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Influence of Psychosocial Factors on Learners' Achievement in Mathematics in Selected Advanced Level Schools in Gwanda North District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Psychosocial influences are important factors in the choices made, targets set, self-perceptions and expectations regarding future opportunities. These factors in the educational environment affect learners' behaviour, motivation and learning. Mathematics provides learners with skills that are important to understand, interpret and transform their environment. It also enhances critical thinking, problem-solving, logical thinking and inductive and deductive reasoning skills. Despite the critical role that mathematics plays in school and society, psychosocial problems affect learners' performance in mathematics, especially at Advanced Level. These challenges include academic pressure, perceived stress, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, conduct-related problems, antisocial behaviour, learning problems and the refusal to seek academic help. The focus of this study was on the psychosocial factors affecting learners' performance in Advanced Level Mathematics. The study used a qualitative design that was inspired by the interpretivist research paradigm, with data being collected using two types of data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis in three schools that teach Advanced Level Mathematics. Attribution Theory was used to understand how the learners attribute their successes and failures to their studies. This revealed that there is significant academic pressure and academic anxiety experienced by the learners when studying Advanced Level Mathematics. Moving from Ordinary Level to Advanced Level Mathematics is challenging, especially in comprehending abstract mathematical ideas and dealing with more complex material. Although learners achieve a good standard in Mathematics at Ordinary Level, some become fearful and negative towards the subject. In addition, problems with understanding new concepts can lead to frustration, depression, and loss of confidence and self-esteem. The study calls attention to the need to pay attention to learners' psychosocial needs alongside their academic needs. It suggests supportive teaching methods, suitable psychosocial interventions and positive learning contexts that will promote the confidence, emotional well-being, and achievement of learners in Advanced Level Mathematics.

Keywords: *Advanced Level Mathematics, Learner Performance, Self-Esteem, Attribution Theory, Psychosocial Factors, and Mathematics Achievement.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how psychosocial factors influence learners' achievement in mathematics in selected advanced-level schools in Gwanda District, Matabeleland South Province, Zimbabwe. Psychosocial problems refer to difficulties adolescents face across different areas of personal and social functioning (Tismalsina et. al., 2018). The psychosocial aspects of an individual's experience, such as thoughts, emotions, and behaviour, are shaped by interaction with the social environment; that is, they are inherently psychosocial in nature (Ray, 2006, cited in Cazzuffi & Lopez, 2018). In Zimbabwe they are two exit points at Secondary School, that is Ordinary level which is the first stage and Advanced Level which is the final stage before University and other tertiary institutions. Advanced-level learners are in late adolescence (16-19 years), and there is a need to study the psychological and social aspects of their lives as adolescents, given the significant problems and risks they face in their development. Adolescents have distinct needs that cannot be overlooked (Jain et al., 2014). It is also essential to invest in adolescents, as they are the future of the country. However, studies addressing psychosocial factors that predict academic success are limited, even though

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various authors have suggested that these factors play a key role in predicting the academic success of disadvantaged students. It is important to examine psychosocial factors because they may predict academic adjustment and academic performance.

Mathematics teaching and learning is still a concern in the world, as many countries still have challenges in improving the mathematics achievement of their students (Nkomo et al., 2026). These difficulties are partly because secondary school students have a wide variety of current norm stressors. Among these, the demands and pressures of everyday academic life are analysed as normal day-to-day hassles that may have a negative impact on learners' academic performance and wellbeing (Pascoe et al., 2020). Studying mathematics in high school may be too demanding for adolescents. Society expects them to be future professionals capable of managing the country's finances and economy. Also, they have to be equipped with powerful ways to describe, analyse, and change the world. More so, develop an attitude of discovery, problem solving and inductive and deductive reasoning. Accordingly, high school students commonly self-report experiencing ongoing stress relating to their education, which is academic-related stress, such as pressure to achieve high marks and concerns about receiving poor grades (UNESCO, 2012). The OECD also found that 55% of students feel very anxious about school testing, even when they are well prepared. As many as 37% of students reported feeling very tense when studying, with girls consistently reporting greater anxiety relating to schoolwork compared to boys (OECD, 2017).

Schools provide access to a large number of young people, across a diverse range of backgrounds, during a formative developmental period. Advanced Level learners come from different schools where they completed Ordinary Level. As such, stress and coping skills in a new environment, as some would be coming from boarding schools and others from rural schools, could be a barrier to learning. The emotional distress the children experience has a negative impact on their educational performance. The children may become depressed and withdrawn, disengaging from classroom activities. If not addressed, this disengagement may negatively affect their academic performance (Chitiyo et. al 2016).

