A Conversation with Nimet Rener, Director of Aga Khan Schools [Transcript]

And joining us now is Nimet Rener, the Director of Aga Khan Education Services. Thank you for joining us, we've had so many questions from our supporters about how AKES and the school system are responding to this crisis, so we're really delighted you've been able to make some time, in the midst of all your heavy responsibilities, to speak to us for a few minutes. So, thanks very much.

It's a pleasure, Khalil, and thank you for inviting AKES and me onto your show.

Nimet, quite a few of our supporters have written in to ask how has the pandemic affected students under the AKES umbrella and what measures has AKES been taking to support students during this disruptive time? You can imagine that this is one of those things that every family in the world in some ways is managing, so there's a lot of empathy, I think, from our supporters in North America, about the condition that must be confronted by families that AKES is trying to support. Can you tell us a little bit about what the issues now are, and how AKES has been able to adjust to the circumstances?

Definitely. I mean as you quite rightly pointed out, this is a global phenomenon. And every family, I think globally, has been affected by this pandemic. As a school system that spans over 12 countries, very diverse, there's been a fundamental impact, which was the closure of the schools. And for students and teachers, not being able to meet face to face is pretty profound in a way because this is, this has been the context in which most of learning and teaching and engagement has happened. But the closure of the schools, apart from the fact that children were not able to meet with their peers, they stopped having the kind of routines that they were used to, the extracurricular activities that they were not having, but we know how much children actually need the contact with their peers. And especially, our secondary school children are teenagers and older students have really, really missed and needed that engagement. But the younger ones have actually missed their teachers a lot. The feedback that we've been getting is that regularity and that relationship seem to have been something that they have missed a lot.

In terms of responding, I mean, as you know, it happened very, very suddenly and pretty much overnight, and as an organization, our response was to act quickly to ensure that learning was going to happen no matter what. And we were so moved by the impetus from our teachers from very remote areas where there was no connectivity or access to their students down to our urban settings, where we galvanized very quickly online. And this wasn't online learning as is in a regular school where it's an integral part of the curriculum, but this was emergency remote learning and I wanted to underscore that differential that we had to go into emergency remote learning. And our AKES staff on the ground has been quite phenomenal and inspiring and I'll give you very few headlines, Khalil, and we're at the sort of early stages of amazing innovation coming through in very difficult context.

The online, where we've had Google classroom or Microsoft and parents had connectivity at home, that was a pretty standard ramping up of how we were shifting from an integrated process in school, which was face-to-face as well as digital learning, to full-time where teachers were actually teaching and engaging. But then we had to look at places where there was no connectivity or minimal connectivity, and that's where the innovation was quite significant. For example in northern Pakistan recognizing that many of the households had access to cable but nothing else, is that we mobilized the cable television and started to run courses from there. And the wonderful offshoot of that was families learning together, as they all started to attend. We've had parents come and be given USB keys that had loaded

lesson plans and activities. We had, in Afghanistan, SIM cards given to all our teachers and the families, so that they could speak to each other over the phone regularly. Packs were made for those who had no connectivity whatsoever and we've had staff walking miles to get these packs to families. But all this interaction has meant that we were also able to communicate health messages around COVID because there was very little avenue for that.

Now, the challenges though, while those were the regular things that most people have reacted globally around the responses, has been the impact on families as a whole. And I think that we recognized very quickly that we had to turn up the volume on our social and emotional attention, and our priority as a system was first and foremost about the well-being of the adults in the system. Because we recognize that if the adults who are so shaken by this whole event that seemed initially, an event that was going to go away in a few months we just needed to knuckle under and ride it, which has now become something that's here and fundamentally changing the way we are. Really paying attention as leadership on emotional well-being of staff and recognizing that they themselves, although they were teachers now reaching out to their students from home, were also dealing with the same issues in their own home with their children and needing to be parents supporting their children. So, there's been a shift in terms of the relationship with families, very, very significantly in terms of our own teachers learning to be counselors at some stages, or starting with asking how they're doing.

We worry, sometimes, about the stress that that's caused families who have had to be challenged economically as well. So, there has been the focus on families who are infected but also affected because as extended family started to get affected either economically or even for health reasons, it's been a very unusual time in terms of what we've had to take decisions around. And it came to, how do we deal with what's most important about education, which was what does it mean to be human actually, and what really matters at the end of the day was going through a shared experience that was affecting all of us fundamentally but in different ways. So, there's been a shift in that. And we are extremely worried about the equity gap in learning, and it's exacerbated I think in a way where the inequities are. And that's the piece that I imagine you want to know more about.

I was, I was going to say Nimet, thank you for that laying out of the landscape. In fact, the issue of the inequities in the global system and of course in any particular country where we work, is something that I think is on the minds of a lot of people, including our supporters. Imran Khan in Toronto asked a question really about what we would call the digital divide, you know, the idea is that online learning requires online access and you've talked a bit about this but, I mean, obviously we work in a lot of places where that access is massively limited or maybe not available at all. And Imran is kind of reflecting, are we worried that this is going to exacerbate all kinds of inequities and marginalization in our countries in our system, in our in the world? I mean, how should we think that through? Could this be a period when we see a massive exacerbation of these inequities and marginalization?

