

## S1 Ep.8: Education Op-Ed: The backpack is heavy - what are our learners going into 2021 with?

**Kentse Radebe:** [00:00:00] [00:00:00] Welcome to the disparate change podcast powered by the birth, the center for social innovation and entrepreneurship. First off, what you need to know about us is that thinking differently and innovatively about solving big social issues is what makes us tick. We love offering new perspectives on social innovation and social justice.

[00:00:25] So we hope you'll be inspired to make a difference. And you are, we're changing the way we're changing the world.

[00:00:36] Welcome to the, just for a change podcast with me, your host Kentse Radebe So we're a few weeks into the new year, and it's apparent that even though a lot has changed a lot has also stayed the same globally. We're still reeling from the social and economic impact of COVID 19. And for us in South Africa, we're in the thick of the second wave of the pandemic.

[00:00:58] Overall [00:01:00] society's morale has taken a serious knock due to the continued restrictions, risk and worry about the future. A recent article published in the maiden guardian notes. How much has been said about the silver lining of COVID-19 that is its comparatively low impact on children. The article then goes on to say that even the one-third of South Africa's population is under the age of 18, only 7% of recorded cases of COVID-19 have manifested in children.

[00:01:28] This appears to be changing. However, as the new COVID-19 variant seems to affect young people more than the previous strain, however less has been said about the silent toll the pandemic has taken on the youth. Children's lifestyles have been disrupted immensely. Not only have they been dealing with the rapid changes and learning methods and not being able to go to school and see their friends, but many children have also lost aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, and teachers due to COVID-19 many hope at the new year will bring new [00:02:00] energy to the education sector.

[00:02:01] But with the shadow of COVID 19, still hanging over the country and school opening dates. Now further postponed. There is much work that needs to be done, too. Sure. The schools are able to hit the ground running and whether the 2021 storm, well, so all this begs the question for the 2021 school year. What baggage are we taking with us?

[00:02:22] What's in the backpack for 2021. And is it perhaps a little too heavy to carry? Today, we're privileged to have Dr. Allister, Wijen and Louise Alberne as our guests on the, just for a change podcast. Allister is the founding director of the center for the community school and the faculty of education at Nelson Mandela university.

[00:02:42] Alistair has been involved in the field of education for almost 30 years and has more than 20 years of experience as a teacher and principal in schools, across Cape town communities. I'll held the position of interim director at the principal center at Harvard university, and is also a friend of the birther [00:03:00] center as co course convener and our leading innovative partnerships in extended education course.

[00:03:06] We're also joined by my colleague, Louise, who is the senior advisor to the UCT graduate school of business's birth, the center for social innovation and entrepreneurship on the education innovation portfolio. Louise brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to this conversation to read close to 15 years in the education sector, working with and in schools and social purpose organizations.

[00:03:28] She joined all in piloting the executive education course for members of school communities seeking to lead partnerships. Well, Alan Louise, welcome to the, just for a change podcast. We're going to jump straight into the questions for today. And I want to start right at the beginning for us at the, just for podcast team, when we were thinking about what we're going to talk about for this episode and why this conversation is so important, because there's so much current public debate around schools were opening.

[00:03:54] What model should the government be following? And really there's a lot of emerging research that points and alarming picture [00:04:00] of how COVID-19 at the various stages of lockdown has affected. So Africans in 2020 Al and Louise, what are your overall thoughts and feelings about the posture that has just gone by?

[00:04:11] **Louise Albertyn:** [00:04:11] Great, thanks, Kentse so I think alarming is, is the right word. I think if I had to sum up my thoughts about 2020, it would be that it's been a perfect storm because I think each. Player within the education story is going through something very difficult at the same time. So you had parents suddenly needing to move to homeschooling.

[00:04:32] And as somebody recently said, homeschooling is a bit of a misnomer because that implies that it was an intentional choice. You were able to plan for it. This was actually something that just thrust upon parents with very little warning and very little equipping. So I think parents are grappling with that at the same time as learners, having everything stripped away in the school day beyond the quite clinical academics.

[00:04:55] So you no longer had your informal conversations with your teachers, your [00:05:00] peers, you no longer had extra murals. Any of the annual events that mark the passing of time. And then at the same time you had teachers who suddenly had to rapidly move online and had to contend with not just uncertainty, but I think sustained uncertainty Kentse, which I think has been particularly difficult.

