



**UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL**

**INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**Exploring Intermediate Phase Learners' Psycho-social Challenges
of Engaging in Blended Learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of Master of Education
Degree

**School of Education
Educational Psychology**

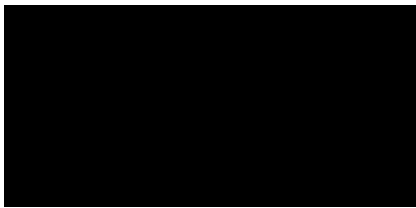
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May 2023

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DECLARATION

I, Alecia Gilmore, affirm that this dissertation is entirely my own creation. I completed this work under the guidance of Dr. Jabulile Mzimela at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education. I truthfully attest that this work has not been previously presented in any academic institution for degree or diploma requirements, and that all sources referenced or utilised have been appropriately cited within the text.



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DEDICATION

I want to express deep appreciation to the Lord our God, who has been my rock throughout my life, paving the route when none appeared to exist.

As Isaiah 41:10 says, *"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"*.

I wholeheartedly dedicate this research to you.

ABSTRACT

This research study aimed to explore the psychosocial challenges faced by intermediate phase learners during the COVID-19 lockdowns when engaging in blended learning. The study was conducted in a Quintile 5 primary school located in Durban, South Africa. Werner's Theory of Resilience (1955) was used as a theoretical framework that underpinned this research study. A qualitative case study methodological design was used when conducting this study. An interpretivist paradigm utilising the purposive and convenient sampling to recruit fifteen intermediate phase learners was adopted. Data were generated through the use of focus groups and reflective diaries. The findings revealed that, overall, intermediate phase learners were most concerned about not being able to physically interact with their friends and did not seem to enjoy the rapid shift to online learning. However, through perseverance and the development of new skills, coupled with the support of those around them, learners became resilient in continuing their education. The study suggests that schools should have an online learning protocol in place that is regularly reviewed, to be ready in case there is another need to shift back to online learning. Additionally, schools should provide mental health assistance that is easily accessible online to support learners in the event of another crisis where they cannot attend school in person. This study has significant implications for the educational system in South Africa and worldwide, as blended learning is expected to remain a prominent feature of education. It highlights the importance of considering the psychosocial challenges that intermediate phase learners may face when transitioning from physical to online learning environments. This research provides a starting point for educators and policymakers to develop strategies that can support intermediate phase learners in such situations, promoting their mental health and resilience.

Keywords: *Blended Learning, COVID-19, Intermediate Phase Learners, Psychosocial Challenges, Resilience.*

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

COVID-19 – Coronavirus 2019

DBE – Department of Basic Education

GET - General Education and Training

KZN – KwaZulu-Natal

LoLT – Language of Learning and Teaching

IP – Intermediate Phase

UNESCO - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

WHO – World Health Organisation

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Background to the Study

1.1 Introduction

Prior to the unanticipated COVID-19 outbreak, South Africa's traditional educational system required learners to attend school and receive in-person teachings from a range of certified professional teachers (Modipane & Kibirige, 2015). However, since COVID-19 was transferred by physical contact, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) had to change the way learners were educated at times when COVID-19 cases were high and strict lockdowns had to be instituted (Anoba, 2020). During these times, learners were asked to adapt to distant learning via online platforms, which was a novel experience for many. This change brought about a number of problems, including a lack of Wi-Fi and inadequate technological equipment, which are addressed in this dissertation (UNICEF, 2021). This study focused on the psychosocial challenges that Intermediate Phase learners encountered while having to adapt and engage in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Durban, South Africa.

1.2 Background to the study

In South Africa, as well as other nations in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and beyond, learners typically attend school and receive in-person instruction from qualified teachers who are skilled in a variety of teaching techniques (Anoba, 2020). According to Modipane and Kibirige (2015), teacher education programs equipped pre-service teachers with a variety of in-person classroom management practices, teaching methods, and teaching styles and knowledge, which are all delivered by specialised teacher educators in various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Adding to this, such a traditional education system required learners to be free to participate in extracurricular activities, and instructional classroom practices like cooperative learning through group work (Anoba, 2020). This

was further maintained by Tularam (2018) as they stated that these instructional classroom practices were once widely used without any hesitance.

With the above in mind, a special note must also be made of the comparisons between the Foundation Phase (FP) and the Intermediate Phase (IP). When speaking of the Intermediate Phase, this phase falls under the General Education and Training (GET) band. In South Africa, this is a phase that caters for Grades 4 to 6 learners (DBE, 2011; McNulty, 2022). The majority of learners in these grades are between the ages of 9 and 13 and attend school for around 7 hours per day (DBE, 2011). This is in contrast to the foundation phase, where learners are typically between the ages of 5 and 9 and attend school for around 5 hours each day (DBE, 2011). When it comes to the many subjects taught in these grades, it should be noted that the overall emphasis in Grades 1-3 is primarily on mathematics, reading skills, and life skills (DBE, 2011). When learners enter Grades 4-6, the emphasis of these topics broadens to include new sets of concepts such as Natural Science and Technology, Life Skills, Social Science, and a second additional language, such as Afrikaans or isiZulu (DBE, 2011). Further to this, Grade 7 falls into the senior phase of education in South Africa, but this grade forms part of all primary schools in South Africa (DBE, 2011).

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, distance learning was established and became more widely accepted across all phases of education (World Economic Forum, 2021). According to Armstrong-Mensah, Ramsey-White, Yankey, and Self-Brown (2020), modern remote learning is referred to as e-learning, mobile learning, or online learning and is usually done using online platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This shift was largely brought on by the lack of an effective vaccination or treatment as well as the requirement to maintain social distance in order to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus (World Economic Forum, 2021). Fundamentally, e-learning occurs when the teacher and the learners are physically separated, and both the learners and the teacher require internet access, as well as a computer-type device, to listen to the lesson live or asynchronously (Kentnor, 2015).

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, and especially in 2020, many institutions were forced to shift away from traditional teaching methods to a blended learning approach (WHO, 2021). Simply put, blended learning is an

educational strategy that combines traditional classroom methods with online digital approaches (Emmanuel, 2020). When the number of COVID-19 positive cases increased, so did the need for schools and institutions to adapt their learning to an online platform (WHO, 2021 & RSA, 2022). Conversely, when the number of COVID-19 positive cases decreased, in-person teaching resumed with limitations to allow for social distancing— thus resulting in the blended learning approach (WHO, 2021; RSA, 2022). And while online learning is not a new concept, it has been rapidly modernised in an effort to personalise the teaching and learning experience and to ensure that learning may continue even if a pandemic is occurring, hence limiting its spread (World Economic Forum, 2021; Emmanuel, 2020). However, this was a lot simpler to say than to do, because the rapid shift presented a slew of new psycho-social issues that even the most capable teachers, support personnel, parents, and learners were unable to handle (Davis, et al., 2020). Psycho-social challenges can be defined as difficulties that individuals confront in various aspects of personal and social functioning (Timalsina, et al., 2018). And for the purpose of this study, the major focus was on Intermediate Phase learners and the personal challenges that they experienced with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and how these challenges may have influenced their psycho-social well-being.

The literature that was consulted revealed that many teachers were left bewildered as their formerly highly respected teaching techniques had to be self-transformed to suit an online learning environment (Davis, et al., 2020; Maatuk et al., 2021; Schroeder, 2020). It was here where work had to be rapidly altered to be more learner-centered with a high priority on individual learning owing to social separation by being online (Davis, et al., 2020). Evidently, many teachers and learners alike were not completely computer proficient, and inconsistent internet connections or a lack of overall necessary resources to have online lessons were some of the common challenges that were experienced (Maatuk et al., 2021). Conversely, even when teachers and learners returned to school for face-to-face lessons, the traditional setup of desks and teaching methodologies used had to be altered to cater to COVID-19 regulations (RSA, 2022; Gaeta, 2020). Schroeder (2020) and Ozamiz-Etxebarria, et al. (2021) argues that the change in traditional education had contributed to learner frustration and confusion, with consequences for learners' psycho-social well-being — such as increased levels of anxiety and depression. Consequently, the lack of social

engagement through play, connection, and proper physical touch had a negative impact on the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of school-going children during this time (Silbert and Mzozoyana, 2021). To amplify the negative impacts of a lack of social interaction through play, Silbert and Mzozoyana (2021) stated that the majority of South African schools had to degrade into unstable settings of ambiguity and unpredictability, further contributing to emotions of depression and anxiety.

Russell (2021) and Silbert and Mzozoyana (2021) further stated that long before the pandemic, most South African learners faced significant psycho-social difficulties as a result of our unequal and socioeconomically burdened landscape. This included everything from macro issues, like the COVID-19 pandemic, to micro and meso issues, like issues in obtaining adequate healthcare systems, domestic and gender-based violence, unemployment, and thuggery, among others (Silbert & Mzozoyana, 2021). And now, the lack of access to in-person education programs had been proven to exacerbate issues such as parent-child disputes, mostly owing to parents being unable to deal with assisting their children with online learning when learners were forced to stay at home (Russell, 2021; Silbert & Mzozoyana, 2021). Among other factors, this resulted in further increased levels of anxiety and depression among South African learners, as well as increased exposure to violence and abuse at home, with no professional aid to turn to at such times (UNICEF, 2021).

This study thus aimed to explore the various psycho-social challenges of Intermediate Phase learners' when they engaged with blended learning during the times of the COVID-19 lockdowns.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt shift to blended learning in various educational systems worldwide, impacting both teachers and learners during the Intermediate Phase of education. This study aims to explore and comprehend the psycho-social challenges encountered by Intermediate Phase learners while engaging in blended learning amidst the COVID-19 lockdowns. The research will investigate the

difficulties arising from the lack of necessary training for both teachers and learners to adapt swiftly to this new form of learning, which was mandated due to the pandemic's restrictions. As a consequence of the pandemic's strain, blended learning has been perceived as a challenging educational approach in South Africa and beyond, as highlighted by UNICEF's observations in 2021 (UNICEF, 2021).

By shedding light on the psycho-social challenges faced by Intermediate Phase learners in blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, this research aims to contribute valuable insights to educational policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. The findings will serve to inform the development of targeted interventions, teacher training programs, and support mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of blended learning approaches. Ultimately, the study endeavours to improve the overall learning experience for Intermediate Phase learners and mitigate the negative effects of unexpected disruptions to traditional education caused by global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.4 Purpose and Rationale of the study

1.4.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore Intermediate Phase (IP) learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the times of rampant COVID-19 infections and the implementation of hard lockdowns by the president of the Republic of South Africa, Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, in Primary Schools in Durban, South Africa.

1.4.2 Rationale of the study

At an international school in Durban, South Africa, I taught Grades 4–7 in a diverse range of subjects as an Intermediate Phase teacher. We started by moving entirely online by April 2020, following the COVID-19 pandemic's emergence in March 2020. Although this concept seemed wonderful at the time, it also brought up a number of new difficulties for which none of us were entirely prepared for.

Many learners and parents were confused, and to make matters worse, we had to work with periodic loadshedding and network issues for the 2020 online academic year (CSIR, 2021). My school also did not use a rotating shift-style back-to-school strategy near the end of 2020 since our class sizes were small enough for them to all return at the same time when the COVID-19 cases were low. Upon returning to school, we had to educate the learners on the various online platforms that we were using in the event that we had to return to online learning when the COVID-19 cases were high.

This required using classroom time to try to educate learners on how to use the selected online platforms, which took up teaching time since we had to make sure that they were completed during class. This then further prevented learners from having enough time to fully absorb proper educational concepts, as well as the concepts on how to effectively and properly use these online platforms. Additionally, since the learners had a short timeframe to get immediate, in-person support from the management that were trialing this new way of learning, many teachers, parents, and learners felt pressured to quickly adopt this new kind of online learning, which caused them to feel anxious and confused. These were based on the experiences of the learners that I personally dealt with during this time period.

This also meant that our usual group work-based classes would come to an end owing to the many COVID-19 constraints that were in place, such as social distancing. All learners would also be kept apart from one another at all times, which would cause them to feel emotionally detached from one another and from me. Due to COVID-19 limitations, many learners that were in the school I taught at were also initially left stranded in countries while abroad or in other provinces and were unable to return to South Africa and Kwa-Zulu Natal for various reasons. One of the main reasons was the implementation of international and local travel bans shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began. These travel restrictions prevented individuals from flying both internationally and within the country. As a result, some learners at my school who were either overseas or in other provinces for personal reasons had initially planned to return to South Africa or Kwa-Zulu Natal. However, due to the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent travel bans, they were unable to come back immediately. Again, this led to feelings of anxiety and stress among the teachers and

learners involved as special lessons and exams had to be organised for such learners who were unable to physically return to school after the usual lessons and tests for the in-person learners were done.

Moreover, my colleagues began to express their concerns regarding exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed by work. This was mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, the COVID-19-related duties they had to take on top of their already heavy workloads were becoming increasingly burdensome and tiring. additional COVID-19-related duties included: sanitising, ensuring social distancing regulations were adhered to, and keeping the learners apart at all times. Secondly, since most of 2020 was spent online, the learners who were enrolled in their classes had not been adequately taught the material from the previous year. Consequently, many teachers were required to teach two years' worth of content in a single school year while also fulfilling numerous additional duties. This frustration was increased when the school gave us teachers laptops when we transitioned to an online platform for instruction. However, together with a lack of prior training, these laptops were out-of-date and thus made it difficult to employ modern online learning technology.

In addition to the aforementioned first-hand accounts, research material found and read also claimed that COVID-19 breakouts within South African schools had resulted in their abrupt closures (Mlambo, 2021). According to Writer (2021), prior to this, schools who were lucky enough to avoid closures had a rotational shift system in which learners were only required to attend class in person on specific days and were expected to finish their homework independently at home on the other days. Amnesty International (2021) adds to this by claiming that rotational shift learning, or online learning, was becoming a bigger problem because learners from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who have disabilities are disadvantageous because they were unable to access online-type learning when the schools closed due to higher COVID-19 numbers, and as such, they fell further behind academically. Richards (2020) adds to this by asserting that many underprivileged or disabled learners in the United States were also harmed by online learning and fell behind in their studies as a result of the radical and overnight shift from face-to-face learning to distance learning. Engzell, Frey and Verhagen (2020) also claimed that this was the case in the Netherlands and in India, according to Dhawan (2020). Since the richer schools were gaining and

retaining an edge while government institutions were lagging behind, this certainly led to a rift between the government and independent schools.

According to the South African Department of Basic Education (as cited by Monama, 2021), COVID-19's effects on education will likely last until 2030. Overall, distance learning was created to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and while some learners benefitted from it because they had access to the right tools and reliable internet connectivity, others suffered and lagged behind (The World Economic Forum, 2021).

1.5 Significance of the Study

As there has not been a pandemic in South Africa recently that has affected how learners attend school, it is necessary to examine the psycho-social difficulties that upper-class learners may have encountered when they were expected to engage with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In the event that a new pandemic was to break out in the future, the data from this study may be applied to further larger-scale research to inform parents, teachers, and other professionals so that, ideally, the system and the experiences these learners had can be improved.

1.6 Research Objectives and Research Questions

1.6.1 Research Objectives

It was also vital to highlight the research's objectives, as with any study. This was due to the fact that research objectives are the outcomes you want to achieve through your research (Khoo, 2005).

In light of the above, the following were the research objectives for this study:

- 1) To identify the psycho-social challenges encountered by Intermediate Phase learners during their participation in blended learning amidst the COVID-19 lockdowns.

2) To explore the experiences of Intermediate Phase learners regarding the psycho-social challenges they faced while engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

3) To examine the factors that contributed to the specific psycho-social challenges experienced by Intermediate Phase learners during blended learning in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns.

1.6.2 Research Questions

In order to answer the above research objectives, one needed to have key research questions that guide the research being conducted. Research questions are specific questions that the research aims to address (Doody & Bailey, 2015). It is at the heart of systematic study and aids in defining a clear route for the research process (Doody & Bailey, 2015).

With this in mind, the following key research questions guided this study:

a) What psycho-social challenges did the Intermediate Phase learners face while participating in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

b) How did Intermediate Phase learners experience psycho-social challenges during blended learning amid the COVID-19 lockdowns?

c) Why did Intermediate Phase learners face specific psycho-social challenges during blended learning in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns?

1.7 Location of the Study

This study relied on empirical data obtained primarily through focus groups and reflective diaries. As such, this study was conducted at a private primary school in the Umlazi District in Durban, South Africa. This school went under the alias of Harvey Primary School in order to safeguard the identities of the individuals located at this research location. This school has around 700 learners, with many, if not all, of the

families belonging to the upper socioeconomic level. In addition to this, Harvey Primary School is a quintile 5 school. Van Dyk and White (2019) state that the lowest socioeconomic level is referred to as quintile 1, while the greatest level is referred to as quintile 5. These rankings, which are determined on a nationwide scale, take into account many infrastructure-related aspects as well as things like the degree of poverty in the neighborhood around the school. As such, Harvey Primary School caters to the most affluent kind of learners here in Durban, South Africa (van Dyk & White, 2019).

This school also uses English as its language of learning and teaching (LoLT). Furthermore, there are almost 60 full-time employees who are qualified to teach grades 000–7 who are supported by the exorbitant school fees. All of this increases the likelihood that these learners at this school will have access to an upper-edge education.

1.8 Clarification of key concepts and synopsis of the reviewed literature

This section serves to present the clarification of key terms used in this study as well as the synopsis of literature that was reviewed. An in-depth presentation of literature review will be done in the next chapter, Chapter 2. This section will commence by clarifying the key concepts that were used in this study. Thereafter, themes that emerged from the evaluated articles will be presented.

1.8.1 Clarification of key concepts:

COVID-19:

According to the World Health Organisation (2023), Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that is transmitted from person to person and is brought on by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The majority of virus-infected individuals will experience a mild to severe respiratory disease and will recover without the need for special care.

COVID-19 Lockdowns:

A lockdown is described as a set of required COVID-19 transmission prevention measures that are implemented indiscriminately across the general population and involves some limitations on the normal course of social and economic activity. These required members of the public to remain at home for extended periods of time in order to attempt to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Haider et al., 2020).

Psychosocial challenges:

Any issues that are not technically medical or somatic fall under the wide category of psychosocial challenges. Family issues, depression, anxiety, substance addiction, sexual abuse, and violence are all significant psychosocial challenges. They have an impact on how the individual functions in daily life, as well as his or her surroundings and/or life events (Vannieuwenborg et al., 2015).

Intermediate Phase learners:

The General Education and Training (GET) band is where the Intermediate Phase is classified. This is a phase that serves learners in Grades 4 through 6 in South Africa (DBE, 2011; McNulty, 2022). The majority of learners in these classes attend school for roughly 7 hours a day and range in age from 9 to 13 (DBE, 2011).

Blended learning:

Blended learning combines traditional in-person instruction with online, distance, and technological learning (Muxtorjonovna, 2020).

1.8.2 Conceptualisation of blended learning (Standards and Procedures)

Prior to the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face teaching was the standard for many learners from both affluent and underprivileged environments and backgrounds. This style of learning is referred to as "traditional" since it requires learners to learn in a shared physical place with a teacher, as previously explained in the study's background (Salik & Cakir, 2014). The need to minimise physical contact emerged from the fact that the COVID-19 infection was transmitted by physical touch, requiring the creation of online safeguards for education to guarantee that learning

continued (World Economic Forum, 2021). Lockdowns were therefore established in South Africa on occasion in order to aid in the reduction of COVID-19 cases among individuals. Lockdowns were states of isolation in which members of the public had limited access to move around except to go to work or for food and medical treatment, and in this instance, it was to assist in flattening the curve of COVID-19 positive cases (RSA, 2021). It was at this time that learning had to take place either online or not at all (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Many educational institutions thus moved from mostly face-to-face instruction to including online learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns and returned to face-to-face learning when positive COVID-19 cases were low—this approach to learning is still commonly referred to as Blended Learning (World Economic Forum, 2021).

1.8.3 Intermediate Phase teachers and learners' psycho-social experiences of blended learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns

Many people saw blended learning as a benefit as, among other reasons, it permitted learning to continue even when there were lockdowns in place by limiting people's engagement, hence preventing the spread of COVID-19 (Maatuk, et al., 2021; Gautam, 2020; Vinikas, 2021). However, there are many disadvantages to this type of education that should not be ignored. Poor internet connections, a lack of technological resources, poor content production by teachers, and a lack of understanding of how to use any technology they may have to ensure the success of online lessons when they needed to be implemented, were among the challenges experienced that impacted not only learner's academics but their psycho-social well-being as well (Maatuk et al., 2021; The World Economic Forum, 2021; Vinikas, 2021). The mental, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of what it means to be well are all included in an individual's psycho-social well-being (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020).

The following was noted regarding teachers' psycho-social well-being while they engaged in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Online learning was found to reduce teacher confidence and working from home had also been linked to feelings of stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and lower job satisfaction since these teachers

were not fully prepared to teach through this platform prior to the start of COVID-19 - this was claimed by both Schroeder (2020) and Ozamiz-Etxebarria, et al. (2021). On the other extreme, advantages mentioned included the fact that certain teachers may prefer online classes since they are thought to be more flexible, personalised, and need less travel time to attend a physical location (Pederson, 2018). Conversely, when it came to teaching in person, some teachers said that it was much easier for them to have access to psychological support from school counsellors and other colleagues than when doing so only online. This also helped to establish a more collaborative environment for everyone.

