

## **“COVID-19 AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR.”**

2020 is a year best forgotten for the infamous COVID-19 Virus pandemic unleashing its fatal fury on the entire World. No country was spared as this unseen formidable foe swathe nation after nation with death and socio-economic destruction. So devastatingly contagious that the earthly planet was plunged into an unprecedented Lockdown to prevent human contact and transmission. Such an extreme response left in its wake incalculable disaster in almost every sphere of Life.

Highly developed, developing and under-developed countries were not spared the crushing effects of the unrelenting Virus. However, it is argued that the greatest ruinous effects are felt in the so-called vulnerable population. In general, the Informal Sector, but in particular school-going children.

Children from the Informal Sector traditionally experience abject poverty, gross deficiency and a poor quality of life under the most compromised conditions. The one saving Grace is that medical experts hold that at present children are not the most susceptible to the effects of the Virus. They are still not immune to the Virus but present with less severe symptoms. The myriad of deleterious and ravaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is beyond the scope of this attenuated brief.

Unemployed parents from the Informal Sector who themselves lowly schooled and struggling to eke out an existence play little or no beneficial roles in promoting their children's educational progress during this extraordinary crisis. Domestic social ills further reduce the poorly performing academic levels of the latter.

In addition, sudden and unplanned school-closure precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic was bound to profoundly impact children from the Informal Sector. Large numbers of these children attend poorly resourced schools. It is not likely that such schools adequately prepared their impressionable charges for any transition to a highly deprived home environment.

It is moot to what extent so-called remote learning was a reality with these seriously disadvantaged children. Further, a lack of electricity and the unavailability of technology like computers, wi-fi and internet connectivity make online learning impossible. Hard copy notes and worksheets were not readily supplied. The March to September 2020 Lockdown has exacerbated what is already a parlous household situation. Without any or adequate educational stimulation these ill-equipped children are bound to have cumulative learning loss. The unequal access of technology is likely to have widened the learning gap. The return to school was necessary but almost perfunctory. The classroom contact time was reduced and almost halved with the Curriculum inevitably syncopated. The Testing programme did not encompass the breath of the Curriculum and it can be conjectured that there could have been relaxation with promotion and progression requirements. It is true that all children experienced the same scenario. The convenience of the adjusted school arrangements definitely does not enhance the academic well-being of children from impoverished and depressed socio-economic environments. Will these environmentally impaired children ever:

- ...return to any semblance of normalcy?
- ...cope with navigating the transition from school to the demanding home circumstance?
- ...realise their full cognitive potential in an uncertain future?

There is no reference to the disruption in the lives of LSEN children who are so-called not neuro-typical. Their unyielding circumstances is a subject for its own discussion.

We are inextricably linked to the business of Education. It behooves all Psychologist, let alone Educational Psychologists to contribute to the re-building in such children's engagement, highlight the overwhelming plight of such desperate children, play advocacy roles and mitigate the tremendous risks for one of the most neglected sectors of this vulnerable population especially during Child Protection Week and always.

Dr N Chetty-Educational Psychologist. SEPSA Vice-Chairperson. May 11,2021.

## CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH WEEK: 2025

PSYSSA is complimented for launching the 2025 MHC with the focus on Children's Mental Health. Children have a special place in Society. They are the archetypal pride and joy of parents associated with fun, laughter, joy and playfully mischievous in a normal society. Parents generally promote their healthy living through social, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. The seminal Children's Act 38 of 2005 and amendments profoundly spell out how children must be cared for and protected.

While there were adverse conditions prior to the drafting of the above Act, the current children's mental health needs have reached uncontrollable proportions. This in fact has given rise to grave concerns for their mental health and fears for their safety. It would make for un-sobering reading to take a snapshot view of how children are faring with their Mental Health globally. Space does not allow for such a broadside perspective. WHO (2022) presents the startling statistic that twenty five (25%) of children present with Mental Health issues. A UNICEF South African Report posited that sixty (60%) of youth needed mental health support. However, only 12.4 % of children and adolescents with mental health problems receive professional help (Kleintjies et al., 2015). This can be explained by the gross imbalance between psychologists and patients. According to the SAACP ( 2020) there were

(3022)-Clinical Psychologists; (1598)-Counselling Psychologists; (1510).-Educational Psychologists

This translates to a ratio of about 1 psychologist for 10 633 clients. At a systemic level this overwhelming inequity explains why children in general find it difficult to access Mental Health services. This situation is further exacerbated by the fact that the majority of the practitioners are in private practice. This begs the question what if any mental health intervention children from the rural area receive. The psychological services attached to the various districts in each province can hardly be considered to be a serious service provider of mental health. Statistics from eight DOE provinces (2020-2021) underscore the stark and gloomy reality of the effete mental health school provisions :

Province	Pupils	Psychologists
Eastern Cape	1 704 581	Unknown
Free State	541 959	15-20
Kwa Zulu Natal	2 758 831	83
Limpopo	1 245 095	30-35
Mpumalanga	745 838	25
North West	584 831	20-25
Northern Cape	272 411	15-20
Western Cape	1048 905	47
Gauteng	2 055 042	45

An overpowering disproportion between pupils and psychologists. It is noted that formal assessments cannot be administered for this reason. In any case it is apparent that psychologists only respond to a request from a school about twelve months later. However, the inordinate disparity in numbers make access to mental health impossible for the majority of pupils. To a large extent detractors to the existence of school psychology are justified. It is an expensive service. It is a first world phenomenon in an under-developed third-world context.

The general public is hardly and selectively serviced, schools are poorly-serviced and the rural areas are abysmally non-serviced. Are we paying attention to the scary Big Picture or merely going through the motions like school psychological services. As the mental needs of our children get more complex and demanding are we psychologists playing the proverbial fiddle. Severe trauma, depression, anxiety, stress and suicide ideation are major psychological constructs that children experience. Their mental health needs are utterly under-provided. In the recent Mental State of the World Report released by Sapiens Labs South Africa ranked

- Second(2<sup>nd</sup>) Lowest on the Mental Health Quotient
- First as the most stressed country in the world

A recent advert notes that the " difference is in the detail ". We are patently aware of the appalling details. We need to step out of the comfort zones in our insulated ivory towers and make the difference.

.Dr N Chetty-Educational Psychologist. SEPSA Vice-Chairperson. January 22,2025.