

*“Faction fights emanating from the community...penetrating...into the school premises...it makes the learners to...not like to have the tenacity and passion to participate...somehow this thing drags them down...”*

*“...as a result it substitute[s] what they are supposed to do at school with what they see in the community.”*

The teachers struggle to create a constructive learning environment due to the negative community influence and the happenings in the community often distract learners from their academic work. The context in which the learners interact outside the school has a direct impact on the potential for successful learning to take place in the classroom.

*“...so the situation in the classroom becomes chaotic and even a learner with maybe the potential to be successful now will be suppressed...”*

*“So there are learners who end up failing at the end of the year, not because maybe they are not capable of passing...but because the things that are going on within the school yard – fighting and everything. Then they fail.”*

### **Lack of Effective Discipline Techniques**

Participants from one school expressed frustration at the discipline techniques employed by their school that seem to be ineffective. They referred to previous years when corporal punishment was allowed and reflected on the benefits of this form of punishment. They did not seem to have substituted corporal punishment with an equally effective form of maintaining discipline. Learners in their school act as they please and the discipline techniques employed are not effective.

*“...previously before the corporal punishment was not banned, there was a principal, he was always getting the shambock...and the learners here were always successful. You know the pass percentage was always high. But now, since this thing’s banned, you know you’re allowed to do willy nilly...they don’t care.”*

### **Parents’ Limitations**

Some of the learners’ parents are also limited in their ability to provide academic support because of their lack of education.

*“I rarely think...the parents help their learners. Because you find the parents they’ve also not gone far in education so they may not have the ability to motivate and help them in certain areas.”*

*“They are so limited because of the shortfall of information. They cannot help them do certain things at home.”*

Certain parents were also found to present a challenge in not supporting the teachers when a learner needed to be disciplined at school.

*“You know in the cases where a child you know is experiencing an offence, then the parents would take it negative and attack the school. So in such cases we come together as teachers and embrace ourselves to protect others in the interests of the child.”*

The participants also referred to learners in their schools whose parents work far away from the home. This poses a challenge in communicating with the parents. Some learners are orphaned and either run their own household or live with guardians, making it more difficult for teachers to liaise with a parental figure. The participants found that the breakdown of many family units in the community made their jobs more difficult. Where parents were absent or deceased, the teachers found it more difficult to maintain the connection between school and family for the benefit of the child.

*“Our children are not having a complete family structure. Where a parent or mother, they are at work, working far, so children are, they’re the ones who are controlling their families. So if you write a letter trying to communicate with the parent, you’ll give the letter to the child and it will not reach the parent because the parent is in the workplace....Some they are orphans and some they are not living with their parents.”*

### **Poor Teacher Compensation**

At a policy level, the participants reflected on poor teacher compensation as a factor that negatively impacts on their ability and motivation to deliver quality instruction to the learners in their school. The participants felt that teachers were more likely to move to another profession and less likely to excel in their jobs in the teaching profession if they are paid poorly.

*“If the environment or the issues surrounding you are against you as a person who is supposed to produce then chances are you are not going to produce to your highest level.”*

### **Schools Measured by Matric Results**

The participants expressed frustration at the policy on measuring the success of a high school by the Matric results. This places an immense amount of pressure on the Grade 12 teachers to produce good results.

*“The focus right now is on the Grade 12s because...the school is measured by...the Grade 12 results.”*

*“...you find the school is going to be graded or it’s going to be judged through the Grade 12s, then the Grade 12 teachers have to work very hard.”*

One participant used an analogy of building a house to illustrate the importance of laying a good foundation of education in lower grades for learners to be successful in Matric. This illustrates the participants’ perception of the continuation of education from primary school to high school. They recognise the importance of education in primary schools as providing a foundation on which they build when the learners come to high school. Conversely they also realise that poor outcomes in Matric are in part related to poor schooling in lower grades.

*“...a good house is determined...by its foundation. If the foundation is well laid it means...the building is going to be very, very strong. So if the focus is so much on the Grade 12 results, then it means the base where these learners are coming from it not actually counted, when we forget that they play a pivotal role up front there.”*

### **Policy on Condonations**

Oftentimes teachers receive learners into high school who have received a poor quality of education in the primary school years. This is partly due to the departmental policy on condoning, which limits the number of years a learner can repeat a certain grade, regardless

of whether he or she has successfully progressed academically. This places a higher burden on teachers and is a challenge to the academic success of some learners.

*“But then sometimes the learners that the high school...receives from the lower grade school [are] not up to standard.”*

*“...the department has this, that a learners should not be delayed in a certain phase for more than two years or more than three years and then the teachers in the lower grades have to push the learners and when you receive the learners in Grade 8 they cannot even read, they cannot even write, you have to start afresh.”*

### **Promotive Factors**

There were many core elements identified by the participants that act as promotive factors in influencing learner success. These basic factors that are beneficial to all learners regardless of the level of risk can be viewed at an individual level, interpersonal level, community or family level, background level and structural or policy level.

#### **Teacher Commitment**

At an individual level, much emphasis was placed on the role of teachers and especially their commitment to their work. The general tasks expected of teachers included planning for lessons, punctuality, balancing the subjects taught and having good knowledge about the subjects taught. Overall the participants seemed to emphasise the necessity of having competent teachers in order for learners to succeed.

*“It’s planning for the lesson in order to assist learners to understand.”*

*“...if a teacher is always punctual at school, even at class and comes right on time then the learners will be motivated.”*

*“Competent teachers who are willing to do their job.”*

#### **Learner Commitment**

Both teachers and learners had to show commitment. That is that there was also an expectation on learners to play a role in their own success. The basic requirements for a learner included attendance at school every day, completion of work, working hard, attending all classes and the academic tasks of studying and reading.

## **Teacher-learner Interactions**

At an interpersonal level, the interactions between teachers and learners were seen as important in influencing the quality of teaching and learning that can take place. The one aspect of this relationship depends on a teacher's competence in delivering quality teaching, in ensuring adequate assessment and revision takes place, in exposing learners to a variety of subject material and in preparing learners to approach tasks and assessments.

*"Teachers strategic and informative skills in imparting knowledge."*

*"Giving them tests regularly...so they get used to the style of how the examiners ask questions."*

*"Learners exposure in approaching learning activities as well as acquainting them to lots of reading text."*

Another aspect of this relationship depends on the teacher's ability to create a classroom environment that is conducive to teaching. A teacher who is willing to allow learners to have an amount of freedom in the classroom to interact with the teacher in the learning process was seen as important. The teacher was also described as a person who can influence the atmosphere in the classroom, thereby determining the extent to which learners will engage in the lesson. A conducive teacher-learner relationship is also built on positive cooperation and teachers having a certain amount of respect and trust in their learners.

*"There should be a healthy relationship between learners and teachers...where the children will be able to speak out, voice their views, say their opinion, give an input. So the lesson can develop."*

*"You know when the teacher is tense, the children cannot be free."*

*"Healthy teaching and learning atmosphere in the learning process."*

*"Positive cooperation between teachers and learners"*

This teacher-learner relationship is also made up of the learners' interactions with the teacher. It was emphasised that learners should be respectful towards teachers in order for teaching and learning to take place.

## **Interactions between Teachers**

In addition to a teacher's interaction with learners, the interaction between teachers was also viewed as important and one of the basic factors that encourage success for learners. In

addition, the relationship between teachers and the management staff is also important. A code of ethics is one element identified that governs the behaviour and interactions between teachers.

