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TOWARDS A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SUPPORT LEARNERS AT RISK OF INTERRUPTED DEVELOPMENT

Midst- and post-COVID-19 interventions

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TOWARDS A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SUPPORT LEARNERS AT RISK OF INTERRUPTED DEVELOPMENT

Midst- and post-COVID-19 interventions

EDITORS

Macalane J Malindi
Johnnie Hay
Thabo Makhalemele

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Peer-review declaration

The publisher (AOSIS) endorses the South African 'National Scholarly Book Publishers Forum Best Practice for Peer-Review of Scholarly Books'. The book proposal form was evaluated by our Social Sciences, Humanities, Education and Business Management editorial board. The manuscript underwent an evaluation to compare the level of originality with other published works and was subjected to rigorous two-step peer review before publication by two technical expert reviewers who did not include the volume editor(s) and were independent of the volume editor(s), with the identities of the reviewers not revealed to the editor(s) or author(s). The reviewers were independent of the publisher, editor(s) and author(s). The publisher shared feedback on the similarity report and the reviewers' inputs with the manuscript's editor(s) or author(s) to improve the manuscript. Where the reviewers recommended revision and improvements, the editor(s) or author(s) responded adequately to such recommendations. The reviewers commented positively on the scholarly merits of the manuscript and recommended that the book be published.

Research justification

This book is a product of the 'Schools as nodes of resilience for psychosocially vulnerable learners' research project. The project is anchored in the Community-Based Educational Research (COMBER) focus area at North-West University (NWU), South Africa (RSA). The book brings together scholars from varied research fields within the School of Psycho-Social Education, nested within the Faculty of Education at NWU, RSA. As per the aim of the book, as scholars, we looked at child development from multiple metatheories on child development. Child development has been a product of dominant Eurocentric perspectives; however, we added Afrocentric theories to ensure that not only theories from the West are privileged.

We acknowledge that there are multiple realities and multiple ways of knowing. Therefore, scholars were not restricted to any singular mode of research. Instead, they were encouraged to use any mode of research they deemed suitable and to generate data through multiple methods. Although some scholars studied children indirectly through the dominant 'adultist' methods that use adults as proxies, some scholars heeded the call to study children directly through participatory, child-friendly, less intrusive, arts-based methods.

Chapter 1 represents a systematic review of research on theories of child development, and Chapter 3 systematically reviews material on psychological development. Chapters 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 involved an empirical component. In these chapters, scholars conducted original qualitative research using various methods to generate data. Following these empirical studies, interesting findings emerged, and evidence-based recommendations are made on how the backlogs in the development of learners post-coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) can be overcome. Chapter 10, an offshoot of the first nine chapters, provides an integrated vision of overcoming the developmental backlogs resulting from the COVID-19 restrictions and curriculum adaptations.

This book contributes to the scholarship of educational psychology, child psychology and developmental psychology, and the target audience is scholars in the field. This book complies with the Department of Higher Education and Training's standards for original content and contains more than 50% unpublished works, and no part thereof was plagiarised.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
ALAR	action learning and action research
ALS	action learning set
CoI	community of inquiry
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
ECD	early childhood development
EDU-REC	Faculty of Education Ethics Committee
FET	further education and training
HoD	head of department
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and others
NGOs	non-governmental organisations
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PALAR	participatory action learning and action research
PE	Physical Education
SGB	school governing body
SARS-CoV-2	severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2
SERT	social ecology of resilience theory
SIAS	screening, identification, assessment and support
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VUCA	volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous
WHO	World Health Organization

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Preface

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This scholarly book was motivated by the desire of the editors to explore development in learners who have been affected by the lockdown rules necessitated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. This book is comprised of ten chapters.

In these chapters, the editors and several authors explored development holistically, focusing on child development's bio-physiological, psychological, social, spiritual and academic domains. We also added chapters that explored themes such as holistic health in the early years, language and mathematics learning and enabling resilience in children experiencing loss and bereavement.

In this book, we approach development from multiple theoretical orientations on child development, explored in Chapter 1. In the last chapter, we present an integrated vision of how learners at risk of poor developmental outcomes can be helped to overcome the backlogs they experienced and are still experiencing. This book incorporates scholarly chapters that seek to shed light on developmental backlogs in learners.

This book will benefit stakeholders in education, social work and psychology, as scholars in these fields have a vested interest in child development and the personal and socioecological barriers that may impair it.

The role of collaboration and multisystemic interventions in enabling coping and holistic development in learners is highlighted. Therefore, a call is made for primary, secondary and tertiary interventions to draw from different disciplines and utilise expertise to enhance development subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As editors, we are grateful to the North-West University, contributors, learners and teachers for the success of this book project.

Towards a holistic theoretical approach to learner development in the midst of and post-COVID-19

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◼ Introduction

The impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is expected to be most damaging for children in poor countries and communities, where disadvantage and vulnerability abound (United Nations [UN] 2020). In this vein, South Africa is and will be bearing the brunt of the pandemic: more than 50% of South Africans are living below the upper poverty line of ZAR1,335 income per person per month (BusinessTech 2021), and disadvantage and vulnerability are rife. Furthermore, the country occupies the seventeenth place in the world in terms of COVID-19-related deaths (102,000) and the 35th place in terms of COVID-19 infections (4.01 million) (Our World in Data 2022), which indicates how hard the pandemic hit home.

Very seldom are children foregrounded when the lived experiences of COVID-19 victims are portrayed. In the words of one of the UN Policy Briefs of 2020: 'Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims [...] the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing' (UN 2020, p. 2). In the Policy Brief, it is argued that children are mainly affected in one or more of four ways, namely, by falling into poverty, through the learning crisis that has been exacerbated, through threats to children's health and survival, and through dangers to children's safety.

This book was conceptualised to specifically deal with the second and third factors mentioned, namely, how children's learning and health have been affected by the pandemic and what type of support is needed to overcome this interrupted development. We will rely heavily on the adapted bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational model of Engel and Winiarski (as adapted by Hay & Joubert 2021). These five domains of human development and functioning (equated to a holistic view) will serve as the meta-structure for this book, where the biological, psychological, social, spiritual and educational aspects of learners' development and functioning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic will be interrogated.

In this first chapter, we endeavour to investigate what uninterrupted, healthy development entails; to provide a sound theoretical basis for the holistic development and wellness of learners; and to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic may have interrupted learner development and wellness. The chapter concludes by looking ahead to how the authors of the chapters that follow will suggest support interventions in the different domains.

◼ Healthy and uninterrupted child development

Child development as a field of study has strong 20th-century and mainly Western origins. Exponents such as David Gallahue (American kinesiologist),

Jean Piaget (Swiss psychologist), Sigmund Freud (Austrian neurologist), Robert Havighurst (American physicist), Erik Erikson (German-American developmental psychologist), Arnold Gesell (American psychologist and paediatrician), Lev Vygotsky (Russian psychologist), John Bowlby (British psychiatrist) and Lawrence Kohlberg (American psychologist) contributed substantially to knowledge in this field.

Their theories can be typified in the following ways:

- Gallahue – theory of hourglass life span motor development
- Piaget – theory of cognitive development
- Freud – theory of psychosexual development
- Havighurst – developmental tasks theory
- Erikson – theory of psycho-social development
- Gesell – theory of maturation
- Vygotsky – socio-cultural theory
- Bowlby – attachment theory
- Kohlberg – theory of moral development

The work of these theorists will be described in more detail later in this chapter. These foundations will be complemented by the recent African views on the (child) development of Bame Nsamenang and the early childhood education of Hasina Ebrahim.

For this section about healthy and uninterrupted development, we will, *inter alia*, focus on Havighurst's developmental tasks theory, which provides a very good overview of normal physical or biological and biological and psycho-social development at the pre-school and school levels. He argues that developmental tasks originate from three sources, namely, 'physical maturation, cultural pressure based on expectations of society and individual aspirations or values' (Havighurst 1956, p. 215). He divided the life span of a human being into six developmental stages, namely:

- Infancy and early childhood (birth to six-years-old)
- Middle childhood (6–12-years-old)
- Adolescence (13–18-years-old)
- Early adulthood (19–30-years-old)
- Middle age (30–60-years-old)
- Later maturity or old age (60-years-old and older)

Havighurst (1972) then developed specific developmental tasks for these stages based on his research. These developmental tasks are depicted in Figure 1.1.

For the purposes of this book, we only focus on the first three stages that deal with children or school learners.

Developmental tasks

Early childhood — 1

1. Learning to walk.
2. Learning to take solid foods.
3. Learning to talk.
4. Learning to control the elimination of bodily waste.
5. Learning sex difference and sexual modesty.
6. Forming concepts and learning language to describe social and physical reality.
7. Getting ready to read

Middle childhood — 2

1. Learning physical skills necessary for ordinary games.
2. Building wholesome attitudes toward oneself as a growing organism.
3. Learning to get along with age-mates.
4. Learning an appropriate masculine or feminine social role.
5. Developing fundamental skills in reading, writing and calculating.
6. Developing concepts necessary for everyday living.
7. Developing conscience, morality and a scale of values
8. Achieving personal independence.
9. Developing attitudes toward social group and institutions.

Adolescence — 3

1. Achieving new and more mature relations with age-mates of both sexes.
2. Achieving a masculine or feminine social role.
3. Accepting one's physique and using the body effectively.
4. Achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults.
5. Preparing for marriage and family life.
7. Acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behaviour (developing an ideology).
6. Preparing for an economic career.
8. Desiring and achieving socially responsible behaviour.

Early adulthood — 4

1. Selecting a mate.
2. Achieving a masculine or feminine social role.
3. Learning to live with a marriage partner.
4. Starting a family.
5. Rearing children.
6. Managing a home.
7. Getting started in an occupation.
8. Taking on civic responsibility.
9. Finding a congenial social group.

Middle age — 5

1. Achieving adult civic and social responsibility.
2. Establishing and maintaining an economic standard of living.
3. Assisting teenage children to become responsible and happy adults.
4. Developing adult leisure-time activities.
5. Relating oneself to one's spouse as a person.
6. Accepting and adjusting to the physiologic changes of middle age.
7. Adjusting to aging parents.

Old age — 6

1. Adjusting to decreasing physical strength and health.
2. Adjusting to retirement and reduced income.
3. Adjusting to death of a spouse.
4. Establishing an explicit affiliation with one's age group.
5. Meeting social and civil obligations.
6. Establishing satisfactory physical living arrangements.

Source: Adapted from fb.com/drkumarpsychologistpy.
FIGURE 1.1: Havighurst's developmental tasks.

Before scrutinising the developmental tasks applicable to learners, some perspectives on healthy and uninterrupted development are necessary. During the last part of the 20th century, the term 'normal development' was widely utilised. Louw and Louw (2020, p. 7) use the phrase 'normal development of the average child' but immediately acknowledge that many children are struggling with factors that are impeding this type of development. With the advent of postmodern thinking, this term came under scrutiny; human development was viewed as diverse, non-normative and strongly dependent on culture. A South African scholar in the early childhood field, Hasina Ebrahim (2010), alerts us to the reconceptualist approach in early childhood education. Reconceptualists argue that issues such as diversity and situated complexities are underemphasised in the dominant discourses on child development based on a modernist view and characterised by certainty.

Therefore, in this book, we steer away from the term 'normal development' and prefer to speak of 'healthy development'. In this way, we try to acknowledge all sides of the developmental coin, of which some are that human development is not only particular to individual and social contexts but also generated by general physical maturation and psycho-social-spiritual-educational unfolding. 'Healthy' also implies that parents and teachers have some broad parameters within which a child can be assessed, as it remains crucial to monitor children's developmental progress in all domains carefully.

The term 'uninterrupted development' is used in this book to indicate that a learner's development unfolded without serious, intense or long-standing interruptions or disruptions. McCormick and Scherer (2018, p. 41) use the phrase 'disruptions of normal biological development' when they describe children's biological development. These disruptions refer to trauma or biological assaults experienced by a child's biology. Along the same line, we accept that the psycho–social–spiritual–educational development of a child can also be interrupted or disrupted by a range of traumatic events or assaults on development. Another related and relevant term often used in developmental psychology is that of 'arrested' development; this term implies that physical, emotional or mental development has stopped before adulthood based on trauma or neglect (Word Counter 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic is especially relevant in this regard, as the associated worldwide lockdowns and school closures, lasting from early 2020 until at least late in 2022, are viewed as particularly disrupting. We argue that serious interruptions and disruptions of development took place

during this period because of the consequences of the pandemic, which, in some serious instances, could even have led to arrested development.

With this background, we are ready to discuss the healthy (and uninterrupted) development of learners in terms of the adapted bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational model of Engel and Winiarski (Hay & Joubert 2021) and regarding Havighurst's developmental tasks theory. Havighurst did not directly refer to the different developmental domains, such as the psychological domain; therefore, we infer the different domains from his model.

■ Healthy biological development

The following tasks in the *infancy* and *early childhood* stages are linked to healthy biological development.

■ Learning to walk

Walking is a fundamental movement skill that enables the child to explore their surroundings; learn about perceptual-motor concepts, such as spatial relationships; and develop other fundamental movement skills, such as running, balancing and the manipulation of objects. Learning to walk (at around one-year-old) is, therefore, crucial for further perceptual-motor learning, which forms the basis of almost all other types of development (Donnelly, Mueller & Gallahue 2017).

■ Learning to talk

To be able to say one's first words (usually at around one-year-old), a child should have experienced different sounds, words, people and objects in their environment during the first year. Besides people (e.g. the parents) talking to the child, their brain will also connect objects and concepts to specific sounds and words through their movements and exploration of the surroundings (Bainbridge 2021).

■ Learning to ingest solid foods

The milestone of starting to take solid foods (usually at around six-months-old) is closely associated with other developmental milestones such as sitting up alone, controlling the head and neck, bringing objects to the mouth and trying to grasp small objects such as toys or food (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). These are all important motor milestones that enable the child to gain control of their body and learn more from the environment (Donnelly et al. 2017).

◼ Learning to control the elimination of body wastes

Toilet training is a form of moral training and the first that a child will receive. The way and success of this first moral training can influence the development of the child's character later in life (Havighurst 1972).

The following task in the *middle childhood* stage is linked to healthy biological development.

◼ Learning physical skills necessary for ordinary games

The perceptual-motor skills needed for playing games involve fundamental movement skills such as running, skipping, throwing, catching and balancing on one leg. These are building blocks for more refined movement skills such as writing, reading and sport-specific skills (Donnelly et al. 2017). The development of children's fundamental movement skills into mature patterns of movement at around six- to seven-years-old will be optimal if the child has had various opportunities to be physically active and stimulated in different movement situations (Haywood 2020).

The following task in the *adolescence* stage is linked to healthy biological development.

◼ Accepting one's physique and using one's body effectively

Concerning biological development, the hormonal changes experienced by adolescents influence their physical growth, movement skills and overall body control. Adolescents are expected to adapt to these changes and still acquire body control (Havighurst 1972). Physical body control includes well-developed balance and coordination skills that contribute to refined movement and sports skills, enabling young people to participate in sports and various physical activities (Haywood 2020).

◼ Healthy psychological development

The following tasks in the *infancy* and *early childhood* stages are linked to healthy psychological development.

◼ Learning to talk

Infants start on their way to communication through non-verbal gestures, vocal expressions and emotional demonstration. When they become

toddlers, they begin to use gestures, such as words, and still, later, start to mix gestures and words (Bergin & Bergin 2018). Gradually, towards the latter part of the third year, speech starts to replace gestures (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow 2005), and the typical, healthy pre-schooler almost speaks fluently (Bergin & Bergin 2018).

■ Learning sex differences and sexual modesty

This development aspect is often described as gender role development (McCormick & Scherer 2018). McCormick and Scherer (2018) state that one of the most important ways people describe themselves is by being male or female. During infancy and early childhood, children become aware of gender differences, mainly in terms of physical differences but also regarding gender roles. Girls and boys dress differently, often like either pink or blue, prefer dolls or cars to play with and like to play with playmates of the same gender (Louw & Louw 2020). It is not clear what Havighurst precisely meant by 'sexual modesty', but our interpretation is that it refers to the realisation that both genders have complementary roles to play in life.

■ Forming concepts and learning language to describe physical and social reality

This task is strongly linked with cognitive development – a component of psychological development. Louw and Louw (2020) state that learners' thinking becomes more organised and sophisticated as they move from infancy to early childhood. Later, during this period, they expanded their knowledge about the physical and the social world. According to Piaget, the early childhood years also constitute the stage of preoperational thinking, which is characterised by *why* questions that are aimed to broaden a child's reality (Louw & Louw 2020).

The following tasks in the *middle childhood* stage are linked to healthy psychological development.

■ Building wholesome attitudes towards oneself as a growing organism

This refers to the emotional development of children and, more specifically, the development of self-understanding and self-concept. Louw and Louw (2020) mention that self-understanding starts to develop through a better grasp of one's own psychological characteristics; children also begin to compare these characteristics with those of others and wonder why they have different strengths and weaknesses. This development has a major

impact on their self-concept and esteem. They now start to judge themselves in terms of academic, social and physical competence, as well as physical appearance.

◼ Learning an appropriate masculine or feminine social role

This represents progress in terms of gender role development from the early childhood stage. Whereas awareness primarily developed during the earlier stage, the focus now shifts to gradually accepting a masculine or feminine role. However, in current terms, gender roles can be expanded to what Bem (cited in McCormick & Scherer 2018) calls 'undifferentiated and androgynous individuals'. Accepting an undifferentiated gender role implies that one is not high on either male characteristics or female characteristics, and an androgynous child is high on both male and female characteristics.

◼ Developing conscience, morality and a scale of values

The skill to distinguish between right and wrong is probably the most important moral task to master during middle childhood (Louw & Louw 2020). This lays the foundation for morality and moral values that will develop. Kohlberg's theory of moral development is often seen as the most important perspective on moral development. He argues that middle childhood children are at the pre-conventional moral level; this implies that they are driven by the punishment and obedience orientation (where the consequences of behaviour drive moral decision-making) and individualism, instrumental purpose and exchange (where awareness that people may have different opinions about moral dilemmas develops). Kohlberg explains that the pre-conventional level means that children do not yet understand that rules are social conventions (Louw & Louw 2020).

◼ Achieving personal independence

This task that Havighurst described can be linked to Erikson's psycho-social developmental stage of industry versus inferiority. By developing their physical and cognitive abilities, middle childhood children develop a sense of competence or start to feel inferior if they cannot cope with the increasing demands placed on them (Louw & Louw 2020). If competence develops, the child can gradually become more independent from parents and other adults.

The following tasks in the *adolescence* stage are linked to healthy psychological development.

■ Achieving a masculine or feminine social role

During this stage, the adolescent has moved from awareness to learning, accepting and achieving a gender role. This coincides with a strong surge in sexuality during these years (Louw & Louw 2020). In Havighurst's theory of the 1950s, the dichotomy of achieving either the masculine or feminine role was obvious. This is no longer obvious with, for example, Bem's typology of undifferentiated or androgynous individuals (McCormick & Scherer 2018) or the focus on LGBTQIA+ persons. Nevertheless, the focus here is on achieving a gender role of choice and identifying with that role. This may not come easy for some adolescents, and oscillation between different gender roles may continue until early adulthood.

■ Achieving emotional independence from parents and other adults

During middle childhood, the focus was on developing competence, increased independence and belief in one's own abilities and not falling into inferiority. During adolescence, this independence is taken a step further by also weaning oneself emotionally from one's parents and other adults. In Erikson's terms, this is the stage of identity versus role confusion – the clearer the identity develops, the easier it will be to achieve emotional independence. On the other hand, if there is identity and role confusion, it may be more complex to wean oneself from significant adults (inferred from Snowman & McCown 2015).

■ Preparing for marriage and family life

Romantic relationships are part of this developmental stage. It is described by Connoly and McIsaac (cited in Louw & Louw 2020) as going through three phases: entering into romantic attractions and affiliations (11–13-years-old), exploring romantic relationships (14–16 years) and consolidating romantic bonds (17–19-years-old). During the latter phase, more serious romantic relationships develop, which are the precursor for a relationship that may lead to marriage.

■ Preparing for an economic career

Subject choices in early high school and career choices later in high school represent crucial decisions to prepare an adolescent for the world of work. In this regard, eighteen-years-old is usually seen as the transition age from schooling to work or post-school study (Hay 2018).

■ Acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behaviour: Developing an ideology

Kohlberg mentions that adolescents find themselves in the conventional level of moral development. This is typified by the stages of mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and conformity (or the good boy/girl orientation) and the morality of social systems and conscience orientation (Louw & Louw 2020). At this level, adolescents try to conform to expectations and abide by their conscience, but this often is difficult, as striving for independence seriously impacts conformity.

■ Healthy social development

The following tasks in the *infancy* and *early childhood* stages are linked to healthy social development.

■ Learning to talk

Learning to talk starts with receptive language development, where infants start to understand language before expressive language develops. Infants usually start to talk at twelve-months-old but have, by then, processed many words. During the receptive language period, phases of vocalisation or prelinguistic speech are identified; some of these are cooing and babbling (two- to five-months-old), lallation or repeating sounds and words (seven- to eight-months-old), and echolalia or correct repetition of words and sounds (nine- to ten-months-old). Single-word sentences start at approximately one-year-old, and full sentences start from about 21-months-old (Louw & Louw 2020). Learning to talk is an enormous step towards healthy social relationships.

■ Learning sex differences and sexual modesty

This aspect was described under healthy psychological development but also affects social development. During this stage, infants and early childhood children become aware of physical differences and different gender roles. Playmates in nursery schools are often of the same gender at this stage, as play interests are distinguished by gender: female-identifying girls often play with dolls and male-identifying boys often play with cars (Louw & Louw 2020). Friendships between girls and boys are not foregrounded, and this may be part of why Havighurst describes this as a time of *sexual modesty*.

The following tasks in the *middle childhood* stage are linked to healthy social development.

■ Learning to get along with age mates

A middle childhood child may have experience of sibling relationships at home but needs to adjust to social relationships with peers. Whereas play predominates in peer relationships during early childhood, middle childhood makes way for relationships based on not only play but also sports, conversation and activities. Same-gender relationships are even more foregrounded than earlier, and often, children now focus on friends they want to be with rather than those in close proximity (McCormick & Scherer 2018).

■ Learning an appropriate masculine or feminine social role

This issue was discussed under healthy psychological development, but it is also significant in terms of social development. Middle childhood children learn how to conduct themselves in social relationships as a boy or girl; for example, a boy may pick up that a man or boy opens a door for a woman or girl, and a girl may model from her mother how to support her father in some respects.

■ Developing concepts necessary for everyday living

Middle childhood children learn several social skills and understandings to be able to live. They learn that other people have enduring traits, such as shyness, friendliness or aggressiveness, and they learn social rules, such as who should be addressed politely and how to dress for different occasions. They also learn about differences in status and how these affect social interaction and power. In short, they learn how to interact effectively with others (McCormick & Scherer 2018).

■ Developing attitudes towards social groups and institutions

Social development is strongly linked to cognitive development (McCormick & Scherer 2018), especially when attitudes develop towards groupings and institutions. Attitudes mainly develop based on modelling from parents and significant others and based on the child's own experiences with the group or institution. Attitudinal development during this developmental stage can greatly influence a child's later socialisation.

   The following tasks in the *adolescence* stage are linked to healthy social development.

◼ Achieving new and more mature relationships with age mates of both sexes

The desire to belong is paramount during adolescence; therefore, increased involvement and interest in peer relationships are demonstrated (Louw & Louw 2020). A clear shift to involvement with friends from the other sex also occurs, from which romantic relationships often start to develop. Dunphy (in Louw & Louw 2020) devised a model of adolescent peer group development that is still relevant today. According to Dunphy's model, during the first stage, boys and girls form separate cliques, usually consisting of five to seven members. During the second stage, these boy and girl cliques start to socialise with each other. In the third stage, the most popular members of these cliques start to form a heterosexual clique, while the other members of the separate cliques start to form a crowd during the fourth stage. During the last stage, the crowd starts to disintegrate when a loose association of couples comes to the fore.

◼ Achieving a masculine or feminine social role

The matter of achieving a masculine or feminine social role moved from awareness during early childhood to learning or acceptance of the role during middle childhood to achieving the role of choice in adolescence. This was also described under healthy psychological development, but social development is intended to support relationship formation and, more specifically, romantic relationships. Havighurst did not describe all the permutations of masculinity and femininity we find today. However, in current terms, a variety of more social roles can be achieved in line with the LGBTQIA+ movement. As mentioned earlier, Connoly and McIsaac (cited in Louw & Louw 2020) described romantic relationships as moving through the following three stages: eleven- to thirteen-years-old, entering into romantic attractions and affiliations; fourteen- to sixteen-years-old, exploring romantic relationships; and seventeen- to nineteen-years-old, consolidating romantic bonds.

◼ Preparing for marriage and family life

During the middle 1900s, when Havighurst developed his theory, marriage and family life were the obvious developments after adolescence. Currently, this development is complicated by several factors, such as post-school education, high divorce rates of parents scaring late adolescents off from marriage, millennials and Generation Z wanting to travel the world, a marriage that is complemented by other forms of secure relationships and so forth. Therefore, many late adolescents and early adults postpone this development to middle adulthood and wish to see the world first, enjoy themselves, work overseas to save for a home and so forth, before settling

down in a more stable relationship (anecdotal evidence inferred from the lead author and his wife's five children).

◼ Desiring and achieving socially responsible behaviour

Despite adolescence being described by many commentators as a time of emotional turmoil and intense experiences, adolescents need to achieve socially acceptable and responsible behaviour by the end of this stage. This is linked with clear identity development and formation that should preferably be accomplished by the end of adolescence (see Erikson's theory later in this chapter and Marcia's concept of identity achievement [Louw & Louw 2020]). This, again, is linked to personality development, which is often seen to become relatively fixed by 20-years-old. The adolescent's identity and personality should have developed to become a socially responsible adult by then.

◼ Healthy spiritual development

The following task in the *infancy* and *early childhood* stage is linked to healthy spiritual development.

◼ Forming concepts and learning language to describe physical and social reality

This task has also been described as part of healthy psychological development. Learners' thinking becomes more organised and sophisticated as they move from infancy to early childhood, and subsequently, they start to expand their knowledge about both the physical and the social world. *Why* questions are developed to understand their reality better (Louw & Louw 2020). Spiritual reality is often introduced to infants and early childhood children by their parents or significant others, and although at the sensory-motor or preoperational cognitive stage with limited understanding of the abstraction of spirituality (see the discussion of Piaget's stages of cognitive development later in this chapter), children do accept a spiritual reality.

The following task in the *middle childhood* stage is linked to healthy spiritual development.

◼ Developing conscience, morality and a scale of values

This task also relates to healthy psychological development and was described earlier. The development of morality during this stage is probably

linked strongest to spiritual development, and distinguishing between right and wrong is possibly the most important moral task to master during middle childhood (Louw & Louw 2020). This lays the foundation for morality, moral values and spirituality to develop. Kohlberg's important theory of moral development highlights the establishment of such a foundation according to which middle childhood children are driven by the punishment and obedience orientation and by individualism, instrumental purpose and exchange (Louw & Louw 2020), and it was referred to and will be described in more detail later in this chapter. This moral development can be seen as the precursor to spiritual values that will develop when faith in a higher being is pursued.

The following task in the *adolescence* stage is linked to healthy spiritual development.

■ Acquiring a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behaviour: Developing an ideology

This task also overlaps with healthy psychological development. Kohlberg mentions that adolescents find themselves in the conventional level of moral development. Stages of mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and conformity (or the good boy/girl gender orientation) and the morality of social systems and conscience orientation (Louw & Louw 2020) are described. Adolescents try to conform to expectations and abide by their conscience, but this is often hampered by the striving for independence. This moral and ethical development relates strongly to spiritual development, where a higher being is served and requires high morality and ethical conduct.

■ Healthy educational development

The following task in the *infancy* and *early childhood* stage is linked to healthy educational development.

■ Learning to read

Apart from learning to walk (biological development) and learning to talk (psychological and social development), learning to read is probably the most fundamental skill in healthy educational development. Reading is also the most crucial skill in being called a 'literate' person (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2004). Although reading is taught and practised in the first formal year of schooling, the foundations of reading are already laid at the pre-school level through vocabulary development and pre-reading skills that are nurtured via oral

language skills and phonological awareness. Recognition of letters and words is crucial to the eventual fluent reading (Louw & Louw 2020).

The following task in the *middle childhood* stage is linked to healthy educational development.

◼ Developing fundamental skills in reading, writing and calculating

Reading skills are now followed up in the early school years by attending to writing skills and basic mathematical calculations. Together, these three aspects make up the components of a literate person. At the basis of these three fundamental skills lies appropriate school readiness, which consists of a level of maturity in the biological, psychological (cognitive and emotional) and social domains (Louw & Louw 2020). To these, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2022) has added digital skills.

The following task in the *adolescence* stage is linked to healthy educational development.

◼ Preparing for an economic career

This task is strongly related to healthy psychological development and was discussed here. From late primary school, learners must start thinking seriously about their careers. The choice of high school and concomitant subject choices in early high school and career choices later in high school represent crucial decisions to prepare adolescents for the world of work. In this regard, the age of eighteen-years-old is usually seen as the transition from schooling to work or post-school study. Moving seamlessly on to a career that is well chosen and linked with an adolescent's abilities, interests and personality is probably the ultimate goal of school education (inferred from Hay 2018).

This concludes the section on healthy and uninterrupted child development. We now look at theories underpinning holistic human development and wellness.

◼ Theories dealing with holistic human development and wellness

In this section, we further investigate theories that are related to healthy holistic development and wellness.

■ An introduction to holistic development and wellness

Firstly, an effort is made to discuss theories that can be viewed as holistic, such as the bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational model of Engel and Winiarski (adapted by Hay & Joubert 2021), the bio-ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner and the social ontogenesis theory of Nsamenang. Thereafter, specific theories focusing on particular domains are discussed in terms of biological, psychological and social development (in the form of cognitive, psycho-social, psychosexual and attachment theories) and moral development. These theories and theorists were mentioned at the start of the previous section, and all of them deal with specific aspects or domains of human development, thereby feeding into our understanding of a holistic view of development. Our understanding of holistic development has been further strengthened by the later exponents on wellness and well-being; they did us a favour by taking a holistic view of wellness, inclusive of the comprehensive domains of human functioning. The theories of wellness of Ardell, Hettler, Arloski, Travis, Wissing, Temane, Keyes and Prilleltensky will round off this section.

■ The bio-psycho–social–spiritual model of Engel and Winiarski, and the addition of the educational domain

George Engel was an American psychiatrist who became disillusioned by the bio-medical model of treating patients. The focus, according to him, was too strongly on the biological and medical side of a human being; he then developed the bio-psycho–social model of human illness and treatment (Engel 1977). Through this model, he aimed to look at patients in a more holistic way by adding the psychological and social domains to explain what is happening to a person. Single biological–medical causes for mental health issues should no longer be the norm but a broader view that includes social and psychological factors.

Mark Winiarski (1997) extended Engel's bio-psycho–social model with his research on patients living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). He added the spiritual component of a human being to name the model the 'bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of human functioning'. He was convinced that a human being can only be viewed holistically if the spiritual component is also attended to. Health care workers then had to make a concerted effort to not only focus on a person's bio-medical, psychological and social domains

but also add the spiritual domain by either assessing it themselves or referring the person to a team member focused on spirituality.

Hay and Joubert (2021) extended the bio-psycho–social–spiritual model even further when dealing with holistic child development by adding the educational domain. The bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational model of human and child functioning also needs to focus on the educational domain of a child. In terms of the focus of this book, this seems quite important, as the interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial effect on children's educational progress worldwide.

■ The ecological systems and bio-ecological models of Bronfenbrenner

In the late 1970s, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed his ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner 1981), which was later adapted to the bio-ecological model (Swart & Pettipher 2019). The ecological systems model is built on ecological-environmental concepts and the systems theory (of Ludwig von Bertalanffy).

The ecological systems model represents a theory that tries to account for all intrinsic and extrinsic systemic influences on a child's development and functioning. Intrinsic means that all biological–neurological and psychological (i.e. cognitive, conative and affective) factors may have an impact on a child's development or functioning. Extrinsic means that all social–environmental systemic factors may have an impact on a child's development and functioning. The development and functioning of a child (in fact, of a person) happen within four systems, namely, the microsystem (intrinsic factors and the closely involved systems surrounding the child), the mesosystem (interaction among a number of microsystems), the exosystem (systems with which the child is not directly involved in but still influence the child's development), the macrosystem (current social and economic influences on national and international level affecting values and beliefs) and the chronosystem (how time influences and plays a role in development and functioning) (Donald et al. 2020).

Through this model, Bronfenbrenner tried to inculcate a holistic view of child development by considering all intrinsic and extrinsic factors that could influence a person's development and functioning. Later, he realised that not enough was made of the intrinsic biological domain or system, and he re-named his model the *bio-ecological model*. With this, he emphasised that the intrinsic biological system or domain of a human's development and functioning could never be minimised or neglected.

The bio-ecological model is currently utilised to explain the development of humans but is of particular relevance in the field of inclusive education or special needs – to explain how barriers to learning develop based on the inner and outer systems of a child. Related to this book, it can be stated that the COVID-19 pandemic is or was an extrinsic factor on the macrosystemic level that eventually influenced or influences much of every child's development and functioning worldwide.

It also needs to be stated that there are a number of similarities between Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model and Engel and Winiarski's bio-psycho–social–spiritual (–educational) model: the biological system or domain clearly overlaps, and the social domain of the latter is similar to the ecological system of the former. Although not very clear in Bronfenbrenner's model, one can confidently state that the intrinsic systems also encompass components of Engel and Winiarski's psychological, spiritual and educational domains. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems also include the components of Engel and Winiarski's model's psychological, spiritual and educational domains, as extrinsic factors and systems highly influence these domains. An African perspective has also complemented these predominantly Western-orientated theories of holistic human development – that of Bame Nsamenang.

◼ The social ontogenesis theory of Nsamenang

According to Nsamenang (2006), the commonly held views of human development and intelligence are nuanced by Euro-American ethnocentrism and presented as being universally applicable despite significant ethnic diversity. The dearth of theories that capture human development in some parts of the world has led to overreliance on the Euro-American theories of child development. Although these theories are beneficial in many ways, they do not fully represent indigenous views. In this regard, in Africa – a continent that is characterised by the legacy of colonialism and much diversity – there is a dire need for context-specific theories that shed light on child development and mirror the socio-ecological processes that influence such development. The theory of social ontogenesis is an attempt to fulfil the need for Afrocentric theories of development.

Although it was developed in West Africa, the theory of social ontogenesis is an attempt to reflect context-specific views on humanity and development. The terms 'ontogeny' and 'ontogenesis' refer to an organism's development process (Tadaura 2020). Therefore, human ontogenesis is indicative of human development. According to Nsamenang (1992), human ontogenesis or human development occurs within three phases of selfhood: spiritual selfhood, social or experiential selfhood, and

ancestral selfhood. Spiritual selfhood commences during the reincarnation of an ancestral spirit or during conception and ends when an infant is named (Nsamenang 2006). Social or experiential selfhood commences after the naming process and ends when biological death occurs, and ancestral selfhood follows biological death (Nsamenang 2006).

Social ontogenesis, which occurs across seven stages, is the focus of this concise description of Nsamenang's work. These stages are neonatal (newborn), social priming (infancy), social apprenticing (childhood), social entrée (puberty), social internment (adolescence), adulthood, and old age and death (Nsamenang 1992, 2006). The process of human social ontogenesis entails the transformation of children, thus enabling them to individuate. Nsamenang (2006) argues that individuation is the process of acquiring personhood and identity or being by actively participating in socio-cultural activities offered by communities in culturally meaningful ways. He further argues that a unique sense of self and personal identity is a product of one's ecoculture, and for full personhood to be achieved, a child requires other people and social responsibility. Meaningful attachments to competent adults and peers go a long way towards enabling positive development in children during the formative years and beyond. Through these interactions, cultural content is disseminated to enable young people to participate meaningfuly in the activities of their communities.

It should be emphasised that the theory of social ontogenesis recognises the role of children's socio-cultural ecologies in determining their developmental outcomes. It contributes substantially towards our understanding of the importance of quality human interaction in determining a child's developmental trajectory. It shows that normative development can be achieved if a child's socio-cultural ecology is favourable or optimal. It is important to note that achieving normative child development requires stability and a measure of predictability in socio-cultural ecologies. While this theory sheds light on understanding human development in West Africa, some may not accept its assertions on spiritual and ancestral selfhoods.

The lockdown and the subsequent intermittent school attendance resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted children's social ecologies. The family remained the main *microsystemic stronghold* for children (Theron & Engelbrecht 2012), but less so the school and the peer group. It is, therefore, important to understand how this disruption and instability influenced physical, social and psychological development in children and how backlogs in this regard can be overcome.

The next section discusses child development theories focusing on specific domains or sub-domains.

◼ Biological development: Gallahue's Hourglass life span motor development model

The hourglass life span motor development model, which was originally developed by Gallahue (1998) and adapted by Donnelly et al. (2017), portrays four main phases of motor development that build on one another and can be influenced by both heredity and the environment. In the first phase, the reflexive movement phase (from pre-birth to about one-year-old), the infant primarily relies on reflexes (involuntary movement reactions to specific stimuli) to obtain information from the environment and seek nourishment and protection through movement. In the second or *rudimentary phase*, which overlaps with the reflexive phase (birth to around two-years-old), the child's higher brain centres take over the control of his or her movements, and reflexes are gradually replaced by voluntary movements that form the basis for more advanced movement in the subsequent phases. The third phase, the *fundamental movement phase* (two- to seven-years-old), entails the development of fundamental movement skills such as running, jumping, catching a ball and balancing on one leg, which usually progresses from basic, uncoordinated skills at around two- to three-years-old to mature patterns of movement at around six- to seven-years-old. The maturation of these fundamental movement skills is extremely important, as fine motor skills, such as reading and writing, and more advanced movements, such as sports skills, will not develop optimally without them. The fourth phase of motor development is the *specialised movement phase* (seven- to fourteen-years-old and older), and within this phase, the fundamental movement skills normally develop into refined movement and sports skills that enable the child to participate in lifelong physical activities. The critical period for the transition of fundamental movement skills into fine motor skills and sports-specific skills within the fourth phase of motor development is from seven- to ten-years-old, which correlates with the first years of school.

Donnelly et al. (2017) point out that if a child receives sufficient physical stimulation and practice, they will progress optimally through the phases of motor development and will usually experience a rapid improvement in visual acuity, tracking abilities, reaction time, movement time and sensorimotor integration by the end of late childhood (eight- to twelve-years-old). This refinement and improved harmony of perceptual-motor skills enable children to perform various sophisticated movement skills during late childhood, going into the prepubescent growth spurt (at around ten-years-old among girls and twelve-years-old among boys). With a basis of well-developed movement skills, young people will move through the typical growth phases of puberty (between nine- and thirteen-years-old in girls and between eleven- and fifteen-years-old

in boys) and adolescence (between thirteen- and eighteen-years-old in girls and between fifteen- and 21-years-old in boys) with movement competence and will be able to transition to lifelong recreational, competitive or daily living utilisation of these skills.

In Gallahue's model, the thin 'waist' of the hourglass shape represents the filters of heredity and environmental factors that influence the motor competence levels achieved in the four phases of motor development. Nothing can be done about the hereditary filter, but various environmental factors, such as poor nutrition, a lack of physical activity and too much screen time, can influence the typical motor development and growth phases of children. This is where the social seclusion and lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a major effect, as discussed later in this chapter.

■ Cognitive development: Piaget's theory of cognitive development

Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist who developed the most influential theory of cognitive development (predominantly seen as part of a child's psychological development). He stated that children (and adults) moved through four stages of cognitive development.

The first stage is called the *sensorimotor stage*, lasting from birth to two-years-old. Sensory and motor development drive cognitive development during this period. The infant's senses develop and lead to the discovery of the world around him or her through touching, smelling, hearing and seeing. At the same time, the child's motor abilities develop rapidly to ensure crawling, standing up, walking and limb movement. These all contribute to expanding the child's cognitive development through the energy and curiosity released by sensory and motor unfoldment.

The second stage is the *preoperational stage*, which is indicative of the time before cognitive operations kick in – with a duration of two to six years. During this time, language and symbols develop, representing objects and ideas. Egocentric thinking (only viewing the world from one's own perspective) and animism (ascribing life to lifeless objects) are characteristic of this period of cognitive development.

The third stage is the *concrete operational stage*, lasting seven to eleven years. The child now develops the ability to work with cognitive or mental operations despite it still being concrete and not abstract. An example is that the child can start to do mathematical operations but not on an abstract level.

The final stage of cognitive development is the *formal operational stage*, from twelve-years-old and older. Here, the adolescent starts to engage in abstract operations that all happen in the mind and without any concrete thinking necessary. Hypothetical situations can be understood and argued, and deductive reasoning about possibilities is opening up (this section is primarily based on Louw & Louw 2020).

Piaget's stages represent the healthy and uninterrupted cognitive development of children. The question arises as to how the COVID-19 pandemic, with its distancing and interruption of socialising, may have influenced this particular sub-domain of psychological development.

◼ Psychosexual development: Freud's theory of psychosexual development

The development of sexuality was described by Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist, in his influential theory mentioned earlier in the chapter. Freud is often called the father of psychology for his oldest psychological perspective on humans, called the *theory of psychoanalysis*. He proposed that children move through five psychosexual stages guided by biological and psychological maturation. Every stage focuses on a different erogenous zone, and allowing too much or too little gratification in each stage may lead to fixation. The following discussion is mainly based on Louw and Louw (2020).

The first stage is the oral psychosexual stage from birth to one-year-old year. Sexuality is focused on the mouth, and gratification is achieved via sucking. If frustrated during this stage, the baby will resort to sucking the thumbs or nail biting, with too much eating or smoking later in life.

The second stage is the anal stage, from one- to three-years-old. Here, sexuality is focused on the anal area with particular attention to the control of elimination functions. Toilet training is foregrounded, with too early or too late attention, resulting in too rigid or too little cleanliness and order later in life.

The third psychosexual stage of development is called the phallic stage – from three- to six-years-old. Sexual energy is transferred to the genitals, and pleasure is experienced via genital stimulation. During this period, jealousy conflicts appear – where children feel desire for the other-sex parent – called the Oedipus conflict in boys and the Electra conflict in girls. Anxiety develops, and the child identifies with same-sex parental characteristics.

The fourth stage is typified as the latency stage, from six- to eleven-years-old. Sexual energy subsides somewhat, and the child's conscience

increasingly develops. More focus is also placed on interacting with adults and same-sex peers, with emphasis on schoolwork.

During the last psychosexual developmental stage, namely the genital stage, sexual impulses reappear in a strong way related to puberty. The art is now to channel this energy in a socially acceptable manner. Sexual maturity and satisfactory relationships may now develop into adulthood if these stages have been accomplished healthily.

Although little reference is made in this book about sexual development during the COVID-19 pandemic, one should reflect on how children's sexuality might have been affected by COVID-19-related consequences.

■ Biological–psychological maturation: Gesell's theory of maturation

Arnold Gesell was an American psychologist and paediatrician who popularised the belief that a timetable of child development exists. This timetable consists of age-related stages through which children move, with each stage being characterised by typical behaviours. Today, we still use many of his terms in everyday parental talk, for example, the terrible twos and school readiness. The unfoldment of children he described is based on biological and psychological maturation, primarily focusing on genetic endowment (Weizmann & Harris 2012).

Gesell believed that development in children happens in an orderly and patterned way, through stages that are comparable but not necessarily identical between one person and another. Although he mentioned the environment as a factor in people's development, his focus on heredity and genetic endowment via neuro-biological maturation overshadowed the external influences (Reed 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic may have interrupted some aspects of this biological–psychological timetabling development of children. This will become clearer throughout the chapters of this book.

■ Psycho-social development: Erikson's theory of psycho-social development

Erik Erikson was a German-American developmental psychologist who was a student of Freud. He developed his widely respected theory by focusing on eight psycho-social developmental stages, each with its unique crisis or challenge that needs to be overcome. For the purposes of this book, we only focus on the first five stages of infancy, childhood and adolescence (section mainly based on Louw & Louw 2020).

The first stage deals with trust versus mistrust (from birth to one-year-old). Here, a baby needs to connect and bond with a significant other or others in their lives to develop trust. If this bonding is impaired, mistrust may follow later in life.

The second stage focuses on autonomy versus shame and doubt (one–three-years-old). Here, an infant needs to learn, from a safe base of trust, to explore and become more autonomous. If not, shame and doubt may develop, which again may hamper autonomy seriously in later life.

The third stage deals with initiative versus guilt (three–six-years-old). During this period, further risk-taking via initiatives needs to occur in terms of trying out new initiatives or things, but the child also needs to learn how to handle failure. Guilt may develop over time if the child fails to persist with initiative and exploration.

During the fourth stage, industry versus inferiority takes precedence (six-years-old to adolescence). During this time, a child needs to learn how to work hard to attain goals and how to work with others to reach these goals. Without this, feelings of inferiority may take hold – lasting into adolescence and even adulthood.

The last psycho-social stage relevant to childhood is the adolescent period of identity versus identity confusion. Here, an adolescent is tasked with developing a clear sense of self that is integrated and consistent, also called an identity. When this is delayed or difficult to establish, identity confusion will follow, probably lasting into adulthood.

After reviewing these psycho-social stages of development again, the big question is how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected these stages and possibly deepened the challenges or crises of each of these periods.

◼ Emotional attachment: Bowlby's theory of attachment

John Bowlby was a British psychiatrist who focused on the emotional attachment between an infant and their mother. He based his theory on observation of the mother–child relationship – not only that of humans but also that of animals. The thread running through his observations was that the young will always cling to their mother until they develop; this was seen as the most significant factor in healthy development. Without this emotional attachment, healthy development would not be possible. He studied many children with impaired affect or deviant behaviour and found that most of these children experienced long periods of separation from their mothers or primary caregivers. His verdict was that disrupted

attachment from the mother or primary caregiver would lead to unsatisfactory or delayed emotional development (Curry 2008). Attachment suffered from severe constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic because of physical and social distancing. While bonding with mothers may have been mostly allowed, bonding with fathers and grandparents was seriously constrained at hospitals and homes.

■ Socio-cultural development: Vygotsky's theory of socio-cultural development

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed a theory that links social development with culture. He believed that every aspect of a child's development should be seen against the family's cultural background and that socialisation is directly linked to how relationships are formed within a specific culture. He also foregrounded the role of language in social and cultural development and believed that language is a key condition for this development. One of the much-used concepts from his theory is the *zone of proximal development*; herewith, Vygotsky argued that children can progress according to their potential when they are supported by a knowledgeable other who challenges them just above their current level of functioning. The challenge should not be too steep but in the zone of proximal development, which is slightly above existing functioning. With help, the child can then accomplish these challenging tasks.