[00:05:19] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:05:19] And Al what are your thoughts?

[00:05:21] **Dr Alistaire WiCen:** [00:05:21] I know it has indeed been very, very difficult. And I want to agree with, with, with Louise on that. So what we've experienced, not only in the education system, but in society as a whole has been what I would call disruptive change. Um, and by disruptive change, I mean, change that unexpected.

[00:05:44] That's being imposed upon by, uh, you know, something that's happening outside of the organization or. You know, outside of the individual. So it's imposed upon you and it forces you to actually change the way you do things. [00:06:00] And this change has affected all of us. Of course, most importantly, we know in our schooling sector, our learners who really are the same of the work that we do, um, have been affected the most.

[00:06:14] And, um, I am not sure whether we as a society have paid enough attention to the extent to which our learners have been affected by what's going on now. And I would say that, um, you know, the fix of this are going to be felt for many, many years to come, especially amongst our learners. And we are going to as not only the schooling system or schools or the government, but as a society, we are going to have to do something to restore.

[00:06:48] Um, our learners to their rightful, places of learning, um, to, you know, unlocking their full potential to releasing their future dreams for them. [00:07:00] And that's going to take time and it's going to take our collective efforts because the impact of what has happened, um, by this pandemic, um, is going to be with us for a very, very long time, especially on our learners.

[00:07:14] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:07:14] Ah, I want to latch onto what you were speaking about a little bit early around the disruptive change. And I want to almost align that to the conversation around leadership, specifically leadership during this period, what would you say are some of the ways that leaders could show up for their staff? How can principals best support teachers, even when it comes to issues like mental health?

[00:07:33] **Dr Alistaire WiCen:** [00:07:33] So yours, what I said, uh, you know, a few days into the log down a few weeks into the log down last year, I was, um, on one of the pladorms and I was talking to a group of, uh, leaders at the provincial level. And I said to them during times of crisis, people won't remember what we as leaders did.

[00:07:54] People will remember how we as leaders made them [00:08:00] feel. And that's a really profound statement because this is exactly what our leaders have to realize that in times of crisis, people look up to leaders almost intuitively to help them make sense of what's going on to give them guidance and direction and to provide some form of support, to help them get through it.

[00:08:22] So the leadership role across all levels of society. No, not only in education or in schools is very, very important, especially during your time of crisis. And what we've done is we've kind of developed this principle or this concept of what we call holding, you know, holding, um, psychological holding, um, it's been developed by psychologists called...

[00:08:48] and what it means is that during times of crisis, what leaders do is they used the concept of institutional holding [00:09:00] and interpersonal holding to help people get through it. So institutional holding, I'm not going to talk a lot about that, cause that's just about how you rearrange the work that has to continue that as to carry on the other aspect, which you call it.

[00:09:13] Interpersonal holding is where the leader steps into create a space. To engage with a team, to engage with a group, to tap into, you know, how they feeling, what their concerns are, what their fears are to allow them to express that you're the most space to do that, to process that. And then to look at how the leader then can pull the team together.

[00:09:38] Not only making sense of it, but in dealing with it from a psychosocial perspective. So this is really important and we've asked leaders to set aside time. And safe spaces to do that in the organizations and in our cases, of course, in schools. So for example, this can happen, um, by just having regular rituals.

[00:09:59] Now, [00:10:00] ritual is not a religious practice. Only a ritual is a practice that one participates in that has deep meaning that gives one hope. That helps one to pause and reflect. That's a ritual and in schools we can have these rituals. So for example, for five minutes or 10 minutes every day before teachers start the work in classroom, just to check in with children, how are you doing right?

[00:10:29] Just one word or write down or draw, you know, how you feeling today? What has happened last night? How's things at home, just giving learners a chance to check in around how they are feeling and what they are going through. The same thing happens at the level of the staff where the principal, for example, before the school starts, the school day could convene the teachers.

[00:10:52] for 10 to 15 minutes to check in with them around how things are going. And that's the concept of falling. That's very important.

[00:10:59] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:10:59] I want to [00:11:00] pick up on what you were talking about on the other side of it, around the leadership, because one of the things that we've seen during this pandemic is how a very top-down bureaucratic position, which only looks at leaders responding can actually prevent a lot of the innovation and some of the solutions from coming through. What does it look like from, I think an educational perspective where we take a more collective leadership approach. What does that look like? Where we're not as looking to our leaders, we were actually looking to the community. We we're looking to the broader, I suppose, perspective. What was that like?