*“I think work ethics too...how we behave, how do we interact. Human relations.”*

However the kind of positive interactions the participants described extend further than merely behaving in a manner stipulated by a code of ethics. They described collaborative relationships that allow them to work together to ensure a high academic standard. It was important to the participants that the teachers worked together moving towards the same goals. This was especially important for teachers who work in the same department and allows for quality teaching.

*“Teachers working as a collective: having one goal.”*

*“Because sometimes we’ll be in the same group, like Maths department and we have to have a relationship between each other.”*

### **Interaction between Learners: Peer Help**

At an interpersonal level the participants highlighted the value of good interaction between learners that facilitates academic improvement. This interaction is orchestrated by the teachers but its success depends on learner interaction. Teachers play a role in initiating groups and interactions as part of their teaching strategy which then allows for positive learner interaction. This illustrates how teachers are instrumental in fostering interpersonal skills between learners which encourages academic success and teaches them to support each other academically. In this regard, activities such as group work where learners can share ideas and learn from each other were suggested as important activities to support the learners and help them succeed.

*“Interaction with other learners....They are helping each other....It’s more than being helped by teachers now, they are helped by...fellow students.”*

*“I think it’s about...the support group.”*

### **Availability of Resources**

Being able to access the necessary resources was a topic emphasised strongly by participants from both schools within the school, family and community level. They identified exactly

which resources were necessary and substantiated why these resources encourage learner success. The resources mentioned can be categorised under the following headings.

### **Teaching resources**

In general, the possession of necessary teaching resources was seen as eliminating barriers to teaching and allows the teacher to prepare adequately for lessons. It facilitates the learning process and increases the confidence of both the teachers and the learners. Having relevant books that were in line with the school curriculum was emphasised as a key resource that allows learners to be properly prepared for examinations. In addition, possessing equipment for certain learning areas makes practical lessons possible. It was acknowledged that learning is better facilitated when learners are able to do practical lessons. New technology, such as computers, was also mentioned as a beneficial resource for learners. If learners are able to research information on their own through the use of computers, this makes them more independent in their learning and increases their confidence.

*“Good resources eliminate barriers on the side of the teacher while preparing to go to class and teach. Because when you have enough resources around you, then you’ve got enough equipment to go and teach the learners.”*

*“...gadgets like computers where learners can be able to go through and offload the information by themselves...boosts their confidence.”*

### **Physical resources**

In addition to the necessary equipment for teaching, the physical school environment is also an aspect that affects learning. The maintenance of school buildings was mentioned as creating a learning environment conducive to learning.

*“Proper maintenance of buildings i.e. windows/doors.”*

*“It leads to competent teachers, cooperative parents...”*

### **Human resources**

At this level, human resources refer to the ratio between teachers and learners. The participants noted that overcrowding in classrooms is a problem and so the ratio of teachers to learners is important in facilitating learning.

*“Good teacher-learner ratio.”*

## **Involvement of Stakeholders**

It was emphasised that stakeholders such as parents, teachers and community members should be involved in the decisions that affect teaching and learning in the school.

Stakeholders were defined by the participants as *“people with [an] interest in education.”*

While teachers and community member were listed as stakeholders, much emphasis was placed on the role of parents in the school. It is important that parents cooperate with the school and understand their role as stakeholders in the school. This includes attending meetings and showing support for their children.

*“They work with the school, they are cooperative. It means they know what is expected of them, on the school side. They work with the school.”*

*“When they give support, like making learners to be able to study even at home at night, giving guidance even after school. Buying materials that are needed by the school.”*

## **School Discipline**

Much attention was given to the importance of discipline in a school. It was seen as a key factor in creating a learning environment that facilitates successful learning. The participants referred to the school rules, or code of conduct, as the means to enforce discipline. This code of conduct applies not only to the learners but to the teachers as well. A disciplined environment begins from the leaders of the school, the management team, but also requires the whole staff to be in agreement and united in their approach to enforcing discipline in the school. It was the opinion of the participants that without discipline, learning cannot take place.

*“It produces a conducive atmosphere or environment.”*

*“...without discipline there is no school. If the learners are not settling, that is no school. It must start with discipline.”*

*“It makes the learners to listen to the teachers.”*

Teachers need also collaborate with each other on a personal level to present themselves as a united front to the learners. This was viewed as affecting the effectiveness of the discipline in the school. One participant commented that the learners in the school know that the staff are united, going as far as to say, *“You mess with one, you mess with all of us!”*

*“The other things as children that can help them to be more disciplined is when the teachers themselves show love between each other...You see then they should relate to that, that they ‘injure one, injure all’....You mess with one, you mess with all of us!”*

### **Availability of Financial Resources**

The parent’s financial resources were seen as important in determining the financial support a parent is able to provide. The availability of financial resources enables parents to provide resources such as books for the learners. The quote below provides an example of an area in which a parent’s financial resources is able to support their child at school:

*“Buying materials that are needed by the school...”*

### **Teacher Compensation**

At a policy level, the payment of teachers was seen as one of the important factors in keeping teachers in the profession and therefore indirectly influencing the teaching of learners through keeping experienced teachers in the teaching profession..

*“It makes them not want to go to other industries. When you love what you are doing and you don’t complain you tend to produce more.”*

### **Protective Factors**

Many additional aspects that seem to play a protective role in encouraging learner success and buffering learners from the challenges they were identified by the participants. They can be organised at an individual, interpersonal, school, community and policy level.

### **The Role of Teachers**

Much emphasis was placed on the role of teachers in encouraging learner success despite difficult circumstances. The role of a teacher at an individual level influences their ability to provide quality teaching. It seems that a lot of the protective factors described in this category are additional tasks that are not necessarily part of the basic, expected part of a teacher’s role. On a personal level, the participants identified a teacher’s motivation and passion to teach as important factors. In addition, a teacher that can act as a role model and act in an exemplary way was seen as a means of encouraging learner success. On a professional level, it is also important for teachers to make sure they keep up to date with the current school curriculum and the changing society in which the learners exist.

*“In fact teachers need to upgrade themselves from time to time in order to be on par with the knowledge that the learners may require in class...so they should go along with the demands of the contemporary society.”*

*“As a teacher you need to be exemplary.”*

*“An umbrella word would be a role model.”*

### **Learners’ Attitude to Learning**

There were many characteristics of a learner that the participants identified as important in encouraging success. These included having a passion and enthusiasm for learning, being diligent in their work, being motivated and self-disciplined and having goals to work towards. This gives an idea of how the participants perceive a positive attitude. In essence, this according to the participants could be described as going “*an extra mile.*” In addition, on an academic level, being proficient in English was also identified as an important individual factor that encourages success.

*“Enthusiasm means...you have determination that is in you have interest in passing the subject. So enthusiasm, it’s important because it leads to success.”*

*“Go an extra mile”*

*“Passion to learn”*

### **Family Transformation**

While many learners face challenges relating to their family background, there are some learners who become determined to change their situation and become successful despite their circumstances. It seems that the participants have a perception that some learners have these innate qualities that motivate them to find ways of coping and succeeding in their situations. It is evident that the participants’ view of family transformation is contradictory and in fact focuses on individual transformation when one is born into a challenging family environment. In effect, the learners are able to employ strategies to succeed despite the difficult contexts in which they live.

*“...the willingness to change the family status...if the learners are coming from a bad background, most of the time they have this element of wanting to fight the system that has been bad or unfair to them and want to change the entire system so that they become remarkable people in society.”*

It was commented that the ability to change your situation was related to attitude. It seems that a learner's perspective has an influence on whether a situation motivates change or not.

