THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA: THE POWER OF PARENTS IN ACCELERATING GLOBAL EDUCATION PROGRESS
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(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

Today's episode is about harnessing innovation to rapidly accelerate educational progress, also known as leapfrogging, and the crucial role that parents can play in educational transformation for children around the world.

I am joined in the Brookings Podcast studio by Rebecca Winthrop, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Universal Education here at Brookings, and author of the book, "Leapfrogging Inequality: Remaking Education to Help Young People Thrive". She is here to tell us more about her research on education transformation and then she'll share her discussions with four education leaders she met during the 2019 LEGO Idea Conference in Denmark. These leaders all have deep insights on the role of parents and education transformation and they bring perspectives on the topic from around the globe.

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And now on with the show.

Rebecca, welcome back to the Brookings Cafeteria.

WINTHROP: Thank you.

DEWS: It was about a year ago, just over a year ago, that you were on this show and we talked about your book, "Leapfrogging Inequality: Remaking Education to Help Young People Thrive".

WINTHROP: It's a pleasure to back with you, Fred.

DEWS: So to set the context for this discussion today, let's go back to "Leapfrogging Inequality". Tell us a bit about why you wrote that book.

WINTHROP: Sure. "Leapfrogging Inequality" is a book I wrote last year with my wonderful coauthors, Adam Barton and Eileen McGivney. The motivation for the book was to address the deep education inequality in the world.

Global organizations have projected that education today is failing one out of every two students, if you can believe it. What I mean by that is by 2030, 884 million children and youth, just over half the world's young people, will reach adulthood without the basic secondary level competencies they need to thrive. And these are competencies like academic skills, like literacy and numeracy, but also important 21st century skills, such as problem solving and critical thinking. Some of these young

people who are being failed by education system in high income countries, like the United States, but the vast majority are children who live in middle and low income countries across the globe. And the current pace of change is so slow it could take up to 100 years for the poorest children who are being left behind to catch up to the richest children. And for me this is just morally unacceptable. And we in the education community really have to do a much better job of finding ways to rapidly accelerate progress for all children. Really, in my mind, we need to leapfrog.

DEWS: So let's stay on this topic of leapfrogging, because that's the key concept here. I encourage listeners to go and listen to that May 2018 discussion that we had about the book, but just kind of briefly to set the stage for today's conversation, what is leapfrogging in educational transformation?

WINTHROP: In the book we put forward this idea that leapfrogging is one way to approach educational transformation, and we said it's the idea of harnessing innovation so that all young people, especially those who are farthest behind, would be able to develop the full breadth of skills and capabilities they need to thrive in work, life, and citizenship.

That's how we define leapfrogging. And really you can't leapfrog unless you think about doing things much faster. We want this transformation to happen not in a century, but in a decade or possibly two. We argue that given the rapid pace of technological change, young people will need to have an education that prepares them for the future and not the past. And at the heart of this change is really a need to transform how students are taught, so that they have a mix of teaching and learning experiences from things like lectures to group discussions to more experiential or playful learning approaches, which can include things like working together to solve problems or to create new things. And only then will young people develop both strong academic and strong 21st century skills that they need to be lifelong learners.

DEWS: And so now we come to parents, the role of parents. Where do parents fit into leapfrogging education?

WINTHROP: That's a good question. I have begun to realize that it's very much one thing for the education practitioners in the world and the education policy makers in the world who are supplying education services to young people to embrace the idea of using innovative approaches to leapfrog, and it is very much all together another thing to ensure the parents are going to accept these types of innovations. And, you know, in truth the education community usually spends most of its time and attention on a how to change the provision or supply of education services and much less of its time on understanding the demand side, meaning, you know, what is it that students and parents on behalf of

their children really want. And I have to say that I've been guilty of that myself. And, in fact, in the "Leapfrogging Inequality" book we focus solely on the supply side of the equation. But I have become increasingly convinced that an important part of the solution lies in engaging parents in what an education for the future actually looks like and what is really the purpose of education.

Obviously, it stands without question that parents are essential in helping shape children's education. First and foremost, of course, they are the most influential teacher and influencer any child will have. But, secondly, parents collectively can and often do exert enormous influence, for better or for worse, on how educators practice their craft of teaching. And, lastly, and this is quite important, parents are voters. And they have an important role to play in sustaining any education transformation across political cycles.

DEWS: So this brings us to the heart of the content, the discussions that you're about to present to our listeners. And you were at the LEGO Idea Conference in Denmark -- and by LEGO, I do mean the plastic interlocking brick toys that we all know and love and that have been around now for 70 years. What was that conference all about and why was that a good place to find global education leaders to talk with?

