



Factors that Influence Academic Resilience of Students from Economically Disadvantaged Environments in South Africa During the COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

Many students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds faced challenges in their academic prospects even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of risk factors both in the family and school environments. Despite these challenges, some learners from economically disadvantaged areas in South Africa go on to achieve academically, while others succumb to risk factors. The purpose of this study was to examine factors that influence the academic resilience of students from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa during the COVID-19 Era. A phenomenological research design was adopted using a qualitative research approach. A non-random purposive sampling technique was used to identify 20 adolescent school learners within the age bracket of 12 to 14 from underprivileged backgrounds to participate in the study. Data was collected using semi-structured individual interviews which were also audio-recorded. Following recordings, the interviews were transcribed. The data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The findings of this study revealed that optimism and hopefulness, determination and perseverance, internal locus of control and family support were the resilient factors that contributed to the academic resilience of learners from economically disadvantaged environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The broad implication of these findings is that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds can succeed academically if they leverage their resilience on internal and external protective factors. By providing insight into the factors that enhance academic resilience, parents and teachers can help learners build the resilience needed to persevere through academic difficulties and succeed in their educational journey.

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INTRODUCTION

Many students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds faced challenges in their academic prospects prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, as a result of risk factors both in the family and school environments. These risk factors include inadequate resources or infrastructures, crowded classrooms, understaffing, poor quality teachers, parental unemployment, domestic violence, lack of enthusiasm, unsupportive home environment, incapacity to acquire school supplies, and absence of parental

engagement. These have been common issues faced by learners, especially economically disadvantaged learners in South Africa.¹

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic required that institutions modify curriculum delivery to suit learner and situation contexts by changing to online teaching and learning. This kind of instruction offered an alternative to reducing physical contact among learners and lecturers. However, because of the economic and digital gap, many students from economically disadvantaged environments were unable to engage in online classes because they lacked the necessary tools or resources. The alternate plan used to keep education going probably only partially restored learning opportunities and instructional quality.²

Consequently, COVID-19 had a major impact on various aspects of education.³ While the COVID-19 pandemic had negative impacts on the academic engagement of almost every school learner in South Africa, the negative impacts were not uniform, with the likelihood that students from economically disadvantaged environments were more afflicted than others.⁴ These disparities, which include fewer opportunities to learn, have had serious consequences for learners from low-income families living in economically disadvantaged environments, such as poorer academic performance, less college enrollment, and a decreased probability of having the specialised skills needed for success in postsecondary education.⁵

Some students from South Africa's economically deprived communities succeed academically in spite of obstacles and the existence of many risk factors, while others fall victim to risk factors.⁶ Academically resilient learners are those who succeed academically in the face of adversity. Few research works have examined learners' academic resilience in African environments, as the majority of academic resilient literature has tended to concentrate on Western contexts.⁷ Masten asserted that western-based research on academic resilience may have limited applications for policy formation in Africa as a result of cultural differences.⁸ Therefore, it is crucial to examine academic resilience in African communities in order to supplement the abundance of studies based on the Western environment. In order to develop interventions and strategies to support the academic success of learners from rural areas and economically disadvantaged learners in South Africa, it is necessary to understand the specific attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of learners from economically disadvantaged learners that are positively associated with academic resilience.⁹

Investigating the academic resilience of learners and their attitude towards school will enable a proper understanding of why some students are able to achieve success while others with similar backgrounds do not. By figuring out how resilient students are able to remain successful at schools, the focus can be shifted to predictors of academic success rather than the reasons for students' failure. Against this background, this study seeks to examine factors that influence the academic resilience of students from

¹ Mahlapahlapana Johannes Themane and Layane Thomas Mabasa, "Epistemic Access and Success of Historically Disadvantaged Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A South African Experience," *Perspectives in Education* 40, no. 1 (March 4, 2022): 18–38, <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v40.i1.2>.

² Fernando Reimers and Andreas Schleicher, "Schooling Disrupted, Schooling Rethought," *How the Covid-19 Pandemic Is Changing Education*, 2020.

³ Amine Amzil, "Academic Resilience and Its Relation to Academic Achievement for Moroccan University Students During the Covid19 Pandemic," *International Education Studies* 16, no. 1 (November 26, 2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v16n1p1>.