The advanced level examination is a crucial benchmark in our education system in Zimbabwe and serves as a gatekeeping device for entry into university. Only those students with good passes proceed to this level of education. Despite the fact that they had good passes at ordinary level and they have set their career goals, some of these students still do not perform well in mathematics at the end of two years.

- *Statement of the Problem*

In Zimbabwe's Heritage-Based Curriculum, Mathematics is a component of the Ordinary Level curriculum, and students qualifying for the Advanced Level in mathematics would have typically achieved good passes at Ordinary Level. Some students, however, do not perform as well as they did in their previous studies. The results in Mathematics are frequently below the desired level at this stage, and there are concerns about learners' capacity to manage the more complex demands of Mathematics. This substandard performance could have larger implications for the nation's development in areas such as science, technology and economic development, which rely on a firm base in mathematics. Although a lot of research has been conducted on primary and secondary school mathematics teaching and learning in Zimbabwe and other countries, little has been done on the study of Advanced Level Mathematics in Zimbabwe with emphasis on the psychosocial factors affecting it. Thus, it is necessary to conduct a study of the psychosocial issues that underlie learners' failures in Advanced Level Mathematics at high schools to gain insight into the factors contributing to learners' failure.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

- *Types of Psychosocial Factors Affecting Learners' Achievement in Mathematics*

Different psychosocial factors hinder learners' achievement in mathematics and even deter them from attempting their dream profession later in life. The focus of this section is to determine how each of the psychosocial factors is associated with poor performance of students in mathematics. Below are examples of psychosocial factors.

- *Conduct Disorders*

Conduct disorder involves a variety of behaviours that violate the rights of others and societal norms and is a multifaceted behavioural disorder affected by biological, psychosocial, and family-related factors (Busari, 2013). Symptoms of this disorder are often aggression, theft, vandalism, dishonesty and frequent rule breaking, and are generally present for at least a year before they are accepted as a diagnosis. The disorder is especially common in adolescence when there is a heightened risk of behavioural/emotional issues. Studies have shown that a child's risk of developing conduct disorders is greatly heightened by adverse family and social factors such as poverty, dysfunctional families, parental absence and low socioeconomic status (Busari & Adejumobi, 2012). In Zimbabwe, economic difficulties have led to parents relocating to find jobs, leaving adolescents without adequate supervision and support. This can lead to behavioural issues which can negatively impact on learners' adherence to school policies, order and learning. Because Advanced Level learners in mathematics are mainly adolescents, the issue of conduct-related behavioural problems may be one of the significant psychosocial issues which affect their academic success. It is however yet to be determined if learners face these challenges and how mathematics underachievement may be related to conduct disorder.

- *Perceived Stress*

Perceived stress is an individual's sense of the stressfulness, unpredictability, and lack of control in life circumstances, and the confidence in handling stress and demands (Phillips et. al., 2015). Perceived stress is not about what happens to people, but about how they see and react to

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what happens to them. Stress can be considered as pressures that are imposed on the body or as the emotional and psychological responses to those pressures, including anxiety, worry and tension (Putwain, 2007). For Advanced Level learners, stress is frequently caused by workload; being prepared for examinations; deadlines for assignments; and the pressure from parents and society to get good grades. Learners, however, react differently to stress due to different personalities, coping mechanisms, available support and resources (Crede & Niehorster, 2012; Sommer, 2013).

The studies indicate that chronic school stress has a detrimental impact on concentration, memory, learning and academic performance (Wolf & Oitzi, 2012; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). For learners at Advanced Level, the transition to new school contexts and the high expectations of achievement may pose an extra challenge, especially in Mathematics, a subject that is often linked to high achievement expectations and career opportunities. Research has shown that many learners experience anxiety related to examinations, grades and academic achievement, and that this is a concern not just in Australia (OECD, 2017; Pascoe et. al 2020). Excessive stress can cause emotional stress, withdrawal from classroom activities, less engagement, and less academic success. Thus, perceived stress can be one of the major psychosocial contributors to the mathematics performance of Advanced Level learners and should be further explored in schools.