Throughout the chapters of this book, the questions of whether COVID-19 had a negative impact on socio-cultural and language development and whether the principle of the zone of proximal development could still be implemented during the periods of isolation will hopefully be answered. This concludes the sub-section on focused domain-specific theories.

As stated in the introduction of this section, wellness theorists (since the second half of the 20th century) assisted substantially in helping us to view persons or children in a holistic manner.

More than 20 years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2000) stated that wellness was the optimal state of health of individuals and groups. Two concerns were emerging at that stage: the realisation that the fullest potential of an individual on physical, psychological, social, spiritual and economic levels should be pursued, and in addition, the optimal fulfilment of one's roles and expectations in the family, community, place of worship and other settings. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2022), *wellness* is a healthy state, especially when actively trying to achieve this. On the other hand, *well-being* is regarded as general health and happiness, a state of emotional, physical or psychological well-being. These two concepts are often used interchangeably. Wellness is often

individually defined and expressed differently for every individual and culture. Because of this very personal 'identity' of wellness, it is not prescriptive and can support every individual to achieve a positive state of well-being (Meraki 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone to revisit the values we treasure to achieve a state of wellness.

For this chapter and book, the following theorists and their models dealing with wellness are discussed: Don Ardell (high-level wellness model), William Hetler (the six-dimensional model of wellness), John Travis (the twelve dimensions of wellness) and Michael Arloski (the ten tenets of wellness). We also briefly report on an African perspective on the wellness of Mari Wissing and Michael Temane. The sub-section concludes with a more comprehensive explanation of wellness by Prilleltensky, as he broadens the focus of individual well-being to include relational and communal well-being.

◼ High-level wellness model of Ardell

Don Ardell started his road with wellness with a book named *High Level Wellness* in 1976, where five dimensions were illustrated within a circle. The dimensions were self-responsibility, physical fitness, stress management, environmental sensitivity and nutritional awareness. He viewed self-responsibility as crucial in the journey to reach wellness, implying that one is responsible for one's own health (Fair 2011).

Ardell then worked on a revised model where he developed the following dimensions of wellness: self-responsibility, relationship dynamics, meaning and purpose, nutritional awareness and physical fitness, and the new dimension of emotional intelligence. The latest model has three domains, namely, the physical and mental domains, as well as that of meaning and purpose – and fourteen skills areas. The model is illustrated in Figure 1.2.

What we can take from Ardell's model of wellness is that a golden thread of self-responsibility is evident and runs through all domains and skill areas. His model is relevant for the focus of this chapter on COVID-19 and the effects thereof on the development of our youth. Important also is the focus on the relationship between mental and physical health and the fact that people need to make meaning of their existence.

◼ The six-dimensional model of wellness of Hettler

William Hettler developed his six-dimensional model of wellness in 1979, where he defined the following dimensions of wellness: emotional, intellectual, occupational, physical, social and spiritual dimensions.
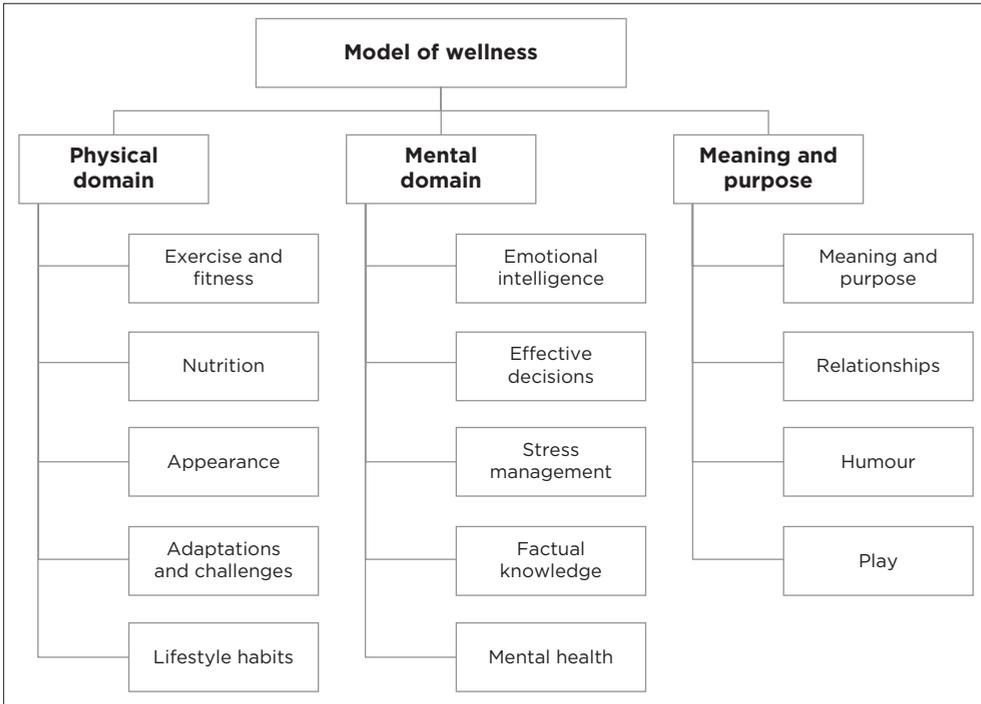
Source: Authors' own work.

FIGURE 1.2: Ardell's 2009 model of wellness.

His model relates to Ardell's model where, for example, the physical dimension is linked to exercise, fitness and nutrition – as also mentioned by Ardell. Hettler (1984, p. 3) stated that wellness was 'an active process through which people become aware of and make choices toward a more successful existence'. According to Oliver, Baldwin and Datta (2018), the definition of wellness, according to Hettler, made it possible to focus on holistic health and not only on the physical domain of a person. Later on, Hettler's six-dimensional model was expanded by Wiener, Mastroianni and colleagues at the State University of New York to become the eight-dimensional model of wellness by adding the environmental and cultural dimensions. Even later, a ninth dimension was added, namely, creativity, which relates to feelings and intelligence (Jonas 2000). To illustrate the now nine-dimensional model of wellness, Figure 1.3 is applicable.

■ The twelve dimensions of wellness according to Travis

John Travis developed the 12-dimensional model of wellness in 1975. As illustrated in Figure 1.4, these twelve dimensions interact with one another to contribute to an individual's wellness.

FIGURE 1.3: Hettler and colleagues' nine-dimensional model of wellness.

Of interest in his model is the change of emphasis in some dimensions – for example, he speaks of *moving* rather than *exercising* and *eating* rather than *nutrition* or *diet* (Arloski 2014). In this way, the sharp edges of the dimensions are minimised, and people may relate better to all the dimensions.

◼ The ten tenets of wellness according to Arloski

Michael Arloski (1994) developed his ten tenets of wellness and actively tried to answer the question of why people are not doing what they know

Source: Authors' own work.
FIGURE 1.4: The 12-dimensional model of wellness of Travis.

is best for them to live well. In his attempt to answer this question, he argued via the following tenets (Arloski 1994, pp. 1–4):

- Wellness is a holistic concept, as we need to look at the whole person.
- Wellness is, in fact, a process where you, as an individual, take care of yourself – therefore, self-esteem is at the core of being well.
- We need good relationships with peers, family or friends to help and support us.
- We have the ability to make choices in order to take control of our lives – and should act accordingly.
- As human beings, we are connected and should be committed to our natural world in order to have a solid sense of belonging.

- In the first place, we are responsible for our health, which implies that we need to own our choices that will influence our health and well-being.
- The ability to care for ourselves on all levels and be self-sufficient will help us overcome fears and allow us to make good choices.
- As much as we need others and good relationships, we also need time to focus on ourselves (called solo time).
- Wellness does not mean that you have to be perfect all the time.
- Lastly, it is important not to take yourself too seriously; give your inner child permission to come out and play.

◼ The general psychological well-being model of Wissing and colleagues

The general psychological well-being model proposes that hedonic well-being (where happiness or contentment and, therefore, pleasure are achieved and pain is avoided) and eudaimonic well-being (which refers to the quality of life and the fulfilment of goals) overlap (Khumalo, Temane & Wissing 2011). Wissing and her colleagues provided an African perspective on well-being, focusing on specific psychological strengths and an element of resilience that allows individuals to cope with adverse situations and psycho-social challenges (Khumalo et al. 2011).

◼ Well-being according to Prilleltensky

Isaac Prilleltensky initially distinguished between three sites of well-being in his model, namely, personal, relational and collective (Prilleltensky 2005). Later, he made a strong case for the relationship between (social) justice and wellness (Prilleltensky 2011). He used the two concepts 'wellness' and 'well-being' interchangeably and adjusted his model to have personal, interpersonal, organisational and communal levels of well-being. Furthermore, he distinguished between different types of justice, namely, distributive and procedural justice. To further explain and connect the types of justice to the levels of well-being, he used subtypes of justice. Firstly, intrapersonal justice focuses on the relationships individuals have with themselves and the fact that we can be fair or unfair to ourselves by, for example, putting ourselves down and treasuring thoughts that we are unworthy. On an interpersonal or relational level, justice will be served by treating one another with respect and dignity. On an organisational level, justice will be served when information in organisations is shared, which can, for example, be in a family or a workplace. It is vital for an individual's well-being that information and communication are part of the process of making people part of the system. Community justice can be distributive, procedural, cultural and retributive.

This concludes the sub-section on wellness theories. However, resilience theories are closely related to wellness theories and contribute substantially to our understanding of human behaviour in adverse circumstances. Therefore, one of these resilience theories is discussed.

■ The social ecology of resilience theory of Ungar

Resilience research suggests that resilience is less of an individual trait and more of the capacity of an individual or group to function effectively in the face of circumstances that potentiate the risk of poor developmental outcomes (Schoon 2012). Another body of research shows that resilience is a product of bidirectional interaction between people at risk and their social ecologies, which include families, schools, neighbourhoods, community services and cultural practices serving as active support systems (Rutter 2012; Theron 2013; Ungar 2012). It is, therefore, clear that person–context interaction plays an important role in enabling resilience in circumstances that can predict maladaptive outcomes (Rutter 2012; Theron 2013; Ungar 2011, 2012). Michael Ungar developed his social ecology of resilience theory (SERT) based on some of the abovementioned principles (Ungar 2011, 2012).

The SERT is based on four basic principles, namely, decentrality, complexity, atypicality and cultural relativity (Ungar 2011). The principle of decentrality requires that a child at risk of maladaptive outcomes is decentred when evidence of resilience is sought. In other words, the focus should not centre on the child alone but rather on the contribution of a child's social ecology in enabling adaptive coping in the context of risk. The role of active support systems, such as the family, school, neighbourhood, community services and culture, must be recognised and acknowledged (Theron & Engelbrecht 2012; Ungar 2012).

The principle of *complexity* requires recognising that the phenomenon of resilience and the protective processes that enable it are too complex to predict singular developmental trajectories in all contexts (Ungar 2011). Resilience in one context may not be resilience in another context, as resilience is context-specific (Dass-Brailsford 2005). The principle of *atypicality* refers to instances wherein children cope with risk in atypical and unconventional ways (Ungar 2011). In other words, a type of coping behaviour may be viewed by society as behaviour that deviates from the norm, notwithstanding the fact that it enables coping in a child at risk of poor developmental outcomes. These atypical behaviours evidence what Ungar (2004) refers to as 'hidden resilience'. The last principle, namely, *cultural relativity* presupposes that the ways in which people cope with risk are rooted in their cultures and histories (Ungar 2011, 2012). There are

studies that show that children at risk depend on their cultures to cope with risk (Malindi & Theron 2010).

This concludes the section on theories at work in holistic development and wellness. Next is a discussion about how COVID-19 interrupted and influenced healthy development and wellness, which will, of course, be rolled out in more detail throughout the other chapters of the book.

◼ COVID-19 and the interruption of healthy development and wellness

Although children have been subjected to infection of the COVID-19 disease to a lesser degree than adults, the effect of the lockdown in various countries implies children's deprivation of institutional educational environments, social interaction with peers and family, and often a lack of sufficient and age-appropriate cognitive, emotional and physical stimulation (Wang et al. 2020). The pandemic has, therefore, indirectly had an impact on or interrupted the various domains of healthy development and wellness in children, including the biological–physiological, psychological, social, spiritual and educational domains.

◼ Biological–physiological impact

The benefits of regular physical activity for children are associated with the development of motor competence, as discussed in the hourglass life span motor development model of Gallahue (1998). Other benefits of sufficient levels of physical activity include cardiovascular health, musculoskeletal health, healthy body weight and associated psychological, social, emotional and cognitive benefits (Saltali 2021). In light of these health benefits, the recommendations for physical activity levels of the WHO (2020) stipulate that children between five- and seventeen-years-old should participate in at least 60 min of moderate to vigorous physical activities per day. However, several studies (e.g. Lafave, Webster & McConnell 2021; López-Bueno et al. 2021; Mozolev et al. 2021) show that the lockdown period of COVID-19 and the subsequent periods of restriction related to physical, social and sports activities have led to significant decreases in children's levels of physical activity to far below the requirements.

In a narrative review of potential health-related behaviour of school-aged children during the COVID-19 lockdown, López-Bueno et al. (2021) concluded that insufficient levels of physical activity are a major concern because of its associated lower levels of physical fitness and motor competence, and higher levels of percentage body fat among children.

These results are supported by those of Mozolev et al. (2021), who found a deterioration of physical fitness levels, motor abilities and body composition among seventeen- to nineteen-year-olds in Ukraine after nine months of lockdown, and of Lafave et al. (2021), whose findings indicate that the pandemic affected the physical activity levels and associated health behaviours of children in early childhood care centres in Canada.

Chapter 2 deals with this domain in more detail.

■ Psychological impact

It is well known that children require stability in their lives for normative development to occur. It is also known that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about much instability and uncertainty that threatened the uninterrupted, holistic development of learners. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted families and schools as microsystemic strongholds for learners, according to Theron and Engelbrecht (2012); consequently, learners were left vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes. Families and schools serve as main sources of psychological and social capital for learners at risk. In addition, learners require access to other services in their immediate communities to cope adaptively. However, the lockdown and the resultant movement restrictions reduced access to what Malindi (2018) refers to as 'socio-ecological resources', which include educational, health and social services, among other things.

A lack of access to socio-ecological resources that enable adaptive coping (during the lockdown) led to an increase in the number of people (including children) who developed mental health problems (Shi, Cahyani & Tiatri 2022). For example, there is evidence that under the lockdown, children experienced risks such as abuse and violence at home and that they did not have access to general and specific mental health services (Rajmil et al. 2021).

Under the lockdown, movement was restricted, and as research shows, learners exhibited behaviour such as irritability, agitation, introversion, hyperactivity, defiance, verbalising negative thoughts, nightmares and tearfulness, in addition to feeling isolated, anxious, depressed, stressed and bored (Chakraborty et al. 2021; Chaturvedi, Vishwakarma & Singh 2021). This implies that the lockdown restrictions disrupted holistic development and gave rise to mental health problems in learners with unreliable support systems. This rendered them vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes in the psycho-social and psychoeducational domains.

Chapter 4 deals with this domain in more detail.

■ Social impact

As explained earlier in this chapter, it is evident how important the social development of every child is during every stage of their life. The question arises as to what the social impact of the COVID pandemic was. School closures during the pandemic led to children experiencing isolation, which contributed substantially to lesser in-person socialising of children worldwide. The developmental stages of a child described earlier are closely related to the social stimulation of a child – for example, to compare oneself with others (middle childhood) or the development of different gender roles. Other important developments dependent on socialising are, for instance, being able to talk, get along with others, develop relationships and demonstrate socially responsible behaviour.

The school environment provides the opportunity to develop relationships, not only between children but also between children and teachers (Sarkova et al. 2014). The impact of the pandemic was that children had much less opportunity to be part of this environment to develop socially.

Chapter 6 deals with this domain in more detail.

■ Spiritual impact

The development of a child on a spiritual level is very closely related to their social development and, more specifically, moral development to be able to distinguish between right and wrong. Children also have to develop their own set of values and worldviews, which are informed by the spiritual point of departure. The impact on the spiritual level during and after the COVID-19 pandemic was centred on the spiritual distress that people experienced – related to the suffering and losses they had. This had a detrimental effect on the well-being of people infected and affected by COVID-19 (Coppola et al. 2021). The research of Manning et al. (2019) on spirituality is pertinent in this regard, namely, to find meaning in life and the ability to reframe loss that is experienced – in this instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 5 deals with this domain in some detail.

■ Educational impact

The lockdown rules and regulations exposed the inequalities that existed as a legacy of previous political systems in South Africa. For instance, some schools struggled with online education because of poor or a total lack of infrastructure (Spaull & Van der Berg 2020). In terms of mortality, the rate was very low among learners but somewhat higher among teachers who

had comorbidities (Spaull & Van der Berg 2020). Stress, fear and anxiety were commonplace at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and parental and teacher mortality imperilled the well-being and mental health of learners.

Online teaching appeared to have been the most viable option, especially in countries such as India (Pareek & Soni 2020). However, online teaching and learning in some parts of, for example, Nigeria were hindered by poor infrastructure and a lack of digital skills among teachers (Onyema et al. 2020). Maree (2021) notes that the schooling system in South Africa – upon returning to school after the hard lockdown – faced challenges such as large classes, which made social distancing difficult. He adds that, as in parts of Nigeria (Onyema et al. 2020), moving to online learning was difficult for many learners, especially those in disadvantaged schools, with the curriculum being trimmed and schools losing time because of rotation and platooning. Undoubtedly, learners lost a lot in terms of content, and teachers experienced more stress because of increased workloads and reduced support. Chapter 3 deals with this domain in more detail.

In this section, a concise glimpse was provided on some of the COVID-19 impacts on the bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational domains of children during and after the pandemic. These impacts are explored in more detail throughout the chapters of the book, and we also hope to provide some meaningful intervention recommendations.

■ Overcoming the developmental disruptions of the pandemic through meaningful interventions

A few principles regarding meaningful intervention should be stated upfront. The first of these is that midst- and post-COVID-19 interventions will probably lean towards curative intervention, based on the damage that the pandemic may have done in the different domains. However, with the reality of curative intervention, preventive interventions will also have to be carried out to prevent further negative impacts. A second principle is that multidisciplinarity and a holistic view are at play when intervening: this book has been constructed and developed from a multidisciplinary and holistic perspective, as one discipline cannot attend to all five domains of the bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational model. Although all the authors involved in this book are specialist educators and work in a Faculty of Education, substantial multidisciplinarity was possible. The authors are qualified not only as educators but also as psychologists, kinesiologists, Physical Education (PE) specialists and early childhood, life skills and learner support experts. Of course, these education specialists do not make

up a full multidisciplinary team; further specialists such as psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, neurologists, spiritual leaders and occupational, physio- or speech-therapists would have completed the team, but the specialist educator team goes a long way in intervening holistically within the educational environment.

In the following chapters of this book, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and suggested interventions are put to the fore. It seems crucial that our at-risk children are supported and the impacts the pandemic has had are minimised so that development can proceed within as healthy parameters as possible. Chapters 2 to 6 deal with the different domains of the bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational model.

Chapter 2 focuses on biological–physiological development during the COVID-19 pandemic and ways in which the impact on this domain of human functioning can be lessened.

Chapter 3 zooms in on the academic development of learners during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and how gaps in this regard can be mended.

Chapter 4 focuses on the psychological impact of the pandemic and how it can be softened in learners' psyches.

Chapter 5 deals with the spiritual development of children during and after the pandemic and ways to intervene.

Chapter 6 emphasises the social development of learners during this time and how measures can be developed to alleviate interruptions.

Chapters 7 to 9 deal with specific issues that need emphasis beyond the mentioned five domains. Chapter 7 foregrounds how holistic health should be improved in early childhood education.

Chapter 8 looks at the curriculum and epistemological access for young learners at risk through language and number concept development and information technology.

Chapter 9 focuses on enabling resilience in learners who experienced loss and bereavement related to the pandemic.

The final chapter tries to integrate the findings from all previous chapters. Chapter 10 provides an integrated vision of how the developmental disruptions of COVID-19 should be overcome.

■ In closing

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the world hard and interrupted the development of children dramatically in many ways. Our task now is to intervene to support our children to overcome this adversity.

Biological–physiological development amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for focused interventions

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■ Introduction

Generally, bio-physiological development involves bodily transformation and maturity that occur over time in the form, size and functioning of the body and vital systems. Physical activity is important for the optimal development of children's bodies. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020b) recommended 60 min of moderate to vigorous physical activities per day for children between the ages of seven- and fifteen-years-old, based on evidence of the benefits of regular physical activity for children. The benefits of regular physical activity include the improvement of cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, blood pressure, dyslipidaemia, glucose and insulin resistance, bone health, cognitive outcomes (including academic performance), mental health (including the reduction of depression) and body composition (Donnelly, Mueller & Gallahue 2017; Stensel, Hardman & Jason 2022; WHO 2020a). The advent of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the related lockdown restrictions made physical activity almost impossible for learners, as they were confined to their homes.

The periods of confinement imposed by most countries during the COVID-19 pandemic meant that learners were deprived of various opportunities to be physically active. For example, activities such as Physical Education (PE) at school, actively commuting to and from school, sports and other recreational physical activities were restricted. Even before COVID-19, health professionals worldwide expressed concerns regarding the declining and low levels of physical activity among children who are associated with various health risks (Osborne et al. 2016; Stroebel, Hay & Bloemhoff 2017).

Several studies have investigated the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on physical activity levels and associated health risks for children and adolescents (Dunton, Do & Wang 2020; Lafave, Webster & McConnell 2021; Molozev et al. 2021; Pajek 2022; Pombo et al. 2021). Regarding physical activity levels, Dunton et al. (2020) reported significantly lower levels of physical activity among three- to thirteen-year-old American children. These findings were corroborated by the findings of another study conducted by Razi and Nasiri (2021), which showed that physical inactivity, overweight and obesity levels of learners in Iran had increased during the first two years of the pandemic.

Molozev et al. (2021) found a deterioration in physical fitness levels, motor abilities and body composition among seventeen- to nineteen-year-old Ukrainian youths after nine months of the lockdown. Pajek (2022) found significantly lower physical activity levels and lower physical fitness and motor fitness indexes among more than 1,600 learners in Slovenia two years into the pandemic. In their review of

studies involving school children during the COVID-19 lockdown in various countries, as reported in over 70 studies, López-Bueno et al. (2021) conclude that the lower levels of physical fitness and motor competence and higher percentages body fat associated with a lack of physical activity are a major concern.

Even among pre-school learners, research shows that there are risks related to the motor development and health behaviour of children because of a decrease in physical activities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lafave et al. 2021; López-Bueno et al. 2021; Saltali 2021). The lower levels of physical activity and higher levels of sedentary behaviour and the subsequent deterioration in body composition have been associated with increased overeating, sedentary lifestyles, lengthy screen time and a lack of PE opportunities because of the COVID-19 restrictions (Dunton et al. 2020; Razi & Nasiri 2021).

Physical Education is generally seen as an important contributor to learners' overall health, as it provides a variety of structured and educational opportunities for meaningful physical activities (Donnelly et al. 2017). Studies indicated that PE has a positive effect on the physical activity, emotional well-being and academic performance of learners (James et al. 2023; Kliziene et al. 2021). Researchers investigated the effect of the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the teaching of PE in various countries (Cruickshank, Pill & Mainsbridge 2022; González-Calvo et al. 2022; Varea, González-Calvo & García-Monge 2022). Data were collected mostly from the perspectives of PE teachers who taught the subject virtually (Cruickshank et al. 2022; González-Calvo et al. 2022; Varea et al. 2022) or face-to-face while implementing COVID-19 recommendations within the PE class (Kamoga & Varea 2022). In this regard, González-Calvo et al. (2022) report that teachers experienced challenges in the presentation of PE virtually, expressed that they struggled with effectively teaching the practical components of PE online, missed personal contact with the learners and found it difficult to assess learners' practical movement skills in the virtual realm.

In Sweden, where no lockdown was imposed, measures such as social distancing, the avoidance of physical contact and outdoor classes were enforced (Kamoga & Varea 2022). Teachers were frustrated and concerned about the effect of these adaptations on learners' social interaction, motivation to participate and reaching specific outcomes that require physical contact (Kamoga & Varea 2022). After reviewing the experiences of teachers offering PE during the pandemic, Cruickshank et al. (2022) also point out that teachers tended to focus more on the facilitation of physical activities while neglecting educational aspects such as the development of fundamental movement skills and movement competence, as well as personal, social and health literacy development.

Other studies show that the lower physical activity levels because of COVID-19 restrictions have led to lower levels of psychological and physiological health (Wilke et al. 2021b). Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, in part because of PE not being a stand-alone subject, challenges in terms of implementation were reported by PE teachers in several studies. Examples are the lower status accorded to PE, underqualified PE teachers, a lack of financial support and equipment, and large class sizes (Burnett 2020; Stroebel, Hay & Bloemhoff 2018; Van Deventer 2012).

When WHO declared COVID-19 a public health emergency in March 2020, the South African government placed the country under a lockdown (with all schools closed) from 26 March to 30 April 2020 and, subsequently, in different emergency state levels of alert until the state of emergency was lifted in April 2022 (South African Government 2022). In the context of South Africa, it is important to note that PE represents a part of the compulsory school subject Life Skills (Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase) and Life Orientation (Senior Phase and Further Education and Training Phase) (Department of Basic Education 2011).

In South Africa, the COVID-19 restrictions, which included fewer opportunities for PE, have also led to a marked reduction in physical activity levels among children (Wilke et al. 2021a). Currently, there is a dearth of studies on the impact of the pandemic on the bio-physiological development of learners in South Africa following the COVID-19 pandemic that led to reduced physical activity. The aim of this study was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the biological–physiological development of learners and the views of South African PE teachers on interventions needed to stimulate physical development among learners.

∎ Theoretical and conceptual framework

This study was undergirded by the bio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner. As discussed in Chapter 1, according to Bronfenbrenner's theory, children develop within five nested systems, namely, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. This model includes all aspects of development within the family, peer group, education system (specifically in the context of PE) and the community (Högman, Augustsson & Hedström 2020; Li & Cheong 2022). The microsystem constitutes patterns of activities, social roles and interpersonal relations within the immediate environment of the learner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). The immediate environment of the learner includes the family, school and peer group where proximal face-to-face interactions occur.

The restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic led to virtual PE classes, which excluded face-to-face contact between teachers

and learners. The lockdown regulations encouraged social distancing and the avoidance of physical contact in PE classes. The class forms part of the microsystem. The restrictions limited physical activity and, thereby, compromised the health and well-being of learners (Högman et al. 2020; Li & Cheong 2022).

Regarding the mesosystem, learners' families, schools and peer group physical interactions were disrupted in the context of COVID-19 (Li & Cheong 2022). However, schools used technology more than ever before to try and collaborate with parents because they had to supervise learners learning online. In the exosystem, COVID-19 led to some parents losing their jobs, others having to work for less pay and others having to work from home. These sudden changes had an impact on learners' development (Li & Cheong 2022).

The macrosystem refers to the wider social system in the community, such as culture, attitudes, beliefs, values and political and economic ideologies that may have an impact on any of the other systems such as schools and family systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006; Högman et al. 2020). The macrosystem directly or indirectly influenced holistic development in learners because dominant social structures, such as economies, cultures and religions, were affected.

The last system is the chronosystem. This system involves the time at which child development occurs over a specific period. It includes the child's age and different development stages in a particular era (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006). In this case, the chronosystem and holistic child development were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions.

■ Research methodology and design

This study was qualitative and designed as a phenomenological study. The qualitative study was conducted (see Table 2.1) within an interpretivist paradigm (see Chowdhury 2014). A total of sixteen PE teachers (female, n = 9; male, n = 7) between the ages of 24- and 42-years-old were invited to take part in it. The invited participants were from schools in varying socio-economic areas, namely, four schools from affluent socio-economic backgrounds, eight schools from middle-class socio-economic areas and four schools from poor socio-economic neighbourhoods. Among the invited participants were teachers who taught in the early childhood development (ECD), Intermediate, Senior and Further Education and Training (FET) Phases. The names of the schools were on a contact list of former education students of the North-West University. The researchers thus used convenient purposive sampling (see Etikan, Musa & Alkassim 2015) to recruit the participants.

TABLE 2.1: Demographic information of participants in the focus group interview.

Interviewee number	Gender	Age	Socio-economic status of school	Year of teaching
1	Female	23	Middle	1st
2	Female	26	Low to middle	3rd
3	Male	26	Low	3rd
4	Male	27	Middle to high	1st

Source: Authors' own work

Data were generated by means of an online, open-ended questionnaire, which was uploaded to the QuestionPro programme. The link to the questionnaire was included in the information and invitation letter that was sent to the participants via e-mail. Of the sixteen teachers who were invited, eight teachers completed the questionnaire anonymously.

The participants had the opportunity to read the information regarding the research project and then click on the link to provide informed consent and access the questionnaire. The questionnaire was focused on the participants' perceptions of their learners' biological–physiological development during the COVID-19 pandemic when PE and extramural activities were prohibited and made recommendations for enhancing bio-physiological development.

An online, semi-structured focus group interview was used by means of the Zoom application. The interview was recorded with consent from the participants and transcribed. The findings from the open-ended questionnaires informed the questions in the focus group interview. Only four of the teachers who completed the questionnaire agreed to participate in the focus group interview as well. The four interviewees were two women and two men between the ages of 24- and 30-years-old, two were from affluent schools and two were from schools in impoverished areas.

Thematic data analysis was used in this study to inductively analyse and interpret the data within the interpretivist framework (Chowdhury 2014). The data analysis process with regard to both the questionnaires and the interview involved the segmentation, categorisation, summarising and reconstruction of the data to capture important concepts as themes within the data set (Belotto 2018).

■ Trustworthiness and credibility

The process of developing the questionnaire included that the questions were presented to experts in the field to evaluate them and make recommendations before compiling the final questionnaire. Strategies to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the study included triangulation, member checking and peer debriefing (Belotto 2018). Triangulation was employed by comparing the data from the questionnaires with the data from the focus group interview; member checking entailed

that the researchers sent the transcribed data to the participants to confirm that the transcription was accurate; and peer debriefing was conducted by presenting the transcripts, emerging categories and final themes from the transcripts to an independent researcher for review and confirmation of the themes (Leedy, Ormrod & Johnson 2019).

■ Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee (EDU-REC) of the North-West University (NWU-00261-22-A2). Before deciding whether they wanted to participate in the study, the participants were offered the choice to attend an online Zoom meeting with the researchers to ask questions or acquire more information regarding the study. In addition to the participants' consent provided in the informed consent and invitation letter, the participants electronically gave consent again by clicking on the link to the questionnaire that was provided at the end of the invitation and informed consent letter. After clicking on the link, they were taken to a new page with the questionnaire, where the information was kept anonymous.

Total anonymity was thus maintained. If the participants decided not to participate and did not give informed consent, they were not taken to the questionnaire but were allowed to leave the programme. With reference to the focus group interview, the participants were asked again to provide informed consent for the recording of the interview and the anonymous use of their answers just after they connected to the Zoom application. The researchers also requested the participants in the interview to keep all discussions in the interview confidential. The participants were also assured that they participated of their own free will and that their data would be kept anonymous and confidential in reporting the data. No schools were identified or named in the responses to the questionnaire or interview.

■ Findings and discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the biological–physiological development of learners in the context of the pandemic and propose interventions to stimulate physical development among learners. Based on the analysis, the following three main themes emerged: *the absence of PE*; *challenges in presenting PE during the COVID-19 pandemic*; and *possible solutions for the presentation of PE*. Next, these themes are summarised in Table 2.2 and then discussed in more detail thereafter with supporting, unedited excerpts.

In the next section, the themes and subthemes are discussed with excerpts from the raw data.

TABLE 2.2: Themes and categories that emerged from the data analysis.

Theme	Category	Result
Theme 1: The absence of PE	Category 1	Impact on physical health
	Category 2	Impact on mental health
Theme 2: Challenges in presenting PE during the COVID-19 pandemic	Category 1	Large class sizes
	Category 2	A lack of equipment and facilities
	Category 3	Unqualified teachers
	Category 4	The poor status of PE
	Category 5	A lack of support
Theme 3: Recommendations for the presentation of PE	Category 1	Self-made equipment
	Category 2	The use of social media and videos
	Category 3	Train and qualify physical education teachers

Source: Authors' own work.

Theme 1: The absence of physical education

Most of the participants indicated that PE was not presented at their schools during the COVID-19 lockdown. This had a negative impact on the bio-physiological development of learners. In this regard, two of the participants mentioned:

'Sport and PE came to a complete stop.' (Interviewee 3)

'We could not give any PE during Covid, as the SGB [*school governing body*] forbid all learners to go out of the classrooms.' (Questionnaire participant 5)

Only one participant mentioned that PE was presented during the lockdown. This implies that learners had better chances of developing physically. The participant said:

'I have to say I was lucky because I could go on with PE, even with social distancing and masks.' (Questionnaire participant 8)

All the participants agreed that the absence of PE teaching because of the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact on learners' physical and mental health. Physical aspects that were negatively affected were learners' physical fitness levels, movement competence and body composition. For example, one participant referred to learners' failure to perform basic movements because of the two-year backlog in their development. The participant pointed out that physical injuries were commonplace as a result of the backlogs. The following excerpts bear evidence of the assertion above:

'Learners are unable to do basic movements and are two years behind in their physical movements and ability. This has a big impact on their sport that just begun and more injuries have occurred due to learners having no physical activity for the past two years.' (Questionnaire participant 2)

'After the lockdown many of my kids struggled to do basic movement skills that they should easily do at their age.' (Questionnaire participant 5)

It is important to note that because of the lockdown, learners were forced to lead sedentary lifestyles. This had the risk of learners becoming overweight and physically unfit, as the following excerpt shows:

> 'PE classes could not be presented, and learners also couldn't play on playground thus leading to increase of learners being overweight and unfit.' (Questionnaire participant 1)

Another participant added that the lack of physical movement during the lockdown had a direct impact on the physical health of some learners:

> '[...] no PE negatively impacted children's physical health [...] learners indicated that they gained weight.' (Questionnaire participant 2)

Another participant mentioned that they could not assess PE participation under ideal circumstances because of the lockdown restrictions. Surely, this compromised the quality of education and contributed to learners being less motivated. It seems as if some learners experienced mental health issues that led to suicide attempts, as they could not cope resiliently in the context of risk. The following excerpt bears evidence of the above statement:

> 'Having presented a [*PE*] lesson and ensure that quality assessments be put into place would have kept the learners in a better motivated mindset and could have prevented many teenage suicide attempts.' (Interviewee 2)

One participant mentioned that on a cognitive level, too, learners demonstrated backlogs. For example, some learners struggled to concentrate in class when schools resumed:

> 'Learners also struggled in class with concentration.' (Interviewee 3)

The long periods of no schooling and intermittent school attendance demoralised learners and contributed to their being reluctant to work in class. For example, one participant said:

> 'The COVID-19 pandemic has been used as an excuse and the learners as well as the educators have become lazy and reluctant to work.' (Interviewee 2)

It is evident from the responses of the participants that prohibiting the presentation of PE during the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative influence on learners, specifically on their physical, mental and cognitive health and development. For instance, the findings of the study show that the learners' movement skills were not up to standard and that they were unfit and overweight. The findings also show that learners were unmotivated to such an extent that there were suicide attempts, and learners demonstrated poor concentration, laziness and reluctance to work.

In the context of Gallahue's hourglass life span motor development model (Donnelly et al. 2017) and healthy biological development within Havighurst's (1972) developmental tasks theory, the finding that learners' movement skills are not on the level that they should be is a matter

of concern, as fine motor skills, writing and more advanced movements, such as sport skills, will not develop optimally if the basic movement skills are not developed well. As described in the hourglass model (Donnelly et al. 2017), the environmental factor of the lack of physical activity levels caused by the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have influenced the development of motor competence levels of learners negatively and can have far-reaching negative consequences for their further development of fine motor and sport skills. Also, in the context of healthy biological development within Havighurst's (1972) developmental tasks theory, the lack of physical activity can also negatively affect the task of learning physical skills necessary for games and sports in the middle childhood stage and the task of accepting one's physique and using the body effectively in the adolescence stage.

The absence of PE, resulting in insufficient physical activity levels, furthermore represents a significant problem because physical activity patterns in childhood are likely to persist into adulthood, which can lead to an increased risk for serious health conditions (Dunton et al. 2020). Another concern is the fact that this inactivity, especially among older children during the pandemic, is extremely difficult to change because of one's adaptation to new behavioural habits of inactivity (Moore et al. 2020). According to Kovac et al. (2022), this decline in physical activity may have greater negative implications for children's physical and mental health over the long term than the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic. If PE is not presented, children will not attain the benefits of regular physical activity (Opstoel et al. 2020).

■ Theme 2: Challenges in presenting Physical Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

In general, PE teachers were presented with new and unforeseen challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic that affected the effective presentation of PE and bio-physiological development. These challenges made it difficult for them to execute their teaching duties. Most of the participants clearly stated that the large class sizes were also a challenge in presenting PE during COVID-19. One interviewee said:

'My biggest challenge is having high amounts of students in a class for PE.' (Interviewee 1)

The large class sizes were especially challenging, as the learners had to maintain social distancing and could not do group work. In this regard, two participants mentioned the following:

'[…] 41 learners in class that have to do PE, and it is difficult as there is no space […] so it's impossible to do PE and maintain social distancing.' (Questionnaire participant 2)

'I have about 40 learners in class and is a big challenge, as it makes it difficult to observe all learners at the same time [...] this was easier when they worked in groups.' (Questionnaire participant 7)

Time allocation related to large classes that most of the participants had made it difficult for teachers to maintain discipline, perform all activities and attend to every learner in the class. For instance, one of the participants described her experiences in this regard as follows:

'Discipline in a big group of students is a big challenge when you only have a certain amount of time.' (Questionnaire participant 5)

One of the challenges faced by teachers from disadvantaged schools was resource constraints. In these schools, there were inadequate equipment, facilities and space to present PE classes. When school resumed, the COVID-19 regulations required that all equipment be sanitised before and after each lesson. Learners could not use one another's equipment, and this was difficult in schools that did not have sufficient equipment for each learner. The participants had the following to say:

'[...] biggest challenge is having little to none [*sic*] equipment.' (Questionnaire participant 4)

'Our school does not have a lot of equipment.' (Questionnaire participant 5)

'[...] allocated space, equipment [...].' (Questionnaire participant 8)

Another challenge that was mentioned by several participants was that PE was presented in schools by unqualified teachers who had not received any training in PE. In this regard, two participants had the following to say:

'[...] not all educators are qualified to teach PE.' (Interviewee 3)

'Classes were presented by teachers who had a free period.' (Questionnaire participant 5)

In this regard, one teacher referred to some of the consequences of PE being taught by less experienced teachers. A lack of experience and guidelines in the curriculum made it difficult for inexperienced teachers to teach competently, as the following excerpt shows:

'Teachers with little PE knowledge is [*sic*] scared to present PE classes, because there is nothing to work from; for example, the CAPS [*Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement*] just give you movements to do without the correct guidelines to follow.' (Interviewee 4)

It is noteworthy that even more experienced teachers complained about the lack of specificity in the curriculum, as the following excerpt shows:

'A well-trained Phys Ed teacher creates the environment in which learners will learn, participate in activities and motivates them to try new activities, but then it needs to be structured, and learners must know what is the goal of this specific activity.' (Interviewee 2)

Most of the participants indicated that PE was, even before the pandemic, not regarded as an important subject in their schools. To them, it was clear that the learners thought it was a waste of time:

'[*The learners*] think it is a waste of time and unnecessary. I think these perceptions are due to the fact that the learners are unfit; they don't have any interest in PE, and the teachers make it clear in front of the students that they find it unimportant and see it as wasting other subjects' time for class.' (Questionnaire participant 6)

Three participants pointed out that qualified and trained PE teachers understood the importance of PE, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and worked hard to change the perceptions of the learners in this regard. For example, one teacher remarked:

'[…] it is just difficult with the syllabus and the amount [*sic*] of learners in the school to do it effectively so that the learners can actually see the benefits and importance.' (Interviewee 3)

A lack of support from principals, teachers and school governing bodies was another challenge mentioned by the participants. For instance, two participants said:

'Support was not given. The principal sees it as something that must be done and the other teachers see it as a waste of time.' (Questionnaire participant 1)

'[…] there has been no support from my HoD [*head of department*] or deputy principal in giving advice, support and the necessary guidance that we need as teachers.' (Questionnaire participant 6)

The challenges faced by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic – but also even before the pandemic – can be summarised as large class sizes, insufficient equipment and facilities, unqualified and inexperienced teachers who had to present PE classes, the poor status of PE in schools and a lack of support from school management and teachers.

A study involving primary and secondary school learners in South Africa shows that 40.9% of the learners indicated that large class sizes contributed to their negative experience of PE (Burnett 2020). This was confirmed by Truelove et al. (2021), where teachers also reported that PE classes were overcrowded and that this factor had a negative impact on the teachers' abilities to meet the curriculum requirements.

An earlier study by Van Deventer (2011) indicated that 51% of Foundation Phase PE teachers and 49% of Intermediate Phase PE teachers were not qualified to present PE lessons. Moreover, another study by Van Deventer (2012) reported that 58% of Senior Phase PE teachers and 40% of PE teachers in the FET Phase were not qualified to present PE lessons. These percentages are supported by a recent study by Burnett (2020), which found that only 38.1% of teachers who taught PE classes were formally qualified.

According to a study by Truelove et al. (2021), when PE lessons are taught by generalist teachers, the focus is more on ensuring that the learners are active during the class and minimal focus is placed on the development of fundamental movement skills. In agreement with this, the findings of Cruickshank et al. (2022), who investigated the experiences of teachers offering online PE during the pandemic, indicate that teachers tended to focus more on the facilitation of physical activities while neglecting educational aspects, such as the development of fundamental movement skills and movement competence, as well as personal, social and health literacy development.

Osborne et al. (2016) also indicate that a lack of support from school management and the understated value of PE in the school context are real obstacles for PE teachers. Similarly, the findings of Stroebel et al. (2018) and Burnett (2020) indicate that a relatively low status is awarded to PE in most public schools in South Africa because school management, parents and teachers put emphasis on subjects that they feel are more important for career development, such as Science and Mathematics.

According to these researchers, PE teachers feel devalued when they receive no support from the school management (Burnett 2020; Stroebel et al. 2018), a statement which is supported by the findings of Cruickshank et al. (2022) that the poor status of PE and the lack of support for teaching PE during the COVID-19 pandemic led to feelings of demotivation and ineffective presentation of the subject among PE teachers.

■ Theme 3: Recommendations to overcome backlogs in physical development

All the participants in this study agreed that renewed efforts towards implementing PE at schools were necessary to improve biological–physiological health and development in learners. Most participants indicated that there were other resources and alternative methods that could be used in the presentation of PE. Regarding possible solutions to the problem of having no equipment available for presenting PE classes, the participants pointed out that teachers could improvise and make their own equipment by making use of recycled material and that they should be creative and innovative in doing so. The following remarks were made in this regard:

'[…] equipment can be self-made, or objects can be used that is [*sic*] suitable and safe. Sometimes you need to think out of the box for needed resources.' (Interviewee 4)

'[…] there is [*sic*] many videos on YouTube explaining and showing how to make certain equipment with recycled materials. You can also use different objects as cones and can create new equipment that can be used for multiple purposes for PE classes.' (Interviewee 1)

Another participant remarked:

> '[…] one good thing of [*sic*] the pandemic is that now we have learnt to use technology in addition to our face-to-face classes.' (Questionnaire participant 3)

The use of technology was mentioned as a possible solution to enhance the presentation of PE classes by other teachers as well. In this regard, most of the participants indicated that PE teachers could utilise videos and social media to support their presentation of PE. One participant stated this as an addition to his normal PE classes:

> 'The educator can use social media as a resource with millions of videos on the Internet. The educator can give challenges to learners every week to motivate them on taking on the challenge.' (Interviewee 3)

The participants indicated that they believed PE presented by qualified PE teachers would be successful and would contribute greatly to catching up on the fitness learners had lost during the pandemic. One participant stated:

> 'With quality PE educators, learners would do exercises they have learnt in class and do them at home once they got bored.' (Interviewee 4)

Furthermore, the participants made recommendations with regard to specific aspects of PE teacher training, including the management of large classes, the motivation of learners to participate in PE classes and other physical activities, and the promotion of the value of the subject in the school and the community. The following was said in this regard:

> 'Learner attitudes should be taken into account, where a lot of PE teachers start in a school with an expectation that all the learners are enthusiastic to participate in PE.' (Questionnaire participant 3)

> 'Topics can be included in training, for example, management of PE discipline, management of larger classes, improvisation of [*sic*] equipment, using space more effectively or [*the*] development of a safe PE environment.' (Interviewee 2)

One interviewee made a suggestion that was supported by all the other interviewees, namely, that parents and community members should also get involved in boosting children's physical activity levels:

> 'I think that parents and the community should get involved. Parents must go walking or exercise with their kids, and communities can have fun-runs or community sport days, like soccer or netball or even handball.' (Interviewee 3)

The findings with regard to the recommendations of the participants to overcome backlogs in physical development among learners are focused on the improvement of PE in schools, including the use of alternative and creative methods in the presentation of PE, such as using self-made equipment and using technology and social media to provide weekly challenges and home activities to motivate learners to be physically active. Furthermore, PE teacher training in the motivation of learners, the

management of discipline in PE and using space more effectively – and involving the community – can contribute to addressing the backlog in physical development among learners.

Learning in children takes place by viewing the behaviour of others, and therefore, children's learning in PE will vary depending upon whether the teacher is one with limited PE training or one who is specifically qualified in PE (Truelove et al. 2021). A study by Tian, Du Toit and Toriola (2017) investigating the effect of a PE intervention among Grade 7 learners in Potchefstroom, South Africa, indicated that the PE programme was successful in increasing children's physical activity levels because qualified PE teachers who knew how to motivate the learners to be physically active and who could improvise equipment and apparatus when no equipment was available were involved.

Similarly, Telford et al. (2016) concluded that learners experienced better health outcomes when PE classes were taught by PE specialists. Van der Westhuizen, Du Toit and Van der Merwe (2020) investigated the impact of a five-day, in-service PE teacher training programme (short course) on the perceptions of teachers in the North West Province regarding their effectiveness as PE teachers. The findings showed that the programme, which included training with regard to the motivation of learners, the value and aims of the subject and strategies regarding class organisation and assessment, had a positive effect on the participants' teaching effectiveness and perceptions of the subject. The authors concluded with strong recommendations for policy-makers to implement in-service training of PE teachers in South Africa (Van der Westhuizen et al. 2020).

With regard to the use of technology, studies (e.g. Cojocaru et al. 2022; Suriya & Arumugam 2020) have shown that technology, such as online videos, smartwatches and applications, can be used in PE classes to help learners to feel more engaged in the PE lesson and motivate them to be more physically active. Phone applications and videos can be used as an alternative to basic PE training programmes to stimulate more interest in physical activities and to maintain or improve cardiorespiratory and physical fitness in children (Cojocaru et al. 2022).

