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Learners and learning in a pandemic: Current trends, future designs and policy options

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Abstract

Utilising social constructivism, with this qualitative bounded case study I explored how learners learnt under conditions of a pandemic-enforced lockdown. Self-determination theory and resilience theory provided the theoretical frameworks of this study. Participants comprised a sample of learners and teachers in 5 South African schools. In this article I report on the learning experiences of learners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data capture included a mix of semi-structured interviews and reflections. Data were analysed using the content analysis method. Findings presented were threefold: Firstly, flocking together in times of a crisis: a community of compassionate and caring learners emerged. Learners were empowered through a community of practice of shared learning experiences. Secondly, the lack of traditional instruction led to the emergence of learner agency, as learners took ownership of their learning. Thirdly, learner resilience: in the face of a crisis and enormous uncertainty these learners did not lose hope, their courage and resilience served as their mainstay. Education systems must move beyond compliance-driven models that rely predominantly on external regulation. Instead, future designs should intentionally cultivate communities of care, embed learner voice and choice, and foreground competence-building through authentic, collaborative, and technology-enabled inquiry. Technology must not serve as a passive delivery mechanism for content consumption (watching videos, reading), but as an active platform for creation, connection, and contribution (create podcasts, produce videos, write blogs, or develop, build, and code robots). This study holds serious implications for future designs and policy options if we want to ensure that no child is left behind.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; flocking together; learner agency; learners; learning; resilience theory; self-determination theory

Introduction and Background Context

The coronavirus disease pandemic 2019 (COVID-19) placed learners in a period of profound uncertainty, fundamentally disrupting established modes of teaching and learning. Educational processes were required to rapidly reconfigure, often without preparation or transitional planning. The accelerated shift to online modes of delivery substantially intensified learner workloads. Learners were required not only to adapt to online instruction but also to develop the technical competencies necessary to engage effectively with digital learning platforms (Fataar & Badroodien, 2020). Simultaneously, learners operated within challenging contexts in which their commitment to learning and academic performance were frequently scrutinised. The pandemic, therefore, created a critical moment for reflection, offering an unprecedented opportunity to examine learning during crisis conditions, including current trends, future educational design, and policy possibilities.

Existing literature on COVID-19 and education largely focuses on the impact of the pandemic on educational institutions and curriculum delivery (Allais & Marock, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020), teachers' responses to anxiety associated with the outbreak (Talidong & Toquero, 2020), teacher well-being during the pandemic (Collie & Martin, 2020), and the challenges that teachers faced in sustaining teaching and learning continuity (Fataar, 2020). Research examining learners' experiences during the pandemic has tended to adopt a pathological framing, primarily emphasising the difficulties that learners encountered. The findings highlight significant disruption to the South African education system, the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, and substantial learning losses (Müller, Goudeau, Stephens, Aelenei & Sanitioso, 2023; Soudien, Reddy & Harvey, 2022). Studies also report learner challenges related to digital literacy and confidence in using institutional platforms such as Zoom (Nkomo, Magxala & Lebopa, 2023), as well as widespread psychological, social, and academic setbacks across grade levels (Berens & Hobert, 2025; Maree, 2022; Tan, Jang, Lam, An & Lo, 2025).

Notably, there is limited research employing the methodology of portraiture which seeks to identify strengths, possibilities, and emergent opportunities for learning arising from crisis contexts. In response to this gap, in this study I explored how learners learnt under conditions of a pandemic. I further investigate what the COVID-19 pandemic revealed about the culture of learning, current learning trends, and the insight that this historical moment offers for informing future learning design and policy development.

Exploring the Terrain

A review of the literature examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning indicates that scholarly attention is largely focused on several interrelated themes. These include the systemic challenges posed by the pandemic to education systems (Kamga, 2020); the rapid expansion of online and remote learning modalities (Dube, 2020; Gittings, Toska, Medley, Cluver, Logie, Ralayo, Chen & Mbithi-Dikgole, 2021); and the lived experiences of remote learning, with particular emphasis on learner perspectives (Johnson, 2020). Research has also explored strategies to support teachers and learners in sustaining learning continuity during

the pandemic (Morgan, 2020), including proposals such as curriculum thinning, which prioritises depth of understanding over content coverage (Mehta & Peeples, 2020). In addition, studies have documented learning losses associated with prolonged school disruptions (Bhamani, Makhdoom, Bharuchi, Ali, Kaleem & Ahmed, 2020), psychological impacts related to uncertainty and anxiety about returning to traditional schooling (Gittings et al., 2021), and patterns of academic regression (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Jain, Lall & Singh, 2021). Furthermore, scholarship has highlighted the economic consequences of the pandemic for the South African education system, particularly for learners who are already socio-economically disadvantaged (Spaull, 2022). In the South African context, socio-economic disadvantage refers to circumstances in which learners' educational outcomes and life opportunities are constrained by intersecting factors such as poverty, historical marginalisation, and systemic institutional dysfunction, rather than by individual ability.

