



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

**Fostering Psychosocial Well-Being in Socioeconomically
Disenfranchised Young People
Building Resilience through Art**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The South African democratic government has put in its policy framework structures to abolish inequality. In spite of these efforts, the country remains one of the most unequal countries globally with more than half of its population living below the poverty line. This has resulted in negative and long-lasting effects on the psyche and well-being of its people. The study focuses specifically on young people as they constitute the largest amount of the population, and have the highest unemployment and crime rates.

This study aims to 1) establish how socioeconomic disenfranchisement affects the psyche of young people, 2) investigate if and how traits such as resilience and psychosocial well-being may counter/diminish the negative impacts of socioeconomic disenfranchisement on the psyche of young people and 3) explore how art may be used to foster these traits that may potentially lead to young people closing the inequality gap.

This is achieved by examining existing international and South African literature; through interviews with field experts from The University of Pretoria Resilience Centre, WITS University's Drama for Life and SOS Children's Village organization; as well as through an art intervention with one of the SOS Children's Village branches.¹

¹ Read my community engagement report on the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness' website to learn more about the art intervention held in partnership with SOS Children's Village.

Introduction

South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with more than half of its population living below the poverty line. This has resulted in negative and long-lasting effects on the psyche and well-being of its people. Youth especially have been negatively impacted by the country's history of apartheid and even current policies. As a result, this population has the highest unemployment and crime rates.

In looking at the prolonged struggle for freedom from the shackles of apartheid, the practice of Constructive-Artistry emerged, a culture cultivated by social trauma, which involves the compilation of freedom songs, poetry, political theatre and dance. During apartheid, it fostered social connectedness and gave “voice, cohesion and power to its people”, which helped build resilience of the people to continue the fight.² There are many applications of this practice that can be applied to the challenges youth face today.

This study aims to explore how socioeconomic disenfranchisement has affected the psyche of young people, and if and how traits such as resilience and psychosocial well-being may counter/diminish the negative impacts of disenfranchisement on the psyche. This study also aims to explore how art, drawing from constructive-artistry, may be used to foster resilience and well-being in a way that helps youth build a more equitable and prosperous path for the future.

The South African Context

Before delving into any South African socioeconomic/political issues, it would be imprudent to look into recent events without considering the country's history. The current

² H.C Groenewald, “The role of political songs in the realization of democracy in South Africa”, *Literator* 26(6) (August 2005).

climate is one of recovery; Post-Colonial, Post-Apartheid and a transitional period called “Neo-apartheid”.³ Centuries’ worth of colonialism, segregation, exploitation, and the oppression of ‘non-whites’ in South African history is well known. However, what is less spoken about given processes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the notion of a Rainbow Nation, are the results it yielded: socioeconomic injustices and intergenerational trauma, among others.

The trauma is not limited to individual psychological trauma but the collective social trauma that has and continues to impact communities. This collective social trauma has impacted the psyche of communities, which manifests in different ways. The dominant expression of trauma is destructive, consisting of extreme violence; physical, emotional and sexual abuse; substance abuse; high crimes rates; and cognitive impediments, all of which are poverty co-factors.⁴

Socioeconomic Disenfranchisement in Young People

Young people constitute 37 percent of the South African population of 58.78 million⁵ and are considered a major resource for development, social change and economic expansion. Since the apartheid system targeted specifically the black majority that forms 80.7 percent of the entire population⁶, it comes as no surprise that more than half of the nation living below the poverty line are black.

³ Tsepho Madligozi, “Social justice in a time of neoapartheid constitutionalism: critiquing the anti-black economy recognition, incorporation and distribution”, (2017).

⁴ Hirokazu Yoshikawa and William Beardeslee, “The Effects of Poverty on the Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health of Children and Youth Implications for Prevention”, *American Psychologist* (May 2012).

⁵ Department: Statistics in South Africa, “Mid-year Population Estimates 2019”, (July, 2019).

⁶ National Youth Development Agency, “Amended Strategic Plan 2014-2019”, (January 2018).