WINTHROP: Yeah, it was a great conference. The LEGO Foundation is a strong supporter of our work here at the Center for Universal Education. And every year they host this wonderful gathering called the LEGO Idea Conference where educators, civil society leaders, policy makers, researchers, all gather to talk about a particular topic related to educational change. And we were invited to attend this year's conference on the theme of unlocking the power of play through parenting, which seemed a perfect place to engage with a number of wonderful individuals and organizations working on this idea of both promoting playful student centered learning and working with parents as partners to do just that.

DEWS: Well, in doing some research, I discovered that the name LEGO is derived from a Danish phrase for play well. While you were at this conference, did you get to play with LEGO?

WINTHROP: I did. And, in fact, the conference was held in what is called The LEGO House, which if you ever get a chance to go, it's stunning. There is only one of its kind in the world. And when you enter there is a two story tree of creativity made purely out of LEGOs, and it just gets better and better from there.

DEWS: Well, that's great. So, Rebecca, I'm going to hand the mic over to you now and we are going to listen to your discussions and your stories with conference attendees.

So thank you.

WINTHROP: Great. Thanks so much, Fred.

I first want to introduce you to one of the most famous parents in the world today, Ziauddin Yousafzai, the father of Malala, who as everybody knows is a global education advocate and Nobel Peace Prize Winner.

Ziauddin himself has been a lifelong educator, running an independent school in the Swat Valley in Pakistan.

Ziauddin, it is lovely to be with you here at the LEGO Idea Conference, 2019 in Denmark. And we met a long, long time ago. I would love to hear a little bit from you about what your history has been and your journey into education.

YOUSAFZAI: Thank you so much. And it's so nice to see you. And thank you for your support.

My father, so he inspired me and he used to tell me the world is an open book, read it. And I had a stammering problem. When I talk I start to stammer, sometimes too much, sometimes less. So he was such a great father that he encouraged me to be a speaker. So he turned my weakness into a power, into strength. So this is something that he gave me and I am so grateful that I was born in the family of such a father. Himself he was like a cleric in the mosque, a prayer leader, a mullah. And traditionally, if he would have followed the social norms, he should not have given modern education. Nobody would have asked him why you are sending your son to school, why not send him to a madrassas. So people sometimes asked him why you are not making your son to follow your footsteps, to be a molana, to be a prayer leader in the mosque, rather you are sending him to a school.

But he sustained that pressure because, I will say, that he was the father of the future. He was not the father of past, of yesterday, he was the father of tomorrow. And he knew, he had this vision and wisdom that the coming years and the coming time is of modern education and if I want my son to have skills for the quid pro quo for market, he should be educated and equipped with modern education.

So that's how he educated me and it changed my life.

WINTHROP: Ziauddin's description of his father being a father of the future and not of the past is a powerful image for the way parents will need to support their children if we truly want to harness new approaches to transform education.

Perhaps his father is exceptional, or perhaps the context in which he grew up made his father's choice very stark. Either way, I was interested to see if others who worked with parents found that fathers and mothers were choosing to be the parents of the future or parents of the past.

Hi, Eszter. Please introduce yourself and tell us the organization you're with and your role.

SALAMON: I am Eszter Salamon, Director of Parents International and President of the

European Parents' Association. And our role is basically doing advocacy for parents as primary educators, and we are also doing a lot of trainings for parents, also professionals working with parents or for parents.

WINTHROP: What would you say most parents think a good quality of education is?

SALAMON: Well, I think it's very difficult to say because I think that the majority of parents are torn. On the one hand they know one form of education, the one that they went through. If they are not education professionals, then they seek the kind of education that made their own peers successful. But we also see that more and more parents do see that this is not good because the circumstances have changed. They know that their children need a different kind of education, but if we don't help them as organized parents, kind of professional parents, and also professionals in different fields around the child, then they are a little bit clueless on what kind of other type of education they should look for.

WINTHROP: We hear a lot from education professionals and child development psychologists that parents are often putting pressure on teachers and schools and education providers to do the "wrong things", do more homework, stop doing perhaps project based learning that looks like of messy in the classroom and the teacher isn't standing in front of the classroom and giving lectures. And parents are uncomfortable with that.

Have you found that to be the case too? Is that something that is familiar to you in your work?