A significant body of research focusing on learner experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the challenges associated with the abrupt transition to remote learning. This transition has been characterised by widespread psychological distress (Tan et al., 2025), declining learner mental health (Fegert, Ludwig-Walz, Witt & Bujard, 2023), increased social isolation (Berens & Hobert, 2025), difficulties with self-directed learning (Blignaut & Du Toit-Brits, 2022), widening socio-economic inequalities, particularly through the digital divide (Müller et al., 2023), and an accelerated shift towards technology-dependent learning environments (Dube, 2020). Although some learners reported appreciating the flexibility associated with remote learning, most studies indicate declining academic performance and a pervasive sense of social disconnection (Akpen, Asaolu, Atobatele, Okagbue & Sampson, 2024). Overall, the pandemic disrupted educational processes, intensified existing inequalities, and produced substantial psychological, social, and academic setbacks for learners (Maree, 2022).

The psychological consequences of COVID-19 lockdowns have been profound, particularly for learners who experienced prolonged separation from peers and teachers. A consistent finding across studies is the deterioration of learner mental health due to isolation and pandemic-related stressors (Henderson, Schmus, McDonald & Irving, 2020). Evidence points to worsening trends in child and adolescent mental health, including increased reports of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and boredom associated with social isolation (Fegert et al., 2023). Learner mental health is, therefore, central to understanding learning experiences during the pandemic, as

stress-inducing environments and reduced socialisation can negatively influence behaviour and learning capacity. Social interaction plays a fundamental role in children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Cherry, 2021). The loss of face-to-face engagement with peers and educators emerged as a major source of dissatisfaction, with many learners reporting feelings of loneliness, boredom, and diminished purpose. Berens and Hobert (2025) conceptualise this experience as three-fold isolation – physical, social, and learning isolation – transforming remote learning into a stressful experience rather than a flexible alternative. The long-term effects of reduced social interaction are likely to be significant, particularly for learners from low-income communities, who are more vulnerable to academic regression (Bhamani et al., 2020; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Jain et al., 2021).

Learners also faced substantial challenges related to self-directed learning. Many struggled with the sudden expectation of high levels of self-motivation, time management, and independent study. Difficulties with digital literacy and confidence in navigating institutional platforms such as Zoom further complicated the learning process (Nkomo et al., 2023). For many learners, the transition to remote learning was experienced as abrupt and unsupported, often described as being “thrown into the deep end” without the structure and guidance typically provided by physical classroom environments.

The pandemic also exposed and intensified pre-existing inequalities linked to socio-economic status and geographic location. The shift towards technology-dependent learning environments amplified what scholars describe as the digital divide (Monareng, Ramraj & Mashau, 2020). The digital divide refers to disparities in access to and effective use of digital technology between individuals who have the necessary resources and those who do not (Azubuike, Adegboye & Quadri, 2021). Research indicates that socio-economic inequalities present in the physical world became even more pronounced in digital learning environments (Jain et al., 2021; Soudien et al., 2022). For many learners from low-income communities, participation in virtual learning spaces was severely constrained by limited access to devices, connectivity, and supportive learning environments (Makumbe, 2020; Monareng et al., 2020).

Within South Africa, deep socio-economic stratification contributes to significant disparities in access to remote and online learning. These disparities are particularly evident in rural and under-resourced communities, where online learning infrastructure and resources are often limited or non-existent (Makumbe, 2020). Learners who lacked access to remote learning technology

experienced significant educational setbacks, further entrenching long-standing systemic inequalities (Dube, 2020; Gittings et al., 2021). Evidence from African contexts indicates that many learners were limited to reviewing textbooks and printed materials without pedagogical support during lockdowns (*Human Rights Watch*, 2020), highlighting the limited capacity of many education systems to implement effective remote teaching under emergency conditions.

These disruptions disproportionately affected learners who were unable to participate in remote learning, increasing the risk of long-term educational exclusion and widening existing inequality gaps (Dube, 2020; Gittings et al., 2021). More broadly, the pandemic placed significant psychological and behavioural stress on children, posing heightened risks to their mental and behavioural health (Henderson et al., 2020). Learners exposed to prolonged stress and reduced social interaction are more likely to demonstrate behaviour associated with anxiety, disengagement, and reduced academic performance. Given the central role of social interaction in learning and development (Cherry, 2021), the prolonged absence of in-person schooling is likely to have lasting consequences, particularly for learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who were already at greater risk of academic regression (Bhamani et al., 2020; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020; Jain et al., 2021).

