




The importance of Life Orientation in a time of COVID-19: Perceptions of preservice teachers

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This research explored the challenges experienced by society during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the role thereof in the validation of Life Orientation in South African schools. The importance of Life Orientation as a subject has been questioned since its implementation in 2006. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that the skills and values taught in Life Orientation were actually needed to survive the mental and emotional impacts of the pandemic. The aim of this study was to explore the preservice teachers' perceptions of Life Orientation, the importance of this subject and the knowledge, skills and values that are taught in Life Orientation and how these can equip society during the pandemic. The research followed a qualitative design in an interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected through an online questionnaire that preservice teachers had to complete. A group of 102 first-year Bachelor of Education students, 18 fourth-year Bachelor of Education students and 20 students in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme were involved in the study. Preliminary data revealed that COVID-19 challenges had a possible impact on the attitudes of 140 preservice teachers towards Life Orientation as a compulsory subject in South Africa and further concluded that Life Orientation plays a significant role in preparing learners for various challenges faced by society, not least the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: validation; Life Orientation; COVID-19 challenges; preservice teachers; South African schools.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a global crisis that has had a significant impact on people's lives and has caused economic, political and social havoc. People are left feeling powerless and unsettled. When social isolation, financial stress and economic uncertainty are added, as well as disrupted work and family routines, it is understandable that people's mental and psychological health is suffering.¹ The aforementioned factors lead one to question whether Life Orientation (LO) as a compulsory subject in the curriculum with the aim of developing learners holistically might contribute to the way the pandemic could be handled. The South African curriculum defines LO as 'a unique subject in that it applies a holistic approach to the personal, social, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, motor and physical growth and development of learners'.² The attributes of LO address (1) the development of the self (personal well-being), including knowledge, attitudes, values and skills; (2) social and environmental responsibility (citizenship education), including social engagement; (3) recreation and physical activity (physical education), such as health responsibility and healthy lifestyle; and (4) career choices, including entrepreneurship.² It appears that the knowledge, skills and values that are taught in LO can possibly equip learners and society, in general, to cope better with some of the challenges posed by the pandemic. One of the biggest challenges faced during the pandemic is the impact on family life, specifically the changes in the well-being of parents and children (personal well-being being one of the topics in the LO curriculum). Parents experience an increase of negative feelings (nervousness, depression, aggression, etc.), and as a result, children's stress levels are influenced by parental over-reactivity.³ The effect of the pandemic on the emotional and psychological well-being of the youth (personal well-being) seems to have escalated. Isolation, being unable to participate in physical sport activities (recreational and physical activities, another topic in the LO curriculum), minimal social interaction with peer groups and a repetitive daily routine (related to citizenship education, which is a topic in the LO curriculum) all have a negative impact on the emotional and mental well-being of the youth.⁴

Not being able to participate in sport for development (recreational and physical activities) plays a significant role in adding to the challenges faced by the pandemic. Sport is a major contributor to economic growth and social development. Physical activity and well-being are intertwined.⁵

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on religious gatherings and practices. Religious events such as church gatherings, assemblies and pilgrimages were cancelled, and this has had a significant impact on people's emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. The sector suffering the most is healthcare (also a topic related to citizenship education in LO). Globally, health systems were not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶

Worldwide, the prohibition on personal gatherings (citizenship education, such as social responsibility as well as personal well-being) is still one of the most difficult challenges to overcome in the harsher lockdown periods. People feel alone and secluded, and they miss their loved ones. Consequently, this has a large impact on their collective emotional and mental well-being. An increase in reports of domestic violence (citizenship education, such as social responsibility and personal well-being) and violence between intimate partners is experienced in many countries across the world during the lockdown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ Factors such as financial stress, poverty, job losses (career choices and entrepreneurship will be of value) and uncertainty lead to amplified aggression at home.