Adding to the above, the American Psychological Association (2020), Stringer (2021), Munos (2021), Nwosu (2021), and Kentucky Counselling Centre (2021), there were many consequences on learners' psycho-social well-being that occurred during COVID-19 when they needed to engage with blended learning, which subsequently also impacted their academics. Examples included that learners were not used to working alone; instead, they were used to working in groups in person and asking peers for direct assistance in a conventional school setting. According to Stringer (2021) and the Kentucky Counselling Centre (2021), learners utilised this socialisation to understand how another person felt, when to provide support, and when to apologise. This has also led to an increase in the prevalence of depression and anxiety among learners in schools (Nwosu, 2021; Kentucky Counselling Centre, 2021). With this in mind, it was noted that in America, learners from low-income households and racial and ethnic minorities were noted to be much more likely to depend on schools for mental health help than other learners, and because they were online for certain periods of time, such learners were unable to reach these facilities and teachers for aid (Kentucky Counselling Centre, 2021).

In light of the above, while it is possible to generalise results from some qualitative studies to some extent (Carminati, 2018), it is important to determine whether these effects were also felt by the upper-class learners in Durban, South Africa. This should be done in order to determine if there were any commonalities or discrepancies in their own experiences in their own school systems and to aid in future planning for improved blended learning in such schools when larger scaled research is completed on this topic.

1.9 Synopsis of the Theoretical Framework

Dr. Emmy Werner's Resilience Theory (1955) can be related to this study. Werner, a German developmental psychologist and emerita professor at the University of California, conducted studies to show that adversity does not affect all children (Shean, 2015; Van Breda, 2021). Werner performed a longitudinal study experiment on the United States of America island of Kauai in 1955 to assess learners' resilience in the face of adversity (Shean, 2015). This study resulted in the creation of her Resilience Theory (1955), which defines resilience as an individual's ability to cope with internal and external stressors (Van Breda, 2021).

1.9.1 The Suitability of Emmy Werner's Theory in Modern-day COVID-19 Times

As previously noted, Werner's Resilience Theory may be read in relation to COVID-19 and the movement in educational institutions from face-to-face to online classes, to a combination of both. The connection between her theory and what we are currently facing can be seen in the fact that learners have had to quickly adapt to a series of changes in education, ranging from school closures and blended learning to teach while adhering to social distancing necessities and other COVID-19 related changes happening around them (Naidu, 2021). Learners were suddenly confronted with new and challenging learning environments, which exacerbated psycho-social difficulties for some (Zhang, Zhou & Xia, 2020). Furthermore, teaching and learning philosophies had to be reformed, and instructors and learners had to adjust to a new way of working in the classroom (Robinson, 2020). Despite the fact that learners had to develop and exercise more skills than before, Werner's theory shows that even in the face of adversity – in this case, the existence of COVID-19 and the psycho-social challenges that it brought – many learners were able to take an adverse event and learn to be resilient in order to keep teaching and learning going (Naidu, 2021).

1.10 Synopsis of Research Design and Methodology

In this section, I will be unpacking the chosen research design for this study, together with the chosen methodologies that were employed in order to generate relevant data.

1.10.1 Research Paradigm

In order to address this research's questions presented above and better understand these learners' personal experiences with the phenomenon under examination, I made use of the interpretivism paradigm. The use of the interpretive research paradigms was to rely as much as possible on the perspectives of participants in a scenario (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit, 2004) – in this research, the scenario was the Intermediate Phase learners and the psycho-social challenges that they experienced when they engaged with of blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. This paradigm was linked to my research through the use of generating qualitative data using focus groups and reflective diaries (du Plooy-Cillers et al., 2014).

This study involved interacting with learners in Grades 4 through to 7, ranging in age from ten to fourteen years old. As a result, they were considered minors, and special care was taken to recognise that in the process of trying to understand these learners' psycho-social challenges of blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns, each learner had their own reality that they have constructed based on their own particular blended learning experiences (du Plooy-Cillers et al., 2014; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Because of this, my personal experiences and beliefs were not discussed with the learners at any point in order to guarantee that they were unaware of my personal views on the subject — instead, they were encouraged to simply share their own experiences based on the questions posed. As in Panday (2021)'s study, children are usually innocent beings and speak the truth most of the time. Participants for this research thus also participated out of their genuine nature and were not coerced in any way. The learners also did not gain any incentive for participation, and as such, those who were willing to participate did so out of their own free will.

1.10.2 Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. In contrast to quantitative studies, which are done in controlled settings, qualitative research, such as this study, is subjective and allowed the participants to freely express how they feel when asked relevant questions pertaining to the study (Flick, 2007). Furthermore, it was in-depth, exploratory, interpretative, and open-ended in character; and such studies are

conducted on things in their natural contexts and are used to analyse an issue, such as the one in this research (Flick, 2007). With that in mind, the interpretivism paradigm is often connected with qualitative research and it is for this reason that it is used in this study along with this research approach (Goldkuhl, 2012). Taking a qualitative research approach into account, this approach is comprised of collecting and analysing non-numerical data (for example: text, video, or audio) in order to interpret the ideas, perspectives, or experiences of participants (McLeod, 2019). Specific questions were presented to the learners in order to allow data to be generated in the participant's environment. Following this, the data was analysed and utilised to inductively develop specifics to broad themes. And lastly, my interpretations of the data were then formed after I analysed the data that was generated (du-Plooy Cilliers et al., 2014). It was also utilised to acquire in-depth insights into this topic and if further studies were to be done, it can be used to produce fresh research ideas as it was conducted using a qualitative research methodology (McLeod, 2019).

1.10.3 Research Methodological Design

This study fell utilised multiple case studies, which are often used in research in the interpretive paradigm (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). According to Crowe et al., (2011), the fundamental goal of a multiple case study is to identify the variables and the relationships between the elements that have resulted in the subject of the study's current behaviour or position. Because I attempted to gain a better understanding of the experiences that Intermediate Phase learners had with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns, this case study also fell under descriptive research. Descriptive research, according to du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis, and Bezuidenhout (2014), aims to characterise features of a phenomenon and can also be used to compare how people feel about that problem or phenomenon – in this case, the psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning on Intermediate Phase learners' during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Furthermore, according to du Plooy-Cillers et al. (2014) and Nassaji (2015), descriptive research tries to shed light on existing obstacles or problems by obtaining data that allows the researcher to characterise the situation more extensively than was possible without doing so.

1.10.4 Data Generation Methods

For the sake of this study, I employed different types of data-generating methodologies that fell under qualitative research. Focus groups and reflective diaries were used in order to generate textually rich data from the participants. Since no single technique is sufficient to comprehend a human phenomenon, such as behaviour, it must be examined from several angles, and holistically (Muribwathoho, 2015). In a study conducted by Kulkarni (2013), he stated that employing various methods to gather or generate data improves the findings' credibility and quality assurance since they capture diverse features of the same phenomenon by collecting views from distinct groups of individuals – this is known as triangulation. Triangulation, as echoed by Creswell and Miller (2000), is the employment of several methodologies, data sources, and researchers to improve the validity of study findings and is a process in which researchers look for convergence between diverse and disparate sources of information in order to construct themes or categories in a study. It is for this reason that three different data generation methods were used in this study.

1.10.4.1 Focus groups as a data generation method

I started by building a deeper understanding and mutual trust with the participants by meeting with them beforehand and learning more about them in general, as well as telling them a little bit about myself in the form of a focus group. This was primarily to ensure that the learners felt comfortable enough to speak up about their experiences (Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). This helped with data generation process since the participants felt at ease with me as the researcher.

The focus groups were scheduled on separate days from the completion of the reflective diaries.. This was so that the learners were not overburdened with questions, having to initially meet me and talk about their experiences in general before completing the reflective journal all in one day. The groups of learners were divided as follows: learners in Grades 4 and 5, followed by learners in Grades 6 and 7. Each focus group took roughly fifteen to twenty minutes to complete.

1.10.4.2 Reflective diaries as a data generation method

Reflective diaries were utilised as the second data generation method. Reflective journal entries provided the participants an opportunity to share rich, detailed, and intimate experiences and also allowed the learners to share their first-hand experiences in an anonymous manner (Hayrärinen, 2007). According to Rutter and van Joolingsen (2015), this allowed learners to report on their life events or tales in order to convey their personal experiences. Reflective journal entries about how people give meaning to their experiences might be written, oral, or pictorial, and for the sake of this research, learners were allowed to share their experiences in written or pictorial form (Trahar, 2009).

Learners were handed diaries with open-ended questions for them to respond to in written or drawing form — these questions and expectations were addressed during the initial focus group session so that the learners were all aware of what was expected of them. Participants' responses to these questions were expected to be in-depth and comprehensive, offering important insights into their experiences, viewpoints, and views connected to this study's topic. Such questions revolved around these learners having to look at the given questions and express their own experiences with the psycho-social challenges that they may have had whilst engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Taking the above into consideration, this sort of inquiry was more open-ended, allowing these respondents to elaborate if and when they chose to, in either written or pictorial format, similar to them being given a questionnaire to complete except this allowed the learners to engage more freely (Schmuck, 1997). These reflective diaries were completed following the focus group session, and the learners were given two weeks to complete these at home and afterward return them.

1.10.4. 3 Research Participants (Sampling)

In order to conduct my study, I employed both purposive and convenient sampling. Convenient sampling allowed me as the researcher to choose a study location that is convenient for data generation (Saunders et al., 2012). This also allowed me to choose a school that is close to my residence and eliminated the need for me to travel far to the research location. Additionally, purposive sampling was used. This type of

sampling refers to the researcher's deliberate selection of persons to include in the sample (Saldana, 2013). The participants in this study were only IP learners from Grades 4-7 who had felt like they experienced psycho-social challenges with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. From Grades 4 to 7, I recruited five learners from each grade and as a result, the overall initial chosen sample size was 20 learners in total. However, only 15 learners agreed to ultimately partake in this study.

Before the data generation procedure, the following measures took place that was adapted from Blanche and Durrheim (2002). Participants were notified that their experiences, beliefs, or opinions would be kept private and that all participants' identities would be protected when the study's findings are published. This research also did not set out to harm anyone, but instead, it provided valuable information to other researchers and societal groups as further research could be employed on a larger scale to allow for further generalisation of the data and to allow for changes to take place going forward. Additionally, before starting the study, participants' permission was sought out, and consent letters were also issued to their parents/guardians, as they are minors. Participants and their parents/guardians were further reminded that they were able to withdraw from the process at any moment as their participation was always because they were willing to participate and were not forced. Furthermore, if the learners ran into any problems, their parents/guardians were informed that they were able to be referred to the schools' pastoral care team for further psychological assistance. The research then began once all consent letters were received by all involved.

1.11 Data Analysis

Based on the study's reflective diaries, the data generated from the research was transcribed, evaluated, and analysed and thematic analysis was then used to examine the data. Boyatzis (1998) states in Braun and Clarke (2006) that thematic analysis is a method for detecting, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data and it further organises and explains your data generation in (rich) detail at a minimum. Many patterns emerged from the data, and thematic analysis helped me easily infer them. Following the idea stated by Appalsamy (2019), the thematic analysis would aid in

deriving different themes that would emerge from the analysis, and I would be able to organise my data by employing themes. For example, when learners respond to the theme "Difficulties that learners encountered from blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns", their responses would be followed by an interpretation of the data. It is for this reason that thematic analysis would be selected, and the other types will not be taken into consideration. After the data had been gathered and analysed, pseudonyms were employed to safeguard the identities of the study's participants.

1.12 Chapter Overview

This research study has five chapters. This section serves to outline the chapters that will be presented as follows:

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

In this chapter, the topic was introduced and further examined by looking at the topic's background as well as outlining how this study was carried out in accordance with the chosen research objectives, questions and justification for them.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter examines blended learning during lockdowns and learners' psycho-social experiences of it during the COVID-19 lockdowns using a variety of secondary sources. A summary of the findings on the psycho-social difficulties that learners had when taking part in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns concludes this chapter. This chapter subsequently presents Dr. Emmy Werner's Resilience theory as a theoretical framework that was used to underpin this study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

A description of the methods used to generate and analyse the data is given in this chapter. Generation methods such as focus groups and reflective diaries are further

explained. Thereafter, the type of qualitative thematic analysis that was used is also unpacked.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis

Based on the information generated, the findings of this study issue will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter. Such findings included the psycho-social challenges that learners opened up about through their reflective diaries.

Chapter 5: Summary, Recommendations and Conclusion

This chapter marks the culmination of the study. It presents a summary of the research, along with recommendations on how blended learning can be improved in the future. It also provides some final comments, and draws a conclusion based on the data that was generated and examined.

1.13 Conclusion

In this chapter, the selected research topic was examined in light of the study's objectives and questions. Such objectives included the need to explore the Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns; to understand the Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns; and to determine the Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns. This chapter also focused on the questions that would be utilised to achieve the aforementioned goals. The research paradigm, which was an interpretivism paradigm, was then dissected. The study's methodology, which used a qualitative approach to achieve its aims, was also examined. Additionally, this chapter describes the multiple case-study methodology that was employed in this study. Focus groups and reflective diaries were the data-generating methods employed in these case studies where purposive and convenient selection was used to choose the participants for this study. This was done in order to make sure that they could help with the goals of the investigation.

The next chapter's focus will be on the literature that was reviewed for this study to better understand the psycho-social challenges that intermediate learners faced while engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Together with this, the theoretical framework that underpinned this study will also be discussed in detail.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In the chapter that preceded this one, the key concepts of "face-to-face learning" and "distance learning" were covered. To uphold the legitimacy of this study's goal, personal experiences of mine, those of my co-workers, and those of the learners were shared, along with a summary of pertinent information gathered. To better comprehend the issue being discussed, the worldwide scholarly literature that was studied and reviewed will be given in this chapter. This chapter presents literature that was accessible on the benefits and limitations of face-to-face and distance learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as the psycho-social experiences of Intermediate Phase teachers and learners who participated in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Seeing as both teachers and learners had to engage in a novel type of learning, one could not exist without the other. As such, it is crucial to comprehend the psycho-social experiences of the teachers who had to pilot this style of learning as well as the effects that it may have had on the learners. However, the primary goal of this research will continue to be to examine, in greater detail, the psycho-social challenges that learners who engaged with blended learning had to face. Because of this, the topic for this research study is "*Exploring Intermediate Phase Learners' Psycho-social challenges of engaging in Blended Learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns*".

2.2 Literature review

This section of this research dissertation aims to present the literature that was reviewed in order to develop comprehension of the phenomenon under lens, in the form of a literature review. With this in mind, Vithal and Jansen (2012, p. 14) state that a "literature review assists the researcher to get a synthesis of what has not been

written on that topic with the goal of clarifying it and addressing the gaps". And whilst there are many kinds of literary reviews, according to Denney and Tewksbury (2012), for the sake of this study, a narrative literature review was conducted. Both Denney and Tewksbury (2012) and Danson and Arshad (n.d.) claim that narrative literature reviews entail summarising and analysing significant information on the selected topic in order to help the reader better understand the context of the study and assess previous research in order to support the goal of the current study.

Moreover, a narrative literature review offers the reader a comprehensive overview of the problem at hand, with particular emphasis on key aspects of the study. Furthermore, it enhances the clarity and refinement of the research questions, providing a stronger foundation for the investigation (Denney and Tewksbury, 2012). According to Arlene (2014), a literature review may also point future researchers in the direction of areas where the chosen topic and associated problems require more research. The literature for this study came from a variety of scholarly online publications, published research articles, university websites, and educational websites that are well-known and reputable around the world, including the World Economic Forum and the World Health Organisation, to name a few. And, in order to present literature that I reviewed, I saw it befitting to present it in themes for ease of understanding. The following two themes emerged from the evaluated articles: a) Conceptualisation of blended learning (Standards and Procedures); and b) Learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

2.2.1 Unpacking the Blended learning model during the lockdowns

Face-to-face teaching was the norm for many learners from both rich and impoverished homes and backgrounds before to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As before mentioned, this type of learning is referred to as "traditional" since it necessitates learners and teachers interacting together in a physical space (Salik and Cakir, 2014 and Singh et al., 2021). Because the COVID-19 virus was spread by bodily contact, there was a need to limit physical contact. In order to ensure that learning continued, online protections for education had to be developed (World Economic

Forum, 2021). Therefore, lockdowns were occasionally implemented in South Africa to help with the decline of COVID-19 infections among individuals (Ede et al., 2021). Lockdowns are periods of seclusion during which the general populace is only permitted to walk about to go to work, get food, or receive medical attention (Ede et al., 2021). In this case, the lockdown served to mainly assist with flattening the curve of COVID-19 positive cases (Ede et al., 2021 and Köhler et al., 2023) and because of this, the only options for learning at the time were online or not at all (World Economic Forum, 2021).

Thus, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, many educational institutions transitioned from mostly face-to-face teaching to incorporate online learning while the COVID-19 positive cases were high; and then switched back to face-to-face instruction whenever the COVID-19 cases were low (Hlatshwayo, 2022). This kind of teaching where there is a combination of in-person instruction and face-to-face instruction is known as blended learning (World Economic Forum, 2021). Blended learning includes both face-to-face and online learning techniques and so it is crucial to comprehend the benefits and limitations of both in-person teaching and online learning in general. This is because it then allows us to better comprehend any particular challenges that Intermediate Phase teachers and learners may have had with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Ngqakamba, 2021; Muxtorjonovna, 2020).

2.2.1.1 The benefits and limitations of face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns

Even though there is no pandemic at present, it is important to acknowledge the benefits and limitations of face-to-face teaching that were seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2.1.1.1 The benefits of face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns

Before the COVID-19 outbreak began, face-to-face teaching was the standard for many learners, typically from both rich and underprivileged environments and backgrounds.

With the above in mind, face-to-face teaching offered several advantages, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Mukhtar et al. (2020), Headspace (2021), and Miliszewska (2007). This included the following: first off, teachers organised learners' daily schedules and were constantly accessible to provide immediate assistance to learners. It was also noted that it was usually easier to get work done in a structured, scheduled environment where there is discipline, such as a classroom when the teacher is in charge and there are rules in place. As a result, peer-to-peer learning took place and social skills could be easily developed through interaction with peers and teachers.

The second benefit was that learners could easily connect with their peers and collaborate with people from different backgrounds (Miliszewska, 2007). Thirdly, there was little risk that assignments or tests would be lost as a result of technical issues because the majority of the work would be completed and submitted by hand (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Fourthly, hands-on activities encouraged learners to be more interested in the knowledge presented to them and enabled teachers to provide learners with more individualised help, unlike a lecture-style classroom where the teacher only explained the task through speech and learners would then begin (Headspace, 2021). Finally, face-to-face teaching fostered a greater feeling of school community that encouraged learners to stay in school and finish their studies by making them feel like they are a part of something bigger than their families (Miliszewska, 2007 and Mukhtar et al., 2020).

2.2.1.1.2 The drawbacks of face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns

Conversely to the information presented above, face-to-face instruction was not seen to be the best option during the COVID-19 pandemic, since learners and school personnel had to be kept apart. This was according to the World Health Organisation which stated that the spread of COVID-19 infections had been linked to social interaction (WHO, 2021). There are further limitations to this method of learning that must be taken into account that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, aside from

the fact that it increased the likelihood of COVID-19 spreading. From my own experience, going back to school during this time had these three notable limitations.

First, learning time had to be shortened since class time had to be spent to ensure adequate sanitisation. Additionally, because learners' desks had to be separated in order to adhere to social distance regulations, conventional collaborative teaching methods were restricted. Learners frequently complained of feelings of isolation, which was also mirrored by Muktar et al. (2021) and in an article published by UNICEF (2021). Further to this, learners said that the wearing of face masks frequently made it difficult for them to be heard clearly, and as a result, many of them avoided asking questions out of concern that the teacher may not hear them – this was also evident in articles by UNICEF (2021) and Muktar et al. (2021). Finally, drawing from both my personal experiences and those of my colleagues, there was a significant amount of misunderstanding regarding the staggered beginning and ending times. The purpose of this approach was to avoid large gatherings of learners, thereby reducing physical contact. However, this often resulted in learners arriving late or being picked up later than anticipated, leading to heightened frustration among many individuals.

Additional research done by Muktar (2021), the South African College of Business (2021) and Gaeta (2020) revealed several more negative aspects of face-to-face instruction during COVID-19. The following are some more notable downsides. The authors discussed how additional materials were needed to conduct in-person lessons effectively and how some underprivileged schools lacked these resources. Consequently, in certain instances, the restricted funds from parents and the school had to be utilised for face masks and sanitising supplies. Furthermore, owing to the COVID-19 regulations, learners were also no longer able to swap resources with one another if study materials were left at home, which prevented some learners from having access to textbooks or other resources they needed to fully participate in the class. Moreover, some schools lacked the resources or classroom layout required for appropriate social distance, which put both learners and teachers at risk because COVID-19 procedures were not able to be consistently followed.

As stated by Ngqakamba (2021) and Muxtorjonovna (2020), this form of teaching style where there are both online and in-person lessons being held is commonly referred to as blended learning. However, in this situation, this was a considerably more demanding technique that was not perceived as sustainable by those who had to perform both online and in-person lessons at the same time.