- *Academic Load*

Academic load refers to the learners' feelings of being overwhelmed by their academic requirements or responsibilities while pursuing their studies. Academically overloaded learners might feel that there is insufficient time to effectively and adequately manage all academic tasks, for example, tests, assignments and examinations. Consequently, this might lead to frustration and failure, especially if learners are overwhelmed with too much workload. Sommer and Dumont (2011) state that learners may cope with and/or avoid academic load at school by learning how to effectively manage their curriculum, by learning and applying time management skills, as well as learning effective study techniques. Learners should acquire time management skills and effective study skills at an early age. It is the duty of teachers at lower levels of education and parents to train learners to manage their time well. This may reduce pressure and the load of reading material during examination time. Moreover, these adolescents can be trained to manage their curriculum instead of waiting for the teacher. Academic load is prevalent among learners, as they are commonly seen studying when examinations have started but usually play and display truant behaviours when examination dates are not yet announced. Consequently, it is important to examine the type of support provided to mathematics learners to address this concern.

- *Help Seeking*

While help-seeking is known to be a protective and learning strategy that can help to decrease psychological distress among adolescents and improve academic performance, many adolescents who have emotional or psychological problems do not actively seek help (Ciarrochi et al., 2003). Adolescence is a developmental period when sons and daughters become more independent from their parents and more dependent on peer relationships for advice and support (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). So adolescents might be more likely to turn to their peers for support than to parents or other adults, and thus be subject to both positive and negative peer influence. The lack of mental health workers in many schools in Zimbabwe may also worsen the chances of learners getting the necessary psychosocial support when they encounter difficulties in their personal or academic lives.

Trust and the quality of the relationships learners develop with potential sources of help are reported to have a significant impact on help-seeking behaviours (Wilson & Dean, 2001). Learners will be more inclined to approach people they think are approachable, reliable, and sensitive. In addition, seeking help has been correlated with better learning outcomes, especially for those learners who see help-seeking as a way to improve understanding and academic ability (Ryan & Hicks, 1997, cited in Taplin et al., 2001). Help-seeking can be beneficial to both mental health and academic success, and schools should seek to create supportive environments that will encourage learners to seek help when they are faced with psychosocial and/or academic hardship. This reinforces the importance of considering whether the learners in the identified schools have access to appropriate guidance and support systems when they experience difficulties that may impact their learning and performance with respect to Mathematics.

- *Educational Difficulties*

Mathematics is considered a challenging discipline because it demands patience, persistence, hard work and conceptual understanding (Fleming, 2019). Many learners experience difficulty because they think of mathematics as a set of procedures and right answers instead of a subject which demands understanding and critical thinking. Learners' attitudes and confidence in mathematics learning have been hindered by deeply held beliefs, such as the belief that only a few people have a "mathematical mind," that mathematics learning relies mainly on memorisation, or that there is only one correct solution to a problem (Chinn, 2012; Ernest, 2011). Moreover, mathematics is cumulative, and new concepts rely on the understanding of the prior ones. This means that learners may face growing challenges as they move through the grade levels due to a lack of mathematical understanding in some areas (Fleming, 2019).

It is also suggested that difficulties in mathematical language, symbols and concepts could underlie mathematical learning difficulties, with the need for effective instructional supports (Mulwa, 2015). It is therefore highly important for teachers to make concepts easier to understand and to allow learners to gain a proper understanding of the concepts. Poor learner performance in mathematics can cause a vicious cycle of poor performance and negative attitudes (Carey et. al., 2016), which can result in low motivation for the subject. Furthermore, difficulties with mathematics have been linked to internalising behavioural and emotional issues that could

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potentially have a further impact on academic attainment (Morgan et. al , 2012). As mathematics is a cumulative subject, early identification and intervention of learners who struggle to make progress are crucial in making sure that gaps in knowledge do not become bigger and therefore have a negative impact on learning progressions in the future.

- *Depression*

Depression is also a major mental health problem which has a detrimental impact on learners' emotional, cognitive, social and academic functioning. The World Health Organisation (2010) describes depression as a syndrome characterised by sadness, loss of interest, feelings of guilt, problems with sleep, loss of energy and memory problems. These symptoms may affect attention, information processing, decision-making, and general thinking skills. Likewise, Cartreine (2020) proposes that depression diminishes the cognitive flexibility and executive functioning of learners, which affects their ability to flexibly adjust strategies and complete tasks effectively. Research conducted by Zaini, Anjum and Dahlawi (2018) also shows that depression correlates with behavioural, social, and academic problems that could affect learners' learning strategies in learning mathematics.

Academic pressure is also identified as a significant cause of depression among school-going children; depressed learners are also reported to experience poor attention span and lack of engagement in learning activities (Steare et al., 2023). Numerous studies have proven that academic stress, academic failure and depression are correlated (Khanehkeshi & Basavarajappa, 2011; Flatt, 2013; Mojs et al., 2012). In addition, personality, motivation, education, mental health and training are factors affecting the academic achievement of learners (Khurshid et al., 2015). Taken together, these studies indicate that good mental health is essential to good learning and that depression has a detrimental effect on concentration, understanding, problem solving, academic performance, helplessness and coping. The need to study depression in high-level Mathematics learners and to develop procedures that could be used to assist them to achieve learning is underlined.