⁴ Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis and Otilia Chiramba, "Access and Success in Higher Education: Fostering Resilience in Historically Disadvantaged Students in South Africa," *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, March 26, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JARHE-05-2023-0217>.

⁵ Themane and Mabasa, "Epistemic Access and Success of Historically Disadvantaged Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A South African Experience."

⁶ Wiwin Hendriani, and Fitri Andriani. "The impact of academic resilience on academic performance in college students during the Covid 19 pandemic." *KnE Social sciences* 6, no. 4. (January 28, 2022). 25.

⁷ Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Haibin Li, "Educational Resilience among Asian Children in Challenging Family Environment," *Social Indicators Research* 153, no. 2 (2021): 675–85.

⁸ Ann S Masten, "Resilience of Children in Disasters: A Multisystem Perspective," *International Journal of Psychology* 56, no. 1 (2021): 1–11.

⁹ Themane and Mabasa, "Epistemic Access and Success of Historically Disadvantaged Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A South African Experience."

economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa during the COVID-19 Era. Specifically, the research question for this study is:

- *What factors influence the academic resilience of students from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa during the COVID-19 Era?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pierre and Raj-Mestry have argued that the South African government has not been able to effectively provide education to the rural sections of the nation, even prior to COVID-19.¹⁰ Gardiner also asserts that the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu Natal, Gauteng, and Limpopo provinces comprise the majority of the former homelands and that these regions still carry a significant legacy of poverty and neglect.¹¹ The situation of South Africa's rural schools' education was influenced by apartheid and its dispossession tactics.¹² Due to inadequate road systems, energy shortages, and low socioeconomic status, rural populations have limited access to information and communications technology (ICT).¹³

Although the educational community worked hard to create and implement plans to make sure that education continued throughout the pandemic, learners were left to use their own devices, like a dependable Wi-Fi connection, a radio, and a television, to learn remotely. Even before the pandemic, computers, iPads, and the internet were not equally available to all students.¹⁴ The results of the study by Alpha and Kelebogile demonstrated that educational outcomes for students from various socioeconomic backgrounds differ significantly and that students from impoverished rural communities in South Africa had trouble accessing online teaching and learning platforms and resources.¹⁵

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rural education received insufficient attention, and the transition to online learning made matters worse for both teachers and students in rural areas, marginalising them as a result.¹⁶ Although some remote learning measures were implemented to ensure continuity in the education of learners, the technological divide continues to exist because the majority of rural learners did not have consistent computer access, compared to learners from privileged homes.¹⁷ Despite these incredible challenges and the presence of several risk factors, some learners from economically disadvantaged areas in South Africa go on to achieve academically, while others succumb to risk factors.¹⁸ Learners who thrive academically amidst challenges are considered as academically resilient.¹⁹

A quality that characterises students who overcome numerous academic challenges is academic resilience. Academic resilience is the ability of a learner to overcome obstacles to academic or educational competency even in the face of difficult or unfavorable conditions, according to Martin.²⁰ Although this definition acknowledges that risk factors do influence the educational process, academic resilience is defined as an individual's ability to succeed in school despite a number of risk factors.

¹⁰ Pierre du Plessis and Raj Mestry, "Teachers for Rural Schools – a Challenge for South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. Supplement 1 (September 30, 2019): S1–9, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39ns1a1774>.

¹¹ Michael Gardiner, "Education in Rural Areas," *Issues in Education Policy* 4 (2008): 1–33.

¹² Department of Education (DoE). "Reflections on rural education in South Africa." (Pretoria: Government Printers, 2020).

¹³ Oyinlola Omolara Adebola, "Supplemental Instruction as a Tool for Students' Academic Performance in Higher Education," *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, June 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.46303/jcve.2021.4>.

¹⁴ Eileen K Fry-Bowers, "Children Are at Risk from COVID-19," *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 53 (2020): A10.

¹⁵ Zwane Siyabonga Alpha and Mudau Patience Kelebogile, "South African Rural University Students' Experiences of Open Distance E-Learning Support," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 23, no. 2 (February 28, 2024): 46–67, <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.2.3>.

¹⁶ Bekithemba Dube, "Rural Online Learning in the Context of COVID 19 in South Africa: Evoking an Inclusive Education Approach," *REMIE: Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research* 10, no. 2 (2020): 135–57.