Moreover, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education is evident, and educational systems worldwide have been affected significantly by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to extensive closures of schools and tertiary institutions. According to data released by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on 25 March 2021, the closure of schools, universities and other educational institutions because of COVID-19 was implemented globally in 165 countries. Terminology and ideas such as remote teaching, online learning, home schooling and distance learning became the 'new normal'. According to Aseev,⁸ in most developing countries, learners' preparedness at all stages, infrastructure, quality, access, population, finances and teacher preparation have been some of the major bottlenecks, amongst other experiences. Remote learning involves many challenges, including a lack of infrastructure, weak or no Internet connectivity, the data cost of teaching or learning online, online assessment and no personal contact. As the lockdown in South Africa and many countries worldwide had an impact on the educational system, as mentioned above, the question arises whether LO might be utilised to equip learners with the skills necessary to cope with the pandemic. The challenges that LO as a compulsory subject has experienced since its introduction include that the subject has a reputation for not being 'important', which has led to the stigmatisation of the subject as a 'free period'.⁹ These perceptions, as well as the fact that LO is excluded from the calculation to determine the admission point score (APS) required for admission to tertiary institutions, contribute to the fact that the subject is not always taken seriously. Fortunately, Magano¹⁰ reported that many learners find LO meaningful, but teachers have a very important role to play in presenting the subject and in the way it is managed in the

school. The attitude of teachers inadvertently impacts how the subject is received by learners and by schools. In this study, the questions that were asked to student teachers explored how they perceived LO, whether and how the pandemic changed their view of the importance of LO and whether it contributed to validating the subject.

Theoretical framework

This study was framed within Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory, as LO cannot be taught without taking the different systems (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, chronosystems and macrosystems) into account. In combination with Bronfenbrenner's theory, we also focus on Michael Fullan's¹¹ change theory and the seven premises he describes. For the purpose of this article, the focus was on motivation as Fullan's first premise to achieve results from the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the change of the context as described by Bronfenbrenner. The third premise of Fullan's theory, where learning in context is the focus, and the fourth premise, where the changing of contexts is described, also directed the theoretical framework. The context and the ability to learn in the specific changed context are now a reality for the teaching of LO. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding the role of COVID-19 challenges experienced by society as a vehicle towards destigmatising LO. How can the knowledge, skills and values that are taught in LO equip society for the challenges presented in a time such as the pandemic?

Research methods and design

For this study, an interpretivist research paradigm was used together with a qualitative research design. Data were collected through an online questionnaire. A phenomenological approach was used for the purpose of this study. Phenomenology focuses on people's mindful experience of their environment, which includes their day-to-day lives and social interactions.¹² A qualitative research design was the most appropriate method for this study to examine the complexities and various nuances of preservice teachers' perceptions of LO and its importance as a school subject during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were selected purposefully. A purposive or non-probability sampling was used when researchers deliberately selected their data sources.¹³ In this case, we used individuals that could provide the most information on the phenomenon under investigation. A group of 102 first-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) students, 18 fourth-year BEd students and 20 students in the Postgraduate Certificate in Education programme (PGCE) were involved in the study.

The research was conducted through an online questionnaire made available to participants through the university's online learning platform. Ethical clearance was obtained, and the participants were informed that the questionnaire will be used for research purposes only. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions. The following three questions were

posed. (1) How do preservice teachers perceive Life Orientation? (2) What role (if any) did the challenges experienced during COVID-19 play in changing your attitude towards the importance of Life Orientation as a school subject? (3) In your opinion, did the COVID-19 pandemic play a role in the possible destigmatising of Life Orientation? By using open-ended questions, the researchers did not offer the participants a predetermined set of answers but instead allowed the participants to provide responses in their own words. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data for the study. The fundamental task during data analysis is to identify general themes in participants' comments about the phenomenon.¹³ Data segments were grouped, constructed by the analysis of the different groupings in terms of similarities and differences, and several themes emerging from the examination itself served as findings. In the study, data analysis was conducted in three phases, as proposed by Wellington:¹⁴ data reduction, where data are collected, summarised and categorised; data presentation, where ordered data are illustrated and represented graphically or visually; and drawing conclusions, where data are interpreted and meaning is given to the data. We identified themes and came to certain conclusions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from North-West University Ethics Committee (clearance number: NWU-00479-17-A2) for a larger project with preservice teachers for which an application was submitted. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants, and those who wished to participate in the study completed an online questionnaire consisting of three reflective questions.

Results and discussion of findings

We begin the discussion with the perceptions of the preservice teachers about LO, followed by the possible change of attitude towards LO during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude the discussion with the role of the pandemic in destigmatising the subject.