*“Others [are] motivated by struggles at home. The need of wanting to change the situation at home.”*

*“Sometimes if you change your attitude...[it] can be easier to achieve transformation.”*

### **Collaborative Teaching and Learning**

At an interpersonal level, the role of teachers was emphasised. Their interaction with the learners that goes beyond what is expected seems to play an important role in encouraging learner success. Providing support and encouragement to learners and providing personal attention to learners in engaging with them to help them problem solve and balance their work were mentioned as some of the extra things teachers can do to encourage success.

*“I think it's being able to listen to the learners' needs and helping them where they are lacking, and where there are strengths, encouraging them.”*

*“And helping them solve problems.”*

An abundance of factors were identified at a school and community level which seem to play a protective role in influencing learner success. These seem to be additional, extra activities over and above the normal expected activities of a school.

### **Community Engagement**

While the involvement of stakeholders in the running of the school is beneficial regardless of the circumstances, they also seem to play a special protective role through certain additional activities which are seen to encourage learner success. For parents, in addition to attending meetings and supporting their children, they should take ownership of the school as stakeholders in their children's education.

*“Parents should also own the school, in the sense that they should understand their role as part of the stakeholders.”*

Community members also play a role in the emotional and academic support of learners. In one instance, extra classes are funded by an external company in the community. This provides additional academic assistance to the learners in the school, directly influencing

their potential for success. Other examples given were mentoring efforts from pastors in the community who would visit the school or a ward councillor in the vicinity who was instrumental in making donations to the school.

*“Like here now in our school on Saturdays we have classes...”*

*“It’s a special programme, we are being supported by a company.”*

### **Networking and Collaboration**

At a school level in the planning and development of curriculum, teachers consult with teachers from other schools and are attentive to the preferences of learners in the planning of lessons. This demonstrates the teachers’ sensitivity to the learners’ needs and their adaptability in being able to accommodate these preferences in teaching the curriculum. The participants are also aware of their skills and deficits and seek the advice of others in the profession to the benefit of their school and learners.

*“Sometimes we go and seek expertise...to help us...as individuals in our learning areas. You don’t rely on yourself only, if there is a teacher across at School B, you go and consult to keep yourself more informative, knowledgeable.”*

*“We stick to what they like mostly the kids...Maybe they like cultural things, poems and everything, they like speeches, we stick to those things.”*

The participants also mentioned that having functions such as motivational talks directed at the teachers is necessary for them to work effectively. This shows the participants self-reflection and the awareness of their needs.

### **Extracurricular Activities**

In addition to the academic curriculum prescribed by policy, providing additional activities such as cultural and sporting events or motivational talks was seen as important in attracting learners to the school and having a positive effect in their learning. While learners may not excel at school, the participants recognise that success in other areas is important for their healthy development.

*“It’s the curriculum outside school, it’s an extra thing that teachers do.”*

*“...another thing that helps attract them to school is the sport because some of them are not good mentally but they can play.”*

However this seems to refer to more than just sporting events in the school but hints at the participants' view of learners as holistic beings. The participants recognise that other events and activities influence the potential for academic success. Excursions provide opportunities for practical exploration of concepts learnt in the classroom and physical activities are beneficial in increasing the learners' concentration and performance in the classroom.

*“Sport promotes healthy minds thus encouraging energetic involvement.”*

*“Excursions as a means of learning and exposure to outside world.”*

### **Providing Support**

Besides financially supporting their children, a parent's ability to provide support in other ways was valued by the participants as important in helping a learner succeed. The family was recognised as a key influence on learner success and represented part of the environment outside of the school to which the learner is exposed. Through their observations of the varied support parents can provide, the participants describe their perception of what qualifies as good parenting. The support provided by the family was described in different ways. Parents could help their children by making allowances at home in terms of chores and responsibilities so that the learners have time to study and complete school work at home. Many learners come late to school as they assist their parents in household responsibilities. Parents who are able to make allowances here were seen as encouraging the academic achievement of their children.

*“Reduce number of activities for the learners at home.”*

In addition, it was seen as advantageous if parents were able to help their children with their school work and provide academic input.

*“Parents to help in their learners' learning.”*

*“Parents who are interested in school work. They look after their kids.”*

The participants expected parents to show an interest in their children's schooling, through encouraging them to attend additional academic services. This further emphasises the participants' perception of parents as key role players in the school, partnering with teachers in the education of their children.

*“You know attached to winter school can be...parents, because they are the ones who should push their children to attend.”*

### **The Turn-Around Strategy**

The teachers in the one school had developed what they called a “turn-around strategy” to attempt to compensate for their poor results and encourage learner success. This is a term used in education that involves many transformative activities. The participants described this strategy as involving extra commitment from the teachers to teach extra classes, run a winter school during the winter holidays and teach classes before school starts in the early morning. They are not compensated for this extra time and do it out of goodwill.

*“It’s part of the ‘turn-around strategy’ to try and...improve results.”*

*“Before the school begins.”*

*“We’ve been doing it...for years.”*

*“...we do it out of love.”*

### **School Versus Home Environment**

In an attempt to create a disciplined school environment conducive to learning, the participants mentioned that it is important for the learners to note the different environment at school compared to their home. This is one of the strategies the one school employs to compensate for some of the difficulties they face in ensuring they are able to create a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

*“So they must differentiate between their location and the school...they should see the difference.”*

### **Compensating for Family Breakdown**

In situations where a learner comes from a home where the parents are not available due to migratory work or if they are deceased, the teachers compensate for this by attempting to reach a relative. They seem to know the family situations of their learners well which aids in negotiating difficult family arrangements. This illustrates a proactive strategy employed by some of the participants to compensate for the breakdown between two microsystems, the school and family, allowing better communication between teachers and family representatives in issues of concern related to the learners.

*“You try and get somebody who is a relative or anybody who is close to that home.”*

*“So even in the event where the parent is away, we ask for a guardian. Anyone who can represent the parent so we can share this.”*

### **Genetic Inheritance**

As one of the family background factors influencing success, the participants in this study identified the genetic inheritance of their learners as one of the factors that influence a learner’s potential to succeed. Further, it seems that the participants perceive a relationship between a learner’s family name and the learner’s academic potential. This is one way in which it is evident that the participants have a contextual understanding of their learners, and see them as embedded in their environment and influenced by the limitations or advantages of their context.

*“Inheritance, it plays a pivotal role...in determining the quality of the learner that comes out of the environment.”*

*“You see in this school we have learners they are from maybe the Nwale family...we know now that if the kid is from the Nwale family that kid will be successful at school...”*

In addition to the genetic potential a parent passes on to a child, other factors originating in the family and in qualities of parents were seen as playing an important role in influencing the success of children at school.

### **Teachers’ Background**

The findings reveal that it not only the background factors related to learners that are important, but the background factors related to the teachers that were seen as important in determining learner success. This factor exists in the exosystem as the teachers’ upbringing is an aspect of society that does not involve the learners but which impacts on them indirectly in producing teachers that are effective. The participants in this study highlighted the families from which the teachers came as a factor that would influence their effectiveness as teachers and therefore the success of learners in the school. The holistic understanding of many factors impacting on learner success is evident in their perception.

*“The teachers, coming from good parents.”*

## **Corporate Identity**

At the structural level of the school, the participants from the one school emphasised the importance of the corporate identity of the school. Part of this was evident in the foyer of the school, where photos of the previous year's prize giving were displayed as well as trophies the school had been awarded for academic excellence and the vision and mission of the school. Reminders of previous academic successes provide encouragement for teachers and learners. For these participants, the corporate identity of the school as set out in the vision and mission sets a standard for learners and teachers to strive for. The vision and mission of a school seems to be more effective in motivating teacher and learner effectiveness than a code of conduct.