¹⁷ Dube, "Rural Online Learning in the Context of COVID 19 in South Africa: Evoking an Inclusive Education Approach."

¹⁸ Hendriani, and Andriani "The impact of academic resilience on academic performance in college students during the Covid 19 pandemic."

¹⁹ Michael Ungar et al., "How Schools Enhance the Development of Young People's Resilience," *Social Indicators Research* 145 (2019): 615–27.

²⁰ Andrew J. Martin, "Academic Buoyancy and Academic Resilience: Exploring 'Everyday' and 'Classic' Resilience in the Face of Academic Adversity," *School Psychology International* 34, no. 5 (October 17, 2013): 488–500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034312472759>.

According to Luthar and Eisenberg, resilience is a two-dimensional construct that includes exposure to risk or adversity and the display of successful academic adaptation (or better-than-expected outcomes) in the face of such risk or adversity.²¹ Adversity or risk exposure can make someone more susceptible to unfavorable results.²² However, in recent times, studies indicated that some Individuals who have experienced adverse situations have attained favorable academic results.²³ It could be because these individuals have certain unique protective variables, which have the ability to mitigate or alter the impacts of risk.²⁴

According to Ungar, protective factors refer to internal and external influences that ameliorate, modify, or alter a person's response to some environmental hazard that predisposes one to a maladaptive outcome.²⁵ Internal protective factors have been identified as those influences within a person that facilitate resiliency. Research focusing on internal factors associated with academic resilience found that problem-solving skills are the result of internal factors like planning, control, self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.²⁶ In other words, learners who believe in themselves and in their ability have positive academic outcomes against the odds. In addition, these learners have been reported to make choices that positively impact their future.²⁷

External protective factors are the support system available to an individual found within the community, school, or family. Along with the internal protective factors, research findings have indicated an array of family, school, and community factors that contribute to the resilience of a child under threatening life circumstances.²⁸ In a study conducted by Cheung et al., external variables such as support from family, friends, and teachers were found to be significantly correlated with positive academic outcomes.²⁹ Considering viewpoints from educational institutions and prior empirical research conducted globally, Ungar et al. pointed out six important resources that are associated with better academic outcomes for learners in school.³⁰ These include learners having access to financial support, family and community support, internal locus of control, experiences of social justice, and experiences of social cohesion with others.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach, Paradigmatic Perspective and Design

Using the qualitative approach, this study sought to understand factors that influence the academic resilience of students from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa during the COVID-19 Era. Using this approach, it was possible to explore the internal and external factors that influenced the academic resilience of students from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa during the COVID-19 Era.

²¹ Suniya S. Luthar and Nancy Eisenberg, "Resilient Adaptation Among At-Risk Children: Harnessing Science Toward Maximizing Salutary Environments," *Child Development* 88, no. 2 (March 2017): 337–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12737>.

²² Tawanda Runhare et al., "School–Community Interventions to Curb Learner Dropout: The Perceptions of Key Education Stakeholders in a Rural South African School Neighbourhood," *International Review of Education* 67, no. 5 (October 27, 2021): 591–610, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-021-09910-0>.

²³ Kimberley Kong, "Academic Resilience of Pupils from Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds," *The Journal of Behavioral Science* 15, no. 2 (2020): 70–89; Gabrielle Wills and Heleen Hofmeyr, "Academic Resilience in Challenging Contexts: Evidence from Township and Rural Primary Schools in South Africa," *International Journal of Educational Research* 98 (2019): 192–205, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2019.08.001>.

²⁴ Luthar and Eisenberg, "Resilient Adaptation Among At-Risk Children: Harnessing Science Toward Maximizing Salutary Environments."

²⁵ Ungar et al., "How Schools Enhance the Development of Young People's Resilience."

²⁶ R Rukmana and I Ismiradewi, "The Impact of Social Support and Self-Efficacy on the Academic Resilience of a New Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic," in *International Conference Proceeding Faculty of Psychology Universitas Ahmad Dahlan*, vol. 1, 2022, 23–34; Vera Victor-Aigboidon, Charity N Onyishi, and Dominic U Ngwoke, "Predictive Power of Academic Self-Efficacy on Academic Resilience among Secondary School Students," *Journal of the Nigerian Council of Educational Psychologists* 12, no. 1 (2020).