■ Conclusion

The findings of this study show that the absence or ineffective presentation of PE exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic had a definite negative impact on learners' physical and mental health. In the context of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, it is clear that the disruption to the chronosystem and macrosystem that was caused by the pandemic in terms of the state of health emergency announced by the WHO in 2020 influenced

attitudes, beliefs and values in the health and education systems of South Africa. Consequently, the teacher–learner relationships in the microsystem changed dramatically with the lockdown and the consequent limited and adapted face-to-face contact in schools.

The limited face-to-face contact and changed routines of teaching and learning in the PE class, as in other classes, had an impact on the learner's family, school and peer-group interactions. Learners not only had increased family time brought on by the lockdown but also decreased teacher and peer interaction, which, in this case, influenced the physical development of learners. Furthermore, in the context of the microsystem, the changes in the PE class brought about by the pandemic restrictions seem to have contributed to the low physical activity and health levels of learners.

Based on the responses of the participants and the studied literature, the recommended intervention to negate this negative impact of the pandemic is to employ renewed strategies to implement effective PE in schools. Of these, the effective and comprehensive training of PE teachers – in-service and pre-service – is paramount. The in-service training of teachers, even by means of online short courses, can make a major contribution to the competence and confidence levels of PE teachers and indirectly enhance the physical activity levels of their learners, thereby even influencing learners' family, school and peer-group interactions within the microsystem and the mesosystem.

Other recommendations that may be considered include involving the community to enhance the physical activity levels of not only learners but the whole community as well. For example, parents can be encouraged to exercise with their children. In this context, PE teachers can promote physical activity at school-parent meetings and provide exercise challenges and worksheets to learners to take home and do with their parents. The community can be involved by encouraging sports clubs to hold recreational sports days and allowing learners to train in their facilities at minimal costs. Moreover, health clinics can encourage members to be physically active by providing information and guidelines.

The findings of this study should be considered in light of specific limitations, leading to recommendations for future research in this field. Firstly, the small number of PE teachers in this study implies that, although relevant, the findings cannot be generalised. Therefore, future research should include more participants who teach at schools of different socio-economic backgrounds, and not only PE teachers but other role players, such as principals, parents and community members. Secondly, only participants from one area of the country were used. Future research should include PE teachers and other role players from other areas across the country. Thirdly, the data analysis would be taken to a higher level in

future research if the gender, age and cultural and socio-economic background of participants were taken into account, as these aspects could influence participants' responses and perceptions.

In conclusion, this study highlights the need for focused interventions to improve the biological–physiological developmental backlogs among learners that had been created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3

The psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the required support to overcome the impact on learners' psyches

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■ Introduction

On 15 March 2020, a national state of disaster was proclaimed in South Africa by President Cyril Ramaphosa to combat the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This led to a nationwide lockdown from 26 March 2020. With this state of disaster, all schools were mandated to close. The impact of these school closures prompted the interruption of the learning of an estimated 17 million learners from preschool to secondary schools (Statistics South Africa 2022). Furthermore, almost 2.3 million students who were enrolled in post-school education and further training institutions were affected (Statistics South Africa 2022). The school closures resulted in all learners being left without contact or face-to-face teaching. Instead, remote or online teaching was implemented in instances where possible. Thus, learning platforms of a virtual nature and other forms of remote learning had to be developed across all educational sectors (Statistics South Africa 2022).

Towards the end of the hard lockdown period, Minister Angie Motshekga – in her media statement – discussed preparations regarding the reopening of schools (South African Government 2020). She stated that even though the coronavirus had brought a lot of trauma and anxiety to all South Africans, there was a unanimous consensus that schools be re-opened (South African Government 2020). Schools in South Africa were then partly re-opened, using different models that ensured that only 50% of learners were present at any given time (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2020). These models included classroom situations where learners attended school bi-weekly (in Week 1, 50% of learners, and in Week 2, the remaining learners who did not attend in Week 1) (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2020). Other models required learners to rotate, leading to learners only being present at school every second day (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2020). Lastly, models that encouraged learners to attend on a platoon basis (one group in the morning and the other in the afternoon) (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2020) were also implemented. To compound these models, one should also reflect on the learners who had just started their school career in 2020, before the lockdown, and were then subjected to the lockdown, as well as those who had started in 2021 and were subjected to intermittent schooling and children who experienced many traumatic events during the lockdown period such as their parents passing away because of COVID-19.

Reflecting on the lockdown measures, it is ironic that the same safety measures put in place to protect children, communities and individuals had a negative impact on the lives of children and their caregivers (Bloom et al. 2022). The parents, children and children from single-parent families reported an increase in mental health problems (Bloom et al. 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic had alarming implications for individual and collective health and emotional and social functioning, as the psychological reactions to the pandemic included emotional distress, various maladaptive behaviours and defensive responses, especially affecting vulnerable people who were prone to psychological problems (Cullen, Gulati & Kelly 2020).

It should be noted that many individuals with established mental illness had poorer physical health outcomes than the general population, resulting in an increased risk of negative physical and psychological outcomes stemming from the pandemic (Cullen et al. 2020). Psychological effects such as an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression were noted, even in individuals who did not have pre-existing mental health conditions (Cullen et al. 2020), with post-traumatic stress disorder often occurring in due course.

In this review chapter, the *ubuntu* philosophy as a conceptual framework is used to explore interpersonal relationships and how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners' psyches can be overcome through support. This African concept refers to humaneness among people within a community (Van Breda 2019).

■ The South African context

The South African economy was already experiencing a decade of low growth when the pandemic began (World Bank 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further slowed down the economy, and fears of an economic depression abounded. Along with this financial strain, the national lockdown in South Africa introduced serious threats to public mental health (Kim, Nyengerai & Mendenhall 2020). One in three individuals in South Africa developed a psychiatric disorder; therefore, the relationship between increased symptoms of depression and anxiety and the risk of COVID-19 infection was notably severe (Kim et al. 2020). In 2020, it was estimated that close to 11.9 million school-attending individuals, aged between five and 24 years of age, relied on free meals provided by school feeding schemes (Statistics South Africa 2022). This number reflects the dire state of survival of most children in South Africa. Along with these basic physical concerns, the pandemic heightened concerns about the mental health of an entire generation of youth.

■ Piecing together the mental anguish of the COVID-19 trauma

School attendance builds a child's skills and social awareness and increases a child's abilities in various developmental areas (Ncube & Motalenyane 2020). Therefore, even a short period of school time missed may have

serious consequences for a child's growth, development of skills and physical and emotional maturity. Furthermore, the move from the school to the home environment to ensure social distancing because of the COVID-19 lockdown was a major disruption for almost every learner in the education system, resulting in disrupted psychosocial well-being in many learners (Ncube & Motalenyane 2020). The change in the comfortable, familiar routines in which children used to thrive affected their confidence, triggering anger, frustration and anxiety (Ho 2020, cited in Ncube & Motalenyane 2020).

The aforementioned challenges were probably identified for children who can be regarded as mainstream, urban school learners. However, the pandemic and the lack of school time were then set to have a permanent, long-lasting impact on marginalised and vulnerable communities, within which many more children resided (Mlaba 2021). This concern was also highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), who added that school closures increased the risk of teenage pregnancy, poor nutrition, a permanent school backlog and a higher number of dropouts (Mlaba 2021). The executive director of UNICEF, Henrieta Fore, makes the following assertion (Hess 2021):

> Mental health is a key issue, and we are going to be living with it for decades to come. It leaves scars that we cannot see, but it doesn't mean that they're not there. (n.p.)

For children, this statement is indeed profound. They are young and more vulnerable as nothing and no one prepared them for what was to come. They were too young to even comprehend what was going on in their lives. They could not comprehend the feelings they had, as children require a measure of stability to develop optimally. They might have developed deep psychological scars that may not heal unless they are favoured with interventions aimed at ensuring their mental well-being.

■ The psychological impact of interrupted development

This section focuses on the psychological impact of interrupted development in children. The profound impact of COVID-19 and the gap in the holistic development of the mental health of many children in South Africa will perhaps only be understood in hindsight. The crisis regarding COVID-19 and social distancing has left a permanent mark on the emotions, thoughts and awareness of the learners who experienced the pandemic (Ncube & Motalenyane 2020).

The COVID-19 impact had a notable knock-on effect on most, or even all, teaching and learning institutions. The impact was so intense and vast

that it is likely that many role players did not and still cannot comprehend the aftereffects of the situation. The 'psychological fallout' (Spencer-Laitt et al. 2022, p. 1) resulting from COVID-19 is seen as an unavoidable consequence of social distancing. Negative consequences, such as economic hardship and struggles, misinformation and the distortion of the truth, as well as many fears related to the disease – compounded by the social isolation – all added to the psychological fallout of people being separated from one another (Brooks et al. 2020).

Isolation, caused by mandatory social distancing and quarantine, tended to be an important factor in the negative psychological consequences for many individuals (Serafini et al. 2020). These consequences were not only evident in the short term, as psychological fallouts have also been noted in the longer term (Serafini et al. 2020). Gwala, a 19-year-old student, provides the following description of the mindset of people during this time:

> Some days I just cry. I still experience a lot of anxiety and a deep sense of sadness has stayed with me. My grief still puts me in a dark place because I feel like my soul has been crushed. (Gcwabe 2021, para. 3)

It is evident from the excerpt above that the teenager experienced a sense of loss, distress and anxiety. A sense of loss is often associated with grieving, which is evident in the excerpt, and children often grieve unnoticed. Humans are inherently social creatures, and if they are cut off from others for long periods, they can experience loneliness, depression, low self-esteem and a lack of a sense of belonging (Cancer Care 2020, para. 1). The longer the quarantine persisted, the more people experienced confusion, anger, frustration and boredom (Brooks et al. 2020; Jassim et al. 2021).

Human beings have a sense of identity and purpose, and a deep-seated need for interpersonal connections with others, communities and societies (Greatist 2022). These interpersonal relationships define and teach people who they are (Greatist 2022). Consequently, a gradual breakdown of interpersonal relationship networks threatens the individual's sense of normalcy, safety, belonging and personhood (Molefe 2018). UNICEF (2021) also notes that being out of school not only leads to learning loss but also causes mental distress, as learners lose their close relationships with others. When reviewing the overall psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of stress and various psychopathological factors was evident (Passavanti et al. 2021).

Benton, Boyd and Njoroge (2021) found that the frequency of clinically significant depression and anxiety symptoms was higher because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. These findings are not surprising, especially those regarding the youth, as in the context of the unusual COVID-19 changes faced by the younger generation, a great loss of community, peer and school interaction was experienced (Benton et al. 2021).

Thus, to preserve the mental health and well-being of all citizens in communities and societies during pandemic emergencies, governments should consider limiting or ceasing to implement highly restrictive and isolating containment measures for long (Georgieva et al. 2021). Moreover, governments should provide more truthful and transparent information when responding to the pandemic. As the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on the mental health of all citizens, it caused nearly a fifth of adult individuals in communities to develop at least one major mental disorder (Georgieva et al. 2021). In considering this, one can only imagine the impact that the pandemic had on children. The need for additional psychosocial services and mental health resources should thus be allocated to ameliorate the situation by facilitating the individual on an individual and community-level recovery path from the pandemic (Georgieva et al. 2021).

■ Supporting children in bridging the gap of interrupted mental health development

In this chapter, we suggest three ways in which children who have experienced an interruption in their daily lives and educational path can be supported and empowered to catch up and move from just surviving to thriving. Firstly, we advocate for the African philosophy of *ubuntu* that encourages children to think more about themselves within a community setting and to minimise the self-centred ideas often evident in the more Westernised mindset. Secondly, we advocate for the development of a growth mindset that empowers children to achieve through their initiatives, efforts and creativity. Thirdly, we suggest a play-based learning approach that enhances psychological health and well-being.

■ Creating an environment of care through the theoretical framework of *ubuntu*

In creating an environment of care, the philosophical framework of *ubuntu* refers to the various moral qualities of an individual, such as generosity, empathy, forgiveness and consideration (Van Breda 2019). The second aspect suggested by *ubuntu* concerns the patterns of interconnectedness among people (Van Breda 2019). *Ubuntu*, according to Sotuku and Duku (2015), is an African philosophy of humanism that joins the individual to the collective. The following elements of *ubuntu* are emphasised: the value of humanness, intercedence and dependence; the spirit of social cohesion, oneness and interconnectedness; and a spirit of compassion, hospitality and sharing (Sotuku & Duku 2015). Omodan (2020) suggests that, in the South African context, the philosophy of *ubuntu* can contribute to filling the vacuum that COVID-19 has left in terms of psychosocial support.

The characteristics needed by teachers to provide for the psychosocial needs of children to circumvent the effects of COVID-19 are incorporated into the concept of *ubuntu* (Omodan 2020). Therefore, in contemplating Omodan's (2020) suggestion, one can see that *ubuntu* further indicates that this philosophical joining of the individual to the collective can accomplish the aims and objectives of teaching and learning by producing partnerships, trust in cooperating and respect. All the aforementioned aspects are encouraged among teachers and learners within an effective and conducive classroom and school environment. Thus, the harmonious elements within the African humanism philosophy of *ubuntu* would go far in bettering the interrupted development of children, which includes mental health. *Ubuntu* can thus assist in creating a teaching and learning environment of care and humaneness. It can be critical in the psychological support of the child, especially when the child experiences academic barriers, the loss of loved ones or just needs a safe, quiet place.

As Loscalzo (2022) asserts, psychological counselling for children at schools must be offered without families paying for the services, as it is fundamental in encouraging the maintenance of psychological well-being, especially during a health crisis such as COVID-19. Thus, in creating an environment of *ubuntu*, learners will feel more comfortable and welcome to re-engage within the classroom environment and ease back into their required academic routines.

■ Instilling a growth mindset in children

According to Seligman (in Donald et al. 2020), frequent experiences of traumatic and distressing events, linked with the inability of a person to control these events, may teach people to experience helplessness. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its lengthy lockdown periods and repeated news about people dying, left many people feeling out of control, helpless and fearful, which created feelings of hopelessness. To instil a growth mindset and support people through such dark experiences, we can lean towards a more positive approach, namely, that of positive psychology. Positive psychology and *ubuntu* place the person in a realistic, encouraging environment with tools to survive and thrive.

Positive psychology emphasises three areas, namely, positive organisations, optimising positive emotions and positive strengths or assets (Donald et al. 2020, p. 1123). In the school environment, we therefore need to focus on instilling feelings of optimism and confidence in children. Creating a growth mindset can be an important aspect of children's holistic development. Dweck (2016) suggests that a growth mindset is found in individuals who believe their talents can be developed through hard work, good strategies and input from others who have a growth mindset within them.

Dweck (2016) explains that most people have a combination of a fixed and a growth mindset. A fixed mindset is when people tend to think their talents are innate gifts, whereas a growth mindset is present when people believe their talents can be developed (Dweck 2016). A growth mindset not only needs praise and reward but should also recognise learning and progress, with special attention given to requesting assistance, trying new strategies, building on setbacks and moving forward (Dweck 2016). However, a growth mindset will not always have positive results, as sometimes one will have to implement policies that lead to real and achievable outcomes. Thus, to encourage growth mindsets, appropriate risk-taking, moving away from competition and towards collaboration, must be promoted (Dweck 2016).

Consequently, if we want to foster a growth mindset in schools, we need to focus on learning and the processes of learning and move away from just rewarding and praising achievement. By moving away from just rewarding achievement, we can instil a more collaborative and creative environment where innovative ideas can flourish within the *ubuntu* philosophy. Brougham and Kashubeck-West (2018) report that general data that have been collected attest to the numerous mindset initiatives that have been implemented to improve student academic performance – in other words, to grow their mindsets.

The mindset interventions point out that learners can change their beliefs about their abilities. For learners to improve, a change of mindset can have a positive effect on their academic performance (Brougham & Kashubeck-West 2018). Therefore, encouraging a growth mindset, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, can support learners and motivate them to catch up and perform better. In encouraging a growth mindset, positive comments from a teacher on the process that a learner has followed or attempted to follow are important. Therefore, praise from teachers is important, but commenting on the process is even more vital in creating a growth mindset, as seen in Figure 3.1.

In an article in *USA Today Magazine* in February 2022, it is stated that a maternal growth mindset can lessen the many negative effects of stress on mothers, especially in the early months of the child's life (Anon 2022). This mindset change is seen as promoting brain development in children, and therefore, by the mother growing her mindset, a growth mindset is engendered in the child.

The article also states that there is a positive link between growth mindsets and positive outcomes in children's learning (Anon 2022). A change in a child's mindset is related to outcomes as early as infancy (Anon 2022). Thus, teachers need to promote interventions that support growth mindsets, which are biologically underpinned by maternal mindsets that can become embedded within the child at a very young age (Anon 2022). As schools and

Source: Adapted from Brougham and Kashubeck-West (2018).
FIGURE 3.1: Focusing on the process to improve a growth mindset.

homes are preparation grounds to assist children with the development of their social–emotional abilities, it is strongly suggested that a systemic approach is necessary to promote this concept of growth mindsets. Mineo (2022), in her article in the *Harvard Gazette*, quotes Elansary and McCoy, who conducted a study that determined when the maternal growth or fixed mindset has the most impact on a child's development:

> We need to advocate for interventions that support growth mindsets, but at the same time, we need to acknowledge that there are huge systemic stressors and barriers placed on new parents, especially in the first year of children's lives, growth mindsets are not going to solve those. (n.p.)

Social–emotional skills are usually learnt and internalised at home and in schools, as these are the prime training grounds that help children become

aware and eventually develop these skills. During the COVID-19 lockdown, many of these skills were disrupted because of long periods of isolation when children only interacted with their families. The need for new friendship dynamics, which also entails conflict resolution and heightened communication skills, is now, more than ever, necessary. Each interactional opportunity provides a context in which the child can practise social–emotional skills and learn to identify, manage and assimilate uncomfortable emotions and situations in a healthy, positive manner (Speer 2021).

Children with a growth mindset maintain the focus on practising their social–emotional skills and allowing themselves to make mistakes as they proceed forward (Speer 2021). Furthermore, Speer (2021) notes the most important aspect, namely, that a growth mindset assists children to remain open to growth within themselves and to see the potential for growth in others. With each new friendship, the child is allowed to function within a relationship, enabling him or her to test, re-evaluate and assess their own and others' needs and to figure out how to overcome awkward feelings and circumstances in a sound, positive manner, thereby developing an 'I can' attitude (Speer 2021). Furthermore, as childhood friendships and relationships develop, children are constantly rehearsing and practising these abilities and experiencing the consequences of their actions – and experiencing conflict as a source of growth and not of concern (Speer 2021).

A growth mindset, therefore, assists children and enables them to remain open to development within themselves as well as in other people (Speer 2021). This intervention can be an important skill for learners to learn, practise and implement, especially after the disruption of daily routines, as was evident during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

■ Utilising play-based teaching and learning

'Our real problem is – what is the goal of education? Are we forming children that are only capable of learning what is already known? Or should we try developing creative and innovative minds, capable of discovery from the preschool age on, throughout life?' (Piaget 1923, cited in Edmentum Blog 2021, para. 1)

Play is often defined as a feature of human development – an impulse hard-wired into human nature (O'Leary 2021). Thus, being a 'kid' is essential, and the quality of early childhood experiences can literally be seen in people's bodies (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child 2010). Early experiences that are positive in nature are noted to lead to a longer life expectancy, improved overall health and an enhanced ability to manage and sustain health even under stressful circumstances. Thus, sound health provides a solid grounding for building a strong 'brain architecture' and is linked with a range of abilities, skills and learning capacities (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child 2010). Furthermore, long-term

socio-emotional capabilities are healthier when children have a chance to learn through play (O'Leary 2021).

As play creates a nurturing, safe, communicative, language-rich and relatively unhurried environment (O'Leary 2021), the child is enabled to form deep relationships, facilitating the development of brain growth. Stach and Veldsman (2021) indicate that children feel comfortable taking risks, attempting new ideas and investigating, failing and trying again if they are provided with an opportunity to play. The child's cognitive development is stimulated and promoted through play activities (Stach & Veldsman 2021). Activities such as block play, drawing and games that add physical activities, as well as following sequences and adhering to rules, all encourage the child to understand and follow instructions, practise listening skills and become aware of and acknowledge other people's perspectives – all of which foster social development (Stach & Veldsman 2021). Stach and Veldsman (2021) also stated that play promotes the physical development of children by decreasing cardiovascular risk factors, improving psychological well-being and developing gross and fine motor skills. Play-based learning thus provides opportunities for children to refine their physical abilities, such as balance and coordination, and to practise using a variety of other fine and gross motor skills.

Therefore, as teachers, we need to create a play-based environment, which will contribute to environments that foster growth and development by providing the child with learning areas that provide opportunities to explore, emotionally interact and experience feelings, and attempt cognitive tasks (Glauser-Abou Ismail et al. 2022). All of these require the use of motor skills, which are central to the child later in life. Furthermore, the teacher should also observe the child's play and engage with the interests and thoughts that emerge from the child in order to discover and understand how the child can be stimulated and then provide appropriate scaffolds (Glauser-Abou Ismail et al. 2022).

According to Glauser-Abou Ismail et al. (2022), there is no question about the great learning potential that play-based teaching and learning hold for children, and that free-play settings offer language-conscious learning, which promotes educational language and a growth mindset. Furthermore, free-play activities do not highlight or favour any gender stereotypes; instead, free-play makes it easier for girls and boys to have emotionally positive and cognisant encounters with the opposite gender (Glauser-Abou Ismail et al. 2022).

In conclusion, after any interrupted development of children, whether it be social, physical or psychological, the simple strategy of play creates a desired activity within a relaxed *ubuntu* environment whereby children can readjust, realign and find their feet to regain themselves and continue to work on their growth mindset.

■ Reflection and recommendations

Reflecting on the impact of COVID-19 on the interrupted development of children, we need to rally together as teachers and support specialists to make sure that all learners have the optimal opportunity to progress and grow. For this to happen, we suggested strategies that can be used in the event of any developmental interruption so that no learner would ever have to ask, 'What did I miss?' Therefore, it is suggested, firstly, that creating an environment of care and community by following the African philosophy of *ubuntu* would go a long way in making any learner feel welcome back after a period of absence. Secondly, to enable learners to build self-confidence and courage, teachers can encourage them to develop a mindset of growth and, lastly, immerse these aspects in a play-based approach where one can only see positivity, joy and fun within the teaching and learning setting. Thus, the way forward should be to keep every learner in school, attentive and engaged, whether it be physically in the classroom or engaged technologically (UNICEF 2023). Either way, barriers must be eliminated, ensuring that the right to education is guaranteed. This will require a more sophisticated, nimble and digitalised education management information system, which should ensure real-time and individualised monitoring of staff and students (UNICEF 2023).

■ Conclusion

It was expected that a high burden of mental health consequences would have an impact on children during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bolt et al. 2021). With this, there was a likely demand for practical mental health interventions that would address very specific COVID-19-related challenges, for example, long periods of home confinement, the disruption of education, the lack of opportunities for socialisation and the absence of structured days, which resulted in boredom and little or no physical or outdoor activities (Bolt et al. 2021). However, along with the burden of mental health issues, other factors were also evident.

COVID-19 can be said to have affected the whole of humanity, though presently, some aspects have still not emerged, leaving future generations to contend with these challenges. For these very reasons, specific and well-developed interventions targeting psychosocial, psychological and physical effects of the pandemic on humankind and especially on children, in the context of the pandemic, needed to be developed (Bolt et al. 2021). In this chapter, we have made some suggestions that can be used in an effort to support and assist teachers, parents and caregivers in providing a solution for children who are not presently coping well with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 4

Social development of secondary school learners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to alleviate interruptions

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■ Introduction

According to Sundram (2020), social development in young children denotes a sustained process whereby a young person acquires the knowledge and skills required to interact with others in social contexts. Children's microsystems, including the family, peer group, school and church, play a pivotal role in the process of socialisation. Social competence is a desirable outcome of the socialisation process. Social competence can be defined as the capacity to interact meaningfully with others in different social contexts. Failure to cope in social contexts may have something to do with poor socialisation. Children require a measure of stability and predictability in their families, schools and communities to develop optimally.

Major disruptions in their lives may upset holistic development, including social development. Disruptions could be in the form of family breakdowns and disasters such as earthquakes, runaway fires, floods and pandemics. Recently, the world was in the grip of fear and anxiety because of the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) for which there was neither a vaccine nor remedy. Authorities decided on what is commonly known as the lockdown to stem the tide of the virus. This lockdown involved the closure of major public places where people congregate in large numbers. A few examples included churches, workplaces and schools. For learners, the closure of schools was a sudden disruption of their daily lives. Social intercourse and interaction were limited because children were confined to their homes. They lost opportunities for social development.

It will be remembered that on 26 March 2020, South Africa went into lockdown as a pre-emptive measure to slow down the spread of the virus and prepare the health care facilities of the country ahead of an anticipated surge in infections. For children, this was a confusing time because they were cut off from their peers and schools. Research shows that school engagement enhances coping abilities in youth at risk (Malindi & Machenjedze 2012; Theron, Ungar & Höltge 2022). Being away from school represented school disengagement that rendered some learners vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes.

Some adolescents may have been more severely affected by the separation they experienced from their peers (Pragholapati 2020). Adolescents are known to be in a phase when social relationships are more important because their social worlds are growing too. Therefore, for them, being out of school led to not only the loss of learning but also to mental distress, exposure to violence and abuse, loss of school-provided meals, a decrease in interactive learning, a lack of interest, impaired interpersonal skills and limited socialisation. This reduced the development of social skills

among learners (Adams et al. 2017). And, as pointed out by Jindal-Snape et al. (2021), in the long term, the skills that are significant to transition into the world of work were negatively impacted.

Despite the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) actively monitored and made every attempt to reduce the impact of the pandemic by identifying, testing, treating and developing treatment protocols for infected individuals (WHO 2020; Pragholapati 2020). However, one may argue that strategies to address the social issues that affected learners did not receive much attention. Furthermore, Wise, Knight and Buckingham Shum (2021) mention that school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that learners from diverse backgrounds, who were more at risk of increased vulnerability, were less likely to receive the support and extra services they needed; consequently, the gap between learners who experienced additional barriers and those who did not might have widened.

The closure of schools had a considerable impact on learners' sense of belonging in schools and their feelings of self-worth, which are key for inclusion in education and the social development of learners. Although the closing of schools was regarded as a positive move, online learning did not benefit learners with diverse needs that much because they require more attention (Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson & Hanson 2020). Furthermore, the closure of schools also exposed learners to the loss of the safe and protective environment that schools provide. Moreover, Ali et al. (2019) and Masonbrink and Hurley (2020) affirm that limited access to schools removed a major source of social support for learners. Social support is an important component of social capital (Drageset 2021). It includes emotional support, a sense of belonging to a supportive social network, a feeling of being valued and receiving help, information and guidance (Drageset 2021).

There is a feeling that social development in learners might have been negatively affected by confinement as the discussion above shows. It may not be possible for the negative impact to be quantified. However, it is important to search for evidence of it in learners so that interventions to mitigate this impact can be designed. Furthermore, it may be important for nations to prepare for the outbreak of another pandemic that might necessitate a similar approach to the one adopted to deal with COVID-19. This chapter reports the findings of a small-scale study that was conducted according to the lockdown regulations, namely, that contact research be avoided to limit infection. The aim of this chapter was to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social development and propose ways in which the impact can be mitigated to enable social development.

■ Conceptualising social development among learners

Parke, Roisman and Rose (2019) outline five phases of the history of social development. These are the *beginning* years (1880–1915), a *period of conceptual clashes* (1915–1940), an *era of expansion* (1940–1960), a time when *contemporary themes began to emerge* (1960–1985) and *the current period* (1985–2020). Although the aim is not to discuss the history of social development in detail, it is important to take note of these eras that may contribute to the many ambiguous definitions found for the concept of social development.

Social development is a process whereby a person learns how to interact with others around him or her (Sundram 2020). Alberg (2018) mentions that social development occurs as a result of socialisation and is regarded as the process by which children learn to interact with those around them. It gives a person the opportunity to develop their personality in the community, and at the same time, it enables him or her to acquire skills and establish connections with others. According to Hurlock (cited in Ghanta 2021), social development is the attainment of maturity in social relationships. It shows how children's relationships with others are developed, recognises the significance of those interactions and comprehends the actions, attitudes and motives of others (Ghanta 2021; Parke et al. 2019).

According to Alberg (2018) and Parke et al. (2019), social development influences cognitive, moral, emotional and language development. Most social development scholars characterise the nature of developmental change as both continuous and discontinuous (Parke et al. 2019). The continuous view 'looks at development as a gradual series in skills and behaviours with no abrupt changes' and the discontinuous view suggests that 'step-like changes make each stage qualitatively different from the one that preceded it' (Parke et al. 2019, p. 6). These step-like changes can be based on the personal motives, interests and goals of the person and the changes in the demands of society (Parke et al. 2019).

Ghanta (2021) describes social development as follows:

> Social development is not a still one; it is ever-changing. It changes based on the personal motives, interest, and goals of the person and the changes in the demands of the society. It plays a huge role in personality development. A healthy social development helps a person maintain and build a positive relationship with his or her family, teacher, friends and others in the society. (p. 83)

Social well-being is regarded as a fundamental concept in understanding social development. Sinclair (2021) defines social well-being as the act of creating, maintaining and sharing meaningful connections with others.

These include pleasant feelings such as joy, happiness, contentment, enthusiasm, awe and tranquillity. It also includes having a decent physical condition and satisfied social interactions. In this regard, one may say that individuals depend on one another because they are social beings.

The need to be with others, around others and emotionally attached to others is controlled by the limbic system – a region of the brain. When individuals are with their units, they get sentiments of security and joy (Sinclair 2021). Parke et al. (2019) warned that people run the risk of becoming socially isolated if they are not conscious of and actively work to improve and maintain their social well-being. Withdrawal from social interaction becomes a self-reinforcing cycle because loneliness, which can be extremely harmful, is caused by social isolation, which, in turn, causes unpleasant sentiments of dread and threat (Sinclair 2021).

Families and learners' social development

The daily routines and rituals of families were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in high levels of anxiety and stress. According to Mistry, Benner and Kimura (2022), practically all families experienced stress because of confinement (quarantine) or, for example, crowdedness at home. Pandemic-related stressors are major factors that have an impact on family members' well-being, deteriorate the quality of family relationships and ultimately affect learners' well-being (Mistry et al. 2022). Ghanta (2021) mentions that learners who live in isolation have an increased chance of suffering from grief and acute stress disorder. Other social issues, such as violence and abuse as a result of COVID-19, were reported by Calvano et al. (2022). These include children observing verbal or emotional abuse and domestic violence.

Community and learners' social development

It is known that adolescent learners are willing to present themselves to help in the community, that is, to take on adult responsibilities and make themselves available to meet the needs of society (Ghanta 2021). Because of COVID-19, learners were unable to devote themselves to such community work. This not only affected their social skills being developed but also prevented them from creating their own social identities (Ghanta 2021). Moreover, community involvement contributes to providing learners with a sense of belonging, which contributes to the social well-being of the learner (Eccles & Roeser 2011).

Furthermore, learners depend on learning from the community in order to get time to process their own actions and to develop their social skills by

means of social interaction (SCAN Families 2022). According to the Centre of Children and Youth (2022), the pandemic has had an impact on the interpersonal connections that learners have with their communities, as well as the sense of self they would usually develop within their greater community. Thus, it can be argued that the creation of a sense of belonging and learning through the community was hampered because of COVID-19.

■ Educational settings and learners' social development

As mentioned earlier, the closure of schools had an impact on learners' holistic development. It is important that learners are physically present in the classroom for holistic development to occur (American Academy of Pediatrics 2021; Ghanta 2021). This has to do with the important role the school and school context play in the socialisation of learners and the development of their social skills (Mistry et al. 2022). Furthermore, Ghanta (2021) argues that learners learn social skills that contribute to their social development through classroom activities, and these skills later influence how they develop professionally and personally. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (social and economic) are dependent on support services provided by the school, including teachers, counsellors, social workers and their own peers (American Academy of Pediatrics 2021). As a result of the lockdown, learners lost a significant source of social and mental support when schools were closed during the pandemic because they had less in-person contact with these support systems.

According to Mistry et al. (2022), it is clear that learners' peer relationships were affected by the pandemic. Learners felt lonely without their peers and missed their friends (Mistry et al. 2022), and this negatively affected their social and emotional well-being. There are concerns regarding peer interaction and social isolation, as well as the ramifications for learners' issues with mental health (Mistry et al. 2022). Although an increase in virtual interaction among learners (adolescents) via online social networks was noted, not all learners had access to the Internet or social networks because of their living environments and lack of technological infrastructure (Ghanta 2021; Mistry et al. 2022). It is thus argued that technology and online learning (e-learning) could not socially and successfully unite learners completely (Ghanta 2021).

■ Promoting access to education despite COVID-19 interruptions

Countries around the world embarked on curbing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic through limited face-to-face interaction and the temporary closure of schools. UNESCO (2020) proposed that schools

worldwide consider using online learning strategies to reach learners remotely. However, this strategy focused on ensuring the continuity of schooling but ignored the alleviation of interruptions in the social development of learners. Like other countries, South Africa responded to the call to ensure continuity in schooling by developing response plans for schooling.

Much was planned and done by the Department of Education of South Africa to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in schools since the initial outbreak of the pandemic and during the lockdown period. However, all these involved efforts to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on academic development. The department made provisions to supply the necessary resources to schools, which included educational broadcasts on television and radio, online learning and facilitation and the provision of worksheets, examination papers and memorandums. The purpose was to make up for the number of lost teaching days; therefore, the curriculum was condensed during this period.

The department also made provision to supply learners with the necessary personal protective equipment and sanitisers once the schools re-opened after the lockdown. Provision was also made for teacher replacements if necessary, and the department envisioned monitoring learner dropout rates (Committee on Education and Technology, Sports, Arts and Culture 2020). As the Department of Basic Education did not want to burden teachers with counselling duties, they relied on using specialists who were there, such as Life Orientation teachers, as well as specialists from non-governmental organisations, universities and faith-based institutions.

Once the schools re-opened after the lockdown period, the Department of Basic Education set out guidelines for the development of school timetables. According to the Department of Basic Education (2020) guideline, documents such as the 'Guidelines for development of the school timetables: re-opening of schools COVID-19' were released to provide a clear vision and comprehensive picture of school activities, that is, what work is being done during which period, where, by whom and when, to recover the loss in teaching and assessment time. The document further explores different models that schools could consider and follow after re-opening to make sure that they abide by the social distancing regulations. The document assisted schools in planning for rotational classes and platooning systems with learners switching classrooms on different days of the week.

The Department of Basic Education (2020) also made suggestions to prioritise some subjects to maximise the amount of time available. In secondary schools, the department made it clear that it is important that

all subjects are taught, even if it means shortening the duration of the periods (Department of Basic Education 2020). However, each province in South Africa had to focus more on the subjects in which learners typically performed poorly. A suggestion was made that schools must keep the core subjects – Mathematics, Home Language, English First Additional Language – on the timetable daily, and subjects such as Life Skills or Life Orientation could alternate.

Furthermore, some of the guidelines to support the reworked timetable of schools containing a social element included the reduction of classroom size, while assemblies, sports, games and other events that create crowded conditions were cancelled. In another memo from the minister of the Department of Basic Education (South African Government 2020), it was reiterated that schools must be aware that all curriculum enrichment programmes would be put on hold until further notice, as the focus should be on basic education, which is the curriculum interpretation.

Subsequently, UNICEF's Tippy Tap guidelines provided operating protocols to be implemented by different countries. South Africa was guided by these guidelines too, and they helped to keep 1,374 drop-in centres in the country open. These are facilities that provide essential services aimed at meeting the emotional, physical and social development of vulnerable children across the country. It is not clear whether any programmes were in place to support specifically the social development of learners. From the 'Guidelines for development of the school timetables' document (Department of Basic Education 2020), one principal suggested motivational talks for learners at regular intervals. According to the document, this can be done once every month or when there is a need (Department of Basic Education 2020).

According to Daniel (2020), the availability of education at all levels has increased dramatically worldwide. However, Daniel (2020) claims that COVID-19 is the biggest obstacle the expanded national education systems have ever had to face. Many governments mandated that schools stop offering in-person teaching to most of their learners and move, almost immediately, to online learning and virtual education (Daniel 2020). For educational systems, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant risk (Daniel 2020). According to Mistry et al. (2022), it is important to note that although the pandemic persisted for over a year, it would continue for many more months to come, and thus, it is argued that COVID-19 may have long-lasting effects on learners' development.

■ Theoretical framework

The study we conducted was undergirded by the social development theory of Vygotsky and the social development model of Catalano

and Hawkins. Vygotsky's (1978) theory primarily shows that socialisation affects the learning process in an individual. The theory focuses on the role that social interaction and cultural experiences play in cognitive development, and it is believed that cognitive development is a result of interaction between individuals and their social and cultural environment and that individuals actively construct their own understanding of the world through these interactions (Vygotsky 1978). The theory further argues that people, especially children, model their behaviour and habits after those of their peers and those they see as superiors (authority figures). Through these interactions, individuals form an understanding of what they are capable of, what they need assistance with and what they are completely unable to do. In addition, children establish a *zone of proximal development*, which consists of specific behaviours and actions that they can practise in order to eventually be able to carry out on their own.

The social development model focuses specifically on the prosocial or antisocial behavioural tendencies that learners pick up from their peers (Catalano et al. 1996). The socialising influences of learners' peers, family, school and other community institutions have an impact on the learners' behavioural tendencies (Catalano et al. 1996). Whether socialisation results in prosocial or antisocial conduct, learning proceeds in the same way. Learners are socialised through processes such as: (1) perceived opportunities for participation in activities and interaction with others; (2) the level of participation and interaction; (3) the skills necessary to participate in these involvements and interactions; and (4) the reinforcement they perceive will come from participation in activities and interaction. A social link forms between the individual and the socialising agent when socialising procedures are consistent (Catalano et al. 1996).

Both the theory (Vygotsky 1978) and the model (Catalano et al. 1996) discussed above are situated within the constructivist paradigm, which emphasises the active role of individuals in constructing their own understanding of the world through experiences and interactions with their environment. Knowledge is not seen as something that is passively received but rather as something that is actively built and reconstructed through experience. Therefore, individuals actively construct their own meaning and understanding of the world through their experiences, and meaning is continually refined and revised as new information and experiences are encountered.

■ Methodology

The researchers chose qualitative research as the overall strategy of inquiry. Qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals in a selected setting make sense of their surroundings, and it places great emphasis on

understanding the phenomenon under investigation (Nieuwenhuis 2020). Therefore, this small-scale investigation adopted a case study research design. A case study research design enabled the researchers to explore the social development phenomenon within a particular context, a high school, through a variety of lenses, namely, the social development theory of Vygotsky and the social development model of Catalano and Hawkins. This enabled them to generate an in-depth, multifaceted understanding of the complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic in its real-life context (Baxter & Jack 2008).

We used a qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions to generate data. The questionnaires were sent via e-mail to the school, and volunteering participants answered the open-ended questions contained therein. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants in this study. Therefore, the participants were purposively selected, as we wanted to gain insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the social development of secondary school learners and how the interruptions of their social development could be alleviated. Seven secondary school teachers volunteered to take part in this study.

As the research was conducted from the interpretive-constructivist paradigm, thematic data analysis (see Braun & Clarke 2006) was employed to explore how the participants gave meaning to the phenomenon under investigation. It should be noted that contact research was prohibited at the time of this empirical study as part of COVID-19 regulations in South Africa.

The empirical study was conducted in a Quintile 1 secondary school. In South Africa, quintile 1 schools cater for learners from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Quintile 1 schools are therefore part of the poorest 20% of schools. It is remarkable that the performance of the school, as measured by the pass rate of Grade 12 learners, hovered around 80% yearly. This was because of the diligence of teachers who had developed the habit of sometimes sacrificing their afternoons, holidays and weekends to support learners. The mixed-gender school catered for 1,100 learners with 30 teachers. Most learners walked to and from school every day. The street leading to the school needed repair, especially tarring, and it was not easily navigable. Parental involvement was not ideal because the parents were working-class parents who worked long hours. However, parents' meetings were scheduled on Sunday mornings to cater for working parents.

Thirteen teachers took time to complete the questionnaire. Nine of them were female and four were male. No member of the management team took part in the study. The questionnaire was developed in English and the teachers used English to complete them.

■ Findings and discussion

The researchers read the questionnaires severally to immerse themselves in the data. The researchers met and jointly coded the data. They processed the data through inductive content analysis. Two major themes emerged, and the findings of this study are, therefore, presented according to two main themes and sub-themes that emerged. The presentation of the findings is accompanied by direct quotations of the participants' responses and relevant literature. We assigned codes to the participants to protect their identities.

■ Theme 1: The result of COVID-19 on learners' social development

The findings of this study show that all the participants believed secondary school learners had lost interest in their schoolwork when they returned to school after the lockdown. Learners were indifferent to the plight of others and showed less interest in learning. Teachers had to motivate them more and encourage them to learn. In this respect, a participant stated:

> '[*The learners*] lost interest about [*sic*] others. They don't care about the feelings of other people [*loss of care for others*] […] They are not interested in learning; you have to push them to do their work all the time.' (Participant 05)

This loss of interest is because of the fact that learners' routines were disrupted by either not going to school and learning online or by attending school on a rotational basis. Research in other contexts also noted the loss of motivation and interest in school, probably because of rotational and online learning (Mahdy 2020; Muthuprasad et al. 2021; Shepherd & Mohohlwane 2021).

The participants lamented the fact that academic performance and behaviour had changed significantly. The participants noted that they had to deal with learners who had been negatively affected by the family, lack of resources, increased workload, limited time and the rotational timetable, as the following excerpt shows:

> 'Their [*the learners*'] academics and behaviour were also affected, as they were learning from home or taking turns to go to school. Negative influences on family context, lack of resources, limited school time played role to [*sic*] all these.' (Participant 02)

It is evident that, as Mahaye (2020) noted, it will take a long time for learners to return to normal or full recovery after the disruption. Furthermore, creating awareness or the dissemination of information during a crisis, as well as effective support, can facilitate the desired recovery of learners from backlogs caused by COVID-19-related movement restrictions (Azzi-Huck & Shmis 2020).

The participants lamented the fact that the learners had lost the value of respect. For instance, the participating teachers pointed out that learners talked back at teachers and were unfriendly towards each other, as the following excerpts show:

‘Respect is now lacking from learners; there seems to be a lot of backchatting.’ (Participant 06)

‘They misbehaved amongst themselves, towards others and us, as their teachers.’ (Participant 01)

It was not obvious to the teachers what the learners had experienced while they were confined to their homes. It is, however, possible that some of them had negative experiences that might account for their perceived lack of respect and discourteous behaviour. This is probably evidence of the impaired process of socialisation resulting from experiences of aloneness, often without structure and routine. Therefore, teachers are forced to take preventive measures, increase monitoring and raise awareness among teachers and learners to deal with a perceived lack of discipline (Sun et al. 2022).

Teachers are agents of socialisation, as are parents and peers. Through social interaction, learners develop socially and acquire values and norms. The findings of our study show that teachers were unable to model and shape appropriate behaviour as they had limited contact with learners. It seems teachers were anxious not to be infected and thus avoided close contact with learners. This had a negative impact on socialisation. For example, one participant said:

‘Before the pandemic, learners use to approach teachers if they do have problems, but during this pandemic, no teachers wanted to be next to learners. We were afraid of [the] pandemic. The pandemic damaged the relationship between learners and teachers.’ (Participant 05)

The findings of our study show that some learners became passive and were not actively involved or focused on their schoolwork. They tended to isolate themselves. As Participant 7 said, the lockdown ‘caused isolation and withdraw[al] as well’. Sun et al. (2022) note that learners exhibited anxious withdrawal as a type of behaviour that stood out during and after the pandemic.

Extramural activities enhance social development in learners. However, the lockdown prevented these activities, with deleterious consequences for learners’ holistic development. The following remark was made by a participant:

‘The restrictions negatively influenced them because they no longer wanted to partake in extramural activities.’ (Participant 01)

It seems as if learners lost interest in extramural activities. According to the literature, taking part in activities (such as extramural activities) at school

contributes to socialisation (Catalano et al. 1996), which, in turn, develops the social skills of learners. If learners do not want to participate in these kinds of activities, they are deprived of opportunities for social development. Sikali (2020, p. 2435) suggests that 'social distancing presents the dangers of increasing social rejection, growing impersonality and individualism'. Moreover, it 'negatively affects learning and growth, and it prevents people from effectively socialising, which is a fundamental human need' (Sikali 2020, p. 2435).

The findings of our study show that after learners had returned to school after the lockdown, they were still restricted from socialising with others because of the requirements to maintain physical or social distance. One participant stated:

'I find learners want to be more in smaller groups or even more distant, which causes a general decrease in working together [...] there also seems to be lots of discrimination and less interaction.' (Participant 06)

Groupwork was hampered, and it seems learners discriminated against one another. This further limited social interaction.

■ Theme 2: Teachers' efforts to engage in and enhance social development

The findings of our study indicate that the teachers showed compassion and understood that the learners had been influenced by the pandemic. Although learners were still anxious, teachers encouraged groupwork to re-establish the process of socialisation. For example, the following response was provided in this regard:

'Teachers had a lot of understanding and compassion because they understood that the pandemic affected us differently. Therefore, teachers encouraged group and class discussions to enhance social development.' (Participant 02)

Furthermore, the participants refer to what they call 'social talks' to encourage learners and enhance coping ability despite risk and adversity:

'Groupwork discussions and social talks [*are held*] to enhance social development in learners.' (Participant 04)

One participant added that they involved parents in school activities to enhance social development in learners:

'Parents are encouraged to be involved in every aspect of any school programme to enhance social development in learners.' (Participant 04)

As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, learners are dependent on families, peer groups, schools and communities to develop socially (American Academy of Pediatrics 2021). These institutions should be stable and

functioning adequately for learners to develop optimally. Thus, the engagement of parents, as well as other stakeholders, in the education of learners is a positive development.

It is reiterated that the findings show that the teachers did all they could to enhance social development through group work and motivational talks. It can be added that teachers had to deal with unbecoming behaviour by learners; however, it was concerning that they felt that they were not competent to handle learners who displayed such behaviour. Probably, they were uncomfortable because they did not know the root causes of such changes in behaviour. They mooted workshops on how to handle learners who display behaviour problems.

One participant said:

> 'Workshops to teachers on how to deal with these learners, because they are experiencing a lot of social issues. When they arrive at school, they become unruly.' (Participant 05)

It is clear from the findings that the lockdown created conditions for backlogs to develop in learners' social development. The study unearthed specific psychological and social indicators of poor socialisation. Table 4.1 summarises the backlogs referred to.