In general, face-to-face instruction used to be the preferred method in many educational institutions, but when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in South Africa in March 2020, alternative educational routes were explored and employed in order to prevent further COVID-19 exposure and to also limit social contact between individuals whenever the numerous COVID-19 waves did strike (Mndende, 2021).

2.2.1.2 The benefits and limitations of online learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns

The need to limit physical contact originated from the fact that the COVID-19 infection was spread by physical contact, as was mentioned in the preceding chapter, necessitating the installation of online safeguards to guarantee that learning continued (World Economic Forum, 2021). There are, however, a few benefits and limitations to this method of learning that one should be aware of.

2.2.1.2.1 The benefits of online learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of educational institutions, including schools and colleges, transitioned from mostly face-to-face teaching to online distance learning (World Economic Forum, 2021). Many people saw this as a benefit for a number of reasons. Firstly, it prevented the spread of the COVID-19 virus by restricting human interaction, allowing schooling to continue even if a pandemic was in progress (Maatuk et al., 2021). Additionally, it enabled these programs to appeal to a variety of learning styles, including those that are visual, auditory, and verbal, and it taught learners how to be more "self-directed" in their learning (Maatuk et al., 2021). As a result, these online-style classes may leverage a variety of resources to customise the learning experience for the learners. Because lessons were delivered online, it

had been found that both the teacher and the learner can manage them simply, and everyone had easy access to the teacher's provided educational materials (Gautam, 2020).

The study revealed that online learning had the added advantage of being cost-effective due to the elimination of hard-copy resources and other associated expenses (Gautam, 2020). By transitioning to online platforms, the need for physical materials like textbooks and workbooks was eradicated, resulting in significant cost savings for educational institutions (Vinikas, 2021). Additionally, the traditional costs incurred by learners and teachers for transportation to physical classrooms were eliminated, further contributing to the overall cost-effectiveness of online learning (Gautam, 2020). Thus, the adoption of online learning benefited both the providers and recipients, making the entire process more financially efficient (Gautam, 2020). This allowed many learners to participate in the lesson even if they were not in the same city or country as the school, and in the comfort of their own choice of learning environment (Gautam, 2020 and Vinikas, 2021).

Thirdly, since there were fewer distractions from other learners in the class, there were many more learners who appeared to be more engaged and remembered more material, allowing for more teaching time and less time spent on classroom management (The World Economic Forum, 2021 and Vinikas, 2021). According to a study conducted by Vinikas, (2021), they found that distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic also allowed learners to connect with teachers more. This was because they could directly exchange notes and other learning resources with them, as opposed to in a classroom where a teacher might have provided work on the board in the hopes that the learner would be responsible enough to write it down themselves and, in many cases, such learners did not (Vinikas, 2021).

Finally, there was, and still is, a greater need for digital learners in the twenty-first century since we now live in a society that is driven by information and communication technologies (ICT) (Vinikas, 2021). As a consequence, these online classes provided learners with the chance to develop the necessary skills so they may one day actively participate in online university courses and better prepare for the anticipated fourth industrial revolution (4IR) (Maatuk, 2021; Reaves, 2019 and Vinikas, 2021). With the

aforementioned information in mind, it was evident that online learning encouraged learners to be more independent and self-directed in their education. This further enabled them to take personal control of their learning by developing personal time management skills, as opposed to being "spoon-fed" in the classroom where the teacher would do everything for the learners (Tamm, 2020). Additionally, teachers had more time to focus on teaching the topic because they did not have to worry about dealing with disruptive learners, as opposed to in-person lessons (Vinikas, 2021).

2.2.1.2.2 The limitations of online learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns

Conversely, this kind of education had several limitations that should not be disregarded in light of the benefits that were mentioned above. First and foremost, more training for learners and teachers was needed for online learning to successfully take place, and in many situations, this was and still is difficult owing to the lack of funding (Vinikas, 2021). According to Maatuk et al. (2021) and Vinikas (2021), another drawback of online learning is the absence of personal connections that, in certain situations, both teachers and learners favoured and anticipated. The third limitation was that underdeveloped countries had challenges that made it difficult for people to learn online successfully. Such challenges included: poor internet, a lack of technical resources, teachers who produced poor content, and a lack of knowledge about how to effectively use any technology they may have had (Maatuk et al., 2021; The World Economic Forum, 2021 and Vinikas, 2021).

The fourth limitation was that because online learning required self-discipline, some learners may have lacked this (Gautam, 2020). Consequently, these learners may have found it difficult to focus on a screen for the duration of an entire school day, which caused them to become distracted in other ways, like visiting social networking sites instead of paying attention to the class being presented (Gautam, 2020 and Vinikas, 2021). The inability to conduct real experiments and observations is the fifth limitation, and it prohibited some teachers from properly imparting essential practical knowledge to learners (Tamm, 2020). Furthermore, Mukhtar et al. (2020) discovered that some learners paid less attention in an online class when being taught since they were aware that certain teachers provided slides of the subject that was covered once

the online class was finished. As a result, many learners missed out on important material that would have been discussed verbally in the online class.

Additionally, it was challenging for teachers to assess whether learners had understood the topic when in some cases, they did not reply to the teacher online in lessons (Tamm, 2020 and Mukhtar et al., 2020). As a result, it became difficult to prepare for the future and created a sense of social isolation, which made it more likely that learners would neglect their academic responsibilities due to the lack of in-person pressure from teachers (Tamm, 2020; Mukhtar and colleagues, 2020). Last but not least, it was shown that it became difficult for teachers to evaluate every learner using the same standards when they were not using the same resources at home to study (Gaeta, 2020).

Overall, as observed by Maatuk (2021), Reaves (2019), and Vinikas (2021), among others, online learning was only feasible if both learners and educators had access to this kind of technology and both parties had been trained sufficiently in the fundamentals of distance learning before commencing this form of learning.

2.2.2 The psycho-social experiences of Intermediate Phase teachers and learners who participated in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns

As previously mentioned above, there are many benefits and limitations to both in-person instruction as well as online learning (blended learning) that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is important to specifically note the psycho-social experiences that both teachers and learners may have had when engaging with blended learning teaching styles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Psychosocial well-being is a multifaceted concept made up of psychological, social, and subjective elements that affect how well-rounded persons are in realising their full potential as contributors to society (Kumar, 2020). The physical, economic, social, mental, emotional, cultural, and spiritual factors of health are all included in psychosocial well-being (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020). To be in good health, a person must be able to manage the many stressors of daily life and reach their full potential as

contributing members of society (Kumar, 2020). As cited by Banu (2015) some notable challenges that individuals can experience when it comes to psycho-social well-being are the following: aggression, antisocial behaviour, anxiety, depression and eating disorders, to name a few. Given that many institutions offered online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, this method of instruction had benefits as well as drawbacks that are important to note in terms of the psycho-social well-being of the teachers and learners who had to engage with them.

2.2.2.1 The limitations of online learning on learners' psycho-social well-being

With the swift, widespread transition to an online distance-learning mode of teaching and learning in schools, the learning environments at home and at school converged into one (Munos, 2021). As a result of the strains from both home life and school converging into one, the remaining tension from the school day suddenly knew no boundaries to both teachers and learners (Munos, 2021). According to the American Psychological Association (2020), Stringer (2021), Munos (2021), and Kentucky Counselling Centre (2021), the following were the effects on learners' psycho-social well-being that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. First off, learners were not used to working in solitude as they would in a typical school setting; rather, they were used to working in groups and asking peers and teachers for direct assistance (American Psychological Association, 2020 and Stringer, 2021). Additionally, the learners were used to spending time with their classmates at school, and their inability to do so had a significant impact on their socialisation and emotional maturity (Kentucky Counselling Centre, 2021).

Further to this, Stringer (2021) and the Kentucky Counselling Centre (2021) stated that learners also utilised this socialisation to understand how another person was feeling, when to provide support, and when to apologise. This, along with other reasons, caused the prevalence of depression and anxiety among young adults to significantly increase since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (American Psychological Association, 2020 and Kentucky Counselling Centre, 2021). Reduced engagement between learners, their peers and teachers via online learning platforms also had a significant impact on learners' relationships with their learning (Munos,

2021). And the limited social connection affected learners' attention and interest in school in general (Stringer, 2021 and Munos, 2021).

Adding to this, parents were unprepared to deal with online learning, which increased learners' levels of anxiety and depression and exposed them to more violence and abuse at home (UNICEF, 2021 and Suyatno et al., 2021). The lack of access to in-person special education services had made parent-child conflicts worse, thus leaving learners without access to professionals to turn to (Russell, 2021 and UNICEF, 2021). Learning distractions, internet access challenges, a lack of privacy for finishing classwork, a lack of study space, and responsibilities at work to maintain their families during this period were also further mentioned as additional pressures that learners must deal with (Russell, 2021 and Suyatno et al., 2021). As learners struggled to stay on top of their academics, all of the aforementioned causes have increased their feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression (UNICEF, 2021).

Finally, Russell (2021) and UNICEF (2021) predicted that many low-income children will leave school and never return, as this is seen by many parents as an easier option. This is because many learners do not attend online school because they lack the necessary resources, such as Wi-Fi and a device with the most recent software to access the lessons. An important consequence of the pandemic in low- and middle-income countries is an increase in child marriage, which is closely related to school closures (Russell, 2021). UNICEF (2021) also stated that due to a lack of funds and means to continue with online learning at home, 400000 South African learners had completely stopped attending school since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak.

2.2.2.2 The limitations of online learning on teachers' psycho-social well-being

As with the learners' experiences with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns that were discussed above, there are also some drawbacks of this kind of learning that affected the psycho-social well-being of teachers specifically. According to that Schroeder (2020) and Ozamiz-Etxebarria, et al. (2021), the drawbacks included the following: The fact that teachers already had a lot on their plates meant that adding more work would only make them more stressed, anxious, and depressed while

neglecting their personal life. Burnout among faculty members had become more prevalent in many institutions as a result of the growing workload consuming the majority of spare time. In addition, a study conducted in Spain at the outset of the pandemic also revealed that instructors had expressed fatigue, stress, and heavy workloads. This was mostly due to the necessity to quickly adapt in-person classes in order to give lessons online.

Adding to the aforementioned points, it was also observed that in some instances, online learning reduced teachers' confidence in their capacity to perform their duties while making it harder to control learner behaviour online (Schroeder, 2020). This was due to the fact that all teaching methodologies were designed with the intention of managing and instructing learners in person; however, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, these methodologies had to be modified to better fit a blended learning approach. This would have been possible, but given the need to move quickly online, this is where the trouble started because no advance preparation had been done (Suyatno et al., 2021).

Additionally, this crisis caused teachers to struggle with conditions like anxiety, depression, and, in some cases, marital violence and divorce, which all reduced their ability to teach learners successfully (Ozamiz-Etxebarria, et al., 2021). These factors were present even more due to the fact that individuals lived and worked in the same environment and had nowhere else to go while everyone was made to stay at home. And since these teachers were also not fully prepared to teach using an online platform prior to the start of COVID-19, working from home while using ICT had also been connected to emotions of stress, worry, exhaustion, and poor job satisfaction (Ozamiz-Etxebarria, et al., 2021). This again linked back to a lack of adequate resources, training and ideas on how to successfully implement online learning to learners of various ages and abilities (Suyatno et al., 2021).

2.2.2.3 The benefits of online learning on teachers' and learners' psycho-social well-being

Even though there are many drawbacks of online learning to most, there are many benefits that people should be aware of, especially if the education sector is ever evolving and will ultimately include more online platforms to facilitate learning going forward. The benefits included the following: some learners felt more secure working at home, according to Pederson (2018) and the American Psychological Association (2020). Additionally, because the majority of parents worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, some learners were able to spend more quality time with their families when both were finished with work for the day. This was due to the fact that neither of them had other commitments to tend to as people were forced to stay at home (Kentucky Counselling Centre, 2021). It also removed the need for learners to participate in physical bullying or follow popular trends at their school, including having the newest gadgets or clothing to "compete" with their friends (American Psychological Association, 2020 and Pederson, 2018). This helped with learners from feeling left out and pressured in order to fit in with the "cool crowd" (Abramson, 2021).

Another major benefit that came with online learning was the enhanced emphasis on mental health. This had the potential to significantly enhance learners' well-being—starting with aiding them in recovering from the pandemic's effects—was also mentioned as one of the benefits of online learning for learners (Abramson, 2021). For instance, schools in New York City employed more than 600 new doctors, including psychologists, to evaluate learners' mental health, assist them in processing trauma connected to the pandemic, and help them get used to the "new normal" of going to school in person (Abramson, 2021).

Additionally, educators and families are becoming more aware of how crucial it is to safeguard learners' mental health in general for both their learning and overall health and safety (Abramson, 2021). A greater understanding of the reality that mental health is a requirement for learning rather than an extracurricular activity has been emerging. Teachers are now more conscious of the need to incorporate social and emotional components into routine lessons (Suyatno et al., 2021). One example of these strategies was for teachers to incorporate mindfulness exercises into the curriculum

and seize chances to support learners in conflict resolution or stress management when they arise (Abramson, 2021). Many people applauded this change because it enabled learners to learn how to better control and express their emotions rather than burying them. It also helped teachers become more aware of the emotional challenges that learners may encounter that they may not have been before, ultimately fostering an environment where learners can thrive and get support when they need it (Abramson, 2021 and Suyatno et al., 2021).

From this, another benefit was that mental health support was now easier to get in schools. School administrators had to determine how to provide mental health treatments remotely due to physical distance regulations, including through online referrals and teletherapy with school psychologists and counsellors (Abramson, 2021 and Suyatno et al., 2021). Some learners also had the chance to learn at their own pace throughout the online teaching session, which educators claim boosted learning outcomes—especially with older learners. Flexibility in both time and style of learning came in as the second most highly appreciated benefit of distance learning, according to a 2020 study of more than 600 parents conducted by Abramson (2021) in The United States of America. According to a recent survey, the main advantage or favourable result of remote learning was increased flexibility in a child's schedule or method of instruction, which was cited by 18% of parents from the above study (Abramson, 2021). Additionally, according to Abramson (2021), learners were more motivated when they had more options for their materials and activities, which may lead to better learning and academic performance and overall happiness. Finally, learners who struggled with anxiety valued the opportunity to avoid in-person classes since doing well in class might be challenging due to peer pressure (Abramson, 2021).

Teachers benefited from online learning as well. This is because not only do some teachers prefer online classes because they are thought to be more flexible, and personalised, and need less travel time to visit a physical campus (Elite Educational Institute, 2020); but teachers are continuously expected to up their game while using e-learning tools to update and improve their teaching methods, which makes professional development a daily effort (Suyatno et al., 2021). Many educators were compelled to reconsider how to keep learners interested in learning throughout the

pandemic. This also gave teachers the opportunity to learn how to change lessons so that they remain relevant to learners (Abramson, 2021). Although this took some time in the beginning, it has led to the development of new skills, more learner engagement, and overall satisfaction with teaching. The finest teachers appreciate the opportunity to continuously learn, in addition to loving to teach.

Online education is a fantastic approach to make up for the time spent monitoring learners' development and the limited access to educational resources. Teachers can quantify the tangible advantages in terms of reduced burden and time-based efforts. A pre-existing or constantly developing question bank can be used by teachers to swiftly generate tests and quizzes using an online learning management system (LMS), for instance (Appanna, 2008). The ability of teachers to concentrate their efforts on pedagogical functions is the main advantage of LMS platforms and e-learning chances (Appanna, 2008). In most cases, the education environment is now a more accommodative and progressive sector that prioritises learners, owing to teachers' capacity to automate marking, digitally administer assessments, and track learner progress (Abramson, 2021).

2.2.2.4 The benefits of face-to-face learning on teachers' and learners' psychosocial well-being

On the other hand, face-to-face instruction can give learners and teachers some mental health relief during a pandemic. One benefit is that staff members may watch both learners and fellow colleagues informally every day at school to ensure that their performance and mental health are both in excellent operating condition (Schroeder, 2020). Additionally, in most cases in independent and some government schools, the school counsellor is available to assist instructors and learners with any issues they may be facing or if not, then the school can refer the teacher or learner for external assistance (Schroeder, 2020). By enabling learners and teachers to seek assistance when necessary and reducing emotions of anxiety, returning to school also reduced feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and pessimism (Munos, 2021).

Additionally, there is a much more collaborative work environment where teachers and learners can rely on one another to overcome whatever obstacles they may encounter (Munos, 2021). Because they can simply communicate with learners in person, teachers are also spared the extra burden of having to track down learners online to get them to submit homework (Schroeder, 2020). Moreover, teachers can benefit from greater support from their peers than they could through an online platform in terms of exchanging resources and ideas, which lessens the load of teaching (Schroeder, 2020).

Another aspect that makes face-to-face learning for overall psycho-social well-being is that some schools offer feeding schemes and so learners and some teachers may benefit from this (Wang & Fawzi, 2020). School feeding programs, often known as school lunch programs, are initiatives that consistently give children and adolescents attending school access to nourishing foods. The benefits of school meals for learners include lowering hunger, cutting down on nutritional deficiencies and anaemia, preventing overweight and obesity, boosting academic and cognitive performance, and promoting gender parity in access to education (Wang & Fawzi, 2020). As such, school nutrition programs help school-age children and adolescents develop physically, mentally, and emotionally, especially in low and middle-income nations (Wang & Fawzi, 2020).

Together with this, attending school in person allows for many more opportunities for exercise to occur. Such exercise takes the form of extra-curricular activities and simply walking from class to class or playing during break times. Exercise boosts mental health by lowering anxiety, depression, and depressive symptoms, as well as by raising self-esteem and increasing cognitive abilities (Sharma et al., 2006). Additionally, it has been discovered that exercise helps with symptoms including social disengagement and poor self-esteem (Sharma et al., 2006).

And finally, if and when teachers and learners were required to quarantine, extra attention must be paid to their psycho-social experiences during this time period (Brooks et al., 2020). A person was required to quarantine for the necessary number of days, which ranged from 2 weeks to 1 week, to a few days, if they had contact with another person who was COVID-19 positive at the time or if they themselves were

positive. The psycho-social well-being of these individuals suffered significantly as a result of this. The majority of studies that were examined reported adverse psychological consequences, such as post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, bewilderment, and hostility (Brooks et al., 2020). Longer quarantine periods, illness worries, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, incomplete information, monetary loss, and stigma were among the stressors (Brooks et al., 2020). Therefore, while everyone was online, this helped to reduce that stress because both teachers and learners could still participate in the classes if they were healthy enough to do so. Once they returned to in-person instruction, they could all reconnect and get any additional support from one another, thus making that traumatic experience for some, feel less traumatic (Brooks et al., 2020).

Overall, there are countless benefits that individuals can benefit from attending school in person but during the COVID-19 pandemic, this proved to be a challenge as a more blended learning approach had to be adopted.

2.3 Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The ideas that support a research study make up a theoretical framework, which helps to explain why the research problem exists (Vinz, 2020). It provides details on the strategy used by the researcher for solving the knowledge gap and flaws in previous studies (Lempriere, 2019). In order to better comprehend what was occurring to learners at a time when COVID-19 was accelerating quick change and people were forced to stay at that pace, this research may be linked to Dr. Emmy Werner's Resilience Theory from 1955 and owing to this link, it can assist to further explain why her theory is still applicable in today's world. Dr. Emmy Werner's theory of resilience can be applied to explain how individuals and communities have coped and adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section will concentrate on relating Emmy Werner's Resilience Theory (1955) to this study and elaborating on why her theory is still applicable in the modern world.

2.3.1 Dr. Emmy Werner's Theory of Resilience

Studies by Dr. Emmy Werner, a German developmental psychologist and retired professor at the University of California, demonstrated that not all children suffered the consequences of traumatic events (Shean, 2015 and Van Breda, 2021). In order to examine learners' resilience in the face of hardship, Werner conducted a longitudinal research project in the United States, on the island of Kauai, in 1955 (Shean, 2015). The main objective of her study was to follow women and their pregnancies, and then to follow the development of their children until they reached adulthood, in order to determine whether these individuals could use adversity to become resilient once they had developed, in addition to following their overall progress (Shean, 2015).

According to her resilience theory, the most important aspect of adversity is how we respond to it. Resilience enables us to recover, endure, heal, and even thrive in the face of difficulty, tragedy, or frustration (Van Breda, 2021). Her Resilience Theory was inspired by this study, and it defined resilience as a person's capacity to deal with both internal and external pressures (Shean, 2015). Similar concepts to Werner's study on children's resilience are now being developed by other researchers. One of them is Michael Rutter's Theory, where he compared children from the Isle of Wight to children from a struggling inner-city neighbourhood in London (Van Breda, 2021). Rutter centred a large portion of his early research on children whose parents had schizophrenia (Shean, 2015). In this experiment, he first concentrated on psychopathology, but he discovered that other children were exposed to the danger and generally avoided injury (Shean, 2015).

A second theorist, clinical psychologist Norman Garmezy, is frequently recognised as the founder of resilience research and conducted studies that were comparable to Werner's. Garmezy developed Project Competence, a long-term investigation of successful outcomes in at-risk kids; his research was carried out at the University of Minnesota in the United States (Shean, 2015). According to Garmezy, a benchmark of strong behaviour under stress is functional adequacy (the capacity to continue competent functioning despite interfering with emotionality) (Van Breda, 2021).