Theoretical Moorings

This study was situated within the theoretical frameworks of self-determination theory and resiliency theory. Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding human motivation, personality development, and psychological growth.

Central to SDT is the proposition that optimal human functioning depends on the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and self-endorsement in one's actions, reflecting the need to feel in control of one's behaviour and life direction. Competence relates to the perception of effectiveness in interacting with the environment and mastering challenging tasks. Relatedness denotes the experience of meaningful connection and belonging with others within a social context. These needs function as essential psychological nutrients necessary for adjustment, integrity, and personal growth (Ryan, Deci, Vansteenkiste & Soenens, 2021). When environments support these needs, individuals are more likely to engage in activities for their inherent interest and enjoyment, demonstrating intrinsic and autonomous motivation. Within educational contexts, autonomy

is reflected in learner choice and agency, competence in feelings of efficacy during learning tasks, and relatedness in meaningful connections with peers and educators. The satisfaction of these needs is, therefore, considered foundational to sustained engagement and effective learning.

SDT posits that the satisfaction of these needs enhances intrinsic motivation, well-being, and performance (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT examines the dynamic relationship between intrinsic motivation, which originates from internal interest and satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by external rewards or pressures. While extrinsic incentives such as grades, recognition, or financial gain can influence behaviour, externally imposed rewards that are perceived as controlling may undermine intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). SDT further identifies intrinsic motivation as the most self-determined form of motivation, characterised by engagement in activities for their inherent satisfaction rather than external outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2017). Individuals who internalise the value of an activity are more likely to engage in behaviour integrated with their sense of self, resulting in actions that are experienced as volitional, meaningful, and self-endorsed. Such self-determined behaviour simultaneously supports the fulfilment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs.

Developed through the foundational work of Deci and Ryan (1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000a) as well as subsequent scholarship (Ryan & Deci, 2020), SDT conceptualises motivation along a continuum ranging from externally controlled to fully autonomous forms of regulation. Historically, educational systems have relied heavily on extrinsic regulatory mechanisms, including grading, sanctions, and performance monitoring, to drive learner engagement (Bandhu, Mohan, Nittala, Jadhav, Bhadauria & Saxena, 2024). However, research has consistently demonstrated that controlling motivational strategies may negatively affect performance quality, self-esteem, and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

Beyond explaining why individuals engage in specific behaviour, SDT also examines the differential outcomes associated with various forms of social regulation. Intrinsic motivation, driven by curiosity, interest, care, and deeply held values, can sustain long-term engagement, creativity, and persistence, even in the absence of external reinforcement.

SDT remains highly relevant for understanding human behaviour in educational spaces. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that environments supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness produce more sustainable and adaptive outcomes. In learning environments, motivation is most effectively fostered when learners experience

meaningful social connection, perceive control over their learning processes, and feel capable of meeting academic challenges. Self-determined behaviour is typically characterised by four core features: autonomous action, self-regulation, psychologically empowered responses to events, and engagement that promotes self-realisation. Collectively, these characteristics reflect the integration of behaviour with an individual's values, interests, and sense of identity, underscoring the central role of need satisfaction in motivating human learning and development.

Resiliency theory offers a framework for adopting a strengths-based perspective (D'Mello, Ensher, Bledsoe, Clark & Whiting, 2024; Zimmerman & Brenner, 2010) in examining how learners learnt during a pandemic. The extensive body of literature conceptualises resilience as a dynamic process characterised by positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity. Richardson (2002) conceptualises resilience as comprising three interrelated dimensions: the resilience process, innate resilience, and resilient qualities. The resilience process is activated by ecological influences within specific contexts. Innate resilience reflects the premise that human beings, like other living organisms, possess an intrinsic energy or force that motivates movement towards self-actualisation, altruism, wisdom, and spiritual harmony. Resilient qualities, while inherent, may remain latent until activated by ecological triggers.

Importantly, resilience is not understood as an individual trait but rather as a multidimensional construct (Ungar, Clark, Kwong, Macknach & Cameron, 2005; Ungar, Ghazinour & Richter, 2013) that integrates both internal assets and external resources (Cora-Bramble, 2006; Cora-Bramble, Zhang & Castillo-Page, 2010). Assets refer to positive individual attributes, including self-efficacy and self-esteem. Resources, in contrast, are located outside the individual and include forms of support such as collegial networks, mentoring relationships, and institutional programmes that facilitate opportunities for skills development and practice.

