Socio-Economic Aspects as a Measuring Tool in Learner Performance

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of socio-economic aspects on learners' academic performance at a secondary school in Lejweleputswa District, South Africa. A qualitative research design was employed. A sample of twenty-three participants, comprising of the school principal, School Management Team member, School Governing Body chairperson, ten educators and ten learners were interviewed to make meaningful sense of their perceptions on socio-economic aspects affecting learners' academic performance. Data was collected through semi-structured telephone interviews with the principal, SMT member and SGB chairperson, and open-ended questionnaires with teachers and learners. Data was analyzed using the thematic approach. It was discovered from the data that the socio-economic conditions in the learners' home background, the school environment, parental support and teacher expectations impacted on learners' academic performance. Learner's family background also plays a major role in developing a strong relationship between all the parties involved in learner's academic life but however, some parents were still not fully supportive of their children's education. The results of the study indicated that learners' academic performance improved in circumstances where there is teamwork between educators, SMT, learners, parents and other stakeholders.

Keywords: Poverty, Academic Performance, Socio-Economic, School Environment

1. Introduction

Socio-economic factors influencing academic performance of learners in more deprived schools are the focus of this paper. The democratically elected and non-racial South Africa which came into being in 1994 brought a surge of expectations, as well as the political will to change education with the aim of addressing and responding to the needs of all citizens (Badat & Sayed, 2014). However, there is a growing recognition that, since the inception of the new dawn of democracy, the development and implementation of idealistic policies were not adequate for the elimination and eradication of historical and structural imbalances in education (Schafer & Wilmot, 2012). Wolhuter (2014) suggests that the South African education system has made advancements during the past two decades by quantitatively increasing pre-primary, primary and secondary school enrolment. However, compared to quantitative statistics, a qualitative analysis of mainstream education shows that imbalances of class allocation, gender, and geographical domains do not

fully translate into participation and quality with specific reference to physical facilities and availability of appropriately competent teachers, as well as effective and adequate learning and teaching support material (LTSM) in mainstream schools.

The impact of socio-economic status on a learner's academic performance is at the heart of most studies – children with strong socioeconomic status mostly tend to display a better academic performance compared to those who emanate from poor socioeconomic, according to (Suleman et al., 2012). Spaull (2013) suggests that there is an unavoidable relationship between education and wealth displayed through the dualistic nature of the South African education system in the post-apartheid era. Additionally, the author believes that learners characterized by low socioeconomic background, or in schools situated in high poverty-stricken communities, are likely to show poor and unsatisfactory academic performance.

The paper attempts to address various aspects concerning the impact socioeconomic aspects have on learners' academic performance. Teacher capacity concerning accommodating learners with poor socioeconomic status to create an inclusive and diverse classroom is essential. Learners' assessment of emotional intelligence in dealing with their socio-economic issues and background is a vital part of understanding their current academic outcomes.

Furthermore, Lareau (2011) asserts that there is a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and learner's academic achievement and cognitive development. Socioeconomic inequality at the school level is a result of a sequence of complex and interrelated factors that emerge from family and society.

2. Socio-economic Factors

2.1 Poverty in South Africa

Galal (2021) states that as of 2021, an individual living in South Africa with less than 890 South African rands (roughly 62.8 U.S. dollars) per month was considered poor. Furthermore, individuals having 624 rands (approximately 44 U.S. dollars) a month available for food were living below the poverty line according to South African national standards. 16.3 million people in South Africa were living under 1.9 U.S. dollars which is the international absolute poverty threshold defined by the World Bank. A prominent aspect of South Africa's poverty is related to extreme income inequality. The country has the highest ranking of the 20 countries with the biggest inequality in income distribution as of 2018. One of the crucial obstacles to combating poverty and inequality in the country is linked to job availability. In fact, youth unemployment was as high as 57.5 percent in 2019.