I think the inequities have always existed. It's just that it's shed light on them. But I think it's also an opportunity for us to radically rethink education. And you know, what we've learned just through these nine months, is that learning can happen in all shapes and forms and when you start to put some of that learning into student's own hands, actually, sometimes, there is a significant engagement with their learning. And as we look at the software that's coming out around adaptive technologies where students, you know, it's the feedbacks coming through their own engagement with the software or the programs, they are flying because they're not being held back. And it's showing up where there is a bit

of a struggle for a student so we can address what's going on. So, I think that, while absolutely the inequities are there and the issue of access and physical access to connectivity, bandwidth, devices, even English language, without having English language, there is a real disadvantage because most of the knowledge on the web is in English. But if I set that aside for a moment and say well, what's the opportunity – well the opportunity now is to really radically, boldly ask ourselves, how is learning going to happen and what learning needs to be supported. So, learning how to learn has been a long statement that's been around about 21st century skills and lifelong learning and students need to learn how to learn. Well, certainly that's what we've had to be doing over these nine months is helping students figure out how to, in a way, begin to manage their own learning, because there isn't a class always managing it. And so, there's going to be work around that.

The other is what's going to be the shape of schools. Right now, we can only, with the return to schools in some of our countries, the regulations understandably around safety means we can only have half the number of children in the buildings at the same time. So, the question is, what role do buildings take now? And why would we come face to face? So how do you leverage the wonderful opportunity of being together face to face, and what can actually be put in the children's hands to get on with? And how do we how do we rethink this? And it's a potentially exciting time, but a school system like AKES can't do it by ourselves. We need enabling environments, governments ensuring infrastructure, software being culturally appropriate, relevant to contexts, curriculum being rethought in terms of what's really essential, because a content, fact-based curriculum gets redundant very quickly as we know, and that's obtainable now, readily obtainable so what do we focus on? The role of teachers now, role of teachers has changed a bit over our nine months as facilitators, enablers of how children were learning, much more of a pastoral care role has been highlighted.

Well, Nimet, this issue of the changes in the fundamental model of schooling and the way we think about the schooling process is a question that's on runs on Amiri's mind. He's written in from Anaheim and he was asking about the curriculum and he's asked should schools change curriculum to meet the challenges of online learning. What are the biggest upsides and downsides of moving to a more online base, and you've talked about the engagement, potentially of the right kind of software but also the limitations in terms of software that's culturally appropriate that's in local languages? How does curriculum need to change in this online world?

In a way, Khalil, I would de-link in online and curriculum. I'll tell you why I'm framing it that way. The issue of online is, it's an enabler for learning and access to learning. However, there is curriculum content or skills related to the issues of digital learning computational skills, the whole digital literacy. But the curriculum itself is, again what I was saying earlier, is what are the skills and aptitudes and values that we require for thriving in the future that's around a corner. And we know the research that says it's actually the soft skills, it's the emotional intelligence, it's the ability to work in a team, it's to be agile, it's to be nimble. Now, you know, there's a lot of thinking to be done and because you know that I have a particular affinity for early childhood development, this pandemic has been the hardest on the little ones. Because, you know, social distancing for three-year olds, four-year olds, two-year olds. The solutions of online have not necessarily been the most accommodating for young children and neither should it be.

And so the focus on supporting families in understanding their children's development needs, and really beginning to support families around that, has also been key. So, I'm not wanting to evade the question

around curriculum and online, I'm just saying that digital availability and the whole virtual learning is a fantastic asset to catalyze, allow for more personalized learning, to create more equity in terms of access to best practice and high-quality information and experiences. It's a bridge, it's an equity, but of course the basic training of teachers, students on digital literacy would need to become part of the curriculum as a non-negotiable, if we were going to make that available.

Earlier, you talked about the social and emotional demands that the crisis has placed on students and teachers, families. I mean that, again, is something I think we can all empathize with, as we have progressed through this period. Nuhad Pirani in Parkland had a similar kind of intuition, he asked: How are we ensuring that the social and emotional needs of students are being met? As you say, partly it's just teachers being able to provide that pastoral care although they can't do it in person, that's also a real challenge.

The issue of resilience and emotional intelligence is very high on the agenda right now, and the whole issue of mental health increases in crisis amongst older children and adults. And so, when we thought about how best we were going to support this, one is it's been a question of whether there was a pandemic or not, is how well do we pay attention to this very important aspect of human development in need? And the pandemic has actually allowed us to say, you know, we are taking a decision as an organization that this comes first. For us, as the organization, I've said, lead with the heart right now, and I hope always, because the head is pretty smart and it will figure it out. But when we don't pay attention to the heart, what we realized is that if the adults' social and emotional support was not happening, it's very likely the stresses get passed on to children unwittingly and not intentionally.