*"I think the vision and mission of the school...is a point of departure that spells corporate identity."*

*"[The vision and mission] motivates the teachers to do exactly what they are supposed to do when they come to school. You see, they must make sure they are in class on time, they must make sure they work together with the kids."*

*"Vision and mission set the standard and tone."*

The school uniform helps create a corporate identity and conveys information to outsiders about the school environment. Both schools had a school uniform which was worn by all learners. Taking pride in one's appearance and dressing appropriately was perceived by the participants as a meaningful way to create a conducive learning environment.

*"The uniform our children look like, when they are putting on their uniform, without being told you know you can...interpret the vision and mission."*

This applies not only to the school uniform the learners wear but also the dress code adhered to by teachers. The participants especially from the one school strongly felt that dressing professionally is an important aspect of being an effective teacher. While there was some disagreement over whether this would necessarily influence academic success, it was agreed that dressing professionally was important and was one aspect of being a role model to the learners. This also illustrates the involvement of teachers in fostering values in the learners that are not necessarily part of the school curriculum.

## **Support Services**

In the event where learners are lacking basic resources, there are certain support services available which attempt to compensate for this. The School Nutrition Programme is one initiative which makes sure learners receive at least one nutritious meal a day. The participants felt that the food provided by this programme helps the learners to concentrate in class and encouraged school attendance. This programme seems especially necessary in rural and poorer areas.

*“Especially for kids coming from the poor areas, less advantaged.”*

*“It has been such that schools that offer food, the pupils are always present at school and they contribute more towards learning. I mean they are so attentive in class and everything. Food supply plays a role in that.”*

Many parents seem to rely on additional financial assistance from the government in order to support their families. Government grants were identified as an important element that aids parents in being able to provide the necessary financial support to buy basic necessities for their children. In essence this is a proactive strategy on the part of the government in order to compensate for the lack of financial resources in many families.

*“Because some parents are not working. They can assist their kids to come to school by those government grants.”*

*“Helping parents to buy some uniforms, pants and everything.”*

Financial support for parents allows them to pay for transport for their children to get to school and affects their ability to fully participate in academic activities.

*“Some of these learners walk long distances to the school. Money, which is a very important resources...can help them to travel faster to school, to be able to be fresh.”*

## **Introduction of Annual National Assessments**

While much focus is given to Matric results, the participants referred to the recent introduction of the Annual National Assessments, which attempts to measure academic achievement at all levels of schooling. This shift of focus to lower grades is significant as it relates to the illustration of a house raised by one participant earlier. More attention is now being paid to lower grades where the foundation of education is laid and therefore is a

strategy formulated at a policy level to compensate for poor Matric results and attempt to rectify this trend.

*“It’s only now when they are starting to introduce things like ANA [Annual National Assessments].”*

*“So now the focus is shifting from Grade 12 to lower grades.”*

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The participants in this study perceived the learners as holistic, situated in a specific context and influenced by the role players in their environment. Their responses are not restricted to any specific realm such as the school or home environment but are spread widely across all levels of society as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). They therefore have a contextual understanding of the learners and have given recognition to the many factors that impact on success. As such, the participants present as key informants in understanding these learners and their ability to succeed.

The participants understanding of the role of the individual is significant in its contrast to resilience theory. More emphasis was placed on the role of context in fostering or discouraging learner success and therefore these perceptions will be discussed. Further, as risk factors, promotive factors and protective factors can be conceptualised as existing along a continuum, it is important to explore how these three concepts were understood by the participants and how they perceived the interaction of risk factors and the environment to produce protective factors. These main concepts will be discussed and then an understanding of resilience as it is perceived in this study will be proposed as well as recommendations for further study and intervention.

### **A Systems Perspective of Adversity and Resilience**

#### **The Role of the Individual**

While the participants in this study did identify individual factors that they perceived to influence success, these were few in comparison to the multitude of factors identified at other levels of society, largely out of the individual's control. The participants identified few individual promotive, protective factors and risk factors at an individual level. This is interesting in that this perception deviates from resilience literature and current research, where individual protective factors are important in determining resilience (see Barbarin et al., 2001; Brooks, 2006; Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Masten et al., 2009; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013; Rak & Patterson, 1996). While the participants seem to understand the importance of contextual factors in influencing success, this also seems to suggest that they place little value on individual characteristics and agency in fostering or discouraging resilience. This is concerning in that it possibly reflects the participants' perceptions of individuals as rather helpless in the face of societal adversity.

## **The Role of Context**

Although there is an expectation on the learner to attend school and approach academic work with a constructive attitude, it was understood by the participants that this in itself is not sufficient. This is consistent with resilience research and literature that have found that factors outside of the individual also have an influence on resilience (see Barbarin et al., 2001; Christie & Potterton, 1997; Ghaffer et al., 2011; Masten, 2001; McCoach et al., 2010; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Moloï & Chetty, 2010; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013; Onderi & Makori, 2012; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Ward et al., 2007). In this study, the participants perceived the learners' potential as influenced by many factors that limit or benefit their capacity to succeed. It is possible that the African conceptualisation of *Ubuntu* explains the emphasis of context evident in this study (Nussbaum, 2003). The foundation of *Ubuntu* is the interdependence of individuals and of community or collective identity as the essence of individual identity (Nussbaum, 2003). It is likely that this African perspective informs the participants' perceptions of individual agency, hence the emphasis on contextual factors. However, this is a tentative proposition and further study in this regard would be necessary before coming to any firm conclusions.

Numerous factors identified by the participants made reference to their own actions as measures taken to foster academic success. The teachers perceive themselves as playing a key role both in their interactions with the learners and each other, and also as critical school role players in influencing learner success. At the same time, they recognised the role of the community which has a negative or positive impact on the ability of learners to succeed; and they expressed frustration when community influence discouraged achievement. The participants situate themselves in a certain sphere of influence and recognise their limitations in relation to other environments to which learners are exposed. In addition to wider community influences, the participants had an understanding of some of the family challenges in their context. Decisions made at a policy level were also perceived as influencing learner success. Therefore the context in which schooling takes place in a rural environment seems to be crucial in understanding the participant's perceptions of factors influencing academic success.

### **Risk Factors in the Rural Context**

Throughout the results, it was evident that the participants had a particular view of learners in their schools. They have an understanding of learners as holistic, existing in a context which exerts influence over their ability to perform. The participants understood that the family situation, community values and the history of South Africa are intricately intertwined with the way learners present and their potential to succeed. This is consistent with the Bronfenbrenner and Evans' (2000) understanding of societal chaos caused by disruption in connections in the microsystems and exosystems, such as between the home and school systems. The participants identified typical factors relating to their geographical context that are known to negatively influence educational outcomes, namely poverty, low parental education, lack of financial resources and disintegration of the family (Van der Berg, 2008). The very definition of "rural" makes reference to some of these very factors, indicating recognition of some of the limitations existing in a rural context (DoE, 2005b; Seroto, 2004). The participants also emphasised limitations specific to the rural context of these schools, which has only recently begun to gain importance in educational literature (Seroto, 2004; Surty, 2011).

