We at Masikhule strongly believe that any challenge or crisis creates an opportunity to do more, be more, develop more. Ryder Carroll said: "No matter how bleak or menacing a situation may appear, it does not entirely own us. It cannot take away our freedom to respond, our power to take action."

Our initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown was a humanitarian one. We responded immediately to the basic needs of the ECD community we serve, and that we have come to know over the past 15 years, in terms of food vouchers (almost 2000), food parcels (1920 parcels), data for principals, over 5 tons of fortified porridge, reading books and educational kits for over 2000 children, soap and sanitizers. We activated and supported 5 soup kitchens, together with our community partners. We responded to the needs of the children to continue their learning experiences through the daily sharing of creative activities that parents/caregivers could do with the children whilst at home using minimal resources.

In July we turned our attention to the needs of the ECD Centres that were preparing to reopen. We supplied over 70 Centres with PPE kits and posters; trained 58 principals in operating compliance and best practice procedures. We followed up regularly with these principals to assess their needs and offer further guidance and support. We were able to continue developing our Masikhule Curriculum, together with curriculum training and mentorship of educators from 8 Centres.

However, we were concerned that the Centres would not be able to afford to feed the children nutritious meals once they reopened, so in addition to the porridge being donated by JAM-SA to 45 Centres we are also supplying 31 ECD Centres (over 900 children) with cooked meals 3 times per week, in partnership with Pebbles Project, and all thanks to our generous donors.

None of this would be possible without the generous support and commitment from funders, donors and volunteers.

The current situation:

We are thrilled that over 97% of the Centres we serve have been able to open, compared to the national percentage of < 30%. Following research recently concluded by our team, here are some positive (and some concerning) results:

(Monitoring and Evaluation conducted in July – pre COVID Readiness training - and again in October 2020)
1. Responses to and compliance with regards to Covid have improved.
2. Principals feel confident and prepared.

![Confidence Chart]

3. The concerning low number of Centres that are registered with the Department of Social Development. Of greater concern is that of this number, only 19% receive a subsidy.

![Registration Chart]

4. Of great concern is the low number of children who have returned to their centres – only 54%. Nationally, this percentage is a disturbing 18%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of children before Lockdown</th>
<th>2 409</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of children returned by end October 2020</td>
<td>1 316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. 83% of staff have returned to work and of these, most are only working part-time. Very few are receiving 100% of their salaries. Nationally, over 100 000 jobs in this sector have been lost.

![Salary Reimbursement Chart]
6. Parents are not paying full fees (which are mostly an average of R350 per month):

![Pie chart showing percentage of parents paying school fees]

With the Centres reopening but few children returning, and much reduced income (after months of no income), we realized the level of stress and anxiety were climbing. We created and are currently busy presenting a 5 module wellbeing course that is being attended by 18 educators. This course concentrates on assisting them with developing tools and strategies, including exploring creativity through waste material, to improve overall emotional wellbeing during this time of great uncertainty.
**Future plans:**

We feel very concerned about the future of the ECD sector and our concerns are governed by the following factors:

- Low percentage of children who have/will return to their centres
- Inability of parents to pay school fees
- Little to no income received by the principals over the past 7 months and this will continue until at least March 2021 due to school holidays and the general economic situation
- Principals unable to pay staff salaries
- Minimal school fees so unable to feed children
- Minimal income so unable to restock PPE
- Minimal income to cover monthly operational costs

Masikhule plans to continue offering the services that we have been able to offer which will include:

- Training and Mentorship:
  - Continuing with curriculum training and mentorship
  - Wellbeing workshops for principals and staff
  - Weekly sharing of stimulating ECD activities with staff and parents
  - Sharing of Covid-19 and other important information with staff and parents
- In-centre nutrition:
  - Supply of fortified porridge to the 45 Centres
  - Supply of cooked in-centre meals 3 times per week to 31 Centres until at least end February 2021
- Resources:
  - Access to our Early Learning Resource Library to principals for teaching materials
- Early Intervention:
  - Continuing with Occupational Therapy (OT) as part of curriculum training and mentorship
  - OT group work as selected centres
  - Resumption of our specialized Early Intervention project in 2021 (funding and Covid-dependent)

As always, we will endeavor to assess and address the changing needs of the community and will do so in the most sustainable and empowering manner. Without solid, stable ECD Centres and trained staff, our children will be at great risk and this will impact strongly on the future of our communities. We are concerned that, despite the determination, drive and passion of the principals, they may not have the resources to maintain their Centres and their staff until February 2021 when the new year will begin for them.

We remain very grateful for the incredible support, encouragement and funding we have received over the past year. Thank you to each and everyone one for every contribution made.

Yours sincerely,

Léanne Keet
(Founding Director)