Missing from these statistics, however, is a deeper look at poor people in terms of their social construct. This brings socio-economic conditions such as low-income jobs, unemployment, and poor living conditions leading to conditions of poverty and deficiency to the surface (Motimele & Ramugondo, 2014). Moreover, almost ten million children of all ages in all regions of South Africa live below the poverty line (Hall & Sambu, 2015). Wilson (2012) asserts that poverty is not only a single factor but is characterized by multiple physical and psychosocial stressors which indicate that poverty consequently has an undesirable impact on education.

2.2 Family Backgrounds

Socio-economic status has been the underlying concept widely used in measuring family background and the most common indicators, which include education, occupation, family income/wealth and prestige, home literacy resources, and certain activities such as participation in social, cultural, or political life (Ormrod, 2011). Tomul and Polat (2013) argue that parents' level of education may affect their children's lives and academic output negatively because, if parents are not educated, their children will struggle with their schoolwork, as they will not receive assistance in the way their counterparts with educated parents will. Fakude (2012) points out that the economic background of learners is a potential determinant of their poor academic performance.

Accordingly, Bokana and Tewari (2014) note that learners from impoverished backgrounds are most likely to drop out of school because of poor academic performance. Parents can inspire and encourage their children by playing a more authoritative role within the family and this can lead to positive academic achievement in a learner, but limited resources to contribute to the education of their children can restrict the academic accomplishment of their children. Being unable to perform scholastically may also lead to emotional turmoil in a learner's life and thus have an undesirable effect on their academic performance (Alshammari, Saguban, Pasay-an, Altheban, & Al-Shammari, 2017).

2.3 Crime and Violence

Schools should be regarded as places of safety for teaching and learning, free of violence and criminal activities, but, unfortunately, crime and violence are a common feature of many schools in South Africa (Burton & Leoschut, 2013). The nature of school violence is evident because it occurs not only in the school playground and surrounding areas, but even in classrooms which have become increasingly common sites for violence. Globally, approximately 246 million girls and boys get harassed and abused in and around schools every year (Greene, Robles, Stout, & Suvilaakso, 2013). In South Africa, to be more specific, elevated levels of school violence reflect a complicated combination of history and recent stresses on individuals, schools, and broader communities, according to Burton and Leoschut (2013). Classrooms were the most common site for violence that occurs in secondary schools, with classes and schoolmates being at the centre of all the commotions at schools (Burton & Leoschut, 2013).

In a study by Obilor and Ikpa (2021), the findings showed that the effects of violence on students' academic performance in public senior secondary schools include a decline in academic progress, an increase in disruptive or uninterested behaviour in the classroom, academic limitations on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level, a decline in social and emotional ability, and a decline in academic performance. Klaus, Rzeplińska and Woźniakowska (2013) assert that crime becomes a central part of learners emanating from the communities they reside in. They further opine that crime is undoubtedly a consequence of many social and economic problems, which constantly change.

2.4 The Learning Environment

Socio-economic issues and the learning environment are related to academic learner performance in that a disproportionate number of learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds attend poor-performing schools as compared to learners from more comfortable backgrounds Moreover,

Bakhashialiabad, Bakshi and Hassanshahi (2015) argue that the learning environment may include social relationships, interactions in class, and a general approach to learning activities, as well as the physical characteristics of the classroom that strives to achieve effective teaching and learning. Cleveland and Fischer (2014) comment that the learning environment also focuses on how culture is incorporated within the class – its prevailing philosophy, characteristics, how learners interact with one another, the educational background or setup of the class to strive for meaningful teaching and learning, the type of learner-centred assessment activities, and the tools useful to evaluate the teaching and learning process. It may thus be concluded that the learning environment is regarded as an immensely powerful indicator of a successful learner's academic achievement, as well as their cheerful outlook toward effective teaching and learning (Penlington, Joyce, Tudor, & Thompson, 2012).