Research Paradigm and Approach

This study was located within a social constructivist and interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontologically, the study assumes the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities shaped through interaction and context. Epistemologically, knowledge is understood as co-constructed between researcher and participants. This paradigm was appropriate given the study's concern with learners' lived experiences of schooling during a pandemic-enforced lockdown, where

meaning-making was situated, relational, and contextually mediated.

Methodologically, the study adopted a qualitative approach to generate rich, textured, contextualised, interpretive accounts of learners' lived experiences. A bounded case study research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) framed the inquiry. The "case" comprised secondary school learners experiencing learning under COVID-19 lockdown conditions within a specific provincial context. The case was bounded temporally (from March 2020 onward) and geographically (selected schools in Gauteng Province). A case study design enabled in-depth, multi-layered analysis of the phenomenon within its real-life context.

Participants and research sites were selected through purposive sampling, specifically, maximum variation sampling. This strategy was employed to capture a wide range of socioeconomic, racialised, linguistic, and institutional schooling contexts, thereby enhancing the richness and heterogeneity of the data.

Five secondary schools were selected across historically differentiated schooling contexts: (two former Model C schools – English and Afrikaans;ⁱ one former Indian school; one former Coloured school; and one former African township school)ⁱⁱ from the Gauteng province.ⁱⁱⁱ These categories reflect enduring structural inequalities in the South African schooling system and were, therefore, analytically relevant to the research focus.

Fifteen learners across these schools participated in the study. Gender and ethnicity were considered as selection criteria to ensure demographic variation and to enable comparative interpretive insight across contexts. Purposive and maximum variation sampling were appropriate because I did not seek statistical representativeness but rather depth, diversity, and information-rich cases. Selecting participants across varied socioeconomic and historical schooling contexts enabled exploration of how structural conditions mediated learners' experiences of lockdown learning.

Sampling limitations could be the small sample size and contextual specificity, which limit statistical generalisation. However, I aimed for analytic and theoretical transferability rather than representational generalisation. The bounded nature of the case also means that findings must be interpreted within their contextual parameters.

Researcher positionality draws on Denzin and Lincoln (2018), where the researcher adopts the stance of a methodological bricoleur, drawing on multiple qualitative strategies to construct layered understandings. As a "quilt maker", I stitched together diverse learner voices into a composite narrative while remaining attentive to difference and nuance. Reflexive engagement with positionality was maintained throughout the study

to mitigate interpretive bias and to enhance confirmability.

Data were generated through online semi-structured individual interviews; written learner reflections (one–two pages) and optional drawings accompanying reflections. Semi-structured interviews enabled flexible conversations, allowing participants to articulate experiences in their own terms while addressing the primary and subsidiary research questions (Maree, 2020; Parveen & Showkat, 2017). Interviews invited learners to describe their routines, emotional responses, and learning adaptations since March 2020. Written reflections and drawings provided additional narrative depth and enabled triangulation. These artefacts facilitated introspection and allowed learners to express experiences that may not have surfaced during interviews. The use of multiple data sources strengthened the richness and credibility of the dataset.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Analysis proceeded inductively through systematic coding and theme development. Codes were iteratively refined as new insight emerged, reflecting a reflexive and recursive analytic process (Sandelowski, 2000). The analytic process involved multiple readings of interview transcripts and written reflections; initial open coding; categorisation of codes into higher-order themes; cross-case comparison across socio-economic contexts; and alignment of emergent themes with theoretical frameworks and relevant literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process facilitated both within-case and across-case thematic interpretation, ensuring analytic depth and coherence.

Trustworthiness was established through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement via in-depth interviews, methodological triangulation across data sources, and iterative coding. Transferability was supported through thick description of research sites and explicit articulation of socio-historical schooling contexts. Dependability was ensured through transparent documentation of research design, sampling decisions, and analytic procedures, including an audit trail of theme development. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive engagement with researcher positionality and systematic, data-driven coding grounded in participants' narratives. Authenticity was pursued through careful representation of diverse learner voices and attentiveness to contextual inequities shaping experience.

I adopted the stance of a qualitative bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), drawing on multiple

interpretive strategies to construct layered understanding of learners' experiences. Reflexive awareness of positionality was maintained throughout to mitigate interpretive bias and enhance confirmability.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty Ethics Committee (Reference: EDU 066/20 Vandeyar 21-01). Informed consent was secured from all participants and guardians where applicable. Confidentiality was maintained, and pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings.