Table 4.1 shows that on the psychological level, there was anxiety, fear, disinterest in schoolwork, demotivation and not showing care for peers among learners. On the social level, learners were not interested in extramural activities, discriminated against one another, lacked respect for teachers and peers, passivity in class, reluctance to interact in class, social isolation outside the classroom, social withdrawal from social interaction, talking back to teachers and unruly behaviour.

TABLE 4.1: Indicators of backlogs in learners' social development.

Psychological indicators	Social indicators
Anxiety	Disinterest in extramural activities
Fear of the pandemic	Discrimination
Less interest in schoolwork	Lack of respect
Loss of motivation	Passivity
Lack of display of empathy for peers	Reluctance to interact
-	Social isolation
-	Social withdrawal
-	Talking back
-	Unruly behaviour

Source: Authors' own work.

■ Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore the social development of high school learners in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The other aim was to develop suggestions for enhancing the social development of learners. The aim of this study, although it is small, was achieved. The study highlighted psychological and social indicators of backlogs in social development. The findings also show that teachers were not in a position to deal with unbecoming behaviour displayed. This shows that the socialisation process had been impaired in learners.

The psycho-social indicators of disrupted social development were looked at through the social development theory and the model of social development. These theoretical lenses enabled us to see how confinement led to reduced interaction, isolation, discrimination and lack of empathy and compassion in learners. It was concerning that lack of interaction with competent adult models of appropriate behaviour, namely, teachers, led to unruly behaviour and talking back tendencies.

In a country where electronic media are replete with episodes of violence, crime and strong language, it is understandable that learners will copy some of these behaviours and display them. We reiterate that during confinement, learners and parents alike relied on electronic media for news and developments in the country and in the world and were thus exposed to negative visual and auditory input. It should be noted that parents were not always there to supervise learners as some returned to work, leaving learners alone.

In line with the theoretical lenses and the indicators of poor socialisation, we are in a position to recommend that schools strengthen collaboration with parents to enhance social development. Life Orientation should be used effectively to teach learners life skills. This implies that the curriculum can be used to enhance social development. It is recommended that psycho-social support services be used to unearth reasons for unruly behaviour as such behaviour could be signs that some learners experienced psychological challenges. Teachers should be trained to be lay counsellors, especially those who teach Life Orientation and those who serve in school-based support teams.

As regards recommendations for policy and practice, we recommend that the South African curriculum be used as a bridge that connects learners to the outside world and promotes social development. Life Orientation and Life Skills are accessible subjects that can be used effectively to promote the social development of learners. Social development is part of Life Orientation. Intra- and interpersonal life skills

should be prioritised to promote social competence in learners. Intervention programmes that build *ubuntu* (showing humanity to others), not only as a philosophy but also as a way of life, can be implemented as part of the curriculum. A system-wide intervention is recommended to prepare the education system to respond adequately in times of future disasters.

Methodological recommendations include the amplification of the call for learners to be studied directly and not through adults – usually parents and teachers – acting as proxies. Our study was, therefore, adultist in nature, as are other studies that use adults to study children indirectly.

The study was not without limitations. We admit that the sample size was quite small; however, this does not discount the significance of the study. Qualitative exploratory studies are usually small, yet their findings can be significant and transferable to similar contexts. Such baseline studies usually serve as a platform for future studies. We recommend that future studies use bigger samples and perhaps include learners as participants.

Spiritual and religious development of learners amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

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■ Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created an existential crisis that imperilled the health, quality of life and well-being of all worldwide. More concerning was the fact that the pandemic occurred in the absence of a vaccine or cure. During times of disaster, spirituality and religion usually play a crucial role in facilitating holistic health management (Coppola et al. 2021; Ferrell et al. 2020). In other words, people tend to rely on their spirituality and differing religions for emotional, mental and physical well-being to cope resiliently during times of crisis. Spirituality and religion tend to anchor individuals and communities during the storms of life and thus facilitate their capacity to resile in the context of risk and adversity.

Spirituality and different forms of religion have been running through human societies since the beginning of chronicled antiquity. The association with the holy or transcendental has a significant impact on individuals' views, stances, emotions and actions. Individuals, families and the community at large have always attained consolation and hope through religion, spirituality or a philosophy of life during perceived trying times, uncertainty, extreme anxiety or disaster. In difficult times, adherence to spirituality and religion improves the fundamental quality of life through holistic health management (Coppola et al. 2021; Ferrell et al. 2020), both for the broad populace and for individuals in distress.

Spiritual care and religion are, therefore, essential components of the abovementioned holistic health management that deals with the establishment of benevolence and understanding during periods of stress. Historically, spirituality and religious practices have been recognised as powerful coping instruments in the midst of traumatic and life-changing events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Developing children is a process that requires that they be seen holistically. While the lockdown connected to the pandemic impacted other facets of child development, it also impacted spiritual and religious development in children because places of worship were closed, too.

The extent of the negative impact of the pandemic on spiritual or religious development may be difficult to ascertain; however, it is important for teachers and parents to collaborate in ensuring holistic development in children. This chapter explores the concept of spiritual and religious development among learners in relation to resilience in the context of learners' experience of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

■ Background

Although spirituality and religiosity are two different constructs, they are deeply intertwined, often used interchangeably and, therefore, difficult to

set apart (Lee 2020; Thuné-Boyle et al. 2013). According to research, most people do not differentiate between these two phenomena and regard them both as synonymous and reference points in their lives, especially during trying times (Milner et al. 2020; Zinnbauer & Pargament 1997). It is, therefore, important to differentiate between religiosity and spirituality.

Religiosity can be regarded as a multidimensional construct, orientated towards institutions and traditions that are reflected as a set of beliefs and rituals. Religiosity, therefore, encapsulates norms, values, rules and dogmas that unify people who share the same doctrine (Coppola et al. 2021). Spirituality, on the other hand, seems to be a more personal social construct. Coppola et al. (2021) accentuated the personal dimension of spirituality. They view spirituality as a more individualised effort to ascertain the sacredness or meaning of life. In this regard, spirituality is then often seen as a personal communal concept within close relationships, such as families, rather than organised religious denominations.

The presence of spirituality and religion in a person's life offers coping skills through organised religion and more intimate groupings, such as families, that would provide opportunities for caring, development and growth during trying times. It is important to note that spirituality and religiosity are phenomena that develop in children through the bi-directional interactions they have within their microsystemic fortresses, such as the family and places of worship. The COVID-19 pandemic that necessitated the closure of places of worship had a negative impact on religious and spiritual development in children.

■ The family as spiritual caregiver

Coppola et al. (2021), Tamminen (2006) and Lee (2020) highlighted the value of spirituality as a source of support and comfort that instils a sense of belonging and interconnectedness among people. A sense of belonging and interconnectedness become even more important in times of disaster. It is important to note that people find spiritual support from various sources, including their families and places of prayer and worship. According to Roman, Mthembu and Hoosen (2020), the family unit is the keystone of humanity and an important social determining factor of holistic health management. Spiritual support is a constant sense of sustenance during times of prosperity, as well as during challenging times (Lee 2021). As such, families offer continued support and care to children and the elderly and provide extended support during times of illness and need. It is therefore clear that the communal spirituality in a family is a contributing factor to the holistic health and wellness of individuals in such a social grouping.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people were forced to rely on their families for extended support in various aspects of their lives (Lee 2021).

During this period, when the family unit and society at large were confronted with various challenges to their holistic health management, significant opportunities for development and growth were also evident. The family unit as a spiritual care provider played a pivotal role in negotiating both positive and negative responses to the pandemic (Coppola et al. 2021). In such life-changing situations, the role of spirituality and religiosity often becomes even more amplified – especially when people, and children, are confronted with mortality (Chirico 2021).

■ Spirituality and religiosity in children

Cole (2011, p. 5) reflects on the value of spirituality for children and conceptualises it as 'a child's development of self that includes a search for meaning, transcendence, wholeness, and purpose'. Lee (2020, 2021) expands on this description by characterising spirituality in children as inherent rationality and connectedness that include creativity, transcendence and spiritual experience.

It is important to mention, however, that not all scholars agree on a simplistic definition of spirituality and religion in children and seem to regard this as an ambiguous concept. Historically, spirituality was viewed as a social construct that included interpersonal and ideological concepts based on post-formalism (Harms 1944; Ratcliff 1985; Smith 1941). The lack of agreed-upon definitions and multiple conceptualisations, as well as the plausible connection to various religions, still poses challenges for academic researchers. The presence of spirituality in children needs to be considered with both the inclusion and the exclusion of organised religiosity. In an inclusive and diverse society, space needs to be created for all religions, as well as non-religious and secular affiliations. In the limited scope of this chapter, the focus is on spiritual development as a general and inclusive concept that includes religiosity rather than a narrow and one-dimensional understanding.

■ Development of spirituality and religiosity

In an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world (Bennett & Lemoine 2014), concepts such as moral citizenship and the spiritual, social, economic and emotional development of children have attracted unprecedented global attention in the recent past (Foster & Armstrong 2017). Such development not only has a profound impact on the personal development of children but also has a significant impact on holistic health management and the spiritual resilience of larger communities (Mountain 2007). Holistic development in children is a complex undertaking that resides with families, religious institutions, greater communities and especially educational institutions, such as schools. Another challenge presented by our

VUCA world is that the primary education of children resides much more with schools than it traditionally did. Moreover, families tend to be less involved in the spiritual and religious development of (some) children.

This spiritual and religious dimension of childhood is often not given adequate attention in schools, where performance management, academic learning and accountability prevail (Lee 2020; Moriarty 2011; Roux 2006; Sitompul & Sutrisno 2022). Teachers and other school staff are often overworked and overloaded with tasks, which results in a strain on their relationships with learners. Although teachers may have the desire to contribute to the spiritual and religious development of learners, their reality does not offer opportunities for enriching conversations and developmental opportunities (Ene & Barna 2014). In addition, Hill and Woolley (2022) remind us that teachers' perceptions of spiritual development can vary considerably and must be regarded as a complex and indefinite concept. Regardless of the challenges in executing enough engagement and developmental opportunities, spiritual and religious development remains a key component of the South African school curriculum (Department of Basic Education 2011). According to Roux (2006), this became a paramount issue with regard to the content of Life Orientation as well as the 'Religion and Education' policy document in 2003.

Embracing the few opportunities that teachers do have to contribute to the spiritual and religious development of learners not only creates communal transcendent experiences for individuals with different backgrounds and beliefs but also contributes to the nurturing of moral values and spiritual multilingualism that transcend the frameworks and practices of institutional religions (Lee 2020, 2021; Roux 2006). Events such as the global COVID-19 pandemic have again shed light on the value and importance of this aspect of holistic health management and development in schools (Coppola et al. 2021; Kelley et al. 2022). An integral component of spiritual and religious development is the attainment of resilience as a life skill. Therefore, the role of resilience as a component of the spiritual and religious development of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be acknowledged and explored.

■ Spirituality, religiosity and resilience

The phenomenon of resilience has been explored in Chapter 9. In this chapter, it is sufficient for us to mention that Windle (2011) conducted a literature study on resilience and, subsequently, defined it as the ability to effectively negotiate, adapt and manage significant sources of stress or trauma. Resilience thus refers to the resources that an individual has access to within themselves and within their environment to deal with adverse situations. It can also be regarded as the ability to bounce back. Da Silva,

Da Silva and Vettore (2014), Wood, Ntaote and Theron (2012), and Libório and Ungar (2014) concur and further highlight the value of resilience in dealing with the negative effects of risk.

Scholars remind us that resilience is often not an individual construct, but rather a socio-ecological undertaking. For instance, Theron, Liebenberg and Malindi (2014, p. 254) state that resilience is no longer understood as an individual trait of an individual; instead, '*a social ecological* perspective conceptualises resilience as a process of dynamic transactions between young people and their socio-cultural ecologies'. In other words, the search for the evidence or presence of resilience should include the social ecology in which one subsists (Ungar 2011). The role of the family, peer group, school and community in enabling resilience in the context of risk should be recognised.

Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010), Smith, Webber and DeFrain (2013) and Ungar (2010) explored the role of the community in providing protective resources that can be negotiated during trying times. Protective resources are processes, factors or services that combine in complex ways with personal strengths such as a sense of agency, assertiveness or a sense of humour to lessen the impact of risk, while resilience risks are factors or processes that make non-resilient outcomes more likely. A distinction can be made between intra- and interpersonal or socio-ecological resources of resilience. Intrapersonal protective resources include a resilient personality, a future orientation, educational progress, value adherence and a calm personality, among other things (Theron, Malindi & Theron 2013). Interpersonal or socio-ecological factors or resources are those that have to do with the quality of relationships and the interaction of individuals with family members, teachers and other community members in order to gain access to resources (internal and external) that make resilience possible (Libório & Ungar 2014). Socio-ecological factors or processes involve the services that communities should make available to all in ways that are spiritually and religiously meaningful.

When considering the above, resilience accentuates the ability of people to identify and use resources to restore or maintain holistic health on various levels. In addition, resilient people can share and source these resources within their families, schools and communities. The importance of schools in the development of resilience in learners was accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nel, Botha & Marais 2021).

The question that might be asked revolves around whether spirituality, religion and resilience are in any way related or not. There is an abundance of research evidence that religious and spiritual youth at risk do cope resiliently in the context of risk and adversity (Malindi & Theron 2010; Theron & Malindi 2010). This may suggest that youth with shaky spirituality and religious adherence may be at risk of poor developmental outcomes. Therefore, a child's microsystems (family, school and church) should

facilitate spiritual and religious development in children to serve as a buffer when trying times ensue.

Resilience may be needed to deal with difficult situations within any area of a learner's life and requires the involvement of different role players to effectively manage such occurrences. Acknowledging this multidimensional and complex nature of resilience highlights the different role players and the different domains in which learners can be resilient. It is a reminder that some learners may have more protective resources available to them than others. The individual contexts of their home, schools, communities and current holistic health management will have an impact on their level of resilience and the manner in which they will deal with challenges. This is also true of their ability to cope with and develop on the spiritual and religious levels during and after a large-scale crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

■ The link between spirituality, religiosity and resilience

The value of spirituality and religion in promoting holistic health is reliant on the ability of a person to be resilient during adverse times. As mentioned, spirituality and religiosity are multidimensional constructs, encompassing a variety of diverse and complementary facets. Owing to its complex nature, the same event in one individual's life may have both positive and negative spiritual and religious implications. The ability to deal with such events is also dependent on the people, resources and skills available to that person (or learner). Spiritual and religious beliefs can, therefore, also be regarded as very valuable resources.

Spirituality, according to Manning (2013), is highlighted as one of the basic characteristics that inspire resilience. In a different study, including older women, she further describes spirituality '*as a pathway to resilience*' (Manning 2013, p. 570). In the same manner, learners can also be accompanied on this pathway by their teachers.

Following an extensive literature study, Roux (2006) indicates that religious education, albeit part of the South African national curriculum, does not cover spirituality *per se*. Religious education thus does not address spiritual meaning-making and, subsequently, the development of skills such as resilience. Regardless, spiritual and religious development are nurtured on various levels, including families and schools. Capitano and Naudé (2020) explored the influence of families and the educational environment on the spiritual and religious identity development of South African adolescents. The spiritual development of learners is closely related to identity development and, therefore, is dependent on various sources and influences.

A strong religious identity will thus promote spiritual development. Different, dominant discourses on identity development are supported by

families, religious institutions and schools. As mentioned earlier and supported by Lee (2021), less than adequate support by families forces teachers and schools to provide these necessary opportunities for spiritual and religious development. The extended lockdown and school closure brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic deprived many learners of personal and face-to-face contact with teachers, thereby possibly also denying them opportunities to develop on spiritual and religious levels.

It is crucial to also explore the ways in which spirituality and religion can develop resilience. Smith et al. (2013) list at least four ways in which this can be established, namely, through relationships, life values, personal meaning and coping. They concluded that there are more plausible ways in which spirituality and religion may influence resilience and positive emotions than the reverse.

This chapter explores the context of the spiritual and religious development of children during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role that resilience played in the way in which they coped with the pandemic. In this regard, the social ecology of resilience theory (SERT) of Ungar (2011) seemed a fitting theoretical framework.

■ Theoretical framework

For the purpose of this chapter, Michael Ungar's (2013) SERT seemed appropriate to give an understanding and background of the role of spirituality amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The SERT is based on four basic principles, namely, decentrality, complexity, atypicality and cultural relativity (Ungar 2011), which were discussed in detail in Chapters 1 and 9. Decentrality refers to the need to focus not only on the child when evidence of resilience is sought in adverse situations but also on the role of support systems in enabling resilient outcomes (Ungar 2011). In other words, the role of a child's social ecology consisting of active support systems such as the family, peer group, school and services in the community in enabling coping capacity in the context of risk and adversity should be recognised.

The principle of complexity requires that the phenomenon of resilience and the protective processes that enable it are too complex to predict singular developmental trajectories in all contexts (Ungar 2011). Complexity focuses on the fact that resilience and the processes associated with it are complex phenomena that differ in different contexts (Ungar 2011). It can be argued, therefore, that a risk in one context may not necessarily serve as one in another context. A fitting example would be poverty. While poverty might imperil development in some, it might be a motivation to seek to acquire an education that will improve one's life and end the cycle of poverty for some. As pointed out in Chapter 1, protection and insulation against risk do not serve to guarantee resilient outcomes because a

significant amount of risk that should be successfully overcome is needed for resilience to be claimed. Furthermore, risk can have a steeling effect on a child at risk and thus prepare a child for future risks (Rutter 2012).

The third principle is atypicality, which refers to hidden resilience as children sometimes cope with risks in ways that are considered atypical or unconventional (Ungar 2011). To put it differently, it is argued that children at risk of poor resilient outcomes (poor and neglected) sometimes resort to coping ways that are not seen to be normal or acceptable (e.g. begging in the streets) if judged by conventional standards in a particular society. However, these behaviours that are perceived to be unconventional enable coping ability in the context of risk.

The last principle, namely, cultural relativity, presupposes that the ways in which people cope with risk are rooted in their cultures and histories (Ungar 2011). Wright, Masten and Narayan (2013) and Ungar (2011) described resilience as a culturally and contextually relevant process where children or learners are moulded and prepared for a life where adversities can be faced. Research shows that children who are at risk of negative resilient outcomes depend on their cultures to cope with risk (Malindi & Theron 2010). This is reminiscent of spiritual resilience. Spiritual resilience, which can be seen as part of cultural relativity, is the ability to use one's own beliefs, convictions and principles to strengthen one's sense of self-worth and to be able to utilise these inner strengths as resources when dealing with adversities (Manning et al. 2019). Spiritual resilience is also the ability to maintain a positive spirit even in the face of adversity (Manning et al. 2019).

■ Research methodology

Bakkabulindi (2020) defines research methodology as the best strategy that researchers can use to gain knowledge. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) describe research methods as the tools that researchers use to collect data. A research methodology is a series of actions or steps that researchers use to describe how they effectively carry out their research (Gupta & Gupta 2011). In this instance, we chose qualitative research as a suitable strategy of inquiry and used questionnaires and the draw-and-write technique to generate data.

■ Research design

A phenomenological qualitative research design and an interpretivist research paradigm were used to explore the ways in which learners coped with and possibly developed during the pandemic. The research questions aimed to address the experience of spirituality and religiosity, the possible

development in these domains and the mechanisms or skills that enabled learners to cope with the realities of the pandemic they lived through. The local knowledge and lived experiences of learners provided rich data to address these research questions.

■ Participant selection

The population for this study included primary and secondary schools in Gauteng. A primary school in Vanderbijlpark and a secondary school in Sebokeng were included in the chosen sample. Teachers and learners from Grade 6 to Grade 9 were included as participants. Convenience sampling, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), was used as the researchers already had an exciting relationship with the chosen schools. All participants agreed to participate through voluntary informed consent and were assured that they could withdraw at any time.

■ Biographical information
☐ Teachers

All the participating teachers were Grades 6 and 7 teachers at the primary school in Sebokeng. Although an invitation was extended to the teachers at the secondary school in Vanderbijlpark, no teachers accepted, as they were conducting examinations.

Participant	Gender
Teacher 1	Male
Teacher 2	Female
Teacher 3	Female
Teacher 4	Male
Teacher 5	Female

Source: Authors' own work.

☐ Learners

Participants	Gender	Age	Grade
Learner 1	Female	12	6
Learner 2	Female	12	6
Learner 3	Female	15	9
Learner 4	Female	15	9
Learner 5	Male	15	9
Learner 6	Male	15	9
Learner 7	Female	15	9
Learner 8	Male	12	6
Learner 9	Female	13	7
Learner 10	Female	12	6

Source: Authors' own work.

◼ Data-gathering

Okeke (2020) states that the uniqueness of qualitative data is guaranteed because of the different data collection methods available to researchers. In this study, data were gathered in two ways, which ensured the depth of the data and assisted with triangulation. The teachers and learners completed separate questionnaires, and the learners also engaged in a facilitated draw-and-write activity, as described by Driesnack (2005).

The following questions were included in the questionnaire that was distributed to the teacher participants:

- How do you think the learners experience COVID-19? Think about emotionally, physically and with regard to schoolwork.
- What do you think were the learners' biggest source of comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Do you think the learners' moral values and faith or spirituality changed during the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, can you tell me how it changed?
- Do you think their faith or spirituality became stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic? If 'yes', why do you think so?
- What do you think helped them cope during the COVID-19 pandemic? Do you think they are now more resilient than before the pandemic?

As the learner participants in this study were young, an arts-based method was also used to generate data. In addition, cultural discourses and traditions might cause some learners to feel uncomfortable about having conversations with adults with whom they did not have a pre-existing relationship. Therefore, the draw-and-write technique (see Driesnack 2005) offered the learners the opportunity to share their lived experiences through art. This child-friendly technique requires participants to make symbolic drawings that they subsequently elucidate by means of a narrative. The mother tongue of the learners was also considered, and therefore, in an effort to make the data-gathering technique as accessible as possible, prompts were provided in English, as well as the native language of each participant.

The following prompt[1] was provided to participants: 'In the space provided, draw a picture in which you show how spirituality (your faith or your moral values) helped you cope with COVID-19. How well you draw is not important. There is no time limit. You can use colour if you wish'.

After the learners were provided with enough time and a variety of stationery and resources to complete their drawings, the researchers

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1. For the sake of this chapter, only English prompts and questionnaires are included.

requested them to complete the second part of the activity. It entailed the following: 'Write a paragraph in which you explain your drawing. Write as much as you can. If writing is a bit challenging, let me know. You can tell me what you want to say, and I will write it down and read it back to you for confirmation. Write in any language you like'.

After the draw-and-write activity and accompanying narrative, the learners were requested to complete the following questionnaire:

- Can you tell me, in short, how you experienced the COVID-19 pandemic? Think about how you experienced it emotionally, physically and with regard to your schoolwork.
- What do you think was your biggest source of comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Do you think your moral values or faith or spirituality changed during the COVID-19 pandemic? If 'yes', can you tell me how it changed?
- Do you think your faith or spirituality helped you cope during the COVID-19 pandemic? If 'yes', why do you think so?

■ Ethical issues

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from all relevant stakeholders, including the Gauteng Education Department and the ethics committee of the tertiary institution affiliated with this study. As mentioned, participation was voluntary, and the participants could withdraw at any stage of the process. Full and rich descriptions of the raw data promoted dependability, while member checking (see Merriam & Tisdell 2016) and triangulation ensured the transferability of the findings. The data were stored in a safe environment that also provided the option of revisiting the data and verifying assertions at a later stage.

■ Findings and discussion

Exploratory and interpretive content analysis was utilised to analyse the data from various sources. Within-case analysis was suitable, as both sets of participants could be regarded as a comprehensive group in and of itself. To ensure academic rigour, the cross-case analysis provided a general explanation that fits both groups (see Merriam & Tisdell 2016; Yin 2014).

The data analysis indicated that the participants' responses could be grouped into two main themes, with sub-themes highlighting specific areas of interest. The themes are indicated in Table 5.1.

TABLE 5.1: Themes emerging from the data analysis.

Intrapersonal aspects concerning spirituality and religion[†]	Interpersonal aspects concerning spirituality and religion
Emotional and physical experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic	The effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the learners' schoolwork
Resilience of learners during and after the COVID-19 pandemic	Sources of comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic
Changes in moral values and faith or spirituality during and after the COVID-19 pandemic	-

Source: Authors' own work.
Key: [†], 'Spirituality and religion' is used interchangeably with 'spiritualism and faith'.

■ Theme 1: Intrapersonal aspects concerning spirituality and religion

■ Emotional and physical experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

The participating teachers shared their personal views of the emotional and physical experiences they had observed in their learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although schools were closed because of national COVID-19 regulations, learners shared their experiences upon returning to school. In their questionnaires, the teachers shared concerns about learners appearing to be depressed and experiencing a range of uncertainties relating to prescribed protocols at school and in the country as a whole. These enforced physical barriers through social distancing and deprived learners of their usual activities at school. Emotional challenges led to changes in sleeping patterns and even nightmares. In addition, some learners experienced loss in different domains of their lives. The following responses were given:

> 'Some learners lost their parents. [*It*] left them emotionally hurt. Without hope.' (Teacher 04, male)

> 'COVID-19 affected learners' emotional stability, as their young minds were not able to balance the changes that were happening in their lives. Things changed for them at home financially. Schoolwork was no longer the same, as attendance changed, and they were exposed to the possibility of early death that can come with being infected with the virus.' (Teacher 05, female)

Learners echoed the experiences that the teachers had noted in their behaviour after the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions brought about by national regulations prohibited them from attending school and church. Fear of contracting the disease contributed to the confusion and uncertainty they experienced. Learner 09 (female, 13 years old, Grade 7) shared the distress

of possibly having to cope without her grandmother, the breadwinner, in their household after she had contracted COVID-19. Learner 06 shared the emotional distress of being confronted with their own mortality, as well as the mortality of their loved ones and the greater community:

> 'It was so scary not knowing what will happen next. There was [*sic*] times where I thought the world was coming to an end with the number of COVID-19 cases increasing rapidly.' (Learner 06, male, 15 years old, Grade 9)

The findings echo the findings by, among others, Coppola et al. (2021), who emphasised the importance of holistic health management in children during a pandemic. Chirico (2021) also explored the impact of being confronted with mortality in such times. These experiences, if addressed in a formal school environment, contribute to the spiritual and religious development of children (Roux 2006). The data shared in this study also report changes in the spiritual and religious experiences of the learner participants.

■ The resilience of learners during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

The teachers agreed that learners became more conscious of their holistic health by obeying COVID-19 regulations. A learner said the following:

> 'Having a healthy spiritual sense helped me find peace within myself despite the chaos that was happening, which also made me make rational decisions.' (Learner 05, male, 15 years old, Grade 9)

The findings of this study corroborate Theron et al.'s (2014) notion that resilience should be regarded as a social construct that is dependent on the various environments in which learners find themselves. In a high-risk situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the already-existing capacity for resilience in learners proved to be a positive contributor to their spiritual and religious development (Ungar 2013).

■ Changes in moral values and faith or spirituality during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

The participating teachers agreed that they perceived possible changes in the spirituality and religiosity of their learners. Teachers noticed that learners relied heavily on their religion and religious gatherings for support and comfort during this time. The learners shared their need to engage with Scripture and prayer. They also shared anecdotes of learning to trust God to protect them and their families and realising that God would provide for them.

Spiritualism in schools

Learners: draw and write

Prompt:

Draw a picture in which you show how spirituality (your faith or moral values) helped you cope with Covid-19.

Write a paragraph or more in which you explain how what you have drawn

As you see in my drawing, I have drawn my self praying because in the Covid-19 pandemic the only person I could think about that can protect us is God. As it was a Covid-19 pandemic I used to pray day and night more than I used to because we didn't know what tomorrow might bring us. We could not go to church because our president Cyril Ramaphosa did not allow us to go as it could get crowded.

Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 5.1: Learner 02 (female, 12 years old, Grade 6).

It is imperative to mention that it was not clear from the data whether these experiences for religious comfort only referred to Christian learners or whether learners from other religions also experienced this. Teacher 05 captured the essence of their experiences in this regard as follows:

'I believe learners' spirituality or faith changed during COVID-19. Being exposed to people being sick and dying left and right will make you strengthen your beliefs and change your moral values.' (Teacher 05, male)

The learners also shared the growth and development they had experienced in their spirituality and engagement with religious matters. They said:

'It really changed, because I didn't go to church almost every Sunday, but now I go every Sunday.' (Learner 09, female, 13 years old, Grade 7)

'What I have illustrated in the picture is the sun and two clouds. The clouds represent COVID-19 and the sun represents God. In the end, the sun will always shine over the

clouds and the clouds will go away. The sun symbolises the faith I have for [*sic*] God. I coped during COVID-19 with my faith in God the creator. He is trustworthy. And so I prayed every single day.' (Learner 06, male, 15 years old, Grade 9)

Cole (2011) reflects on the value of spirituality for children and describes it as a search for meaning and purpose. The findings of this study highlight that schools play an important role in the spiritual and religious development of learners. The affirmation they seek for turning to religion in a time of need confirms Lee's (2020, 2021) findings that schools provide opportunities for spiritual and religious development.

■ Theme 2: Interpersonal aspects concerning religion and spiritualism

□ The effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the learners' schoolwork

Most of the teachers agreed that COVID-19 had a negative impact on the academic achievement of most learners. COVID-19 regulations, such as personal protective equipment and social distancing, had a huge impact on activities in classrooms. The number of school days that were lost and the inability of all learners to engage in remote learning created conundrums that teachers were forced to deal with. Concern about possibly becoming ill or dealing with illness and loss in their families and communities had a negative influence on the ability of learners to concentrate in class. The following was said in this regard:

'It was very emotional for me that I couldn't concentrate at school and my marks dropped.' (Learner 03, female, 15 years old, Grade 9)

'The lockdown carried on for months, and I was starting to stress about my academics. I was doing online classes, but I still thought that I might have to repeat the grade because we missed most of the school year.' (Learner 04, female, 15 years old, Grade 9)

□ Sources of comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic

According to the participating teachers' perceptions, religion, parental and family cohesion were the most significant sources of comfort to learners throughout and after the pandemic. The information about holistic health management they received from the media and local health care facilities was also a significant source of support. The learners reported that teachers were an additional source of comfort and a stabilising factor in a very uncertain world. Some teacher participants reported that learners experienced compulsory vaccination as another source of support. One of the teachers said:

'What helped the learners cope during COVID-19 was seeing that the government had a plan to help bring the virus to an end. Having safety

measures to prevent us from getting infected also helped the learners cope with COVID-19.' (Teacher 05, female)

Data from the draw-and-tell pictures and narratives corroborated the data from the teachers' questionnaires as follows:

'My biggest source of comfort was a prayer, telling God all my emotions inside me and to protect my loved ones.' (Learner 02, female, 12 years old, Grade 6)

'My biggest comfort during COVID-19 was a church to have some prayer sessions and use holy water.' (Learner 10, female, 12 years old, Grade 6)

'My family, always being around my loved ones who I knew would care and protect me at all costs and knowing that this experience brought me closer to them than before.' (Learner 05, male, 15 years old, Grade 9)

Donald et al. (2010) highlight the value of community as a source of support and comfort that also contribute to a sense of belonging and
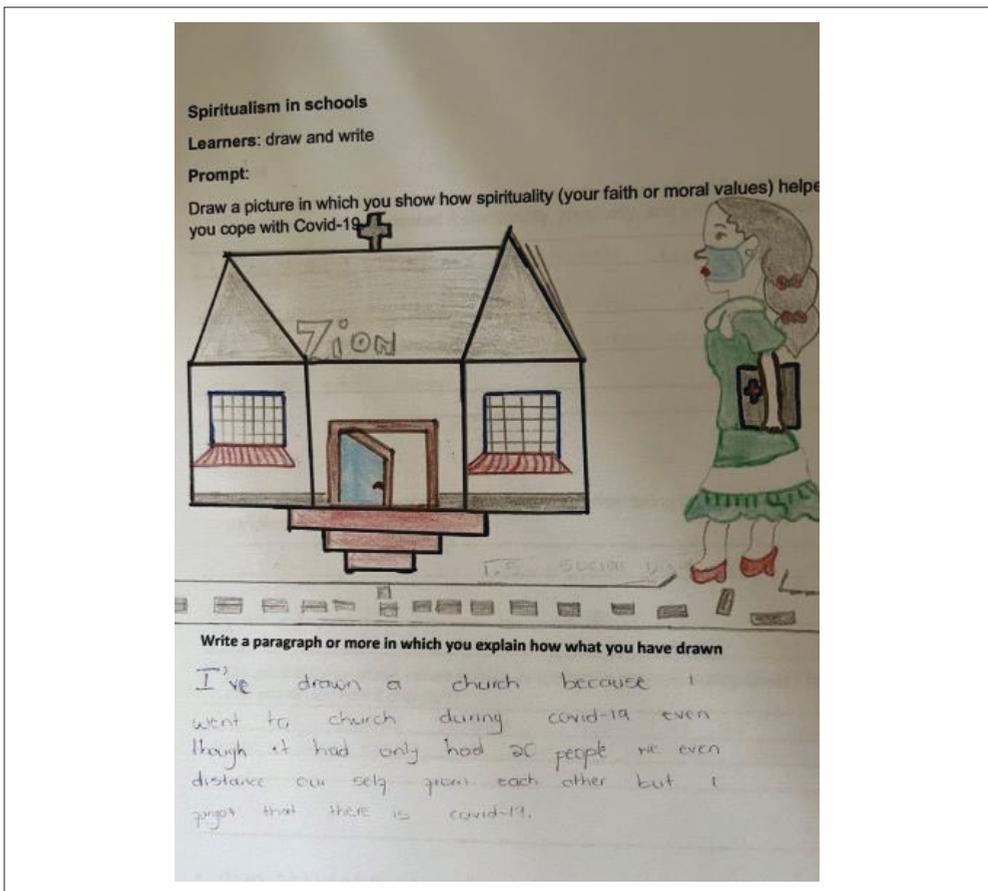
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 5.2: Learner 09 (female, 13 years old, Grade 9).

interconnectedness among people. Furthermore, Roman et al. (2020) emphasise the value of family as an important system of support. This aspect also contributes to the holistic health and wellness of individuals in a family. In addition, the findings also verify Capitano and Naudé's (2020) statements with regard to the influence of families and the educational environment on the spiritual and religious identity development of South African learners.

The themes in this study highlight literature that values the role of parents, families and schools in the spiritual and religious development of learners. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic amplified the need for development in these areas. Although schools were initially closed, the role teachers played in informing and comforting learners after the schools had re-opened cannot be underestimated. Learners' innate resilience also contributed to their coping with the new, challenging world they had to navigate.

Although Roux (2006) points out the gaps in the South African curriculum and highlights the fact that religion, rather than spirituality *per se*, is addressed as part of Life Orientation, this study indicates that spirituality is indeed pragmatically addressed in classes. Albeit not formally and as part of specific learning areas, informal discussions and interaction between learners and teachers do indeed contribute to the spiritual and religious development of learners.

■ Limitations to this study

This study is of limited scope and cannot be generalised. However, the findings are transferable to other similar contexts. It needs to be acknowledged that a small sample of teachers and learners was used in this study. It was not clear what the religious convictions of all the participants were. The distinction between spirituality or spiritualism, religion and moral values could also be clarified in more detail.

■ Recommendations

The spiritual and religious development of learners can be regarded as part of the hidden curriculum enacted by all teachers. The findings in this study highlight the importance of schools in helping learners cope with significant events such as pandemics, as well as smaller, more individual crises they may experience. Schools are an extension of families and communities and, as such, have a moral obligation to contribute towards the holistic health management of learners.

It is recommended that teachers be made aware of this responsibility and trained to deal with such situations should they arise. Religious diversity

in South Africa is acknowledged and so is the secular nature of the state. While religious observance is permitted in schools, it is no longer enforced as an integral part of the curriculum. Therefore, professional development opportunities should be created to empower teachers with the knowledge and skills they might need to identify and address matters relating to spiritual and religious development, notwithstanding the religious diversity that characterises South African society. Cultural sensitivity, as well as a basic knowledge of various religions, will be helpful in efforts to foster spiritual and religious development among learners.

It is apparent that collaboration is important in spiritual and religious development. This collaboration can and should include three key contexts, namely, the family, school and preferred places of worship. The family, school and church triad may enable embracing diversity and social justice in a country where diversity was used to divide rather than unite people. The gains of religious development are far-reaching and include tolerance, equality, ethics, '*ubuntu*' [I am a person through others] and social cohesion.

■ Conclusion

The realities of the COVID-19 pandemic created even more uncertainty in the world where adults and children alike were suddenly forced to deal with life-changing events. This brought about challenges on the physical, emotional and intellectual front. In addition, young children were forced to confront their fears and even deal with the notion of mortality. The need for holistic health management and a multi-level support system for learners was made obvious. During and after the pandemic, teachers were presented with the opportunity to provide holistic support to their learners. Their efforts seemed to be rewarded with a view into the resilient nature of human beings, in this case, learners.

The pandemic might have passed, but the lessons learnt from studies like this highlight the important role that stakeholders, like teachers, play in the spiritual and religious development of learners. Life presents ample opportunities for conversations, modelling and interaction that promote the development of this essential component of a child. This study highlights the critical awareness that teachers should have of the impact that events outside of the school can have on learners' development. It is a reminder that schools cannot simply rely on the curriculum to foster spiritual development but that communities need to embrace a joint effort between all stakeholders towards the holistic well-being of our children. In that way, we will raise resilient citizens who can face and cope with other challenges that the future might bring.

It can be concluded that development is incomplete without maximum religious/spiritual development. It is important to ask whether families, schools and communities are ready to cope with future disasters (natural or artificial) or not. The SERT (Ungar 2011) shows that to cope resiliently, one requires personal strengths or assets. It then shows that a young person's social ecology is equally important in enabling coping capacity. Therefore, a young child should have faith and be able to express it within social ecologies that potentiate resilience. While some young people can cope in ways that deviate from the norm according to the SERT, our study did not show any atypical coping ways. However, religion is seen as part of culture in resilience circles, and having faith or recognition of the transcendental potentiates coping ability in times of disaster. As religion is an accessible coping resource, it is important for children to have opportunities to develop faith. The question is whether a state that claims to be circular can provide fertile ground for the development of faith as an accessible resilience resource or not. Further research is needed to answer this question.

Chapter 6

COVID-19 and the academic development of learners: The need for targeted interventions

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■ Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic broke out and spread across the globe. It was caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome that had its origin in China (Remuzzi & Remuzzi 2020). It resulted in the death of many people across the world and caused much fear and anxiety because there was neither a vaccine nor a cure for it. As a global health crisis, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (Mishra, Gupta & Shree 2020). Scientists have discovered that COVID-19 was an infectious disease that was spread through close human contact (Remuzzi & Remuzzi 2020). Therefore, measures were taken to minimise contact between people, especially in public places. Movement within and between nations was restricted because the virus was mobile within and between states. Public places where people congregated in large numbers, such as places of worship, institutions of higher learning and schools, were thus closed.

The closure of schools had been implemented in many countries by late March 2020 (Moloney & Moloney 2020). To salvage schooling and the academic year, UNESCO (2020) proposed that schools and other educational institutions worldwide adopt online learning to mitigate the disruptions in education. It is important to note that online learning required resources that many schools in South Africa lacked, namely, computers, Wi-Fi and data. Therefore, many learners from immiserated family backgrounds in South Africa struggled to cope with online learning and were thus at risk of poor developmental and academic outcomes.

Academic development provides learners with the knowledge and skills that are needed later in life (Al-Rawi, Auckaili & Lazonby 2021; Gunna et al. 2015; Sutherland & Hall 2018; Viljoen 2015). Scott (2016) argues that schools should prioritise the academic development of learners and recognise it as essential for improving learning outcomes. Dube (2020) argues that COVID-19 and the implementation of online learning magnified the challenges faced by rural learners and teachers. Research shows that measures taken to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 served as a blow to the academic development of rural learners who are taught within a traditional classroom setup, where a teacher is visible and monitors learning at close range (David et al. 2020; Ebrahim et al. 2020; Krishnakumar & Rana 2020).

Learners who experienced a learning breakdown because of personal and socioecological barriers to learning were even more at risk during the lockdown necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Peterson, O'Connor & Strawhun 2014). Typically, these learners have diverse learning needs that require teachers and relevant stakeholders to collaborate to prevent learning breakdown. In other words, teachers and other relevant stakeholders create conditions for learners at risk to do well in school (Shay 2015). In South Africa, most of these at-risk learners were deprived of

continued access to academic support because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shepherd & Mohohlwane 2021). The term 'at-risk learner(s)' refers to a learner or groups of learners who are facing barriers that may contribute to learning breakdown and poor developmental outcomes (Malindi & Koen 2021).

Statistics show that schools in South Africa lost about 14% of the annual school curriculum because of the temporary closure of schools to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Fowler et al. 2021; Mahaye 2020). Kekić and Miladinović (2016) report that the loss of teaching and learning time may lead to temporary and permanent damage to the education system and put the future of learners at risk. Gustafsson and Nuga (2020) add that learning losses in schools in South Africa:

> [A]t least as measured soon after the disruption, will be greater than what is suggested by actual days lost, [largely] because disruptions [resulted] in learners forgetting some of what was previously learnt. (p. 3)

According to Maree (2022), another challenge that impaired the academic development of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic was finding sufficient space in classrooms to attain social distancing. Learners were expected to maintain a social distance of one metre when seated and one and a half metres when standing or walking, and some affluent schools rebuilt and rearranged school desks in many classrooms (Maree 2022). Gustafsson and Maponya (2021) noted that some classroom resources had to be removed to ensure more space for social distancing to be achieved.

According to Sithole (2021), schools implemented new rotational timetabling models to accommodate learners' learning needs. These timetabling models included daily rotation, weekly rotation, a hybrid and a platooning system. However, many problems were encountered in the implementation of these strategies, especially in rural contexts. It will be remembered that rural schools do not have enough resources. Some schools in urban contexts have limited resources because of the legacy of the apartheid system that systematically exposed African learners to poor learning contexts. Rural and other schools that experienced historical disadvantages did not cope efficiently with online learning. Learners lost much, and this had a negative impact on their academic development.

A matter of interest to all stakeholders is the extent of loss and the impact of such loss on the academic development of learners at risk of poor developmental outcomes, learners in rural contexts and those who were generally doing well before the lockdown was implemented. Although it might be difficult to quantify such loss and impact, it is necessary for teachers and education stakeholders to keep them in mind in planning after the pandemic. For some learners, these losses and the impact thereof may be temporary; however, for some learners, they may be permanent.

The main aim of this chapter was to examine how the interruptions of teaching and learning impacted academic development in a high school for enhancement strategies to be suggested.

■ The impact of COVID-19 on the academic development of learners

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the academic development of some learners. For instance, strict adherence to lockdown measures had a negative impact on schooling as learners' access to education was reduced, and some schools were vandalised (Mahaye 2020; Malindi & Koen 2021; Shepherd & Mohohlwane 2021; UNESCO 2020). Mayimele and Makhalemele (2020) found that a lack of support for learners at risk negatively affected their academic performance. Another study found that high school learners confirmed that the quality of their education was substandard during the lockdown (Puteikis, Mameniškytė & Mameniškienė 2022). Likewise, West (2020) found that teachers and administrators struggled to maintain distance learning in their online classes, as there were no clear standards. This resulted in the increase of educational injustices for learners from low socio-economic backgrounds who relied on physical engagement. The move to remote learning was beneficial to well-resourced schools and learners from high socio-economic backgrounds, as they were able to continue teaching and learning through the online platform (Crain, Vijay & Jaqueline 2022). Ramrathan (2021) established that learners from independent schools benefited from online learning because of the availability of needed resources.

The COVID-19 pandemic destabilised education systems in developed and developing countries and forced teachers and learners to adjust to the new teaching and learning modes within a short space of time (Dube 2020; UNESCO 2020). Most teachers and learners were not technologically skilled, yet they had to shift from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning in a short period of time. According to UNESCO (2020), the closure of schools worldwide deepened prevailing social inequalities as 50% (826 million) of learners around the world did not have a household computer, and 43% (706 million) of learners did not have access to technology tools such as mobile phones. Moreover, about 89% (216 million) of learners had no access to the internet (UNESCO 2020). Mukuna and Aloka (2020) noted that learners in rural primary schools in South Africa experienced a plethora of learning challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these were a lack of parental engagement, a lack of infrastructure to cope with online learning, poor network access for online learning, poor quality of work, and a lack of learning equipment and devices such as smartphones.

Tadesse and Muluye (2020) argued that the shift to remote learning had a serious impact on assessment and evaluation because teachers were required to adopt the online mode of assessment they were not used to. This affected the academic development of learners because assessment plays a pivotal role in providing information about a learner's progress.

In South Africa, Jansen (2020) notes that the education sector trimmed down the curriculum because of time constraints and that learners missed important curriculum content for an academic grade. Reducing the amount of teaching content and adjusting assessment procedures contributed to significant gaps in knowledge, even in early grades (Wyse & Hills 2020). Propositions aimed at salvaging the academic year included assessing only the curriculum content that had been taught, and this meant that assessment influenced what was taught in the classrooms (Ramrathan 2021).

Learners' academic levels dropped into what Azevedo (2020) refers to as learning poverty, which means learners showed incompetence in reading for understanding. It is important to note that learners missed almost five months of schooling, and some learning outcomes could not be met (Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD 2020). Learners in early grades and those in need of additional support showed the highest gaps in knowledge and skills, for instance, in Mathematics and when reading (Dubey et al. 2020; Falk 2020). In a study conducted by Boughey (2010), it was found that gaps in conceptual knowledge, which builds critical thinking for personal learning and personal growth, developed. In this instance, the gaps in knowledge and skill affected learning in the next grades (Dorn et al. 2021; OECD 2019).

■ Interventions to address the impact of COVID-19 on academic development

It is common knowledge that the sudden closure of schools at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic affected teaching and learning to a large extent (Tarkar 2020). Interventions had to be developed to mitigate the impact of the disruption of schooling and ensure continued access to the curriculum. Therefore, the World Bank (2021) advised that learners be supported through tailor-made interventions to re-adjust and catch up on the learning they had lost during the hard lockdown. According to Spaull and Van der Berg (2020), the mooted interventions would ensure the continuity of schooling and enhance academic development in learners. In South Africa, several interventions were proposed by the Department of Basic Education in collaboration with various key stakeholders in the education sector. As mentioned before, online learning was adopted as the main approach.

Online teaching and learning was adopted and played a significant role in assisting schools to continue teaching and learning (Subedi et al. 2020). In South Africa, the implementation of online teaching and learning was, however, not uniform across the education system. For instance, independent schools had resources to implement online teaching and learning, and electronic gadgets such as smartphones, tablets and laptops played a pivotal role in this (Chinnasamy 2021; Tarkar 2020). Former Model-C schools were in a better position to adopt online learning too, because they do have the resources. Parents who send their children to these schools are usually middle-class parents who can afford the electronic equipment needed. The same cannot be said of many schools that admit clientele from poor socio-economic backgrounds. These schools struggled to adapt, and parents battled to support learning from home because of a lack of resources. Rural schools, as pointed out elsewhere in this chapter, were in a worse position.

