

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on learners in 2020 as school closures limited the time they spent in school and shaped their interactions with educators. It also adversely affected their well-being. *Sylvia Hannan* and *Fabian Arends* use data from the Department of Science and Innovation's Talent Development Programme (TDP) in 2020 to explore the impact of the pandemic on the learning and well-being of 568 grade 11 and 12 South African learners who participated in the programme.

**Photo:** *Monstera, Pexels*

# Learner voices:

## Learning experiences and well-being amidst COVID-19

The disruption of young people's education during the COVID-19 pandemic has been extensive and will likely have profound long-term consequences. Learners' educational attainment and progress have been negatively affected, as have their social and emotional development. School closures have also raised challenges for the most vulnerable and marginalised, worsening existing disparities within the unequal South African education system. In this article, we investigate TDP learners' perceptions of educator support, home support and their psychosocial well-being during school closures. While, as a group, these learners are not nationally representative, their responses provide us with some insights into educational interactions and well-being during 2020.

The TDP is an out-of-school supplementary programme, usually conducted over three, week-long contact sessions with high-performing grade 11 and 12 learners from working-class backgrounds. In 2020, the programme was restructured and delivered through a digital platform – the TDP Smart Classroom – in response to the national lockdown. Two-thirds (67%) of the TDP learners were selected from low-socioeconomic or no-fee schools, and Figure 1 shows key demographics of the 568 learners who completed our survey.

**Figure 1:** Key demographics of TDP learners



### Learning and well-being amidst COVID-19

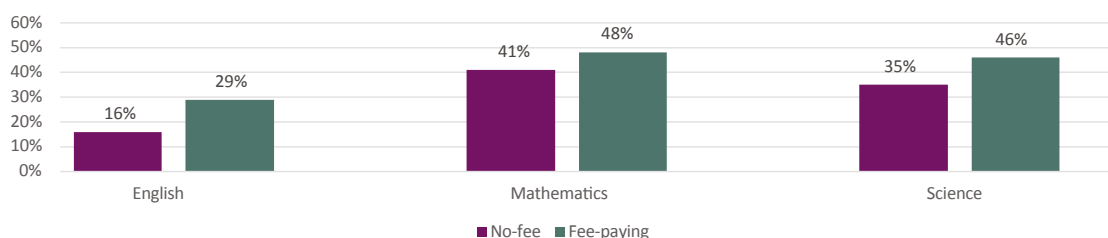
From the survey we conducted with TDP 2020 learners, we report on (i) educator support, (ii) home learning and support, and (iii) learner well-being.

#### Educator support to learners at home

The lockdown period presented numerous challenges to the basic education sector and served as a real-life laboratory for policy experimentation and implementation. Educators needed to be flexible and adapt their teaching and communication approaches. TDP learners were able to communicate with their educators via WhatsApp (87%), telephone (16%) and e-mail (14%), while 12% were unable to communicate with their educators.

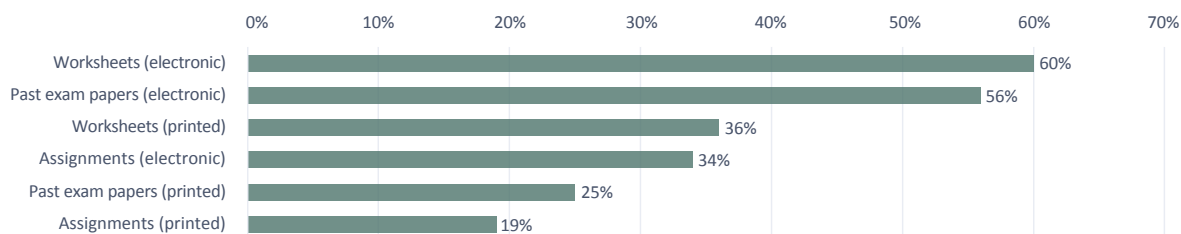
On average, about 45% of TDP 2020 learners were provided with either live or pre-recorded online lessons in mathematics, 41% in science and 22% in English. Further analysis (Figure 2) revealed that, as expected, TDP learners from fee-paying schools had greater access to both live and pre-recorded online lessons, although the access provided to learners from no-fee schools was not far behind.

**Figure 2:** Online lessons provided, by school type



During the school closures, the most common resources provided by educators were electronic worksheets, electronic past exam papers, printed worksheets, and electronic assignments (Figure 3). The electronic resources were accessed by more learners in fee-paying schools, while more learners in no-fee schools received printed resources. It is reassuring that educators found ways to support learners during school closures, either via e-mail or WhatsApp, or by providing printed materials.