As a consequence of disenfranchisement, many young people drop out of school prematurely and it is estimated that out of every 100 first graders, only 40 percent will pass grade 12, and a further 12 percent will qualify for tertiary education.⁷ Research also shows that young people in the age group of 12 to 22 years make up the main cohort of being a victim or perpetrator of crime.⁸ Furthermore, 55 percent of young people face unemployment with low prospects of finding a job while the total number of unemployed people in the country stands at a staggering 29 percent - the highest in 11 years.⁹

These stats are telling of the tough economic climate as disenfranchisement is the gateway to social ills. Socioeconomic factors directly influence youth education and dropout rates, as well as employment levels and risky behaviour.

South Africa's democratic government, having been founded on the premise of equality, adopted multiple economic policies to bring the country out of extreme poverty. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA) and New Growth Path (NGP) have however all fallen short of their expectations and failed to transmit proceeds of economic growth to the poor.¹⁰ Now in 2019, the country's prospects of eliminating poverty by 2030 is urgent. The existing Social Assistance Programme by the national Department of Social Development has proven successful in helping to alleviate extreme poverty and narrow the

⁷ Elizabeth Weybright et. al, "Predicating secondary school dropout among South African Adolescents: A survival analysis approach", *South African Journal of Education*, (May 2017).

⁸ Eric Pelsner, "Learning to be lost: Youth Crime in South Africa" Discussion Paper for HSRC Youth policy initiative (May 2008).

⁹ Trading economics, "South Africa Unemployment Rate 2019", (July 2019).

¹⁰ Levisha Ramnath, "The Effectiveness of Poverty Reduction Strategy in Post-Apartheid South Africa" (2015).

inequality gap.¹¹ However, further expansion of social support grants in the future may be fiscally unsustainable.¹² While the government is commendable for having funded 60 percent of the 2017 grade 12 (final school year) class through social grants, the focus must be on getting more learners than the current 40 percent who make it to grade 12.¹³

Mental health in South Africa

In addition to socioeconomic disenfranchisement, one-third of the entire population suffers from a mental illness.¹⁴ The public-health sector only assists 16 percent of people needing treatment.¹⁵ On average, there are 1.52 psychiatrists and 18 beds available per 100,000 people.¹⁶ Furthermore, the South African Government has reserved only three percent of its total health budget to mental health; only one percent of those resources are targeted at young people.¹⁷ Adding to the lack of resources is stigma and ignorance attached to mental illness. The peculiarity of the illness often devoid of physical symptoms and terminologies that do not exist in African languages contributes to its complexity and makes it that much harder for the public to grasp.¹⁸ As such, in an ongoing discourse on South African mental health, there is consensus among field experts that a “uniquely South African solution” is required.¹⁹

¹¹ South Africa World of Bank, “Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa: An Assessment of Drivers, Constraints and Opportunities”, (March 2018).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ UNICEF, “Social Development Budget Brief South Africa 2018/19”.

¹⁴ South Africa College of Applied Psychology, “The Shocking State of Mental Health in South Africa in 2019”, (August 2019).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Malose Makhubela, “From psychology in Africa to African psychology”: Going nowhere slowly” *Psychology in Society* (2016).

Psychosocial Well-being

According to Catherine Mathebula, a registered South African counsellor, psychosocial well-being is “traditionally a psychological process where an individual’s capacity to be self-reliant in stressful situations would be heightened.”²⁰ She explains that the process includes the capacity to have harmonious relationships as well as a combination of human psychological well-being factors.²¹ This state can be achieved through the interaction of external and internal resources, implying therefore that, “The relationship of the self in community and of the self and the community is a codependent one.”²² The external resources comprise of environmental factors and social relations, such as having positive attachment, sufficient social support, and healthy relationships with people and institutions.²³ Internal resources include a range of emotional, personality and identity proficiencies that may also be referred to as “psychosocial skills.”²⁴ The following are outcomes of psychosocial well-being: self-confidence, self-acceptance, a sense of purpose, the ability to reflect, and have positive relations with others.