2.5 Feeding Schemes to Curb Hunger

Gwacela (2013) indicates that food insecurity at the school level has been given top priority in South Africa, and appropriate measures have been put into place and acknowledged on the nation's national food security strategy. The South African government has implemented school feeding programmes to combat poverty in public schools, where poverty is manifested by children attend class hungry. By offering free lunches at schools (a feeding programme) and developing vegetable gardens, the strategy's implementation has increased class attendance and improved their ability to focus in the classroom. The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), which is a small part of the Integrated Food Security Strategy in the South African context, was introduced to ensure that all learners from all levels of society had access to a balanced and nutritious meal (School Feeding Scheme Education Policy:1-2).

In a systematic review by Wall, Tolar-Peterson, Reeder, Roberts, Reynolds and Rico Mendez (2022), the enhancements in academic results discovered in the studies examined in this review point to an overall favourable impact of school meals on academic results. Although serving and eating the food takes some time, the learners are more attentive and focused in class. The amount of time spent in the classroom would be more productive if learners' hunger-related distractions were eliminated. Children who eat a meal before school perform better on short-term memory tests because the brain responds to nutrition supply differently.

3. Materials and Methods

To explain both the process and effect of phenomena, the researchers employed an instrumental case to provide insight into the socio-economic status at a school. The latter procedure necessitated a contextual examination of the occurrence in question, which required the use of several data sources to find relevant information. Additionally, the topic was not examined through a single lens, but by employing a range of lenses, which allowed for the discovery and understanding of numerous aspects of the event. In this case study, the researcher investigated various aspects of the socio-economic inequality phenomena at the school in question. The study's aim was to determine participants' perceptions regarding the socio-economic status of learners and its impact on their academic performance.

The principal, a school governing body (SGB) member, a member of the school management team (SMT), 10 teachers of Grade 12 learners and 10 Grade 12 learners of the selected school in the Lejweleputswa

education district in the Free State province of South Africa were identified as the sample of the study. The sample totalled 23 participants. The researchers used purposive sampling to target participants who would be able to provide information-rich data.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with the principal, an SGB member, and a member of the SMT. These interviews were conducted one-on-one to convey the diversity and individuality of each participant's perceptions in the natural setting of their surroundings. The prevalent Covid-19 pandemic resulted in these interviews to be conducted telephonically as a safety measure.

Open-ended questionnaires were disseminated to 10 Grade 12 teachers and 10 Grade 12 learners from the identified school. For this study, an open-ended questionnaire was utilized because it allowed participants the opportunity to qualify and clarify their answers in as much detail as they wished. Participants were respectfully requested to complete the questionnaire and were given instructions and an explanation of the questionnaire's aim and how the results could be useful to them as participants.

The qualitative data was organized and summarized to make meaning of the data obtained and to recognise patterns and variances. Transcripts of the interview tapes were thoroughly examined and studied. Creswell (2012) asserts that data analysis is the process of putting data into order and arranging it into patterns, categories, and descriptive units to make meaningful sense of the information gathered. Qualitative analysis is referred to as a process of provisional discovery analysis aimed at establishing coded subjects and categories that may originate from the data, as well as pattern-seeking for probable explanations (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Lester, Cho and Lochmiller (2020) state that in the process of conducting a thematic analysis, researchers seek to provide broad descriptive statements that demonstrate how well they comprehend the data as a whole and provide answers to their research questions. Data preparation and organisation, transcription, familiarisation with the data corpus, coding, and the creation of categories and themes from the underlying coded passages are some of these stages. Themes and sub-themes are used to report the qualitative data.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the verbatim quotes of participants are abbreviated as follows: Principal (PL), School Governing Body member (SGB), School Management Team member (SMT), Teachers (T) and Learners (L). A short discussion is provided after each sub-theme.