The Department of Education and several role players in the community developed several approaches to mitigate the impact of the disruption. For instance, television and radio stations were used to broadcast recorded lessons, and these lessons were uploaded on zero-rated educational websites (Mhlanga & Moloi 2020; Tadesse & Muluye 2020). In addition to the abovementioned academic support interventions, the South African Department of Basic Education published study materials and resources on its website, such as e-books, revision question papers and answers, and study guides (Mhlanga & Moloi 2020).

Collaboration between families and schools as microsystems that were closest to learners was used effectively as an intervention approach. In other words, to strengthen the academic development of learners, schools strengthened collaboration with parents (Pokhrel & Chhetri 2021). Parents were expected to supervise and support their children's learning from home, and they received learning materials and lessons for their children through WhatsApp groups. This strategy benefited learners who experienced barriers to learning because they did not have to travel to school. However, learners with barriers to learning – including the visually, neurologically, physically and hearing impaired – experienced more challenges because they required specialised and professional support in their learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri 2021).

In South Africa, the Department of Basic Education (2020) developed a school re-opening plan for the benefit of learners. This intervention involved learners taking turns to attend school for one week. This was reduced to alternating days at a later stage. Blended learning continued in schools that had the required digital infrastructure, and the curriculum was trimmed for Grades 1 to 11 (Department of Basic Education 2020). Grade 7 and

Grade 12 learners had more school days because they did not follow rotational timetables and resumed schooling earlier than the other grades. This is because they were in transition grades (Ramrathan 2021).

Interventions relied on teachers to succeed. Teachers were regarded as a key resource to ensure that learners could catch up and re-adjust to the situation at hand (World Bank 2021). However, training and support for teachers were needed to enable them to cope with the changes. Therefore, teachers were prepared through training for the delivery of online teaching and learning (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2020). The South African Department of Basic Education ensured that teachers received basic training about COVID-19 and on how to use applications such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to deliver lessons (Department of Basic Education 2020). It should be noted that South Africa is a well-developed country compared to other African countries. Other countries in sub-Saharan Africa did not provide adequate training to teachers on online teaching and learning (Tadesse & Muluye 2020).

◼ Theoretical framework

This study was premised on the transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow. Mezirow (1998) argues that the way people think, feel and act is influenced by frames of reference and perspectives that are established during interaction with others and through exposure that may make their experiences meaningful. Transformation is, therefore, achieved by changing perspectives and habits to have the inclusive and integrative perspective needed to create new understandings and new ways of doing things (Mezirow 1998).

Moreover, Mezirow (1998) maintains that altering already-existing frames of reference can be undesirable, as it involves 'unlearning' common practices and somehow letting go of personal values, thus threatening one's way of doing things. This theory becomes relevant when people realise that their existing way of doing things is no longer relevant to the circumstances they are experiencing (Taylor 2000). There is a firm belief, according to Mezirow (1998), that transformation that necessitates a particular action often happens because of dilemmas triggered by a major crisis.

Taylor (2000) argues that transformative learning is grounded in human communication and consists of three interconnected elements that include fostering transformative learning (namely, the centrality of experience), critical reflection and rational discourse. The transformative learning theory is about the process of effecting change in a frame of reference that encompasses habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow 1998). Habits of

mind are engaged whenever there is a change that happens after learning has taken place. This suggests that for learning to take place, there is a need for interdependence among teachers and learners, as the new knowledge becomes useful when two persons strive to reach an understanding of the meaning (Habermas 1981).

Dirkx (1998) indicates that according to the transformative learning theory, knowledge is seen as something that is found outside the learner and can only be taken in when learning occurs. Transformative learning focuses on personal change (Daloz 1986). Boyd (1991) emphasises the importance of personal change for a developmental perspective and personal transformation, which comes through learning. Transformative changes in the way we learn cannot be made unless what we learn fits comfortably into our existing frames of reference (Mezirow 1998).

Goldstein, Popescu and Hannah-Jones (2020) pointed out that many learners received less teaching and learning was reduced because they studied remotely. However, online learning required several changes on the part of teachers, including didactic approaches, assessment procedures and the use of technology. COVID-19 was a worldwide crisis that necessitated change in ways of doing things. COVID-19 challenged the way in which teaching and learning were done and, more importantly, how academic development could be achieved. Teachers had to develop a new mindset, a new frame of reference, by critically reflecting on how they could transform their didactic approaches to support academic development in learners. They had to develop innovative teaching and assessment strategies and interventions to mediate the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning.

■ Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic development of learners and the need for targeted interventions. In Yin's (2011) perspective, qualitative research explores the significance of peoples' lives within authentic environments, portraying their viewpoints and outlooks. It encompasses the environmental factors in which people reside, provides valuable insights into established or evolving concepts that aid in elucidating their human social behaviour, and endeavours to incorporate a diverse array of evidence sources rather than being reliant on a solitary source.

A single case study research design was used to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the academic development of learners and suggest targeted interventions. In this regard, the high school we purposefully sampled was our single case. The school is in a township, and it is considered a previously disadvantaged school. The school admitted learners from Grade 8 until

Grade 12. The total number of learners in the school was 1,204. Despite its status as a disadvantaged school, the school regularly obtains a high matric pass rate because of the dedication of the headmaster and teachers.

There were 34 teachers in the school; 60% of them had a Bachelor of Education degree (BEd) and 40% had a three-year education diploma. One of them was busy with her PhD and two were studying towards their BEd Hons. The headmaster holds a PhD in educational management. The school is situated in a township beset with poverty, unemployment and crime. The most common crime in the area was house burglary, and the school itself had been burgled a few times. In this regard, cutlery and computers were stolen. We prepared research letters and consent forms for the participants. In the letter, we provided details regarding the study and the need for voluntary participation in the study. We referred to the right to withdraw from and non-participation in a study and that there would be no consequences in such instances.

This study resembled a baseline study in which we assessed academic development in the school following the lockdown. Our methodology and methods of generating data were influenced by the need to avoid human contact and infection. Contact research was not encouraged yet. Therefore, we had to use open-ended questionnaires to avoid contact as required by regulations. The questionnaires were sent to the school and teachers completed them. We made arrangements to collect them thereafter.

Only fourteen teachers (41%) returned the questionnaires. When we examined the questionnaires, we noticed that eight females and six males completed the questionnaires. The teachers had been teaching for five–23 years. Twelve of them had a BEd and two had a three-year education diploma and were nearing retirement. The most senior members who took part in the study occupied managerial positions. One was a deputy principal and one was a head of the department.

The language used in the questionnaire was English, and the teachers answered the questions in English too. We all read the responses of the participants in the questionnaires to gain a full understanding of the data. We coded the data individually and developed themes. We then met to compare our codes and themes. We refined them and reached consensus on the themes we were going to use. The participants' responses were similar in many ways. Below, we present these themes and use the most detailed responses because some of the answers were one-word, two-word or three-word sentences.

■ Discussion of findings

We reiterate that we all read the transcripts several times to gain an understanding of the nature of the data. We coded the data, and similar

codes were put under meaningful categories. Three themes emerged, namely, the accessibility of support, support programmes for learners with barriers, and assessment activities. These themes are presented and supported with verbatim, unedited excerpts.

Accessibility of support

The findings show that teachers tried to ensure that support remained accessible to learners even though schooling had been disrupted. However, they experienced challenges in providing support to learners. Therefore, accessibility of support will be discussed under two themes, namely, the provision of extended support and challenges experienced during the provision of extended support services.

Provision of extended support

All the teachers were aware that learners had developed backlogs regarding academic development because of their long stay at home. Therefore, they provided learners with more opportunities to learn. This involved extra, informal activities and tasks to enable academic development in them. It is noteworthy that caring teachers noticed that some learners needed psycho-social support and that teachers tried their best to provide what most of them call moral support. The following excerpt bears evidence of the assertion above:

> 'Ehhhh [...] we gave them a lot of informal activities [...] this assisted to some extent because when I assess, I was able to see the benefits. I also provided my learners with moral support [...] in a way to say to them they must keep on coming to school and focus on their studies during COVID-19.' (FT1)

From the excerpt above, it is evident that teachers motivated learners to keep coming to school, notwithstanding the perils associated with the pandemic. The findings further show that the teachers were dealing with grieving learners. For example, some learners had lost parents and loved ones. Therefore, teachers encouraged learners to resile in the context of risk and provided light snacks if they had physiological needs for food. Learners were given worksheets to complete with parents and caregivers. The following excerpt bears evidence of the above:

> 'I gave learners information about COVID-19 because it was emotionally affecting our learners [...] some lost their parents and relatives due to Covid. I also provided some learners with snacks because their parents lost jobs during COVID-19. I also gave them some tasks to do in their workbooks with their parents.' (FT2)

The findings show that teachers went the extra mile to provide the support needed for academic development to occur. For instance, they chose to

hold extra classes on weekdays and used weekends for extra tuition. Most of them reported that these classes were effective in enabling academic development; however, some reported that some learners in lower grades could not concentrate for long:

> 'Ma'am, I tried to offer extra classes for my learners as [*a*] way of catch-up [...] but I could not win [...] they ran for only two weeks because they were not working. These lower grade ones do not understand [...] they would lose concentration the minute they see other learners go home [...] I then sacrificed my Saturdays to try to accommodate them but, hey [...] it did not work because the learners I targeted did not attend my Saturday classes [...] I don't know, but maybe because their parents did not push them [...] but I stopped [...] It just did not work for me.' (FT6)

Evidently, the participant (FT6) believed that perhaps parents did not encourage learners to take advantage of the extra learning opportunities provided as extra classes.

The findings clearly show that parent–teacher collaboration became even more important during the pandemic. It will be recalled that online learning and later intermittent class attendance meant that learners were expected to learn more on their own than they would. In this regard, parents and caregivers played a pivotal role in monitoring, supporting and encouraging learners to complete the worksheets that were sent to them. Parents had to supervise homework too. The data do not show evidence of teacher–teacher collaboration within and between schools though. Furthermore, the data do not show how collaboration extended to include stakeholders in the community.

Other participants referred to their collaboration with curriculum specialists from the district office. The Department of Education played an important supportive role too. In this regard, curriculum specialists in the district office collaborated with schools in matters related to the curriculum, namely, content selection and assessment procedures. These district-based specialists made previous question papers accessible to teachers and learners alike. The following excerpt bears evidence of the assertion above:

> 'Our district assisted [...] the education specialists and curriculum managers provided us with recovery plans, term planning documents where the curriculum is reduced [...] you see, my education specialist also gave me previous question papers and memorandums to share with the learners.' (FT1)

The Department of Basic Education introduced a telephonic support service for learners to extend support to them in districts. The programme was called the *dial-a-tutor programme.* The programme was aimed at ensuring that learners could call and thus have access to teachers who could provide the support they needed. One of the participants said:

> 'I am fortunate that I am part of the dial-a-tutor programme [...] this programme is very helpful to our learners [...] I am able to assist all the learners in our province.

> The learners call in and when it is found that they need assistance with Social Sciences, the call centre link[*s*] me with the learner who needs support [...] You know, I am happy because this programme was able to reach out to learners since from [*the*] COVID-19 lockdown when schools re-opened in August 2020. The programme is still operational [...] I am still assisting them.' (FT5)

Not much research is available on how schools can support academic development in learners during a pandemic. For some time, there have been pandemics such as cholera, TB and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in South Africa; however, none of them was a pandemic that necessitated the closure of all institutions of learning at once for a long time. Some of the participants reported how they were stressed and how they were anxious because of this. Furthermore, schools had not been required to provide support to so many learners at the same time. Some of the participants, as the data show, mentioned that they were not ready for the sudden changes they experienced. The COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in South Africa; however, the education department played an important role in salvaging the academic year.

Available literature indicates that the South African Department of Basic Education published study materials and resources on its website, such as e-books, revision question papers and answers, and guides to study various subjects (Mhlanga & Moloi 2020). Tadesse and Muluye (2020) indicated that the other resources used as academic support interventions during COVID-19 were the use of television and radio stations to broadcast lessons.

■ Challenges experienced during the provision of extended support services

Apart from challenges ranging from teacher stress, anxiety and lack of involvement by parents and caregivers, several challenges were reported by all the teachers who took part in our study. For example, it was not always possible to support learners in resource-constrained schools, and the performance of such learners dropped because of this. The rotation system was not effective, as one participant pointed out:

> 'Yoh, Ma'am, [*the*] COVID-19 lockdown brought so many challenges [...] it became impossible to support the learners effectively [...] as a result, the performance of learners dropped. You know, my school is like a school in a rural area [...] One could not use any online method to support learners. This rotation method did not assist much, but at least learners managed to attend classes.' (FT4)

All the participants lamented the fact that what they called '*rotational class attendance*' was not as effective as expected. In this regard, learners took turns to attend school. It seems the participants believe the parents and caregivers did not do much to encourage attendance of classes as the following excerpt shows:

'Eish, Ma'am, there were a lot of challenges. With rotational class attendance, we relied on parents to remind the learners to come to school […] parents are illiterate […] we gave them letters indicating how learners will be attending, but hey […] sometimes learners would be absent because they did not agree to come to school while their sibling sisters and brother are at home not attending […] rotational class attendance was challenging.' (FT3)

The teachers who took part in the study further lamented not only absenteeism on the part of learners but also the confusion, as the following excerpt shows:

'Ma'am, neh, I encountered high levels of absenteeism due to rotational class attendance. The learners and parents were confused and mixed the days for the class attendance […] they could not follow […] parents are not educated, so this hampered the implementation of rotational class attendance. And, Ma'am, the learners' performance was affected.' (FT9)

Absenteeism affected the academic performance of some of the learners, as the excerpt shows. All the teachers who took part in the study mentioned that some parents and learners did not have smartphones to receive important WhatsApp messages from teachers. Therefore, they had to intensify curriculum recovery plans that included extra tuition:

'The main challenge was [a] lack of online teaching and learning, like where my other school is situated. Parents do not have WhatsApp and learners do not have cell phones; so, it was a challenge to them, but at least curriculum recovery plans assisted.' (FT12)

The lack of resources served as a barrier to learning and academic development in our study. Mukuna and Aloka (2020) made a similar finding in their study.

■ Support programme for learners with learning barriers

In some instances, the participants provided short one-word, two-word or three-word answers in their questionnaires. Nevertheless, the findings show that all the participants could not provide intensive support to learners at risk of poor developmental outcomes because of personal and socioecological risks. The school-based support team meetings could not take place and the internal referral support system stopped functioning. Some said they could not send referrals to the district either. Under normal circumstances, these learners receive individualised support and therapeutic interventions from district-based support teams. When schooling partly resumed and rotation timetables were followed, these learners fell through the cracks. At the time, as some participants pointed out in their short sentences in the questionnaires, every learner needed support. The department pushed for teachers to do a significant amount of work to make up for months of lost time. Rotation did

not allow time for support to learners who were at risk of poor developmental outcomes, as the following excerpts show:

'Since COVID-19 started, we could not provide any support to learners experiencing barriers to learning [...] it was not easy even when lockdown levels were lifted because we had to cover lost time. And using the rotational timetables was another challenge to those learners who are experiencing barriers to learning.' (FT14)

It was evident from the findings that the academic performance of learners at risk dropped during the pandemic. Some of the participants pointed out that learners at risk returned to school with wider gaps in their learning:

'Support was highly affected, as in our school, we chose [the] one week in and one week out timetable. Being at home for one week impacted learners' ability, and when they come back, you would see a drawback in what the child already knew.' (FT8)

Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) made a similar finding that learners with barriers to learning experienced more challenges, as they required specialised and professional support in their learning. This implies that there is a need to intensify support to ensure that learners who are experiencing barriers to learning do not lag further behind their peers.

■ Assessment activities

Assessment is regarded as an integral part of teaching and learning and should be administered on a frequent basis. This study showed that the teachers experienced challenges in administering assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they did their best to assess their learners. The participants mentioned that they assessed learners using a variety of assessment methods. Learners at risk of poor developmental outcomes received extra time during assessments. Teachers gave learners individualised support and graded their assessment tasks according to the theory of Bloom. One participant said:

'We would give them extra time during assessments. They would get individual attention, since they were now coming to school in small groups unlike when they were many in class. Instructions were read for the learners with barriers to learning. We used Bloom's taxonomy.' (FT13)

The findings show that the Department of Basic Education trimmed the curriculum because so much time had been lost during the total lockdown. The trimming of the curriculum was also implemented to suit the rotational teaching and learning strategy that was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers tried their best to provide learners with tests, projects and group assessment tasks. One participant had this to say:

'The curriculum was trimmed. We gave learners different activities such as tests, projects, pair work. Learners were, doing well in projects since they had enough

time at home. They came to school on a rotational basis; however, some learners absented themselves from school.' (FT11)

The findings show that trimming the curriculum resulted in learners not mastering much of the content for the grade and phase. The Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (2020) established that missing five months of teaching and learning resulted in major losses, as some learning outcomes could not be met. Azevedo (2020) found that the total lockdown and the rotational attendance strategy resulted in a drop in learners' academic performance. Furthermore, the participants experienced the challenge of learners not completing tasks because they needed more time to do so, as the following excerpts show:

'Most learners could not finish their classwork, while others did not write at all.' (FT10)

Some teachers pointed out that they had to repeat content as some topics took a long time. They repeated that learners at risk needed more time and time was limited, as the following excerpt shows:

'Some learners would take time to complete, since [*the*] learners were rotating. A topic would take a lot of time to complete, since the same topic would be repeated to the other group. It was difficult to complete tests because the learners with barriers to learning needed more time and there was no time to allocate them, since the other group of learners would have to write the following day also.' (FT5)

The above findings confirm that assessment was hindered by the lockdown restrictions and rotational school attendance. Mukuna and Aloka (2020) reported that teachers experienced the challenges of receiving poor quality and incomplete work submissions. According to Dorn et al. (2021), the unfinished learning outcomes may affect learning in the next grade.

■ Conclusion

In this baseline study, we explored the impact of COVID-19 on the academic development of learners. The study lays the foundation for future studies aimed at assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic development for targeted academic support interventions to be developed. The findings of this study indicate that caring teachers tried their best to continue teaching and meaningfully assessing learning at the height of the pandemic. They varied their didactic approaches to accommodate learners, including those at risk of poor developmental outcomes.

The study shows that teachers relied heavily on parental engagement and district support. The study shows that teachers experienced challenges of a personal and occupational nature but that the authorities were supportive in many ways. This shows that there is a need for studies that

will focus on teacher well-being. Other studies should focus on how burnout can be detected and overcome.

The study was limited by circumstances. Large-scale contact research was not permitted when the study was conducted. It was further limited by the increased workload of teachers as participants. They did not have much time to take part in research activities. The study could have also generated data from learners. However, questionnaires are not always effective when used with learners. Participatory, child-friendly methodologies are mooted for studies with children. These methodologies are less intrusive.

The transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow enabled us to understand the teachers' experiences better. The theory is about people's thoughts and feelings and how these frame their perspectives. For example, it was evident that despite the sudden change to online teaching, lack of resources, fears and anxieties during the pandemic, teachers were willing to work hard to salvage the academic year and future of learners. The transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow purports that transformation is achieved if people change their habits and perspectives in line with new ways of doing things. In this regard, the pandemic challenged teachers to adapt their didactic and assessment approaches to meet the needs of learners. They had to develop new ways of thinking, too, and this necessitated a change in existing ways of doing things.

The transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow shows that changing old ways can be uncomfortable because it involves letting go of personal values and threatening habitual practices. In the same way, teachers were uncomfortable with the increased workload, teaching and assessing online, rotation timetable and not being able to provide intensive support to learners at risk of poor developmental outcomes. The value of care and compassion was more important in enabling them to brave the storm and teach under the circumstances. According to the theory of Mezirow, major crises can trigger dilemmas. For teachers, there were several of these dilemmas in the context of the pandemic, namely, to teach or not to teach and to assess or not to assess for fear of infection.

The question that may be asked is whether South Africa is ready to face another pandemic of this nature. This suggests that measures should be put in place to ensure that teachers are equipped to teach online if need be. Schools should be equipped with resources such as Wi-Fi and computers. Priority should be schools in rural contexts and those in disadvantaged contexts in townships. School-based support teams should be assisted to develop ways of supporting learners at risk. We, however, argue that every teacher should be in a position to support learners at risk in their subjects. This will lighten the workload of support teachers.

The aim of this small baseline study was achieved; however, further research is needed to fully understand the experiences of both teachers and learners and the impact that the pandemic has had on the holistic development of learners and teacher well-being. The findings do not show how teacher– teacher collaboration within and between schools occurred, though. Furthermore, the findings do not show how collaboration included stakeholders in the community. More research is needed to answer these questions.

Chapter 7

Supporting holistic well-being in the early years during a pandemic and beyond

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∎ Introduction

It is recognised worldwide that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic jeopardised the already-strained early childhood development (ECD) sector, including the holistic development of young children (Ally, Parker & Peacock 2022). Because of intermittent school closures, children have been cut off from their right to quality ECD programmes, which contributed to learning losses in vital areas of their holistic development, especially among the most marginalised, living in poverty and rural areas (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2022). As a result, basic foundational skills imperative for formal schooling have been erased for children expected to commence with Grade 1 for the first time. In addition to the loss of learning and development, school closures had an impact on children's mental health and regular sources of nutrition and increased their risk of violence and abuse (UNESCO 2022).

Important role players in young children's lives, such as the family and the school, were directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Srivastava, as cited in UNICEF 2022). The loss of some family members as a safety net negatively influenced young children's holistic well-being during and after the pandemic (Flanagan 2021). The death of parents and caregivers, job losses, forced displacement, increased poverty, domestic abuse and violence all contributed to young children's basic needs and sociocultural development being at risk. Added to these already detrimental influences was the disruption of free movement in a faceless (mask-wearing) society; this contributed extensively to the vulnerabilities in young children's holistic well-being (UNICEF 2022).

Young children in their formative years require stability to develop optimally. This implies that the early years are crucial in building young children's potential because of the tremendous pace at which learning and development take place. It therefore requires a sustained, specialised educational approach in which critical developmental milestones, skills and concepts are attained (Excell et al. 2020). Internationally, the term ECD is used when referring to children in the early years and indicates that early years (birth to eight-years-old) education is fundamental for lifelong learning, well-being and development (Bakken, Brown & Downing 2017). In South Africa, ECD is divided into three age groups. The first group is from conception to two-years-old, also known as the first 1,000 days, where the focus is on health and nutrition. The second group includes children aged two- to five-years-old and concentrates on early learning, while the third group focuses on Grade R (five- to six-years-old) to prepare children to transit from an informal learning environment to a formal schooling environment (Dirks 2021; Kotze 2020). In this chapter, the terms 'early years', 'early learning programmes' and 'ECD' are used when referring to

the teaching and learning of young children from birth to five-years-old, according to the definitions used in the ECD census report (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2021).

Researchers advocate for supporting the holistic growth and development of children from birth to five-years-old to mitigate the impact of poverty and socio-economic inequality and create opportunities for young children to reach their full potential (Daelmans et al. 2017). It is argued that ECD includes more than the mere preparation phase for formal schooling, but is, in fact, regarded as an important phase that involves the child as a holistic being. Programmes offered in the early years should, therefore, focus on cognitive development and lay the foundation for good health and nutrition, learning and educational success, socio-emotional learning and economic productivity throughout life (Warwick, Warwick & Nash 2018).

In the *National Development Plan 2030* (South African Government 2017), the South African government acknowledges the importance of a holistic approach to ECD. It is also outlined in the *National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy* (Republic of South Africa 2015) that all children should have access to comprehensive, age-appropriate and quality early childhood education services from conception to the year before formal schooling commences. The Nurturing Care Framework, developed by the WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank (cited by Flanagan 2021), also states that quality ECD programmes should deliver adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning. In addition, it is specified in White Paper 5 (Department of Education [DoE] 2001) how early childhood education should enable young children to grow and thrive in various interconnected domains. Harris, Anderson and Visconti (2022) regard these interconnected domains as the physical (motor development, health and nutrition), socio-emotional (positive relationships and self-esteem), cognitive (planning, problem-solving, information processing, critical thinking and reasoning) and spiritual (values and norms) domains.

Based on the interdependence of the dimensions or domains of development, every aspect of a child's development interactively affects the other, and this can have an adverse ripple effect on their holistic well-being for years to come (Ally et al. 2022). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory and Nsamenang's (1992) theory of cultural socialisation show that growth, development and the ability to rise above oneself are impeded when young children's basic needs, such as physical needs, love and belonging, and safety needs are not met. Their growth needs, such as intellectual, aesthetic and self-actualisation potential, are then at risk (Maslow 1943; Nsamenang 1992). This can have a lifelong impact on children's development, and therefore, it is important to reflect on the factors that might have an impact on the fulfilment of young children's

needs during a pandemic and to identify ways to support the holistic development of young children beyond pandemic times. This chapter reports on the importance of collaboration for supporting the holistic well-being of young children during a pandemic and beyond by reflecting on the influences of a pandemic on young children's needs.

■ Background

The worldwide pandemic, COVID-19, took the whole world by surprise. On 15 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster, and schools in South Africa were closed (Dalton & Stein 2020). Although the lockdown was aimed at slowing down the infection rate, it had deleterious consequences for children. It is accepted that education plays an important role in children's holistic well-being; however, the closure of schools led to substantial changes in the daily routines and social lives of approximately 150 million children worldwide (Flanagan 2021).

These changes contributed substantially to uncertainty, stress and a sudden modification of priorities (Geher 2020). During the early years, children need to be exposed to an environment where they will develop confidence and resilience and have a secure and supportive relationship with their parents and caregivers to give them a sense of safety and security (DBE 2015). Young children's holistic well-being is determined to a large extent by the environment in which they find themselves, as well as the people they encounter. For young children to develop holistically, they need to experience positive social relationships that are interlinked with good emotional and physical health, future expectations and a sense of contentment (Clark & Schlaback 2013; Kundu 2022).

Children's spiritual, emotional, social, intellectual and behavioural fitness are all crucial components of their general health and well-being. According to Majola (2022), these elements influence the way young children feel, think and react. Additionally, mental health affects how children deal with stress, get along with other people and make appropriate decisions. To develop holistically and flourish, children ought to develop in an empowering and supportive environment that provides for all their physical and emotional needs and offers psycho-social support.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the holistic well-being of young children was greatly threatened. Flanagan (2021) reports that many children were exposed to domestic violence, which had a negative impact on children's physical and mental states. These children did not have a loving and nurturing home environment, and in some cases, older siblings had to care for younger children while their parents were working under stressful circumstances (Timmons et al. 2021). Moreover, children could not

understand why they were suddenly forbidden to attend a centre or play with their friends. Spending much time at home, experiencing restricted freedom of movement and having limited or no physical social interaction with their friends resulted in an increase in sadness, anger, irritability and clinginess among younger children (UNICEF 2021). Not only did the closing of schools result in unrecoverable loss of instructional time, but the regular rhythm of a daily routine, which provides a sense of security, was disturbed, and the loss of vital social interaction with friends and teachers left young children with a sense of loss (Rautenbach 2022).

Finally, when ECD centres in South Africa were allowed to reopen, almost 68% of these centres experienced major challenges in reopening because managers had to comply with restrictions on the number of children who could be accommodated per square metre (DBE 2021). In addition, there was a lack of financial reserves to purchase new health and hygiene equipment, which put further strain on the reopening of ECD centres (Ebrahim, Martin & Excel 2021). Many ECD centres did not receive government subsidies and were dependent on their income from the fees paid by parents. In many cases, schools allowed children to bring lunchboxes from home and provided only a cooked meal during lunchtime (May, Witten & Lake 2020). Flint, Blaauw and Van Niekerk (2018) also found that the meal plans of many centres tended to be low in micronutrients and energy density.

In addition to the abovementioned physical needs, many children did not have access to data or equipment that could be used for online classes; when some equipment was available, it was used by older children who needed to attend online classes presented by their teachers (Jalongo 2021). Not only was it difficult to get access to technological resources, but most of the teachers working at ECD centres in disadvantaged communities were not competent and trained to use technology to teach their learners through online sessions. The successful implementation of the online mode of delivery with younger children greatly depended on parental involvement (Ebrahim et al. 2021).

Delays in support from the government had a significant impact on providing for the educational needs of children attending ECD centres in vulnerable communities. Some ECD centres were fortunate to receive financial support from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the South African Childcare Forum organised workshops for them; however, a delay in receiving support from the government had a negative impact on their capacity to meet the educational needs of many children attending ECD centres in vulnerable communities (Ebrahim et al. 2021).

According to Danese et al. (2019), the spiritual health and well-being of children can be disproportionately affected and easily ignored in the

context of trauma and adversity. It can thus be argued that the holistic well-being of young children was negatively affected by all the trauma and the impact of the sudden lockdown restrictions. Hearing their parents being concerned about the public health threat from the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing the impact of parents losing their income and falling sick resulted in children feeling anxious and insecure, leading to a loss of motivation to attend to growth needs when their secure environment became dangerous (Noltemeyer et al. 2012).

Inner self-respect and a sense of self-worth are essential for a child to feel appreciated and experience a feeling of belonging and personal worth. This can only be experienced if children realise that they are accepted and valued regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves (Cherry 2022). COVID-19-related stressors, such as alcohol abuse, domestic turmoil, working from home and the financial burden on parents because of unemployment, led to parents developing mental health problems that negatively affected parent–child relationships and often led to child abuse and unmet childcare needs that left children vulnerable and anxious (Westrupp et al. 2023)

The atmosphere in which a child grows up plays a significant role in the holistic well-being of the child. When all the lower-order needs are being taken care of, higher-order needs, such as growth and cognitive needs, will follow (Sibal 2019). In this chapter, we argue that parents and teachers can collaborate in supporting holistic well-being in the child's early years to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

■ Theoretical framework

This study was undergirded by Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, combined with Nsamenang's (1992) theory to make sense of factors influencing the holistic development of young children. Understanding holistic well-being is a key factor in supporting optimal development in the early years. Maslow (1943) developed a model to organise a hierarchy of needs into different levels (Noltemeyer et al. 2012). In 1970, towards the end of his life, Maslow theorised about transcendence as the highest level in the pyramid model (Tekke 2019). Maslow (cited by Neuropsych 2019) believed that this level should be added to the model to show how a person is motivated by values that transcend beyond the personal self. Neuropsych (2019) emphasises that the value of the pyramid model lies in the idea that a person should first satisfy their deficiency needs (e.g. physical, safety, belonging or social and esteem needs) to move on to fulfilling growth needs (the need to understand and aesthetic, self-actualisation and transcendence needs).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners and parents were faced with an unprecedented situation and forced to identify ways to meet all the

needs of children in their early years. Most people were knocked to the bottom of Maslow's (1943) pyramid and found themselves focusing mostly on deficiency needs, leaving young children vulnerable (Geher 2020). For many young children, the school is usually the place where their deficiency needs are met, but the COVID-19 restrictions deprived them of access to education, nutrition, health care and providing for their basic needs (Flanagan 2021; Loots, Yan & Vember 2022). Without the necessary income at the end of the month and with all the social restrictions, parents were struggling to provide for their children's basic physical needs (Sibal 2019). As a result, paying for school fees at ECD centres became a lower priority for parents (Sibal 2019).

The lack of targeted relief for centres in South Africa and the COVID-19 restrictions left an estimated 1 million children in vulnerable families without any way to continue having access to education (Ebrahim et al. 2021). Mashaphu et al. (2021) mention that it is during adverse times like these – when change is forced upon cultures – that opportunities arise to explore indigenous knowledge systems for resilience. In this chapter, therefore, the view of Ngu (2017) that Africans must start to interpret Maslow's (1943) theory in terms of growth and deficiency needs (see Figure 7.1) is combined with Nsamenang's (1992) theory.

Nsamenang (1992) believes that the socialisation of young children is acquired via their traditional family culture; he places much emphasis on caring for the child in the African context (Nsamenang & Lamb 1995). This developmental process will lead to an idea of selfhood and social responsibility through seven stages of selfhood, namely, newborn, infancy, social apprenticeship, puberty, adulthood and old age (as discussed in ch. 1). The focus of this chapter is on the third developmental stage, namely, childhood, when young children are inducted into the established ways of their family and culture. Below is a schematic representation of how the growth and deficiency needs of children are embedded in the social ecology and cultural systems in which children are nurtured.

Figure 7.1 portrays the importance of meeting young children's deficiency needs to ensure that they move on to their growth needs (Ngu 2017). This idea may be feasible when acknowledging the importance of the social ecology in which development is situated and the cultural systems in which children are nurtured (Nsamenang 2006).

Ansorger (2021) highlights the fact that while most individuals encountered challenges throughout the pandemic, none was affected as much as marginalised young children. Many young children were affected by the impact of the pandemic, ranging from isolation, quarantine, hospitalisation and even death (Shob et al. 2022). As a result, they had to deal with additional physical, socio-emotional and cognitive challenges.
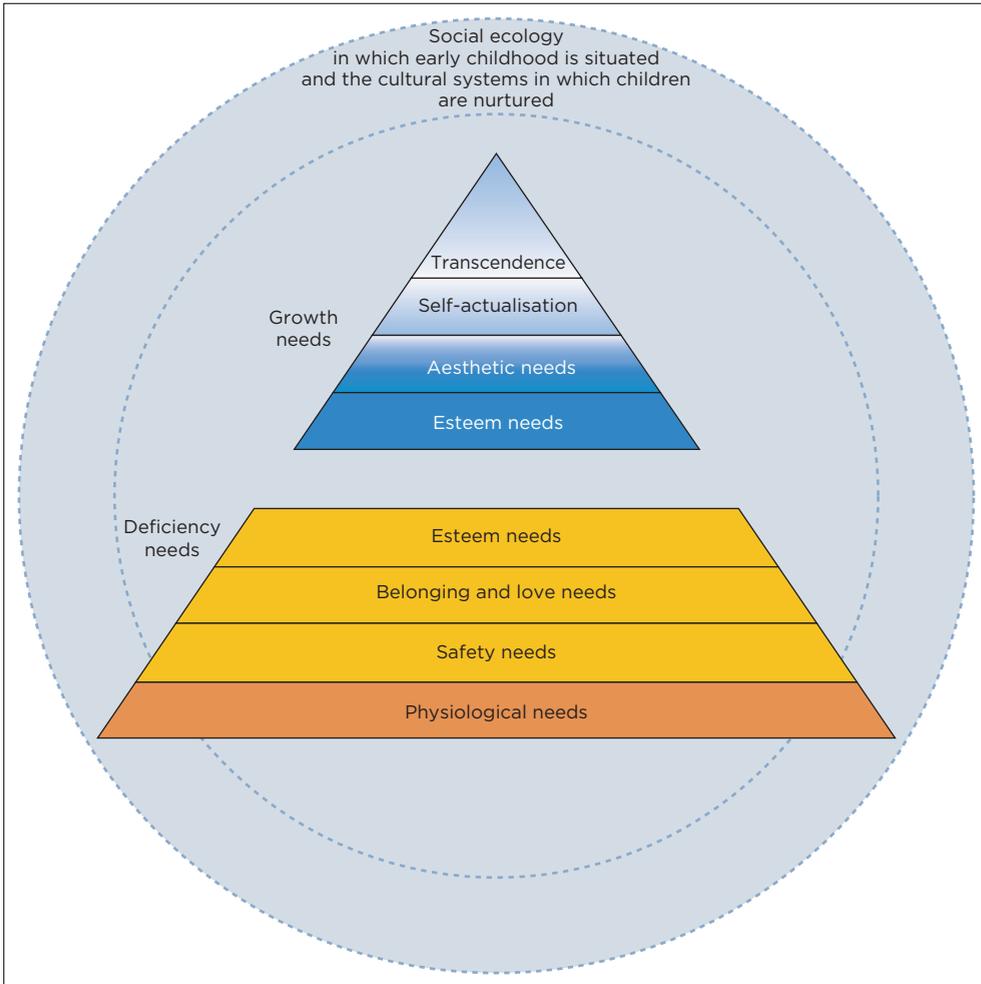
Source: Adapted from Maslow (1943), Nsamenang (1992), and Peak Performance Center (2023).
FIGURE 7.1: Growth and deficiency needs of children embedded in social ecology and cultural systems.

Before practitioners could focus on growth needs, it was vital to ensure that the physiological needs of young children were met, for example, food, health care and shelter. Nsamenang (1992) emphasises the important role of cultural communities in making provision for children's basic needs and initial learning to support their integration into society. This idea can be very helpful to overcome the abovementioned physiological challenges during a pandemic.

Safety needs involve the need for stability, security, protection and freedom from fear. Sippl (2022, p. 2) argues that modelling was an important way for young children to learn about safety, social distancing and hygiene during COVID-19. Nsamenang (2011, p. 235) refers to 'passing

on or imparting', where young children are confronted with cultural norms. Cultural values and beliefs are important during and beyond times of pandemics, as they are the socially approved ideas to motivate action and give solutions during crises (Atalay & Solmazer 2021).

The next deficiency level, namely, love and belongingness, deals with social needs, including affection, love and friendship. Families who were fortunate enough to meet the basic physiological and safety needs of children during the first few weeks of the pandemic could meet their needs for love and belonging. When young children are surrounded by a caring family, their basic human needs will be met, but if children do not feel connected to their surroundings, this may be problematic for their development (Shob et al. 2022). It is important that young children can make friends or connect with their loved ones at home, but the COVID-19 pandemic complicated this process with rules and restrictions, including social distancing and isolation. Nsamenang (2011) highlights that much learning takes place by communicating within cultures. Yamaoka et al. (2021) agreed that learning experiences in communities can boost social capital, which is related to higher subjective well-being.

The next level of needs, namely, esteem, is centred on a child's need to gain independence, self-respect or achievement. This is where young children will benefit from being praised for their work or being able to accomplish something on their own. Young children in low-income environments experienced learning loss because of challenges with high-quality remote learning, inconducive learning environments, a lack of a quiet space, distractions, technological challenges and parents who were not able to support them (Jansen & Farmer-Phillips 2021). Ansorger (2021) explains that online instruction may lead to learning losses influencing the realisation of self-esteem needs. Nsamenang (2011) talks about the child as an agent or instigator where they need to act as an agent of socialisation for future goals and aspirations.

It may be argued that without the involvement of caring and encouraging parents and teachers, children's deficiency and growth needs will not be fulfilled. Narain and Maheshwari (2022) reported that the way in which children are brought up and educated has a significant influence on their development of good self-esteem and self-actualisation. In addition, the development of social identity is influenced by the context of the culture in which the child grows up (Nsamenang 1992). According to these ideas, children's development is partly influenced by the social environment in which it occurs, as well as by interacting with their siblings, their peers' cultures, and learning from one another. Narain and Maheshwari (2022) agree that being part of a community and having close family ties, social interaction, good self-esteem and a positive outlook on life all aided young

children in dealing with stress-related situations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Growth needs involve the need to cognitively understand and actualise aesthetic needs and realise personal potential or self-fulfilment. It develops over time and involves a sense of oneself and the situation, which is challenging for young children to comprehend. Wong et al. (2021) argue that self-transcendence could act as a buffer against COVID-19. According to these authors, self-transcendence represents the most promising path for individuals to flourish in uncertain times. Therefore, practitioners, parents and policymakers have an important role in changing flaws in systems that did not support oppressed young children before the pandemic (Ansorger 2021).

The aforementioned combination of theoretical frameworks provides suggestions on how to alter parents' and practitioners' thoughts on what young children need. It is argued that the views of Ngu (2017) (based on Maslow's hierarchy) and Nsamenang's (1992) theory provide a framework to create interventions to address unfulfilled needs on the different hierarchical levels. This should be seen from both an individual and a community perspective, combined with an integration of the social indicators of holistic health. The findings may show how this idea helped to focus our priorities as we moved through the seriously challenging times of the pandemic.

■ Research methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant's viewpoint by allowing co-researchers to explain how, why, or what they are thinking, feeling and experiencing at a specific time or during an event of interest (Merriam & Grenier 2019; Tenny, Brannan & Brannan 2022).

■ Context of the study

Data were gathered from one semi-rural South African district, namely Sedibeng-East in Gauteng. An action learning set (ALS) was formed by eight co-researchers. An ALS is a small group of co-researchers (including practitioners and university researchers) with a shared vision of reflecting on progress and focusing on social change (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt 2022). It is argued that the meaning participants assign to their real-life experiences could be valuable in supporting the holistic well-being of young children. Table 7.1 depicts the biographical details of the members of the ALS in this research study.

TABLE 7.1: Biographical details of the co-researchers.

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age group	Ethnic group
CR1	Female	45+	AmaZulu
CR2	Female	45+	English
CR3	Female	45+	Basotho
CR4	Female	35–44	Basotho
CR5	Male	35–44	Shona
CR6	Female	45+	Afrikaans
CR7	Female	45+	Afrikaans
CR8	Female	45+	Afrikaans

Source: Authors' own work.

The eight co-researchers who participated in this ALS were aged from 35- to 45-years-old and older. Online sessions were conducted because of constraints with regard to distance and time, as some of the co-researchers needed to travel between 30 and 50 kilometres to meet at a central point. While the study employed three cycles to answer the main research question, as discussed in Lunga, Esterhuizen and Koen (2022), this chapter reports on the second cycle. During the second cycle, we investigated how to strengthen the capacity for play-based learning in early childhood education. This led to the question of how holistic well-being in the early years could be improved.

In answering this question, the co-researchers identified COVID-19 as one of the major challenges in strengthening holistic well-being during the pandemic because of school closures, financial constraints and social distancing. During the second cycle, four online sessions, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes, allowed the ALS to think collaboratively about ways to support holistic well-being in the early years during a pandemic and beyond. Photovoice and transcribed recorded ALS discussions were used to capture the data.

◼ Research design

Zuber-Skerritt (2019) argues that a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design is a form of action research that foregrounds learning through cycles of action and reflection, grounded in overarching values of care, inclusion and collaborative learning. During this process, co-researchers become active producers of knowledge, rather than informants and recipients (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt 2022). A PALAR design was thus employed in this study, as it fosters collaborative problem-solving from the inside out, allowing co-researchers to work together to regularly reflect on the progress and the process of the project. This idea is in line with the ideas of Zuber-Skerritt (2019), who argues that continuous critical reflection and dialogue develop the agency of co-researchers to become advocates

and enablers of change; co-researchers are emancipated to think critically for themselves so that they can make decisions about their own lives and work to create more socially just environments.

Three components of PALAR are identified by Kearney et al. (2013), namely, the development of democratic, authentic, trusting and supportive relationships, the process of continual critical reflection in a collaborative learning context and recognition of the achievements of all co-researchers. These three components were respected during the discussions in the ALS to ensure an equal participatory process.

The six-phase thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify themes and patterns within the qualitative data. This process entailed becoming familiar with the data that have been collected, followed by generating initial codes through coding to highlight different sections, which included phrases or sentences. Thereafter, themes were generated by identifying the patterns in the codes. To ensure that the themes had been identified correctly, a review of the themes was conducted. Then, the themes were defined, described and named to make sure that they were easily understood. Lastly, a report was written to indicate the themes.

■ Data analysis and ethics

Research integrity has to be guaranteed during research; therefore, the five quality indicators as set out by Herr and Anderson (2015), namely, outcome validity, process validity, democratic validity, catalytic validity and dialogue validity, were applied. The Edu-Rec Ethics Committee of the North-West University and Sedibeng-East District of the Gauteng Department of Education both granted permission to conduct this low-risk-level research project.

■ Presentation of findings

The data were recorded, transcribed and analysed by means of manual coding, which allowed us to identify two themes, namely, the magnified influence of a pandemic on young children's needs and collaboration for support. Next, the two themes are discussed. We present verbatim excerpts from the statements and substantiate these with relevant literature.

■ Theme 1: Magnified influence of a pandemic on young children's needs

The lockdown necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic jeopardised the already-strained ECD sector. Because of intermittent school attendance after the hard lockdown, children continued to be deprived of their right to quality

early childhood programmes. This contributed substantially to learning losses in vital areas of their holistic development, especially among the most marginalised, living in poverty and rural areas (UNESCO 2022). In this regard, the co-researchers agreed that while most people were affected by the pandemic, vulnerable children were deprived of access to education and the provision of basic needs. Geher (2020) agrees that COVID-19 deprived young children of quality education, care, safety and a sense of belonging. One of the co-researchers explained the extent to which the pandemic had increased the existing challenges in terms of providing for children's basic needs as follows:

> 'The arrival of COVID-19 really gave serious challenges to us in the centres, mostly because it was so difficult for the parents who lost their jobs, which consequently affected the financial flow for most centres; hence, it became very difficult for them to buy some food.' (CR2, an English-speaking woman)

This comment highlighted the financial constraints and failure to pay school fees because of the pandemic. Without the financial support of parents, ECD centres could not provide healthy food to young children. This situation compromised the health and nutrition needs of children, as pointed out as follows by another co-researcher:

> 'I understand the issue of failing to pay fees on the side of the parents; however, to make matters worse since COVID-19 started in March 2020, some organisations which were providing food to some centres had also stopped, meaning there were no free meals at school anymore, and some of those children we know could only have their main meals at school. And so the nutrition or the holistic well-being of the child was affected, as there's a hole and all the nutrition goes out.' (CR5, a Shona-speaking man)

The co-researchers referred to the negative influence on children's physiological needs when they reflected on food insecurity and poor nutrition. When the centres were closed, young children ate less nutritious food, and home confinement led to lower levels of physical activity (Schleicher 2020; Shelley 2020). In this regard, a participant added that young children's health was also compromised because of a lack of fresh air and outdoor activities. She explained that many young children were restricted to indoor activities:

> 'I hear many of us felt the pain of not having food, but I also had a different observation during COVID-19, and I think this can continue to affect young children even a few years after because their physical growth has been seriously affected due to the shortage of food and prohibition of outdoor activities.' (CR7, an Afrikaans-speaking woman)

The above comment referred to a lack of outdoor activities, which may have not only affected motor and perceptual development but also social interaction with friends. It appears as if the impact of COVID-19 can be compared to a rock that fell into a pond and formed a huge wave that affected the holistic well-being of young children. Geher (2020) confirms that children must first satisfy their deficiency needs before they can move

on to fulfilling growth needs. The co-researchers agreed that the ECD centre was usually the place where young children's deficiency needs were fulfilled, but COVID-19 deprived them of opportunities to fulfil these needs. Flanagan (2021) adds that children need to be exposed to a social environment. However, young children had limited social interaction with friends and teachers during the harder lockdown periods of the pandemic.