2.3.2 The Most Important Elements of Emmy Werner's Theory and Findings

Referring back to Werner's Theory of Resilience, she initially conducted her research in 1955 with the assistance of several experts, including nurses, paediatricians, and other psychologists, to analyse every facet of the infants' development (Shean, 2015 and Van Breda, 2021). The participants' development on the physical, mental, and social levels, as well as any behavioural problems they could have developed, were all taken into account (Shean, 2015). To further understand the development of these infants, stressful life events and their academic accomplishments were also recorded (Van Breda, 2021). Living in a home where the parents had a struggle with alcohol or drugs, being abandoned, growing up in a single-parent household, divorce in the family, and being born into poverty were some of the traumatic events listed (Van Breda, 2021). Approximately 30 boys and 42 girls were found to be robust throughout the trial despite being exposed to one or more of the dangers outlined above (Shean, 2015).

2.3.2.1 Protective elements

Werner's research revealed that resilient children were more likely to be very active, experience less sleep and food issues, had a strong sense of social responsibility, and had great communication skills (Shean, 2015 and Van Breda, 2021). This can be a result of "protective factors," which are characteristics, people, and resources that help people overcome hardship (Werner and Smith, 2001). There are both protective and hazardous elements all around us. According to Shean (2015), protective and risk factors are often divided into three groups:

- **Environmental:** The security of your house, the quality of the programs and services you may access (or not);
- **Within-person:** temperament, capacities (and inabilities), skills, and personality qualities that characterise you; and
- **Familial:** how compassionate and loving your family is and how much time and support they provide to one another.

2.3.3 Final findings of Werner's study

Eighty percent of the subjects from Werner's initial research in 1989 returned for a follow-up survey in 1955 (Werner and Smith, 2001). The findings of the follow-up research demonstrated how crucial childhood dangers were to adult well-being. The resilient children from the original cohort were highly achievement-oriented adults who had generally continued their education after high school, had a full-time job, and had made professional or work-related success their main objective (Werner and Smith, 2001). They all had at least one positive role model who supported their growth in trust, autonomy, and initiative, and they all had at least one accomplishment that gave them a sense of pride and acceptance among their peers, according to Werner, who found that this group shared a number of characteristics as children (Werner and Smith, 2001).

Werner's research revealed that these resilient children have protective traits that served as a buffer against the negative effects of risk. Strengthening children's protective factors is essential to fostering their resilience and mitigating the impacts of risk (Werner and Smith, 2001). It was also seen that some individuals who were previously considered to be less resilient were able to gain resilience over time with the proper aid and support resources from other individuals and organisations, such as seeking psychiatric therapy (Van Breda, 2021). Werner found that many children "self-righted" in the most consistently unfavourable circumstances, which further contributed to the development of resilient traits in the face of adversity (Werner and Smith, 2001).

2.3.4 Emmy Werner's Theory's Applicability in Contemporary COVID-19 Times

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to the education system, prompting a transition from traditional face-to-face lessons to online or blended learning. Applying Dr. Emmy Werner's theory of resilience to this context reveals how both teachers and learners demonstrated adaptability and resilience in the face of adversity.

The sudden shift to blended learning required teachers and learners to quickly adapt to various changes, including school closures, remote learning, and adhering to social distancing norms (Naidu, 2021). This transition led to psycho-social challenges, impacting collaborative learning, learner motivation, and teacher-learner interactions (Robinson, 2020). Despite these difficulties, individuals showcased resilience by embracing technology, engaging in remote teaching methods, and finding innovative ways to maintain educational continuity (Robinson, 2020).

Werner's research emphasises the significance of personal characteristics like problem-solving skills, emotional regulation, and a positive outlook in fostering resilience. During the pandemic, educators and learners needed to develop new abilities and refine existing skills to thrive in the online learning environment (Povich, 2020). Teachers had to enhance their technical and pedagogical knowledge to facilitate effective online instruction, while learners had to take ownership of their learning and regulate their emotions in the absence of physical classroom support (Povich, 2020).

Furthermore, resilience was not merely an intrinsic trait but a learned response to adversity. Teachers and learners actively made efforts to modify their teaching and learning approaches, showcasing the malleability of resilience through conscious efforts (Werner and Smith, 2001). To support teaching and learning activities during the pandemic, educational institutions needed to provide proactive organisational support (UNESCO, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). These measures were essential in helping educators and learners cope with the challenges posed by COVID-19, including mental health issues, economic hardships, and the loss of loved ones (Naidu, 2021; Schroeder, 2020).

In conclusion, Dr. Emmy Werner's theory of resilience provides valuable insights into how individuals and educational institutions coped and adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers and learners demonstrated resilience by embracing technology, developing new skills, and adapting their teaching and learning approaches to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. Proactive organisational support played a crucial role in facilitating this resilience and ensuring the continuity of education in the face of adversity.

2.3.5 Skills that had to be exercised due to COVID-19

The Royal Society (2021) and UNESCO (2021) both assert that teachers need to be more creative in order to present their courses online and make sure that learners are engaged throughout this new type of learning. Even if many were unprepared or unequipped to do so before COVID-19, teachers also had to develop their organisational skills in order to plan their days out effectively in order to organise these dynamic and engaging sessions (UNESCO, 2021). Last but not least, teachers had to learn how to interact with learners online when before they could just check in with them in person (Royal Society, 2021). However, learners also needed to be organised since they had to take care of their own academics at home, make sure they were at class on time, and complete the homework given by teachers (Royal Society, 2021).

Additionally, learners had to develop their independence. When using online classes, group work and working in pairs became challenging, and even when switching back to in-person instruction, learners still had to learn to be more autonomous since group work caused difficulties when it came to following social distancing standards (Royal Society, 2021 and UNESCO, 2021). To guarantee that all teachers and learners felt secure and supported in their work, schools and teachers had to work together more than ever during the COVID-19 lockdowns (UNESCO, 2021 and Zhang, et al. 2020).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented a detailed examination of literature from various sources that dealt with the benefits and limitations of online learning and face-to-face instruction in general and also on teachers' and learners psycho-social well-being. Overall, it can be seen that while both face-to-face and online learning had benefits and limitations for teachers, as well as learners' academics and psycho-social well-being, traditional face-to-face education appears to offer significantly more advantages for learners' academics and psycho-social well-being, especially during the COVID-19 lockdowns. This was not only through individuals being able to socially interact more than online, but also enabled all individuals to have easier access to school feeding and clothing schemes, professional assistance and also, access to exercise - which overall had more positive impacts on the overall psycho-social well-being of all. And in general, it was found that the learners' social support from friends, family, teachers, and the

schools they attended was essential in assisting them in building resilience and getting through the difficult situations they experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further research by Zhang, et al. (2020) and Naidu (2021) revealed that emotional resilience was a critical component of psycho-social well-being and improves coping with major life events like the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also found in a study by Skalski et al., (2022) in Poland which revealed that their evidence supports the positive correlation between mental resilience and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, despite the fact that Werner's Theory of Resilience (1955) was created decades before COVID-19 appeared in South Africa in 2020, it can still be applicable to what we are going through at the moment because even in difficult times, people can learn to make the most of these challenging circumstances to become resilient (Naidu, 2021 and Van Breda, 2021).

In the next chapter, we will be looking further into the techniques used to create and analyse the data will be described. The use of focus groups and reflective diaries as generation techniques will be discussed in more detail. Additionally, the particular type of qualitative theme analysis that was conducted will next be discussed in detail.

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I reviewed literature that related to the psycho-social challenges that Intermediate Phase learners faced when engaging in Blended Learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns. The previous chapter also presented a snapshot of Dr. Emmy Werner's Theory of Resilience (1955). According to the theorist's perspective, the most crucial aspect of adversity is how a person responds to it. Resilience is what enables humans to overcome difficulties, deal with tragedies, and even evolve as a result of these experiences (Shean, 2015). In light of this, I linked this concept in Chapter 2 by relating it to the COVID-19 issues and their impact on the educational system in South Africa. The Resilience Theory (1955) and what I observed, had a clear connection since many learners as well as teachers were able to persevere in the face of difficulty and develop resilience (Naidu, 2021). This brings me full circle to the goal of this study, which was to explore the effects of blended learning on the psycho-social well-being of the Intermediate Phase (IP) learners during COVID-19.

The aim of this chapter is to present the research design and methodology elements that are entailed in this study. These elements include the research paradigm, research approach, research methodological design, sampling procedures, data generation methods, and other related elements. For ease of comprehension, the following section presents a detailed discussion of each element and how each contributed to this study.

3.2 Research Design and Methodology Elements

The framework of research approaches and procedures that a researcher selects to characterise the type of research that is being conducted is known as the Research Design (Pawar, 2020). In order to ensure that their studies are successful due to the

design, researchers may concentrate on research procedures that are suited for the subject matter. In light of this, Pawar (2020) and Creswell (2013) state that there are several research design options available, including descriptive, correlational, exploratory, experimental, causal, case-study, and action research designs. In this study, I opted for the use of case studies.

Figure 3.1 below gives a thumbnail graphic representation of the research design and methodology that I used when conducting this study.

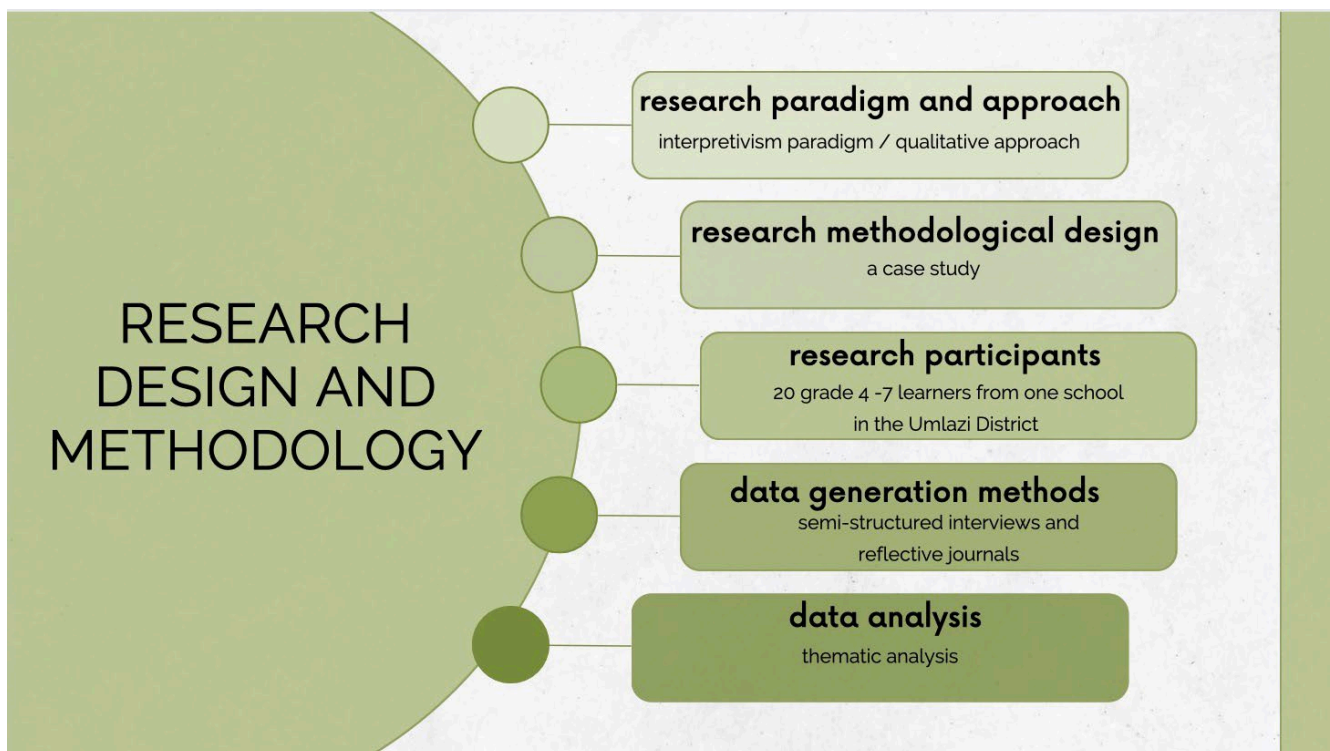


Figure 3.1: Research Design and Methodology Elements

Source: Alecia Gilmore

3.2.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is defined by Willis (2007) as a full belief system, worldview or framework that shapes research and practice in a discipline. In a similar way, a paradigm, according to Khatri (2020), directs the researcher throughout the whole investigation, including selecting a research subject, developing research questions, and determining the nature and types of reality, knowledge, technique, and relevance of the research works. It is the prism through which a researcher views the research

topic and the methodological components of their research that are based on certain philosophical assumptions (Khatri, 2020). As stated by Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), paradigms are important because they provide beliefs and directives that regulate what should be explored, how it should be studied, and how the study's findings should be evaluated by researchers in a certain field.

The Positivist approach, Interpretivist approach, Pragmatist approach, and Critical Theory approach, to name a few, are only a few paradigms that researchers can use (Mittwede, 2012). I employed the interpretivism paradigm in this study to address the questions raised and better comprehend the sampled participants' encounters with the phenomena being studied. According to Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit (2004), the interpretivism paradigm aims to draw as much information as possible from the perspectives of participants in a scenario. In this study, the scenario was the Intermediate Phase (IP) learners' psycho-social challenges with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. This study's primary objective was to examine human subjective experience in its natural environment. Each individual had a distinct perspective of blended learning due to their cultural and historical backgrounds, therefore even while two people may experience the same occurrence, they may do it in very different ways (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The experiences that the IP learners had when the educational system changed to be a more blended learning approach, as well as the implications of this on their psycho-social well-being, were what was researched.

3.2.2 Research approach

A research approach is a set of methods and processes for conducting research that spans everything from broad assumptions to particular data generation, analysis, and interpretation methodologies (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The research process is systematic in that it adheres to established norms and follows set frameworks for identifying the purpose, processing data, and communicating the findings (Williams, 2007). Researchers can use frameworks and recommendations to choose what to include in their study, how to conduct it, and what sorts of conclusions are likely based on the data acquired (Williams, 2007). Researchers can then pose questions that their

study attempts to answer, and a research approach can assist the researcher in addressing these questions logically in order to make sense of the phenomena under investigation (Williams, 2007).

In contrast to quantitative studies, which are conducted in controlled environments, qualitative research is subjective and enables participants to speak freely about their feelings in response to pertinent study-related questions (Flick, 2007). In a qualitative approach, studies are carried out on items in their natural environments and are used to analyse a problem; they are in-depth, exploratory, interpretive, and open-ended in nature (Flick, 2007). It is clear from the description above that this study the use of a qualitative research methodology was deemed suitable as this would allow me to gain a deeper understanding into the personal psycho-social experiences of the learners while they had to engage with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In other words, a qualitative research methodology would allow the participants to have a voice and freely discuss their experiences while being guided by open-ended questions. In light of this, the interpretivism paradigm is frequently associated with qualitative research, which is why it is employed in this study together with this research methodology (Goldkuhl, 2012).

According to the qualitative research approach, this approach entails gathering and analysing non-numerical data (such as text, video, or audio) in order to evaluate the concepts, viewpoints, or experiences of participants (McLeod, 2019). In order to generate data in the participant's environment, specific questions were provided by me as the researcher. In this study, I engaged with the sampled participants because I wanted to understand their psycho-social viewpoints and experiences when engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

3.2.3. Research methodological design

Research methodology mainly refers to how a researcher prepares a study with a methodical approach to provide accurate and reliable results that satisfy the aims and objectives of the investigation (Jansen & Warren, 2020). The authors further state that it describes what information to obtain and what information to discard, as well as from

whom to obtain it, how to obtain it, and how to analyse it. The research design is the framework of study methodologies and processes that a researcher chooses to identify the sort of research that is being conducted (Pawar, 2020). Because of the chosen research design, researchers may focus on approaches for their investigations that are pertinent to the topic matter and prepare for their success (Pawar, 2020). Therefore, researchers have a wide range of research designs to select from, including descriptive, correlational, exploratory, experimental, causal, case-study, and action research designs (Pawar, 2020).

The utilisation of multiple case studies in this research is based on several key reasons, as outlined in the literature. Firstly, the research falls within the interpretative paradigm, where multiple case studies are commonly employed (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Multiple case studies are particularly suitable for exploring the factors and interconnections that have influenced the current behavior or position of the subject under study as they entail choosing and examining two or more instances that have certain similar traits or qualities but also differ in some ways (Crowe et al., 2011). They offer a deeper understanding of the "how," "what," and "why" aspects of the phenomenon, rather than just a description of what happened (Muribwathoho, 2015).

Moreover, multiple case studies are valuable in conducting empirical investigations within real-life settings, allowing researchers to explore current phenomena in their natural contexts (Yin, 2003). They facilitate in-depth examinations of specific cases over time, using various data collection methods, and the researcher can define the boundaries of the case (Terre Blance et al., 2006; Percy et al., 2015). These cases could be programs, events, activities, or groups of individuals, chosen for their uniqueness or to highlight specific issues.

Incorporating multiple case studies enables the research to delve into the perceptions and ideas of the participants concerning their circumstances, providing valuable insights into their lived experiences (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2000; Mertens, 2010). This approach allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject, making it particularly suitable for exploring complex and multifaceted issues.

Overall, the decision to use case studies in this research is grounded in their ability to offer rich and detailed insights, their alignment with the interpretative paradigm, and their capacity to explore the underlying factors and connections that influence the subject of study in their natural setting.

Learners from the IP (Grades 4-7) served as the case study for this research, and they shared their first-hand accounts of using blended learning when the COVID-19 lockdowns were in effect. The Intermediate Phase learners were the case that was researched in depth as the aim was to better understand the psycho-social challenges that these learners experienced with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Moreover, this study was classified as descriptive research. Du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., (2014) claim that descriptive research aims to characterise the characteristics of a phenomenon and can also be used to compare how people feel about that issue or phenomenon. In this study, learners' feelings about the effect of blended learning on their academic performance and mental health during the COVID-19 lockdowns served to characterise the characteristics of this phenomenon under lens. Furthermore, according to du Plooy-Cillers et al., (2014) and Nassaji (2015), descriptive research seeks to illuminate current challenges or issues by gathering information that enables the researcher to define the situation in greater detail than was previously feasible. The assertions from the aforementioned authors assisted me with engaging in greater detail with the sampled participants to understand their challenges.

3.2.4 Research Participants Sampling

According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), sampling necessitates making decisions about which people, circumstances, events, or behaviours to study. Researchers can use a variety of sampling techniques, which can be divided into two primary groups: probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Non-probability sampling techniques were used for this study's

sample selection. The reason behind why non-probability sampling was chosen for this research was because this category covers convenience or other-based non-random selection, which streamlines data collection by allowing only participants who meet the requirements of the research to contribute to the collection of specific data (Saunders et al., 2012). There are several forms of non-probability sampling techniques, including purposive sampling, quota sampling, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling, to mention a few (Saunders et al., 2012).

When conducting this research study, I employed convenient and purposive sampling. Convenient sampling enabled me, as the researcher, to select a study location that is practical for data collection (Saunders et al., 2012). As a result, I did not have to drive too far to the site of the research and selected a school that was near my home. The term "purposeful sampling" refers to the researcher's deliberate choice of participants for the sample (Saldana, 2013). I chose to employ purposive sampling since the participants in this study were Intermediate Phase learners in Grades 4–7 who believed they had encountered psycho-social difficulties with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Five learners from each of the grades from grades 4 through 7 were purposively and conveniently sampled for this study, making the total sample size 20 learners. Out of the initial 20 individuals approached, only 15 learners ultimately consented to participate in this study.

The following steps were taken before the data generation process commenced, which was adapted from Blanche and Durrheim's (2002) advice. I began by informing the principal and the teachers of my goals for my research. The next step was to choose the 20 learners who had been purposefully identified by the principal and teachers as having had psycho-social challenges with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Only those chosen learners who agreed to take part in the study were selected, which happened to be 15 learners. These participants were further informed that their names were to be safeguarded when the study's results are published and that their experiences, beliefs, or views would be kept confidential. In addition to the foregoing, this study did not seek to harm anyone; rather, its primary goal was to produce information that would be helpful to other researchers and social groups. This is because it could serve as a springboard for further investigation into the psycho-social challenges that Intermediate Phase learners encountered with blended learning

during the COVID-19 lockdowns and other instances of crisis. Moreover, because the subjects were minors, permission was obtained from their parents or legal guardians before the data generation process began, and consent forms were given to them, as well as the principal of the school. Finally, participants and their parents and/ or guardians were also reminded that participation in the process was always voluntary and never coerced and that the learners were always free to leave at any time.

3.2.5 Data Generation Methods

Data creation, according to Given (2008), refers to the ideas and techniques used by researchers to produce data from a sample data source. For example, events, publications, organisations, and human participants are all viable data sources (Given, 2008). In this study I wanted to make use of a variety of qualitative research-related data-generating methods. To generate textually rich data from the participants, a variety of methods was employed, including focus groups and reflective diaries. Since no one method can fully explain a human phenomenon like behaviour, it is advisable that investigating from a variety of perspectives in a holistic manner is critical (Muribwathoho, 2015). Three different qualitative data-generating techniques were set to be employed in this study as a result of this. According to research done by Kulkarni (2013), using several ways to generate data enhances the findings' credibility and quality assurance since they capture different aspects of the same phenomena by gathering opinions from many groups of people, this process is known as triangulation. Cohen et al., (2018) maintain that triangulation improves the trustworthiness of study findings. Therefore, it is a process in which researchers look for convergence between various and disparate sources of information in order to construct themes or categories in a study, as stated by Creswell and Miller (2000).