Theme 1: Unemployment

Sub-theme 1.1: Affordability and family income

Illiteracy, early exit from school, and substance abuse are the basic reasons for adults in the community being dependent on social grants because most of them had not acquired the necessary skills or knowledge to be employed. Moreover, they struggle to find permanent employment and therefore experience varying levels of poverty due to their low educational level (Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013). Consequently, most learners that grow up in such home environments are more prone to be at risk regarding poor academic performance. Hence, the majority of learner and teacher participants suggested that learner's academic failure might be due to a lack of affordability and level of household income.

Teachers mentioned that learners absented themselves from school and/or missed classes, especially in the morning, because of late arrival at school. There were also other factors, such as lack of transport fare, poor health, and weariness due to the distance they walked to school, because most walked to school as their only mode of transport. "Not having transport fare and being delayed for classes because of transport issues is a common challenge to the majority of the learners and learners tend to ask for assistance concerning transport fare from teachers" (Participant T6).

Some participants highlighted that household financial constraints also resulted in increased learner absenteeism. "Some learners would rather stay home on days where there are activities at school such as civvies and so forth as a result of not affording or not being able to contribute certain fee requested by the school and this also affect learner's self-esteem and impact negatively on their academic performance" (Participant SMT).

The SGB participant indicated that "Some learners were teased and bullied by others for not being able to afford proper school uniform." Participant PL substantiated the above-mentioned statement by indicating that the parent's level of income can motivate or demotivate learners and as such impact their academic performance. "Learners that are supported economically by their parents tend to do much better than those learners that are struggling socially."

Discussion: It is clear from the above statements from participants that family income might harm learners' academic success, because some learners are likely to miss classes due to late arrival at school. This negatively affects learners, since they arrive at school tired and hence might not have the concentration required of them in the classroom.

Accordingly, Rosenshine, (2012) asserts that learners from high poverty-stricken backgrounds may have limited access to technology, resources, and required school materials due to the income level of their parents. This shortage of resources and materials should not be disregarded; in fact, great consideration ought to be given to it.

Sub-theme 1.2: Poverty and hunger

According to Muandu, Parsitau and Wambugu (2015), learners affected by factors such as poverty, unemployment, and social ills tend to achieve weak academic results. Proof of this was notably evident in the SGB participant's response concerning the effect of poverty on a learner's academic performance, when she outlined poverty as one of the barriers to successful academic performance. The participant focused specifically on the fact that learners from underprivileged backgrounds suffer and are unable to concentrate in class: "Some learners cannot perform at their best because they come to school hungry" (Participant SGB). The issue of poverty also leads to low self-esteem in learners, Participants SMT and T5 highlighting that "learners tend to perform badly because they are preoccupied with their backgrounds and circumstances; they spend most of their time worrying about where their next meal will come from".

In addition, the SGB participant pointed out that poverty affected learners' formal education as individuals, by stating, "At times learners tend to miss school due to not having sanitary towels and thus absenting themselves from school." Learners' background is also a driving force that leads them to being unable to

cope with their circumstances and therefore ending up being involved with the wrong group of people: Participant T9 indicated, "Poverty influences learner performance negatively, as some learners are forced to sell illegal substances for their survival".

Discussion: The above responses indicate that participants agreed that poverty affected learners' academic performance negatively. Moreover, poverty significantly harms learners' academic performance – several studies show that much higher rates of learners affected by poverty are likely to perform below grade level. Several factors, such as health and nutrition, vocabulary, effort, hope-and-growth mind set, cognition, relationships, and distress play a crucial role in learners' academic performance (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Learners in poverty-stricken areas are more likely to be exposed to poor nutritional food, which affects their cognitive functioning and, in turn, has adverse effects on their academic achievement.

The effect of poverty on learner behaviour is noticeably significant – as expressed by Wilson (2012), those originating from persistent poverty are likely to face detrimental physical, psychological, and educational deficits. Poverty-related stressors, such as crime, violence, and truancy are evident in the lives of youngsters. Learners from hopeless families, where there are few facilities available for them to do their homework or study appropriately, are more disposed to dissatisfaction and disappointment. A learner who is not well-taken care of battles to focus in class and does not take part during class time.

