

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

“NO END IN SIGHT”

The Children's Mental Health Week is an appropriate time to reflect on what extent we as collegial professionals have delivered on our previous mandate which we could have eloquently articulated around this time last year. In essence during the intervening period, how relevant and responsive have we been to current needs and circumstances?

Children's Mental Health are impinged by a multiplicity of factors. This is borne out by Bronfenbrenner (1979). His Ecological Systems Theory is wide encompassing. Space does not allow an in-depth elaboration of his valuable theory. However, his emphasis on the environmental interaction between and among family, peers and school have great significance for Children's Mental Health. Are intersections in the Microsystem amongst these three constructs contributory factors in respect of Children's Mental Health?

The much-desired harmonious balance is at times shattered in the home. Ordinarily a safe haven for an intact family becomes the very place that disrupts the familial bond and turns it into chaos and instability. Hostile school circumstances further diffuse mental health difficulties. Negative peer pressure also plays a vital role in mental health reduction of children.

In the meantime, according to SAMRC (2025) Mental Health concerns are growing almost unchecked at an alarming rate:

- Depressive disorder (10.1%)
- Anxiety (6.7%)
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (17.6%)
- Suicide thoughts (10.1%)
- Substance abuse (33.17%)

This is by no means exhaustive. There is a myriad of other mental conditions. However, the above merely serves to highlight the scope of the problem. Let us briefly consider the impact on education and future opportunities.

While the above are well-known, let's posit how the school may be an indirect source of aggravating Mental Health challenges among learners. At present this is intuitive. It may possibly generate further research.

The psychological profession, no less Educational Psychologists, need to press pause and examine the inferences of TIMMS (2019) and PIRLS (2021) studies. In TIMMS (2019), South African grade five pupils ranked among the lowest. This is the group who will be writing the grade twelve examination at the end of the 2026 year. Watch this space.

In PIRLS (2021), grade four learners landed bottom of the pile. A dismal repeat performance of PIRLS (2016). Further, it was concluded that almost (80%) of the 2021 cohort were unable to comprehend the simple narrative text.

The educational repercussions and the mental health implications are far-reaching.

Back at the ranch. Department of Basic Education, 2025, records an (88%) pass rate for NSC learners. Unsuccessful learners comprised (12%) of this pool which equated to 110 520 students.

Is this something to be really proud about?

While the classrooms burn, the Officials go on 'fiddling'.

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