

# THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PERSPECTIVES OF ECD CENTRE PRINCIPALS

## INTRODUCTION

Challenges within the early childhood development (ECD) sector in South Africa have been well documented. The sector has been described as “fragile and largely informal”,<sup>1</sup> and has historically not been well supported by government in terms the funding necessary to provide quality early care and early learning services. It was ill-equipped to withstand further shocks, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this sector has been devastating. This included the closure of many ECD centres, loss of jobs and livelihoods, the suspension of the ECD subsidy in some provinces, and limited resources to stay operational.<sup>1</sup> These financial challenges, along with the negative impacts of the pandemic on education, employment, hunger and mental health, have also been highlighted in the NIDS-CRAM Survey.<sup>2</sup>

Although this impact has been documented, little research has been done to qualitatively capture the perspectives of the ECD centre principals impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this gap, and better understand principals’ perspectives on how they had been affected by the pandemic, 17 principals were interviewed (15 in a group setting, 2 individually). All principals have been part of the Centres of Excellence Programme at the Foundation for Community Work (<https://www.fcw.co.za>). These principals work within low- and middle-income communities, many of which were hard hit by the pandemic. This report provides a summary of the findings from these interviews, including quotes from the principals to best illustrate their perspectives and highlight their voices in this pandemic.

## OVERALL IMPACT ON ECD CENTRES

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic, and associated lockdown and restrictions, were perceived to have had a substantial detrimental impact on ECD centres. As one ECD principal stated, “everything came to a standstill”, and there was wide acknowledgement that this has led to considerable losses in terms of the early learning and development of the children in their care. The impact of the pandemic included challenges associated with complying with COVID-19 safety requirements, the financial impact on ECD centres and meeting the need, the impact on ECD principals and practitioners, and the impact on children.

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<sup>1</sup> Berry L, Biersteker L, Rantsi T. Children and COVID-19 Advocacy Brief – ECD programmes: a case for investment in times of crisis. <http://www.ci.uct.ac.za/ci/projects/covid-children>

<sup>2</sup> National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey: <https://cramsurvey.org/reports/>



*"You know COVID if it was a child, I would give it a smack and send it back to where it is coming from. Honestly, there is a lot that we missed out on, trust me. We lost out on a whole year of planning there were things that we were doing that were supposed to be done, that put us into another level that got held up and disappeared into the COVID lane."*

## FINANCIAL IMPACT ON ECD CENTRES

Based on the responses of these principals, the most significant negative impact of the pandemic on ECD centres seems to have been the loss of revenue from fees; a few mentioned that they had lost sponsors or donors. While centres were closed, many parents were not able to pay fees for their child due to job losses and other economic challenges; some may not have wanted to pay fees while centres were closed, given that children were not attending. Many reported lower numbers of children returning when the centres reopened – some getting as low as a third of children back – either due to parents not being able to afford the fees, or wanting to keep their child at home for safety reasons. For some smaller centres, it was not financially viable to reopen and stay operational with such limited revenue.

The crux of this challenge for ECD centres was that they still had overhead costs to cover, and many spoke about the difficulty of paying staff and still having resources for feeding the children. This obviously had knock-on effects on the financial situation of ECD staff, and ultimately the children at these centres in terms of the resources available. Some principals mentioned that they needed to increase their fees in 2021 to be able to cover their costs, and that due to losing donor funding, they needed to be more reliant on parents for extra costs.



*"Remember the ECD it is, the fees, it is less fees coming in. And the parents are so used to... we feeding their children. So, we can't say okay we are going to charge more because that child used to be fed at the ECD. So, you can see that child had the right nutrition, nutritious meal for the day. So, parents don't want to pay a certain amount of money because some of the parents work one day off, one day on."*

*"I'm listening to them say that on so many occasions parents have lost their jobs and you don't see the financing, you see the heart of the child, because this is where the child is safe. And yes, nutrition. But at the end of the day you are still an operational business with the same overheads, with the same expenses, however your capacity is not the same as it used to be. So, you find a lot of challenges in that regard."*

*"Ja, you know as soon as we came back in September none of them had a salary and every month they are just taking whatever change they get paid. I think it is a long time now, it is more than a year ago that they come to work and work for 8 hours every day and not earn your full salary. It doesn't make me feel good anyway."*