²⁷ Indriyana Rachmawati et al., "Do Social Support and Self-Efficacy Correlate with Academic Resilience among Adolescence?," *International Journal of Learning and Change* 13, no. 1 (2021): 49–62.

²⁸ Jacquelyn M Carrillo, "Academic Resilience in Newcomers," 2018.

²⁹ Justine R Cheung et al., "Cultivating Resilience in College Students with a Foster Care Background," *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 15, no. 2 (2021): 182–202.

³⁰ Ungar et al., "How Schools Enhance the Development of Young People's Resilience."

The selection of an interpretivism paradigm was impacted by the philosophical foundation that directs this study, which is inherently focused on comprehending the world through people's lived experiences.³¹ Given that the objective of this study was to explore resilient factors that enhance academic success, phenomenological research design was chosen. Due to the complexity of this phenomenon and the need for fresh perspectives, this study aligns with Creswell's that a phenomenological approach should be employed when analysing a phenomenon as the participants describe it.³²

Sample and Sampling Strategies

The research employed a non-random purposive sampling technique to identify students from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa particularly those from quintile 1, quintile 2, and township schools. Twenty adolescent school learners within the age bracket of 12 to 14 from underprivileged backgrounds were purposefully selected to participate in the study. This rural sample represents a low socioeconomic status group. The following criteria were used to select twenty participants for this study: Participants who are grade 7 and 8 learners. Secondly, participants had to come from an economically disadvantaged environment or a rural village area. They had to demonstrate academic success in their studies, and not score below code 5 (60%) in each of their subjects. This was important because the study intended to include only learners who were successful, despite the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research participants were informed about the research and its potential implications for education, and an appointment was arranged with them in a location free from any disturbances.

Instrumentation

The researchers conducted in-person, semi-structured and focus group interviews with each participant to learn more about their viewpoints and experiences. With consent from each participant, all interviews were recorded. The objective for utilising the interview was to elicit detailed and authentic data based on participants' perceptions, experiences and beliefs about factors that influence their academic success despite the challenges of Covid 19 and coming from economically disadvantaged environments, in a relaxed and unhostile atmosphere and without being influenced by others. Moreover, the interviews enabled probing for more detailed enunciations to avoid researchers' assumptions and preconceptions.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Creswell's model of data analysis which contains a series of steps was adopted.³³ The digitally recorded interviews were first transcribed and then analyzed based on the themes and categories that surfaced. The transcriptions of the audio recordings of the interviews and notes comprised the qualitative data that were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The purpose of inductive theme analysis, which is a commonly used kind of qualitative research analysis, is to find, investigate, and document patterns in data.³⁴ Data was coded to identify and provide significant patterns. This involved a) familiarising oneself with the data; b) creating preliminary codes; c) looking for themes; d) going over the themes; e) characterising and labelling the themes; and f) compiling the findings.

³¹ Nasrin Pervin and Mahani Mokhtar. "The Interpretivist Research Paradigm: A Subjective Notion of a Social Context." *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development* 11, no. 2. April 14, 2022. 419–428.

<https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i2/12938>

³² John W Creswell, *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research* (SAGE Publications, 2021).

³³ Creswell, *A Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*.

³⁴ Loraine Busetto, Wolfgang Wick, and Christoph Gumbinger, "How to Use and Assess Qualitative Research Methods," *Neurological Research and Practice* 2, no. 1 (2020): 14.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness takes into account believability based on coherence, insight, and instrument utility.³⁵ Conformability, as described by Babie and Mouton was employed, to meet the criterion of trustworthiness in the use of the qualitative research design.³⁶ To facilitate simple transcriptions, field notes and audit trail notes were created from the raw data that was captured on audiotapes. An identical set of questions was used for all of the interviews. To determine reliability, the responses to the question were compared. To create a peer debriefing and strengthen the research study's credibility, the research methods and conclusions were further reviewed with a number of peers who were not involved in the study.