Studies suggest that psychosocial development is more important than cognitive development. There is proof that psychosocial skills make one more inclined to succeed economically and otherwise in life than cognitive skills, which don’t guarantee success.²⁵ However, the possession of both skills is ideal as the two have been found to be “mutually

²⁰ Catherine Mathebula, interview, July 25, 2019.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sinethemba Makanya, “The missing links: A South Africa perspective on the theories of health in drama therapy” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* (July 2014)

²³ Louise Yorke and Maria Jose Orgando Portela, “Psychosocial Scales in Young Lives Round 4 Survey: Selection Adaptation and Validation”, *Young Lives* (May 2018)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

reinforcing,”²⁶ where one skill naturally leads to refining the other. Studies have also found that psychosocial skills are continuously developed, and can therefore also be taught to young people, as opposed to cognitive skills which are relatively solidified around the age of 8.²⁷

Resilience

The definition of resilience varies depending on the subject at hand. However, what remains consistent is the line of thought that resilience is a common, existing trait in most human beings that allows them to cope and triumph in the face of adversity. Resilience can take the form of “a trait, a process or an outcome” and is determined by the interaction of “biological, psychological, social and cultural factors.”²⁸ These factors also determine the degree of resilience as they provide a context for the response to stress and trauma.²⁹ As such, resilience exists on a continuum, and may therefore be strong or lacking in certain domains of life. Jessica Versveld, a PhD candidate at The Centre for the Study of Resilience at the University of Pretoria, clarifies that there are pathways to resilience and it may be fostered through “building social ecologies that support it,” such as dramatic arts.³⁰

Growing up socioeconomically disenfranchised exposes one to a multitude of adverse experiences. Due to stress caused by economic hardship, one is more inclined to being raised by parents who are living with mental illness along with exposure to substance abuse and domestic

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ George Bonnano et al., “Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives”, *European Journal of psychotraumatology* (October 2014).

²¹ Jessica Versveld, interview, August 13, 2019.

²² Andrew Newsham, Christopher Bene and Rachel Wood, “Review article: Resilience, poverty and development”, *Journal of International Development* (March 2014).

²⁹ George Bonnano et al., “Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives”, *European Journal of psychotraumatology* (October 2014).

³⁰ Jessica Versveld, interview, August 13, 2019.

violence. At the community and school level, these experiences are further exacerbated by low performance schools, bullying, drugs, corporal punishment, violence, rape, and murder among others. In these circumstances, resilience becomes absolutely necessary and must be built. Andrew Newsham *et al.* cautions in a review article on *Resilience, Poverty and Development* that resilience can also yield damage and must be monitored.³¹ He articulates that, “Unacceptable trade-offs which people are sometimes forced to make to guarantee survival may also appear like resilience,” and further explains that, “Some households may have managed to strengthen their resilience but only to the detriment of their own well-being or self-esteem.”³²

Art Therapy as a Pathway to Healing and Resilience

Given South Africa’s context of socioeconomic injustices and intergenerational trauma, the government should not only continue to offer social assistance support but simultaneously invest in building social ecologies that develop traits such as resilience and psychosocial well-being. As suggested earlier by Jessica Versveld, an expert in resilience, the arts is a possible pathway.

Welma De Beer, a drama therapist and lecturer at WITS University who is currently investigating “*education and how trauma affects the physical, psychological and cognitive development of learners, their teachers and parents*” shared in conversation that the latest statistics reveal that 99 percent of South African children are traumatised.³³ She further explains

³¹ Andrew Newsham, Christopher Bene and Rachel Wood, “Review article: Resilience, poverty and development”, *Journal of International Development* (March 2014).

³² Andrew Newsham, Christopher Bene and Rachel Wood, “Review article: Resilience, poverty and development”, *Journal of International Development* (March 2014).