Sub-theme 1.3: Child-headed families and orphans

Currently community support for children is waning and the belief that "it takes village to raise a child" is no longer valued in our societies. Ramabu, (2018) point out that children with no one to care for them may develop attributes such as low self-esteem, poor academic efficiency, and elevated levels of depression. This was notable in many learners in the school, especially those from child-headed families where the learner may have been angered and depressed as well.

Learners affected by socio-emotional commotion may develop traits, such as disrespect for teachers and bullying fellow learners, thereby causing further problems for themselves, and placing blame on others, who often might give them the support they yearn for from parents. Participant PL stated that "we note that children more especially orphans because they are not supported, they become radical and engage themselves in activities that are not so good and against the law."

Child-headed families are more likely to be vulnerable and disadvantaged, driving learners to drop out of school or seek employment to care for the family, and thus negatively affecting their school attendance and academic performance. A child-headed family refers to the formation of a living arrangement of two or more siblings who have lost their parents or other caregivers, have no adult present to take care of them, and in which the eldest child assumes the role and responsibility of household head.

It is obvious that if children are alone in charge of a household, they may face enormous challenges in providing for daily necessities in the face of no additional income than grant money. It is a reality that many of these children do not receive social grants, in most cases because they are not registered as they do not have proper documentation, such as identity documents or birth certificates. Such an unstable home setting is overwhelmingly daunting and affects their academic performance accordingly. However, the assistance of stakeholders such as businesspeople, as well as teachers and SGB members, can make life

bearable for such learners. Participant PL indicates this: "In the school where I am working, for example, we do have a person that is highly essential in the society who arrange with the school-based support team and organize packages and toiletries for child-headed learners." This statement was supported by both the SGB and SMT participants who agreed that "sometimes these learners are helped by educators."

Growing up in the absence of an adult leads to the question of how these children cope on their own. Participants revealed that these children were not assisted in carrying out family errands which, as a result, weighed heavily on their shoulders. "The learner should ensure that their siblings are well-taken care of and as a result, this puts a strain on their academic performance and becomes a burden on them" (Participant SGB). Moreover, completing home chores adds to the weight carried by learners because they are still expected to focus on their schoolwork and do all the activities given at school hence it becomes a challenge to carry out both tasks. Participants confirmed that learners had other duties, such as running errands, cleaning, and taking care of other family members, in addition to the academic activities expected from them, duties which sometimes caused them to miss classes: "Mostly learners are dealing with family matters because they are from child-headed families" (Participant T10).

It is clear that the burden of not having parents weighed heavily on learners. They ended up not doing well academically because they were faced with more challenges than those learners from parent-headed households. Caring for children is a demanding task on its own which needs constant attention and hence their efforts to satisfy the needs of bringing up children are sometimes not effectively met. Participant SGB indicated, "Learners have to look after their siblings and as a result, they come to school tired and become sleepy in class." In agreement, Participant T5 stated that "some learners are heads of their siblings and child-headed family, therefore cannot cope with schoolwork".

Discussion: Learners from child-headed families need support because they are faced with many challenges which may result in them performing badly. As indicated by the participants, learners from child-headed families were most likely to face high-stress levels from the responsibility of being in charge and having to provide for a family. Due to their poor living conditions, such learners struggled to perform at a satisfactory level.

The research brings to our attention the openness of positive adult role models, consistent associations, opportunities to be trustworthy and take part in neighbourhood activities, chances to go to class, solid companions, neighbours, and educators as powerful factors. The identification of existing resources that provide additional support to these children and extending the role of teachers from their normal teaching to that of providing emotional support to children are further powerful factors, which are practically evident in the case of teachers who went the extra mile and provided emotional support to the children.