And so, providing the support there, and then the skills to the adults on how you actually do that, so what kind of things did we do? So even for myself, as the head of the agency, bringing together our senior leaders, it was modeling the way, was starting by saying it's okay for us to take a few minutes at the beginning of any meeting to see how we're actually doing, and "fine" was not an allowed answer. Slowly, there was almost a cultural shift in the way we started to engage with each other around bringing all of us to the table. And what happened is that started to happen with our heads of academics, who started to model their meetings with their teachers in that way, and the conversation around "what do we do with these strong feelings of worry or anxiety or hope?" You know, some teachers have unleashed creativity, they're just flying because of the things they were not able to do before that, it's almost like all bets are off, create, create, create, problem solve, problem solve, problem solve. So, I think Khalil, right now, I could list a thing of "here are the practical things we've done," but I think it's more profound than that, around placing this engagement as people and caring and empathy and allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, showing up with resilience has been where we're going with this. And it's not over, and I think our human engagements will always contain a need for that.

You know, one of the striking things about the AKES school system is how diverse it is, you know there is everything from an IB-caliber high school in the middle of bustling Nairobi to a one-room school somewhere in a remote valley of northern Pakistan. What have you learned about the diversity of the system during this period and how that has affected the way in which COVID, and the response, has had to play out?

Well, the diversity we've always known, but actually what we've learned is the strength of our DNA. And what I mean by that is that because we were not physically traveling to visit and meet each other, the coming together was so frequent from all different corners of the world, regularly every week now.

There were global meetings of heads of education, groups of math teachers, globally. That what we've learned is and the metaphor I've given in the past has been that while the diversity is what we love and value and want to honor, is they're like these beautiful beads of a necklace. But what's got strengthened is the string that binds it, and what has been the same is that teachers need care. When we're using our digital tools and means to reach our students, we're actually entering someone's home to enter with respect, enter with care. Now that doesn't matter whether it's the home up in the valley, or in Nairobi, or in South Pakistan, we are entering people's homes, and we do so with respect. What we've learned is everywhere, there is still issues of safeguarding, there's an underbelly to this, and a concerning aspect to this, which also goes back to how we support resilience and people's ability to deal with stress, family dynamics, which we as educators, don't get into per se, but the relationships we form with families can at least help in terms of support and enabling.

But it's also thrown up inequities, Khalil, but it's also shown us, for example we had a sweet example, because our south Pakistan schools had access to Google classrooms and Microsoft and connectivity, the minute we were able to increase bandwidth in some of our northern schools, strong teachers from the south were teaching students from the north, and some strong teachers from the north were teaching students in the south. Now what we're going to see is that while we have diversity, there is actually a bridging happening, and coming together, and an "actually our problem isn't that different from yours, but look, this is how we solved it" or "you have something amazing that we want to learn from." This has actually allowed bridges over this diversity and the desire to close some of the inequities really from the heart now, it's no longer an observation "oh we have diversity", but it's being felt now, and a desire of "what do we do together to start closing some of the inequity gaps", so these have been some of the more the DNA of AKES, and I'd say AKDN have really, really come into their own. It surfaced when it needed to surface, and it's been very palpable.

Well, they say, you know, moments of crisis are as much about tests of character as they are a test of competence. And I suppose one thing you're saying is that it really has brought to the foreground all of the elements of the character of the system. They've had to step up. Nimet, you've been involved in education for a long time. Everyone has saying that this is an unprecedented crisis even for people who have been involved in whatever sector they've been involved in for decades. What has surprised you about what you've seen in the last in the last several months as the system has adjusted and adapted to this unusual circumstance?

That teachers actually really, really, really care about their students. And that when we can let people be a little bit more than we are, and come together around a shared problem of trust, and evolve, problem solving, a little more widely to students, to teachers, to parents, solutions are there. And so, that has been something that I would have always hoped in the world that I want to live in, is that would be the case. And there have been examples of that, that I've seen happening across the AKES community, but also AKDN more widely, where suddenly a hospital needed space for testing, and I'd get a call, "We want to give our hospital because the kids are not there, can we?", and I said, "Absolutely share, share, share, share, share".

That's exactly what this is all about. And so, I think that has surprised and delighted me. But what has been difficult, as I said, is the underbelly, has been the increase in mental health issues. And I worry about that. I worry about that because of the impact on very young children, who, if they are in environments of stress and high stress over a sustained period of time, and they're not having role

models of many different ways to deal with situations, we're going to have some work to do moving forward on addressing the issue of resilience, but also embedding very deeply, very early on, the kinds of tools and skills required around managing relationships and managing stress.

Nimet, you have with great insight and thoughtfulness really helped us understand both the opportunities, and the challenges that we are grappling with as this unusual situation of COVID continues to confront us. Please know that there are many supporters around the world who are thinking about you and all the teachers and students, and other leaders in the system and really are hoping and praying that all your important work continues to meet with success during these difficult circumstances. Thank you so much for taking the time out to speak with us today.

Thank you, Khalil, and I want to just again really acknowledge all the teachers and their families, because the partnership that's now unfolded between families and teachers has been important but they're the ones. They're the heroes out there.

Agreed.

Thank you. All the best. Thank you very much.