³³ Welma de Beer, interview, July 20, 2019.

that drama therapy (a form of applied theatre that uses a variety of art modalities)³⁴, is a very safe way of working with children and young people as it has the ability to access and release trauma without talking about it or re-traumatizing them. She asserts that, “All over the world it has already been established that it is quite successful,” and that drama therapy modalities have produced phenomenal results.³⁵

Internationally over the last three decades the arts and health sector have collaborated and developed an independent field. There have been studies proving that participation in art programmes and interventions has a positive impact on physical health, mental health and general health.³⁶ In recognition and support of this research, in 1990, South Africa began to register different forms of art therapy with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. Despite a lack in research and that art therapies are relatively new in South Africa, there is a growing interest in the use of art-based interventions for psychosocial support, and resilience and character building.³⁷ Furthermore, James J. Heckman, a Professor of Economics at The University of Chicago and an expert in the economics of human development, has shown through a 35-year study called *Character skills are more important than IQ in driving better life outcomes*, that character skills lead to “increases in monthly income and probability of employment.”³⁸

Drama therapy, one of only two art therapies which have government-recognized training in South Africa, employs modalities such as movement, music, role playing, and storytelling to

³⁴ Anna Marie Webber and Craig Haen, “Clinical Applications of Drama Therapy in Child and Adolescent Treatment”, *Brunner-Routledge* (2005).

³⁵ 29 Welma de Beer, interview, July 20, 2019

³⁶ Heather Stucky and Jeremy Nobel, “The Connection between Art, Healing and Public Health: A Review of Current Literature”, *AM J Public Health* (February 2012).

³⁷ Kirsten Meyer, “Making Fires: Rethinking the possibilities of Creative Arts Therapy practice in South Africa”

³⁸ James Heckman, Rodrigo Pinto and Peter Savelyev, “Character skills are more important than IQ in driving better life outcome”, (2013)

foster emotional intelligence, psychosocial well-being, resilience, social connectedness, and healing. This form of therapy for young people serves as an opportunity to step out of the daily adversities of life, interact with others, as well as build oneself emotionally, cognitively and physically. This intervention can take place at a community hall, school or church with all the young people of the area. The nature of the form is that it is playful and reflective and headed by a trained facilitator that will guard against destructive resilience, as per the aforementioned caution by Andrew Newsham. Drama therapy therefore affords young people a safe space for personal healing and collective social transformation.

Recommendation

Drama therapy interventions align with the mandate and goals of the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and the National Youth Policy (NYP), and should be carried out by them together with the Department of Social Development. The NYP aims to:

Consolidate youth initiatives that enhance the capabilities of young people to transform the economy and society. This will be achieved by addressing their needs; promoting positive outcomes, opportunities, choices and relationships; and providing the support necessary to develop all young people, particularly those outside the social, political and economic mainstream. This policy emphasises the need for various youth development efforts and interventions that holistically respond to all aspects or spheres of young people's lives.³⁹

The NYDA should work with NGOs to identify and train community leaders to head the programmes. The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness and Synergos South Africa, the partners for this research and fellowship, could work with existing art therapy programmes in South Africa, such as the Tree of Life Project and Hero's Journey, to design working models that

³⁹ "National Youth Policy 2015-2020", (April 2015).

may be easily transferable to community leaders to help ensure the programmes have longevity and far reach.

Conclusion

This report found that socioeconomic disenfranchisement has negative impacts on the well-being of young people, therefore making it harder to break the cycle of poverty and reduce the nation's economic and social inequalities. There is extensive research in South Africa and beyond that demonstrate the power of art therapy, specifically drama therapy to address the trauma and impacts of poverty co-factors on youth. Thus, building psychosocial well-being and resilience in young people through arts could diminish the negative impacts of socioeconomic disenfranchisement, enabling them to succeed in personal and professional settings. Future research should explore specific models and frameworks of art and drama therapy that can be applied in different settings beyond education and healthcare service delivery, as well as explore the correlation between resilience in youth and success in securing employment. This latter research could help further the argument and importance of building resilience, through art therapy, in order for youth to succeed personally and professionally.

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