Findings

Numerous themes emerged from the data, which were clustered into three categories: (1) flocking together in times of a crisis; (2) the emergence of learner agency; and (3) learner resilience.

Flocking Together in Times of a Crisis

"A handful of worry and a stomach full of fear"

Some learners found ways to adapt and even to thrive under pandemic conditions. Their responses highlighted the importance of flocking together, to gather with others with whom they felt safe to traverse through the COVID-19 pandemic. For these learners being together with others in flock, or in community was one of the most helpful and supportive ways through tough times and conditions. They demonstrated that together they were stronger, and while "birds of a feather flock together" they often travel and flock with other species of birds expanding their flock to more than just "their feathers." A community of compassionate and caring learners emerged. Learners were empowered through shared learning experiences.

COVID 19 was not all about oneself, it was about flocking together in a time of crisis. It taught me to protect others as well, especially learners that were less fortunate and disadvantaged. We shared our learning experiences with each other and tried to help where we could, either in the form of physical notes or online assistance, through our mobile phones. (Jane, White female, former Model C school, Grade 10)

Other learners who tried to reconnect and help found strength in a community of learners and in the broader community.

Many of us reached out to other learners offering assistance with strict precautions, or online. We formed online/WhatsApp groups and tried to help and teach each other in terms of understanding the content ... to help and make a difference in other people's lives who needed it just as much as I did. (Miriam, Indian female, former Indian school Grade 10)

Some learners found a sense of community and flocked together in a virtual world,

Life suddenly went into a 'digital ditch' and everything was led by a switch. We were added on WhatsApp social groups and digital newsletters. Socialising with a text. Our social connections expanded into global links through the virtual

world. We could access schoolwork, yoga classes and even have game night through FaceTime. We are, after all, social beings. (Raj, Indian male, former Indian school, Grade 10)

For others, the flocking together provided a support system that helped alleviate stress – learners realised that they were not alone in this crisis.

Thanks to the inspiration and support system from fellow learners in the form of voice or video recordings, shared on my phone, I found my academic stress lessened while my academic goals increased. Learning together with my peers in this way was fun. I understood the work much better. (Kholiso, African male, former African Township school, Grade 10)

The Emergence of Learner Agency

“Change is inevitable. Growth is optional – Seeing the good”

The lack of traditional instruction witnessed the emergence of learner agency: learners took ownership for their learning by utilising resources around them. Learner agency seemingly came to the fore during the COVID 19 pandemic. The way learners reacted to changes brought about by the pandemic, the attitude they took to deal with it and their actions and reactions to change, led to coping, accepting and growing with change. Responses from some learners were illustrative of how they embraced change and how their mindsets had the power to shape how change unfolded and how it impacted on their lives.

I am a firm believer that there is good in everything around us. Although I might have lost sight of that for a few months during lockdown, I am glad that I had the opportunity to not only cement this way of thinking but also to make the conscious decision to grow in my faith, sport, school, people skills and relationships and become a change agent. (Cherese, Coloured female, former Coloured school, Grade 11)

No matter how much chaos is happening around you, the power to find peace therein lies only within yourself. The energies that you absorb or situations that you react to or the duration thereof are all within your control. This only becomes possible once we disallow external uncertainties to control us. It's just about slowing down and listening to our inner voices. Stress is a choice, and so is peace. (Kamala, Indian female, former Indian school, Grade 10)

Some learners believed that change was necessary for growth.

Even though I was reluctant to admit it at first, the pain and fear that I had to overcome didn't only heal and strengthen me in areas of my life I didn't even know needed it, it also gave me a reason to go back to the drawing board and get rid of things that no longer served me. I learned that change is necessary for growth and that if something doesn't challenge you, it simply won't change you. (Annelize, White female, former Model C, Afrikaans medium school, Grade 11)

I have learnt to accept challenges in a way that makes me stronger and that does not destroy me.

Instead of asking why me? Ask how can I defeat this? (Nomsa, African female, former African Township school, Grade 10).

Rather than being complacent in discomfort, some learners became agents of change and took to self-schooling.

I went through multiple stages of 'self-schooling.' I set up a strict schedule during the week. I woke up at 6 am every morning to get ready for the day and began my schoolwork by 8 am. I followed the timetable as if I were at school and worked on each subject. (Tanya, White female, former Model C, Afrikaans medium school, Grade 11)

Others had a change in mindset.