It is also evident from the participants' responses, that there is frustration in implementing departmental policies within a rural context. Seroto (2004) explored the impact of education policies on rural schools in South Africa. He refers to the previous approach called Outcomes Based Education (OBE). Those with an interest in education in rural areas were not included in consultation during the development and adoption of this approach. As a result, the very resource-based curriculum that also required a lot of reorganisation and paperwork was difficult to implement in under-resourced, under-staffed rural schools (Seroto, 2004). Although the participants did not directly refer to the OBE approach and its influence in the curriculum implantation, their frustration over the lack of resources impacting on their ability to teach gives insight into the difficulties they are facing in their rural context in attempting to implement the curriculum. Ironically, the ineffective implementation of the curriculum acts to further divide the rich and poor rather than create equal access to education as it was intended to do (Jansen, 1997, cited in Seroto, 2004).

In a study by Books and Ndlalane (2011), the teachers from rural areas identified this disparity between urban and rural schools and were frustrated that it seemed little progress had been made since the onset of democracy in South Africa. Similarly, the teachers in the

current study compared themselves to ex-Model C schools in urban areas who achieve good academic results when they are not able to.

The lack of effective discipline, especially in the one school, is another example raised by the participants where their rural context has not been taken into account. Corporal punishment in schools was prohibited in 1995 by the South African Schools Act, however it is still prevalent in many schools (Bower, 2008). This is especially true of low income schools (Soneson, 2005). One of the reasons for the continued use of corporal punishment in schools is that teachers have not been trained in alternative forms of discipline, although this was intended by policy makers (Soneson, 2005). For some teachers, this is the only form of discipline they know and they are at a loss of how else to maintain discipline in the school. This is further complicated by the fact that corporal punishment is often still administered at home (Morrell, 2001). In one of the schools in this study, the deputy principal was observed walking around the school with a stick as a threat to the learners to behave. Ironically, this was the school where the teachers are not able to maintain discipline effectively. The participants argued that they were administered corporal punishment as children and they feel this is an effective form of discipline. This emphasises that these teachers, especially from School B, are unaware of the motivation for out-ruling corporal punishment and do not seem to have alternative forms of effective discipline. They require the training that was intended for teachers when corporal punishment was prohibited.

Seroto (2004), in his research on the historical context of South Africa and its impact on rural education, refers to the impact that policy has had on rural communities. In the years since the onset of democracy in South Africa, rural areas have continued to be negatively impacted by governmental policy. There is an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, with most of the poor concentrated in rural areas (Seroto, 2004). KwaZulu-Natal carries one of the greatest burdens, having one of the largest rural populations in the country (Gardiner, 2008). Those living in rural areas are especially affected, being limited by scarce resources to access education. Rural context is often not taken into account in implementing programmes aimed at alleviating poverty (Seroto, 2004). The participants in this study consistently referred to striving to create a conducive learning environment despite poor school resources and with factors impacting on the learners' ability to participate. They illustrate Seroto's point in their constant struggle to compensate for the factors in the rural environment that impact

negatively on learner success. Similarly, Seroto (2004) comments that rural education is especially affected by poverty which impacts on creating a conducive learning environment.

Often it is a lack of resources that has the biggest impact on accessing education in rural areas. A large proportion of rural households rely on income from various grants as well as from family members working far away from the home (Seroto, 2004). The participants were aware of this and referred to many families who rely on government grants to support their children. They also noted the breakdown of the family due to parents working away from the home. Households relying on this kind of income are classified as vulnerable, as the income is largely unstable (Seroto, 2004). In essence, it also means that the family's basic needs compete with the child's education, with the family's needs for food, shelter and necessities often taking precedence (Gordon, 1997, cited in Seroto, 2004). The participants' frustration with this situation was evident, where parents are often unable to provide support for their children's education in areas such as providing books and stationery. Lack of resources often causes children to drop out of school, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty in these areas (Gordon, 2000; Seroto, 2004).

Also apparent in the participants' conceptualisation of the context in which their learners live, was the limitations of parents. Besides limited financial resources, many parents are not well educated which hinders their ability to assist their children academically. This is a remnant of South Africa's history of apartheid, where education of African people was poor (Surty, 2011).

In many instances, the uniqueness of a rural environment has not been taken into account when policies relating to education have been developed (Seroto, 2004). In striving for equal treatment of all people in South Africa as a reaction to the unequal past, rural schools have ironically been unfairly treated by not receiving the necessary support, resulting in growing inequality between the education provided in these schools compared to urban schools and ultimately an increasing number of learners who leave school without a Matric (Seroto, 2004). This was recognised by the participants and can be deduced from their frustrations in trying to implement educational policy and in their attempts to compensate for the many challenges faced by learners in rural areas. However, despite this the participants demonstrated many strengths, especially in their identification of proactive strategies that are implemented despite the adversity faced.

### **Promotive and Protective Factors**

While Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original Ecological Model is helpful in illustrating factors influencing success at different levels of society, a recent trend in resilience research has resulted in a shift from merely identifying these factors at the different levels (White & Pulla, 2013). What is required rather is an examination of the interaction of all the factors, that is, the "interaction between a subject, the adversity and the environment" (White & Pulla, 2013, p. 129). This implies that the context in which the factors occur and the way in which the individual can negotiate the environment is important in understanding resilience. This is consistent with Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) development of two propositions, which gives much emphasis to the interactions between individuals and the context in which these interactions occur. This thinking was evident with the participant's emphasis on context in their perception of the academic success of learners.

It is remarkable to note that although the pass rates in the schools under study are very poor and fluctuate year by year, a percentage of learners still manage to pass Matric each year. Part of this may be due to protective factors implemented by learners, teachers and policy makers which buffer learners from risk and encourage success.

This interaction between risk and the environment has resulted in adaptation on the part of all role-players in acting in a protective manner in an attempt to buffer against adversity and encourage academic success. This illustrates the continuum on which risk factors, promotive factors and protective factors exist, and how in one situation a promotive factor can be adapted to act in a protective manner (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). The participants identified many factors which are assets or promotive factors in the ability to be advantageous for any individual, no matter the level of risk (Masten et al., 2009). This included characteristics of teachers and learners, having sufficient resources at school and home and maintaining school discipline. It is acknowledged that the distinction between promotive and protective factors can be confusing and blurry (O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013). This is evident in some of the factors identified by the participants, where in some situations certain characteristics of the learner can be considered promotive (e.g. school attendance), however, in situations of high risk, an adaptation of this characteristic possibly acts in a protective manner (e.g. passion to learn). Another example is while the commitment of teachers in planning for lessons can be viewed as a promotive factor, in challenging

circumstances, where learner success is low, the participants in this study have adapted and increased their level of commitment to include activities such as voluntary extra lessons and winter classes. The protective factors identified by the participants were many, and represent the adaptation of all role players in situations of risk.

At an individual level, learners from challenging backgrounds strive for the transformation of their families. The transformation the participants referred to appeared to be largely socio-economic, in that the individual is motivated by the adversity faced to make him- or herself into an educated and economically successful person, unlike his or her family.

Schools have been recognised as important sites for fostering resilience (Brooks, 2006; Masten, 2001, 2003). It is evident throughout this study that the teachers have an important role to play in compensating for challenges facing the learners. Proactive strategies initiated by the teachers act in a protective manner and aim to counteract some of the challenges the learners face. The school itself also acts as a vehicle for positive influence, being able to mobilise input at departmental level to the benefit of the learners. An example of this would be the School Nutrition Programme. Both schools in this study were part of this initiative which benefitted many of the learners in the school and acted to compensate for the poverty prevalent in the communities.