*"I lost some of my sponsors you know. So, for instance last year there wasn't any graduation, there was no concert, no nothing. This year I'm struggling because I had sponsors doing that for me. This year I'm struggling because I had to ask parents to put in something. Because when I used to do those things, I used to get something sponsored, so I wouldn't ask parents to pop in anything, they would just come you know. Now I need to ask parents to donate money also do the planning of the whole thing you know."*

## COMPLYING WITH COVID-19 SAFETY REQUIREMENTS

Many centres closed in March 2020 under Level 5 restrictions, and were closed for approximately 6 months. The Department of Basic Education produced a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for ECD centres that specified a range of safety requirements with which centres needed to comply when they reopened. This SOP was described as very lengthy and daunting, and some mentioned that they had to be prepared for unscheduled visits from government officials to check if they were complying. Principals spoke about their efforts to comply with these requirements, such as sanitising hands, surfaces, toys and learning materials, as well as physical distancing and not touching. One of the specific challenges relating to physical distancing is that many centres needed to provide additional tables and chairs for the children in order to comply, since they could no longer seat as many children around one table.



*"I think that COVID has really hit the ECD sector really, really hard in terms of things that we needed to get in place in order to be compliant. And as I know with my colleagues here, we have all done everything in our power to be compliant, so that we don't run the risk of parents having that stigma attached to that specific school, it's been a really, really challenge."*

Principals mentioned that complying with these requirements was costly and quite overwhelming. Some centres only reopened at the beginning of 2021, and this was due to the challenges of meeting the requirements in the SOP. For many, space was a constraint against meeting the distancing requirements, and some principals mentioned having to cut down on the number of children enrolled in order to meet these requirements. The guidance on masks (only required for children 5 years and older) was found to be confusing for some since it meant that children sharing the same facilities (from different age groups) would have different requirements. While none seemed to firmly oppose children wearing masks, there appeared to be a tendency to not enforce this as strongly as other requirements. In general, principals expressed their sense of responsibility to provide a safe environment for their children and staff, as well as their families. Many spoke about the repeated closures when children or staff tested positive or were exposed to COVID-19, and while this was chaotic for ECD centres, principals emphasised the need to be safe.



*"...the challenges of COVID when it comes to the finances those challenges, they are real. They are still real, trying to do your best under these circumstances. Obviously coming back and the whole protocol story was very daunting for me. When I attended a workshop by zoom last year May I said to my husband I'm resigning...I'm not coming to do this, I'm too old for this, no, this challenge is too great for me. I'm not going to take this on someone else can do it."*

## MEETING THE NEED, DESPITE THE CHALLENGES

In spite of these economic challenges, many principals felt responsible to still accommodate children whose parents were not able to pay the fees. They acknowledged that many children relied on the food provided at ECD centres, and they also did not want children to be left at home or unsupervised in their community. In some cases where children had lost a parent/s, relatives were not able to look after the child during the day, and relied on ECD centres for providing this care. This was also problematic when a child was sick and did not have someone at home to look after them, meaning they went to the ECD centre and potentially made other children and staff sick.



*"It did affect us but some of us like me I don't mind having two or three children staying as long as the rest are paying school fees. I try to find out as much of the families that I'm dealing with and I know who can maybe, say this month I'm not paying school fees, you say okay, but don't keep your child at*

*home, bring the child to school, we will pay the school fees next month you know. That is the relationship that we have got."*

*"But also that there needs to be a safe haven for our kids. So, some of the ECD...can't afford to operate, but they open because they don't want to see that children on the road."*

*"...I think it is just re-establishing home away from home. And that is what I always say to them, the centre has to be a home away from home for all of us who come here. We spend more of our hours here you know... So, I think because we, the staff there is a positive ethos man that comes because of their positivity and the jumping into assist wherever needed. I also think it helps the children feel secure and you know they love being here."*

Some principals spoke about having a good relationship with parents in terms of managing quarantine and isolation, but many reported having many challenges in this regard with parents not being open and honest about their child's exposure to COVID-19.