3.2.5.1 Focus groups as a data generation method

Focus groups and reflective diaries were used to collect qualitative data for my research (du Plooy-Cillers et al., 2014). Learners in Grades 4 through 7, who were between the ages of ten and fourteen, participated in this research. As a result, they were regarded as minors and great care was given to acknowledge that each learner

will have their own reality that they have created based on their own unique experience with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns (du Plooy-Cillers et al., 2014 and Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In order to ensure that the learners were unaware of my own opinions on the issue, I did not discuss my own experiences or thoughts with them prior to this study; instead, I simply urged them to express their own through prompted questions. Children are often innocent individuals who tell the truth most of the time (Panday, 2021).

It is mentioned that in order to establish a research connection with a participant that would provide them access to their story, qualitative researchers must start by creating rapport with them right away (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2007). In light of this, I met with the participants beforehand to get to know them better as a whole and to introduce myself to them in the form of a focus group. This was also done in order to foster mutual understanding and trust because the purposively and conveniently sampled participants were minors. In a focus group, a researcher conducts a group interview with six to eight people who share similar histories, demographic characteristics, or both (Larvakas, 2008). Dilshad and Latif (2013) state that focus groups encourage free communication among participants and rely on the ongoing interaction of participants to provide data that would be challenging to get using other techniques, such as one-on-one interviews. Focus groups, when conducted properly, offer insightful perspectives into people's emotions and ideas, leading to a far more deep, nuanced, and complete understanding of their viewpoints on the subject at issue (Larvakas, 2008).

By having the initial focus group, information was shared more openly and honestly, which aided in the generation of data (Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). In order to prevent the learners from feeling overexposed to questions, these focus groups were organised on a different day from the completion of the reflective diaries. Learners in Grades 4 and 5 were divided up first, then learners in Grades 6 and 7 were seen. The optimal amount of time for each focus group was around 20 minutes and this enabled the learners to have the freedom to discuss their opinions and not feel rushed in any way.

Further to this, participants in this study also took part voluntarily. Those who choose to participate did so of their own free choice. Moreover, the learners did not get any incentives for agreeing to participate.

3.2.5.2 Reflective Diaries as a data generation method

Reflective journals/diaries were used as the second technique of data generation. Reflective journal entries provided individuals the chance to discuss in-depth, intimate, and rich experiences, as well as the chance to speak from personal experience, without feeling judged as their entries remained anonymous (Hayrärinen, 2007). This enabled individuals to recount life events or anecdotes in order to share their personal experiences (Rutter & van Joolingsen, 2015). Written, spoken, or visual reflections on how individuals interpret their experiences are all acceptable forms of journaling and these were also acceptable in this research (Trahar, 2009). Rutter and van Joolingsen (2015) found that participants' experiences were accurately reflected when utilising reflective diary entries.

During the focus group meeting, the reflective diaries were discussed. Learners were given diaries with particular questions that they needed to answer in writing or drawing. Such inquiries needed individuals to discuss their own encounters with any psycho-social difficulties they may have encountered during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Reflective journals were suitable to use in this study because the participants—who were two years younger at the time of the lockdowns— were able to draw their experiences more effectively than they could have done so orally. This advantage was also mentioned in research conducted by Rutter and van Joolingsen (2015). Adding to this, another advantage of using diary entries was that the young participants were not afraid to talk honestly because they could write down or sketch their experiences (Soobramoney, 2016). This was important to the study because it gave participants a place to share their feelings about any psycho-social difficulties they may have had while adjusting to blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Considering the foregoing, this type of inquiry was more open-ended, allowing respondents to explain as needed, comparable to when they are given a questionnaire to fill out (Schmuck, 1997). Following the focus group meeting, these reflective diaries

were handed out, and the learners then had two weeks to complete them at home and return them. Upon handing the diaries out, I then went through the details and the questions within them and urged the learners to be as truthful as they can be in their responses, mainly because their identities would not be recorded.

3.2.6 Data analysis

The act of summarising and organising acquired data in order to uncover overt and covert themes and patterns within the research is known as data analysis (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). As this is qualitative research, the data is generally visual or textual, and it could be collected through audio recordings or notes recorded during the data generation process (Christiansen & Bertram 2010). There are various types of data analysis methods that researchers can utilise in qualitative research, namely: narrative analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory, interpretive phenomenological analysis, and thematic analysis (Warren, 2020).

I employed a thematic analysis which is a well-known qualitative method to analyse the data. The information gathered was organised into topics after my extensive engagement with data. I performed the following procedures to analyse the data in line with recommendations made by Connaway and Powell (2010), Yin (2011) and Panday (2021):

The initial analysis starts once the researcher discovers new ideas or hunches during the initial interview or observation. This might direct the researcher to probe further or improve the interview questions. After the data was generated, I started a more thorough analysis. Based on the study's focus groups and reflective diaries, I transcribed, evaluated and analysed the data generated. Thematic analysis was then used to examine the data in-depth. As stated in Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for detecting, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data and it further organises and explains your data generation in (rich) detail at a minimum. Similar to the approach taken in Butina's (2015) research, the narrative thematic analysis procedure I employed consisted of five distinct steps: (a) data organisation and preparation; (b) gaining a broad understanding of the data; (c) the

coding process; (d) categories or themes; and (e) data interpretation. These steps are outlined below:

Step 1: I became familiar with the information I had learned from the data generated from the reflective diaries. I read and reread the data from the reflective diaries.

Step 2: I extracted crucial patterns from the data, and codes were created.

Step 3: I analysed the codes and derived themes from the codes to create themes from the data.

Step 4: I reassessed each theme by making sure that the appropriate information was included under each theme.

Step 5: After outlining each theme's contents, I gave the themes specific names.

Step 6: And finally, the investigation was then written and linked back to the theoretical framework and information found in the literature review.

Data analysis was employed to transition from specific details to overarching themes in an inductive manner, once the reflective diaries were read (du-Plooy Cilliers et al., 2014). The researcher's interpretations of the data were subsequently formulated. When applied within the context of qualitative research, this method can offer profound insights into a subject or stimulate the generation of fresh study ideas (McLeod, 2019). Hence, this approach was adopted.

Many patterns did emerge from the data, and thematic analysis helped me infer them. Following the idea stated by Appalsamy (2019), the thematic analysis further aided in deriving the different themes that emerged from the analysis, and I thus was able to organise my data by employing themes. For example, when learners responded to the given questions, the theme of *"Understanding Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns"* emerged following the interpretation of the generated data. It is for this reason that thematic analysis was selected, and the other types of data analysis strategies were not taken into consideration. After the data was gathered and analysed, pseudonyms were employed to safeguard the identities of the study's sampled participants.

3.2.7 Research Quality (rigour) issues in qualitative research

Quality research is most commonly used to refer to the research process which encompasses all aspects of study design, including judgments about the appropriateness of the chosen research methods and questions, participant selection, data measurements, and protection against systematic bias, non-systematic bias, and inferential error (Boaz & Ashby, 2018; Lohr, 2004; Shavelson & Towne, 2002). I investigated the following research rigour principles in this qualitative study: credibility and trustworthiness; transferability; dependability and confirmability.

3.2.7.1 Credibility and trustworthiness

As a researcher, it is paramount to establish the trustworthiness of the qualitative data generated in this study. De Vos et al. (2005, p. 346) define credibility and trustworthiness as "establishing the truth value of the study, its applicability, consistency, and neutrality." Trustworthiness goes beyond credibility and encompasses the overall reliability, integrity, and ethical conduct of the research process. Confidence in the researchers' techniques, data collecting, analysis, and interpretations must be established (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Qualitative research, such as this study, relies on people's personal experiences and opinions instead of numerical data (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Therefore, establishing trustworthiness is crucial in determining the reliability and validity of the study.

Mzimela (2007) emphasises the need to engage in various data generation methods to ensure the data acquired is trustworthy. In this research, I utilised focus groups and reflective diaries for data generation, following these guidelines to ensure trustworthiness was established. In summary, trustworthiness is vital in qualitative research to determine the reliability and credibility of the data. It involves ensuring the truth value of the study, its applicability, consistency, and neutrality. By adhering to ethical principles, being transparent, and employing diverse data collection methods, the research can establish trustworthiness and enhance the credibility of its findings.

Credibility, on the other hand, refers to the degree to which a source or information is perceived to be believable, reliable, and how accurately the researcher interprets the responses from the participants (Korsjens and Moser, 2018). This can be achieved through spending time with the participants, which occurred by meeting the participants and speaking to them in focus groups (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). By doing so, I was able to generate a greater initial overall understanding of the experiences that these Intermediate Phase learners had with blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic's lockdowns. This was maintained by generating data from the learners, who were minors, on three separate occasions in order to allow me to compare the findings to uncover overt and covert themes and patterns. I also ensured that the questions posed were objective and open-ended in nature, with no reflection or sharing of my own views and opinions with the learners. This was to avoid learners from responding to questions based on my own beliefs and experiences. Further to this, due to the fact that their reflective diaries were performed individually, learners were only able to rely on their own thoughts and responses, making their responses more of a true reflection of their experiences.

3.2.7.2 Transferability

Transferability is an alternative to external validity or generalisability in which the researcher's task is to demonstrate the applicability of one's research findings to other contexts (Muribwathoho, 2015). Further to this, it refers to whether or not the findings can be applied in a similar situation and deliver similar results (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). According to Korsjens and Moser (2018), this can be achieved by utilising purposive sampling, as this considers the participants' characteristics, which are directly linked to the research questions for this research. Other researchers could potentially conduct the same research in a different context – such as in Cape Town or Johannesburg – and they could follow the same data generation and analysis methods, and possibly arrive at a similar outcome that would show the findings to be in line with the findings that was found through this study.

However, enabling other researchers to see the transferability of this study to other contexts is only possible through having a rich and detailed description of the context

and research process (Muribwathoho, 2015). This was preserved in this research dissertation by ensuring that every stage of this research process was well documented.

3.2.7.3 Dependability

Dependability is an alternative to reliability in which the researcher is required to account for changing conditions in the phenomena under investigation as well as changes in the design resulting from a better grasp of the environment (Muribwathoho, 2015). Shenton (2004) emphasises the link between credibility and dependability, and in reality, demonstrating the former goes a long way toward securing the latter. To directly address the issue of dependability, the study's procedure should be published in detail, allowing a future researcher to duplicate the work, but not necessarily with the same results (Muribwathoho, 2015; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This means that the study should include a full explanation of the research strategy and implementation, as well as operational details of data generation and project evaluation (Muribwathoho, 2015). This may be accomplished by explicitly defining the research method so that it can be followed, examined, and evaluated by those not participating in the investigation (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Again, this was preserved in this study by precisely stating each phase of this research process so that future researchers may reproduce it in other situations.

3.2.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is associated with objectivity, and it emphasises the necessity for the researcher to question whether the study's conclusions might be validated by another. As echoed by De Vos et al. (2005) the trustworthiness of a research study may be established or verified by asking the following questions:

- a. How reliable are the specific findings of the study?
- b. What is the extent to which the findings are transferrable or relevant to other contexts?

c. Is it possible to replicate the findings if the study was done with the same subjects in the same setting?

d. How can one be certain that the conclusions are accurate representations of the individuals and the investigation?

The use of different data-gathering methods which is referred to by Cohen et al., (2018) as triangulation, asking questions about facts or behaviours, past or present, and using external checks are all utilised to demonstrate trustworthiness. As a result, this study employed two types of data generating methods that helped to maintain confirmability – namely focus groups and reflective diaries. Shenton (2004) recognises the difficulties of achieving true impartiality because tests and questions are created by people, and the researcher's biases will always be present. As a result, Shenton (2004) suggests that, in order to address the issue of objectivity, procedures should be put in place to guarantee that, as far as possible, the work's conclusions are the product of the participants' experiences and ideas, rather than the researcher's qualities and inclinations. To ensure objectivity and avoid researcher bias, the learners' written responses were transcribed verbatim without any additional input from me. Additionally, the research includes comprehensive and detailed accounts of the focus group discussions and reflective diary entries, carefully documenting the context, settings, and participants' responses. This thorough documentation aids readers in assessing the credibility of the interpretations (Shenton, 2004).

3.3 Addressing the Elements of Bias

Any inclination that inhibits an issue from being considered objectively is known as bias (Pannucci & Wilkins, 2010). The authors further allude that when a certain outcome or response is chosen or encouraged above others during testing or sampling, bias arises in research. Bias can appear at any stage of the research process, including study design, data collection, data analysis, and publishing. Since data generation methods are designed by people, it is impossible to ensure true impartiality as the questions chosen are selected by the researcher (Muribwathoho, 2015). It is also unavoidable for the researcher's prejudices to enter the equation as they will have their own ideas of what they feel the data will reflect. Shenton (2004)

advises that in order to address the issue of objectivity, actions must be taken to help ensure that the findings of the work are, to the greatest extent possible, the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher. To circumvent this, I generated data using identical questions and reflective diaries with each of the participants in this study and also remained impartial during the focus groups, being careful not to share any personal accounts that the learners could use as their own.

3.4 Limitations to the Study

Given the foregoing, there were certain limitations to this study that were identified. According to Ross and Zaidi (2019), limitations are those aspects of the methodology used that have an impact on the study's outcome. The following were some of the limitations of this study:

Representativity: Only one school in Durban, South Africa participated in this research. Even though the learners in the participating school were varied, they were not completely representative of the national population. This was because many more learners from differing backgrounds underwent blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, other than those chosen to participate in this study. To mitigate this as much as possible, I chose a demographically varied group of learners so that I could attempt to generate data from each ethnic group to see whether there were any significant differences across the races. It was also impossible to ascertain the financial condition of these varied learners due to privacy concerns, therefore this component was unable to be addressed in this study.

Sample Size: 15 learners ultimately participated in this study. As such, this sample size may imply that fewer opinions were obtained, which may not be genuinely reflective of all learners' experiences with blended learning. This was mitigated by stating in this research study's suggestions that a much bigger scale study would be required to find the genuine reflections of South African learners when engaging in blended learning during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Generalisability of the findings: Each school has its own distinct qualities. As a result, finding a single case that is indicative of others is impossible. This is virtually synonymous with representativity. This also contributed to restricting the findings' applicability to the rest of South Africa, as the findings cannot be expected to apply to rural areas. This constraint might be overcome by doing large-scale research that covers not only private schools but also schools that fared poorly during the COVID-19 lockdowns, in order for researchers to be able to see the full impact of blended learning on Intermediate Phase learners.

Subjectivity or Observer bias: Preconceived notions, expectations, and beliefs about what will be noticed are all examples of this. These expectations have the potential to contaminate one's views and study findings. Muribwathoho (2015) puts it another way - as a researcher, I will see and hear just what I want to see and hear only what I want to hear. It was best to keep a neutral and non-partisan stance. This established and strengthened the trustworthiness of this study. I avoided this, by making sure that the questions asked were open-ended enough that the learners were allowed to share their own experiences without being influenced to do so by the way the question is phrased.

Lack of triangulation: In order to elicit data that is abundant in textual content from the participants, a range of methods were planned to be utilised, such as focus groups, and reflective diaries. It is important to acknowledge that a singular method cannot comprehensively elucidate complex human phenomena, such as behavior. Therefore, adopting a holistic approach by investigating from various perspectives is crucial (Muribwathoho, 2015). I acknowledged the necessity of implementing triangulation methods to ensure a thorough understanding of the generated data. Unfortunately, due to time constraints on the part of the school, this objective could not be accomplished.

Use of newspaper articles: I recognised that newspaper pieces are not academic papers and that their conclusions are not based on empirical study, as stated by Muribwathoho (2015). These publications were essential, however, in order to adequately expound on blended learning in South African schools, given there were few research articles accessible on the issue during the COVID-19 era (2020- 2021)

at the time of this study. Nonetheless, I utilised both current and prior research studies to help make an understanding of the impacts of blended learning on learners in general, as well as research publications that mainly deal with learners and blended learning during the COVID-19 period.

Parental or guardian influence: As the learners were able to take their reflective diaries home to finish them, there was a potential that interested parents or guardians will exert external influence. This could not be fully resolved because I was not present with the participants during this time when they were at their homes, and in order for rich data to be obtained, participants were allowed time to finish these diaries and not be rushed. To reduce outside influence, a note was delivered with the diaries to the participant's parents or guardians encouraging them not to intervene with the participants' responses. To circumvent this issue, an alternative possibility was to employ data generation methods based on triangulation.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

De Vos et al., (2002) define ethics as a set of moral principles proposed by groups or individuals, widely accepted, and offering rules and behavioural expectations about the most appropriate behaviour toward experimental subjects and participants, employers, sponsors, other researchers, assistants, and schoolchildren. Ethical principles also serve as benchmarks and the foundation for each researcher to evaluate his or her own behaviour. Ethics, according to Liamputtong (2007), is a set of moral norms that attempts to prevent researchers from injuring people they investigate. Simply put, they should function as the researcher's conscience and moral compass, according to Muribwathoho (2015). A lack of commitment to ethical issues may have a negative impact on the research's credibility, the researcher's autonomy, the quality of the research, or the participants' rights (Muribwathoho, 2015).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), because participants being questioned are persons, the researcher must guarantee that they are not harmed. Patten and Newhart (2018) add to this by stating that ethics must be considered in any research involving humans. They further stipulate that the researcher must guarantee that the participant suffers no bodily or psychological damage. With this in mind, I guaranteed

that persons are treated with the highest respect and that their dignity is preserved throughout the study process (Goodwin, 2010). No participant was hurt in any way, both physically and emotionally, over the course of this research. With that said, the following took place to protect the participants and guaranteed that this study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the various institutions.

1. UKZN application - Research and Higher Degrees Office

I completed the necessary application for this research, meticulously outlining the specific aims and objectives of the study. By doing so, I ensured that the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal has a comprehensive understanding of every facet of my research. I submitted this application along with my study proposal.

2. Department of Basic Education (DBE)

In relation to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), all the required documents were duly completed and submitted for their evaluation. This step was crucial not only to apprise them of the study's objective but also to ensure their awareness and involvement in the research. Upon the DBE receiving these documents, a letter of approval stating that this research may be conducted (See Appendix A).

3. Principal of the research site and teachers

A letter was composed and sent to the principal of the selected school, providing them with comprehensive information regarding the nature, purpose, and objectives of this research. Additionally, an identical letter was also addressed to the teachers, ensuring that they are well-informed and knowledgeable about the study's intentions. (See Appendix B).

4. Parents

As the participants in this research fell within the age range of 10 to 14 and were considered minors, obtaining parental consent was essential for their involvement. Thus, a letter of consent was carefully drafted and sent to the parents before any data collection commenced, ensuring that their permission was obtained prior to generating any data. (See Appendix C).

5. Learners

The participants in this study were learners who were provided with a straightforward form outlining the research procedure. The form emphasised that their identities would remain confidential and highlighted their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, without any impact on their academic achievement. This ensured that participants were well-informed about the research process and their rights as voluntary participants. (See Appendix D).

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research design and methodology that was adopted when conducting this study. Different research elements were discussed in-depth. The research paradigm, research approach, and methodological design were all discussed in this chapter along with the research methodological design. I made the choice to employ an interpretivism paradigm, which was descriptive in nature. This study also included case studies, which in this instance were learners in a specified school's Intermediate Phase. Therefore, convenience and purposeful sampling were both used to choose a sample for this study of 20 learners. The different limitations with the quality of the study were also discussed, along with steps I took to try to prevent them. The following chapter will present the presentation of data, a discussion of the data that was generated, as well as its analysis. I will also be presenting the themes that arose from the data that was generated. These themes were as follows: a) Understanding Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns; b) The emotional rollercoaster of blended learning; and c) Thriving against all odds.

Chapter 4

Data Presentation, Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 began by covering the research design and methodology used to conduct this study. Various research elements were also discussed in depth, such as the methodological design of the research, the research paradigm, and the research approach. As mentioned earlier, I opted for an interpretivist paradigm, which was also descriptive in nature. Additionally, this research featured case studies, which in this instance were learners in a given school's Intermediate Phase. It was then noted that the sample of 20 learners for this study was selected using both convenient and purposive sampling methods. However, due to unforeseen circumstances only 9 of these learners participated in this study. The various limitations of the study were also discussed, as well as the steps I took to avoid them.

This chapter begins with a description of the selected research site and a demographic description of the research participants. This is followed by a summary of the participant's responses, with themes derived based on each of the data collection instruments. Thereafter, an analysis of the data generated by the participants is presented using pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms, as opposed to the research participants' real names, ensures that the identity of each participant who took part in the study is protected and that they can communicate without hesitation. Chapter four of this study thus aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research findings, with a focus on this research topic, namely "*Exploring the Intermediate Phase Learners' Psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.*" The research questions that guided the study were also taken into account in this chapter. These questions are listed below in Figure 4.1.

