Protecting democracy through education

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The immediacy of today's vivid news cycle as Russia invades Ukraine has not spared our children. In our youth, caring adults often buffered us from disturbing topics like war, nuclear threats and human cruelty.

Today, our children have no such insulation. They are overwhelmed with horrific images, graphic videos and politically motivated propaganda in real-time.

Updates and notifications buzz their phones at all hours of the day and night. Provocative content, algorithmically targeted to their online data, oozes into every crack and crevice of their lives.

All of this is hitting them amid a decade- long adolescent mental health crisis and lack of community support amplified through two years of COVID-19-related stress and isolation.

Information overload and a barrage of trauma-inducing experiences have left our children overwhelmed, unsettled and unwell.

In classrooms and at the dinner table, they have asked us about the possibility of nuclear war, how to make sense of conflicting news reports and why world leaders are hellbent on spreading fear, division and hatred.

They question why the power to harm so many is consolidated in the hands of so few. Inherently, they sense injustice and look to their parents and teachers for answers.

These are legitimate questions.

Each of us has focused on providing answers in age-appropriate ways. In high school history classes, transitioning from the Cold War to current Russian aggression was natural.

Giving students support in having respectful conversations and considering multiple viewpoints allowed all students, including those with Ukrainian and Russian families, to engage.

Elementary students, less familiar with the details of what's happening, were reminded that they had caring adults in their life that were available for support.

They reviewed basic cyber- safety lessons learned in the past: spend time away from devices each day; make sure your information sources are reliable; be thoughtful and kind when interacting online.

For our university pre- service teachers, we modelled digital tools to bring diverse, global perspectives to their students in the future.

As teachers, our determination to fight for democratic values must mirror the unwavering resolve that the Ukrainian people have shown fighting for their sovereignty.

The lives of all on this planet are connected and events in one country have global ramifications. Freedom and democracy are fleeting, replaced with oppression if taken for granted.

"Freedom" and "democracy" have increasingly been pawns in polarising political discourse. Now, we see those terms through a new lens as brave Ukrainians make impossible sacrifices to protect their country, friends, families and kids.

We must model for our children the change we want to see. Adding a Ukrainian flag to social media profiles might make us feel better, but our next generation deserves more.

As they've grown, we have told them that they should treat others as they wish to be treated. We taught them to tell the truth.

We encouraged them to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. We explained that living in a community means we have both rights and responsibilities to others.

The Russian primary school children, recently arrested for laying flowers and "No War" signs at the Ukraine embassy in Moscow, courageously embody these principles.

Conversations about these values can be uncomfortable because the world rarely offers binary choices and adulthood involves moral ambiguity.

Discomfort cannot prevent us from having the conversations our children need and deserve.

Addressing our children's concerns and anxiety must start by assuring them that they are safe. They need to be allowed to express their emotions and share worries with adults who listen without judgment.

When our children are not socially and emotionally well, they cannot learn, have genuine civil interactions with others and understand themselves – all foundational characteristics of healthy citizenship.

We don't have to provide solutions to every problem our children see in the world, but we need to assist them in processing the cacophony of information and emotion in their lives.

Of equal importance, we can work with them to build emotional intelligence. Helping them find shared humanity with others in their community and those in different parts of the world creates the capacity for the nuanced conversations necessary for inclusive local and global communities.

Digital literacy must also be a priority. A population that cannot evaluate sources, identify bias and demand media transparency is susceptible to manipulation and control.

While the Putin regime has relied heavily on disinformation, fake pictures, altered video and blatant lies to justify aggression, these tactics are not unique to Russia.

We've seen them used as instruments of division in our own countries. Understanding the flow of information is critical for those who wish to remain free. Through data mining and social media algorithms, the corrupt and powerful are aiming to radicalise and bond us in ignorance. Those who cannot think for themselves cannot defend themselves.

These issues reflect the complexity of our interconnected world and are not getting simpler. Teaching our students to think critically and see multiple perspectives is critical to their future.

The humanities and exposure to accurate history are how we teach these competencies. While we condemn Russia's warmongering, we must also acknowledge that our own countries have been liberators and oppressors at different times in history.

As we celebrate Ukraine's neighbours for welcoming refugees, we must recognise that those of non-European descent do not always have the same experiences at international borders.

During our focus on these European events, we must question what aggression and occupation in other parts of the globe have we failed to notice and why.

Embracing this complexity and modelling civil discourse on these topics does not show weakness. Instead, it shows we can learn from our collective experiences to create a sense of belonging for everyone.

How will our children look at this time in history in 20 years? The answer to that question lies with us.

Teachers worldwide have shown their resolve in supporting democratic values and collectively participating in professional teachers' organisations to translate that resolve into action.

Ukrainian teachers have set up classrooms in makeshift subway station bomb shelters, determined to continue supporting their students.

Teachers in Baltic nations, formerly part of the USSR, rallied together in February to combat Russian misinformation about the war. Polish teachers are preparing their classrooms to welcome refugee students once again.

Our colleagues in Africa, Australia and Asia are using discussion circles and other conversation-based teaching methods, allowing students to discuss media bias and current events respectfully.

Across the globe, educators and parents are now recommitting to uphold democratic principles.

The Ukrainian people are standing as the last line of defence between Putin and the West. World leaders, diplomats, businesses and ordinary citizens must continue to mobilise, protecting the liberty of all those who seek freedom.

Solidarity as educators, committing to fighting misinformation, teaching accurate history and protecting student social-emotional health is also essential.

Education is how we help our children and students to see solutions within themselves. It is how we pass the inherently democratic values of inclusivity, equity and human rights to our next generation.

This moment is an inflection point. The peaceful, democratic world we want for our children is dependent on our actions right now.

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