Teachers have played a key role in negotiating the challenges their learners are facing and developing strategies to attempt to foster academic success. At a school level, the participants in the one school have reacted to the challenges in the school, especially the poor Matric pass rate, and have developed a “Turn-around Strategy”. Extra commitment from the teachers in conducting morning classes and school in the winter holidays is part of this compensatory strategy as they attempt to influence the success of the learners in the school. In addition, teachers have to compensate for the family breakdown in situations where learners are orphaned or their parents are absent for different reasons. The teachers, particularly in the school where discipline was successfully maintained, found it important for the learners to realise the distinction between the discipline within the school environment and their home environment. This allowed the learners to understand what is expected of them at school in terms of their behaviour. This gives an idea of the participants’ perceptions of how the learners are disciplined at home and perhaps suggests that there is lack of effective discipline coming from the home environment. Hence the reason why the participants from this school

found it important to make a distinction between the home and school environment. This illustrates the teachers' and learners' active involvement in acting in a protective manner as a result of the interaction between individuals and the challenges faced.

This interaction is also illustrated at a policy level, where compensatory strategies have been implemented at a departmental level to try and compensate for some of the challenges facing learners and teachers and education in general. Support services, namely the School Nutrition Programme, is one compensatory strategy that has been introduced which aims to buffer learners from the effects of poverty, especially prevalent in the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal. On an academic level, the introduction of the Annual National Assessments is an attempt to gain a more realistic gauge of education at all grades rather than assessing school success by Matric results alone.

### **Understanding Resilience in this Rural Context**

The participants' emphasis of context in which the learners exist and their negotiation of opportunities and challenges correlates with current understandings of resilience as a dynamic process, with individuals as active agents interacting within their particular context to negotiate favourable outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; White & Pulla, 2013). At the same time, the participants seem to underemphasise the role of the individual, and place much burden on themselves to influence the success of learners in the school. While the participants identified many challenges facing the learners in their school, there are nevertheless learners who are succeeding. The current research adopts a strengths-based focus; it is an attempt to understand how and why some learners succeed, when other learners in similar positions and contexts fail to thrive.

In rural Mpumalanga, Moloi et al. (2010) found that creating a pedagogical dialogue (made up of characteristics such as trust, discipline, teaching activities and vision) between teachers and learners was a key foundation for encouraging academic success. In a sense, the proactive strategies implemented by the teachers in the current study as well as some of the protective factors they have identified (such as corporate identity and discipline) reflect an attempt to create this pedagogical dialogue. Moloi et al. (2010) cautions that part of creating this relationship depends on both parties being willing participants as listeners and communicators. What seems evident in this study is that while the teachers' intentions have been good, circumstances and contextual factors have damaged the potential for this

relationship to develop. Negative community influences and the difficulties of teaching in a rural environment have influenced the teachers' motivation as well as the learners' ability to engage in learning. So while the vision is present for many of the factors that constitute this dialogue, it has been difficult to implement and develop in practice.

Christie and Potterton (1997), identified a number of characteristics of resilient schools in South Africa, and some of these characteristics are evident in the schools in this study. One of these characteristics is having a sense of responsibility which involves taking initiative in the school environment to maintain the school grounds and not relying on the education department for every need (Christie & Potterton, 1997). This willingness to take initiative and act was evident in School A to an extent, where the principal and staff seem to have taking responsibility for their environment to make it function efficiently. However, this was not evident in School B, where low morale and poor discipline dominated the atmosphere. The teachers at this school had high expectations for the government and the researcher to fulfil a list of needs, and they did not perceive themselves as agents of change in many areas. This provides insight into their perception of academic success being contextually situated or determined and their under-emphasis on individual factors.

Leadership of the principal is another area where these schools differ. At School A, the staff seem to have good relationship with the principal and management team and support the decisions made at this level. In a sense they therefore fulfil this resilience characteristic. In addition, the teachers at this school had a strong sense of their corporate identity which unified them as a staff and increased the effectiveness of other resilience characteristics such as commitment to teaching, maintaining discipline and encouraging a sense of responsibility for the school. In contrast, although the principal in School B is a very driven leader, the staff and management team are not on good terms, and this is definitely an area of weakness for the school. They have low morale and this also weakens their ability to develop other resilience characteristics resulting in a sense of dependence on outsiders to solve their problems, which has an impact on their perception of being able to discipline the learners.

Both schools are committed to teaching and learning and this was emphasised throughout the focus group discussions. The participants place high expectations on themselves to conform to curriculum standards and to be exemplary as teachers. However, this seemed to be carried out more efficiently in School A, where learners were monitored more closely to make sure

they remained in class, and teachers seemed more empowered in their ability to teach the curriculum. In School B, teachers were often out of the classroom and learners also wandered around the school property during class time. This seems to be closely linked to discipline.

In Christie and Potterton's (1997) study, maintaining discipline was emphasised as a prerequisite for effective teaching. Similarly, in the current study, the teachers from both schools placed much emphasis on discipline as the foundation for creating an environment conducive for teaching and learning. Although this is recognised, it is not effectively implemented in School B, where the learners are a law unto their own, thereby impacting on teaching and learning. School A, however, has been able to effectively instil and maintain discipline in their school and this seems to contribute to the success of their learners.

Safety and organisation of the school is another characteristic identified by Christie and Potterton (1997). This involves setting clear boundaries in the school and preventing community influence from entering the school property (Christie & Potterton, 1997). School A again were more effective in being able to achieve this and seemed overall to be less affected by community influence and seemed to run according to a timetable and routine. The participants from School B had been dealing with difficulties in the community filtering in to the school grounds and this was one of their main concerns in dealing with the learners. Although School B also had a timetable and the learners wear a uniform (both good efforts to maintain boundaries), they were in a sense helpless in the face of negative community influences. They identified this as a factor that discourages the academic success of learners in their school.

Another salient point raised by Christie and Potterton (1997) that pertains to this study, is the role of parents in the life of the school. The participants seemed to expect involvement of parents and recognised their importance in the functioning of the school, however oftentimes parents did not seem to fulfil this role. Interestingly, School B reportedly had a very motivated School Governing Body partly made up of parent representatives, however, this did not seem to be sufficient against all the other challenges facing the school. Parent involvement, especially on School Governing Bodies has long been an issue of concern especially in its implementation in rural areas (Christie & Potterton, 1997; Moloi & Chetty, 2010). Again this highlights a previous point made, where special care needs to be taken in implementing government policies in the context of rural schooling.

In examining the responses made by the participants in this study, it is clear that the development of these resilient characteristics does not occur in isolation but they are linked and affect each other. The successful development of one characteristic helps support the development of others and similarly the lack of one characteristic has a weakening effect on the successful development of others.

The application of the Swiss Cheese Model to this study seems to provide insight into the reasons why some of the learners are resilient despite the challenges they face (Reason, 2000). Both schools present with several resilience characteristics identified by Christie and Potterton (1997) and other resilience literature, but it is evident from the participants' responses that the learners in the schools face many challenges or risks across all levels of society. There is a percentage of these learners who succeed, evidenced by the Matric pass rate each year, albeit low. If this is to be understood according to the Swiss Cheese Model, the risk factors facing the learners can be seen as the holes in the layers of cheese. Risk factors or challenges identified by the participants include negative learner interactions, lack of resources, negative community influences, limitations of parents and policy level limitations. However, the existence of these risk factors does not necessarily determine failure. Protective factors, largely on the part of teachers but also at a school level and policy level, act to buffer the learners from the risks they face. For example, children who come from poor homes are able to receive a meal at school as a result of the School Nutrition Programme. This is a proactive strategy on the part of the education department which is mobilised by the school to compensate for a challenge faced by the learners in the school. Therefore, if enough of these protective factors are present, they can in some circumstances prevent the lining up of risk factors to form a trajectory of risk through the layers of "cheese" thereby preventing failure and allowing resilience to remain (Reason, 2000). This seems to explain how some of these learners are able to succeed despite the challenges they face.