[00:11:31] **Dr Alistaire WiCen:** [00:11:31] So, you know, I've said that, um, gone are the days of the all knowing leader because our knowledge systems could not, firstly get us out of it. Couldn't provide an effective response to the pandemic. And even now, As we trying to develop a vaccine, we don't know everything yet.

[00:11:48] The science around it is evolving and this is very important leadership lesson. So they all know there's no such a thing as an all knowing leader anymore, the single era, weak leader, what we all need to realize as [00:12:00] leaders. And that includes all of us, even in this conversation, what we all need to realize is that we don't know everything, that we are still in the process of knowing or learning. And when we, in that process, we then realized that we need to go to others for information that we may not have. And I've seen this as a trend, even working with some of the bureaucrats, the officials in the department, where they sit in that, you know, we, we have to talk to people we have never spoken to before we speaking to the health department officials in terms of how we deal with things at school.

[00:12:36] So it's become very important that as leaders. We realized that we don't have all the answers that we cannot solve all the answers on our own and that we need others to help us. And that is what I call distributed leadership. In other words, distributing leadership across, you know, grow the group of people or collective leadership, as you say, Kentse it is so [00:13:00] important.

[00:13:01] Um, during this time, and I would say it is really going to be very important as we figure, um, our way forward in terms of getting, getting the education system back on track.

[00:13:12] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:13:12] And I suppose I think about how do we figure out our way forward Louise. I want to bring you back into the conversation. You recently wrote an

important opinion piece about the educational challenges that we're going to be carrying with us into 2021 coming from 2020.

[00:13:26] Could you unpack the areas that are requiring our urgent attention?

[00:13:29] **Louise Albertyn:** [00:13:29] Kentse, I think it's great that you've actually laid with questions around leadership and around mental health, because I think that those should precede a lot of the conversations that we have about how to get this year back on track.

[00:13:43] But I think one of the other big parts of the puzzle, and I think it's that many people gravitate towards is what are we going to do about the curriculum? I think there's a significant temptation to just want to resume the normal calendar. For example, if you're in grade nine this year, we will start with the grade nine [00:14:00] syllabus, um, when we get back in February.

[00:14:03] But I think as the "nets cram" data showed us up to 40% of school days were missed by most grades. So I think that we're going to be experiencing significant gaps in curriculum coverage. Government has already announced that they will be running rapid bootcamps at the start of this year to catch up the content.

[00:14:24] I would caution against that because I think that flies in the face of another educational principle. And that is the one of scaffolded learning. So recognizing that one layer of learning needs to be firmly in place before you can apply the next layer of learning. So I think what we need to call for is a long-term strategy that looks at how we recover content and how we bridge the existing gaps.

[00:14:49] And in that way, avoid piling work onto what I fear is already quite a shaky foundation.

[00:14:55] And Louise. I want to

[00:14:55] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:14:55] drill down a little bit into that because we know that children who don't develop basic [00:15:00] literacy, can't use reading to gain new knowledge, for example. And we know that those who don't master basic numeracy, aren't able to move on to other demanding concepts like high school mathematics.

[00:15:10] How important is it that we get back to basics as we kick off 2021?

[00:15:15] **Louise Albertyn:** [00:15:15] Kentse again, I think that speaks to the danger of acquired learning deficits. I think it, it is a challenge when we assume that, um, we move on to the next concept because the calendar says so as opposed to whether we've actually mastered the content.

[00:15:32] And I think in a sense like this. Particularly dangerous. And as you've said, particularly when we're looking at our younger grades from grades one to three, where you're learning how to read. And at grade four, we actually using reading to acquire new knowledge. If we miss out now on that transition without having that firmly in place, then as Al said earlier, the legacy of this year of this COVID period is going to be enduring. So I think it is [00:16:00] important that we, we go back and we make sure that we've mastered those fundamentals of literacy and numeracy and actually pause and park there and spend some consolidating those foundations.

[00:16:13] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:16:13] And I think Louise, what's so critical about what you're saying is how by not getting that foundation, right. It'll probably expose our pupils to greater levels of inequality in their educational schooling life. Right. So, so Al, I want to bring you back in, on that point around inequality, because it's been a real big conversation driver here in South Africa because we know how inequality affects our pupils.