The world is only how we choose to see it. Your life is only what you make out of it – so make it count. It is your story – edit often, make mistakes, hit yourself with a plot twist and change the narrative because it is your story and every story deserves a happy ending. (Rishi, Indian male, former Indian school, Grade 11)

Learner Resilience

“Solitude is making 'loneliness' your strength”

In the face of the crisis and enormous uncertainty learners did not lose hope, their courage and resilience served as their mainstay. Learners highlighted how their resilience brought about a positive attitude shift towards change in their thoughts, words and actions. Loneliness led to personal transformation. Responses from some learners demonstrated the ability to bounce back from adversity, adapt to challenges, and grow stronger through adverse experiences.

The fact that the pandemic disrupted our day-to-day lives provided an opportunity to stop and reflect on things and reconsider. What, and why do we do what we do? Do our daily actions or jobs align with our higher selves? Do these activities take us closer to our goals? This offered a great opportunity to rethink our habits and routines and to make changes if unsatisfied. (Laurel, White female, former Model C school, Grade 11)

Some learners expressed their feelings of being alone during COVID-19. However, they were able to bounce back and turn these experiences into something positive, highlighting their resilience in the face of adversity.

'Loneliness' seems like a weakness and that we always need someone's company to be occupied or happy. I became a victim of loneliness during the lockdown but, if there is one thing I learned, there is another word that describes 'loneliness' which is solitude. Solitude is making 'loneliness' your strength. This is where I found myself performing greater without having any dependency on others. (Aslam, Indian male, former Indian school, Grade 11)

Others emphasised how their resilience took the form of work ethic and self-discipline.

COVID-19 definitely took its toll on me, I felt alone and isolated, but this 'doomsday' had given me a better work ethic and self-discipline which ultimately helped me to keep up with my

schoolwork throughout the pandemic. I was also training twice a day and building my sport ability. This led to a stronger mindset and a more capable body. (Lindelani, African male, former African Township school, Grade 10)

For some, belief fuelled their resilience: *“As a person you should hold onto the belief that things will get better, without rain the flowers would not blossom”* (Mpumi, African female, former African Township school, Grade 10). Spirituality was a source of resilience for some learners.

I was captivated by water colour paints and brushes. I loved the way the shade of colours layered across the ceiling boards I painted, it was almost as if the colours sang a sweet melody to which the brushes couldn't help but dance. They danced freely. Was I ever going to dance or sing or even feel a fraction of their freedom? Well, one thing is certain, where the spirit of the Lord is ... there was freedom. (Bronwyn, Coloured female, former Coloured school, Grade 11)

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This study highlights pockets of excellence that contrast with the predominantly pathological focus of previous research (Berens & Hobert, 2025; Soudien et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2025) on how learners learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Flocking Together in Times of Crisis

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that optimal functioning depends on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: relatedness, autonomy, and competence. The theme of “flocking together” strongly reflects the fulfilment of relatedness, defined as the need to feel connected, cared for, and significant to others. Learners’ formation of WhatsApp groups, shared note exchanges, and peer tutoring created relational spaces that mitigated isolation and fostered belonging. Jane’s and Miriam’s accounts illustrate how mutual assistance reinforced interdependence, while Raj’s reflection highlights the digital extension of social connectedness. Even in virtual environments, learners cultivated meaningful relational bonds, suggesting that relatedness need satisfaction can be technologically mediated.

Importantly, relatedness satisfaction appeared to catalyse competence and autonomous motivation. Kholiso’s reduced academic stress and increased academic goals reflect how peer support enhanced perceived efficacy. Within SDT, such experiences signal movement toward intrinsic motivation, as learning became enjoyable (“learning together ... was fun”) rather than externally imposed. Thus, “flocking together” functioned not merely as social coping but as a psychologically nourishing structure that supported self-regulated engagement.

Resilience theory conceptualises resilience as a dynamic process of positive adaptation in contexts of significant adversity. The communal

orientation described here aligns with resilience literature identifying protective relational systems as critical buffers against stress. Peer networks served as protective factors, particularly for learners from under-resourced contexts. Collective coping reduced vulnerability and redistributed academic and emotional labour. The metaphor of flocking across “species” suggests bridging social capital, expanding resilience beyond homogeneous peer groups. The data illustrate social resilience – the capacity of groups to adapt collaboratively to disruption. Rather than fragmenting under crisis, learners co-constructed support systems that enabled continuity in learning and nurtured well-being. Community, therefore, was not incidental but constitutive of resilience.