Resilience is in essence an ordinary capacity that should predominate when all spheres of society are functioning effectively (Masten, 2001). However, the protective factors in place do not seem stable over time and seem to have an inconsistent effect on the learners year by year. This is evidenced by the inconsistent Matric results, with the one school experiencing a steep decline of more than 20 percent in the Matric pass rate between 2011 and 2012. It seems that while the participants can try their best to compensate for the challenges facing the

learners in their schools, this is not always sufficient to ensure academic success. Both schools exhibit resilient characteristics but these are sometimes incomplete (such as good top leadership without staff support), not effectively implemented or changing over time. The tendency for this unstable system to predict failure is explained by Bronfenbrenner and Evans' (2000) extension of the Bioecological Systems Theory. They predict that systems disrupted by chaos interfere with proximal processes, which are interactions that can produce competence (or resilience). This can lead to the absence of any positive, supportive system which can lead to failure or lack of competence (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). These communities are in some ways chaotic, with few systems functioning effectively all the time. In effect, there do not seem to be sufficient resilient characteristics present in these schools to provide a stable system that can act protectively to consistently buffer the learners from the risks they face and allow the ordinary capacity of resilience to prevail. However, there is still much potential in these schools as sites where these resilience characteristics can be fostered. Further research and investigation is necessary to explore in detail the actual effect of the proactive strategies and protective factors mentioned to determine whether they are in fact having the intended buffering effect.

### **Recommendations for Rural Schooling**

The participants' responses in this study have provided much insight into the areas where they are succeeding as active agents to develop many proactive strategies in an attempt to buffer the learners from the risks they face and foster academic success. They have shown perseverance and commitment to fostering learner success and the results are evident in the small percentage of learners who are resilient and are able to achieve academic success each year.

However, despite these efforts, the outcome seems unstable and inconsistent. Both schools in this study experience inconsistent Matric pass rates each year. Although the actions undertaken by the participants and at a greater school and departmental level are definitely advantageous to many learners, they do not seem to necessarily predict success each year. It seems likely that at times the odds are overwhelmingly in favour of the risks rather than the protective factors. This study was limited by time constraints at each school.

Further study is needed to explore the perceptions of other role players in the school environment, such as the learners, families and community members as to the factors

influencing learner success. A case study approach may be helpful in gaining a holistic understanding of the entire school system. It is interesting to note that although most of the teachers in the current study had over 10 years experience, almost half of the participants had been employed at the current school for five years or less. As an area for future study, it would be useful to determine the reasons for high staff turnover and the impact this has on the quality of instruction provided.

The potential for these schools to experience greater success is present, and the value of these schools as sites of entry into influencing the learners and community positively must not be under-estimated. As experience has taught many, the strengths of rural communities and their role players must be acknowledged as they provide an opportunity for development and change (DoE, 2005b; Gardiner, 2008).

Christie and Potterton (1997) provide a comprehensive outline for characteristics observed in resilient schools. Schools are a valuable site for fostering resilience as they have connections to many levels of society: the learner, the family, the community and policy makers.

Providing support to schools to foster these resilient characteristics will undoubtedly go a long way in encouraging learner success. The schools in this study have made a great effort in some of these areas, but need further support to ensure they develop these characteristics so that they remain stable over time. Further research is necessary to determine the extent to which these characteristics are present in the schools as well as the extent to which the proactive strategies employed by teachers and the schools are effective in achieving what they intend to achieve.

The Department of Education has now realised that a different approach to rural schooling is necessary to take into account the unique context in which teaching and learning occurs (DoE, 2005b; Surty, 2011). Surty (2011) provides suggestions to improve the quality of education in rural areas, some of which are applicable to the schools in this study. The idea of a partnership between a public school and a private company has seen good results (Surty, 2011). The private organisation sponsors resources for the rural school in different learning areas such as equipment for the Sciences. A similar concept of tutoring sponsored by a local company in the rural area was occurring at the one school in this study; however, this partnership could be developed further to include sponsorship at the school.

Surty (2011) also promotes the idea of “twinning”, which refers to a partnership between a well-resourced and poorly resourced school in a rural area to allow for the sharing of resources. This would also have the benefit of collaboration between schools and reduce the sense of isolation many teachers in rural areas seem to experience. It would likely be beneficial for rural schools to collaborate regardless of the resources available. The two schools who participated in this study would benefit from hearing the experiences of other teachers in a similar position and would be able to learn of ideas that might work in their own school. For example, School B might be able to learn how School A maintains such a disciplined school environment.

Surty (2011) also mentioned the importance of participating in sport at school as a means of developing skills that underlie learning and in encouraging social skills. School A recognised the value of sport, however, due to community violence and tension, School B was no longer able to allow the learners to participate in after school sports. Schools in partnership with one another can also provide the opportunity for school sports teams to interact through competition against one another.

What overarches the new approach to rural education and which was strongly suggested by the participants in this study, is that the context of rural schooling is unique and needs to be treated as such (DoE, 2005b; Surty, 2011). The same approaches to schooling in urban areas in the implementation of policy and curriculum cannot be applied in the same way in rural areas. Unfortunately ignorance in this matter has caused much harm to the quality of teaching and learning in rural areas over the years (Seroto, 2004). Schools in rural areas need support in interpreting policy documents for their context. This was especially evident in areas of developing an effective discipline approach that does not involve the use of corporal punishment, in involving parents in a way that takes into account the family structures in these areas and in collaborating with community members to ensure the support of teaching and learning. In a sense, the collaborative approach suggested by Surty (2011) indicates that the teachers themselves are the experts in their own context, and through collaboration with other experts in similar situations, will be empowered to implement departmental policy in an effective manner. However, they need to be given permission to make suitable adaptations and also need to rely on the support of the department where necessary.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study aimed to understand rural high school teachers' perceptions of the factors that influence the academic success of their learners. In doing so, this study sought to find out what these factors were, what challenges learners face in achieving success and how the school environment can help foster academic success among their learners. A qualitative research design was used in order to gain a rich, descriptive understanding of the participants' perceptions (Durrheim, 2006; Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010). Purposive sampling was used and participants who worked at the schools approached were invited to participate in the study. Two focus groups were run based on the Participian method (ISDS & ICRW, 2011). This allowed for interaction and discussion among the participants and the active engagement of participants in the organisation and determination of the main themes of the discussion (ISDS & ICRW, 2011). Factors related to the contextual setting of the schools under study meant that the research method needed to be adapted to the specific limitations of a rural context. The basic steps of thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clark (2006), were used to analyse the data. In addition, the main concepts of resilience theory and the Bioecological Systems Theory were used to better organise the results of the study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Masten et al., 2009).

The results showed that the participants in this study identified a wide range of factors located at all levels of the Bioecological Systems Model that they perceived to influence learner success (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In a sense they had a contextual view of the learners, and perceived their success to be determined by many spheres of influences. Promotive factors or assets, those aspects that would benefit an individual at any level of risk (Masten et al., 2009), included the interactions between teachers and learners and the availability of resources at school and at home that influences success. Protective Factors, those factors which act to buffer learners against the challenges they face to encourage success (Masten et al., 2009), included the involvement of the community, the corporate identity of the school and the teachers' roles in encouraging success among their learners. It was also evident that the learners, participants and Department of Education had made an effort to compensate for the challenges present and had developed proactive strategies to foster academic success. These included school strategies to improve Matric results, learners who were motivated to transform their families and support services such as the Nutrition Programme. Many challenges were perceived by the participants as discouraging success among the learners.