[00:16:33] Learning at home during the lockdown continued in an estimate like 6% of homes, the most privileged in, in the South African context. What do you think gets lost in the conversation about reducing inequality in education, in the public debate?

[00:16:47] **Dr Alistaire WiCen:** [00:16:47] Well, I think that's a really important point because the pandemic has really surfaced, you know, the huge social and educational inequalities in our system.

[00:16:57] Um, I mean, yeah, we struggling still [00:17:00] to get schools to have basic running water and really opening them. But let me just go back a bit to the point that was raised earlier by Louise. And she's made some really good points then. I want to say that critical coverage is important, but it's not the only important thing we should be focusing on.

[00:17:17] My biggest concern is actually school dropout, right? Um, they presented a figure of 15% . I think school dropouts actually much higher than that. And so how do we, when we, as we, we try to reconnect to the schooling processes, how do we not only focus on curriculum recovery, but also how do we focus on school attachment and school engagement?

[00:17:42] You know, in many communities, the more learners are at home, the less attached, they feel to the school and they become more and more distant to the learning processes and the learning orientations that they really need to be successful at school. That's another big issue. [00:18:00] What about the psychosocial stress?

[00:18:02] So many, many people have been infected by the virus, but I would say all of us have been affected psycho-socially by what's happening. That's really important. So these are important things that we have to address. And I would say that, um, you know, just focusing on one at the expense of the others, that's not the best way to move forward.

[00:18:24] I also just quickly want to talk about, you know, just drilling down deeper into this whole, this learning thing. So I think it was in April, I wrote an opinion piece around the concept of, you know, um, training app, what I would call community education workers. And it was based on the concept of the community health care workers, a group that was trained.

[00:18:48] Uh, a big group that was trained when we had the HIV AIDS crisis and they were trained up, they will lay healthcare workers, trained community members, and they were trained to go in to administer [00:19:00] and support people and families were affected by HIV AIDS. So they took the services into the community. So I based the idea of a community education work on that.

[00:19:10] And I said that they could be young people from our communities. We'll get trained up to actually not only support teachers in the classrooms, but to actually help, really get to grips with, you know, insilling in our learners, basic numeracy and literacy skills. And

so they could work in classrooms, but they could also work in the interface between the school and the home.

[00:19:39] Right. And for example, running reading circles, connecting around libraries, and you can do this in safe spaces. So I propose that as something that we, we, we do as a system, you know, in terms of really embedding some of the basic skills that are needed for success, that was in, um, In April last year, I [00:20:00] think somehow the idea filtered through to government and I see that they appointed young people from communities to help in schools. However I'm concerned about it.

[00:20:10] Cause I don't think they'd be trained up to assist teachers to really support learners, um, especially around, um, you know, the basic skills of, of learning. That they would need.

[00:20:21] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:20:21] So Al and Louise listening to both of you speak about, you know, what should we be thinking about, you know, for educators, policy makers, the community. I mean, there's so many important things that both of you are speaking about around inequality around the curriculum, around supporting our educators and listening to both of you speak. I'm hearing a lot around the complexity and thinking about the decision-making process that individuals are obviously thinking about what the, you know, the 2021 school year is going to look like.

[00:20:46] And I guess what I'm coming back. You know, almost with a bird's eye view. I'm wondering with all of this complexity, with all of these important decisions having to be made, how does one even begin to act in a really practical and [00:21:00] meaningful way, particularly for those who are on the ground? Our teachers, our pupils, our communities, because I feel like there's so many moving parts.

[00:21:09] **Louise Albertyn:** [00:21:09] Kentse I think you're right, that there is, there is there need for. Well, something very practical and that we don't want to just spend our time analyzing what needs to be done, but actually doing it. I think just to give recognition to some of the work that's already been doing, I was looking at a wonderful resource this week produced by the COVID-19 people's coalition.

[00:21:31] That was a home learning support guide that's available in all official languages that actually gives guidance to parents around how to structure a day for their children of various ages that are at home. And it's very practical from what activities to do to the duration of those activities. So I think that there are existing resources and maybe Kentse we can share that in the show notes of this episode, um, where we can look at practical [00:22:00] guidelines about how we run the day.