- *Mathematics Anxiety (Ma)*

It is a well-established fact that MA is a psychological state associated with fear, tension, apprehension and discomfort in relation to mathematical activities (Beilock & Willingham, 2014; Al Mutawah, 2015). People with a 'maths phobia' may lack confidence in their mathematical skills, may refuse to do things involving mathematics and may exhibit physical reactions to mathematics anxiety. There is evidence that the stereotype of the ‘difficult maths' can add to feelings of anxiety and that innovative pedagogies that link mathematics to real-life contexts and motivate learners can help combat this stereotype (Hemmings, et. al 2011; Nkomo,2016). Taylor and Fraser (2013) also showed that the learning context had a significant impact on mathematics anxiety, specifically, the social, psychological, and pedagogical factors associated with learning. Chinn (2012) lists some of the major causes of mathematics anxiety as environmental, intellectual, and personality-related factors, such as low self-esteem and reluctance to ask questions. All of these studies demonstrate that mathematics anxiety has a negative impact on learners' attitudes towards mathematics, involvement in learning, and performance in mathematics. In addition, research shows that mathematics anxiety can be found in learners and teachers; it may be more pronounced with higher levels of education, where the mathematical content is more complex (Al Mutawah, 2015). Learners who think that they are low-achieving are likely to feel the most anxious and may develop avoidance behaviours and hence perform less. It is also evident that assessments, tests and examinations are among the best indicators of mathematics anxiety for secondary school learners, as noted by Chinn (2012), which points to the fear of failure in mathematical learning. Furthermore, the teacher's own anxiety and self-efficacy may be affected by the teacher's anxiety. Moreover, teachers' anxiety can impact teachers' self-efficacy and teaching approaches. Professional development training and in-service training are important in enhancing mathematics teaching and decreasing learner anxiety, as teachers with high confidence in mathematics are more likely to use developmentally appropriate teaching methods (Geist, 2015). In brief, literature suggests that mathematics anxiety is prevalent and significant in mathematics education and that it needs to be countered in a supportive learning environment, through innovative teaching strategies and well-trained teachers in order to foster learners’ achievement and positive attitude towards mathematics.

- *Antisocial Behaviours*

Parenting is a key determinant of children's behaviour, self-perceptions and social development via the three aspects of parenting support, control and role modelling. Parents play a significant part in their children's behaviour; Johnson et. al. (2016) stated that some antisocial attitudes, values, and behaviours can be passed from generation to generation, and children can learn this from their parents. Based on Cooley's theory of the “looking-glass self,” positive self-concept and healthy social identities are more likely to be developed when the child sees a warm, supportive, nurturing façade in the parent. Johnson et. al. (2016) also believe that parents' closeness, support, monitoring and behaviours directly affect children's identity development and/or vulnerability to anti-social behaviour. Likewise, Simons et. al. (2007) related hostile, rejecting and antisocial parents to children who engage in delinquent behaviour.

Results indicate that supportive parenting, close supervision, and positive parenting behaviour play a significant role in healthy child development and decreasing behavioural issues. Supporting these suggestions, Longmore et al. (2013) highlight the significant role of parents in shaping children's positive and negative self-perceptions. The researchers state that parents who have suffered from problematic behaviour could send negative messages, stereotypes, or labels that can affect children's self-perception and future actions. This type of communication can affect the parent-child relationship and may have adverse consequences for behaviour.

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The literature thus clearly indicates that children tend to adopt their parents' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns. As a result, parents have a role to play in demonstrating positive values, in avoiding inappropriate or antisocial behaviour and in creating positive relationships with their children. In general, the studies highlight the importance of effective parenting – through warmth, support, positive role modelling and active involvement – in children's social, emotional and behavioural development, and the role of negative parenting practices in the development of delinquent and antisocial behaviours.

- *Low Self-Esteem*

Self-esteem is a person's own feelings about his or her worth, abilities and competence. Self-esteem is the feeling people have about themselves, and having a healthy sense of self-esteem allows them to feel good about what they are capable of and have a positive outlook on life, while low self-esteem is linked to many emotional, social and behavioural problems, according to Henriksen et. al (2017). Earlier studies by Firestone (2017) and Rosenberg and Owens (2001) indicate that low self-esteem is associated with self-doubt, sensitivity to criticism, fear of rejection, and constant self-evaluation of negative self. They may feel unloved, feel that they cannot do anything right, or feel inferior and may be their own worst critic. These learners tend to be unconfident, not participating, fear making mistakes, and have negative attitudes about their ability to learn. Therefore, it is essential to develop learners' healthy self-esteem to build their confidence and resilience, and develop positive self-perceptions.