SALAMON: This is exactly what I'm saying, what I've been talking about. That parents on the one hand are seeking the type of education that has proven to be successful for their peers or people they have high respect for, and they don't know other ways. So if you introduce a new methodology and want to have the parents on board, then first you have to introduce the methodology to parents for them to understand why it works, how it works. Usually what works is not telling them what works and why it works, but you need to have an experience based approach to that.

So if you want to introduce project work, if you want to introduce play based learning, then you have to expose teachers and those parents to that kind of meeting. So a parent-teacher meeting and take the form of a playful learning session, probably videoed and then discussed together. And the parents can reflect on their own learning. If you just tell them about it, they will not believe it.

WINTHROP: If you had power over all the people working in the education community and told them, you know, you would really like them to change by doing one or two things, what would you have them do differently?

SALAMON: Well, first of all, I would definitely want professionals in the education community to collaborate very strongly with other professionals or peers that the parents trust, because by the time a

child reaches school the parents already have some preconceptions about the format, the methodology, the outcomes of education they seek. And if you manage to catch them in pregnancy or in the first two years, when the majority of people don't meet any education professionals, you can have the incoming generations with a different mindset.

WINTHROP: I found Eszter's description that many of the European parents she worked with are really struggling to embrace a parent of the future approach to be very poignant. Parents desperately want what is best for their children, but absent clear direction they find it much easier to recognize signals of good quality education that remind them of their own education or the education of their successful peers.

I was struck that the very first thing she would do to change the situation is to effect a mindset change in what quality education looks like and can be by reaching parents before their children even enter school. Luckily, I knew just the person to talk to about how exactly one might go about doing this.

LEXMOND: My name is Jen Lexmond. I am Founder and CEO of Easy Peasy. Easy Peasy is an organization I set up a few years ago. It's a platform that supports parents to discover, play, create, and share learning games with their young children from birth to five. And the idea is to support parents with ideas and inspiration for games and activities that they can play with their children that support foundational skills.

So when I say that, I am talking about things like language, communication, social and emotional capabilities, physical development, all of the basic foundational skills that kids need to do well when they get into the classroom, but also beyond. Skills for school and life. And that's because of the principle of early intervention. We know that the bulk of a baby's brain is already developed by the time they get into school. And so that very important early years where neural connections are firing and forming very quickly is really the best time that we have to invest in their development and their outcomes.

WINTHROP: I asked Jen about how she is hoping to influence parents. And then, more importantly, how does she go about reaching them.

LEXMOND: We are always looking at how we can create more effective feedback loops that help us learn about how Easy Peasy is working for children, but also helps us share with parents more information to give them a sense of progress, of motivation, and to build their understanding of the relationship between playing and learning. Pretty much all of our games either have no materials or they use things that are available in the home, like a toilet paper roll or some food items in the cupboard, or just your own hands, or eye contact. So that's the kind of sell to parents. Here's just stuff

you can do when you're stuck for something and your kids want to engage and you are trying to control them or entertain them, here are things you can do.

Then over time we build more of that understanding for them of hey, this isn't just about filling time or juts about even having fun -- not that that is just -- but we also then try and build that understanding of how this is helping with education and how it can rise up their list of priorities.

WINTHROP: While Jen is looking to transform the mindsets of very young parents so they understand the important connection between play and learning, and ultimately she wants to help the most disadvantaged young ones, there is also a need to transform the mindsets of parents of school age children, for these are the very parents who can resist unfamiliar pedagogy in school, especially pedagogy that leverages playful learning approaches and brings students out of their desks and into the community.

I sat down with a colleague who works day in and day out on exactly this.

Thank you, Brij, for talking to us. We're here at the LEGO Idea Conference 2019 in their cafeteria, with a nice little band in the background. We are excited to talk to you. Can you tell us your name and your title and your role and your organization?

PATEL: Thank you for interviewing me. It's Brijpal Patel. I am Director of Global Program Development at Right to Play, based at the global headquarters in Toronto.

WINTHROP: And how many countries do you cover in your job?

PATEL: Right to Play works in 15 countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. We have programs in North America with the First Nations communities.

WINTHROP: And if you had to summarize briefly what the purpose of Right to Play is, what would say?

PATEL: To empower, educate, and protect children to overcome adversity through play.

WINTHROP: And I know you reach about 2 million kids a week through your programs, which is a huge number. And one of the questions I wanted to ask you about is how open are parents to this idea that you are helping kids not only develop, but also learn and be educated through play? Do they understand, are they supportive? Or do they think it's fluffy or not rigorous?