[00:22:02] Then I think there needs to be. Significant, um, financial action. So I think one of the areas that, that we wanted to speak about as well was particularly looking at the ECD sector. That's, that's poised for kind of collapse. If we don't make some significant changes, we were actually looking at some of the research that shows that in last year's mid July to mid August, only 13% of children were in ECD centers.

[00:22:30] Which is heartbreaking given the significant gains that we've made in the previous year in 2018. At that same time period, we had 47% of children in those centers. So they're

one of the big contributing factors to that was the lack of money for ECD centers to be able to open responsibly and, um, to meet all the compliance requirements.

[00:22:53] So there we're looking at, we urgently need to pay outstanding ECD subsidies from government. We need an [00:23:00] ECD stimulus package. Um, and we need to look at private sector partnerships there around how we invest in that space. I think we also need to partner the very practical with the financial resources to enact.

[00:23:12] Um, some of those, those practical steps and there, again, to give credit to organizations like equal education, like the COVID-19 people's coalition, who've been mobilizing around putting some of these, these key line items at the top of the agenda.

[00:23:27] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:23:27] Louise. Thanks for highlighting, you know, the importance that different organizations have been playing during this pandemic and AI, I want to bring you in here specifically around the fact that you facilitated the establishment of the Manyano Network of Community Schools.

[00:23:42] And as I understand it, um, current interventions in the network range from curriculum support for teachers and learners to community-based programs aimed at encouraging greater parental and community involvement and schools. Now, what do you think is the importance of parental and community involvement in schools, [00:24:00] especially in the midst of our current COVID-19 situation? What are some of your perspectives on that?

[00:24:05] **Dr Alistaire WiCen:** [00:24:05] Well, I think it's absolutely essential that schools are strongly connected to their communities. Um, and that's not only to parents, um, you know, a community around the school. You know, would be any individual or group that is connected to the school around a common purpose.

[00:24:24] So it would be parents. It could be faith based organizations. It could be businesses, it could be universities. So we think about the community in a much broader sense and, you know, parents are central to that. And of course, the connection between schools and our parent community becomes very, very important.

[00:24:43] So the Manyano network of schools is a good example of how you can bowl a sort of broader, more comprehensive response. Um, to supporting the holistic development of children, because what you do is with the community [00:25:00] school is that you tap into networks of support that are, may even be outside of the community to, to, to support the learning and development of children.

[00:25:10] So in the Manyano Network of Schools, they used to speak about a pipeline of support. And, you know, the word pipeline is, but it's a bit hard, but basically it means that, you know, if the challenge in the pipeline, you know, the child is easy for the child to fall out of their pipeline. And inside of that pipeline would be supports that range, not only from, uh, uh, from educational interventions, but right through to health interventions that are coordinated and that's connected via the school to all the other important stakeholders. Um, the Manyano Networks spoke about that as a pipeline from cradle to career. Right. So how do we build this? This network of support for our learners, especially our learners, you know, um, urban township, um, and rural schools. How do we build that network for them?



[00:26:00] [00:25:59] Because it's very important. And I think w you know, just for me, seeing a community school in ac<on is actually seeing parents at the forefront of that. Seeing them taking ownership. And exercising agency, seeing them coming into a university space to do a basic course around how to support their children at home.

[00:26:22] There's a lovely program that is run at Nelson Mandela University called Family Maths. And the university works with parents to help children with numeracy skills. So there are a number of good examples of these innova<ons. The big challenge is how do we scale this up? How do we make this, um, and na<onal project?

[00:26:43] And this is where, you know, gemng government to think about educa<on in a much broader way becomes important because we need a societal response to, to, you know, to gemng us out of the current crisis. And that has to have two very important, um, parts a]ached to it. [00:27:00] First we need to have inter-ministerial connec<ons.

[00:27:04] So we not only need a new loca<on to be part of this. We need health services. We need social services. We may even need SAPS. The South African Police Services because safety and security administrators is a big problem, but how do the departments come together to support schools? The second component would be what are the community organiza<ons out there?

[00:27:24] That we could call upon to help and support schools. And they are many, many, many of them doing good work, um, in our country in many different communi<es. And what we need is a more coordinated response that is more purposeful about what we want to achieve.

[00:27:41] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:27:41] Al, I love what you're saying about the pipeline and the different elements that we need to bring together to make something like that work. It makes me think about how we speak about a whole systems approach when we're thinking about interven<ons and where we intervene within an ecosystem. Right. And, and Louise, I want to bring you in, because I know you have a lot of insights. Having worked with [00:28:00] teachers, having done a lot of work with schools, with the work you're doing for the birth of center.