Theme 2: Teacher approach and support

Sub-theme 2.1: Class size and environment

Overcrowding in classes is a factor which badly affects learners' academic performance. Overcrowded classrooms in which the number of learners is far over the optimal level cause interference in the teaching and learning process (Khan & Iqbal, 2012). It is evident that effective teaching and learning will not be

conducted in an environment where there are a high number of learners which exceeds the acceptable limit (Khan & Iqbal, 2012).

It is evident from the learner participants' responses that a high number of learners in a class was a challenge which made it difficult for effective teaching and learning. Engagement with the teacher and making meaningful contributions to the lesson were seldom possible, especially in those subjects which are difficult for many learners. Participants also highlighted that large class size sometimes made it difficult for them to focus, and that they tended to miss valuable information during the lessons because of elevated noise levels. Participant L9 indicated, "There is a lot of traffic, crime, and overcrowded classes".

The state of classrooms and sanitation systems also affected learners' academic performance because some classes were not conducive for effective teaching and learning and, as a result, learners become extra passive because they could not engage fully in the lesson and so spoke amongst themselves. Participant T10 suggested this: "classrooms without heaters in winter and fans in summer as well as conditions of toilets which are sometimes not having water".

Participants indicated that educators did not treat them equally, which aggravated ineffective teaching and learning. Participant L10 asserted that "teachers should treat learners alike". Participant L3 shared the same sentiments, indicating that "learners should feel equal at school ad treated the same so that they cannot focus on what's happening in their environment". Another disturbing issue was tribalism, which seems to exist because many learners originate from other provinces and may be treated specially by their teachers which creates conflict among the learners. Participant T2 made this statement, "the other subject of acceptance between two home languages, Sotho and isiXhosa seems to treat each other differently and according to rank".

Discussion: Both teachers and learners agreed that learners should play a more active role in their learning process. All participants concluded that the teacher-learner ratio was a considerable factor when measuring learners' academic performance, because overcrowding in classes led to bad overall educational performance. Moreover, all participants indicated that strong academic results were obtainable only if learners were motivated and committed to their schoolwork. If teachers were fully supported and allowed to share their expertise with others, then they would be able to create a rich educational opportunity for all learners (Hjemdal, Vogel, Solem, Hagen, & Stiles, 2011). Lamport, Graves and Ward (2012) maintain that learners' academic performance might improve if teachers were given the necessary skills, such as training to teach large classes, planning time with their co-teachers, and adequate resources. Sub-theme 2.2: Identification and referrals of learners

Data collected from participants concerning functionality of support structures for timeous identification of learners in need. School-Based Support Teams (SBST) in schools are formed and joined by teachers who are enthusiastic about learners' interests and who are devoted to assisting them – by identifying learners with scholastic and learning barriers to assist them to cope with their schoolwork and their wellbeing in general. Participant PL supported this assertion, indicating that "Identifying them is key, it starts with class managers in our school the subject teachers as well tend to pick up these things as they teach and so on."

Every public school is obliged to establish a support structure such as a SBST. Participants indicated that teacher development played a key role in ensuring that all teachers were equipped with the necessary skills to deal with learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds: "Teachers can be supported through training programmes to deal with these learners, these are educators who have been trained with SBST" (Participant SGB).

Learners who had been identified as coming from poor backgrounds were then referred to the relevant structures that will assist them with food parcels, cosmetics, counselling, and so forth. "Parents can have the most insight and knowledge about own children, by collaborating with teachers and other professionals they have the possibility of addressing barriers to learning that a child may be experiencing" (Participant PL).

There is a considerable number of community-based organizations, NGOs, and professional institutions, even in rural areas, that schools can tap into to access support. All participants agreed that "SBST collaborate with learners who are slow learners, those who don't have parents or who are looking after their siblings then they help them by taking them to social workers and organizations such as SANCA".

The SBST was not only valuable for learners but could assist the whole family to ensure that learners' needs were addressed and were being resolved. Participant PL supported this notion, indicating, "for example, we do have a partnership with SANCA where we know that when we experience learners who are having challenges. Consequently, they need to be referred, then parents can be easily taken to SANCA, parents can be able to be taken to FAMSA where you realize that the family structure it is not feasible, it does not allow for the learners to be well-groomed and so on."