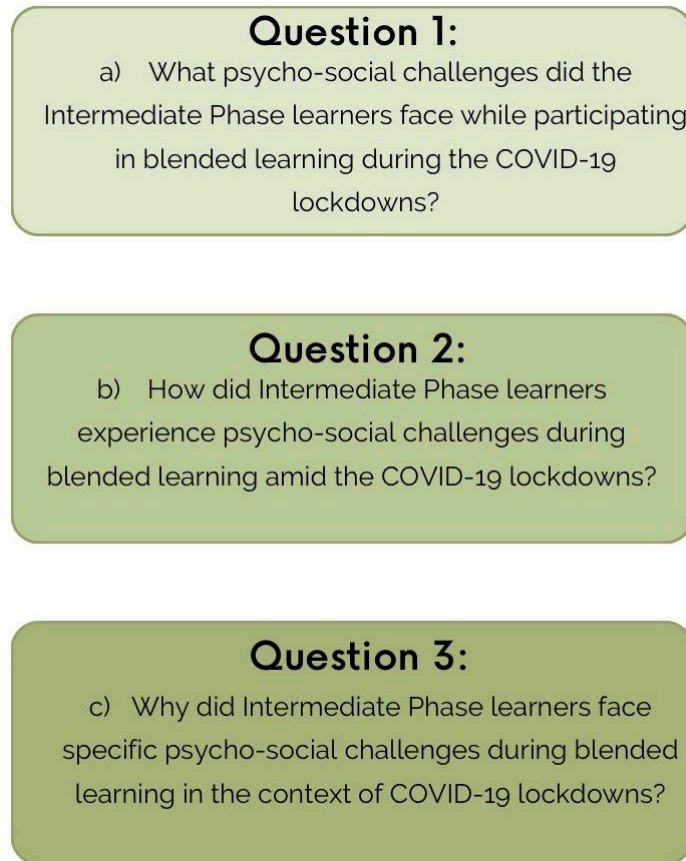


Figure 4.1: Research Questions

Source: Alecia Gilmore

Based on the overarching research questions indicated in Figure 4.1 above, this study generated qualitative data through an initial focus group and reflective diaries as data generation methods. Learners were provided with specific questions to guide their responses in their reflective diaries. These questions were open-ended, allowing learners to freely express and discuss their personal experiences. For a detailed list of these questions, please refer to Appendix E. The data from the reflective diaries was then analysed in light of the literature presented in chapter two and the theoretical framework underlying this study. As previously mentioned in chapter three, I chose to analyse the data using thematic analysis. As stated by Appalsamy (2019), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and representing patterns (themes) in data. It organises and describes your data set in a minimalist and detailed way. Thematic analysis therefore helped me derive many patterns from the data that was generated in this study. By using themes, which derived from the data that was

generated in the reflective diaries, I was able to put my data into an ordered manner which conclusions can thus be drawn from.

4.2 Demographic description of the selected research site and research participants

4.2.1 Background of the research sites

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, this study utilised empirical data generated mainly through personal connections, including focus groups and reflective journals. It was conducted at a primary school located in the Umlazi District in Durban, South Africa. This research site went by the name of Harvey Primary School (pseudonym) to ensure the anonymity of the individuals involved in the research. Harvey Primary School is classified as a quintile 5 school, which caters to the most prosperous schools in South Africa (van Dyk & White, 2019). According to Van Dyk and White (2019), the lowest socioeconomic level is known as quintile 1, while the highest level is known as quintile 5. These rankings, which are based on data collected across the country, consider a variety of infrastructure-related factors as well as elements like the level of poverty in the area around the school.

The school also employs English as its Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), and it is a private institution with approximately 700 learners, whose families belong to the upper socioeconomic level. In addition, there are almost 60 fully qualified teachers to teach grades 000-7 who are supported by the high school fees that the school charges parents. These circumstances increased the probability of these learners having access to a superior-quality education as compared to their counterparts in less socio-economic contexts.

4.2.2 Biographical information of the research participants

Fifteen learners from Harvey Primary School in grades 4 through 7 were conveniently and purposefully sampled for this study. The research participants who were

conveniently and purposefully sampled for this investigation are listed in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Research participants that were purposively and conveniently sampled for this study.

Source: Author

Research Participants	Gender	Age	Race
Tayla	Female	10	Caucasian
Peter	Male	10	Coloured
Vanessa	Female	10	Asian
Emma	Female	10	African
Andy	Male	11	Caucasian
Alex	Male	11	Caucasian
Ugu	Male	11	African
Doreen	Female	12	Asian
Mary	Female	12	African
Larry	Male	12	Asian
Lindi	Female	13	African
David	Male	13	Caucasian
Jean	Male	13	Coloured
Violet	Female	13	African
Jane	Female	13	Caucasian

4.2.2.1 Research Participant 1: Tayla

Tayla is a Caucasian female learner who is 10 years old and in Grade 4.

4.2.2.2 Research Participant 2: Peter

Peter is a Coloured male learner who is 10 years old and in Grade 5.

4.2.2.3 Research Participant 3: Vanessa

Vanessa is an Asian female learner who is 10 years old and in Grade 4.

4.2.2.4 Research Participant 4: Emma

Emma is an African female learner who is 10 years old and in Grade 4.

4.2.2.5 Research Participant 5: Andy

Andy is a Caucasian male learner who is 10 years old and in Grade 4.

4.2.2.6 Research Participant 6: Alex

Alex is a Caucasian male learner who is 11 years old and in Grade 4.

4.2.2.7 Research Participant 7: Ugu

Ugu is an African female learner who is 11 years old and in Grade 5.

4.2.2.8 Research Participant 8: Doreen

Doreen is an Asian female learner who is 12 years old and in Grade 6.

4.2.2.9 Research Participant 9: Mary

Mary is an African female learner who is 12 years old and in Grade 6.

4.2.2.10 Research Participant 10: Larry

Larry is an Asian male learner who is 13 years old and in Grade 6.

4.2.2.11 Research Participant 11: Lindi

Lindi is an African (Black) female learner who is 13 years old and in Grade 6.

4.2.2.12 Research Participant 12: David

David is a Caucasian male learner who is 13 years old and in Grade 7.

4.2.2.13 Research Participant 13: Jean

Jean is a Coloured male learner who is 13 years old and in Grade 7.

4.2.2.14 Research Participant 14: Violet

Violet is an African female learner who is 13 years old and in Grade 7.

4.2.2.15 Research Participant 15: Jane

Jane is a Caucasian female learner who is 13 years old and in Grade 7.

4.3 Emerging themes and sub-themes

Data on primary school learners' psycho-social experiences with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns was generated in accordance with the research questions that were put out to them. The data analysis revealed three primary themes and the related sub-themes, which I was able to group the generated data into for greater understanding. By arranging the information meaningfully, conclusions were thus also able to be formed. This study's main questions that guided it and the developing themes and sub-themes that emerged are displayed in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Research Questions and Emerging Themes

Source: Author

Research Question	Theme	Sub-themes
<p>What were the Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns?</p>	<p>Understanding Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns.</p>	<p>Need for human touch</p> <p>Not being able to interact with teachers and peers physically</p> <p>Stressful and overwhelming situations brought on by COVID-19 lockdowns on blended learning</p>

<p>How did the Intermediate Phase learners experience the psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns?</p>	<p>The Emotional Rollercoaster of Blended Learning.</p>	<p>The unexpected move</p> <p>Unexpected move to online learning and the new use of unknown applications</p> <p>Expensive data – we were expecting learners to battle with data, but they come from a stable socio-economic status, so parents were able to buy the data even though it was expensive.</p> <p>Wi-Fi connection issues</p> <p>Rewards and Joys</p> <p>Learning new soft skills Learning new hard skills Able to eat during lesson time Wearing pyjamas during lesson time Not worrying about waking up early</p>
<p>Why did the Intermediate Phase learners experience</p>	<p>Thriving Against all Odds.</p>	<p>Help through others</p>

<p>the psycho-social challenges of blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns the way they did?</p>		<p>Getting help from different people</p>
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4.3.1 Theme 1: Understanding Intermediate Phase learners’ psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns

As the world grappled with the unprecedented challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were forced to adapt quickly to a new mode of learning - blended learning (Suyatno et al., 2021). While this approach offered a way to keep education going during lockdowns, it also presented a unique set of challenges for learners. Among them were Intermediate Phase learners, who found themselves struggling to navigate the psycho-social aspects of this new learning format. These challenges are highlighted below.

4.3.1.1. Sub-theme 1: Need for Human Touch

When schools suddenly shifted to blended learning due to COVID-19, it brought together the learning environments of both home and school (Stringer, 2021). This caused tension for both teachers and learners as the boundaries between home and school became blurred. Studies by the American Psychological Association (2020), Stringer (2021), Munos (2021) and the Kentucky Counselling Centre (2021) have shown that this shift had various effects on learners' psycho-social well-being. For instance, learners who were used to working in groups and seeking help from peers and teachers found it challenging to adapt to working alone. Also, not being able to spend time with classmates when they were not physically at school affected their socialisation and emotional growth.

After carefully reviewing the participants' responses, a subtheme, "The need for human touch," became evident as a result of the main theme, "Understanding Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns." This subtheme was crucial in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the participants' journal entries, as revealed through their reflective diary entries. Therefore, including this sub-theme was essential to fully grasp the impact of the participants' psycho-social experiences with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Upon reviewing the reflective journals, the following was noted when asked about how the learners' felt about not being able to interact with one another:

Peter wrote: *"I was unhappy with the lack of physical closeness to my friends, my inability to hug them, and a sense of disconnect from my peers"*. Peter also described his experience as: *"A 'forced confinement' that caused significant stress"*.

Further to this, Alex highlighted that: *"I feel emotionally disconnected from the outside world while learning online and not being at school physically for periods of time"*.

Ugu also shared mixed feelings of happiness and sadness regarding online learning. She added to this and wrote that: *"The worst part was learning in groups online. I also felt happy and sad. Happy because it gave me freedom and sad because I could not see my friends"*.

While Doreen, Jean, and Tayla expressed feeling upset as they felt behind in their education. Vanessa admitted the following: *"I felt bored and easily distracted and I struggled with the stress of social distancing and technology use"*.

Violet added to this discussion by saying: "I love being at school because I get to see my friends and hated not being able to see them. It was very stressful because we didn't feel like we really had each other to talk to while being online, like we would if it was in person."

On the other hand, Lindi wrote: *“I felt stressed, and that the situation was unfair”*. This was also the case for Larry who said, *“It was so confusing to be online one moment and then back to normal the next, I hated it because you never knew what was happening. I also missed my friends because I could get help from them in class”*.

Lastly, David shared the same sentiments as Lindi as he wrote that: *“I was feeling stressed and worried”*, to which Emma agreed to by saying *“The whole situation was stressful because I was not used to working on an iPad or laptop and suddenly, I had to.”*

For Alex, Jane, Tayla, and David, the entire experience was new and also caused some level of anxiety.

Adding to the responses above are examples of images drawn when the learners were asked to draw a picture that shows how they felt during the COVID-19 lockdowns in general:



Figure 4.2: Image drawn by Tayla

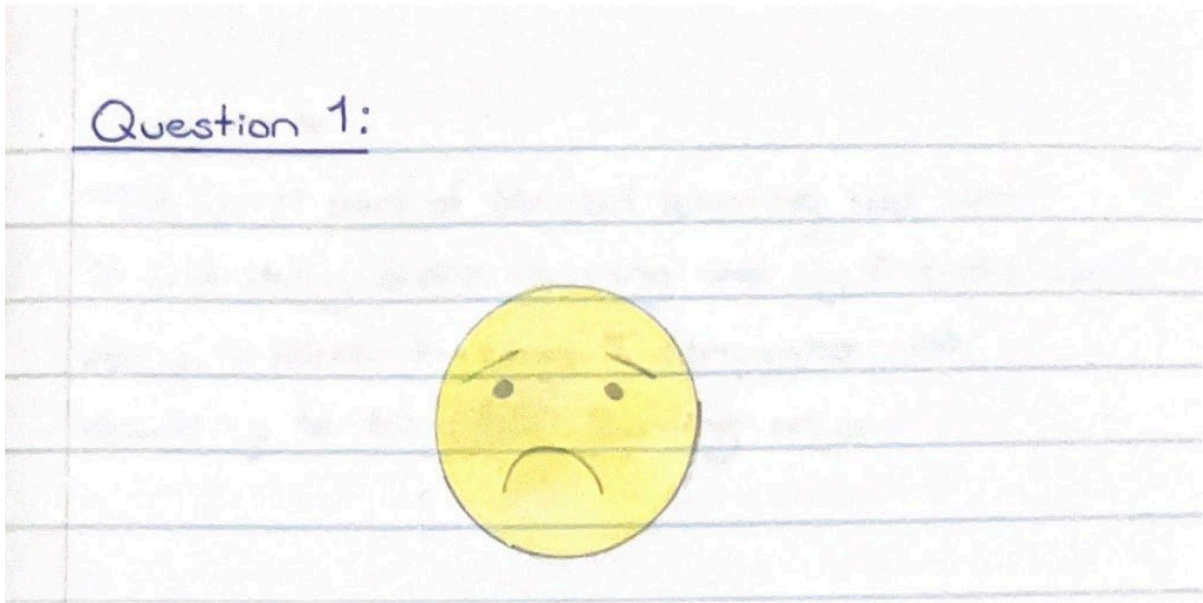


Figure 4.3: Image drawn by Peter



Figure 4.4: Image drawn by Vanessa



Figure 4.5: Image drawn by Jean

These above entries emphasised the importance of human touch, and how learners missed being physically present with teachers and peers when they had to learn online during the period when the COVID-19 cases were high. Maatuk et al., (2021) and Vinikas (2021) also highlighted that online learning had a disadvantage of lacking personal connections, which teachers and learners may have preferred and expected to still take place even during a pandemic. This could be attributed to the fact that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional classroom-based instruction was the widely accepted approach to education, making learners and teachers more familiar with this mode of learning and communication (Vinikas, 2021).

When it came to writing about *stressful and overwhelming situations brought on by COVID-19 lockdowns and its impact on blended learning*, the learners wrote the following responses about how they felt about blended learning:

Tayla: “*Stressful, awkward, messy*”

Lindi: “*Complicated, frustrating, fun*”

David: “*Scary, stressful, overwhelming*”

Doreen: “*Scary, depressing, worrying*”

Violet: “*Lonely, depressing, sad*”

Vanessa: “*Stressful, irritating, different*”

Jane: “*Fun at times, boring and different*”

This was further echoed by learners from this study in their reflective diaries when they were asked how they felt about the challenges they experienced with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. These learners responded by writing the following:

Doreen and Tayla both stated that they felt annoyed and sad when they had to learn online. Tayla mentioned: “*These changes made me feel annoyed and sad because with not being able to sign into meetings, I did not know what to do or how to complete by schoolwork.*”

Vanessa, David and Alex all stated that they felt anxious and stressed when it came to online learning. Alex mentioned: “*These changes made me feel anxious at the beginning because it was all new to me.*” Larry also added by saying “*I felt stressed as I had never been taught online before and I had nobody at home to help me if I got stuck because my parents had to work. At first, this was scary!*”.

Moreover, Jean stated that he felt the following: “*I felt confused and did not understand the online learning processes.*” Andy added to this by saying: “*At first I was confused and then when I had network connection issues, this made it even worse because I would then miss out on even more work, and I had nobody at home to help me when these connection problems happened.*”

Additionally, Peter and Lindi described their experiences as “*frustrating*”. And finally, Ugu stated: “*I felt as if I would struggle when going back to face-to-face learning only.*”

The above feelings were also acknowledged by UNICEF (2021) when they noted that a lack of social interaction and feelings of uncertainty around blended learning, contributed to an increase in feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression among learners as they grappled to keep up with their academic demands during the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses above also further concurred with what the American Psychological Association (2020) and Kentucky Counselling Centre (2021) stated. It was stated that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it had led to a rise in the prevalence of depression and anxiety in young people, among other factors (American Psychological Association, 2020; Kentucky Counselling Centre, 2021). The relationships that learners have with their learning were significantly impacted by reduced engagement between learners, their classmates, and teachers via online learning platforms (Munos, 2021). Additionally, learners' attention spans and general interest in learning were impacted by their restricted social connections (Stringer, 2021; Munos, 2021). Adding to this, learning distractions, internet access challenges and a lack of study space was also further mentioned as additional pressures that learners had to deal with during this time (Russell, 2021 and Suyatno et al., 2021).

4.3.2 Theme 2: *The Emotional Rollercoaster of Blended Learning*

As the world has shifted towards blended learning, the educational landscape had been forever transformed (Singh et al., 2021). But with this transformation came a new challenge - navigating the emotional ups and downs that come with this blended approach to education. From the excitement of new technology to the stress of managing a new schedule, learners and educators alike were strapped in for an emotional rollercoaster ride (Mukhtar, 2021 and World Economic Forum, 2021).

4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: *The Unexpected Move*

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a significant shift in the education sector, resulting in an unexpected move to online learning (World Economic Forum, 2021). Schools and universities around the world had to adapt to this new normal and embrace the challenges that came with it. This sudden transition to online learning not only

affected educators but also learners and parents (Maatuk et al., 2021; The World Economic Forum, 2021 and Vinikas, 2021). In this context, it is crucial to understand how this unexpected move to online learning impacted the various stakeholders involved in the education process.

When writing about the *unexpected move to online learning*, this is what the learners' responses were the following:

Ugu *"It was very difficult to learn online because we were unable to form groups"*. She also mentioned that she was *"feeling nervous about the learning experience."*

Jean stated: *"I found learning boring"*. He added by further writing: *"I was confused by the various applications and technologies used in blended learning due to a lack of prior experience with them."*

Jane stated: *"At times, online learning was fun but also boring. I had to learn to like it though because I didn't know how long we had to be online for. Google became my best friend as I had to research how to use these tools my school wanted us to use."*

On the other hand, Tayla and Alex mentioned feeling stressed and anxious. While Peter expressed: *"I disliked the inability to physically be with my friends and the feeling of embracing them"*. Peter also stated: *"I felt lonely, and I questioned myself whether online learning was suitable for young learners like me."*

Keeping with this, Emma wrote: *"My school tried to show us new applications to use while we had to do online learning but it was all explained too fast and I didn't understand it and neither did my parents, so at first I felt stuck."*

Violet shared her thoughts by saying: *"Just before we went into lockdowns and had to learn online, I had just moved to this school and so I had no friends. Learning online made this even worse because nobody even knew who I was, and I didn't have any chance to make new friends. This was very lonely, and I hated this."*

David added to this by stating the following: *“I hated learning in person because we could not go near our friends or share our snacks. Online I did not really learn anything, and the connection was horrible.”* He also said *“My mum and her side of the family all got COVID in 2020 so I stayed with my dad. And with load shedding it was so much harder to learn. I also found it hard to social distance from my friends.”*

Additionally, Vanessa felt a mix of excitement and anxiety. Vanessa stated: *“Well, it mostly just caused me stress but academically it also did not help due to the syllabus changing to online and us falling behind with a lot of work.”*

Mary stated: *“Even though I enjoyed learning from home in my pyjamas, I just wanted to hug my friends and be close to them again, I didn’t want to be away from them because that wasn’t fun. Learning online was also hard at first because I wasn’t used to it but then quickly learned how to do it and then it was okay.”*

Tayla felt a range of emotions, including nervousness, happiness, excitement, and anxiety. She wrote: *“I felt really nervous and anxious, yet happy and excited”*. She also added *“Learning online made me feel really upset because I did not get to see my teacher, friends and classmates in person anymore.”* Peter added to this by saying: *“The worst part of blended learning was when I was doing online learning and my friends were doing in person learning. I struggle with adjusting to doing both learning ways.”*

Additionally, Larry wrote: *“At first blended learning was weird but I learnt to like it because that was the new normal that we had to get used to.”* This was also echoed by Jane who wrote: *“My friends and I still made ways to speak and stay connected while we had to do online school – that was the best way to get through it all and actually enjoy learning because without them, school is very boring.”*

Finally, Doreen, Lindi, and Peter shared feelings of happiness upon returning to school. These learners also found it distracting to wear masks while attending in-person classes. Alex stated: *“The challenges that I faced during in person learning was having to wear masks and not seeing the expressions of people. We also had to social distance and limit our group work which I did not like.”* Lindi also stated *“A challenge with in-person learning was masks. It was very distracting and hard to focus with.”*

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, the learners also faced issues with their internet connection during class time and expressed their dislike for wearing masks. Specifically, Alex, Tayla, Doreen, Lindi, Peter, Jane, Mary and David shared their struggles with network issues caused by load shedding and other connectivity problems. Lindi specifically mentioned *“The worst part of online learning was the issues with the Wi-Fi. It was very annoying”*. Adding to this, Alex also said *“One of the challenges that I face during online learning was having network issues.”* Similarly, Peter stated *“One of the challenges I experienced while learning online was Wi-Fi issues - when I was stuck on a question, I could not easily access my teacher for help because of this.”*

David also mentioned the difficulties of practicing social distancing in person. He said, *“I found it hard to social distance from my friends”*. This was also echoed by Lindi when she said: *“The worst part about in person learning during lockdowns was wearing masks and not being able to hug my friends.”* Similarly, Tayla also said: *“I felt sad because although I got to see and talk to my friends it wasn’t the same because we always had to stay 5 feet apart and could not hug.”*

Vanessa expressed her frustration with working on iPads: *“Sometimes when we have work to submit and you tried to upload it, it wouldn’t go through. And working at school we still have to work on our iPads due to not getting hardcopies because of COVID. So, if your iPad died you missed out on work”*. Andy added by saying: *“Using an iPad to do everything was so weird and not normal. Sometimes my iPad would freeze during the meetings, and I would then get kicked out and miss out on what was said.”*

Jean found it challenging to navigate applications on the iPad, he wrote: *“Some of the challenges I faced was not knowing how to use the apps such as PowerPoint and Microsoft Word”*.