The literature also shows that low self-esteem is related to academic performance, peer relationships and emotional health. Learners who have low self-esteem tend to demonstrate some of the following characteristics: shyness, insecurity, underachievement, lack of motivation at school, lack of communication skills, depression and social withdrawal (Guindon, 2006). Likewise, Alesi et al. (2014) concluded that low self-worth has a negative impact on learners' moods, academic performance, relationships with other learners, and may result in feelings of isolation and discouragement. A further theory of why many learners avoid challenges is that they fear failure and the potential repercussions failure may have on their self-image, as stated by Chinn (2012). Thus, the role of the parent and teacher is very important in the detection of learners with low self-esteem and the encouragement, support and opportunities for success given to them. Healthy self-esteem can help learners handle academic challenges, engage in learning activities, and have the confidence to keep going no matter what their challenges are and to reach their educational objectives.

- *Self Confidence*

Self-confidence is usually described as a person's confidence in their own capabilities, potential, and ability to achieve success. Confidence in the self and confident about the ability to act is what is described by Kunhertanti and Santosa (2018), and the belief in being able to solve problems and contribute positively to others is what is described by Ghufron and Risnawita (2012). Likewise, Reddy (2014) suggests that self-confidence helps people to hold positive but realistic beliefs about themselves and their situation, and Salirawati (2012) equates it with confidence in their capacity to achieve their goals and expectations. Self-confidence in mathematics education is the learners' confidence in their capacity to learn and successfully solve mathematical problems. According to Preston (2007, cited in Kunhertanti & Santosa, 2018), the important elements of confidence are self-awareness, intention, thinking, imagination, and positive action, while Ghufron and Risnawita (2012) state that the factors influencing confidence are optimism, objectivity, responsibility, rationality, realism, and belief in one's abilities. These views indicate a strong relationship between self-confidence, positive thinking, self-belief, and mental health, which leads to learners' perseverance and success in their academic studies.

Previous studies have shown that self-confidence is one of the important factors in learners' mathematics learning and achievement. Some of the studies indicate that there is a positive relationship between confidence and mathematics performance; learners who are more confident have higher achievements in mathematics, while in one of the studies, Kunhertanti et al. (2018), found that there is no significant relationship between them. This requires further study.

Das et. al. (2014) reported that learners with higher self-confidence showed lower mathematics anxiety, which helps learners to make a decision confidently and approach any mathematical task with less fear and nervousness. In turn, Mata et. al. (2012) found that learners' confidence and sense of control over their learning are supported in a supportive classroom environment and by encouraging teachers. Learners who are confident in their maths abilities tend to believe that they will be successful, appreciate hard work and demonstrate positive attitudes towards new challenging mathematics, while those learners who are less confident tend to assume failure, dislike new challenging mathematics, and feel that they are not good at mathematics. In general, the literature has drawn attention to the role of self-confidence in minimising anxiety, increasing motivation and improving learners' learning outcomes in mathematics, which is needed in learning mathematics. Self-confidence is a very important aspect in learners' success, as it is important for learners to develop positive self-beliefs and teaching practices to ensure success in mathematics learning.

- *Theoretical Framework*

Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour (Culatta, 2018). According to attribution theory, learners need to feel in control of the outcome of an academic task. Learners who feel more in control of the outcome will have more motivation to successfully complete that task (Lim, 2007). For instance, if the learners are motivated to perform a task, they are likely to perform well. On the contrary, a learner who is not motivated to perform a task may be likely to fail. An example is a learner who fails a mathematics test because she/he never studied for the test and is demotivated. In this regard, each time the test is written, the mindset still lingers and brings that feeling of failure

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again. According to this theory, the learner has accepted failure due to his/her thinking and is not encouraged to study. The theory maintains that the learner needs to understand the cause of his/her failure and act on it in order to perform well in a test. If the learner understands that studying is important for the test, and then prepares for it, the learner will be more motivated to study and do well on the test. Therefore, this theory aligns with the present study and explains the influence of psychosocial factors on learners' performance in mathematics.

