The state of disaster announced on 15 March saw South African schools close more than a week before the country went into a hard lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19. Schools reopened for some grades in June with the intent to phase in other grades in July and August. With a technique called photovoice, South Africans shared their concerns with HSRC researchers through photographs and social media messages. By Candice Groeneveld, Thobeka Ntini and Mafanato Maluleka.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the HSRC embarked on a study to understand how children, teenagers and adults experienced the nationwide lockdown in South Africa and how their lives were impacted by the pandemic. The researchers used a technique called photovoice, where participants were asked to document their experiences of the lockdown using photos, voice notes and text messages via WhatsApp. In this way, the researchers were able to capture the participants’ personal stories and experiences while maintaining physical distancing to protect all parties from getting infected.

The researchers asked teachers, parents and learners how they felt about the reopening of schools. Noticeably, most participants, regardless of age, expressed increased anxiety related to children returning to schools, where they could “get infected” and spread the virus. Specific concerns included overcrowded classrooms, young children’s perceived inability to maintain social distancing, and the availability of adequate sanitation products at schools.

A female teacher from a public school said: “My fears and concerns [are] around the issue of sanitisation and the safety in terms of wearing masks … especially the protection for us as educators […] Right now, we don’t have extra classrooms … where will these learners be accommodated with the 1:20 [teacher to learner ratio] that would be mandatory? In [some] classes we have 35 learners for the same grade and others have over 40 learners. We do not have sufficient classrooms. How are they going to split those learners? Where are they going to learn? […] My worry [is] whether they would have enough resources [such as] masks and the sanitisers and how we would practise social distancing?”

Anxiety about schools reopening: Enhancing the voice of teachers, parents and learners through photovoice
Many parents echoed this, citing concern around overcrowded classrooms, infrastructure, hygiene and the ability or willingness of children to maintain a physical distance from each other: “What worries me the most is how are they going to handle the situation in class? Especially in certain schools where children are 40 in one class; it is havoc and it would spread the virus easily.”

“Poor personal hygiene. Children won’t follow social-distancing regulations. Rural schools won’t cope with COVID-19 due to lack of infrastructure and sanitisation.”

Despite the coronavirus causing no symptoms or mild disease in most children, some parents expressed fears about the unknown or danger of COVID-19, especially where children had underlying conditions: “I’d never send my child to school facing such a deadly disease.”

“No, I won’t send my child to school. My daughter is asthmatic and no medical staff will be there. If she gets infected I won’t know.” — learner (7 yrs)

“My mother told me never to send my child to school. My sister and I wear masks when we exit the house.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

Children know about protection

The following responses were shared by child participants when asked to show ideas that they would do to ensure that they did not get the coronavirus:

“My sister and I wear masks when we exit the house.”

“I will wear a mask.”

“Carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

“Wash your hands, keep safe and not carry the germs and always wash your hands.”

The importance of this work lies in its ability to encourage South Africans to tell and showcase their stories of how their lives have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pictures are particularly captivating and revealing, because they display the participants’ experiences and perceptions with minimal interference from the researchers (besides posing research questions). In this way, we can enhance the ‘participant voice’ and share children’s, teenagers’ and adults’ stories of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives. The study is ongoing and we hope to learn more about the implications that national regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have on the lives of everyday South Africans.

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