*"Well some are working with me but some you find them it is difficult because they don't have someone else to look after the child when the child is not in school. The parent take a day off but not more than two days off then he wants to bring the child, like then where you find the parent he is just say 'no he was feeling fine, he was playing outside yesterday'. But he knows he is lying because he needs to bring the child to school, because she knows there is no one and she has to go back to work."*

*"But one major challenge is parents are still in denial like they will go for testing but still send their child to school. Then after they have gone for testing and still waiting on the results, they will come and tell you, 'oh yes I've gone for testing and still waiting'. Then why did you send your child to school? You could have kept them at home until you get your results."*

## IMPACT ON CHILDREN

As expected, principals' responses indicated that the pandemic has been harmful to the children in their care, and some felt that children had been traumatised. In terms of the home environment, they recognised that children were dealing with difficult situations, such as the loss of jobs and other socioeconomic challenges, and that their routines had been disrupted. Many saw this playing out within the ECD centre environment, where some children were anxious and acting out. Principals noted that some children battled with the restricted movement brought about as a result of the safety requirements, e.g. staying at their desk or in their 'hoola hoop'.



*"The other challenge that we have is that the kids are traumatized because their mommy and dad are not working are in the house, there is a fight. And now it's some of them they are not concentrating because of the situation at home. And then to the teachers to be quite openly and they there too are traumatized because they have got, the accounts to pay, it is obviously a lot of problems."*

*"Ja, the beginning there was a lot of children that was like very stressed out because they are acting out. And just to be in one place at home, they can't go nowhere. My grandchild just burst into tears, and I was like 'what is wrong?' She said 'I want to go out.' And I wanted to die. So, they are traumatized with the whole COVID issues."*

*"So, the younger ones they don't know how to explain themselves. But you can see, by the way they act, and how they fight with each other, you talk with them, they start crying, because they are traumatized, they don't know what to expect next. I see that they're routine orientated, now*

*everything is different so what is happening now, now we must learn a new thing. And the children to just implement a new thing it take time."*

*"The children that also suffer the most is the active children they have to sit still at your desk, and you can say so many times 'don't get up, this is your space you need to be here, you can't come to teacher, teacher will come to you'."*

*"When it, look what we have noticed in the beginning the children were very sensitive and I think it is because they have been protected in their family units...So, when they came back there was not the usual brightness and excitement and it was almost like we were all brand new and we were starting there...Don't talk about separation anxiety we had a lot of that at the beginning of the year."*

From the perspective of children's social and emotional development, principals saw that children were missing out on opportunities for social interaction and sharing due to the safety requirements, as well as physical contact and affection with practitioners which previously helped practitioners to provide a nurturing and supportive environment for children. From an early learning perspective, principals noticed the negative effects of the pandemic, especially for children in Grade R who would be less prepared for primary school. Some of these effects were due to combining of age groups in classes, taking time to learn new things again, and having to build up their English proficiency again. This was relevant for those children whose parents sent them to an English ECD centre, if their home language was not English.



*"I think even the children also suffered a lot. They are social beings, so they were used to you hugging and kissing and all of those things that you changed, so even the method where you were firm, giving just a bit of a hug, just that reassuring them by physical touch those things are all out...They want to have that affection and share because we taught them sharing is caring."*

*"Their development was stunted. So, you have 3-year-olds that could hold a scissor. And I was sitting with one of them yesterday and he was struggling...you can see that was to the children to the 3-year-olds detriment to have the classes combined. So, that is a big negative when it came to COVID actually."*

## IMPACT ON PRINCIPALS AND PRACTITIONERS

Not surprisingly, principals described dealing with the impact of the pandemic on ECD centres as extremely stressful and anxiety provoking. The financial challenges mentioned above contributed significantly to this stress and anxiety, and they also mentioned having to "have the answers", decision fatigue, the difficulty of dealing with the impact of all of this on the children in their care, and that children look to them (and their parents) to see how they should be dealing with the pandemic. Some principals mentioned practitioners who had died from COVID-19, and a few said this stress was causing them to lose their passion for ECD.



*"Every day, every situation is all about decision making and also doing the right thing all of the time because I got to protect myself first and foremost, then my teacher and then my children, and parents as such."*

*"Yes, definitely, I think there is so much anxiety. Because now as a principal, as the teachers you are accountable to more than just your administration, now it is the COVID administration...I would say it is a lot of anxiety building up on a daily basis."*

*"Because if you look at it the parents look at you as the teacher you are the person that runs this you have all the answers. But you are also just abiding by the rules. And it is sometimes very difficult."*

*"Because it is very stressful and especially now that we have opened dealing with all the children getting sick all the time, because the children are getting sick all the time. Every week there two, three children that is not in class, they are sick, they have got flu, this and that, this and that it is too much."*