Early identification of learners could assist teachers to share experiences on how to deal with learners who had learning barriers because of their backgrounds. This idea emanated from the research, in which most participants indicated that, for the well-being of learners, we needed to join hands and come together as parents, teachers, and community members at large – that we needed to support one another to uplift the lives of these learners. In agreement with this assertion, Participant SMT stated that "teachers need to be orientated and it is far from the obligation of the SMT (School Management Teams) to ensure that all the teachers are aware of these socio-economic issues. Discussions of such issues are needed so that we can better understand them so that whenever we go to the learner's we know what is expected from the teachers so that they can support the learner".

Discussion: Schools need committees such as the school-based support team (SBST), which can assist with the early identification of learners at risk and those that need additional support to make sure that they cope with their schoolwork and that they are well taken care of. Participants agreed that learners needed the support of teachers because they spent most of their time in the presence of teachers. They also agreed that teachers were expected to conduct pastoral care and should act in loco parentis, which simply translates to teachers being the learner's parents in the absence of their biological parents and or guardians.

Sub-theme 2.3: Feeding Scheme

The feeding programme gave support to primary schools by providing food and nutritional learning, but in 2006 the government extended the programme to secondary schools, hence the budget for the national

school feeding scheme was increased in 2008. The feeding scheme was prioritised to commence with the schools in the poorest communities and cascaded to other deprived areas as well. By 2010/2011, the school feeding scheme had been introduced in all secondary schools, with the quality and quantity of food also having increased from three cooked meals a week to five.

The school under study hoped to improve school attendance by offering learners a morning snack or breakfast, thus motivating learners to be punctual. Participant T2 stated, "There is a system in place, such as the NSNP. This programme has helped alleviate the issue of poverty amongst our township schools." Participant SGB pointed out that "learners are being fed through feeding scheme." Participant SMT added that "the school is having a process, programme of NSNP whereby learners are fed at school. The learners are given breakfast as well as lunch."

An increased level of school attendance was suggested because learners were reliant on the food they received at school. Participant SMT, for example, indicated that "we notice that now we are not having more dropouts than before, because now learners are at least having something to eat rather than when they are at home." Furthermore, "attendance is very good because some of them, they are attending school simply because some of them they need something to eat," asserted Participant SMT. The inception of the feeding scheme not only benefited learners, but parents as well, who took greater responsibility for their children by being employed and thus increased the socioeconomic status of their families. Participant PL indicated that "If learners are provided with food, they seem to concentrate better in the lessons. This will help with their marks."

Discussion: Participants agreed that many learners in South Africa are affected negatively by hunger, which is often associated with their parents' or family's' socioeconomic background – hence, the strong connection between nutrition and learning (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Moreover, it was noted through the research that, if they do not have proper nourishing meals, then the cognitive and learning performance of learners in the school will be negatively affected (Hochfeld, Graham, Peters, Patel, Nyathela & Moodley, 2013).

From the literature review, it was clear that long walks to school without having anything to eat, often caused short-term hunger and that, in implementing the feeding scheme, the government intended to provide nutritious and healthy food to benefit learning in schools. As most learners attending school face food security problems at home, the feeding scheme assist in learners attending school with subsequent benefits to their academic success.

5. Conclusion

The paper discussed socioeconomic conditions and the effect on academic performance of learners. Even though progress has been made to assist learners from such impoverished families, socio-economic challenges in South African schools still require attention. An active economy, a better health care system, a reduction in unemployment, and a reduction in poverty are all driven by education. For South Africa to reform socially and develop into an industrialised, globally competitive nation on par with developed nations, education is essential. Learner achievement is the cornerstone to this realisation. All interested

parties are urged to join forces and make use of all available resources in order to achieve the educational objectives of learners from all socio-economic groups.

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