Attribution theory is centred on causes. Causes are invoked to explain outcomes or results, such as success and failure, rather than actions; they are antecedents instead of justifications and can apply to intended or unintended outcomes and factors that may or may not be controllable (Weiner, 2018). Failing in mathematics because of perceived poor aptitude is considered here to be an attribution, or a causal antecedent, rather than a reason, while enrolling in a class to be with a friend is a reason and is not regarded as a cause. Causal beliefs vary between age groups, cultures, and depend on whether the causal target is the self or someone else. According to attribution theory, the most common cause of failure in mathematics is aptitude; that is, the student lacks the ability or skill to perform a task (or a learned skill). Consequently, the learner lacks intrinsic motivation. The zeal for the learner to do his/her work without being pushed by an external factor like a teacher is lacking, and this causes the learner to dislike mathematics and leads to failure.

This theory is an anchor to the present study in that it provides the attributes of learners' feelings towards achieving mathematics performance. According to Weiner (2018), learners' feelings or beliefs can impact their performance in mathematics. Therefore, they need to be motivated intrinsically through constant practice, working with peers, and consulting the teacher for help in order to pass advanced-level mathematics.

The attribution theory was chosen because it suggests a relationship between learners' sense of control over the outcome of an academic task and motivation to succeed, which has an impact on psychosocial problems. Learners who are convinced that success will not happen will not do anything to try to succeed, which leads to failure due to psychosocial factors. This theory and the relationship with motivation and psychosocial problems resonate with what is happening within the education system around the world and Zimbabwe in particular. For example, to be motivated to learn, one must clearly understand the reward he/she might receive, and one must actually value the reward, hence less or no failure in mathematics.

III. METHOD

The interpretive paradigm was used for the guidance of this study because it allowed the researchers to derive a deeper understanding of the learners' performance in mathematics with regard to the various psychosocial factors. In order to delve into these issues, a qualitative research approach was taken, and in the selection of respondents for interviews, advanced-level learners were chosen with the aim of selecting those who were deemed to be sufficiently developed to engage in the interview. The study was carried out in three secondary schools in which learners who were having problems in mathematics were screened out based on their mark lists. Data were gathered using document analysis and semi-structured interviews with six mathematics teachers (two from each school) and fifteen learners with psychosocial challenges. Teachers reported their experience of Advanced Level mathematics teaching, the strategies they used to teach this course and the available support systems for the learners who were having problems in a psychosocial context. Learners shared their experiences of mathematics learning and shared their views on the influence of the psychosocial factors on mathematics achievement

IV. RESULTS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Learners indicated that even though they are confident, sometimes they are not sure what they will be working on the board. Also, they said they are confident when they are sure of the answer. In School A, some learners revealed that they are terrified and shy to work on questions on the board. This was similar to School B's responses, where learners said they are nervous and scared of being criticised after giving a wrong answer. Moreover, in School C, learners claimed confidence depends on the topic. 28% of learners further stated that some colleagues laugh at you when you are not understanding or when you are panicking and they even insult which leads to depression and low self-esteem. *"My classmates have a tendency to laugh at you when you are not sure of the answer, and this discourages a lot"*. Studies have shown that competence support, autonomy support, expectations, and feedback that learners receive from others have an impact on their cognitive appraisals, and these are the main sources of their emotional dispositions. Hence, learners are affected by the remarks they receive from their learning counterparts.

Learners in all schools revealed that there is too much pressure in learning mathematics at Advanced level and they tend to give themselves too much pressure if unable to solve the question. This is supported by Famakinwa et al. (2016), who argue that secondary school life comes with pressure and adjustments that can be overwhelming for learners, as most of them will be at the developmental stage of adolescence. Hence, at this stage, learners need a very strong support network, which should be coordinated by the teachers and accessible within the school environment for them to be able to sail through this period. Learners confessed that learning mathematics was tough at the beginning, as the teacher was rushing to finish the syllabus, while some in another school said their teacher was unavailable as he has administrative duties.

Additionally, there are no resources to get information when at home. In School B, most lessons are unattended by the teacher, and this contributes to the learning difficulties of the subject. Similar studies have shown that neglect has a contributory effect on poor performance in school. As a result, learners who are neglected perform at the lowest levels of academic achievement. Consequently, the attribution

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theory states that students lack intrinsic motivation. Thus if the student is lacking the zeal to do their work without being pushed by an external factor like a teacher. It triggers the learner to dislike mathematics and leads to failure.

Learners in School A confessed that they do not see themselves producing the same quality results as in Ordinary Level. One learner said he is looked down upon by peers because of his background and it gives him emotions since he will not be trusting himself making learning to be difficult. This is comparable to the studies of Weiner (2018), who established that learners' feelings or beliefs can impact their performance in mathematics.

