ECD sector needs urgent support

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“The devastating impact of Covid-19 on the general population of South Africa, and within the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector in particular, has presented us with many challenges as well as opportunities to be agents of change,” says Leanne Keet, founder of Masikhule.

Masikhule is an NPO that has been training women from marginalised communities of the Helderberg to be ECD educators since 2005.

During the first phases of lockdown Masikhule could no longer train nor mentor educators, and instead focused on ensuring the survival of the principals, the educators and the families of the Early Learning Centres they work with.

Up to 70 ECD centres, their principals, staff, children and families (over 2 000 families) were given food parcels, personal protective equipment (PPE), books, Jam-SA porridge, etc while store vouchers were SMSed along with airtime so that they could all stay in touch.

Masikhule “Shares” – which are stimulating activities for young children using mainly recycled waste (bottle tops, toilet rolls, cereal boxes, etc) and minimal space – were sent out via WhatsApp to the principals and uploaded on social media so that parents and siblings could keep the young children playing and developing while not in the ECD centres.

The centres not only provide children with development and stimulation, they are often the only source of a nutritious meal and also a place of safety.

During lockdown many children were denied this, so it was a huge relief when the High Court instructed that ECD centres be allowed to reopen, once compliant, in July.

However, ECD centres had been without fees since the middle of March (fees being from R300 to R500 per month per child), and thus most principals were unable to pay their educators or their overheads, resulting in many job and premises losses.

Not only this, but the Department of Social Development requirements for reopening were financially out of reach for the vast majority. Masikhule addressed this by providing training and resources.

With assistance from donors they were able to hold workshops with 57 principals over two days in late July, where all aspects of reopening were covered, including the emotional well-being of the educators, children and their parents.

This included a summarised Standard Operating Procedure (as the Department of Social Development had issued a daunting 61 page document), PPE kits (including cleaning materials, posters, masks and all relevant documentation in order for them to be compliant).

As a result of this, along with these women’s determination, 95% of the ECD centres Masikhule works have reopened.

However, it is with growing concern that the Masikhule team are noting the large number of small children (pre-schoolers) still unattended in the streets despite these ECD centres being reopened.

On investigation it would seem that only one third of the children have returned and some of these only on certain days as their older siblings are attending school two to three days a week, and being left with caring for these little ones on the other days. This in order for the carers/parents to pay reduced fees since many more of them are now struggling to survive.

These ECD centres managed, somehow, to pull through the months of no income and are now trying to manage on an extremely reduced income.

With the advent of December, January and February being "no fee months" as they are closed, the future is dire. Yet these are the centres that mould the very foundation of our future.

The first five years of a child’s life are the most important for health and development. Their brain is most receptive to learning during this time than at any other point and deprivation will have a lasting impact on their learning ability.

Along with this, good nutrition, routine and social-emotional skills are essential areas of development that are provided by the centres.

Early deprivation is very difficult to make up in later school years, especially in overcrowded classrooms with little capacity for remedial support.

Without immediate and substantial spend in the ECD sector, the estimate is that over 100 000 women will lose their jobs and over 1.8 million children will be affected. ECD needs far more focus and support nationally, and this needs to be fast-tracked to enable the revival of this sector that is essential to the growth of our economy and our future.

The Presidential Employment Stimulus just announced is therefore very welcome, promising a relief fund for registered and unregistered ECD programmes, in an effort to reduce the risk of permanent closure.

This scheme promises to transfer a grant of R760 per month for a maximum of six months to 83 335 employees or sole practitioners of eligible ECD programmes.

The question that remains is, is this too little, too late?

For more information about Masikhule, visit www.masikhule.org or follow them on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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