[00:28:04] I'm curious about listening to what I'll say is about the pipeline. What do you think are some of the challenges that our schools and our teachers may have to building something like this?

[00:28:15] **Louise Albertyn:** [00:28:15] Kentse I think one of the, the fundamental components of building that community of support is communica<on. And I think that has really suffered at the hands of the pandemic because a lot of our communica<on has been stripped down to the bare minimum.

[00:28:32] We're only talking about the func<onal things when we talk to our fellow stakeholders, we're talking about when were we opening? We're talking about data costs, which is so important, but I think what I've heard. People express is a frustra<on around the quality of the communica<on. So where is the transparency?

[00:28:51] Yes, we're hearing the decisions, but we'd also really love to hear the ra<onale behind some of those decisions. So again, just to reclaim that sense of. [00:29:00] Us. And I

think that's difficult. We're grappling with that within our, our own professional organizations, right. Where we know that moving online to zoom means we're missing out on the corridor conversations that sometimes fuel some of these collaborations.

[00:29:13] And I think that's exactly the same thing that's happening in schools. I think, um, as Al mentioned, not to underestimate the role that. Um, the NGO sectors plays in strengthening and supporting schools, and they have also been dealing with significant financial HR and technology challenges as their entire mode of delivery has had to change.

[00:29:33] And that's happening at the same time as a funder, potentially clinging to the agreed upon deliverables and how are we going to measure those deliverables? So then missing that freedom to say exactly what I'll mentioned earlier, let's acknowledge that none of us have all the answers. And let's give each other the grace to be able to have a conversation where we co-create what this might have to look like in this time when we're uncertain.

[00:29:57] So I think we need greater [00:30:00] communication. We need greater, um, humility perhaps in having spaces where we're not looking for the adults in the room with all the answers. But actually acknowledging that we need to figure that out together. Um, and then perhaps just returning to, to assuming the best of each other, I think for the majority of teachers that I've engaged with, they're passionate about learners and supporting learners.

[00:30:22] And, um, I think, I think we just need to, to return to those shared values that that is Al ojen speaks about like, are those boundary spanning values that help us to figure out what us looks like?

[00:30:35] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:30:35] So, I guess in, in closing, the disruption that COVID-19 has caused on our schools has had a major effect on the mental health of learners and a recent report that was published by the Western Cape burden of disease reduction indicated that 2020, so the highest level of teen suicides in the Western Cape. So can we talk a little bit about acknowledging the psychological damage caused by COVID 19 in 2020 and how do we move [00:31:00] forward?

[00:31:01] **Dr Alistaire WiCen:** [00:31:01] So, yeah, then the emerging research is correct. I mean, the impact of this is really, really severe. And, you know, I always say that, you know, we can sometimes see the impact of disruptive schooling because it's in front of us.

[00:31:15] But the impact of, you know, the psychosocial effects on learners, on parents, some teachers it's it's invisible, right. And, uh, you know, we can't expect colleagues to bury it, right. We have to allow space for them to be able to share and talk about what they are experiencing and going through. So I've proposed and in the work that we're doing in some provinces, the concept of the three C'S for schools first C is care.

[00:31:43] We need to encourage schools to build a culture of Care the second C is the Curriculum, and we need to focus on the curriculum, but it cannot be an exclusive focus. And the third C is the community. So care, curriculum and the community should be [00:32:00] the focus of schools. And what we say is that a culture of care underpins the curriculum, a culture of care in a school underpins teaching and learning, right. A learner is going to engage in the learning processes much more effectively in that learner feels that I, as the

teacher care about him or her. So that's really important. So key underpins the curriculum of a school and community.

[00:32:29] Extends the curriculum. So if we get those treaties right, and we build the relationships and the links between the three C's, um, I feel we can put together quite a comprehensive response to not only what our learners are going through psycho-socially, but also in terms of. But he engaging them in the learning process.

[00:32:50] And like I said, it has to be a comprehensive approach, um, in order for us to succeed.

[00:32:56] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:32:56] Thanks. I'll um, Louise, your closing thoughts.