Additionally, Cicerchia (2020) asserts that repeated underperformance in maths can cause a learner to become demotivated and believe they are not good at the subject. Because mathematical concepts build cumulatively upon one another, this underperformance often causes learners to fall behind and miss out on subsequent foundational instruction throughout the school term (Fleming, 2019)**.** Learners feel concepts are getting harder each day and there are too many topics to cover compared to Ordinary Level. *Mathematics is my favourite subject, but I have difficulties in learning it, and it is now challenging compared to Ordinary Level*. Also, learners argue that mathematics seems to be easy when the teacher is explaining, but it becomes challenging when revising on their own. *"Mathematics seems easy when in class or with others but very difficult when alone or when writing the test; it will be like you have never learnt it"*. Learners feel teachers give simpler examples in class, and it becomes a different story in tests and assignments; the questions are usually not clear about what they need and tend to confuse. Another learner said, "*There are new developed and advanced concepts introduced and if confused from the start you won't understand the rest"*.

The speed of the teacher makes slow learners fail to cope, and the subject becomes difficult. Some learners complained that the teacher does not treat them equally in class; there are some who are favoured and chosen to present several times on the board. Learners further argued that topics are totally new at this level and difficult, and that the lack of clear explanation makes the subject more difficult. It was noted that there are many assumptions, including that learners are good performers in mathematics, as some previous concepts are considered to be basic to new topics. Teachers further stressed the lack of comprehension of the abstract concepts associated with mathematics learning among learners. Learners revealed that past examination questions are challenging compared to questions from the textbooks.

Teachers are of the idea that there is a general fear of the subject among learners. It is not clear where the fear emanates from, but generally learners fear the subject. Learners said one of the contributory factors to fear is that teachers are angered when learners do not understand the concepts. *"I fear to be chosen to work a question on the board because if you make a mistake, others laugh at you and the teacher sometimes embarrasses you, so I will be discouraged"*. Lane et al. (2019) identify connectedness as a substantial component in a supportive network for higher education learners, in which the sense of being accepted and supported by peers and teaching staff is important to enhance academic capabilities. Meanwhile, Ajjawi et al. (2020) explain that learners often attribute academic failure to a lack of support from teaching staff. Related conclusions are drawn in a systematic review on the impact of teacher–student relationships in higher education, in which feelings of belonging and emotional support are vital for enhancing academic mastery and preventing dropout (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Therefore, fellow classmates and teachers play a crucial supportive role when learners struggle and experience doubts about their capabilities.

When a new concept is introduced which relates to a concept not understood, learners say they become so depressed and they will not understand anything throughout the lesson or topic. These learners are not motivated to learn, and they do not feel in control of the lesson. The Attribution theory clearly states that learners need to feel in control of the outcome of an academic task, which makes them more motivated to successfully complete that task. For instance, if the learners are motivated to perform a task, they are likely to perform well. The theory maintains that the learner needs to understand the cause of their failure and act on it in order to perform well.

- *Reasons for Failing Mathematics at an Advanced Level*

Learners were very open to highlighting the issues they believe are the main causes of failure in mathematics. One of the reasons was losing confidence and low self- esteem. Lunenburg (2011) is of the view that beliefs about one's ability to accomplish specific tasks influence what one chooses to learn and the goals they set for themselves. Hence, this affects learners' level of effort and determination when learning difficult tasks. They lose confidence in themselves as they are discouraged by those who have failed the subject and declare that the subject is very challenging. Some say they were forced by their parents to take the subject, hence not confident in themselves. Also, a lack of answering techniques and revision is contributing to failure of mathematics at the advanced level. Examination questions require techniques for tackling them, so they believe they lack that skill as they write examinations with unfinished syllabi.

Pressure also contributes to failure. Pressure from other subjects and peer pressure. They engage in drug abuse and internet(media) abuse, which takes away their study time. This is caused by a lack of specific goals, heartbreaks and problems in relationships. They say some of them fail to handle the transition from childhood to adulthood as there are no counselling sessions for them. Poor family background and problems at home cause some learners to be easily influenced to do bad things.

Moreover, learners said they tend to be reluctant and playful as they start advanced level, thinking it's easy since they have done well at ordinary level. This causes a lot of pressure, as there would be many concepts to be practised and understood in a short space of time. Teachers revealed that some of the learners are generally lazy and feel demotivated

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to revise their work, hence losing interest in the subject. They also lack concentration during lesson time thereby putting blame on the teachers that they do not explain in depth the concepts. It was also noted that some learners have a negative attitude toward the subject and teacher. Teachers must be aware that psychosocial problems have become a hindrance in the proper learning of mathematics not only in Zimbabwe but in many countries. Teachers also need to be sensitive to learners' understanding and misconceptions and determine their learning gaps in mathematics.