These included negative learner interactions, limitations specific to the rural context and negative community influences.

The participants' perceptions of the factors influencing success provides insight into the unique nature of academic success in rural South Africa. It was evident through the participants' responses, that much emphasis was placed on context as determining the extent to which a learner can be successful. Little focus was placed on individual agency and capability, which is in contrast to traditional resilience literature and research (see Barbarin et al., 2001; Brooks, 2006; Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Masten et al., 2009; Rak & Patterson, 1996). However, a contextual understanding of resilience is consistent with more recent trends in resilience theory that places more importance on context and interactions between the individual, the challenges and the environment in which this occurs (see Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; O'Dougherty Wright et al., 2013; White & Pulla, 2013). Many studies have also identified factors outside of the individual as important in affecting resilience (see Barbarin et al., 2001; Christie & Potterton, 1997; Ghaffer et al., 2011; Masten, 2001; McCoach et al., 2010; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Moloï & Chetty, 2010; Onderi & Makori, 2012; Rak & Patterson, 1996; Ward et al., 2007).

It is noteworthy that while the participants perceived context as foundational in fostering learner success, it was their specific context that provided many obstacles to achieving this success. The participants experienced frustration in attempting to implement departmental policy in their schools, and the nature of families and community interactions often added to the challenges faced by the learners in the schools. The uniqueness of rural schooling has been recognised as requiring a different approach (Seroto, 2004) thus that the participants have identified a legitimate challenge facing rural schools.

The remarkable success of learners in these schools despite the many challenges present is consistent with the model of resilience provided by the Swiss Cheese Model (Reason, 2000). It seems that in some instances, sufficient protective factors were in place to prevent a trajectory of weakness to align. These protective factors seem sufficient to allow for a certain percentage of learners to succeed each year. However, due in part to the unstable and chaotic nature of the systems in these communities, the presence of protective factors seems unpredictable and unstable over time. Despite this, it was evident that these participants and the schools in which they work are in a unique position to connect to individuals, families,

communities and wider society to influence academic success. The participants themselves and the schools in which they work possess many resilient characteristics that have been shown to predict resilient schools and predict learner success when developed adequately (see Christie & Potterton, 1997; Moloi et al., 2010). It is evident that further research is necessary to explore the proactive strategies employed by the participants to determine their stability and effectiveness over time as well as to further understand the context of these schools. The participants and other role players in the school environment (learners, management and parents) need to be recognised for their strengths and as informants of their own contexts. To prevent a repetition of the past, initiatives that are recommended for improving academic success in rural contexts (such as twinning and corporate partnerships) should be implemented with the input and consultation of those who are most affected by such actions, namely the teachers, learners and other school stakeholders.

It is clear that the participants in the current study were key informants in providing their perceptions of the factors that influence the academic success of the learners in their schools. Their insights, while creating a greater understanding of resilience, also indicate further areas of study that will be instrumental in improving the quality of education in South Africa.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1: Interview Schedule**

1. What specific factors made the learners in your school able to succeed in their Matric exams last year?
2. What challenges do you think learners face in achieving academic success?
3. How do you think the school system can help learners achieve academic success?

## Appendix 2: UKZN Ethical Clearance



18 June 2012

Ms Michelle Edwards 204506817  
School of Applied Human Sciences

Dear Ms Edwards

Protocol Reference Number: HSS/0332/012M

Project Title: Understanding High School Teachers' Perceptions of the Factors Influencing Academic Success of Learners in KwaZulu-Natal

In response to your application dated 8 June 2012, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. Please note: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

Professor Steven Collings (Chair)  
/pk

cc Supervisor Ms Nontobeko Buthelezi  
cc Academic Leader: Professor Johanna Hendrina Buitendach  
cc School Admin.: Ms Candice Whiteman

Professor S Collings (Chair)  
Humanities & Social Sc Research Ethics Committee  
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Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS



## Appendix 3: Permission to do work in a KZN Educational Institution



kzn education

Department:  
Education  
KWAZULU-NATAL

Enquiries: Sibusiso Alwar

Tel: 033 341 8610

Ref.:2/4/8/173

Mrs. Michelle Edwards  
46 Neden Road  
Montrose  
Pietermaritzburg  
3201

Dear Mrs. Edwards

### PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **Understanding High School Teachers' Perceptions of the Factors Influencing Academic Success of Learners in KwaZulu-Natal**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The Period of investigation is limited to the period from 01 April 2012 to 30 April 2014.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mr. Alwar at the contact numbers below.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report / dissertation / thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Director-Resources Planning, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to the following Schools and Institutions:
  - 10.1 [REDACTED]
  - 10.2 [REDACTED]
  - 10.3 [REDACTED]

  
Nkosinathi S.P. Sishi, PhD  
Head of Department: Education

25/04/2012  
Date

...dedicated to service and performance  
beyond the call of duty.

#### KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

POSTAL : Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200, KwaZulu-Natal, Republic of South Africa

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## Appendix 4: Informed Consent

### Understanding High School Teachers' Perceptions of the Factors Influencing Academic Success of Learners in KwaZulu-Natal

My name is Michelle Edwards. I am a Psychology Masters student in the School of Applied Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. I am conducting research that explores high school teachers' perceptions of the factors that influence the academic success of learners. I would like to speak with you only if you agree to speak to me. It is hoped that your ideas and opinions as a teacher will provide great insight into this area.

This research will take place in a group discussion with other teachers from your school. The discussion will take between 2 to 3 hours. I will be asking you questions about what factors you think influence a learner's success, challenges you think learners face in achieving academic success and how you think a school can help learners achieve academic success.

All information you contribute during the discussion will be kept confidential and an appeal will be made to the group at the start of the discussion to refrain from talking about the discussion to other people. The discussion will be recorded and all information collected will be stored in the School of Applied Human Sciences archives and only my supervisor and I will have access to it. The raw data will be stored for 5 years and then destroyed. Your anonymity will be maintained in the reporting of the findings of the study. This means that if anyone else were to read the research, besides those who were present in the discussion group, they would not be able to identify that you were a part of the study, based on the descriptions in the research report. The name of your school will not appear in the research report.

The findings of this study may be used in conference presentations or for publication however confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

You will not be given any monetary payments for participating in the study, but the results of the study will help us to understand factors that help learners to succeed which will be helpful in planning interventions in the future.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you have the right not to talk to me if you do not want to. If you agree to take part in the study, I will ask you to sign this form as an indication that I did not force you to participate in the study. You will not be at any disadvantage if you choose not to participate in the study. You may also refuse to answer any questions if you do not feel comfortable answering them and you may leave the discussion at any time if you feel uncomfortable with the process. If you have any further questions about the research, my contact details are below.

Researcher: Michelle Edwards

Institution: Psychology Department, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg

Contact: 084 823 9390

OR

Supervisor: Ms. Nontobeko Buthelezi, Educational Psychologist

Institution: Psychology Department, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg

Contact: buthelezin@ukzn.ac.za or 083 923 4651

I \_\_\_\_\_ (please print full name)  
give my consent to be involved in a group discussion that will be recorded for the research exploring teachers' perceptions of the factors influencing academic success.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_