[00:33:00] [00:32:59] **Louise Albertyn:** [00:32:59] Kentse it just to, you would echo what our has said there about the care component. I think as, as a former teacher, myself, I'm always very protective of teachers. And I think one of the things I would caution against is again, making this an additional duty that solely rests with teachers to be able to identify, um, the psychosocial challenges to be able to address them. I think the best thing that we can do for teachers is to establish a credible referral pathway for teachers. Yes, they know children the best, but they're not equipped to deal with the myriad of challenges that young people are experiencing at the moment. So again, wanting to call on government for an increased psychosocial support.

[00:33:43] Pathway that is accessible. That is reliable. But I would say particularly in this time that urgently is able to respond seamlessly um, to say to teachers it's okay, because you can refer a child, but you, as a teacher know that that child will only be seen to in months is not, is [00:34:00] not something that we can rely on in this time. So I think I'm setting up those partnerships with the department of health, the Department of Social development to speed up that referral pipeline is important. And I love what, um, Professor Jays Pillay said that sometimes we use the notion that children are resilient as a cop-out.

[00:34:20] Yes, they are resilient, but we need to give them the resources to activate that resilience. So I think we need to be intentional as the adults in the room about equipping our young people with those resources.

[00:34:31] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:34:31] Well, that's certainly some food for thought. Thank you, Al and Louise, for your insights. We've asked some teachers what they think is most needed to make 20, 21, a good year for our children.

[00:34:42] Here's what they had to say.

[00:34:44] **Voice note:** [00:34:44] So what is needed? For 2021 to be a good year, a measure of certainty I think. They need to know what the academic year. Um, full-time one, but at least we'll look like they [00:35:00] need a plan. A if things are gonna stay the same, um, this is what, uh, to, we will be doing this year. A plan B if things change for better or worse, this is what, what the academic program would look like.

[00:35:17] They need to know assessment wise, how are they going to be assessed? We need to take pressures and anxiety from our learners and try and come up with a plan and at the start. So they need that sort of, they know what the year will look like more or less.

[00:35:38] I would just say that I think the most significant baggage that they're carrying at the moment is, um, an, the negative impact on their social relationships and interactions.

[00:35:48] I think we are going to be forced to really consider what are the fundamentals that we really need our children to invest on, not just for this year, [00:36:00] but the ongoing good. It's interesting. A lot of things are going to change and it's, they all rather stayed the same quite a while. So for me, I would emphasize good education, um, really good education without compromising the safety of those that are involved in education.

[00:36:17] Um, and integrating that education with health and not just the economy cause it seems as if the economy is very important.

[00:36:25] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:36:25] It's no doubt going to be another tough year for our children and youth. But innovations inside and outside the classroom may hold some important lessons for the 2021 school year.

[00:36:36] And on that note, I'll hand over to Simnikiwe as she chats to spark schools and Ziphindile Mbiza about what they've been doing differently.

[00:36:43] **Simnikiwe Xanga:** [00:36:43] Thanks Kentse 2020 called for rapid innovation, particularly in the education sector. That's for sure. But the recognition that not all low cost private schools are created equal as education experts.

[00:36:58] One of unregistered fly [00:37:00] by night operators that prey on the perception that private necessarily means better. The well established Sparks Schools and network of independent schools working to offer affordable globally. Competitive education was one example of the willingness to be agile in response to the challenges of the last few months.

[00:37:21] A previous indicator of their responsiveness was with the call to grow multilingualism in schools, all Spark schools offer as a first additional language, mandatory from grade are the most populous, previously marginalized African language of the province. For example, the first additional language offered in Gauteng and the first education language offered in the Western Cape is, is it cost.

[00:37:46] One of spark schools, initiatives launch at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, was it Ignite relief fund project. This project was aimed at raising funds for existing Spark schools, families who lost their jobs and [00:38:00] income due to COVID-19. In addition to this initiative, the network of schools decided not to increase school fees for 2021 and is allowing parents to pay fees over 12 months instead of 10 months.

[00:38:14] As Kentse mentioned today, we hear it from Ziphindile Mbiza, Spark schools, principal of Spark Roslyn hub in Soshanguve. Welcomes Ziphindile. We excited to have you on the show today, and I'm sure we're going to clean some helpful insights from you. So we'll just jump right in and to our conversation. To start, um, low-fee private schools are said to be one of the fastest growing segments on the continent. Could you tell us a bit about this box, school model?