Through member checking - a process that involved asking participants for input on the data, its interpretation, and the study's conclusions - the study's credibility was ascertained.³⁷ By giving them the chance to ask questions, the participants were given the chance to get any questions they had, answered regarding the research procedure. Another strategy for overcoming parochialism was space triangulation.³⁸ Moreover, participants received emails with transcriptions of the data for validation.³⁹ Lastly, it was made sure that no conclusions derived from the interviews were impacted by the cultural, personal, or, religious beliefs of the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

The research ethics committee of the authors' institution provided ethics approval. Participants had the option to leave the research at any time and were fully told about the possible implications of the study in advance.⁴⁰ All necessary safety measures to ensure that research participants would not suffer harm were taken. These measures included but were not restricted to, getting written informed consent prior to the study, closely monitoring their conditions, making plans for emergency intervention or stopping the study if a dangerous situation developed, and providing research participants with a thorough debriefing right after the study session. The research participants were informed ahead of time that the study might cause psychological discomfort because they would be required to recount their experiences coming from a poor socio-economic background. Those who required counseling or debriefing were referred right away after their participation. Individuals who had difficult situations or unsolved issues and may require counseling were sent to an educational psychologist.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The four themes that emerged from the data were used to present the findings. These themes revealed the academic resilience factors that enhance the academic achievement of learners from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa.

Theme 1: Optimisms and Hopefulness

Optimism and hopefulness were identified as essential components of academic resilience. Optimism is the tendency to believe that positive outcomes are possible, even in challenging situations. According to their stories, participants had greater faith in their capacity to overcome obstacles and produce positive results for themselves. Therefore, they concentrated their efforts just on manageable strategies for conquering obstacles, and they kept a positive perspective on their experiences despite hardship. For instance, a participant stated:

I wish to have a good future in my life and have a good job which is why I take my studies seriously so that I could pass and get a bursary since I know my parent may not have enough

³⁵ Creswell, A *Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*.

³⁶ E. Babbie and J. Mouton, *The Practice of Social Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Creswell, A *Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*.

³⁸ R.K. Yin, *Case Study Research, Design and Method*, 4th ed. (London: Sage. Publications Ltd., 2009).

³⁹ Creswell, A *Concise Introduction to Mixed Methods Research*.

⁴⁰ H. Strydom, " Ethical Aspects of Research in the Social Science and Human Service Profession," in *Research at Grass Roots for the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, ed. A.S., De Vos et al., 4th ed. (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 2021).

money for my education. That is why I need to study more so that I can get a bursary, pass my exams and get a good job that pays well in the future. (P4)

Learners with an optimistic outlook are more likely to perceive academic difficulties as temporary or manageable, leading them to be resilient.

I know if I study hard at home I won't fail so when schools were closed, and we were not able to attend extra classes anymore, I came up with a different study technique. Sometimes I seek help from the older students. I know this will help me to make up for the time lost. (P6)

Learners with high hopes create multiple strategies to achieve their academic goals and adjust them if obstacles arise, rather than becoming discouraged. Optimistic and hopeful learners are more likely to view setbacks as learning opportunities rather than failures.

Theme 2: Determination and Perseverance

Determinations and perseverance are essential components of academic resilience. Participants had strong determination factors that were disclosed during the interview sessions. When asked what motivated them to remain focused on their studies during the COVID-19 era when schools were closed, while some participants revealed their determination to make their parents proud, others revealed their determination to achieve academic excellence as the major reason that prompted them. Participants maintained their focus on long-term academic success even in the midst of challenges.

I was so determined to succeed in my academics and make my parent proud, I did not have a choice of not studying. My only focus is to do well in school so that my mama will be happy (P8).

The majority of participants showed a strong dedication and determination to improve their socioeconomic situation through education. Participants believed if they work hard enough they have a high chance of getting a good job, thereby achieving financial stability.

The reason why I want to have good grades is that when I finish school I will be able to work nicely for myself and for my parents. I want to be a Doctor so that I can earn big money to buy the things we cannot afford in our house now. (P1)

Another participant expressed his determination to achieve whatever he is determined to do:

If I put my mind to something, I do it well. I don't like to fail. That is why I put in my best at all times. I hate the word failure (P3).

Determined learners set academic goals and persist in their efforts until they achieve them. Determination provided participants with a clear sense of direction, while perseverance ensured they remained on course despite difficulties and setbacks.