Lastly, Ugu admitted to struggling with motivation during this period: *“I did not have motivation at all to do my schoolwork – I experienced challenges of being lazy as well as miscommunication challenges”*. Mary also said: *“It was challenging to have to hold*

myself accountable to finishing work because I did not have my teacher there to check that I was doing work like usual. I had to learn to motivate myself to get it done.”

This too was echoed by Maatuk et al. (2021), The World Economic Forum (2021), and Vinikas (2021). The authors state that challenges that make successful online learning difficult include a lack of technical resources, inadequate content production by teachers, and a lack of knowledge about effective technology use. Additionally, another limitation of online learning is the requirement for self-discipline. Some learners may lack this quality, leading to difficulty in focusing on the screen for an entire school day and becoming distracted by social networking sites, as stated by Gautam (2020) and Vinikas (2021). Moreover, Mukhtar et al. (2020) found that some learners paid less attention in online classes because certain teachers provided slides of the material covered instead of discussing it verbally, resulting in important information being missed.

4.3.2.2. Sub-theme 2.2: Rewards and Joys

As the world grappled with the challenges of remote learning, one method stood out as a beacon of hope: blended learning (WHO, 2021). This innovative approach combined the best of both worlds, providing learners with the benefits of both online and in-person instruction. From increased flexibility and convenience to a more personalised learning experience, blended learning offered a wealth of rewards and joys that made a positive impact on learners' academic journeys (Gautam, 2020; Maatuk et al., 2021; Muxtorjonovna, 2020 and Vinikas, 2021). This theme was also important to note as even though the participants in this study experienced challenges, they also found rays of hope.

When asked about their positive experiences with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the participants had a lot to say. While some praised the opportunity to learn in new ways and connect with their peers in an online-sense, others found comfort in the casual attire, the ability to eat during lessons and also wake up later when these lessons were held online.

Lindi spoke about the challenges of balancing both online and in-person learning, and how it taught her patience. She wrote: *“These challenges might have made my patience levels go down, but they did teach me to focus when I should, or else I would be left behind.”* She also said: *“The best part of on learning was waking up really late and wearing casual clothes. I also learned to manage my stress better by planning my day and making sure I stuck to a schedule”*.

Alex spoke about the new skills that he acquired during this time. He said: *“I had to be independent and the new skills such as time management and scheduling. This assisted with me which cause me to feel at ease and not feel stressed.”*

Ugu found the freedom of blended learning to be a blessing. She added by saying: *“The best part about online learning was more freedom and staying in my PJ’s”*. Emma also found joy in this situation by stating: *“Online learning allowed me to spend more time with my parents at home and I was able to learn new skills like being in control of my own learning and learning how to make a proper study schedule. It was hard at first but it was what had to be done and it helped me to feel relaxed and not anxious.”*

Doreen added to this by saying: *“The best part about learning online was that I was able to stay in my PJ’s and when we were not online, I was able to see my friends again even if it was through social distancing. But even online we learnt new ways to stay in touch and so my friends didn’t end up feeling too far away from me – this helped me to feel relaxed as I knew I had my friends right there again.”*

To add to the above, David stated: *“I think that when it came to school in person, I really liked masks – white ones, colourful ones and ones with decorations. While learning online wearing comfy clothes and eating food during class time with something I enjoyed.”* This was also the case with Andy who said: *“The best part about online learning was always being able to snack while I worked. It was scary and stressful at first but we had to make the most of this weird situation.”*

When trying to find the joys of blended learning, Vanessa stated the following: *“In my opinion the best time during online school was that I was in the comfort of my own home. I also loved in-person school because we could finally get out of the house and see your*

friends.” Violet shared similar thoughts by saying: “I could not wait to get back to normal in-person school because it meant I could make friends properly! People did message me online to be my friend after some time, so it was nice to then meet them in person. This made me feel less stressed as I did not feel alone.”

And finally, Peter had this to say: *“The best part of blended learning was to be able to stay in my room and eat during lesson time. It was also so much fun to do blended learning because I got the best of both worlds. I also learned how to better manage my studying better and stuck to a schedule that I made so I did not feel as stressed as my friends did.”*

4.3.3 Theme 3: Thriving against all Odds

The COVID-19 pandemic had presented an unprecedented challenge to the education sector, with lockdowns and social distancing measures forcing schools and learners to adapt to a new reality of blended learning (The World Economic Forum, 2021). Despite the challenges, many learners had shown incredible resilience and determination to succeed in their academic pursuits. These responses explore the inspiring responses of learners who have thrived against all odds during the COVID-19 lockdowns and blended learning, showcasing their achievements and highlighting the importance of perseverance and adaptability in times of crisis. These responses were found to be in line with Dr Emmy Werners Theory of Resilience (1955), as cited by Shean (2015) and Van Breda (2021), which will be unpacked later in this section.

4.3.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: Help Through Others

With the sudden shift to blended learning, many learners found themselves struggling to adapt to this new way of education, and as a result, they turned to others for help and support (Brooks et al., 2020). When it came to seeking help, the learners utilised a variety of resources. Below were some of the responses when the learners were asked the following question: *When you were stuck on something while learning at home, how did you get help with it?*

Vanessa wrote: *"I turned to my brother, teacher, and Google for assistance"*. Doreen wrote that *"I sought help from my tutor as well as my mother"*.

Lindi wrote: *"I relied on my mother"*.

Emma wrote: *"My parents helped me and we worked together to figure it all out."*

Jean wrote: *"I reached out to my teacher and friends for support"*.

David wrote: *"I sometimes either left out the task or asked my grandmother for help"*.

Alex, on the other hand, wrote *"I sought help from both of my parents and my teacher"*.

Tayla had a tendency to panic when stuck but wrote that: *"I would ultimately ask my friends or my teacher for help"*.

Peter wrote: *"I asked my mother and my teacher for assistance"*.

Violet wrote: *"At first I had nobody, but eventually I learned to make friends online and they stuck by my side and helped me when I was stuck. Even my teachers were kind!"*

Finally, Ugu wrote: *"I sought help from both my teacher and my friends"*.

Learners were also further asked to sum up their blended learning experience using 3 words, and these were some of the responses:

Alex: *Communicate, independent, adapt*

Ugu: *Challenging, nice, convenient*

Peter: *Unexpected, exciting and memorable*

Jean: *Amazing, wonderful, energetic*

Violet: *Interesting, learning skills, communication*

And finally, Tayla had this to say: *"The best part about online learning and in person learning is the fact that my class had become a family and throughout everything, we were all there for each other."*

The aforementioned responses showcase the remarkable resilience and determination of these learners who were able to overcome various challenges and uncertainties posed by the new way of learning. Despite facing educational obstacles, these learners refused to be deterred and demonstrated an unwavering commitment to their education. Their ability to adapt and persevere in the face of adversity serves as a testament to their strength and tenacity.

This resonated with Emmy Werner's study of Resilience (1955) which underpins this study on the psycho-social challenges that Intermediate Phase learners faced with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. In 1955, Dr. Werner conducted a study on the island of Kauai, in the United States, to explore the resilience of learners in the face of adversity (Shean, 2015 and Van Breda, 2021). According to her theory, resilience is a person's ability to cope with both internal and external pressures. The study followed women and their pregnancies, and then tracked the development of their children until adulthood, with the aim of determining whether adversity could be used as a tool to develop resilience. Studies by Shean (2015) and Van Breda (2021) have also shown that not all children suffered the consequences of traumatic events. Werner's Resilience Theory (1955) emphasises the importance of human response to adversity and suggests that resilience enables us to recover, endure, heal, and even thrive in the face of difficulty, tragedy, or frustration.

As mentioned earlier, Werner's Resilience Theory (1955) can be applied to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to blended learning, where traditional face-to-face teaching had been supplemented with online learning (Emmanuel, 2020). Both educators and learners had to quickly adapt to a variety of changes in education, including school closures, remote learning, and teaching while following social distancing protocols, making a connection between Werner's Theory and the current situation apparent (Naidu, 2021). The participants' responses in this study about the psycho-social challenges of blended learning illustrated similar findings as Dr. Werner's study in terms of resilience as they found ways to continue with their learning, despite being faced with many obstacles present to them and this new way of learning.

5. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research findings in relation to data that were elicited from the participants. The overall responses from the participants about their experiences with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns demonstrate the incredible resilience and determination they exhibited to continue their education despite the unprecedented challenges they faced. Despite facing various challenges such as unreliable internet, power outages, feelings of anxiety and depression, and technical difficulties, these learners managed to overcome these obstacles and succeed in difficult circumstances. They showed resourcefulness by seeking support from teachers, tutors, family members, and online resources like Google. They also developed new learning skills and strategies, such as utilising different online tools and finding innovative ways to connect with peers while adhering to COVID-19 safety measures.

These accounts demonstrate that the learners didn't let the sudden shift to blended learning deter them. Instead, they remained determined to make the best of the situation and find positivity in what could have been perceived as negative. Their strength and perseverance were truly remarkable, serving as a testament to the indomitable human spirit and our capacity to flourish even when faced with challenges. The determination and resilience exhibited by these learners were truly inspiring and reminded us that we can overcome adversity, adapt, and accomplish great things.

The next chapter marks the culmination of this study. The final chapter presents a discussion of the findings and recommendations for this study.

Chapter 5

Summary of the Study, Recommendations and Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter began with a description of the selected research site and a demographic profile of the research participants. It was followed by a summary of the participants' responses, from which themes were derived based on each of the data generation methods. Subsequently, an analysis of the data generated was presented. The participants' names were not disclosed; hence pseudonyms were used. The use of pseudonyms safeguarded their identities, allowing them to communicate freely and without any hesitation. Chapter four of this study also aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research findings, focusing on the research topic: "Exploring the Psycho-social Challenges Faced by Intermediate Phase Learners in Engaging in Blended Learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns."

The key research questions that guided the study were also considered in this chapter, which gave rise to the following broad themes: a) Understanding Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns; b) The emotional rollercoaster of blended learning; and c) Thriving against all odds. Furthermore, the findings derived from the data generated through the use of reflective diaries were presented and interconnected with Dr. Emmy Werner's Resilience Theory (1955), as well as other relevant literature identified in the process of reviewing relevant and recent global and local literature.

This current chapter now represents the culmination of the study, providing a summary of the research along with the presentation of recommendations and conclusions that I made after conducting this study over a period of two years (2022-2023).

5.2 Summary of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to explore the psycho-social challenges that were experienced by the Intermediate Phase learners in engaging with blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. As such, this study comprised five distinct chapters, each serving a specific purpose. The purposes of each chapter were as follows:

Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

In this chapter, the study was introduced and explored further by examining its background and purpose. Additionally, the chapter outlined how the study was conducted in alignment with the chosen research objectives, questions, and the justification behind this study. The chapter conclusion by presenting a snapshot of the research methodology and conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter explored blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns, focusing on Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social experiences during this education turbulence. Various sources from national and international scholarly sources were utilised to substantiate arguments made in this study. The chapter included the presentation of a theoretical framework that underpinned this research study. Hence, Dr. Emmy Werner's Resilience theory (1955) and its theoretical constructs, including its relevance to this study, were presented.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter began by explaining the research paradigm. More specifically, it was identified that this research fell under the genre of case studies, under the interpretative paradigm. The interpretative technique enabled a subjective comprehension of participants' viewpoints within the framework of the investigation. Furthermore, this paradigm, together with the chosen genre tries to discover

characteristics and relationships that contribute to the present behaviour or position of the subject being investigated.

This chapter then also provided a description of the methods employed to generate and analyse the data. It explained the use of methods such as focus groups and reflective diaries. This study also made use of qualitative research methods, which differed from quantitative studies in that they focused on individual experiences and allowed participants to openly express their views and feelings about this study.

And finally, participant sampling and research location choice was also unpacked in this chapter. To choose participants and the research location, respectively, purposeful and convenient sampling approaches were used in a way that allowed data gathering and convenience. Additionally, the chapter elaborated on the qualitative thematic analysis approach utilised.

Chapter 4: Data Presentation and Analysis

Drawing from the qualitative data generated, this chapter delved into a detailed discussion of the study's findings. It specifically focused on the responses from the learners' reflective diaries based on questions posed around the psycho-social challenges that were experienced by the learners during the COVID-19 era. It was also noted that thematic analysis was used here in order to make sense of the data that was generated for this study. The actual data generated from the participants was then presented in themes for ease of data coding and comprehension.

Chapter 5: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Marking the culmination of the study, this chapter presents a summary of this research. It also offers recommendations for enhancing blended learning within the Intermediate Phase, in other related education crisis in the future. Furthermore, this chapter provided final remarks and draws a conclusion based on the examined and analysed data.

5.3 The Study's Findings

Within these chapters mentioned above in Section 5.2, this research study was guided by the following three (3) key research questions:

1. What were the Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns?
2. How did the Intermediate Phase learners experience the psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns?
3. Why did the Intermediate Phase learners experience psycho-social challenges of blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns the way they did?

With the key research questions at the forefront, this research study drew parallels to Dr. Emmy Werner's Resilience study (1955) as learners in this research also displayed resilience in pursuing their education amidst the disruptive effects of the pandemic, which impeded social interactions in school, as well as in their societies. Data generation took place through focus groups and reflective diaries at a local Quintile 5 primary school in Durban, South Africa, referred to as Harvey Primary School for anonymity purposes. Initially, 20 participants from grades 4 to 7 were selected, but only 9 willingly consented to participate in the study. Thematic analysis was then employed to analyse the data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the participants' responses and enabling the grouping of these responses into various themes and sub-themes. Subsequently, the challenges experienced by the learners became evident through the identification of these themes and sub-themes. These challenges that were experienced by the learners in this study will be presented as summarised findings below:

5.3.1 Understanding Intermediate Phase learners' Psycho-social Challenges of engaging in Blended Learning during the COVID-19 Lockdowns

Suffering from a lack of concentration

Regarding the first identified theme, data revealed that the learners in this study experienced feelings of unhappiness, stress, being scared, anxiety, and even

emotional disconnection from their peers when engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Findings suggested that many learners expressed a sense of boredom and lack of enjoyment when learning online in groups. While a few mentioned experiencing some happiness due to the newfound freedom of online schooling, their primary concern was the inability to be physically present with their friends, which deeply upset these learners. Additionally, many felt confused with the process of having to suddenly learn online and they were concerned that upon returning to traditional ways of learning (face-to-face), that they would struggle.

The findings suggest that the aforementioned excerpts underscored the significance of human interaction and the impact felt by learners who missed the physical presence of teachers and peers while transitioning to online learning during periods of high COVID-19 cases. Reference was made to the works of Maatuk et al., (2021) and Vinikas (2021), who further emphasised that online learning suffered from a lack of personal connections, which both teachers and learners may have anticipated and preferred even amidst a pandemic. This observation can be attributed to the prevalence of traditional classroom-based instruction prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it had been the widely accepted approach to education, rendering learners and teachers more accustomed to this mode of learning and communication (Vinikas, 2021). These emotions were also acknowledged by UNICEF (2021), who recognised that the absence of social interaction and the uncertainties associated with blended learning contributed to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among learners. The findings revealed that these challenges emerged as learners struggled to cope with the academic demands imposed upon them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.3.2 Theme 2: The Emotional Rollercoaster of Blended Learning.

The opportunity for a more personalised learning experience

In relation to the second identified theme, the findings suggested that numerous learners experienced nervousness when transitioning to online learning, often expressing confusion due to the use of various unfamiliar applications. They disliked the fact that they couldn't be physically close to their friends, resulting in feelings of

loneliness. A recurring concern among these learners was their inability to be with their friends. Additionally, the prevalent issue revolved around the technology used for online learning and their lack of proficiency with it. Even when these learners returned to in-person learning, they still expressed discontent as they were socially distanced from their friends. Moreover, the data revealed that the continued reliance on technology during in-person classes perpetuated these issues, leading to significant levels of stress and anxiety among the learners. Additionally, learners also mentioned feeling unmotivated to do their schoolwork as they felt lazy.

This sentiment was echoed by Maatuk et al. (2021), The World Economic Forum (2021) and Vinikas (2021). These authors highlighted various challenges that hindered successful online learning, including a lack of technical resources, insufficient content production by teachers, and limited knowledge about effective technology usage. The findings suggested that another limitation identified in online learning is the need for self-discipline. Some learners may struggle in maintaining focus on the screen for extended periods, becoming easily distracted by social networking sites, as emphasised by Gautam (2020) and Vinikas (2021). Additionally, Mukhtar et al. (2020) discovered that certain learners paid less attention during online classes when teachers relied solely on slides instead of engaging in verbal discussions, resulting in the omission of important information. And finally, the issues experienced by the learners due to a lack of social engagement through play, connection, and correct physical touch was also echoed in a study by Silbert and Mzozoyana (2021). This was seen to have a poor influence on school-age children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development during the COVID-19 timeframe (Silbert and Mzozoyana, 2021).

On the other hand, blended learning, despite its challenges, provided numerous benefits and positive experiences that had a significant impact on learners' academic journeys. Increased flexibility and convenience, along with the opportunity for a more personalised learning experience, were cited as rewards and sources of joy by Gautam (2020), Maatuk et al. (2021), Muxtorjonovna (2020) and Vinikas (2021). With the above in mind, and in contrast to the aforementioned challenges, the learners in this study also highlighted positive aspects of blended learning. Some learners acknowledged that they developed patience and improved their time management

skills through this process. They also mentioned the need to become independent workers to stay on top of their work. The findings suggested that many expressed simple joys, such as the ability to sleep in later and attend online school in their pajamas. Some even stated that they felt they had the best of both worlds, enjoying the benefits of both online and in-person learning.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Thriving Against all Odds.

The swift adaptation to various changes in education

The third identified theme aligns with Dr. Emmy Werner's Theory of Resilience (1955). The findings suggested that Werner's Theory of Resilience (1955) can be applied to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to blended learning, where traditional face-to-face teaching was supplemented with online learning (Emmanuel, 2020). Data also revealed that both educators and learners were required to swiftly adapt to various changes in education, including school closures, remote learning, and teaching while adhering to social distancing measures. This connection between Werner's theory and the current situation becomes evident (Naidu, 2021). Data revealed that the participants' responses in this study regarding the psycho-social challenges of blended learning showcased similar findings to Dr. Werner's study in terms of resilience, as learners found ways to persevere with their learning despite encountering numerous obstacles associated with this new mode of education.

Findings suggested that the application of Werner's Resilience Theory (1955) was evident in the learners' responses, as many mentioned that they were able to continue their learning by conducting research or seeking assistance from those around them. When asked to summarise their blended learning experiences in three words, findings suggested that the learners' use of terms such as amazing, wonderful, challenging, independent, and adaptable were a true reflection of their psycho-social experiences with the blended learning during the COVID-19 period. One learner even mentioned that their class felt more like a family after going through this together. The findings suggest that these responses highlight the resilience displayed by the learners as they navigated the challenges and embraced the opportunities presented by blended learning.

5.4 Implications of Findings

The aforementioned findings can be connected to the key research questions that were identified at the outset of this study. The implications of each research question is discussed in the below to shed light on the significance and impact of this study's findings.

5.4.1 Implications of Research Question 1

The first research question was: *What psycho-social challenges did the Intermediate Phase learners face while participating in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns?*

Analysis of the data presented in Chapter 4 reveals that learners faced several significant psycho-social challenges while engaging in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The participants' responses consistently highlighted feelings of anxiety, stress, confusion, and fear resulting from the sudden shift to remote learning. Additionally, all of the learners in this study expressed a sense of emotional disconnection from their peers, which, when combined with the stress of technological challenges, emerged as a central concern for them. The inability to be physically present with friends and engage in social interactions as they were accustomed to was particularly disliked by the learners. These responses highlighted the various psycho-social challenges that were experienced by these learners.

5.4.2 Implications of Research Question 2

The second research question was: *How did Intermediate Phase learners experience psycho-social challenges during blended learning amid the COVID-19 lockdowns?*

Based on the generated data, the research findings indicate that the identified psycho-social challenges can be attributed to two primary reasons: a) technology issues, and b) lack of social interaction with peers and friends. The sudden shift to blended learning initially led to confusion and distress among the learners, as evident from their

responses. They expressed feelings of confusion, anxiety, and discontent with the inability to be physically close to their friends. These challenges highlight the impact of technology-related difficulties and the absence of traditional social interactions on the learners' well-being and overall experience during blended learning.

5.4.3 Implications of Research Question 3

The third research question was: *Why did Intermediate Phase learners face specific psycho-social challenges during blended learning in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns?*

The data generated from the participants strongly indicated that the psycho-social challenges experienced by these learners were primarily due to a lack of preparation and their accustomed reliance on in-person interactions with peers and teachers. The sudden transition to online learning caught them off guard, resulting in feelings of unhappiness, stress, and anxiety. Many learners also expressed a lack of motivation to complete tasks, as they did not feel adequately stimulated by the initial inclusion of online learning. These challenges can be attributed to the absence of human touch, which both learners and individuals in general had previously relied upon for emotional and physical support. The shift to online platforms also further limited the immediacy and effectiveness of seeking assistance, thereby exacerbating the feelings of isolation and disconnection experienced by the learners.