**Figure 3:** Resource provision to learners

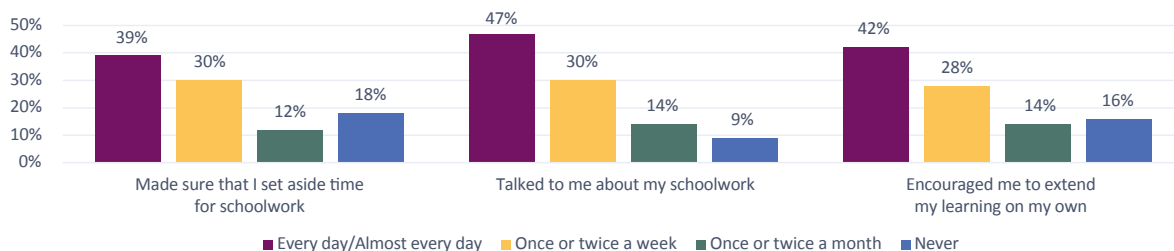


#### Home learning and support

We asked the TDP learners about the kind of learning activities they were involved in at home during closures. Seventy-seven per cent reported revising their schoolwork, 61% read their set schoolwork, and 58% completed past exam papers. These responses suggest that they continued with some learning activities while at home. These learners were high performers and may have been more self-motivated than other learners.

Research emphasises the importance of a supportive home environment in shaping learner achievement. Home support played an important role in keeping TDP learners on track with their learning. Figure 4 shows learner responses about interactions with someone at home: two-thirds reported that someone made sure they often set aside time for their homework, three-quarters had someone talk to them about their homework often, and 70% were often encouraged to extend their learning on their own.

**Figure 4:** Home involvement and support

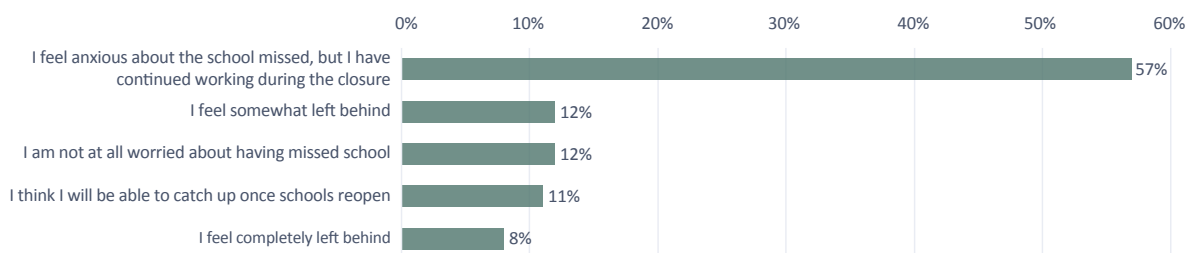


Most TDP learners reported that their families were equipped to cope with the impact of the pandemic, in terms of having sufficient information (79%) and resources (61%). However, a small percentage indicated that their families did not have sufficient information (4%) or resources (12%), which would likely be the case for many South African learners.

**Learner well-being**

Studies on learner psychology suggest that exposure to crises, such as public health emergencies, has enduring negative consequences for socioemotional and cognitive development. Figure 5 shows that more than half the TDP learners felt anxious about missing school during the pandemic but had continued working. A fifth felt ‘somewhat’ (12%) or ‘completely’ (8%) left behind. A quarter of learners reported not being worried at all or reported feeling they would be able to catch up when schools reopened. This was concerning, as it was unlikely that learners would catch up easily.

**Figure 5:** Views on learning impact



We asked learners whether they felt they required counselling or psychological support due to the impact of COVID-19. Seventeen per cent felt that they required counselling or psychological support and of these learners, a quarter felt they needed counselling to a ‘high’ extent.

**Conclusion**

COVID-19 has had a major impact on learning and well-being, and not all learners are equally equipped to deal with it. However, we have limited insights into how higher-performing learners from lower-income households navigated learning at home during school closures. This study sheds light on some aspects of learners’ experiences and feelings. We have highlighted the importance of access to learning resources, home support and particularly online educator support during the pandemic.

Educators maintained communication with the TDP learners, mainly through WhatsApp, and provided access to electronic and printed resources. While it is encouraging that just under half the TDP group received online lessons, it is concerning that the rest had minimal learning engagements during this period. Continued and frequent communication between educators and learners was crucial to ensuring academic progress. According to TDP learners, they received a high level of support at home, which is a key ingredient to managing learning. Many learners were anxious about missing school but had continued working at home.

Moving forward, we need to understand more about learning experiences and well-being during this unusual time in learners’ lives. Psychosocial support, increased resource provision by schools, and encouraging home support for learning will be crucial to mitigating the impact of the pandemic.

**Authors:** Sylvia Hannan, a senior researcher, and Fabian Arends, a senior research manager, in the HSRC’s Inclusive Economic Development research division

[shannan@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:shannan@hsrc.ac.za)

[farends@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:farends@hsrc.ac.za)