[00:38:43] **Ziphindile Mbiza:** [00:38:43] Okay. So as you know, Spark Schools is also one of the schools that offer quality education at a low of fee, because we believe that every child or rather every child in each family deserves quality education.

[00:38:58] And just because you have [00:39:00] access you do not have access to certain resources does not necessarily mean that you should not receive the best that you can. So our model is providing quality education at a low cost. And, um, we also use the based with our curriculum and obviously we cut costs where it's not necessary.

[00:39:19] **Simnikiwe Xanga:** [00:39:19] Well, thank you. Um, so being deal, indeed quality education is a necessity in this country. And, um, I liked that you've mentioned that, um, it needs to be at a low cost because a lot of people don't have enough money to, um, to be able to take their children to school, um, that will give them quality education.

[00:39:39] And so following on that, um, data is such a big thing in this country where a lot of people don't have access to data and so access to data and online learning, isn't always a possibility, especially in a South African context, there are always obstacles. Um, how did you go about supporting [00:40:00] your school communities during COVID-19, um, as well as how you made it possible for kids to continue learning?

[00:40:08] So perhaps if you can share a bit about your remote learning offerings during this time as well.

[00:40:13] **Ziphindile Mbiza:** [00:40:13] Okay. So with our remote learning, we wanted to cater for pretty much everyone. So we do cater for people who have access to the internet, but we also cater for the scholars or families that do not have access to the internet.

[00:40:27] So at the moment we have, um, two offerings. Um, before we reopen in February, our first offering is remotely offline. So teachers will prepare the slides and all their plans and work that scholars as the two, um, completing class, and these are uploaded online for people who can access them and download them at their own time.

[00:40:50] And then. Those same activities are also shared with parents. Parents are welcome to come to school and collect these Home learning packs. So the scholars at home [00:41:00] who are not able to access the online learning are still able to access the same content that was taught in the classroom, even though the teacher was not present.

[00:41:10] So that's how, at the moment we are working around the situation and obviously we're still trying to find other means in case we the school year changes completely. So those are the two offerings that we have now, and parents have a choice to choose one of them. And we make sure that whatever we give them is of quality so that they get the same, um, as the child who would be online.

[00:41:34] **Simnikiwe Xanga:** [00:41:34] I thank you for sharing that. And I, that you mentioned, um, parents having a choice cause sometimes the parents are not able to make the choice of, um, having these two different things on offer. So with 2020, it's asked to a lot more innovation in many have argued that we shouldn't return to normal in all ways.

[00:41:54] I'm just curious to hear a bit more about last year's necessary innovation. Um, [00:42:00] what did spot schools do differently that you would like to keep going in 2021 and perhaps even beyond?

[00:42:07] **Ziphindile Mbiza:** [00:42:07] So last year immediately when, um, lockdown hit, uh, we came up with. Um, contingency plans and, um, the first one was obviously moving

online and at that time, no one really knew how, what the best one would be, but we use, um, We use a lot of Google and we use its learning.

[00:42:27] So what we're doing now, making sure that teachers have their lessons online and making sure that those lessons, we can keep those lessons for parents who are able to download them later and, um, ensuring that whatever was in class. It's also a given to parents who are not, who can come to school physically.

[00:42:47] So the one thing, um, that Spark did really well, I think it's just in the amplitude to the fact that we need to make sure that there is no child left behind. So we just need to make sure that learning is happening. [00:43:00] So I think that's what we worked on. That learning should happen regardless of where we are, um, as a country.

[00:43:06] So we started off with remote learning, and now we are just improving that. I think the fact that we're continually just seeing how we need to make things work for that particular moment is what I feel should continue as Spark even though, um, I mean, at times it's completely different, but that's what I feel that amplitude of continuing and adapting

[00:43:28] **Simnikiwe Xanga:** [00:43:28] Ziphindile thank you so much once again, for your time. It was so great to have you here and you sharing insights about the school.

[00:43:35] **Kentse Radebe:** [00:43:35] Well the concept of the new year as a metaphor, bringing with a thoughts of fresh starts and renewed energy is appealing. This approach may leave us unprepared to meet our current challenges.

[00:43:46] Education in South Africa already has a painful legacy of inequality and historical imbalances. And these have by all accounts be made worse by COVID-19. We need to find ways to remedy the loss of learning, to motivate for increased funding and capacity building and to strengthen partnerships and collaborations that can help us boost educational outcomes. There is too much and already so much has been lost.

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