As photo-elicitation was used to co-create data, one of the co-researchers took and presented a picture of a tortoise (Figure 7.2), pointing out how limited social contact influenced young children. The picture was presented alongside the description given by the co-researcher and provided:

> 'When I look at this picture, I think of COVID-19 [*sic*] as it negatively influences children's holistic well[-]being of young children. Just like the tortoise, our children had been withdrawn and confined to one space. COVID-19 limited social contact and interaction for young children. The lack of access to schools led to stress and anxiety. For example, they lost their daily routines, they experienced social isolation, among other things. This had a negative impact on not only their social and emotional development, but also resulted in anxiety.' (CR7, an Afrikaans-speaking woman)

It can be argued that a tortoise may look healthy on the outside, but it is not clear what is happening inside the shell. Co-researcher CR5 compared the effect of COVID-19 to a tortoise that had withdrawn from social interaction.

Source: Photograph taken by one of the authors, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 7.2: Importance of social interaction (CR5).

On the outside, the shell looks fine, but one cannot identify the impact inside. Research shows that while it may appear as if children experienced milder symptoms from the pandemic than older people, the limited social contact and interaction, changes in routines and school closures may have led to stress and anxiety, which were not always visible to parents or teachers (Shelley 2020). The stress and anxiety had an impact on children's ability to flourish and fulfil their deficiency needs, and this increased their vulnerability.

One of the co-researchers agreed with the above comments and argued that children were vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes because of the lockdown restrictions. She took a picture of a dog tied to a fence (Figure 7.3) to explain that children could not escape the impact of the pandemic:

> 'This picture symbolises a living creature in distress, left outside without any protection against the sun, rain or wind that can influence its health and safety. This animal is extremely vulnerable. It cannot move to a safer place because it is chained to the fence. That is how COVID-19 affected our young children, leaving them extremely vulnerable, with no way to escape the effects of COVID-19.' (CR6, an Afrikaans-speaking woman)

Source: Photograph taken by one of the authors, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 7.3: Feeling of hopelessness (CR6).

She interpreted the picture as a manifestation of the vulnerability of young children. The social distancing regulations meant interpersonal interaction among children was prohibited, which resulted in fewer opportunities to interact with friends, teachers and family. The co-researcher explained that children felt vulnerable because they experienced social isolation as being 'chained to a fence', as depicted in the picture of the dog. Being connected to others can help with coping during difficult situations; therefore, being isolated from family and friends enhances people's feelings of loneliness, which could lead to anxiety and distress (October 2022). Young children were not only confined to social interaction with family but were often left alone at home without care and supervision, as noted by Participant CR3:

> 'Children are left on their own without proper supervision by an adult, and so they are not allowed to play, as parents will be trying to protect them. So, what disturbs me is that these children do not express themselves in any way, which kills their feelings of adequacy, worthiness as well as being loved.' (CR3, a Sesotho-speaking woman)

The co-researcher pointed out that some children left on their own without proper supervision. This idea resonates with Ansorger's (2021) reasoning that while many families could spend more time together, there were many cases of children being left without proper care while they had to deal with additional emotional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. October et al. (2021) added that it is the family that plays a pivotal role in the promotion of good societal incomes. For many families, the lockdown regulations were combined with work or other stressors, for example, homeless families, out-of-home care, separated parents, children with disabilities, children at risk of child labour and forced labour or migrant families (Shleicher 2021), which made the meeting of basic needs almost impossible.

The abovementioned challenges added to feelings of inadequacy, unworthiness and not being loved. Flanagan (2021) emphasises that the loss of love has a negative influence on young children's holistic well-being. As young children were seriously affected during the pandemic and the effects were felt long after the pandemic, it can be argued that children in the early years require continuous support in order to promote their holistic well-being in the future. This argument is linked to Nsamenang (1992), who emphasises the important role of communities to support children's basic needs and integrate them into society.

■ Theme 2: Collaboration for support

Not only were young children at risk, but teachers and parents also experienced distress and hopelessness because of COVID-19. To illustrate this, Participant CR2 (an English-speaking woman) took a picture of a staircase and provided a narrative, as shown in Figure 7.4. In her description of the picture, she

FIGURE 7.4: Parents and teachers also lost hope (CR2).

mentioned that they, as practitioners in ECD centres, had lost hope. Hopelessness can be described as a product of feeling helpless and a loss of power and control over what is going on in one's life. She mentioned the hardship that everyone experienced and especially highlighted how they found other ways to navigate their pathways towards overcoming challenges:

> 'The steps made me think of the situation where practitioners, parents and children themselves had lost hope. The steps symbolise that although COVID-19 brought serious hardships to children, parents and practitioners found ways to manoeuvre and overcome the challenges. I would say COVID-19 made everyone […] very strong and prepared for any other disaster that may come in the future.' (CR2, an English-speaking woman)

The significance of the abovementioned narrative lies in the idea that while the co-researchers experienced adversity during the lockdown, it also made them stronger and prepared them to face future disasters. Rutter (2012) makes a similar observation when he argues that hardship can lead to positive outcomes, especially when the negative experiences may have a 'steeling effect' to assist individuals to cope with adversity in the future in a more positive way. It appears as if COVID-19 could have had both beneficial and adverse effects in relation to growth and deficiency needs. It is

important to note that some of the co-researchers benefited from the assistance they received from concerned members of the wider society. This enabled their coping ability, as the following excerpt shows:

'With all the difficulties we were facing because of this disease, I think as a community, it made us fortunate because we managed to have some international universities that realised the predicament we were encountering. There was a certain professor from Texas who came with the students to introduce the soya food into our centre so that children can have it as a part of nutritious food. They explained and demonstrated to us how rich soya is and the benefits it had to our young children and made us start a nutritional garden where we grow most soya and some other veggies to feed our children.' (CR2, an English-speaking woman)

The importance of collaboration was further emphasised by CR7 (an Afrikaans-speaking woman) who said:

'I think it is high time that as teachers and parents, we value the importance of being connected to different organisations such as universities and NGOs because they can train us so that we have skills and we become ready for any eventuality. It is true that two heads are better than one. Imagine if that professor had not come to your community were you going to have the knowledge you have now?' (CR7, an Afrikaans-speaking woman)

It is important to note that coping ability is a product of bi-directional interactions between people and their social ecologies (Ungar 2011). This means that those who cope with adverse circumstances rely on what is built inside them and what is built around them (Ungar 2005). Active support systems are, therefore, important in enabling coping ability in the context of risk and adversity. The utterances of CR7 imply that in future, people ought to value collaboration for them to solve the problems they encounter. It is during times like these that communities need to look for opportunities to support one another through community support (Mashaphu et al. 2021). Nsamenang (2006) supported the idea of social connectedness in the cultural system in which young children are nurtured. A co-researcher (CR5, a Shona-speaking man) took a picture of a refuse bag held on both sides by two women and provided a descriptive narrative to highlight the importance of social support:

'Before COVID-19, many people could not share the challenges they were encountering in life but with this picture, I see many people were sharing the difficulties they had because of the pandemic. So, the lesson I take from the picture is that as the centres, we should make our problems known so that we can get assistance which will be helpful in teaching the children because a shared problem is half solved.' (CR5, a Shona-speaking man)

The descriptive narrative suggests that those experiencing risk and adversity should share their experiences with others. This implies that a sense of connectedness should not be lost. Furthermore, Participant CR5 (a Shona-speaking man) took and presented a picture of various clothing items in Figure 7.5 and Figure 7.6. The narrative and picture by CR5 point

Source: Photograph taken by one of the authors, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 7.5: Social support is important during and beyond a pandemic.

Source: Photograph taken by one of the authors, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 7.6: Culture of co-operation (CR5).

to African cultural principles, which emphasise that human beings cannot live in isolation but need support from others. This is reminiscent of the *ubuntu* philosophy that says: 'I am because we are' (Roy et al. 2021). Nelson Mandela (as cited in Mutwarasibo & Iken 2019) said that when a traveller passed through the community, he would stop at a village and the people would give him food and entertain him. Participant CR5 explained this idea by focusing on the importance of culture in holistic support:

> 'You know this picture reminds me of the situation in South Africa, and maybe in many African countries, there is a culture of co-operation where people assist each other in some tasks in their homes or in the fields. So, COVID-19 taught us to keep and cherish this good culture of being united and helping one another in our neighbourhoods.' (CR5, a Shona-speaking man)

This idea explained above stresses the African culture of helping one another, as was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic where every individual learnt the culture of helping one another. In the theoretical framework, it is emphasised that culture can be used as a means of helping children to achieve their goals (Nsamenang 2011). The consequences of the pandemic, in this case, reminded the co-researchers that they should value one another's contribution to supporting young children. This corresponds with the participative paradigm as embedded in the PALAR design used in the current study.

■ Discussion of the findings

Tracing the history of South Africa since gaining independence in 1994 shows that we have made remarkable progress in the early childhood care and education sector. There is, however, no question that the COVID-19 pandemic substantially contributed to unprecedented disruption, as it threatened people's quality of life and wellness, intensified inequalities and disrupted the development of the holistic well-being of young children (Flanagan 2021; Jalongo 2021). An important goal of the study described in this paper was not only to understand the impact of COVID-19 on young children but also to understand how to support holistic well-being in the early years during a pandemic and beyond.

For many young children, school is usually the place where their deficiency needs are met. The findings confirmed that young children in low-income environments experienced great losses of interface with teachers and friends because of school closures. Ebrahim et al. (2021) added that the lack of targeted relief for centres in South Africa left an estimated 1 million children in vulnerable families without any way of providing for their children's need for education. Without the necessary income at the end of the month, in combination with all the social restrictions, parents were struggling to provide for their children's basic

physical needs; thus, paying for school fees at ECD centres was not regarded as a priority (Sibal 2019).

The COVID-19 restrictions deprived young children of access to not only education but also nutrition, health care, safety, a sense of belonging and self-esteem. Maslow (1943) reasons that failure to meet these basic needs at various stages of their development can lead to serious physical and mental challenges. The co-researchers in this study noted that young children depended on engaging in activities that were healthy for physiological, emotional, social, cognitive and spiritual development; therefore, they were concerned about the effect of the pandemic on children's holistic well-being.

A lack of social experiences disrupted the development of young children's growth needs. The literature on child development shows that disruptions in social life lead to increased child vulnerability, endangered mental health and high levels of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Kutsar & Kurvet-Käosaar 2021). That is probably why Nsamenang (2011) underlines the importance of social learning through communication in a community. It is argued that children's development is partly influenced by the social environment in which it occurs, as well as by interacting with their siblings and peers and learning from one another.

Narain and Maheshwari (2022) agreed and stated that being part of a community and having close family ties, social interaction, good self-esteem, and a positive outlook on life all aided young children in dealing with stress-related situations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without the involvement of a family of professionals, children's deficiency and growth needs could not be fulfilled. It is argued that challenging times, such as the pandemic, may force people to fulfil the basic needs of children by exploring opportunities to support social relationships with young children.

■ Conclusion

In this chapter, it is argued that the COVID-19 pandemic largely had a negative impact on meeting the deficiency and growth needs of young children, which could compromise the holistic well-being of young children. The aim of the study was, however, not to generalise but to focus on the sample that was limited to the accounts and experiences of people in a specific context.

Inequality in terms of income forced many parents, caregivers and teachers to suddenly modify their priorities and to halt the fulfilment of lower deficiency needs, which led to challenges in satisfying the higher needs of young children. This study confirmed the value of understanding

the theories of Maslow (1943) and Nsamenang (1992) in improving our understanding of the holistic well-being of children during and beyond a pandemic. It also demonstrated the importance of community support to challenge the fulfilment of deficiency and growth needs and to work on the risk of isolation while focusing on meaningful relationships.

Two important conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, while social isolation meant spending more time with families, not all family environments were constructive. The findings highlighted the importance of a positive social environment in order to alleviate the negative effects during a pandemic. Community, family, parental or teacher support can guide young children to cope with unexpected changes in their everyday lives. The voice of supportive adults is very important to assist young children in coping with the fulfilment of deficiency and growth needs. Secondly, it is clear that the fulfilment of needs cannot happen in isolation because children grow up in different contexts and environments where the foundation for developing skills, knowledge and values is laid. Nsamenang (1992) highlights the significance of support beyond a family context, arguing that the social ecology in which a child is situated and the cultural systems in which children are nurtured are vital in the holistic development of young children.

Recognising the important role of cultural communities in making provision for satisfying children's basic needs in order to fulfil their higher actualising needs may lead to positive action during pandemic times. After the COVID-19 pandemic, we are required to focus on creative interventions to address individual and community relationships to focus our priorities on supporting all young children.

■ Acknowledgement

Supporting language and mathematics development in Foundation Phase learners: A case for communities of inquiry

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■ Introduction

'In crisis it is acceptable to have more questions than answers. In crisis there is no room for "not-invented-here." In crisis, we all become learners.'

– HRH Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands

The above quote serves as a reminder of how the global community had to learn from one another, adapt, rethink and refocus during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Although teachers, learners and parents are grateful to settle back into their traditional roles as before the pandemic, scientists warn that even more catastrophic pandemics in future are imminent (Mishra et al. 2023; Stefan et al. 2023; United Nations 2020). The closing of schools not only impacted the academic progress of learners but also had long-term effects on education (Kaffenberger 2021; Maree 2021). The United Nations (2020, p. 3) calls for the building of 'resilient education systems for equitable and sustainable development' in future times of disrupted education. Teacher educators from the North-West University, therefore, collaborated with practicing Foundation Phase teachers to explore systems that could serve to sustain mathematics and language development in future disrupted education as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To inform our reflections on possible solutions, we firstly explored the challenges Foundation Phase teachers were confronted with in their strive to sustain learning during school closures, as well as the difficulties experienced with catch-up programmes in the aftermath of the pandemic. An in-depth analysis of these challenges pointed to the value of a community of inquiry (CoI) as a pre-emptive system to sustain teaching and learning in the Foundation Phase when face-to-face education becomes impossible. The CoI theory, especially applicable in cases of online or remote learning (Garrison 2007; Sanders & Lokey-Vega 2020), therefore underpinned the study and guided us in the analysis, interpretation and reporting of the findings.

Emergency education, which involved online teaching and learning, was implemented during the pandemic, and although it was meant to enable access to the curriculum despite the lockdown and movement restrictions, it hampered learning among at-risk learners who required high levels of support (Drane, Vernon & O'Shea 2021). Therefore, many learners were left

behind because of schools, teachers and learners – especially in impoverished communities with a lack of resources – not being able to shift towards online or remote teaching and learning. In South Africa, the closure of schools had a dire effect on especially language and mathematics development of at-risk learners.

At-risk learners are regarded as those whose developmental trajectories are negatively influenced by constellations of risk because of intrinsic learning barriers and extrinsic barriers influenced by socio-economic or health factors (Skinner et al. 2006). At-risk learners are highly reliant on teacher support for their academic progress (Lewis & McCann 2009). Thus, the abrupt absence of the teacher's physical presence when teaching and learning were moved to an online environment had a significant impact on these learners' development (Huck & Zhang 2021). Successful learning in an online learning environment is dependent on establishing and maintaining a teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence (Garrison 2007).

Granting the study set out to specifically explore measures to sustain support for language and mathematics development in disrupted learning, the important role of Life Skills in an integrated approach to education to support the holistic development of the young learner is recognised. Specifically for at-risk learners, the emotional aspects of learner development are of extreme importance, even more so during disrupted education (Daunic et al. 2021). However, the literature reports that the disruption of the Foundation Phase curriculum posed specific challenges to the development of learners in the areas of language (Van der Berg et al. 2022) and mathematics (Maree 2022). Hoadley (2020, p. 15) explains that knowledge and understanding of language, as a 'content-rich' subject, and of mathematics, as a 'concept-rich' subject, are constructed vertically. This means that the concepts mastered in previous grades in these subjects provide the foundational conceptual basis on which to continue learning in the higher grades. Therefore, progression in these two subjects in ensuing grades relies heavily on solid foundations laid in the preceding grades, which augmented the impact of school closures on these two subjects.

South African teachers attempted to mediate learning through technology during COVID-19 alert level 5, while learners attended school on a rotational basis during alert level 4 and lower. These arrangements strived to enable access to the curriculum. However, despite the emergency education measures implemented during the pandemic, teachers still have to contend with learners who lag behind in all developmental domains, with specific emphasis on language and mathematics. Considering the above, the following research question guided this empirical study:

• How can a CoI framework support language and mathematics development in Foundation Phase learners during disrupted education?

■ Background

Learning to read, write, count and calculate forms the basis for all other learning in school and beyond (Hoadley 2020). Learners start to learn these basic skills in the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3), after which the content becomes more complex. Our focus on strategies to sustain language and mathematics development in disrupted education in the Foundation Phase required us to reflect on the way learners acquire knowledge and skills in these two subjects.

■ Language development in the Foundation Phase

In South Africa, the five essential components of reading form the basis of the language curriculum, which include phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (National Reading Panel 2000). These components inadvertently become the building blocks for language development. Education in the home language is suggested in South Africa's multilingual educational context (Vos & Fouché 2021). The Home Language curriculum for the Foundation Phase suggests a balanced approach to language development and advocates for small-group instruction in ability groups, as described by the Department of Basic Education (2011a). If children lose out on acquiring essential knowledge and skills for reading and writing, they may struggle with all subjects where they must read, interpret texts and express their understanding in writing.

Language development can be divided into two overarching categories – language learning and language acquisition (Scarborough 2001). Language learning focuses on developing language skills related to the linguistic rules pertaining to grammar, syntax and spelling (Krashen 2003), linking it to a phonics-based learning approach. On the other hand, language acquisition implies that learning is constructed through meaningful real-life experiences, active engagement and learners developing understanding through their own perspectives (Krashen 2003), implying a whole-language approach (Department of Basic Education 2011a) that emphasises social interaction and real-world experiences. With both the phonics-based approach and the whole-language approach, a balanced literacy approach is embedded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as each element of this literacy approach is constructed to meet learners' needs within the zone of proximal development. Thus, a social context is created in which learners will be able to learn literacy at their level of ability through scaffolded facilitation. The aspects of scaffolding, the zone of proximal development and learning in the social environment are directly linked to the teaching, social and cognitive presences of a CoI.

Grounded in the CoI model, *teaching presence* refers to the role of the teacher in the facilitation of discourse and direct instruction (Garrison 2007).

In the context of Foundation Phase language education, this implies encouraging active learner participation in talking, arguing and predicting activities to cultivate critical thinking. *Social presence* highlights the importance of open communication and group cohesion (Garrison 2007) that plays a core role in group-guided reading activities and classroom discussions. *Cognitive presence* involves exploration, integration and resolution (Garrison 2007). Specifically, when literacy is taught in the early grades, the context that children's literature creates enables learners to explore and predict what is going to happen while they integrate their prior knowledge with the newly learnt skills.

During emergency education, the familiar teaching, social and cognitive structures supported in the classroom were disrupted, and learners' learning environment became home-based. Although mother-tongue instruction is advocated for in South Africa, eleven official languages are used as the language of teaching and learning, depending on the district and language of most learners in the school. Because of this diversity, learners are not always taught in their home language, and it is not a given that parents speak the language of learning and teaching to support their children's learning at home (Vos & Fouché 2021). Thus, shifting the responsibility of language development to the parents or caregivers, who were not prepared for their role in sustaining teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence in an online learning environment, created many challenges, especially for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The limits of these learners' language environments became the limits of their learning and acquisition of language.

■ Mathematics development in the Foundation Phase

Mathematics consists of five universal content areas, namely, number operations and relationships, patterns, functions and algebra, space and shape, measurement and data handling (Department of Basic Education 2011b). Learners must master mathematical skills such as problem-solving, word problems and other computational skills (Garcia & Pacheco 2013; Yeh et al. 2019); develop mental processes that enhance logical and critical thinking; and develop accuracy that will contribute to decision-making, as required by the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* (Department of Basic Education 2011b).

Being a concept-rich subject (Hoadley 2020), it is crucial that learners have a solid early understanding of the number system in mathematics on which to build later learning of algebra and geometry. Hence, the sequence in which learners master these concepts is paramount in mathematics education (Hoadley 2020). If Foundation Phase learners

lose out on basic concepts and skills, their later learning will be compromised as mathematical problems and contexts become more complex (Garcia & Pacheco 2013).

The literature strongly agrees that the teaching of mathematics for understanding is grounded in both constructivism (Bermejo, Ester & Morales 2021) and social constructivism (Mabena, Mokgosi & Ramapela 2021; Vintere 2018), which requires learners to be actively engaged in their own knowledge construction that should involve sensory learning with concrete manipulatives (Sarama & Clements 2014). Vygotsky (1978) explains that higher functions in humans originate as actual relations among human individuals. In Foundation Phase classrooms, the teacher and peers play a core role in the way learners construct mathematical knowledge, which Ernest (1991) regards as social knowledge gained through social tools. Important to note is the fact that in mathematics, learners' social involvement through direct collaboration and discussion of practical mathematical problems simulated as part of the daily world environment is critical (Li & Schoenfeld 2019; Mabena et al. 2021). Mabena et al. (2021, p. 454) emphasise the role of communication in mathematics learning whereby teachers 'involve students working in small groups interacting and arguing to find solutions to the learning activities'. At the heart of such pedagogy is the interrelated teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence (Garrison 2007).

According to the literature, the gap caused by the absence of the physical presence of the teacher during school closures adversely affected the teaching and learning of language and mathematics in the Foundation Phase. Based on the vertical construction of knowledge and understanding in language and mathematics learning (Hoadley 2020), concepts learnt in previous grades provide the foundational conceptual basis on which learners continue learning. Gaps in learners' knowledge and understanding of these basic concepts and skills will thus compromise their later mathematical learning.

A literature search produced several reports confirming the impact of the closing of schools on language and mathematics learning during the pandemic. However, no study could be identified exploring how establishing and sustaining a CoI could serve to support language and mathematics development in Foundation Phase learners during disrupted education. It was therefore crucial to explore how a CoI as a support system could help to sustain learning in the Foundation Phase when education is moved to an online environment in times of emergency education. In the next section, we discuss the theoretical framework and the methodological considerations that guided our research decisions in our quest to find answers to the research question.

■ Theoretical framework

Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is the construction of knowledge and skills in a social context. His sociocultural theory triggered a scholarly debate about how people learn from social environments and the importance of scaffolding for the cognitive development of the mind (West, Swanson & Lipscomb 2021). This study draws on the sociocultural learning theory with a focus on the zone of proximal development, knowledge acquisition through social interaction and scaffolding as a method of constructive learning (Mehri & Amerian 2014). Vygotsky (1978) advocates that learners should actively participate in their own learning, constructing learning experiences from their environment. The term 'scaffolding' has become synonymous with Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural learning (Mehri & Amerian 2014), which emphasises the role of teachers, parents, classroom practices, peers and the environment in learning.

Social interaction leads to intersubjectivity (Garte 2016), and the changing role of the teacher in the scaffolding process depends on the learners' reaction and constant changes in their potential abilities (Mehri & Amerian 2014). Scaffolding should operate within the challenging zone where the task can only be mastered with some assistance from the teacher or more knowledgeable other(s) (Vygotsky 1978). Implementing this kind of scaffolding in the context of social-interactive learning was hampered during the emergency education provided during the pandemic. Hence, even in post-pandemic catch-up programmes, at-risk learners are lagging behind, especially in language and mathematics (Maree 2022; Van der Berg et al. 2022).

The aspects of social learning environments and the role of scaffolding are closely linked with the CoI theory (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000). The CoI theory is especially applicable in cases of online or remote learning (Garrison 2007; Sanders & Lokey-Vega 2020), such as that experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and emergency education. The mentioned literature confirms that a CoI can sustain teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence in a technology-mediated environment and a blended learning environment. Teaching presence is defined as 'the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes' (Anderson et al. 2001, p. 5). Social presence is defined as (Garrison 2007):

> [7]he ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities. (p. 352)

Cognitive presence is grounded in the critical thinking theory and 'focuses on higher-order thinking processes as opposed to specific individual learning outcomes' (Garrison et al. 2000, p. 8). These presences are interlinked to create a learning climate that develops space for discourse and supports

teachers in selecting content and the appropriate teaching methods. Participants contribute to upholding these presences. In the Foundation Phase context, participants can be teachers, learners, parents or caregivers, and classroom assistants. When one of the presences changes or is absent, it affects all the other aspects of the educational experience (Anderson 2017).

Although some researchers advocate for a learning presence (Shea & Bidjerano 2010; Wertz & Belachew 2022), collegial presence (Sanders & Lokey-Vega 2020) or emotional presence (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell 2012) to be included in the CoI theory, we regard them as integral to the three presences presented by the seminal work of Garrison et al. (2000).

We drew on aspects of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning theory and aspects of the CoI theory (Garrison et al. 2000) to understand how a CoI can help to address the challenges experienced by teachers during emergency education. A CoI, where teachers support one another, can serve as an approach to scaffold the language and mathematics development of at-risk learners. Figure 8.1[2] illustrates the three presences
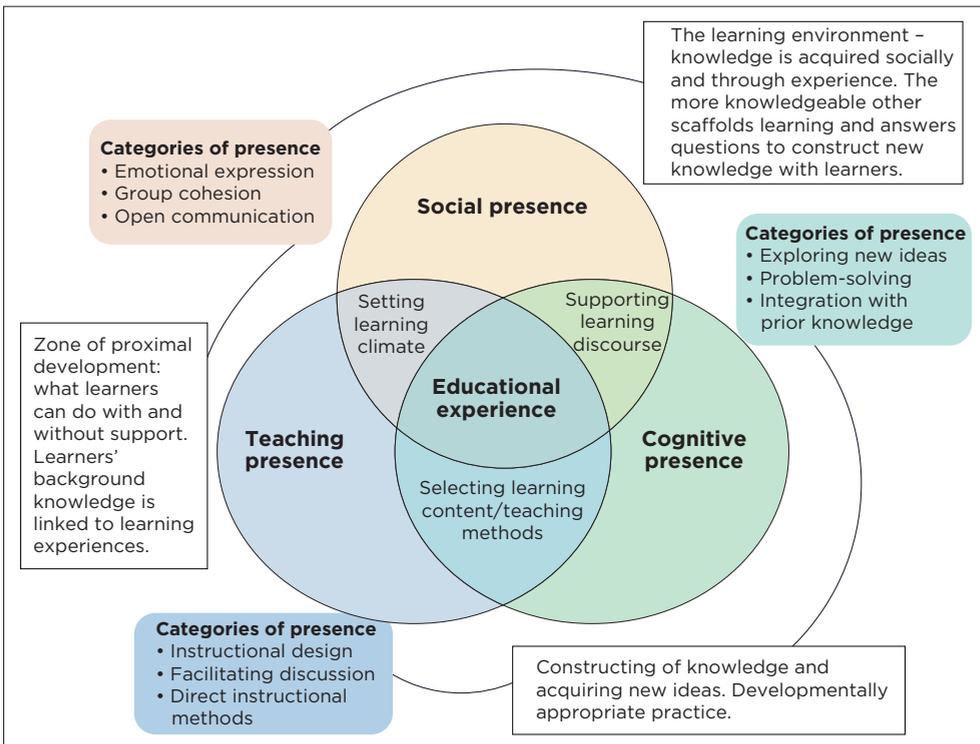
Source: Adapted from Garrison et al. (2000, p. 88) and Vygotsky (1978, pp. 80–84, 118).
FIGURE 8.1: Relationship between community of inquiry presences and aspects of the sociocultural learning theory.

2. Larger image of Figure 8.1.

for educational experiences identified by Garrison et al. (2000) in their theory, along with the aspects of the sociocultural learning theory and how the aspects of the two theories are interconnected.

■ Research methodology

In this study, we followed a qualitative research approach. This approach recognises multiple realities and worldviews, acknowledges that knowledge is developed from lived experiences, uses smaller participant groups who share their experiences and understanding of phenomena through inductive reasoning and generates codes and themes arising from textual analysis instead of numerical data (Mertens 2018).

■ Action learning and action research design

This chapter reports on the first cycle of an action learning and action research (ALAR) project. Action learning and action research is a form of qualitative action research that emphasises the emancipatory and transformative outcomes of research in the social sciences (Morales 2019) with a deepened focus on learning through reflection (Zuber-Skerritt 2019). The three Rs (recognition, relationships and reflection) of action research informed the reflective activities of our action learning group, who collaboratively developed new knowledge about strategies to enhance teaching and learning during emergency teaching. Action research studies follow cyclical processes of planning, acting, evaluating (observing) and reflecting (Wood 2015). Figure 8.2[3] illustrates the cycles of our project, and for this chapter, we report on Cycle 1, which we view as our theoretical and conceptualising action research cycle.

Ongoing reflection on all our activities took place as a means to document our learning and generate new, contextualised knowledge within the action learning group. The research methods followed in this study were participative, critical, reflective and collaborative – as set out in the next section.

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3. Larger image of Figure 8.2.

- Engage in reflective discussions of individual experiences
- Identify possible challenges
- Reflect on contextual relevance of ideas

Evaluate

3

- Reflect on learning during the first cycle
- Co-generate a CoI framework for the specific education context

Reflect

4

- Reflect as a group on challenges, successes and gaps
- Develop contextual changes for implementation

Evaluate

7

Act

2

- Identify different teaching contexts
- Reflect on experiences of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Arts-based knowledge generation followed by group reflections

1

Plan

- Relationship building
- Role clarification and administration of the project
- Collaboratively craft vision
- Adapt initial research questions through reflection (needs analysis)

Act

6

- Implement an action plan
- Reflect on process individually and in an action learning group

5

Plan

- Develop an action plan for implementing the cogenerated CoI framework
- Develop objectives for the envisioned CoI to sustain learning

8

Reflect

- Disseminate newly generated knowledge
- Continuous reflection to adapt, contextualise and improve the CoI framework
- Adapt and contextualise strategies continuously

Source: Adapted from Zuber-Skerritt (2011, pp. 33–34, 2019, p. 73).
Key: CoI, community of inquiry; COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.
FIGURE 8.2: Action learning and action research cycles for this project.

■ Research methods

Through this study, we aimed to bring about change in education by suggesting solutions to sustain learning during emergency education grounded in teachers' reflection on their emergency education experiences. During reflective and arts-based data generation activities, the participants shared challenges experienced and strategies implemented to overcome these challenges. We purposively grouped participants together to reflect critically, and through creative prompts, we generated data on these challenges, which we analysed using a CoI lens to determine how a CoI could serve as a system to strengthen teaching and learning in future disrupted education. We discuss our recruitment, data generation and analysis methods in the following sub-sections to substantiate our choices of research methods.

■ Participant recruitment

We employed purposive participant recruitment by inviting experienced Foundation Phase teachers from different quintile schools situated in

Gauteng to participate in the study. The teachers who agreed to participate voluntarily collaborated as active members of an action learning group. The research team included five Foundation Phase lecturers from the North-West University and five Foundation Phase teachers from Gauteng. Our action learning group was inclusive in terms of race, age, experience, socio-economic background and language background; however, as the Foundation Phase is a field dominated by women, all the participants were female.

Data generation methods

During two action learning group sessions, the participants collaboratively reflected and shared their views and experiences regarding sustained language and mathematics development for at-risk Foundation Phase learners during the emergency education. Data generation in the first session entailed arts-based activities,[4] as well as nominal group technique (NGT), while a reflective discussion (RD) was conducted in the second session. The arts-based strategies used include photovoice (PV), metaphor reflection (MR) and collage reflections (CR). These critical reflection methods guided the participating teachers to reflect on the problem and share their views in different and creative ways, as suggested by Masinga et al. (2016).

Data analysis

The data were analysed thematically and inductively by using the sociocultural and CoI theoretical frameworks as references for coding the data and reporting the findings, as explained in Figure 8.1. One team member imported the transcribed data as a hermeneutic unit into ATLASti™, a computer software tool for qualitative data analysis. ATLASti™ was then used for axial and selective coding to identify preliminary themes, which the research team then critically discussed before organising the findings according to the presence of a CoI.

Ethical considerations

This study was part of a larger research project that was rolled out in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. The larger project was approved by the relevant research ethics committee of the university (ethics number: NWU-00541-19-S2), and consent was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education.

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4. Detailed data generation process followed.

The study upheld all ethical considerations, including participant informed consent, transparency and protecting the privacy of the participants. It was made clear in both written and oral agreements that participation was voluntary and confidential, as we would report the findings by using participant codes. The research findings have been reported completely and honestly without misleading others about the nature of the findings. No incentive was awarded for participating in the study.

■ Techniques to enhance trustworthiness

It is important for researchers to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research. The measures that we took to ensure trustworthiness were based on credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Grant & Lincoln 2021). Credibility was ensured by the careful alignment of the theoretical framework that underpinned the study and the lived experience of the participating teachers. Grounding our findings in authentic participant quotations and credible literature in the field further strengthened the credibility of the research. By describing the research contexts and those of the participants and providing a detailed account of the research methods, an opportunity is provided to consider the transferability of the findings to other, similar contexts and the way the study could be replicated in other contexts. We ensured dependability by carefully planning and documenting the research procedures to allow someone outside the research to follow, audit and critique the research process. Confirmability involves the level of confidence in the fact that the findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases. To maintain confirmability, we recorded all conversations and motivated our findings based on direct quotations that reflect the participants' lived experiences.

■ Discussion of the findings

Using a CoI lens for the analysis, categories and indicators related to the three presences (Garrison 2007) served as the framework to categorise the codes in our research. Linking codes to the presences as themes enabled us to determine how a CoI framework could serve as a support system to address the challenges experienced by teachers during emergency education and thereby sustain language and mathematics learning by at-risk learners in future instances of disrupted learning.

Codes were linked to the presences based on a logical relationship with the categories and indicators of the presences (see Table 8.1). Because of the interrelatedness of the presences, challenges or strategies to sustain, one presence will logically also influence the other presences.

TABLE 8.1: Categories and indicators of the presences that play a role in a community of inquiry.

Elements	Categories	Indicators
Teaching presence	Design and organisation	Setting curriculum and methods
	Facilitating discourse	Sharing personal meaning
	Direct instruction	Focusing discussion
Social presence	Effective expression	Demonstration of emotions
	Open communication	Risk-free expression
	Group cohesion	Encourage collaboration
Cognitive presence	Triggering event	Sense of puzzlement
	Exploration	Information exchange
	Integration	Connecting ideas
	Resolution	Applying new ideas

Source: Adapted from Garrison (2007, p. 65).

The Foundation Phase curriculum further influenced data analysis and discussions of findings in more than one way: Firstly, the holistic approach to teaching in the Foundation Phase influenced the way the participants were able to separate their reflections on teaching and learning strategies employed to sustain language and mathematics specifically. Secondly, the interrelatedness of teaching, learning and assessment in the Foundation Phase requires an integrated approach to the discussion of data referring to these components of education.

■ Teaching presence

According to Garrison (2009, p. 65), teaching presence is sustained by the '*facilitation of discourse*', evidenced through '*sharing of personal meaning*' and '*direct instruction*' to '*focus discussions*' (Table 8.1). The findings of our study show that the teachers made efforts to maintain a teaching presence to support language and mathematics learning during school closures. However, linking data to the indicators points to three factors hindering the maintenance of this presence; firstly, in the rushed implementation of emergency education strategies, there was limited time to meaningfully adapt the *curriculum design* and teaching *methods* for meaningful online education that could scaffold learning within the Foundation Phase learners' zone of proximal development. Secondly, the lack of access to technology limited the opportunity to *facilitate discourse* and *discussions* through *direct instruction*. Thirdly, engaging the learners in the learning process to maintain language and mathematics development as set out in a curriculum designed for teacher-facilitated face-to-face learning was hardly possible because of role players not being prepared for their role in sustaining the teaching presence in an online environment. It became clear that the teacher had to shoulder responsibility for all technology-mediated teaching and assessment initiatives while accommodating diverse learners from diverse backgrounds.

Although some schools used WhatsApp groups for direct instruction to sustain a form of teaching presence, others reported a complete absence of teaching presence during alert level 5, with no learning taking place, as evident from the following shared experiences:

'I'm teaching Grade 3 in a rural area, public school. And we did no teaching because we had no communication with anyone.' (P3, NGT)

'We could not reach our children who live in the location [*rural areas*] [...] but we could reach the children that live in town because their parents normally had a phone or a laptop or they had airtime, things like that.' (P2, RD)

To some extent, learners from the more affluent schools were more able to benefit from a teaching presence as mediated by the teacher through technology during alert levels 4 and 5. This is not to say that no learners from rural and low-income homes experienced a teaching presence; however, access to technology just made it more challenging. In this regard, one participant said:

'Our principal didn't want us to go and hand out the books. So, we actually did everything on WhatsApp.' (P2, RD)

Maintaining teacher presence in assessment approaches was probably one of the biggest challenges. The multiple challenges that teachers had to deal with to manage emergency education measures left little time for formative assessment of learners' progress through '*informal discourse or sharing*' as developmentally appropriate assessment in the Foundation Phase, as the following excerpt shows:

'Mostly we don't do corrections; we just say this is how you do it [...] carry on!' (P2, NGT)

Despite the challenges, the teachers were continuously devising plans to sustain a teaching presence through direct instruction during alert levels 4 and 5, such as sending worksheets to the parents, which learners had to complete as evidence of learning progress. However, this strategy did not actualise without challenges for teachers and learners who have limited access to resources. For example, one participant said:

'That was the problem, because not everybody could print it [*worksheets*] [...] it must be so simple that they can just read it out on the phone and writing on the separate paper at home and take a picture and send to us.' (P2, RD)

Although most teachers did their best to support learning remotely, these time-consuming efforts to provide instruction rarely included the 'facilitation of discourse' whereby learners could demonstrate their understanding as an opportunity for authentic and fair assessment.

WhatsApp and text messages, as well as videos, were viewed as the options to mediate *direct instruction*, albeit time-consuming. The following excerpt bears evidence to support this assertion:

'Alert level 4/5: We took screenshots of the books, photos, and then everything went over WhatsApp.' (P2, RD)

'We used videos with the math for those long sums with place value that you had to take them apart. So, we took the video from above and then we explained the sums like that; so, they didn't see us but just our hand and you hear us.' (P1, RD)

With regard to '*design and organisation*' (see Figure 8.1), the participating teachers took the autonomy to make decisions about the curriculum, reverting to the curriculum of a previous grade as a catch-up strategy based on their knowledge of the vertical construction of knowledge in language and mathematics learning (Hoadley 2020). In this regard, two participants said:

'For catch up, I also did Grade 1 work going through the sounds, doing easy sums […] plus, and minus sums.' (P3, NGT)

'What mine involves is a lot going back to Grade 1, because I'm with Grade 2; so, I went back to sounds and small numbers so that the foundation can be laid again. And then, at the end of the year, we started with what we did in Term 1. So now they know what they missed. And now we can build. The Grade 3 teacher will do Grade 2. And then that is how we build.' (T1, RD)

The teachers' concerns about the inevitable knowledge gap in language and mathematics as a result of the sudden shift to online education and the effort it will require to fill this gap through the vertical construction (building) of knowledge (Hoadley 2020), are reflected in the above two quotations.

Although no specific mention was made of attempts to '*focus discussions*' on learning, the teachers reported that they devised technology-supported language and mathematics tasks that could easily be facilitated by parents at home, as shared by Participant 02:

'[*Language*]: And then with language, I gave them spelling words and sentences they have to go and practice to read and to write neatly and they have to ask the guardian to help them with that.' (P2, NGT)

'[*Mathematics*]: And then I gave very simple homework that they should go and do, like "identify the shapes that you see in your house" or "count the number of knives and forks you have in your house" and things like that, so that they can just report back to me.' (P2, NGT)

Motivated by Garrison's (2009) theory of CoI, it could be postulated that parents who are well acquainted with their role as members of a CoI will know how to mediate the direct instruction received from the teacher to facilitate '*focused discussions*' on the relevant content at home to support learning. However, the disparity in access to technology and the inability of some parents to mediate learning at home hampered equal benefit from these emergency teaching strategies.

During lockdown alert levels 4 and 5, there was hardly time for assessment, let alone time for constructive feedback to support learners' learning. Even when teachers were allowed to distribute learners' workbooks, they were prohibited from touching the books to assess and

provide perceivable feedback to the learners on their progress. One teacher reported the time-consuming effort of transferring the learner tasks received through WhatsApp or text messages to her learners' workbooks to keep track of their progress, as the following excerpt shows:

> 'And there was a stage that you weren't allowed to mark because if you touch this book [...] you must sanitise [...] and then the next book and sanitise and [...] so I did not mark, and then, when we could mark again, we had to catch up all those assessments. So, we wrote learners' answers in the books. It was a lot of work.' (P5, RD)

Emergency education was a new terrain, and role players, including the Department of Basic Education, school management, teachers, and parents, had to come to terms with their roles. Apart from having little or no knowledge of pedagogies such as '*focused discussions*' or '*facilitating discourse*', some parents may have found it more challenging than others to play their role in sustaining a teaching presence at home, as noted by a participant in the following excerpt:

> 'As a teacher in the family, one could stay at home. Some of the jobs you had to continue with your job [...] go out every day and do work at your house [*and*] teach your children [...] essential workers like a nurse or a doctor.' (P8, PV)

While teachers were striving to maintain the teaching presence in an unfamiliar online environment, the Department of Basic Education was set on organising and instructing teachers on managing teaching and learning through online workshops. The shared feeling was that too much time was wasted on these workshops when the time could have been spent more productively to support learners. In this regard, one teacher said:

> 'It was really horrible; many workshops that I actually did. I was like, "I get it, you guys!"' (P2, RD)

When teachers and learners went back to the classroom during alert level 3, even more workshops and meetings were implemented to align catch-up programmes that limited the time for remedial support for at-risk learners. Teachers did not always have time to support learners. One teacher said:

> 'With our schools, every afternoon, we have a meeting! Every afternoon! Then I have to tell my learners: "Sorry I can't help you. Teacher needs to be in a meeting this afternoon."' (P3; RD)

Language diversity continues to have an impact on teaching presence. In some cases, parents are not fluent in English as the language of teaching and learning. This hampered their ability to facilitate learning at home. Teachers were also in a race against time to catch up on valuable learning time, and accommodating language diversity took even more time, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> 'We also have a lot of children that struggle because their language will be Xhosa, or Zulu, or Sotho or other African language. So, with me it's so difficult to explain, because I can just speak Afrikaans or English.' (P2, RD)

It is important to note that teaching presence does not only refer to the presence of the teacher. Any member of a CoI, including a parent, assistant or even learners can take on the role of instructor and contribute to the teaching presence. The value of learners supporting their peers is illustrated by the following excerpt:

> 'What I do is, I always have somebody that will help me. Then I'll tell him: "Okay, explain to the boy in his language or to the girl in her language what is happening." And I think that helps the other learner because then the other learner has a chance to think about it, and put it in his own words, giving instructions to somebody else. So that's what I do when I come to a language barrier. Or I'll get another teacher to assist.' (P2, RD)

The above quotation confirms the role learners could and should play in a CoI and the need to prepare learners for this role in a remote education approach.

Teachers guided parents to sustain a teaching presence in the home environment. In some cases, they even provided evidence of their parent–teacher role, as the following excerpt shows:

> 'Oh, yes, they were quite involved […] they were also taking videos of the children reading. And then you will see they help a little bit.' (P5, RD)

However, some parents needed to be reminded of their roles and the importance of a parent–child relationship to maintain a teaching presence at home. One teacher said:

> 'And I always tell the parents: "When you got to bed, read the same story again and again." Reading is like riding a bicycle, you have to repeat and repeat […] I can just ride a bicycle; it's just practise and practise to go faster.' (P5, PV)

Some parents' attitude and motivation to be involved in their children's learning played a crucial role as a determinant of teaching presence at home, which was detrimental to learner progress during alert levels 4 and 5. There is evidence that some parents were reluctant to be optimally involved and that some became aware that they had no choice but to be involved, as the following excerpts show:

> 'Communication has been hit, but even before COVID-19 times. No matter how many times we say the parents must come to school […] before the time, they back out.' (P1, NGT)

Participant 02 expressed the hope that the experience will alert parents of their role to sustain learning at home in future emergency education situations:

> 'I think the parents had an eye opener when we came back to see: Well, I did nothing with my kid […] now my kid had to fail […] and they realised: "Well, if I'm not going to do something, then nobody's going to do something" […] if something like that happens, they will make a plan to help their child because they saw what impact it had on the education.' (P2, RD)

This last excerpt implies that if parents were aware of the value of a CoI prior to the pandemic and had knowledge of their role in sustaining the teaching presence, it could have served as motivation for parents to support their children in their learning during emergency education.

Various factors hampered parents from sustaining a teaching presence at home, such as lack of access to technology, illiteracy or working conditions, which required remedial classes to help learners catch up on language and mathematics development. Experience gained through emergency education made the teachers more aware of ways to accommodate the challenging circumstances of learners and their parents or guardians when choosing strategies to sustain a teaching presence. In this regard, the following was said:

'I now know exactly. For you [*the learner*] to get into my remedial classes, because now I know, you don't have a mommy or daddy or whoever that can read. Because I assumed [*they*] had somebody at home [*because*], actually, no mom came to me and said, I'm really struggling.' (P3, NGT)

The lesson learnt reported by Participant 03 puts emphasis on the important relationship between teaching presence and social presence. An awareness of the context of the parents or caregivers can help teachers understand how to support parents or caregivers in fulfilling their role in a CoI to sustain a teaching and social presence to strengthen the cognitive presence.

■ Social presence

Garrison (2007, p. 61) emphasises that in a CoI, the social presence is evident in '*effective expression*' through the '*demonstration of emotions*'. Social presence further requires a '*shift from socio-emotional support to a focus on group cohesion (from personal to purposeful relationships)*' (see Table, 8.1). In a CoI, '*open communication*' provides the opportunity for '*risk-free expression*' that supports teaching presence and cognitive presence.

It became evident from the data that the emphasis was still on the *socio-emotional support* with less focus on '*group cohesion*'. Teacher characteristics such as resilience, passion for teaching, religiosity, empathy and an understanding of learners' learning needs played a role in providing socio-emotional support to learners – not only during the emergency education but also before and after the pandemic. More than one participant expressed a desire to make a difference with their teaching based on a higher calling for teaching that reflects a spiritual connection with what they do. One teacher said:

'We are not doing it for people to acknowledge us. Personally, I believe that God creates you from the onset to be a Foundation Phase teacher.' (P1, PV)

The characteristic demonstrated above possibly motivated the strive to fulfil one of the most important responsibilities of the teacher in the South African context, namely, to create a learning atmosphere conducive to learning that implies socio-emotional support. In the following excerpt, one participant demonstrated her realisation that for any learning to take place amidst turmoil and panic, establishing a favourable environment where learners feel safe to focus on learning is foremost:

'To me, from the very onset, nobody even spoke about the five components of language or the facets of math, but what we concentrated on was the atmosphere – to create teachable moments. The teacher should be responsive to the learners and see what they need to install.' (P5, CR)

Creating a learning environment, whether at school or at home, where learners feel safe to express themselves without fear of ridicule or punishment when they make mistakes will motivate 'open communication'. While communication is one of the most valuable vehicles for learning (Fredericks & Alexander 2021), creating this kind of learning environment in an online or blended learning context – especially for Foundation Phase learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds – requires innovative strategies that call for more research.