Fear of asking questions of the teacher when not understanding has an effect on failure. There is a lack of commitment and consistency to schoolwork. Some learners are not committed to working extra hard on their own; they want to be pushed to work. The unavailability of resources like textbooks and past examination papers means learners have less revision on the concepts, hence leading to failure.

Generally, parents are not happy, disappointed, complaining, worried, and not confident. Parents are disappointed because they think their children performed well at the ordinary level, and now the performance is bad as it keeps dropping; they feel there is room for improvement. "*My parents are not happy with my performance because I'm their only child who got an A grade in mathematics at ordinary level and I'm the first one to do mathematics at advanced level, but now my performance is lacking*". Parents expect their children to excel and continue with their education in tertiary institutions. This is in accordance with studies by Phosaly et al. (2019), which reveal that the cultural obligation toward obedience to one's parents regarding educational success can lead to high levels of student burnout. Expectations from parents can have negative effects, such as depression and anxiety among learners, which affect the final score in examinations. Other studies have also concluded that emphasis on academics takes precedence over the social and emotional well-being of learners. Thus, parents should be educated on this matter to avoid overemphasis on academics in learners.

Another response was "*My parents are worried about my performance, but they have trust because in my community those doing mathematics at advanced level are regarded as geniuses"*. So intrinsic motivation must prevail among learners for them to perform well in mathematics, as mathematics is a precursor to the development of any society. Since these learners are still at the adolescent stage, they also need encouragement to exert effort in their studies from both teachers and parents. Learners should understand the causes of failure to take positive action.

Another reason is that parents try to provide everything so that children go to school, but the performance is not pleasing. *"My parents shout at me as they believe I'm too playful, but in fact I'm trying my best*". Therefore, parents need to be well-informed that outcomes of behaviour among learners in mathematics are influenced by internal factors such as effort and external factors such as difficulty.

Teachers stated that a learner who has a social problem is normally withdrawn, and attention is diverted. Even if the teacher is explaining, their minds will be switched to something not related to the lesson. Concentration on learning activities is limited.

Mathematics learners are demoralised by the marks they get in the tests. The marks that are gotten tend to generate names among learners. Names are given to those who are good performers and bad performers. Those who usually do not perform well in mathematics class their marks tend to deteriorate more while good performers continue to do better. Hence, labelling usually affects the performance of learning.

Teachers also highlighted that the behaviour of learners affects their performance at school. All these challenges affect the confidence level of learners. If learners' confidence is compromised, this leads to dropout.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study sought to examine in detail the influence of psychosocial factors on learners' achievement in mathematics in selected Advanced Level schools. The research objectives are linked to the results of the study through an analysis. The study made use of a qualitative research design. Two methods of data collection were used to intensify validity and integrate several viewpoints and methods. Interviews were conducted with both learners and teachers. Also, document analysis was used in order to have a better understanding of the phenomenon. Twenty-one people participated in the study.

Culatta (2018) argue that Attribution theory is concerned with how individuals interpret events and how it relates to their thinking and behaviour. Mathematics has been identified as a worrisome subject for learners because of anxiety, which can be caused by stress, fear of failure and lack of self-confidence. These feelings may lead to learners feeling out of control in academic activities. This is also in accordance with the findings of Weiner (2018), who argues that learners' feelings or beliefs can impact their performance. Learners lacked intrinsic motivation to improve their performance. Intervention and discussion of these issues with learners foster a positive change on the view of the subject by the learners. Learners who had passed mathematics at lower levels begin to fail it at higher levels, even though mathematics issues are discussed in Zimbabwe.

Also it was deduced from the study that learners are mostly affected by the remarks they receive from their learning counterparts. If their classmates criticise them after giving an answer or working a question on the board, they become discouraged, which leads to low self-esteem. Fear of being negative criticism reduces confidence among learners to give out their answers in a class discussion.

Learners feel the concepts are becoming harder each day. This is also fuelled by the assumption that some topics are basic to the topics learnt at high school, which is not the case for all learners. High school learning is characterised by

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more research, and most learners are not experienced with research.

The study, therefore, recommends above other things that teachers take an active role in preparing learners for the transition from ordinary level to advanced level. Schools should also be well equipped with learning materials in form of textbooks, both hard copies and e-books so that the learners have adequate interactive learning platforms.

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