*"So, when we opened up ECD there was so much passion and drive with this COVID a lot of things that spiralled a bit down because now you have got to find myself, is this my passion am I going through this, some principals decided no I'm rather going to close my doors because you know what the passion was there, but the pay wasn't there you know."*

## COPING WITH THE PANDEMIC

Principals' discussions gave an indication of how they have coped with the challenges of the pandemic. For the most part, they displayed resilience and a positive 'can-do' attitude in the face of these challenges, which is likely related to the sense of responsibility mentioned earlier, and their desire to provide a supportive environment for the children in their care. It was evident that principals had become more adept at meeting the COVID-19 safety requirements, and some stated that they got used to the protocols in the SOP.



*"So, it has been good, the challenges, it also makes you realise it has swivelled round and because your love is children and the people you are working with, we are going to work like a bullet, and I speak to the staff very much on open communication, so I tell them look here this is the situation this is what we need to do."*

One principal believed that being more careful about who came into her ECD centre was something positive to come out of the SOP. Some principals described the lengths they went to maintain a relationship with the children from their centre, which included sending activities and books to parents to do or read with their children, and that this helped with the transition when centres reopened and to mitigate the loss of development gains during the closure of centres. Where this contact was limited, coming back to the centre was said to be more difficult and children were more likely not to want to come back. Communicating with parents via WhatsApp groups seemed to also play a key role in maintaining a relationship with parents, and one principal maintained that this was something she would continue doing.

In terms of coping financially, not all principals reported receiving the government stimulus package for ECD centres, even though they applied. This seemed to be related to some complexities of the system of applying, although some principals had no difficulty applying for and receiving the package. Some principals reportedly received generous funding from donors, in the form of food vouchers and food parcels, as well as direct funding and other resources, such as soap, sanitiser, masks, desk dividers and mattresses (to allow children to be better spaced out when taking their nap). Some principals mentioned that their practitioners received unemployment insurance, but many seemed to struggle with accessing these funds, most probably due to the overall burden on the system (Unemployment Insurance Fund) due to the pandemic. Apart from this, there were numerous examples of how principals had been resourceful, such as asking friends and family to sponsor a child or arranging fundraising activities, and had been frugal in order to cover their costs.

With regards to social support, one principal was grateful for the support she received from the ECD forum in her area; another spoke about the support she received from her family and faith community; both

believed strongly that their faith and prayer helped them to get through the pandemic. Other principals who were already part of a 'support group' (linked to a community-based organisation) were clearly already providing support for each other through the pandemic, sharing their ideas of how to make things work, and helping the group to understand the SOP requirements.



*"But because of the support that we still feel okay we recovered, but not that much there was so much that we planned on doing, as the forum, as individual, myself personally so much."*

*"I think maybe firstly for myself I believe in prayer and the power of prayer...I also have a very supportive husband and my parents are very supportive. And my son and his wife...I think having my own positive safe kind of network around me definitely made me more positive. And it was like by nature I'm the kind of fight or flight...fight there is not going to be flight here you have just got to do this...And ja, so you know we just feel very peaceful and calm and if there are challenges we just rise to the occasion. Are we going to sink or swim?... So, yes we are surviving, we are swimming, then we look, that is why I say to you when we look at our second batch of SO,P I was just like 'girls, we have won this battle, victorious we are, there is nothing here we don't do'."*

*"I think because I pray and I believe that when I pray that God is listening because I would always feel that it is cool, it is fine, it is okay, it is good, it is going to happen, I have that belief, I have my faith in God."*

## CONCLUSION

ECD centres in South Africa, particularly in resource-challenged environments, not only provide early education for young children; they also provide safety, supervision, and nutrition – without which many of these children and their families would not cope. The findings presented in this report underscore the importance of support needed for the ECD sector to enable ECD centres to provide these essential services. Should ECD centres not be able to provide these services, children lose more than just early learning opportunities. While the resilience and resourcefulness of ECD principals is highly commendable, it should not replace the crucial systemic support that this sector so desperately needs from government, particularly in terms of funding. It is imperative that this support includes ECD centre principals and practitioners, given the extent to which they carry the responsibility – and indeed the burden – of providing care and early learning to young children at a critical period of development.

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*Report compiled by Associate Professor Catherine Draper and Dr Caylee Cook, SAMRC/Wits Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit, University of the Witwatersrand.*

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