The Emergence of Learner Agency

The emergence of learner agency during disrupted schooling demonstrates the activation of autonomy – the experience of volition and self-endorsement of action. In SDT terms, learners shifted from externally structured schooling to self-regulated learning environments. Tanya’s self-schooling schedule exemplifies autonomous regulation combined with competence striving. Similarly, Kamala’s assertion that *“stress is a choice”* reflects internal locus of causality, a core SDT construct (Ryan et al., 2021). Learners reframed crisis conditions as opportunities for growth, signalling movement toward integrated regulation, where behaviour aligns with personal values and identity (e.g. becoming a “change agent”). The data suggest that when external structures weakened, some learners did not disengage but instead internalised responsibility for their learning. This internalisation process is central to SDT’s explanation of sustainable motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Notably, agency was not synonymous with individualism. Rather, it co-existed with relatedness (Theme 1), demonstrating that autonomy and connectedness are complementary rather than oppositional psychological needs.

From a resilience perspective, agency represents a protective adaptive system – the individual’s capacity for self-regulation, goal orientation, and meaning-making. Learners reframed adversity as developmental opportunity (“if something doesn’t challenge you, it won’t change you” – Annelize), illustrating adaptive meaning reconstruction. Resilience theory emphasises that resilient individuals are not unaffected by stress; rather, they engage in adaptive recalibration. The reflective stance (*“go back to the drawing board”* – Annelize) demonstrates cognitive flexibility, a hallmark of resilient functioning. Agency thus operated as both coping mechanism and growth catalyst. Learners did not merely survive disruption; they

reconstructed identities as disciplined, reflective, and self-directed actors.

Learner Resilience: Solitude as Strength

The theme of transforming loneliness into solitude reflects deep psychological integration. Within SDT, solitude can support autonomous self-reflection, strengthening intrinsic motivation and identity coherence. Aslam's reconceptualization of loneliness as strength reflects increased self-determined functioning, where performance becomes less contingent on external validation. Lindelani's disciplined routines further illustrate competence satisfaction – structured effort leading to mastery. Spirituality and creative expression (e.g. Bronwyn's painting and faith narrative) can be interpreted as forms of integrated regulation, where behaviour aligns with deeply held beliefs and values. SDT recognises that spirituality may enhance internalisation when it supports autonomy rather than control. Thus, resilience in this context was intertwined with psychological need fulfilment – particularly competence and autonomy – within conditions of constrained relatedness.

Resilience theory conceptualises resilience as positive adaptation despite adversity, often facilitated by meaning-making, hope, spirituality, and self-regulation (D'Mello et al., 2024). The data reveal several resilience processes: cognitive reframing (Laurel's reflective reassessment of life routines); emotional regulation (transforming loneliness into solitude); behavioural adaptation (enhanced work ethic and self-discipline) and spiritual coping (Mpumi's hope narrative; Bronwyn's faith-based freedom imagery). These responses reflect what resilience scholars describe as post-adversity growth (Taku & Efthemiou, 2025). Importantly, resilience here is not portrayed as invulnerability but as adaptive transformation. Solitude became a developmental space rather than a deficit condition. Learners harnessed introspection to strengthen identity, discipline, and belief systems – illustrating resilience as a dynamic and developmental process.

Viewed together, SDT and resilience theory offer complementary explanatory power. SDT illuminates why learners adapted positively: psychological need satisfaction (relatedness, autonomy, competence) sustained motivation and well-being. Resilience theory explains how adaptation occurred: through protective relationships, cognitive reframing, self-regulation, and meaning-making processes. The findings suggest that resilience was not an individual trait but an emergent property of relational ecosystems (flocking together); agentic self-regulation (ownership of learning) and meaning-oriented transformation (solitude, spirituality, discipline).

In the context of the COVID-19 disruption, learners demonstrated that when psychological needs are supported – even in altered forms – adaptive and growth-oriented responses are possible. Community fostered resilience; autonomy enabled agency; competence strengthened confidence; and meaning-making sustained hope.

In sum, learners' experiences during COVID-19 demonstrate that adversity does not uniformly diminish motivation or well-being. When relational bonds are nurtured, autonomy is supported, and competence is scaffolded, learners can mobilise resilience in generative ways. The convergence of SDT and resilience theory underscores a central insight: resilience flourishes where psychological needs are met and where learners are positioned not as passive recipients of crisis, but as relational, agentic, and meaning-making subjects capable of growth within complexity.

Cross-school Patterns and Divergences

A clear pattern across all five school types (two former Model C, former Coloured, former Indian, and a township school) was the collective orientation to coping. Regardless of background, learners emphasised “flocking together” as a key survival strategy. However, the form this took differed by context. In former Model C schools, support was often structured and self-directed (e.g., organised schedules, disciplined “self-schooling”). These learners tended to frame collaboration alongside individual responsibility and productivity (Tanya, Jane). In former Indian schools, there was a strong emphasis on digitally mediated collaboration and peer teaching (Raj, Miriam), suggesting relatively better access to technology and established peer-learning cultures. In township schools, while collaboration was equally valued, it was more explicitly tied to mutual care and overcoming structural disadvantage (Kholiso, Lindelani). Sharing resources (notes, phones) reflects material constraints shaping collective practices.