Theme 3: Internal Locus of Control

An internal locus of control is a critical component of academic resilience because it empowers learners to take ownership of their learning and believe in their capacity to overcome challenges. When learners attribute success to their efforts they are more likely to persist through difficulties and maintain a positive attitude towards learning. This mindset played a crucial role in fostering participants' academic resilience as evidenced by the extract below:

I realised early that if I could do more work on my studies, study more, and read up on my DBE books ahead, I stand a good chance of scoring high marks and earning a better grade. I think this is what helped me. (P5)

Through their actions, such as studying hard and seeking help, most of the participants believed in their abilities to shape their academic success. Hence, the learners took absolute responsibility for

their academic performance which made them develop strategies to overcome setbacks. Believing they can control outcomes encouraged the participants to stay motivated, even in the midst of difficulties.

I believe in myself, I used to say to myself that if I try my best, I will be the best in my class. That is why I read and study all the time because I know that I can be the best in my class. (P7)

Students who feel they have control over their activities and the results of their efforts are more likely to be self-motivated. The fact that they have a great deal of influence over their studies was mentioned by participants. An internal locus of control orientation is the conviction that one's own actions and efforts, rather than outside factors like fate or luck, have a greater influence on life events.

Theme 4: Family Support

Family support, encompassing emotional, practical, and motivational aspects, is critical to building academic resilience. It equips learners with the coping mechanisms and self-belief needed to navigate challenges and setbacks, fostering a mindset that encourages persistence, adaptability and academic success. Family support played a vital role in fostering academic resilience for participants during the Covid-19 era. Parents and guardians of the participants provided a safe emotional environment by offering encouragement, empathy and understanding. In this study, the participants utilised their family resources and opportunities to their full potential.

My parents always encouraged me and advised me on the importance of studying, even though they were uneducated and not rich. They could do anything for me to succeed in my studies (P2).

Participants noted that their parents set for them realistic academic goals which motivated them to strive for academic achievement.

My mom promised to buy me a new bicycle if I came back with good results. I know she will buy it if she gets the money and that is why I study hard to have a good result at the end of the term. (P9)

A supportive family environment provides learners with a sense of belonging, reducing feelings of isolation that can arise from poor socio-economic backgrounds. When asked how her family support her to achieve academic success, a participant said:

My family members always give me words of encouragement, and advised me on the importance of studying, even though most of them are not educated (P12).

In response to a question on what contributed to their academic performance, one participant talked about his father's encouragement. He said:

My father loves education and this is why he really attaches great importance to education. He has been a big support for me. Although he is not putting pressure on me I don't want to let him down and that is why I concentrate on my studies. (P14)

DISCUSSION

Academic resilience is important to learners from economically disadvantaged environments as it can enable them to achieve academic success. Learners are described as being academically resilient if they maintain high levels of academic achievement, despite the stressful challenges and situations they encounter.⁴¹ This study identified four diverse themes that capture internal and external factors that influence the academic resilience of students from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa during the COVID-19 era. The findings showed that family support, internal locus of control, perseverance and determination, and optimism and hopefulness all improved academic resilience.

⁴¹ Rukmana and Ismiradewi, "The Impact of Social Support and Self-Efficacy on the Academic Resilience of a New Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic."

Optimism and hopefulness are a component of the internal protective factor that influences the development of academic resilience in students. The findings of this study showed that there was a strong connection between optimism and hopefulness, positive expectations for the future, high educational aspirations, and academic resilience. The participants perceive education as a way out of the challenges they faced as a result of their poor socio-economic background. Hence the reason why they are committed to their studies despite difficulties. This finding resonates with the findings by Dass-Brailsford that learners from economically disadvantaged families view education as a form of changing their lives in the future so that their own families would not experience the same difficulties.⁴² Snyder et al. also revealed that learners who have high optimism and hope are intrinsically motivated and are able to achieve academic resilience.⁴³

Determination and perseverance appear to have a significant influence on the academic resilience of learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds as revealed from the findings of this study. Participants were determined to achieve the academic goals they set for themselves rather than letting the unpleasant economic situation they found themselves to be a barrier. Determination and perseverance are important factors that predict academic achievement as pointed out by Mullin.⁴⁴ The findings of this study indicated that learners who thrived academically exhibit resilient characteristics that kindle their perseverance and self-determination to succeed. This finding echoes the findings of Shah and Thomas, who confirmed that academic resilience is enhanced as a result of the manifested determination and perseverance of the individual.⁴⁵