Preservice teachers' perceptions of Life Orientation as a compulsory subject

The following themes were generated from the questionnaires of the different groups of preservice teachers when they were asked about the way they perceived LO. Firstly, the theme *the importance or value of Life Orientation* emerged. A total of 102 first-year preservice teachers answered this question, and 88 of the participants agreed that they perceived LO as an important subject. This finding challenges the view prevalent in the literature that LO as a compulsory subject has the stigma of being an unnecessary subject. The fourth-year students and PGCE students responded mostly positively in this regard. It was evident that the first-year and fourth-year BEd preservice teachers and the PGCE preservice teachers were convinced that the content of the LO curriculum was

both necessary and a tool in making a difference in the lives of learners. It was also perceived as a means of preparation for the future, with most of the participants commenting on this aspect. It became clear that the preservice teachers have the motivation to work against the stigma that is experienced in the subject. They are aware of the perceptions that exist towards LO. This resonates with the premise of Fullan's change theory¹¹ that these preservice teachers are instrumental in building capacity in the teaching of the subject, with a focus on positive motivation to work against the stigma.

A large majority of the participants agreed that LO was important for learners' holistic development, taking all systems in Bronfenbrenner's theory into account. Other participants were positive about the role that the subject could play in the development of learners in general and the fact that the content can contribute to the restoration of our society during and after the pandemic:

'Life Orientation is central to the holistic development of learners. LO leads and prepares learners for life and equips them to live meaningfully and successfully in society that is changing rapidly.' (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

'Life Orientation teaches learners skills and knowledge that is applicable to real-life situations and how learners can respond and deal with everyday challenges in their lives. It gives one an opportunity to understand himself or herself and what they want to become.' (BEd fourth-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

Lastly, the theme of the *importance of physical and mental health* emerged. A total of 75% of the first-year preservice teachers agreed on this theme, and the fourth-year and PGCE students also commented on this issue.

The following quotations give a summary of the participants' views:

'People suffered emotionally during the pandemic, and LO's knowledge could teach people how to deal with that emotional stress by, e.g., to do exercises etc. Even other teachers do not consider LO to be an important subject but during the pandemic they wanted to hear more information or new developments from the LO teacher because they are the people who stay informed about most things.' (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

'LO is just not a subject that is just there and not important, but in fact it is very important because it is where learners are able to learn about practicing good hygiene and taking care of their well-being, both mentally, emotionally and physically. With so much stress that the pandemic brought, at least our learners are taught about how to manage stress and pressure and also how to overcome.' (BEd fourth-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

'Life Orientation also plays an important role in addressing and emphasizing the importance of mental health. COVID-19 changed the world and brought so many challenges. People lost their jobs while others suffered from mental breakdown. Therefore, I believe Life Orientation is very important to equip learners from an early age to be resilient and strong, which is

what we needed the most during this hard time.’ (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The above-mentioned responses place emphasis on the attributes that are taught in LO that could be used to cope with the challenges of the pandemic. Examples of these attributes are self-awareness (i.e. staying positive during COVID-19); stress management (i.e. how to effectively deal with stress during COVID-19); dealing with depression (i.e. seeking psychological help during COVID-19); resilience; human rights (in case of abuse) as well as how to handle domestic violence or even creating positive relationships. All these attributes taught in LO helped individuals to deal with the challenges of COVID-19 whilst displaying the importance of LO, or rather the knowledge acquired through these subjects was used during the pandemic for survival and sustainability.

Possible change of attitude towards Life Orientation during the COVID-19 pandemic

The first-year preservice teachers indicated that the pandemic played a role in changing their attitude towards LO as a compulsory school subject. The following themes emerged from the data: teaching of pandemics and diseases, health and environmental responsibility, social responsibility, physical and mental health, development of the self, development of learners and development through the pandemic. It became clear that the participants realise the importance for the youth to have the appropriate knowledge and skills that is currently addressed in the LO curriculum. Firstly, the theme *teaching of pandemics and diseases* came to the fore. Most of the participants agreed that LO is important because of the content on pandemics and diseases covered in the curriculum:

‘People were mentally unprepared and scared. My sister was in her matric year and the one thing she taught me during this pandemic was a small activity from her LO textbook that helped her stay calm and headstrong. LO taught by the right teacher can have a huge impact on their student’s life. Therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized just how important LO is as a school subject.’ (BEed first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The stigma attached to some diseases was also brought up by some of the participants. The fact that the participants commented on the stigma made it evident that it is an issue in the school setting. Fortunately, the whole issue of stigmatisation and especially the stigma of HIV is taught in LO, and they linked that content to COVID-19:

‘Life skills teaches about the stigma attached to diseases and how being mean to sick people can harm them more than the virus ext. Life Skills also teaches where to go when sick and how to take care of yourself. People started being very judgmental and emotionally abusing to people with COVID-19.’ (BEed first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

One participant commented on the fact that LO gave teachers the opportunity to teach learners about COVID-19:

‘When schools restarted, the first assignment that learners had to do was about COVID. So it taught us about the whole pandemic, how it started, what it is, how it spreads, the do’s and the don’ts. So I think it also changed some of the learners’ attitudes about the subject and actually realised that it is an important subject.’ (BEed fourth-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The COVID-19 pandemic also challenged the way teachers have to think about their own teaching in general. New ways were explored to cope with the fact that South Africa had a national lockdown and schools were closed for several weeks. The reality was that teachers still needed to teach their subjects to learners in innovative ways, even when learners only come to school on alternative days or weeks, depending on the school programme. This resonates with the notion in Fullan’s change theory¹¹ that in order to move forward and to change, reflective action is needed, and this was indeed what could be seen during the COVID-19 pandemic:

‘COVID came to rob the majority of our human lives. It is the LO teacher’s duty to educate the learners more with a psychological approach. In other words, learners may be emotionally and physically affected by the effect which caused the pandemic on our lives. Because COVID has become part of our daily life, we as teachers can educate the learner with the necessary knowledge. The pandemic did not take everything away from us, it just caused us not to do certain things as in the past. In the past we could all be together, but in this lockdown period, everything has changed so that social-economic issues have also diminished.’ (BEed fourth-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The responses from the participants led to the theme *health and environmental responsibility*, which is also covered in the LO curriculum under this topic and focuses more specifically on personal hygiene.¹⁵ The preservice teachers seemed to realise the importance of these topics during the pandemic:

‘Life Orientation already had contents where learners are taught of health and safety measures; in this manner Life Orientation played a huge role in emphasizing the regulations of COVID-19 that were implemented, such as washing hands with soap and using hygienic products.’ (BEed first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The applicability of LO and the role it can play in the dismantling of negative perceptions about the subject is further discussed by the following participants:

‘Challenges experienced during COVID-19 played a huge role in changing of attitude towards the importance of Life Orientation; it made me to realise how Life Orientation is important in my life. In terms of being a responsible citizen, it showed that I was because I got used to wearing a mask and always washing my hands to avoid getting infected and infecting others. It helped in dealing with emotions and living a healthy life.’ (BEed first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘... [W]hen this pandemic occurred, Life Orientation had to be applied into our everyday lives.’ (BEed first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘I, for one, used to regard Life Orientation as unimportant during high school, but that perception completely changed during the

COVID-19 pandemic. I realized that most of the skills I used to survive during the pandemic, I adopted them in Life Orientation. These include the following: in the Life Orientation subject, we were taught about hygiene which included the washing of hands (a core skill needed during the pandemic); physical activities – in Life Orientation we have physical education which promotes the strengthening of the immune system (one's immune system must be strong).' (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The pandemic also made teachers more aware of the importance of the content of LO, for example, basic hygiene and looking after oneself:

'Life Orientation as a subject is important because it is that subject in schools that educates learners about the importance of taking care of themselves, both mentally, emotionally and physically.' (BEd fourth-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The third theme that emerged was *social responsibility*, which also is a topic in the LO curriculum. The participants emphasised the importance of responsibility towards society. One participant indicated that the stereotyping of people with COVID-19 was unacceptable:

'Stereotype is one concept of Life Orientation. People are stereotyping people with COVID-19 without knowing how they look like when they are affected.' (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The participants also emphasised the importance of respect towards each other in society:

'The COVID-19 pandemic taught learners about morals and respecting each other and following the rules and regulations implemented.' (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

'LO also teaches learners to exercise their rights and responsibilities and respect the rights of others. Learners needed to know that they and the people around them have the right to health and a safe environment where they are safe from the COVID-19 virus. During COVID, learners should know that others have the right not to stand near them to protect themselves from the virus.' (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The next theme was physical and mental health, where the participants agreed that their attitudes had changed in this regard:

'The challenges experienced during the COVID-19 played an important role on my attitude towards Life Orientation, because I got a chance to use all the skills and knowledge I attained from LO when dealing with mental issues like how to deal with anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Mainly how to cope with the stress that COVID-19 has brought. Therefore, I think Life Orientation is an important school subject to help both learners and adults to develop skills to conduct positive interaction even at the worse times like COVID-19.' (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The focus of the participants on all the topics in the subject, as described in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy

Statement document, gave evidence of the importance of the content and the possibility that the stigma of LO as being useless and a waste of time is not fair at all. The following three themes that emerged were intertwined: development of the self, development of learners and development through the pandemic. It became evident during the pandemic that violence and abuse have increased. Some of the participants mentioned how learners developed to be able to handle those situations better because of what they have learnt in LO:

'... [D]uring confinement, families were forced to be together for a long time under one roof, which could lead to an increase in violence ('abuse'), where a subject such as Life Orientation could contribute to a learner being able to evaluate the situation and even could control.' (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

It seems as if the preservice teachers were well aware of the input and influence of LO in learners' lives to help them be more resilient and cope better during the pandemic:

'The subject Life Skills is the centre of holistic learner development.' (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

'The subject played a role by instilling the knowledge of evolving; this prepared me for the changes that came with COVID-19. I was able to rethink the way I live my life, change my lifestyle, because self-isolation gave me time to focus on confidence building. As the subject addresses the evolving and the development of the society, during the pandemic, virtual system was introduced and it played a role in communicating across learning, working, transacting and consuming.' (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

'Challenges experienced during COVID-19 period played a role in changing negative attitude towards the importance of Life Orientation, because not everyone was able to cope with challenges and stresses caused by COVID pandemic. For example, unemployment challenge which caused stress led to [the] realization that stress management is essential and LO addresses effective ways of dealing with stress. During the pandemic period social order transformed. This leads to the realization that LO is important as it equips learners with the skills to use in order to function optimally in a changing environment.' (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The view of the participants was that LO plays an important role in the development of learners holistically because the content has the opportunity to equip learners for productive and effective functioning in a constantly changing world. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made everyone very aware of the fact that skills are needed to help one cope in this ever-changing world. It also shed light on the fact that the current situation will emphasise the fact that subjects like LO are really needed and that the stigma towards the subjects is unnecessary:

'LO is a very insightful subject as it provides learners the basic principles in life needed to achieve self-actualisation, success and wise decision-making. These values are not embedded in most subjects, and in many households I have noted that these values and principles are not taught from parents to learners.' (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘Therefore, it is crucial that today’s youth can enjoy a subject such as LO and acquire the right knowledge, receive guidance in dealing with life crises and situations correctly.’ (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The role of the pandemic in destigmatising Life Orientation as a compulsory subject

The last part of the study focuses on the role of the COVID-19 pandemic in destigmatising LO. The preservice teachers taking part in the study were convinced that the pandemic played an important role in destigmatising these subjects. Four themes came to the fore from the data analysis: skills and knowledge obtained through LO, the curriculum and its changes, the development of learners and the compulsory nature of LO. About 90% of the first-year preservice teachers agreed on the importance of skills and knowledge obtained through LO and felt that the pandemic highlighted the importance of these skills:

‘Absolutely! After the COVID-19 pandemic of last year, I think a lot of learners, parents and even teachers saw the importance of the skills and values studied in the subject of Life Orientation. Life Orientation holds great power in changing young lives, preparing learners for difficult times they might face and equipping them with skills and values needed to overcome challenges.’ (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘Yes, the pandemic played a huge part because a lot of skills and knowledge attained from LO were put to use. A lot of facts, opinion, strategies, theories, etc., about mental, emotional and environmental issues were addressed and emphasized to the people to be mentally fit and fight COVID-19 challenges. So it has lowered the bad way people see Life Orientation as a school subject.’ (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

Curriculum and its changes emerged as the second theme. Many of the participants stated that COVID-19 as a pandemic and the handling thereof should be added to the curriculum, as they already have incorporated the content since the outbreak of the pandemic:

‘Yes, because Life Orientation can now be used as a platform to teach learners more about the pandemic. Even though Life Orientation was never considered as an important subject, this time it was used to spread an important message to learners.’ (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘... [T]here was not many questions teachers could answer about the topic as it was new to everyone. And the fact that the curriculum was changed to COVID-19 made the whole subject.’ (BEd fourth-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘The stigma of LO as a compulsory subject can only be addressed if the curriculum in the high school as well as assessment in the high school are changed. I would rather try to change social issues of learners, or make learners more resilient to be able to enter a career after school. Learn skills that the learners can do something with to make money.’ (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The importance of the LO content was commented on by many of the participants. Many of them opined that the importance of LO had come to the fore because important

topics that form part of the curriculum were addressed during the pandemic, for instance, personal hygiene, personal relationships and important skills such as coping skills, especially with feelings of loss and stress:

‘Life Orientation has faced stigma for many years before corona, but knowing what we know now, there has never been a better subject to address COVID-19, how to cope with it, increase knowledge of the disease and how to live a better mental, physical and social life with the knowledge presented by this subject.’ (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘Yes, COVID-19 did change the stigma of LO. Teachers and learners now realize the importance of LO more as an education subject. It was previously seen as an unimportant subject, but now because of COVID-19, people are realizing the importance of discipline (wearing masks and regularly hand-sanitizing) as well as personal hygiene that is part of the LO content.’ (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

The *development of learners* emerged as the third theme, with 75% of the participants stating that LO indeed contributes to the development of learners. According to the participants, it became evident since the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic that learners have become more aware of personal development. The following statements provide a summary of the responses:

‘The COVID-19 pandemic also played a role in schools, as learners were able to acquire unique skills to solve problems themselves and ways to deal with depressive and frightening situations in an appropriate way. Interpersonal conflict can now also be prevented because learners know what to do in certain situations where holistic skills are required.’ (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

‘The process of change happens systematically. Supporting cognitive development is the most important, but aspects such as COVID-19, cancer and HIV [and] AIDS accelerate the change. The positive outcome can be maintained if the teacher acts as a change agent. However, facts regarding values, attitudes and norms remain the same. The whole concept of presenting LO remains regulated by sources of knowledge and teacher skills.’ (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

Lastly, *the compulsory nature and the importance of the subject* emerged as the fourth theme. The following response serves as an example of the comments made by the participants:

‘Yes, COVID-19 definitely played a role in the possible destigmatizing of Life Orientation. I think it was an eye opener for some to see that so many people don’t have knowledge of basic skills like washing your hands regularly, respecting other’s health by not coughing without covering your mouth, etc. A subject like Life Orientation would play a very important role in teaching children, who in turn go home and teach their parents too.’ (BEd first-year student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

According to the participants, the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed contributed to the destigmatising of LO because of the content of the subject and the fact that learners are educated on how to deal with diseases such as COVID-19:

‘Yes, I think that once individuals realised that the subject highlights and touches on topics that are very real and applicable

in everyday society, the stigmatisation and labels associated to the subject were relooked at. It is unfortunate, however, that a pandemic has played a role in a change of perception regarding the subject and not the recognition that it is indeed important to equip learners with life skills that some learners are only aware of because of the subject. It should be a constant that Life Orientation teachers continue to shed light on the importance of the subject, especially among South African youth, because of the many disparities encountered by students.' (PGCE student, undisclosed gender, date unknown)

Some comments focus on the fact that the subjects give learners the opportunity to develop on different levels to improve their well-being mentally, emotionally and physically. This resonates with the aim of LO to develop learners holistically.

Conclusion

This research concluded that according to the perspectives of preservice teachers, LO plays a significant role in preparing learners for various challenges faced by society, not least the COVID-19 pandemic. The importance of LO came to the fore in no uncertain terms. The participants' perceptions of LO are that the content of the subject is needed to help with the development of learners in a holistic way and that it is also important for the physical and mental health of learners. The responses of the participants suggest that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fact that it is necessary for learners and society to have knowledge about pandemics and diseases. It also came to the fore that topics such as health and environmental responsibility, as well as social responsibility and the development of the self, can contribute to the knowledge, skills and values that contribute to mental and emotional resilience, which is critical during the pandemic. Looking at the results and perspectives of the participants, the importance of LO is clear. The knowledge, skills and values that are taught in LO and how these can equip society in a time such as the COVID-19 pandemic were emphasised.

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A.E.B., J.R. and S.d.J. all contributed equally to this work.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study can be made available by the corresponding author, A.E.B., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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