A second pattern that emerged was learner agency – individualisation within inequality. Learner agency emerged across all contexts, but its expression reflects unequal conditions. In more resourced contexts, agency was framed as self-optimisation (time management, mindset shifts, personal growth). In less resourced contexts, agency was more relational and survival-oriented, focused on persistence despite limited access and instability (Nomsa). This suggests that agency is not uniform – it is contextually mediated, shaped by access to resources, stability, and prior schooling cultures.

A third pattern that emerged was resilience on a scale from introspection to endurance. Resilience

appears as a universal theme, yet with different emphases. In middle-class contexts, resilience is often introspective and reflective (Laurel, Aslam), framed as personal growth, solitude, and self-discovery. In township contexts, resilience was more embodied and action-oriented – manifesting as discipline, work ethic, and perseverance under pressure (Lindelani, Mpumi).

Across all themes, a key pattern was the interplay between structure and agency. While all learners demonstrate agency, their capacity to act was clearly enabled or constrained by their socio-economic and schooling contexts. The excerpts illustrate that community (flocking) compensates for systemic gaps; agency is unevenly resourced and resilience is both a personal and socially conditioned response. Overall, the data suggest that the pandemic did not flatten inequalities – it refracted them, shaping distinct yet overlapping pathways of coping, learning, and becoming.

Conclusion

This study repositions the narrative of pandemic learning from deficit to possibility. Against a backdrop of disruption, inequality, and uncertainty, learners did not simply endure the COVID-19 crisis – they adapted, collaborated, and, in many instances, grew. Through “flocking together”, they constructed relational ecosystems that mitigated isolation and redistributed academic and emotional labour. Through emergent agency, they assumed ownership of their learning, internalising responsibility in ways that traditional schooling structures seldom demand. Through resilience, they transformed loneliness into solitude, fear into reflection, and disruption into developmental opportunity.

Interpreted through SDT, these findings affirm that when the psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence are – even imperfectly – satisfied, learners sustain motivation and well-being under adverse conditions. Viewed through resilience theory, they demonstrate that positive adaptation is not a rare trait but a dynamic process activated through protective relationships, cognitive reframing, disciplined action, and meaning-making. Resilience in this study was not rugged individualism; it was relational, agentic, and purpose-driven.

The implications are clear. Education systems must move beyond compliance-driven models that rely predominantly on external regulation. Instead, future designs should intentionally cultivate communities of care, embed learner voice and choice, and foreground competence-building through authentic, collaborative, and technology-enabled inquiry. Technology must not serve as a passive delivery mechanism for content

consumption, but as an active platform for creation, connection, and contribution.

Future research could focus on how teachers integrate technology as a primary pedagogical driver to facilitate real-life collaboration, immersive simulations, and learner-led inquiry and how learners use technology (digital tools) to make podcasts, produce videos, write blogs, or develop, build, and code robots to influence their learning.

If the pandemic revealed fractures within education systems, it also illuminated possibilities for renewal. Learners have shown that they are capable of self-direction, solidarity, and growth within complexity. The challenge for policy and practice is to design learning environments that do not wait for crisis to activate these capacities. To ensure that no child is left behind, we must build systems that centre human connection, nurture agency, and recognise resilience not as exceptional, but as educable and expandable.

Education is not just about going to school and getting a degree. It's about widening your knowledge and absorbing the truth about life.

—Shakuntala Devi, BrainyQuote, 2024

Children have to be educated, but they have also to be left to educate themselves.

—Ernest Dimnet, BrainyQuote, 2023

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Notes

- i. Model C school: schools that receive government funding, however they are administered and largely funded by the parent body.
- ii. During the apartheid era, the term “Blacks” referred to Indian, African and Coloured people of South Africa. The terms Coloured, White, Indian and African derive from the apartheid racial classifications of the different peoples of South Africa. The use of these terms, although problematic, has continued through the post-apartheid era in the country. In this article, I use these terms grudgingly to help present the necessary context for my work.
- iii. Gauteng province: one of nine provinces and the smallest province by land area in South Africa.
- iv. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- v. DATES: Received: 10 March 2025; Revised: 30 April 2026; Accepted: 16 June 2026; Published: 31 August 2026.

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