Social presence is also evident when teachers have an open communication channel with learners, parents and colleagues. Although indicators related to true social presence in support of language and mathematics learning rarely emerged from the data, it was obvious that the teachers made attempts to involve parents to support social presence. Teachers shared their knowledge with parents in the form of training to ensure optimal learning, as the following quotations show:

'We tried to do a lot of parent training to let them know how to do it.' (P5, RD)

'And I had this one mom, she said: "I actually forgot how to do this. Now I can remember again." So, we taught the kids and the parents.' (P2, RD)

The following excerpt indicates that in some instances, meaningful connections between parents and learners were established, as parents could draw from their own experiences as learners when they engaged in teaching their own children:

'But I think for a lot of parents, it was an eye opener to know what your child is doing at school actually. And now ever since then, you and your child will do the journey at school – normally it was just the child. But now the mom knows: "When I was in Grade 2, I did this" […] so they are starting to get more involved.' (P2, RD)

It is evident from the findings that both parents and teachers realised how important it was to interact meaningfully during the pandemic through technology. For example, creating and maintaining WhatsApp groups immediately provided a platform for social presence and group cohesion

among teachers and parents. Teachers strived to involve parents to enable learners to learn, as the following quotations demonstrate:

> 'The communication really improved. Because I went out to my parents and met them more. They came to me to tell me: "I cannot do this or that."' (P3, NGT)

> 'And then I started interacting with my parents. So not just my learners. I've tried really hard interacting with my parents, sending notes to their houses. And now, more parents send me numbers to use as WhatsApp for them [...] it's the granny's phone or the neighbour's phone or whoever's phone that was close to them. So, WhatsApp started!' (P3, NGT)

The above quotations reflect a new awareness of the value of creating and sustaining a social presence through a CoI. However, it is evident that, in some instances, parents did not have the needed technological devices to maintain social presence and teaching presence during the pandemic. This is an example of how the pandemic highlighted social inequalities in communities in South Africa. One participant said:

> 'I have a problem; like I have 34 learners, but I have contact with only seventeen parents. And that is because the rest don't have phones. Like, they don't even have SMS.' (P3, RD)

The rigid COVID-19 regulations and the fear of contracting the virus hampered social learning that plays a motivational role in learning (Bandura 1986). Modelling plays a crucial role in learning from a sociocultural view (Vygotsky 1978). Learners acquire new knowledge and skills by observing and practising what teachers and more knowledgeable others model. This is especially important in the learning of languages and mathematics. However, as the following excerpt shows, the findings suggest that the absence of social presence because of movement restrictions hampered cognitive skills and perceptual learning to support both language and mathematics learning:

> 'So cognitive and motor skills – very important. In COVID-19, children were locked in the house, and they did not play at all; we only watched TV. And when school started back, they were not allowed to play. They were supposed to sit in the circles that we draw at school; they were supposed to be apart from each other; they were not allowed to interact with each other.' (P6, PV)

The participants felt that learners lost opportunities to learn through play, which supports social learning as well as perceptual learning, which plays a role in mathematics and language development . One participant said:

> 'So, I think play and all those small motor skills didn't develop. And that's why we're struggling with writing and writing in the line and why do we need to teach that now. Because they only used computers in lockdown. Another thing that they completely threw out of the window [*is*] sharing with friends.' (P8, PR)

The findings suggest that the participants attributed learners' inability to speak freely to wearing masks. Learners and even teachers could not read

non-verbal facial expressions. It seems that some preferred to remain quiet, as the following excerpt shows:

'I found with COVID-19 with the masks, that the children didn't use their mouths. When they talk, they don't move their lips, because they cannot see the teacher's lips, so they cannot see how the sounds have formed, how I'm counting. They start to feel like they cannot hear anything, because they cannot see your lips and they cannot "see" your sounds. And they started to be quiet, because "the teacher cannot hear me." So, I'll rather stay quiet.' (P2, PVR)

One of the tenets of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is that language is crucial for cognitive development. However, the excerpt above suggests the possibility that learners' speech development was negatively affected too.

Vygotsky's theory emphasises the role of social interaction in cognitive development. For learners, group work provides opportunities for social interaction where language is used. As the following excerpts show, teachers and learners lamented the fact that group work to sustain social presence through '*open communication*', '*risk-free expression*' and '*collaboration*' was not possible at the height of the pandemic:

'I could see my children were missing group work like we did it before COVID-19. And the thing that I missed the most was group work.' (P3, NGT)

'Unfortunately, that some of the [*life*] skills that suffered. Group work was also not allowed, learners may not sit next to each other.' (P10; NGT)

A positive outcome of emergency education is that teachers and parents were compelled to find alternative ways to establish a social presence to sustain a teaching presence. This may have opened communication channels that would not have materialised if not for the pandemic, which should now be expanded on to establish a CoI for sustained support for learners in future. The ultimate aim of teaching presence and social presence should be to create the conditions for cognitive presence to attain educational purposes (Garrison 2007), which is discussed next.

■ Cognitive presence

Cognitive presence triggers higher-order brain function through '*exploration*', '*integration*' and '*resolution*' by employing strategies such as creating a '*sense of puzzlement*' and '*information exchange*' (Garrison 2007, p. 65) (see Table 8.1). This presence was probably the most difficult to uphold during emergency education, especially in contexts where parents were not able to facilitate learning on this level at home. The participants were aware of the lack of '*exploratory learning*' during alert levels 4 and 5 because of the absence of teacher guidance in meaning-making processes. Teachers and learners could not fully engage in concrete and perceptual learning opportunities that are especially crucial in

mathematics learning (Sarama & Clements 2016). For instance, one of the participants said:

> 'The children had to see the things because when they were at home and maybe just saw a video or listen to a voice note, they couldn't see the numbers. They didn't have counters. Like in the class, you can put it on the whiteboard, put up a picture and see how much a number is and that that made a gap for them, because they couldn't see.' (P1, RD)

During emergency education, teachers were forced to pay less attention to cognitive functions such as 'information exchange' or the 'connecting and applying of new ideas' (see Figure 8.1). The aim rather shifted to supporting learners to master the basic content and concepts, as is made clear in the following excerpt:

> 'And if I can send my learners to Grade 4, and they can read and they can write and they can count, then I'm fine. Then they can go on their own.' (P2, NGT)

Despite initiatives to mediate learning and maintain learner-centredness, as Vygotsky's theory suggests, time constraints forced teachers to be less interactive in their approaches. One teacher said:

> 'It's a teacher-centred classroom; it's not a children-centred classroom. The teacher talks. It's not interactive. They were used to keeping quiet and the teacher only explained so that we can get through the day.' (P1, RD)

In other words, teachers adopted the direct teaching and teacher-centred approach which is not supportive of engaged learning that is crucial in both language and mathematics learning.

The participants felt that time constraints forced them to employ a more teacher-centred approach, resulting in gaps in language and mathematics learning. Three teachers explained their approaches as follows:

> '[*Mathematics*]: I didn't have time to teach them all the number names, if I can say it like that. They were Grade 3. It was so hard to teach them it's "three hundred and sixty-four." They only knew "I'm on 3-6-4" [*on the counting card*] and I have to bounce on or I have to bounce back.' (P2, RD)

> '[*Language*]: Like in the mornings, we will start with the alphabet in front of my class. Every day they [*Grade 3 learners*] start sounding every letter – they need to sound it out – "a," "b," "c" ... they started off this year.' (P2, RD)

The teachers created extra teaching and learning opportunities to fill gaps in learners' language development. One teacher said:

> 'I'm sitting on a Tuesday and Thursday. I excused myself from everything. And then I said: "What am I doing? Grade 1 work again." So doing the sounds, building words, reading short words, giving them a letter and say: "Give me words with that letter." I'm trying from my side to do Grade 1 work again with them.' (P2, PV)

The teachers were aware that prior learning was the foundation for future learning on higher cognitive levels, especially in language and mathematics learning. If prior learning is shaky, it negatively affects later academic

success (Schaffler, Nel & Booysen 2021). Teachers looked for more learning material on the Internet to supplement classroom learning. However, they found that some of the learners struggled with the language in which the material was provided. One teacher said:

'In Grade 2, we decided that we're not going to make videos to show the children; so, we sent voice notes and we looked for videos on YouTube to send them to watch, but then it was English and that made it difficult.' (P1, RD)

The teachers had to contend with learners who started school in Grade 1 with backlogs in language development. The backlogs were compounded by the disruption caused by the pandemic, as one teacher pointed out:

'Now we have kids that come into Grade 1 that do not know anything except their home language. For them to have lost that year in Grade 1 was so bad. Because they didn't learn the sounds; they didn't learn their counting.' (P2, RD)

The compulsory wearing of masks during the pandemic had an impact not only on social presence but also on learners' willingness to '*exchange information*' that is indicative of a cognitive presence. A participant said:

'They stopped participating in the class; they stopped talking in your class, because they were frustrated with this thing covering their identity.' (P2, PVR)

One participant mentioned the impact of the pandemic on cognitive presence even when the wearing of masks was no longer required:

'Our Grade 3s, they are now constantly speaking. And if you ask them a question, they will not answer you. But if they have a chance to talk to their friends, then they will.' (P2, RD)

From the data, it became clear that emergency education renounced the importance of a learner-centred classroom, which is core to sustaining a cognitive presence. It is with this aim in mind that Shea and Bidjerano (2010) specifically advocated for learner presence to be included in the CoI to support cognitive presence. Active learner engagement in the learning content is especially important to develop competence in language and mathematics.

■ Conclusion

The overarching aim of our study was to explore how Foundation Phase learners could be supported in future emergency education to sustain language and mathematics development. The shift to online education during the closing of schools had specific implications for the vertical nature of knowledge construction in these two subjects that require constant scaffolding of learning where new knowledge is built onto previous knowledge, skills and understanding. Implementing an ALAR approach provided data on the educational challenges experienced to sustain language and mathematics learning during the pandemic, pointing to the

absence of teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence as requisites for successful online learning (Garrison 2007; Garrison et al. 2000; Sanders & Lokey-Vega 2020; Wertz & Belachew 2022)

Motivated by the literature, the CoI theory was applied as a lens to code, analyse and interpret the data. Linking the CoI categories and indicators to the data enabled us to determine in which way the implementation of a CoI framework could serve as a support system to sustain language and mathematics development in the physical absence of the teacher in future emergency education in the Foundation Phase. The findings show that establishing a CoI could have countered many challenges hampering sustained learning of language and mathematics by Foundation Phase learners during the pandemic.

The challenges teachers were faced with to sustain learning of language and mathematics during the pandemic concur with related literature in this field (Soudien et al. 2022; Van der Berg et al. 2022), including unequal access to technology and parents lacking the competence and knowledge to manage and support engaged learning at home. Although participating teachers employed strategies to sustain a teaching, social and cognitive presence to support both language and mathematics development through remote learning, using technology (WhatsApp and videos), they agreed that these strategies could not prevent learners from falling behind. Teachers implemented these strategies to sustain open communication and maximise parental involvement. However, not all parents or caregivers could fulfil their role to sustain the teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence in the physical absence of the teacher. In the case where face-to-face education is replaced with remote emergency education, teachers, parents and learners should thus understand their roles to sustain social presence.

Although technology-mediated learning cannot be classified as fully online learning, which is the suggested context for CoI, the strong support for CoI in the literature and in the findings of this study strengthens our argument that a CoI can serve to support language and mathematics learning in the Foundation Phase. We argue that if teachers, learners, parents or caregivers are prepared for their roles in a CoI and apply these roles on a continuous basis to support learning, learners at risk of poor developmental outcomes can have sustained access to the curriculum in times of emergency education. Although we acknowledge that Foundation Phase learners have not yet developed sophisticated skills to deal with the complexities of online learning and to independently play their role in a learning community, it is imperative that teachers, parents or caregivers take hands to guide learners in developing these skills.

Scientists cannot predict when the next pandemic will occur, but what they are certain about is that future pandemics are imminent. While we

may still have some time to adapt the current curriculum design and methods and get a system in place that could support the presences in times of emergency education, role players should consider ways to prepare teachers, parents, caregivers, learners and the community for their roles in a CoI. Such an approach will, however, require a paradigm shift from the current approach where the teacher has the sole responsibility for learners' progress to a new consciousness that all involved must engage collaboratively to sustain language and mathematics learning by Foundation Phase learners, not only during online emergency education but also on a constant basis. Two requisites will, however, determine in which way a CoI can serve to sustain language and mathematics learning in school communities. Apart from role players taking responsibility for their part to sustain the presences, education in the Foundation Phase will have to make the long-overdue shift to a learner-centred approach, in which self-directed learning as part of a community of learners is scaffolded. This will not only empower learners to take ownership of their own learning but also strengthen life-long learning as required for success in the 21st century.

Our study was not without limitations. Time constraints hampered recruiting participants from diverse contexts. Including parents as participants would have provided insight into their experiences of challenges and how to adjust the design of a CoI to ensure that parents' contexts are recognised. Time limitations also constrained a truly collaborative approach to the inquiry, although the second cycle of the study was more collaborative and reflects the values of action research. In addition, ethical clearance was only granted for Gauteng, which made it challenging to recruit participants, as our research team primarily works in the North-West province.

Disruptions in education are increasing globally, not only because of pandemics but also because of wars and disruptive weather conditions. The valuable lessons learnt should serve as a basis for establishing communities of inquiry to sustain language and mathematics development in emergency education. Building onto the communication channels created to mediate learning, permanent structures should be put in place to strengthen continuous communication and collaboration among all role players. A CoI can serve as a continuous and fortified scaffold that links learning in the classroom with learning in the home environment. We argue that the CoI should not only be maintained during emergency education but also be part of the day-to-day practice to serve as a permanent scaffold for language and mathematics development – not only for at-risk learners but also for all Foundation Phase learners.

Enabling resilience in learners who experienced grief and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic

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■ Introduction

Fiorini and Mullen (2006) prefaced their work with an allegory titled 'The land of myth and make believe':

> Once upon a time there existed a land where death was never talked about. In this land children were always happy and resilient and bounced back from any loss or trauma they might experience. In fact, children in particular were thought to be incapable of feeling depressed or truly understanding or experiencing loss. Children in this land held their heads high and were 'strong little troopers' when faced with issues like death, divorce, or other life transitions. In this land, parents and other adults decided that it would be better not to talk about

traumatic events with their children so as not to 'confuse' them or make them feel upset. The less said the better. In fact, the parents and other adults around these children decided that they should also hide their own feelings so as not to upset the children. The adults were very surprised then when the children began to behave differently, act sad or angry, or engage in risky behaviours after they experienced a traumatic event or life change. 'How could this be', the parents thought, 'when we have tried our best to insulate our children from pain?' 'Could we have been wrong all along?' 'Do children grieve?' (p. 31)

Phenomena such as grief, loss and bereavement are more commonplace among children than they are thought to be. As these phenomena are often associated with the phenomenon of death, less attention is directed to other events and transitions that may potentiate a sense of loss and distress in children. Grief can be described as an overwhelming sense of loss, mental anguish and emotional suffering resulting in a grief reaction (Abi-Hashem 1999). A deep sense of loss may initiate a negative grief reaction such as anger, crying, shock, sadness, anxiety, fear, numbness, helplessness, tendencies of regression and clinging behaviour in children, especially when major events such as separation, natural disasters, family conflict, divorce, abuse, moving to another place and feeling uprooted, among other things, occur (Abi-Hashem 1999; Ferow 2019; Roberts, Thomas & Morgan 2016; Taylor et al. 2009).

Overwhelming events render children with shaky support systems vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes. It is, however, important not to see grief and loss as pathological conditions, as even positive, life-changing events and transitions can engender a feeling of grief and loss, often expressed in thoughts, affect, particular behaviours and physical sensations (Fiorini & Mullen 2006). Furthermore, it is important to note that grief pervades the physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and spiritual domains of existence (Venkatesan 2022).

Compared to adults, children have special vulnerabilities (Etzel 2020; Grobbelaar & Jones 2020) and require stability in their lives for normative development to be achieved. Events that are out of children's control can be overwhelming, and they may find it difficult to cope resiliently, as they may lack the requisite coping skills and active support systems (Ferow 2019; Theron & Engelbrecht 2012). Overwhelming and traumatic events may cause children to feel powerless and experience childhood traumatic grief (Cohen & Mannarino 2011).

Worldwide, interest has emerged in the capacity of human beings to be resilient in the context of natural disasters, political violence, disease, malnutrition, maltreatment and other risks to normative human development (Masten 2014). Researchers are looking for anchors of resilience in individuals and communities affected by natural disasters, pandemics and political instability. Specifically, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

pandemic represented yet another disaster that had a severe impact on the lives of South African youths besides the ongoing human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a biological hazard that caused much chaos and instability in the lives of children, causing some to experience disenfranchised grief – a condition in which people do not publicly mourn or express their pain (Venkatesan 2022). People with disenfranchised grief often do not receive the support they need (Venkatesan 2022). During the lockdown, schools were closed and children were restricted to their homes. Schools adopted online teaching and learning; however, many learners from impoverished households did not have the equipment for online learning.

Furthermore, many teachers were ill-prepared to teach and assess online. While some learners coped with the changes, others failed to positively adapt to the changes that threw their psycho-social environments into a state of economic shutdown, isolation, chaos, fear and anxiety (Ganie & Mukhter 2020). Shmatova and Razvarina (2022) added that at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, children exhibited fear, experienced problems with online learning, a deterioration in physical and mental health and reduced physical activity, and they demonstrated an increased interest in gadgets and body weight. During the lockdown, some learners exhibited negative affect and behaviour and experienced neglect or abuse, isolation, boredom, a lack of free outdoor play and poverty (Ganie & Mukhter 2020). Under the circumstances, schools were unable to support learners' development as they should.

It should be borne in mind that schools, as nodes of care, play an important role in enhancing the holistic development of learners. However, in the midst of the pandemic, some learners could not receive the support that schools, as 'microsystemic fortresses', provide (Theron & Engelbrecht 2012). A school is part of a child's social ecology because of supportive learner–learner and teacher–learner interaction that occurs in it (Malindi & Machenjedze 2012). Usually, caring teachers have an important role to play in enhancing the capacity of vulnerable children to be resilient in the context of risk, including those exhibiting symptoms of childhood traumatic grief (Ferow 2019; Malindi & Machenjedze 2012; Theron & Engelbrecht 2012). Sayed et al. (2021) pointed out that teachers were not involved in policymaking procedures, neither were they provided with the requisite psycho-social support amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This state disenfranchised teachers and rendered them vulnerable.

According to Berbés-Blázquez et al. (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic enabled an examination of the resilience or adaptive capacity of socio-ecological systems. For learners, their socio-ecological systems, such as

schools and communities, were disrupted and disabled to function, rendering them vulnerable. A study by Treier et al. (2023) shows that vulnerable children, such as those with affective dysregulation and those in out-of-home care contexts, exhibited elevated reactivity to stressors and maladaptive emotion regulation coping strategies. The disequilibrium resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown worsened their plight, as they could not access the resilience-promoting psycho-social support in their schools and communities.

Communities were not accessible and thus rendered weaker in making resilience resources accessible to all. This implies that the COVID-19 pandemic magnified the pre-existing social inequalities and further marginalised the poor and academically disadvantaged communities (Sayed et al. 2021). It should be noted that cultural differences among communities account for the capacity of communities to cope adaptively (Sugawara et al. 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed cultural fragility and inequalities in communities (UNESCO 2022), where risks in terms of resilience abound. It showed that some households subsist in contexts that negate normative development in learners, with deleterious consequences for them. Resilience risks and protective factors occur at multiple levels and influence people's mental health and well-being in the context of natural disasters and outbreaks (Coulombe et al. 2020).

While the COVID-19 pandemic caused the development of psychological challenges in some learners, others were able to be resilient in the context of risk (Panzeri et al. 2021). Much has to be learnt about how school-going children coped in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this chapter was to examine how resilience could be enhanced in learners who experienced loss and grief during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter grants privilege to the voices of learners on the loss and grief they experienced and provides caveats on how they experienced loss and grief in silence in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The central research question that guided our study was: How can resilience be enabled in learners who experienced loss and grief during the COVID-19 pandemic?

■ Conceptualising resilience

The search for a universal definition of the resilience phenomenon is far from over. This is because the phenomenon of resilience is not easy to define, as it is strongly influenced by the context (Dass-Brailsford 2005; Ungar 2011). It was Masten (2001) who, from a systems perspective, provided a comprehensive characterisation of the resilience phenomenon. She sees resilience as the ordinary magic of lives lived well. She argues that for young people to cope resiliently, they require ordinary adaptational systems and institutions, which should be functional. This means that there

is a realisation that the capacity to cope resiliently depends on what is built both inside and around the child (Ungar 2005).

Further research shows that positive adjustment in the context of risk or resilience depends on reciprocal, dynamic, contextually influenced, bi-directional interaction between people and their social and physical ecologies (Theron & Donald 2013). This implies that, in addition to their strengths, children require active support systems to cope resiliently in the context of risk and adversity (Theron, Theron & Malindi 2013b). In this regard, families, schools and the peer group can serve as microsystemic strongholds for young people who are at risk of poor developmental outcomes (Theron & Engelbrecht 2012). Schools that are respectful of children's rights enhance their abilities to cope resiliently in the context of risk and adversity (Theron, Liebenberg & Malindi 2013a). Children achieve positive developmental outcomes if they have opportunities to experience support not only in their schools but also in their communities (Ungar et al. 2019).

According to Rutter (2012), children do not demonstrate resilience simply because they have been shielded from potential stressors; instead, significant stress or adversity may have a steeling effect on children who have been exposed to such risk and adversity. So, researchers should be mindful of the steeling effect children's unique experiences may have on them. This means that exposure to significant stress may strengthen children and thus prepare them to cope with future challenges.

In a study that privileged the voices of South African youths at risk, Theron (2015) notes that contextual realities shape positive adjustment among African youths in disadvantaged communities. It should be noted that children who grow up in disadvantaged communities face a myriad of risks; however, some of them do well, nevertheless, especially if their socio-ecological contexts support positive adaptation in them.

■ Metatheory

Ungar's (2011) social ecology of resilience theory (SERT), which undergirds this study, was discussed in detail in Chapter 1. It consists of four basic principles, namely, decentrality, complexity, atypicality and cultural relativity (Ungar 2011). The SERT shows how positive human development in contexts of adversity is influenced by psychological aspects, as well as social ecologies comprising families, schools, neighbourhoods, community services and cultural practices (Panter-Brick & Eggerman 2012; Ungar 2012). Therefore, Ungar (2011) suggests that, in line with the principle of decentrality, young people should be decentred when evidence of positive adaptative coping is sought. Although individual attributes are important in enabling resilience,

research on resilience is attentive to social ecologies and their impact on positive development (Panter-Brick & Eggerman 2012; Ungar 2012).

It should be emphasised that resilience in one context may not be so in another, because resilience, risk and protective resources are too complex for researchers to predict developmental trajectories for young people who are at risk (Ungar 2011). This is in line with the principle of complexity. A child's social and physical contexts do potentiate resilience, and their unique roles should not be ignored (Ungar 2012). Furthermore, the SERT shows that, in line with the principle of atypicality, young people sometimes use atypical ways to cope adaptively in the context of risk (Ungar 2011). These unconventional coping mechanisms in the context of risk characterise hidden resilience (Malindi & Theron 2010).

Through the principle of cultural relativity, the SERT sheds light on how culture can either enable or compromise adaptive coping in young people at risk (Panter-Brick & Eggerman 2012; Sugawara et al. 2021; Ungar 2011). Belonging to a cultural group provides access to culture-specific ways of coping in the context of risk. However, cultural fragility and harmful cultural practices may cause culture, which is a dominant macrosystemic structure, to fall short of enabling resilience in at-risk learners. The SERT was useful in enabling us to make sense of the experiences of learners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

■ Methodology

We chose to conduct qualitative research, designed as a phenomenological study. We were interested in the lived experiences of young people whose development had been disrupted by loss and bereavement associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. We generated data through the child-friendly draw-and-write technique (see Machenjedze, Malindi & Mbengo 2019). This was in response to the call for children to be studied directly as opposed to the traditional adultist approaches in which children are studied indirectly through adults acting as proxies (Driessnack 2005; Gibb et al. 2022). We recruited fourteen school-going children, twelve of whom were girls. Only two boys took part in our study. The learners' ages ranged from thirteen- to seventeen-years-old. They were in grades ranging from Grade 8 to Grade 11 and spoke Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiZulu, Sesotho, isiXhosa and Sepedi. Table 9.1 summarises the biographical details of the participants.

The learner participants were requested to make symbolic drawings that represented their lives during the lockdown period. Then, they were asked to write paragraphs in which they described their drawings. We provided them with a drawing brief with two instructions. The instruction on the first page read as follows: 'Think of the time when we had the lockdown beause of the COVID-19 pandemic. Make a drawing that represents what life was like for

TABLE 9.1: Biographical details of participants.

Participant	Age	Gender	Grade	Language group
01	14	Male	9	isiZulu
02	15	Male	10	Xitsonga
03	17	Female	11	Sepedi
04	16	Female	11	isiXhosa
05	13	Female	8	Sepedi
06	15	Female	10	Sesotho
07	14	Female	9	Sepedi
08	13	Female	8	Tshivenda
09	16	Female	11	Sepedi
10	16	Female	11	isiZulu
11	14	Female	9	Sepedi
12	15	Female	10	Tshivenda
13	16	Female	11	isiZulu
14	15	Female	10	Sepedi

Source: Authors' own work

you during that time. How you draw is not important. Take as much time as you require. Use colour if you wish'. The second instruction on the other page of the drawing brief read as follows: 'Write a paragraph in which you describe your drawing. You may write as much as you can. Use any language you are comfortable with and use more paper if you wish'.

We made it clear to the participants that how they drew was not important. They could write their paragraphs in any language. The draw-and-write technique can be used with groups of participants. Therefore, we asked for venues with adequate space, lighting and ventilation. The participants were verbally requested not to look at what others drew or wrote. On average, they took 45 minutes to make their drawings and write their narratives, as some of them added details to their drawings.

This study was an offshoot of a bigger study that looks at how schools can become nodes of care for vulnerable learners. It was ethically cleared by the ethics committee of the North-West University (ethics number: NWU-00541-19-S2). The Gauteng Department of Education granted permission for us to use schools in Gauteng as research sites. All the young participants signed assent forms before they voluntarily took part in the study, and their parents and caregivers co-signed consent forms. The school principal and school governing body granted us permission to conduct this study. We requested permission to keep the drawings and narratives for analysis. We examined the drawings closely and read the narratives several times. Then we coded the narratives in line with inductive content analysis. The findings are presented below with evidence from the raw data. The narratives are provided precisely as the participants wrote them, without any corrections or additions. We then conducted a matrix analysis of the data to make the data accessible.

■ Presentation of findings

Participant 01, a fourteen-year-old boy in Grade 9, made a drawing of a tree without leaves. He saw a tree without leaves as an allegory of his life during the lockdown period. It is interesting to note that Participant 01 used the tree without leaves as a simile, representing his life during the lockdown. This suggests that during the lockdown, he felt that his life had been stripped bare, as he could not do the things he had enjoyed before. His drawing appears in Figure 9.1.

In the drawing shown in Figure 9.1, Participant 01 wrote words that show that he experienced shock as a result of the unprecedented lockdown rules. It is apparent that Participant 01 experienced fear for his life and family and was worried about his schoolwork, as schools had been closed. On the right-hand side of the drawing, Participant 01 indicated that he coped because his parents cared for him, helped him with his schoolwork and advised him to take precautions seriously. Furthermore, playing with his siblings enabled Participant 01 to cope adaptively with the situation.
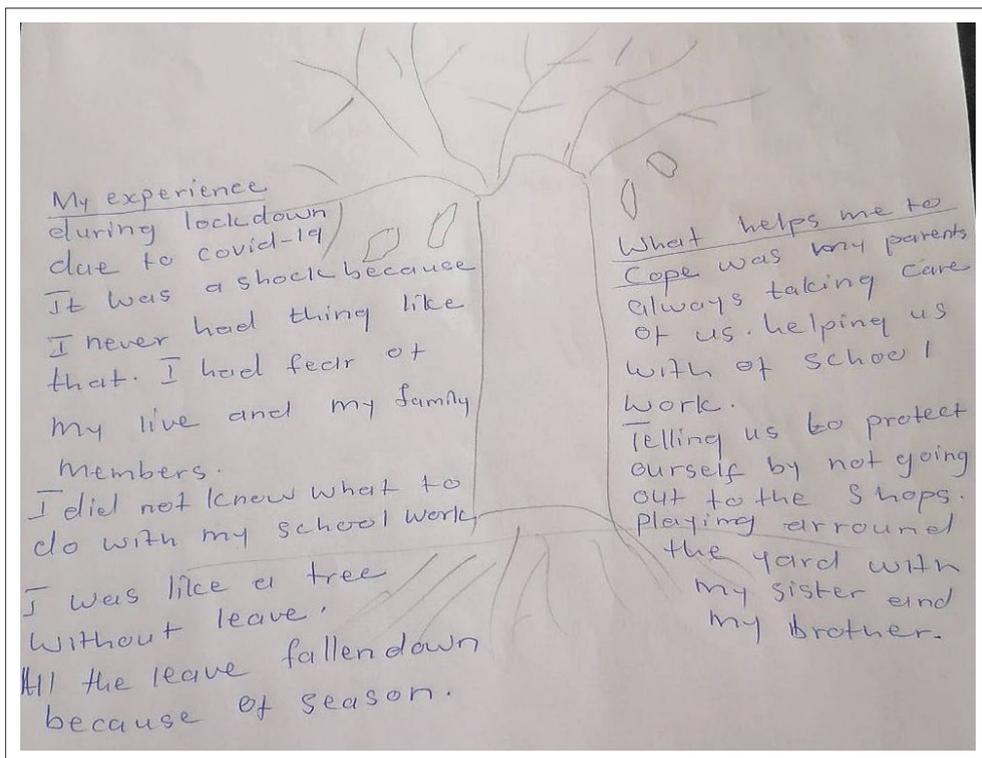
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.1: Drawing by Participant 01.

Participant 01 wrote an extra narrative in which he described his drawing as follows:

> 'My tree helped me to cope because the tree during winter all leaves fall down. No leaves left, everything taken away by the wind. Others are burned on fire. My life was like that. Everything was taken away by lockdown. All my friends that I love they were away from me. My relatives, my grandfather and grandmother we could not see them during lockdown. That situation was frustrating, I felt hopeless, but the support I got from my parents helped me a lot.' (Participant 01, a 14-year-old boy in Grade 9)

Participant 01 stressed that his life was like a tree without leaves, as the lockdown took away everything he enjoyed. The lockdown eroded his social support system comprising friends, relatives and grandparents. Although he felt frustrated and hopeless, he received support from his parents.

Participant 02, a 15-year-old boy in Grade 10, made a drawing of three human figures. One of the human figures is playing football, one is holding a mobile phone in his left hand and one is sitting on a couch, watching television.
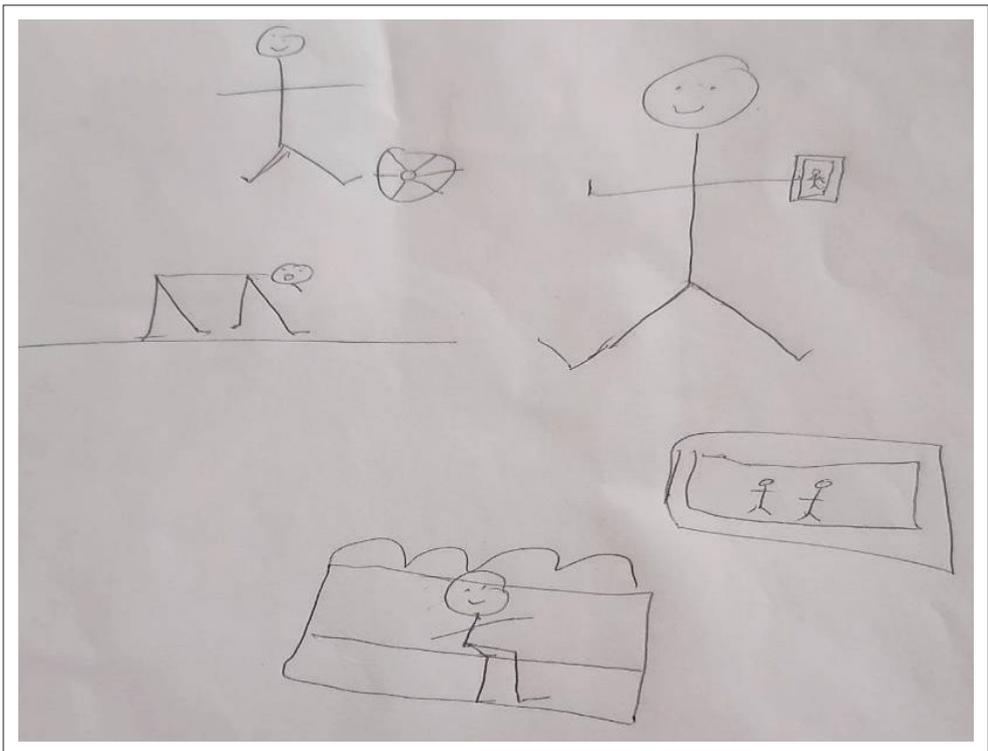
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.2: Drawing by Participant 02.

Participant 02 wrote the following narrative to explain his drawing:

'In this journal of my life since COVID-19 began in South Africa the year 2020 I experienced something that I have never experienced before. But as time went by, I started to realize something positive in my life. I began to gym with house workout, widely positive and motivated and I even began to learn new things like reading. I even began a YouTube channel and motivated people through the Internet.' (Participant 02, a 15-year-old boy in Grade 10)

The narrative shows that Participant 02, like many others, had never experienced an issue such as the lockdown before. It is important to note that the participant started to engage in physical exercise, developed a love for reading and started a YouTube channel to motivate people.

Participant 03, a seventeen-year-old girl in Grade 11, made a drawing of a table with an assortment of victuals, as shown in Figure 9.3.

Participant 03 then wrote the following narrative:

The difficult things we faced during COVID-19 and lockdown:

1. It affected most people with diseases.
2. There were no jobs.
3. It affected people financially.
4. Shortage of food.
5. No visiting our friends and relatives.
6. It automatically killed the economy of our country.
7. We were always wearing masks.

'Wearing mask was something I could not get used to. The thing that we must always wear the must while walking around made it difficult to breath sometimes. At the time of lockdown, it was very difficult, there was no money to buy food since there were no jobs. It was even difficult to find someone who can help as everyone had difficulties. Even were we renting when month end comes, they were expecting us to pay the full amount. Lockdown hurt us a lot in our lives, and it ruined our jobs.' (Participant 03, a 17-year-old girl in Grade 11)

In this narrative, Participant 03 lists seven indicators of adversity in her lifeworld during the lockdown. The risks include infection, financial difficulties because of unemployment, a shortage of food, economic collapse, the wearing of masks and the erosion of social support systems.

Participant 04, a 16-year-old boy in Grade 11, made a drawing of a male figure standing beside a tap with water dripping into a bucket.

Participant 04 then wrote the following narrative in which he explained his drawing:

'I have been working in the yard keeping myself fit. It was not a good time because I wanted to go and look for work and I couldn't. But along the way I began to do something constructive at home. I embraced it in the positive way.' (Participant 04, a 16-year-old boy in Grade 11)
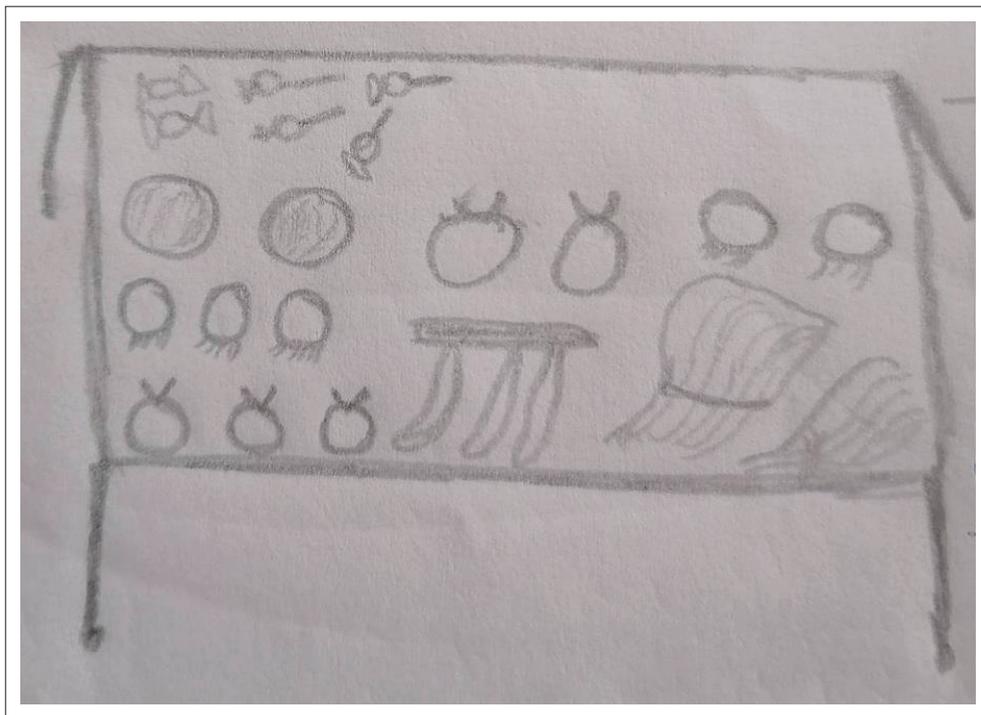
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.3: Drawing by Participant 03.

The narrative shows that Participant 04 did manual work at home to keep fit. He describes the lockdown as a good time in which he even thought he could find a job to supplement the family income. His narrative shows that he experienced the lockdown as something positive.

Participant 05, a 13-year-old girl in Grade 8, made a symbolic drawing that depicts two human figures and four flower stems. She wrote the following words: '*This is flowers*'.

Participant 05 wrote the following narrative:

'I had tough weekends, I was not allowed to go to the shops, and I was not allowed to go to school. When we started going back to school, in class there were not many pupils. We had class A and class B. We had to wear masks all the time. If you didn't have a mask, you were not allowed in school or at the shops.' (Participant 05, a 13-year-old girl in Grade 8)

In her narrative, Participant 05 laments the restrictions she experienced and the fact that they took turns to attend school and that some of her peers did not fall within her group.

Participant 06, a 15-year-old girl in Grade 10, made a drawing of a female human figure with an outstretched arm and holding a mobile phone.
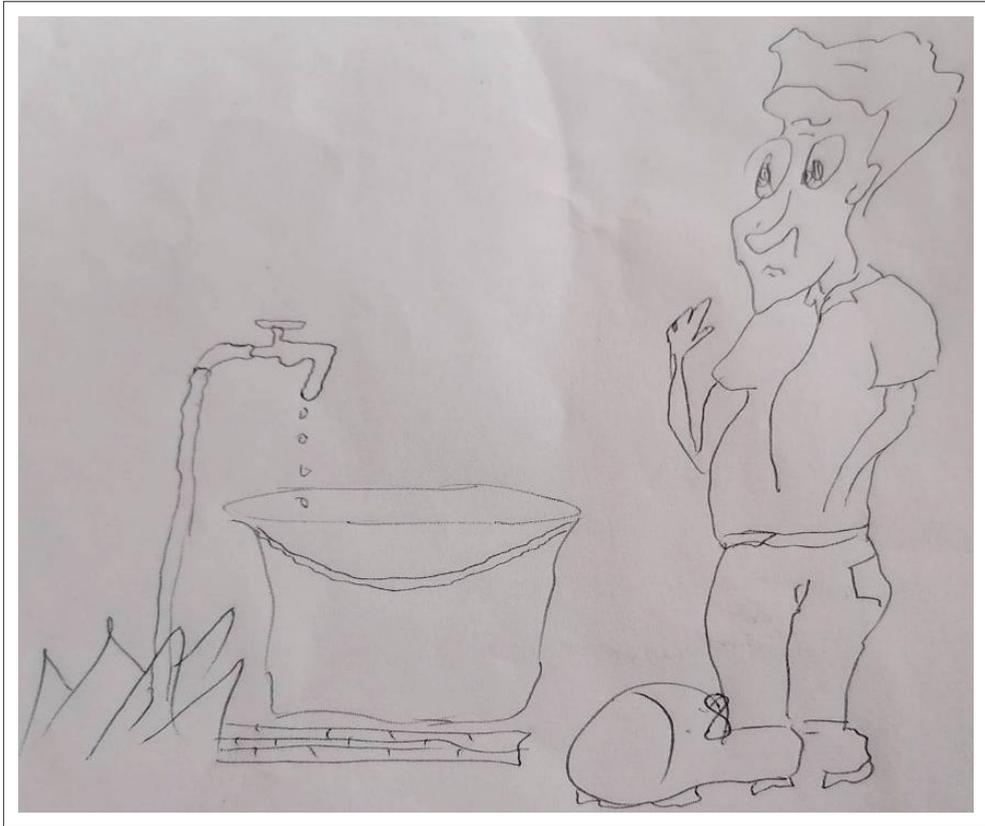
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.4: Drawing by Participant 04.

She inscribed the drawing with the words '*My phone keeps me busy*' and labelled the human figure '*Pretty Perty*'.

Participant 06 wrote the following narrative:

'During lockdown things were not good because you had to go to the shops the police were patrolling the streets. I was afraid to walk on the streets, I had to watch my back as police where beating people who had no mask on. Some people who drink alcohol had to drink sanitizer and people were dying due to COVID-19. I saw that COVID-19 was very dangerous and that the people did not want to respect Mr Ramaphosa and he had to close the shops and we could not go anywhere.' (Participant 06, a 15-year-old girl in Grade 10)

The narrative shows that Participant 06 experienced fear when she ventured out to the shops because the police patrolled the streets. She mentioned that some people consumed hand sanitiser and some died from consuming it. She also remarked that some people ignored the lockdown rules and regulations in the midst of the danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
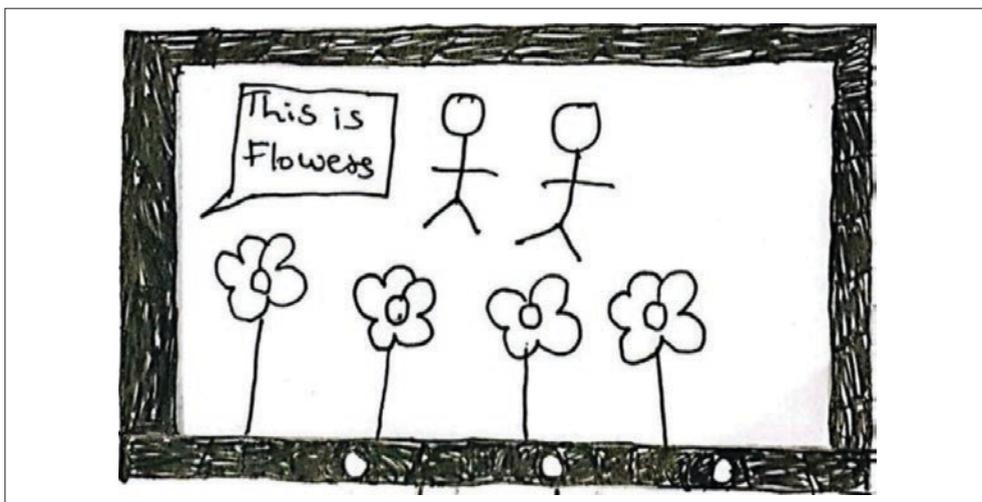
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.5: Drawing by Participant 05.
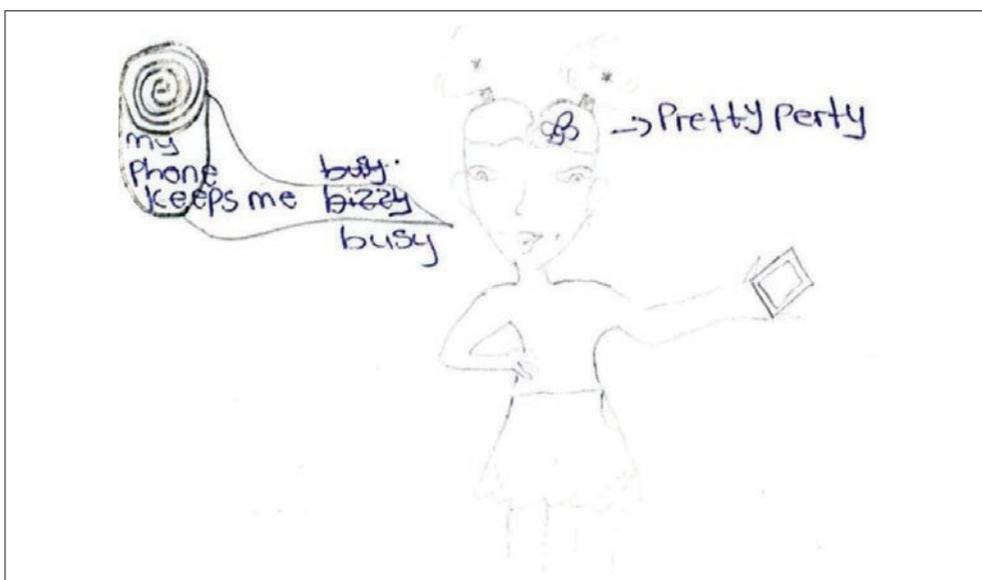
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.6: Drawing by Participant 06.

Participant 07, a 14-year-old girl in Grade 9, made a drawing of a television set. A hockey stick and ball can be seen on the television set, as shown in Figure 9.7.