PATEL: Yeah, a lot of parents to begin with do think that it's fluffy -- why are children playing all the time in the school. That's a question. The way we engage with parents and with all adults within our programs also, we teach this in a similar way, is that we use play with parents for them to experience what a playful experience is. And once they have that experience, they see it for themselves, they feel it for themselves, what kind of learning is possible, what kind of voice an agency gives

themselves by participating in an activity, and then related it back to their children, saying if this is what my children are doing in school, then they are actually not just playing, they are actually gaining something out of it.

The second thing that we do is particularly effective is child led activities with parents. It's children engaging parents in play. Because in the context we work in, even if there are -- I mean in most cases there are no report cards, there is no teachers providing feedback to the parents, saying your child is doing great or teamwork or on problem solving, but there is some work that needs to be done on reading. There is no such sort of observation.

WINTHROP: Right.

PATEL: Or if there is observation there is no feedback to parents. So the only way parents know that their children are getting something from the school is by seeing that change in behavior in their children. So when children actually take back home those skills or use play to engage their parents, it suddenly demonstrates for their parents, for the adults around them, that wow, this kid has learned something. There is a skill that he has acquired. And that immediately brings home the message for parents that my child is actually learning something at school and it's not just playing. That playing is helping the child to do other things better in life, and those skills -- the leadership skill is going to help, or if a child has learned to read better because there is literacy using play based approaches, then the parents see it because the child is able to read a form that the parent has brought home from the office in the town that the parent doesn't know to read, but the child can now read for him.

So it's things like that that are observable changes in children, which bring home the message for parents that this is working and play is actually not a concern.

WINTHROP: Do you find in the communities you work with that parents, once they've gone through that journey, and they see these signals through their children's changed behavior, they have a different sustainably transformed view of what makes quality education?

PATEL: Yes, it changes parents' perception around what education is for their children. It also changes perception of what schools are, that schools are a safe space for children, schools are a positive learning space for children. As parents we have got to be engaged in supporting the school in their work. So all of those pieces, parents' participation in parent-teacher association changes.

So there is a whole range of positive contribution. From our perspective, what it also takes is you've got to engage with parents at multiple points. It's not just -- so parents in the community in community based activities engage with parents, at home on reading and supplementary reading for children, also engage with parents within the parent-teacher association. So interacting with parents in

multiple points, multiple sort of touch points is also helpful in bringing that kind of change in perception for parents around school.

WINTHROP: I asked Ziauddin about this idea of changing mindsets. After all, for many years he was an educator in the Swat Valley in Pakistan, running a highly successful school for girls and boys that he describes as being dedicated to the development of the whole child. And he did this up until the day when the Taliban overpowered his community and shot his daughter, Malala.

I wanted to know from his perspective what he thought about making sustained educational change.

YOUSAFZAI: I personally think that parenthood and pedagogy, these are the most important forms that can galvanize and that can leverage a change that we really want to see, because these are the people, these are the change makers who change the minds, souls, and hearts. It's not just a policy or you pass a law through a parliament and then you just search for people to implement it and people do not agree to it.

So, for me, parents and teachers.

WINTHROP: You've talked about that journey from being a child with a father who did everything to help you grow and flourish, you then in turn were incredibly passionate about helping, not only being a father to your own children, but being in a way a father in terms of education for many young people in your community.

YOUSAFZAI: There I was a leader and she was my supporter I can say. And now she is the leader and I am one of her millions of supporters, and I am so proud of this -- really, so proud of this.

So being the son of a mother whose name I could not mention to a doctor, and when I took my mother to the doctor he used to write Ziauddin Yousafzai's mother -- mother of Ziauddin Yousafzai. If my father took her, wife of Rohul Amin. So that boy, becoming a father of the most known daughter, and then letting her fly, not clipping her wings, though she ties my legs sometimes. (Laughter) She is a wonderful girl.

WINTHROP: Spunky.

YOUSAFZAI: But this is not just about her. Somebody told me oh, she has already flown, why you say let her fly. This is about every girl in every corner of the world, right from China to African countries, from Mexico to Far East, that every girl should have a right to choose her future.

WINTHROP: This is indeed what a father of the future looks like and Ziauddin himself is a role model for what parents of the future can be.

We in the education community need to think more about how we can help parents embrace

this vision. Indeed, it is a crucial step to ensure that innovations like playful learning can help leapfrog education around the globe.

I want to thank Lauren Ziegler and Katie Portnoy for their support in preparing this episode.

To learn more about leapfrogging and our upcoming research on this topic, go to the Center for Universal Education on the Brookings website, Brookings.edu.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does many of our book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Finally, my thanks to Camilla Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.