Internal locus of control was explicitly identified as an influencing factor of academic resilience during the COVID-19 era. Learners who exhibit internal locus of control often demonstrate a high sense of purpose in life and a goal achievement-oriented thinking style. Similar to the findings of this study, internal locus of control proved to positively predict academic resilience among middle and high school students from low socio-economic backgrounds in a study conducted in Indonesia by Arsini et al.⁴⁶ One explanation for this could be that learners having a high internal locus of control are more likely ready to take responsibility for their lives than those having an external locus of control orientation. These learners appear to have an intrinsic locus of control and goal-oriented characteristics that contribute to their academic success.⁴⁷

It was found that family support appears to play a major role in promoting academic resilience in learners during the COVID-19 era. Evidence from the data analysed in this study indicated that parental involvement i.e. physical, academic, emotional, social and communication of expectations influenced the academic resilience of learners. Parents viewed education as an important family value and this was communicated to their children. On the other hand, children also made an effort not to let their parents down, hence they made deliberate efforts to achieve academic excellence. This assertion is supported by Rutherford et al., who reported that learners who have a positive relationship with a caring and supportive parent were better able to demonstrate academic resilience.⁴⁸

⁴² Priscilla Dass-Brailsford, "Exploring Resiliency: Academic Achievement among Disadvantaged Black Youth in South Africa: 'general' section," *South African Journal of Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2005): 574–91.

⁴³ C Richard Snyder, "Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind," *Psychological Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (2002): 249–75.

⁴⁴ Amy Mullin, "Children's Hope, Resilience and Autonomy," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 13, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 230–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2019.1588907>.

⁴⁵ Ms Gomathi J Shah and Sybil Thomas, "Theoretical Perspectives on Understanding Secondary School Students' Psychosocial and Educational Outcomes," *English-Marathi Quarterly* 5, no. 111 (2016): 13–29.

⁴⁶ Yenti Arsini, Ahman Ahman, and Nandang Rusmana, "The Role of Locus of Control and Resilience in Student Academic Achievement," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 22, no. 3 (March 30, 2023): 396–412, <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.22.3.24>.

⁴⁷ Rubén Trigueros et al., "Is Resilience Learned through the Frustration of the BPN? An Empirical Study about Its Role in the Acquisition of Positive Lifestyles and Academic Outcomes Framed in SDT," *Current Psychology* 42, no. 28 (October 12, 2023): 24882–91, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03496-y>.

⁴⁸ Katrina Rutherford, Janya McCalman, and Roxanne Bainbridge, "The Post-Schooling Transitions of Remote Indigenous Secondary School Graduates: A Systematic Scoping Review of Support Strategies," *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education* 29, no. 2 (2019): 8–25.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Factors identified in this study may be helpful to add to the understanding of academic resilience. By providing insight into the factors that enhance academic resilience, it is recommended that resilience mindset principles should be incorporated into the curriculum. This mindset plays a crucial role in fostering learners' academic resilience. Workshops that teach learners how to approach setbacks positively should be organised for learners. In such seminars, the emphasis should be on promoting protective factors such as optimism, hopefulness, perseverance, determination, commitment, and toughness. By promoting these protective factors, parents and teachers can help learners build the resilience needed to persevere through academic difficulties and succeed in their educational journey.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine factors that influence the academic resilience of students from economically disadvantaged environments in South Africa during the COVID-19 Era. The findings revealed that academic resilience is key to academic success and the career goals of learners. However, it is frequently challenging for students from underprivileged socioeconomic circumstances to achieve academic success. Hence, fostering academic resilience among disadvantaged students is crucial for the academic achievement of learners. The findings of this study further revealed that despite the challenges learners from economically disadvantaged environments experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, optimism and hopefulness, determination and perseverance, internal locus of control and family support were the resilient factors that contributed to their academic success. The experiences and opinions of the participants strongly agreed with the body of research on academic resilience-enhancing factors. It was intriguing to learn that while experiencing more economic hardship during the COVID-19 era, the participants in this study are able to remain successful at school.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The researcher declares that the research, authorship, and/or publication of this paper were conducted without any potential conflicts of interest.

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