'During lockdown COVID-19 was hard and difficult because we were always at home and there were no up and downs. It was so much hard everywhere you go you had to wear a mask and make sure you do social distance and sanitize your hand. Corona virus was always putting people's lives in danger, you had
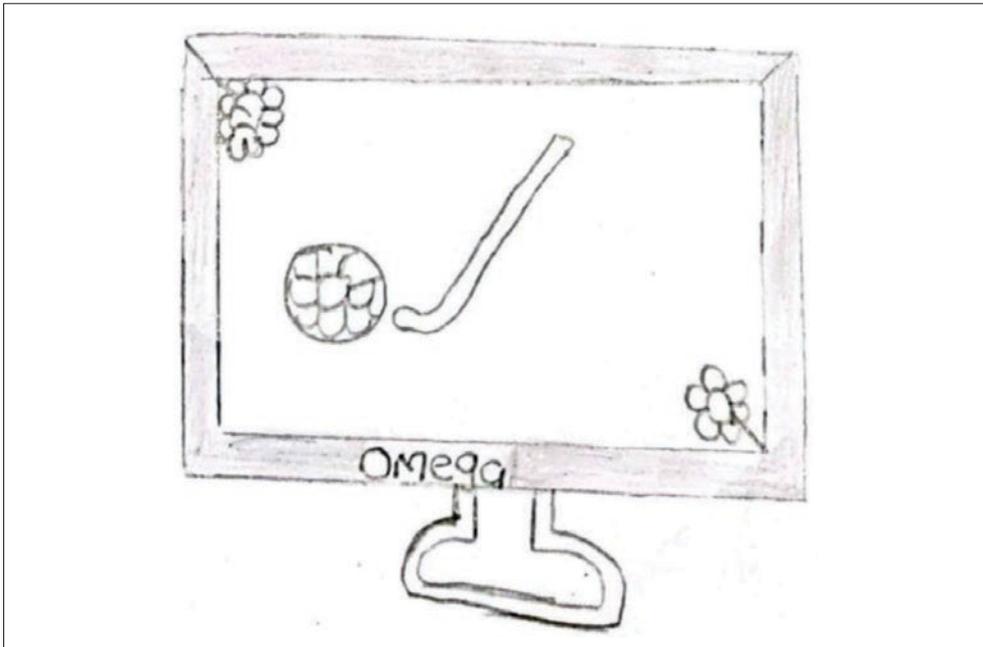
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.7: Drawing by Participant 07.

to always stay at home. For me to cope I washed my hands, and I did social distancing. I was always at home because corona virus is too much dangerous and I had to keep myself in a healthy place. Corona virus was always killing people every day.' (Participant 07, a 14-year-old girl in Grade 9)

The themes that can be gleaned from the narrative that Participant 07 wrote are hardships related to the restriction of movement and the danger posed by the pandemic. She pointed out that she, like others, learnt to take care of herself.

Participant 08, a 13-year-old girl in Grade 8, made a drawing of a young female human figure, as shown in Figure 9.8.

Participant 08 wrote the following narrative:

'During lockdown, COVID-19 made us not to go shopping to celebrate. Our day was so difficult to us because we didn't go shopping, all day we were at home, we had to wear mask, wash our hands and do social distancing. That's what I did to cope. We didn't go to church but now we go to church.' (Participant 08, a 13-year-old girl in Grade 8)

The narrative shows that Participant 08 could not freely go shopping and celebrate. She had to observe regulations, and as a result, she could not go to church.

Participant 09, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11, made a drawing of a television set. She wrote 'Channel 309' and 'Telefunken' on it. The screen
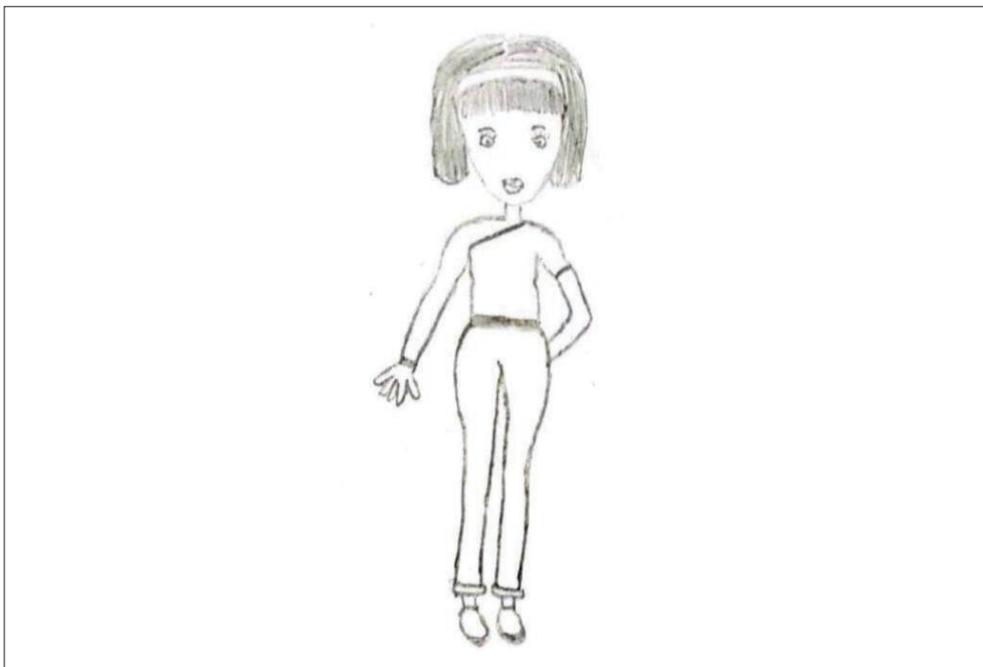
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.8: Drawing by Participant 08.

shows two figures or puppets – a male and a female. The participant drew hearts on the stomachs of the figures and one big heart between the two.

Participant 09 wrote the following narrative:

'During the experienced lockdown due to COVID-19, we could not go on trips, and we could not visit our grandmothers. COVID-19 made us wear mask always and to sanitize our hands. We were always sitting without going anywhere. COVID-19 affected us so badly and when we go to school we go by groups for exams. Ramaphosa said we must always wear mask and sanitize our hands. COVID-19 affected us badly, it affected our grandmothers badly and it is dangerous to our lives. Because everything is bad in our country, people don't take care of our country and that is why our country is always in trouble.' (Participant 09, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11)

The participant decried the movement restrictions and the fact that learners had to attend school in turns. She pointed out that the lockdown badly affected families, as they could not freely visit their extended families.

Participant 10, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11, made a drawing of a girl playing with a skipping rope.

Participant 10 wrote the following narrative:

'During lockdown of COVID-19 it was not easy. I was very scared because I thought I would be affected by the virus. A lot of people were passing away.
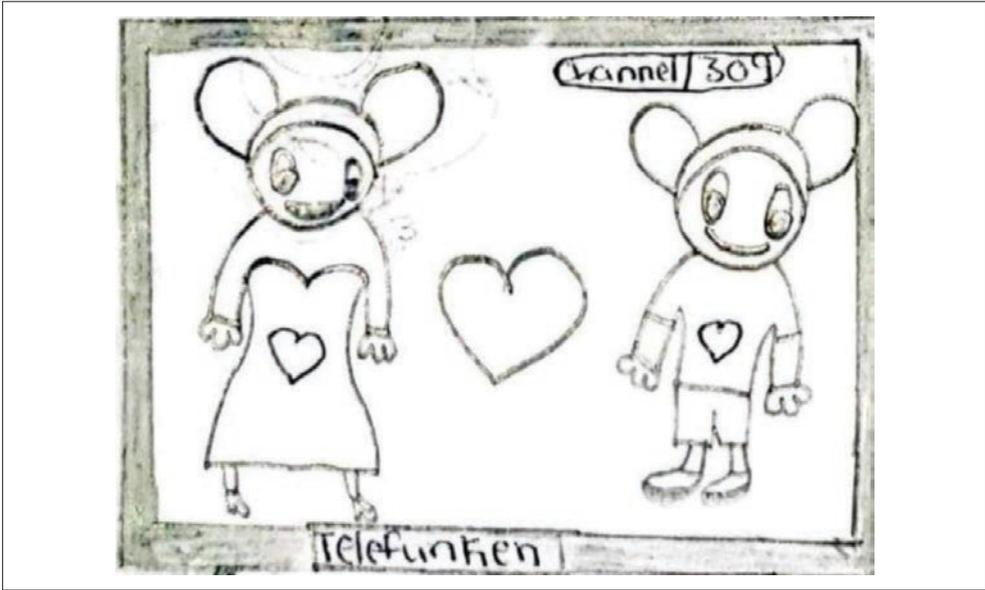
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.9: Drawing by Participant 09.

Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.10: Drawing by Participant 10.

The other thing that scared me was that the police were running the world to check if people were walking around and sometimes, they were arresting them. Things that helped me to cope, was playing with my cousin and my two little sisters. Sometimes I use to watch tv and play with dolls or play games on my brother's phone. Some days I used to read books to refresh my mind and play with my skipping rope.' (Participant 10, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11)

The narrative shows that Participant 10 experienced fear because people were dying. The other source of her fear was the police who were on the streets, enforcing the law. She, however, showed resilience because of protective factors such as playing with her siblings, playing with dolls, playing with her brother's mobile phone, reading and watching television.

Participant 11, a 14-year-old girl in Grade 9, made a drawing of a Samsung television set. On the screen of the television is an image of a female human figure and the following words in a speech bubble: '*The world is ending, run*'.

Participant 11 wrote the following narrative:

'Lockdown has made us not to go anywhere. We didn't even go to the shops, not even to go see our friends. I was bored because I was watching the television the whole day. When I was in the house, I had to wear a mask and after 30 minutes I sanitize my hands or wash them with soap. And we were tired of wearing the mask everywhere. Staying at home was a hard thing for me. We didn't go to school every day; we were skipping days. Sometimes I play. My mom bought us a pack of snacks if I want something salty, I take a snack and eat.' (Participant 11, a 14-year-old girl in Grade 9)

Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.11: Drawing by Participant 11.

The narrative shows that the participant was hindered by the lack of movement, the closure of schools, wearing a mask, isolation from friends and boredom. However, playing and eating snacks enabled her to cope.

Participant 12, a 15-year-old girl in Grade 10, made a drawing of a female human figure. In a speech bubble, the woman says: '*I am helping other people who needs help by cope*'.

Participant 12 then wrote the following narrative:

'COVID-19 made us not to go to school and shopping, it even killed a lot of people. We stayed at home, and we had nothing to do. We could not even go to church to pray. We had to wear masks all day long. We could not touch anything without sanitizing our hands. COVID-19 made us not see our friends and family.' (Participant 12, a 15-year-old girl in Grade 10)

Themes such as death, a lack of school attendance, not going to church, wearing masks, sanitising and not seeing friends and family emerge in the narrative.

Participant 13, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11, made a drawing of a female human figure with a mobile phone in hand. The words in the speech bubble are '*My phone made me cope well OMG*'. The words '*Love you*' are written on the lap of the figure drawn by Participant 13.

Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.12: Drawing by Participant 12.
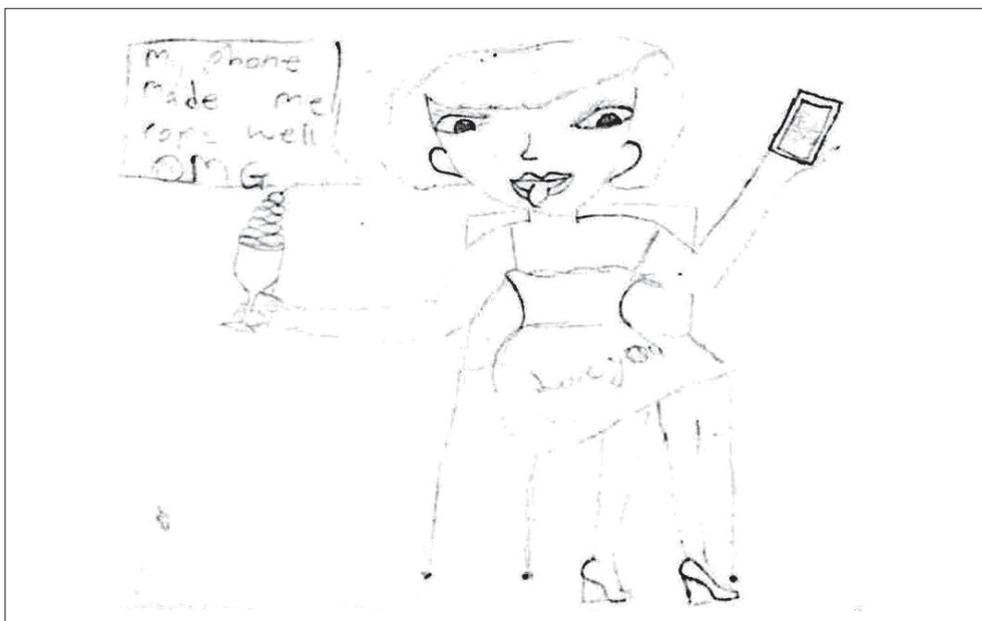
Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.13: Drawing by Participant 13.

Participant 13 wrote the following narrative:

'During lockdown I experienced a lot of things that made my day. We were not allowed to do many things such as going to play, going shopping and other things. Staying at home was a hard thing for me, just waking up in the morning to eat food, see the same people every day. But I did cope by looking at my phone and watch videos, play games and other things. And sometimes my sisters and brother used to play board games. I used to keep myself busy and I made myself a new hobby cooking and baking. The best thing about lockdown was that we did not go to school every day, we skipped days.' (Participant 13, a 16-year-old girl in Grade 11)

The narrative shows that the participant experienced movement restrictions like everyone and staying home was difficult for her. Her mobile phone, board games and cooking and baking enabled her capacity to cope resiliently. What was best for her about the lockdown was that they attended school on a rotational basis.

Participant 14, a 15-year-old girl in Grade 10, made a drawing of a female human figure sitting on a chair. The figure is labelled, '*My Mom*', and she says: '[Name withheld] *go and watch TV because you are bored*'.

Participant 14 wrote the following narrative:

'During the COVID-19 lockdown life was not easy because going to the shop you had to watch behind your back. I was not able to visit my friends or relatives.

Source: Photograph of a drawing and answer by a learner, published with signed consent.
FIGURE 9.14: Drawing by Participant 14.

> I could even go outside to play. Even going to town, I was not allowed because my parents said there is COVID-19. I coped only by watching television and playing games on my sister's phone and just relaxing.' (Participant 14, a 15-year-old girl in Grade 10)

The narrative shows that the participant experienced anxiety when she was out on the streets. She could not interact with friends and relatives because of the movement restrictions. However, she coped by watching television, playing games on her sister's mobile phone and just relaxing.

■ Discussion

A close examination of the data shows that the participants experienced a number of risks and that they coped adaptively because of a number of protective resources. The process of matrix analysis yielded Table 9.2, which summarises the risks perceived by the participants.

Table 9.2 shows that the risks perceived by the participants can be classified into six domains, namely the academic, economic, physical, psychological, religious and socio-ecological domains. Regarding the academic domain, it should be noted that schools were initially closed in South Africa, and online learning was adopted. Later, learners were divided, and they attended schools fortnightly, with online learning continuing as

TABLE 9.2: Resilience risks.

Domains	Perceived risks	Participants
	Resilience risks	
	Perceived risks	Participants
Academic	Intermittent school attendance	P05, P09, P11, P12
	Concern about schoolwork	P01
Economic	Financial difficulties	P03
	Upsurge in the rate of unemployment	P03
	Food shortage	P03
	Economic collapse	P03
Physical	Requirement to wear masks	P03, P11, P12
	Movement restrictions	P05, P07, P08, P09, P11, P13
	Frequent hand sanitising	P12
Psychological	Experience of shock	P01, P02
	Experience of fear	P01, P06, P10
	Existential anxiety	P06, P12
	Perception of danger	P07
	Experience of boredom	P11
	Experience of anxiety	P14
	Disruption of daily life	P01
Religious	Inability to go to place of worship	P08, P12
Socio-ecological	Erosion of socio-ecological systems	P03, P05, P09, P11, P12, P14

Source: Authors' own work

well. It is evident from the narratives written by Participants 05, 09, 11 and 12 that they experienced loss and did not enjoy attending school intermittently. The closure and the partial opening of schools affected the holistic development of learners. Participant 01 pointed out in his narrative that he was really concerned about his schoolwork. It should be noted that many learners had problems adapting to online learning. Shmatova and Razvarina (2022) made a similar finding in their study, namely that some learners found it hard to adjust to online learning during the lockdown period.

In the economic domain, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to untold economic difficulties for the families of the participants. For example, Participant 03 mentioned financial difficulties, an upsurge in the rate of unemployment, food shortages and general economic collapse in the country. This finding corroborates the findings of Ganie and Mukhter (2020). It is possible that many households experienced loss and grief as a result of the economic meltdown.

In the physical domain, Participants 03, 11 and 12 experienced the compulsory wearing of masks as inconvenient, as they struggled to breathe adequately. Participants 05, 07, 08, 09, 11 and 13 criticised the imposed movement restrictions, and Participant 12 did not enjoy the frequent hand sanitation during the lockdown. It is important to note that although these measures were aimed at protecting people from infection, the participants struggled to cope with them.

The findings show that on the psychological level, the participants experienced negative affect. This finding was reached by Ganie and Mukhter (2020) and Shmatova and Razvarina (2022) too. In our study, the lockdown rules and their enforcement produced shock, as Participants 01 and 02 pointed out in their narratives. Other participants, namely 01, 06 and 10, experienced fear, while Participants 06 and 12 experienced existential anxiety because people were dying. Participant 14 experienced anxiety, especially when she ventured out into the streets where the police enforced the lockdown regulations. Participant 07 also referred to perceived danger, while Participant 11 experienced boredom. The lockdown disrupted and threw the lives of the participants into a state of chaos, as pointed out by Participant 01. It is possible that the participants experienced disenfranchised grief, which they could not show. As a result, they did not report that they received any support to be resilient in the context of risk (see Venkatesan 2022). This may have hampered their psychological development.

In the religious domain, two participants, namely 08 and 12, referred to their inability to go to places of worship because the churches had been closed. This situation probably impaired their religious development.

On the socio-ecological level, Participants 03, 05, 09, 11, 12 and 14 experienced loss and grief resulting from the erosion of their socio-ecological systems, such as the peer group and their teachers and extended families. It should be remembered that the family, peers and schools serve as microsystemic strongholds for vulnerable learners (Malindi & Machenjedze 2012; Theron & Engelbrecht 2012; Ungar 2012).

Further matrix analysis of the qualitative data in the form of narratives yielded protective resources that reduced the impact of risk among the participants. Table 9.3 summarises the protective resources that enabled resilience in the participants.

TABLE 9.3: Protective resources.

Domains	Protective resources	
	Resources	Participants
Academic	Parents helped with schoolwork	P01
Entertainment	Playing enabled coping	P01, P10, P11, P13, P14
	Watching television	P10, P14
	Developed a love for reading	P02, P10
Motivation	YouTube channel to motivate others	P02
Physical	Physical exercise enabled coping	P02, P04
	Eating snacks	P11
	Relaxing	P14
Self-care	Learning about self-care	P07
Socio-ecological	Parental care	P01

Source: Authors' own work

The findings show that on the academic level, Participant 01 coped with schoolwork because of the support he received from his parents. On the level of entertainment, Participants 01, 10, 11, 13 and 14 coped with adversity through play, while Participants 10 and 14 coped by watching television. Participants 02 and 10 coped resiliently with the situation because they developed a love for reading. As far as motivation is concerned, Participant 02 developed a YouTube channel to motivate and encourage others. In the physical domain, the enforced movement restrictions and lack of sports led to reduced physical activity; however, Participants 02 and 04 kept themselves physically fit by working out and working in the yard. Participant 14 coped with the situation by just relaxing, while Participant 11 coped by eating snacks. Although the lockdown posed developmental risks for the participants, it is important to note that Participant 07 learnt more about self-care during the lockdown. Lastly, socio-ecological support systems comprising parents played an important role in enabling the participants to cope resiliently. A similar finding has been made by Theron and Donald (2013), Theron et al. (2013b) and Theron and Engelbrecht (2012). Other sources of social support, such as teachers, the extended family, peers and the church, were limited in providing support because of movement restrictions.

■ Conclusion

In this study, we sought to investigate how resilience could be enabled in learners who experienced unexpressed grief and loss in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We documented the risks that potentiated poor developmental outcomes for the participants, as well as the mechanisms that enabled them to cope resiliently. We were mindful of the fact that, according to the SERT, resilience, risks and protective resources are complex phenomena for developmental trajectories to be predicted (Ungar 2011). The findings confirm that these phenomena, namely, resilience, risks and protective resources, can reside inside and around the child.

Of interest is the fact that national imperatives regarded the lockdown rules as important in curbing the spread of the pandemic, while the participants experienced loss as a result of these. This confirms that a potential risk or protective resource in one context may not be experienced as one in another context. Our findings are silent on the role that culture played in compromising or enhancing adaptive coping in the participants. There is no evidence that the participants displayed atypical coping behaviour.

Except in one instance, the findings are silent on how parents enabled adaptive coping in the participants. The findings make it clear that communities were incapacitated in providing adequate and sustained

resilience resources. Movement had been reduced to the bare minimum, which hamstrung the participants' navigation in the direction of these resources. The findings suggest that the physical, academic, psychological, social and religious development of the participants was impaired. This amplifies calls for multisystemic interventions to enable adaptive coping in learners affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, increased bi-directional interaction between schools, families, state departments and non-governmental institutions is important in dealing with socio-economic, psycho-social and academic challenges.

School-based support should be strengthened in contexts where inequalities persist. Priority should be given to learners' psycho-social development, as the findings suggest that the learner participants did not openly express their loss and grief. It is important to note that two boys and twelve girls took part in the study. Mainly, the boys resiled by keeping themselves physically fit, while the girls largely coped by relaxing, playing games, cooking and watching television. Future studies should involve more boys to learn more about their ways of coping. The draw-and-write technique was used to generate data in this study. Perhaps future studies should use other more interactive, child-friendly and participatory methods to co-create data. Such studies may involve learners from other national groupings and, especially, learners based in rural settings.

Only high school learners participated in this study. It would be interesting to know the risks experienced by learners in primary schools, as well as the resources that enabled resilience in them. The findings show that, although many people believe the pandemic is over, the impact of the pandemic on child development will linger for years. The findings answer the question that appears at the end of the allegory with which we started, namely, 'Do children grieve?'. Indeed, children do seem to grieve – although often in implicit ways – and parents and caregivers should be attentive to events that may trigger grieving in children, however inconsequential they may appear to them. In conclusion, psychotherapy, counselling and interventions that recognise the interaction between the physical, psychological, social and spiritual domains of development should be considered to enable holistic development among learners who are at risk of poor developmental outcomes.

An integrated vision of overcoming the developmental disruptions of COVID-19

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■ Introduction

Children require stability in their lives to achieve positive developmental outcomes. They ideally depend on stable and accessible micro-, meso- and macrosystemic strongholds – represented by families, schools, peers, churches and communities that serve as active support systems and make

resources and services accessible in culturally meaningful ways (Theron & Engelbrecht 2012). Sudden events and traumatic experiences may have deleterious consequences for children whose support systems are suspect. On this topic, Sandstrom and Huerta (2013) say:

> Children's early experiences shape who they are and affect lifelong health and learning. To develop to their full potential, children need safe and stable housing, adequate and nutritious food, access to medical care, secure relationships with adult caregivers, nurturing and responsive parenting, and high-quality learning opportunities at home, in childcare settings, and in school. (p. 4)

The excerpt above clarifies the assertion we make that children need stable, safe and nurturing environments to develop healthily and learn more effectively. Their basic needs for nutrition, healthy relationships and community services, such as health care, social and such like services, should be met.

Natural hazards, such as floods, pandemics, storms, wild fires and earthquakes, and manmade disasters, such as wars, may contribute to disequilibrium in children's lives and negatively affect their growth and development. Therefore, much interest has been directed worldwide towards the influence of disasters on children's development (Masten 2014). Recently, the world was in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted children's lives. It is important to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the development of children, as they experienced bereavement and suffered movement restrictions and the interruption of learning. The purpose of this book was, thus, to gauge and determine the backlogs that occurred in children's development through the interruption caused by the pandemic and to suggest ways in which holistic development can be enhanced in learners in the midst of and post-COVID-19.

■ Metatheoretical orientation

The phenomenon of child development has been studied from several theoretical angles. In Chapter 1, we presented some of the main theoretical lenses that we drew from to understand how child development has been affected by the lockdown. We acknowledged from the outset that there are multiple realities and multiple ways of knowing. We also accepted that multisystemic interventions are based on multiple theories. The authors of the chapters following Chapter 1 latched on to the theories presented initially but also added further theories specifically relevant to particular domains.

The structure of the book has been based on the bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational model of Engel and Winiarski (as adjusted by Hay & Joubert 2021). We view this model dealing with the biological, psychological, social, spiritual and educational domains of a human being as a holistic and metatheoretical perspective covering all domains of a person or learner.

We continued to look at what healthy and uninterrupted development looks like across these domains of human functioning by utilising Robert Havighurst's (1972) developmental tasks model as a point of departure. In his model, he provides specific developmental tasks that should be accomplished across the different domains over one's lifespan, provided that uninterrupted development can take place. We argued that 'healthy development' is probably a more appropriate term than 'normal development' and that healthy development is usually linked to uninterrupted development.

The description of healthy development across different domains was followed by scrutinising a number of theories dealing with holistic human development, such as the bio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner and the social ontogenesis theory of Nsamenang. This was extended by focusing on specific developmental theories dealing with specific domains or sub-domains. Proponents such as Gallahue, Piaget, Freud, Gesell, Erikson, Bowlby and Vygotsky were discussed. Subsequently, these developmental theories were complemented by looking at how some wellness theorists view well-being across different human domains. The chapter concluded with glimpses of how the COVID-19 pandemic might have affected the healthy development of learners as a precursor to what would follow in the next eight chapters.

In Chapters 2 to 9 of this book, we presented the findings of a review of literature and empirical studies conducted in different contexts on the impact that the lockdown and irregular school attendance had on child development across grades and age groups. In general, the book provides a picture of holistic child development and makes recommendations on how backlogs can be overcome. We looked at development across the biological, psychological, social, spiritual and educational domains in the early years and in high schools. Also, we demonstrated how children grieved during the lockdown, often without their parents noticing.

■ Biological–physiological development

The COVID-19 pandemic caught almost everyone by surprise. Countries were ill-prepared to deal with a pandemic such as COVID-19 – one for which no cure was available. These countries had to rely on non-medicinal mechanisms to prevent and reduce infection. One of the measures that was taken to arrest the spread of COVID-19 was a complete lockdown. During this phase, companies and institutions of learning were closed and movement was reduced to the bare minimum. For learners, these sudden changes were detrimental to their bio-physiological development.

Trawick-Smith (2014) conducted a systematic review of the literature on the benefits of physical play and motor development in the early years.

The observations made from the study of literature by Trawick-Smith (2014) are that physical activity in children starts before they are born. As children grow up and engage in physical play, the parts of their brains that are linked to behavioural and emotional regulation develop. Physical play helps with the removal of cortisol – a stress hormone from the bloodstream. The environment within which children grow up and the people in that environment determine whether children will acquire motor skills and maintain healthy development or not. If children do not engage in physical play, chances are that their sedentary lifestyles will lead to conditions such as obesity. Children with disabilities should, as much as possible, be involved in physical play, as physical play is important for cognitive, perceptual and language development.

In Chapter 2 of our book, the authors reported that preceding research showed that reduced physical activity led to increased body weight and a general deterioration of physical fitness, motor abilities and body composition among learners (Lafave, Webster & McConnell 2021; López-Bueno et al. 2021; Molozev et al. 2021; Pajek 2022; Saltali 2021). They conducted an empirical study in order to determine the extent of backlogs in the bio-physiological development of learners in South African schools. The authors noticed that in South Africa, the picture looked similar to what prevailed elsewhere.

For example, teachers noticed that when normal schooling resumed, albeit partially, learners were not motivated to take part in physical activity and failed to produce some of the basic physical movements. This was a result of the sedentary lifestyle to which learners had grown accustomed. The findings showed that Physical Education (PE) could not be taught the way it should because of, *inter alia*, restrictions and rotational school attendance. This exacerbated the already-disrupted physiological development of learners. The teachers who took part in their study reported that some of the learners demonstrated poor concentration too. The participants acknowledged the need for them to work towards reducing the backlogs in learner development in the bio-physiological domain. However, they felt that their efforts focusing on the disrupted bio-physiological development of learners were undermined by big class sizes and resource constraints.

Based on the findings of this study, a key recommendation is improved collaboration between schools and parents to improve motor development. In this regard, while teachers are teaching PE in schools, parents should not only encourage children to be involved in physical activity but should also exercise with their children. This may improve the general health of children and parents in the community. From their side, teachers should manage large classes in more innovative ways to ensure that learners overcome backlogs and develop optimally. It has become clear that physical play has

benefits for holistic development in learners. Therefore, Trawick-Smith (2014) put forward principles that teachers, caregivers and parents should consider:

- Principle 1: Begin motor play early
- Principle 2: Make movement enjoyable
- Principle 3: Attend to intensity
- Principle 4: Integrate movement throughout the day
- Principle 5: Help all children to play
- Principle 6: Send play outdoors
- Principle 7: Advocate for play to support learning

■ Psychological development

It is important to mention that the pandemic created much fear, anxiety and uncertainty in the lives of many people. A review of the literature on the impact on the psychological development of learners resulting from the pandemic was conducted in Chapter 3. It was evident that the psychological development of learners of all ages worldwide was disrupted. Several themes emerged from the reviewed literature. For example, learners' basic need for belongingness was disrupted, as close psycho-social relationships were reduced to the bare minimum. This, in turn, reduced the learning and practice of psycho-emotional skills (Speer 2021).

Another prominent theme was that some learners exhibited symptoms of anxiety and depression (Benton, Boyd & Njoroge 2021). Clearly, learners were overwhelmed by the sudden changes that affected their lives and created a lot of uncertainty. The authors argued for the adoption of the *ubuntu* philosophy and the creation of a mindset of growth among learners. They further argued for the use of play-based teaching and learning, which would not only restore childhood to those children whose lives had been disrupted but also have the potential to normalise their lives.

Furthermore, teachers should be alert to signs of psychological distress among learners. There is no single approach to enhancing the psychological development of learners. It has been demonstrated that learners present with behavioural problems when they are in distress or silently grieving. However, below, we present a model by Corso (2007) for promoting children's social-emotional development and preventing challenging behaviour. The model is presented in the form of a pyramid. The levels of the model, from the highest to the lowest on the pyramid, are:

- Intensive individualised interventions
- Social and emotional teaching strategies
- Creating supportive environments
- Positive relationships with children, families and colleagues

The model is accessible and covers several domains of development. Furthermore, the model allows for the involvement of multiple stakeholders.

■ Social development

Social development is a process that relies on socialisation (Alberg 2020). Through social interaction within families, the peer group or school, learners develop ways to relate to one another in meaningful ways. The pandemic restricted social interaction, and this delayed the social development of learners. Therefore, the questions that needed to be answered were how social development had been affected by movement restrictions, which types of behaviour characterised disrupted social development and how the backlogs in social development could be overcome.

The authors of Chapter 4 conducted an empirical study to answer the questions above. The findings showed that teachers noticed that on a psychological level, high school learners exhibited a loss of interest in their studies and were, thus, less motivated to take part in learning activities. This psychological phenomenon was also continuously observed after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the implication is that learners will take longer than expected to return to healthy social relationships. This matter was exacerbated by the fact that schools did not have programmes in place to facilitate the recovery of learners' social development.

On a purely social level, during and after the pandemic, learners did not show adequate care and concern for others. Furthermore, they did not show the required respect in some instances, and this negatively influenced their relationships with one another and teachers. The findings showed that some learners exhibited problem behaviour, and some were passive and socially withdrawn. Teachers mentioned that some learners discriminated against others, probably because of the fear of infection, as social distancing was still a requirement. Moreover, it was reported that because of COVID-19, the participation of learners in extramural activities declined, and as a result, the socialisation aspect of their lives was dismally affected. Research shows that when the socialisation aspect is affected, there is a possibility that the development of social skills among learners is also suppressed.

A further interesting finding of Chapter 6 was that despite the number of factors affecting the social development of learners, teachers persisted in engaging with them and adapted the curriculum to promote their socialisation and social development. It was discovered that when teachers engaged with learners, they employed strategies such as encouraging group and class discussions, arranging extra classes and parental involvement.

In this study, it was the opinion of the participants that to address the disrupted social development of learners, the subject Life Orientation

should be expanded to become a recovery tool for learners in the post-COVID-19 period. It was also found that teachers had their own specific needs with regard to bringing about changes at their school. Some of the needs mentioned were efficient support, a mental health day and training on addressing social and emotional needs of learners.

■ Spiritual and religious development

During difficult times, spirituality plays a crucial role in facilitating holistic health management (Coppola et al. 2021; Ferrell et al. 2020). At the height of the pandemic, people relied on faith, religion and spirituality to cope with mental anguish. However, it was not easy, as during the lockdown, places of worship were closed and only later partially opened. This affected their spiritual development. The findings of the qualitative study that was conducted by the authors of Chapter 5 showed that learners experienced bereavement, and because of this, some of them developed fear and anxiety. While some experienced the weakening of their faith, some drew hope and comfort from religious faith. The findings further showed that learners showed resilience in the context of the pandemic through protective processes such as prayer. It can be concluded that faith was instrumental in enabling the coping abilities of some learners, while there was also a concern that some might have experienced a weakening of their faith. Certainly, the pandemic tested the spiritual or religious development of learners.

Roux (2006) argues that Life Orientation can be useful for enhancing children's spirituality. We add that the involvement of community-based religious formations should not be discounted. Religiosity has been found to be promotive of resilience in at-risk learners (Malindi & Theron 2010; Theron & Malindi 2010). It, therefore, remains an accessible resource for development in learners. Religiosity is linked to the learning and acquisition of values.

■ Educational-academic development

As pointed out earlier, in South Africa, there was initially a complete lockdown during which all schools were closed to halt the spread of the pandemic. This phase was followed by one in which learners mostly learnt online; thus, technology became the vehicle for curriculum delivery. Somewhat later, there was a partial re-opening of schools with rotational attendance or platooning. Although these measures were necessary, they led to the development of gaps in learning and the acquisition of skills among some learners. It is important to note that for some, these backlogs may persist well into the future.

Elsewhere on the globe, research showed that in like manner, the lockdown had a negative impact on the academic development of learners,

especially learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds (Crain, Vijay & Jaqueline 2022; Mahaye 2020; Malindi & Koen 2021; Shepherd & Mohohlwane 2021; UNESCO 2020). Learners in poor socio-economic backgrounds did not have the technology needed to learn from home. Teachers struggled too, as they had not been required to use technology to that extent before the pandemic. Large classes did not make things easier, especially when it was combined with resource limitations.

Qualitative research was conducted, as part of Chapter 6 of our book, to assess the situation in South African schools. The study involved teachers as participants, and the findings showed that the teachers had to provide extra support to learners to bridge the gaps that had developed in the acquisition of learning and skills. The situation for learners who required high levels of support was even more dire. For example, the teachers bemoaned the fact that they had limited time and could not fully meet the needs of learners at risk of poor developmental outcomes. They confessed that at-risk learners received little to no support, as school-based support teams could not function as they should because of the challenges to open access to the curriculum.

Another crucial element of teaching and learning is assessment. In this regard, the teachers reported that they had limited time for assessment, as they had to scale down on the time they used to have prior to the pandemic. This threatened the quality of education in more ways than one.

Another finding was that schools in more affluent areas, where parents were better qualified and financially better off, had adapted to the changes easily, as opposed to those in resource-constrained environments, where parents were neither well qualified nor in a financial position to support their children with, for example, devices and data. It is important to note that despite these inequalities, teachers worked collaboratively with parents to open up better access to the curriculum. This network of collaboration between teachers and parents or caregivers to support learning is a further role that the teacher-parent dyad should play – already mooted a number of years before the pandemic (Department of Education 2007).

Furthermore, the researchers discovered that teachers acknowledged that schools would not be able to address educational problems on their own; however, with the involvement of parents or caregivers, such problems were much more effectively addressed. The pandemic highlighted the fact that parental involvement was all the more important in supporting learners to learn optimally under difficult circumstances.

Although the study found that the involvement of district officials enhanced success in the academic development of learners during the pandemic, these interventions seemed minimal. In other words, despite

some support from district offices, the challenges that hindered the availability of extended support for at-risk learners in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic persisted. Moreover, the findings showed that there was little to no evidence of the implementation of support programmes in schools during the highest levels of the lockdown. There was minimal focus on the screening, identification, assessment and support (SIAS) process during the hard lockdown periods. In this respect, it is crucial to recognise that one of the principles of support is that support delivery can be efficient and cost-effective when it is based on intersectoral collaboration. Unfortunately, this collaboration also suffered during the pandemic because many of these stakeholders worked from home and only ensured that the basics of possible service rendering continued.

We recommend that the collaborative efforts evidenced at the height of the pandemic be maintained and strengthened. School- and district-based support is needed, especially for learners who are at risk of poor developmental outcomes, who could not access it at the height of the pandemic. Such support should be as comprehensive as possible and focus on innate and socio-ecological barriers to learning. It should cover all domains of development, be they psychological, physical, social or spiritual.

◾ Holistic development in the early years

It can be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown rules negatively influenced holistic well-being in the early childhood development (ECD) phase. In Chapter 7, it was argued that children in the ECD phase require an environment in which they will develop confidence and resilience – one that is safe and secure and enables supportive relationships with parents and caregivers (DBE 2015). Children depend on their parents and caregivers to develop optimally.

It is evident from the findings of the empirical research in Chapter 7 that ECD centres were deprived of quality education, care, safety and a sense of belonging. During the lockdown, some parents lost their jobs, and this made it difficult for them to pay the ECD centre fees for their children. This caused cashflow problems for many ECD centres. The findings showed that movement restrictions led to backlogs in fine and gross motor development in early childhood learners. The perceptual development of learners in the early years was delayed as well. On the psychological level, learners experienced stress and anxiety because of the uncertainty that gripped their communities.

Moreover, the findings showed that children in the ECD environment were rendered vulnerable to poor developmental outcomes in several domains of development. The researchers noted that some of these children were left

without adequate supervision. Irrespective of these challenges, it is important to note that despite the hardships experienced during the pandemic, parents, non-governmental organisations and ECD practitioners collaborated to alleviate the challenges of these young children. One of the collaborative efforts among these stakeholders was to ensure food security.

The role of physical play in enhancing holistic development in the early years has been mentioned elsewhere in this chapter. We presented the principles proposed by Trawick-Smith (2014) to enhance not only physical development but also other domains of child development. We now add that biokineticists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and education specialists in early learning can be involved in overcoming backlogs in the early years.

■ Language and mathematics development

The ability to read, write, count and calculate is important in life in general (Hoadley 2020). It is, therefore, essential to ensure that learners develop these basic skills while in school. Opportunities to learn the basic skills mentioned above decreased during the pandemic. The curriculum was scaled down too. The findings of the study recorded in Chapter 8 showed that it was important that teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence were maintained to facilitate the acquisition of these basic skills. Language and mathematics learning depends strongly on teaching, social and cognitive presence. The theory related to community of enquiry (CoI) proved to be crucial in enabling language and mathematics learning during this period.

We add that the role of school- and district-based support teams in enhancing language and mathematics development cannot be overemphasised. Audiologists and speech therapists can add value to all efforts aimed at enhancing language development. Furthermore, teachers can collaborate with curriculum specialists dealing with languages and mathematics. It is evident that more stakeholders can be beneficial in helping learners overcome backlogs in language and mathematics learning in schools. From their side, teachers can make play-based language and mathematics activities an everyday occurrence in their classrooms (Cheep-Aranai, Reinders & Wasanasomsithi 2015; Mosimege 2020).

■ Enabling resilience in learners who experienced grief and loss

It is important to note that because of their level of development, children have special vulnerabilities (Etzel 2020; Grobbelaar & Jones 2020). It is, furthermore, important to note that overwhelming and traumatic events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may substantially contribute to children

feeling powerless and experiencing childhood traumatic grief (Cohen & Mannarino 2011). This occurs if their support systems are less effective in supporting their abilities to cope adaptively – a phenomenon referred to as resilience. Also important to note is the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged children to be resilient. They experienced fear, stress and anxiety, but their families, peers and schools – which should have been microsystemic strongholds for them (Theron & Engelbrecht 2012) – were often not in the position to support resilient coping in them. The questions that needed to be answered were how adaptive coping in learners had been affected and how they could be assisted to cope adaptively.

The authors of the chapter then conducted qualitative research to answer the questions asked above. The findings of the study reported in Chapter 9 showed that learners experienced risks to resilience in six domains, namely the academic, economic, physical, psychological, religious and socio-ecological domains. These risks are documented and elaborated upon in Table 9.8 in Chapter 9. Notwithstanding these risks, some learners coped adaptively because their parents were academically supportive and the learners enjoyed some entertainment, were motivated, kept themselves physically fit and took care of themselves. Table 9.9 in Chapter 9 summarises the protective resources referred to above. These protective resources were combined in complex ways to lessen the impact of risk.

It is important to note that some learners experienced grief and loss, often without adults in their lives noticing. Furthermore, the findings showed that the physical, academic, psychological, social and religious development of learners was disrupted. Families, peers, schools and churches were often too incapacitated to provide the socio-ecological support learners needed.

Resilience-focused interventions based on the social ecology of resilience theory (SERT) (Ungar 2011) can benefit learners whose coping capacities have been negatively affected. The SERT calls for the recognition of microsystemic strongholds, such as families, peers, schools, churches, culture and services, in enhancing coping ability. That underscores the importance of multisystemic interventions in efforts to ameliorate the plight of learners who are at risk of poor developmental outcomes.

■ Towards a holistic approach to supporting learners at risk of interrupted development: Midst- and post-COVID-19 interventions

The literature reviewed and the empirical research reported in this book – across the holistic domains of learners – clearly indicate that the COVID-19

pandemic contributed to the interrupted development of learners. Motor development was delayed, anxiety, uncertainty and a sense of loss were increased in terms of psychological functioning, social relationships were interrupted, spirituality was affected either negatively or positively and academic progress was hampered in terms of reading, writing, mathematics and accessible teacher support. Early childhood learners in ECD centres were affected by a number of issues during a critical developmental period of their lives.

It may be stated that the healthy development of learners – with, *inter alia*, reference to Havighurst's developmental tasks – came, and still is, under severe pressure. Partial testimony to this are the findings, in terms of academic development, of the *NIDS CRAM Wave 5 Report* (Spaull et al. 2021, p. 3), which projected that 'between March 2020 and June 2021, most primary school learners in South Africa have lost 70%–100% (i.e. a full year) of learning relative to the 2019 cohort'.

A holistic support approach is probably the way forward to alleviate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on the domain of the child, where the interruption was most severe. In most instances, educational-academic development has been interrupted substantially; therefore, a special focus needs to be placed on this domain, but it is also necessary to find out which other domains have been seriously affected.

Teachers and education support services staff will need to assess children in terms of their bio-psycho–social–spiritual–educational domains, clarify where the most serious interruptions happened and plan to intervene holistically, but with special attention to the domains most substantially affected. The power of collaboration in supporting holistic learner development cannot be overemphasised.

We advocate for multistakeholder collaboration where schools can draw from services that are found in their immediate contexts. Schools should serve as nodes of support and mobilise support for learners who are at risk in their communities. Care and support should focus on various domains of health and well-being, including the emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual, physical and environmental domains. Therefore, the involvement of non-governmental organisations, churches and state departments, such as the Departments of Health and Social Development, is crucial. Furthermore, private businesses should support schools through social responsibility programmes.

Schools can enhance biological–physiological functioning through sports and PE, which are part of the curriculum. We are mindful of schools where sports facilities lack or are inadequate. Teachers can use Life Orientation and Life Skills to enable learners to cope with loss. They can enable the resilience of learners in the context of risk in their teaching of Life Orientation and Life Skills (Theron 2006, 2008).

Our findings showed that some learners were verbally aggressive towards teachers and their peers. It should be noted that young people sometimes display aggressive behaviour because of unhealthy relationships, poor communication, media violence, prior experiences of aggression and unresolved trauma in their lives, which can trigger the fight response in the nervous system (Ali 2014). Serious behavioural issues may require psychological intervention; however, teachers can be empowered to use behaviour modification techniques, such as reinforcement, to strengthen desired behaviours and extinction to weaken undesirable behaviours. We emphasise here that teachers should be trained adequately, as these techniques can be dangerous if inappropriate behaviour is inadvertently reinforced and appropriate behaviour is extinguished.

The teaching of intra- and interpersonal life skills through Life Orientation and Life Skills and intentionally shaping desired behaviour through behaviour modification techniques may improve social competence. Opinas (2010) defines social competence as follows:

> Social competence is defined as the ability to handle social interactions effectively. In other words, social competence refers to getting along well with others, being able to form and maintain close relationships, and responding in adaptive ways in social settings. (p. 1623)

Schools should create environments in which learners feel safe and welcome. Communication, which is an interpersonal life skill, should be healthy for learners to get along with others and establish and maintain meaningful relationships. We also advocate for the creation of CoIs that enable collaboration and play-based teaching and learning for our early childhood learners.

■ Conclusion

The healthy development of learners was, and still is, seriously jeopardised and interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research done for this book affirmed much of the research done worldwide since the start of the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic has been clearly evidenced in terms of children's biological–physiological movement and motor development through a variety of emotions, such as anxiety, uncertainty and a sense of loss experienced on a psychological level via impaired in-person social relationships, through either a deepening or shallowing of faith on a spiritual level and via substantial backlogs on an educational level experienced by, possibly, a majority of learners. These challenges were especially real for early childhood learners whose learning institutions struggled to remain open and where challenges in all domains were clearly demonstrated.

We strongly recommend following a holistic multidomain and multistakeholder approach in alleviating backlogs and challenges in the different domains of development of learners, where a central theme of resilience will be promoted. We believe that in this way, much of the ideal of healthy development can be restored in learners. This will not happen on its own; it requires a concerted, focused, planned and holistic effort from all stakeholders involved.

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Chapter 1

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This scholarly book remarkably explores the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learners' holistic development and the crucial support they require. This publication offers a deeply insightful and culturally sensitive analysis by integrating diverse theories, including Afrocentric perspectives, through an *ubuntu* lens.

The book stands out for its pioneering focus on the multifaceted effects of COVID-19 on learners' development and the indispensable support systems needed. The inclusion of lesser-known theories, such as Nsamenang's social ontogenesis theory, elevates the discourse, making it an exceptionally compelling and intellectually stimulating read. Moreover, the meticulously structured framework and thoughtfully curated chapters provide a panoramic view of the subject matter, leaving no aspect unexplored.

Through scientifically substantiated research and meticulous methodological explanations, this publication delivers invaluable insights into the impact of COVID-19 on learners' development. It serves as an indispensable resource for researchers and scholars, empowering them with essential knowledge to effectively navigate the challenges faced by learners during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

The editors deserve to be commended for their judicious timing in publishing this important work and for assembling a team of interdisciplinary researchers and authors of the highest calibre. Their deliberate emphasis on an African-centred approach fills a significant void in the field and highlights the importance of adopting an interdisciplinary lens. The exceptional standard of scholarship exhibited in each chapter's research projects, coupled with the comprehensive introduction and concluding summary chapter, further solidifies the book's impact.

In conclusion, this book makes a resounding contribution to our understanding of the profound impact of COVID-19 on learners' development and the indispensable support they require. This book is an indispensable resource for scholars in education, psychology, and related fields due to its integration of diverse theories and meticulously constructed framework. Through the editors' unwavering dedication and the book's comprehensive nature, this publication lays the foundation for further ground-breaking research and transformative interventions, fostering holistic learner development in the face of future challenges.

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