5.5 Recommendations based on the Research Questions

After analysing the responses to the three key research questions from the learners in this study, the following recommendations can be made:

Firstly, implementing an online protocol in schools to prepare for future crises is highly recommended. Regular practice of this protocol among staff and learners is essential to ensure that everyone is familiar with the process of transitioning to online learning swiftly and effectively when needed. Computer lessons at school can serve as an opportunity to highlight and reinforce this protocol. Learners can engage with online

platforms in a controlled environment, accessing tasks and seeking assistance as needed. This provides an avenue for learners to ask questions, become acquainted with the platforms, and develop the necessary skills for independent learning during a crisis. By proactively establishing and practicing this online protocol, schools can help alleviate the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty associated with the online learning component of blended learning. And secondly, to further enhance the connectedness and support for learners during online learning, schools can implement various online support structures. These initiatives aim to maintain a sense of connection and provide assistance, even when learners are not physically present in the classroom.

One important aspect is to establish mental health support mechanisms between staff and learners. This can involve designated staff members who are available for virtual counselling sessions, check-ins, or virtual support groups. By prioritising mental health and providing a platform for learners to express their concerns, schools can help alleviate stress and anxiety and promote overall well-being.

Additionally, implementing a buddy system can foster peer connections and support. Learners can be grouped and assigned online buddies, whom they can connect with regularly in a controlled and monitored online space provided by the school. This buddy system allows learners to interact, share experiences, and offer support to each other, thus mitigating feelings of isolation and loneliness.

It is crucial for schools to establish clear guidelines and protocols to ensure the safety and effectiveness of these online support structures. Regular monitoring and supervision by school staff can help maintain a positive and secure online environment for learners.

By implementing these online support structures, schools can enhance the sense of connectedness and provide necessary support to learners during online learning. This fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment, even in times of crisis or remote learning, promoting the well-being and academic success of all learners.

The following research studies can be considered in future:

- i. Investigating the enduring psycho-social impacts of blended learning on Intermediate Phase learners in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ii. Examining the psycho-social ramifications of blended learning during the COVID-19 era from the perspective of educators.
- iii. A comparative analysis of the transition from online to in-person learning: assessing the psycho-social effects on learners and educators post COVID-19 era.

5.6 Recommendations for future research

Due to time constraints and limited participation from learners across various backgrounds and schools, it is recommended that future research be conducted on a nationwide scale. This should be done in order to gain a broader understanding of the psycho-social challenges experienced by learners during the COVID-19 lockdowns in South Africa as a whole, as opposed to only looking into one school in Durban. Given that South Africa is a developing country, such research would be crucial for preparedness in the event of future lockdowns or crises, in order to ensure that learners' academics are not affected, wherever possible, by events happening around them.

Furthermore, it is important to include a diverse range of schools in future research, including those from middle-class and lower-class backgrounds. This will provide valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by learners in different socioeconomic contexts and help inform strategies to improve resilience and support systems for all learners in future crises.

5.7 Limitations to the Study

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which were discussed in detail in Chapter 3. These limitations are summarised below:

5.7.1. Representativity: The study involved only one school in Durban, South Africa, which limits the generalisability of the findings to the national population. Although efforts were made to include learners from diverse backgrounds, it was not possible to capture the experiences of all learners who underwent blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the financial condition of the learners could not be addressed due to privacy concerns.

5.7.2. Sample Size: The study included 15 learners who consented to be part of this study and who also returned their reflective diaries. This limited sample may not fully reflect the experiences of all learners with blended learning. A larger-scale study would be necessary to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of South African learners' experiences during COVID-19 lockdowns.

5.7.3. Generalisability of Findings: Each school has unique characteristics, making it challenging to find a single case that is representative of others. Therefore, the findings may not be applicable to all schools, particularly those in rural areas. To overcome this limitation, future research should include a larger sample of schools, including those that faced challenges during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

5.7.4. Subjectivity or Observer Bias: The researcher's preconceived notions and expectations could influence the interpretation of data. To mitigate this, a neutral and non-partisan stance was maintained, and open-ended questions were used to allow learners to share their experiences without undue influence.

5.7.5. Lack of Triangulation: While focus groups and reflective diaries were planned to elicit rich data, time constraints limited the implementation of these methods. Triangulation of data from different perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of learner experiences.

5.7.6. Use of Newspaper Articles: The inclusion of newspaper articles, which are not based on empirical studies, was necessary to supplement the limited research available on blended learning during the COVID-19 era. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting these sources compared to academic research studies.

5.7.7. Parental or Guardian Influence: Participants had the opportunity to complete their reflective diaries at home, which could potentially be influenced by interested parents or guardians. Although efforts were made to minimise external influence, it was not possible to directly observe the participants during this time. Employing alternative data generation methods based on triangulation could address this limitation.

5.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study delved into the experiences of learners during the shift to blended learning amidst the challenging times of COVID-19 lockdowns. The findings shed light on the various psycho-social challenges that learners faced during this transition. From feelings of anxiety, stress, and confusion to a sense of disconnection from their peers, it became evident that learners grappled with significant obstacles.

One key factor contributing to these challenges was the technological issues learners encountered. The unfamiliarity with different applications and the lack of practice caused frustration and hindered their learning experience. Additionally, the absence of face-to-face interactions with friends and classmates added to their feelings of isolation and loneliness. These social connections, which learners had relied upon for emotional support, were sorely missed.

Despite the difficulties, blended learning did bring some benefits, such as flexibility and personalised learning opportunities. Learners also developed important skills like patience and time management, along with becoming more independent in their learning journey. It was not all negative, with some learners finding joy in the small things, like the ability to sleep in and attend online classes in their pyjamas. They saw it as a unique blend of the best of both worlds.

It is crucial for schools to proactively prepare for future crises by establishing well-designed online protocols and regularly practicing them with staff and learners. This will ensure a smoother transition to online learning if the need arises again. Furthermore, implementing online support structures, including mental health support

and buddy systems, can help foster a sense of connection and alleviate some of the challenges learners face.

While this study provides useful information, it is important to recognise its limitations. The reality that just one school in Durban, South Africa, participated may restrict the generalisability of our findings to a larger community. Future research should aim for a more diverse sample, including schools from different backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, to capture a more comprehensive picture of learners' experiences in blended learning.

However, despite these limitations, this study significantly contributes to our understanding of the psycho-social challenges associated with blended learning during times of crisis. The research findings have important implications for educational policymakers, schools, and educators. Armed with this knowledge, they can develop targeted strategies and support systems to address the unique needs of learners in blended learning environments. By aggressively addressing these difficulties, we have the opportunity to create a more inclusive and resilient education system that effectively responds to learners' individual requirements. This will better prepare learners to navigate and thrive in the face of future challenges.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of addressing the psycho-social challenges faced by learners in blended learning environments. Through the recognition and mitigation of these obstacles, we can work towards building an inclusive and resilient education system that supports learners during times of crisis. By implementing effective strategies and support systems, learners will be equipped to adapt, thrive, and successfully overcome future disruptions in their educational journey.

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APPENDIX A – DBE LETTER OF APPROVAL



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1063

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Phindile Duma

Ref.:2/4/8/4109

Miss A Gilmore

[REDACTED]

DURBAN

4000

Dear Miss Gilmore

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **“EXPLORING INTERMEDIATE PHASE LEARNERS’ PSYCHO-SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF ENGAGING IN BLENDED LEARNING DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS”**, 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 August 2022 to 01 August 2025.
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 Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
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 Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

PINETOWN DISTRICT

[REDACTED]

Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 04 August 2022

**APPENDIX B –
LETTER TO THE PRINCIPAL AND TEACHERS AT RESEARCH SITE**

Durban
4001

20 April 2022

Dear Principal of school and members of the Pastoral Care Team

My name is **Alecia Gilmore** (220057472), and I am a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in the School of Education at Edgewood Campus. This is my official request for the Intermediate Phase learners of your school to please be a participant in my research.

The research topic of my study is:

Exploring Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in Blended Learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns.

The intention is to explore the experiences that Intermediate Phase Learners had of Blended learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns and what affects this may have had on their academics and mental health. The study involves engaging in focus groups and reflective diaries where relevant questions will be asked to the participants in order to find out their experiences around blended learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

The research questions that I aim to respond to are:

a) What psycho-social challenges did the Intermediate Phase learners face while participating in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

b) How did Intermediate Phase learners experience psycho-social challenges during blended learning amid the COVID-19 lockdowns?

c) Why did Intermediate Phase learners face specific psycho-social challenges during blended learning in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns?

I am requesting to please perform this research at your school. The participants will be chosen randomly from Grades 4-7. There will be 5 learners chosen per grade. Please take notice of the following features of their engagement as a participant:

- Confidentiality of all the information that you will give is guaranteed as your input will not be attributed to you as an individual, but reported only as a participant member's opinion.
- None of the information that you will share will be used against you in any way and the generated data will be used for academic purposes only.
- Your participation will not cost you financially.
- Your participation is voluntary, and as such, is not for remuneration.
- The focus group may last for about 15-20 minutes and class observation will follow according to your class timetable.
- Data generated will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- If at any point you are uncomfortable in the participation process, you have a right to withdraw from participating in this research project. You will not be penalised for taking such action.
- If the learner becomes uncomfortable or requires additional support, I will refer them to the school's pastoral care team for further assistance.

Kind regards,

Alecia Gilmore.

My contact details are as follows:

Email Address: 220057472@stu.ukzn.ac.za

You may also contact my supervisor:

Supervisor's Name: Dr. Jabulile Mzimela Phone Number : 031 260 3807

Email Address : Mzimelaj@ukzn.ac.za

You may also contact the Research Office through:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Tel: 27 31 2604557-

Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

**APPENDIX C –
LETTER TO THE PARENTS OF PARTICIPANTS**

Durban
4001

28 July 2022

Dear Parents/Guardian

My name is **Alecia Gilmore** (220057472), and I am a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in the School of Education at Edgewood Campus. I am currently a Locum teacher at Crawford La Lucia and many of the learners know me through this. This is my official request for your child to please participate in my research.

The research topic of my study is:

Exploring Intermediate Phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in Blended Learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns.

The intention is to explore the experiences that Intermediate Phase Learners had of Blended learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns and what affects this may have had on their academics and mental health. The study involves engaging in focus groups and reflective diaries where relevant questions will be asked to the participants in order to find out their experiences around blended learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns.

The research questions that I aim to respond to are:

a) What psycho-social challenges did the Intermediate Phase learners face while participating in blended learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns?

b) How did Intermediate Phase learners experience psycho-social challenges during blended learning amid the COVID-19 lockdowns?

c) Why did Intermediate Phase learners face specific psycho-social challenges during blended learning in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns?

Please take notice of the following features of their engagement as a participant:

- Confidentiality of all the information that you will give is guaranteed as your input will not be attributed to you as an individual, but reported only as a participant member's opinion.
- None of the information that you will share will be used against you in any way and the generated data will be used for academic purposes only.
- Your participation will not cost you financially.
- Your participation is voluntary, and as such, is not for remuneration.
- The focus groups may last for about 15 to 20 minutes and class observation will follow according to your class timetable.
- Data generated will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- If at any point you are uncomfortable in the participation process, you have a right to withdraw from participating in this research project. You will not be penalised for taking such action.
- If the learner becomes uncomfortable or requires additional support, I will refer them to the school's pastoral care team for further assistance.

Kind regards,

Alecia Gilmore.

My contact details are as follows:

Email Address: 220057472@stu.ukzn.ac.za

For further information, you can contact my supervisor:

Supervisor's Name: Dr. Jabulile Mzimela

Phone Number : 031 260 3807

Email Address : Mzimelaj@ukzn.ac.za

You may also contact the Research Office through:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609 Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Please indicate by ticking where applicable.

-----**Please return the slip.**-----

Declaration

I (Full name/s of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project. I give consent/ do not give consent to participating in the project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire

EQUIPMENT	WILLING	NOT WILLING
Audio Recording		
Written Material		

Signature of participant : Date :

**APPENDIX D –
LETTER TO THE LEARNERS (THE PARTICIPANTS)**

Durban
4001

20 April 2022

Dear Prospective participant - Learner,

My name is **Alecia Gilmore** (220057472), and I am a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, in the School of Education at Edgewood Campus. I am kindly asking for your permission to take part in my research study.

The research topic of my study is: **Exploring Intermediate Phase learners’ psycho-social challenges of engaging in Blended Learning during Covid-19 Lockdowns**. The purpose of this study is to better understand how you were affected by blended learning during the Covid- 19 lockdowns. I will be generating information from you by interviewing you and then asking you to complete a reflective journal. I, therefore, seek your permission to take part in this study. I have

also notified your parent/s about my visit to your school whereby I will be engaging with you in a focus group.

Kind regards,

Alecia Gilmore.

My contact details are as follows

Email Address: 220057472@stu.ukzn.ac.za

For further information, you can contact my supervisor: Supervisor's Name : Dr. Jabulile Mzimela

Phone Number : 031 260 3807

Email Address : Mzimelaj@ukzn.ac.za

You may also contact the Research Office through:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Please indicate by ticking where applicable. Please return the slip.

Declaration

Please tick the box to indicate whether you agree or do not agree to be part of classroom observation.

I agree to be part of your study

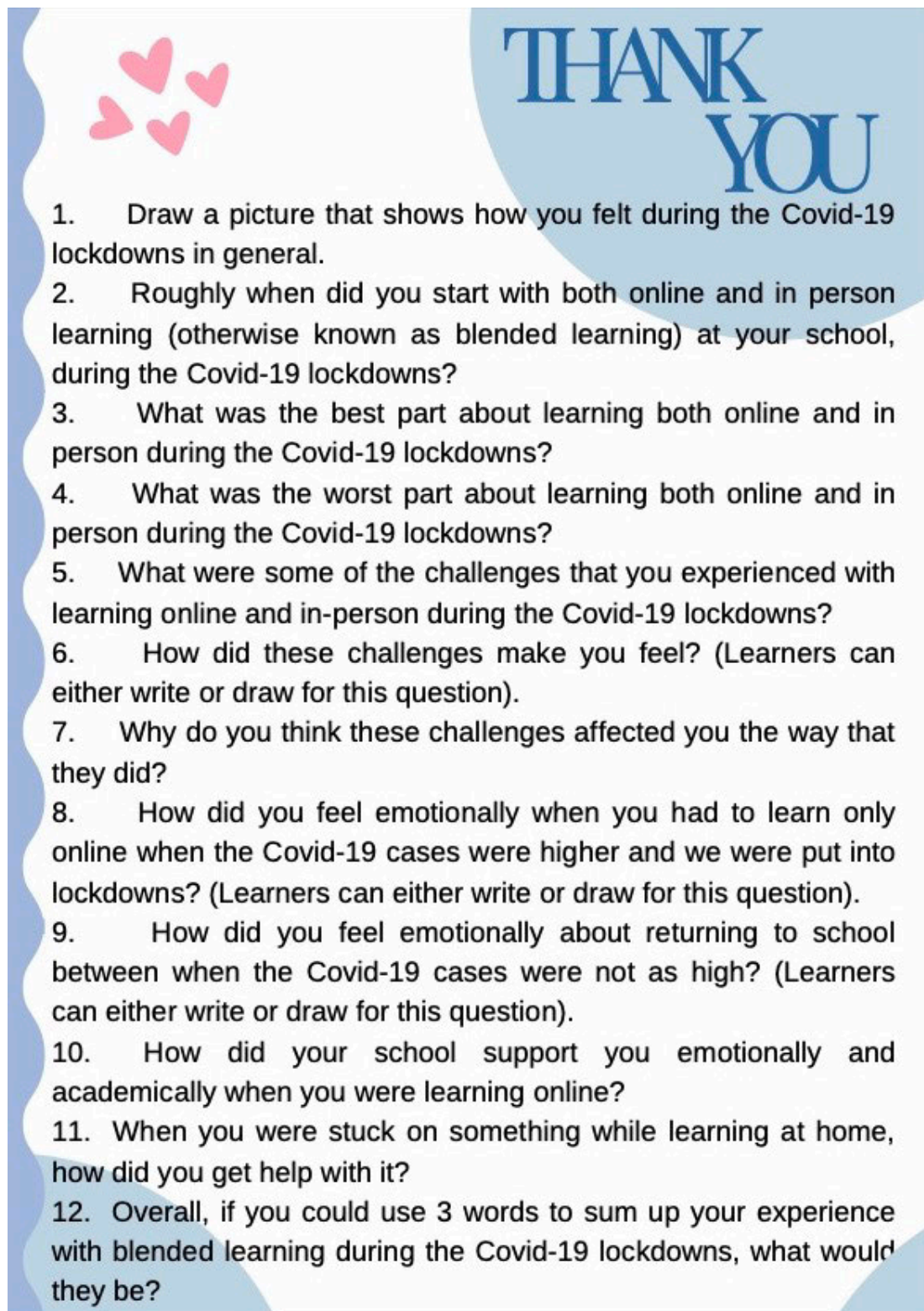
I do not agree to be part of your study

Name of learner:

Date :

APPENDIX E –

DETAILED LIST OF QUESTIONS ASKED TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE REFLECTIVE DIARIES



THANK YOU

1. Draw a picture that shows how you felt during the Covid-19 lockdowns in general.
2. Roughly when did you start with both online and in person learning (otherwise known as blended learning) at your school, during the Covid-19 lockdowns?
3. What was the best part about learning both online and in person during the Covid-19 lockdowns?
4. What was the worst part about learning both online and in person during the Covid-19 lockdowns?
5. What were some of the challenges that you experienced with learning online and in-person during the Covid-19 lockdowns?
6. How did these challenges make you feel? (Learners can either write or draw for this question).
7. Why do you think these challenges affected you the way that they did?
8. How did you feel emotionally when you had to learn only online when the Covid-19 cases were higher and we were put into lockdowns? (Learners can either write or draw for this question).
9. How did you feel emotionally about returning to school between when the Covid-19 cases were not as high? (Learners can either write or draw for this question).
10. How did your school support you emotionally and academically when you were learning online?
11. When you were stuck on something while learning at home, how did you get help with it?
12. Overall, if you could use 3 words to sum up your experience with blended learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns, what would they be?

APPENDIX F –

ETHICAL CLEARANCE



02 November 2022

Alecia Gilmore (220057472)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear A Gilmore,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004793/2022

Project title: Exploring intermediate phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during the coronavirus lockdowns.

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 19 September 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) 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 discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 02 November 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX G – PROOF READING LETTER



**INTERN
PLANNING**

Durban | South Africa

INTERNPLANNING1@GMAIL.COM

8 May 2023

UKZN
School of Education

EXTERNAL MODERATION REPORT

Candidate: A. Gilmore [2200574720]

Thesis Title: "Explore intermediate phase (IP) learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during Covid-19 lockdowns"

Degree: Master of Education Degree – Educational Psychology

Moderators Comments

I hereby present my findings on the dissertation of Mss A. Gilmore, titled: " Explore intermediate phase (IP) learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during Covid-19 lockdowns"

Title/Subject

The title of the study is very topical in the field of education and conveys the focus of the study in a clear manner. The study was conducted at a primary school located in the Umhlanga neighbourhood of Durban, South Africa and examines the intermediate phase learners' psycho-social challenges of engaging in blended learning during Covid-19 Lockdowns.

The research

The candidate provides a brief background at the onset of the chapter followed by a brief description of the study area. A clear problem statement is provided which provides the reader with a good contextual understanding of the aims of the thesis.

There is a clear research aim of the study and the objectives are set out in a clear manner. The limitations of the study are also sufficient.

Research design and methodology

The candidate applied the appropriate research design and method. The aim was to obtain information in order to answer the research questions. Information was assembled through interviews conducted with stakeholders.

In terms of the interviews conducted, the candidate only listed broadly who the stakeholders were. Although the sample size methods was inadequate, this was acknowledged in the thesis.

Data analysis section was well presented.

Literature review

The literature review was adequately addressed.

Technical presentation

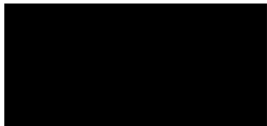
The technical presentation is relatively good with good use made of graphics, and tables.

Contribution to the field of knowledge

The candidate makes a good attempt to contribution, through the literature and research, to the field of knowledge. In the final chapter, the candidate indicated how the research objective was reached. Also recommendation from the research findings is made.

Suggestions and recommendations

It is found that the Thesis meets the requirements, no evidence of plagiarism was found. The thesis was authentic and complies with the rules.



8/05/23

.....
P. Gilmore Pr.Pln, A/1384/2010

NHDip. TRP, MTRP, MComm, MSAPI



APPENDIX H – TURNITIN REPORT

Turnitin Originality Report

Processed on: 10-May-2023 11:34 AM CAT

ID: 2089353110

Word Count: 31758

Submitted: 1

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Exploring Intermediate Phase Learners' Psycho-social Challenges of Engaging in Blended Learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns By Alecia Gilmore

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