The resilience of education in a broken world

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This article is the second of a two-part series and is the transcript of a speech delivered by Education International President Susan Hopgood (pictured above right) at the Australian Education Union's 2022 Federal Conference in Melbourne in April.

The world knows that educators can be powerful and uniquely credible voices, especially in areas where disinformation has given oxygen to the so-called anti-vax and other anti-science communities.

For example, a certain part of the vaccine gap is corporate greed and lack of infrastructure, but as we know, part is hesitancy.

It's one of the reasons the World Health Organisation (WHO) came to EI and adopted our call for widespread teacher vaccination.

We have witnessed the staggering power of ignorance – the ability of weak men with national microphones – to sow distrust in medicine and denial of science.

No vaccine or personal protection or simple restatement of the truth will undo the deadly results of authoritarianism.

The ignorance it fosters and breeds and the amplification it receives from companies like Facebook and Google's YouTube has led to huge pockets
of vaccine denial and rejection in communities worldwide.

Science denial has other deadly consequences. Following action by our World Congress in 2019 and our Executive Board, EI announced on Earth Day last spring the launch of a campaign to make climate change education a critical priority.

Our goal is ambitious. Climate education – based on science and with a civic action focus – should be as fundamental as teaching reading and writing.

The fight against climate change must have an educational face and a teacher's voice in every area of the world.

Quality climate education must be based on science. It must be taught across all levels of education and across all subjects, recognising and explaining the varied social impacts of the climate crisis.

Climate change education must foster critical thinking and civic engagement, empowering our students to consider just and sustainable alternatives, and take informed action in their communities and beyond.

One special focus of the campaign is girls' education.

The data shows that educated women and girls who are involved in decision-making are a formidable force for change.

They help their families and communities build resilience to economic and climate shocks, they accelerate recovery from climate catastrophes and adaptation to the effects of climate change.

These policies are important, but the action behind them is equally important. We are mobilising not only our own members and organisations, but we are also joining and leading coalitions that make our majority voice even stronger – on every issue, in every forum possible.

Throughout the most difficult periods of COVID-19, the evidence shows that governments that have worked in partnership with teacher unions to get education back on its feet have been far more successful in doing so than countries where partnership has been non-existent.

Last year, EI and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) jointly released 10 Principles for

Effective and Equitable Educational Recovery, a collaborative way forward from COVID-19 for nations and their education systems.

The OECD is a powerful organisation, representing 38 of the world's most developed democratic countries, including Australia.

The key principles were very simple:

• Keep schools open as much and as safely as possible.

• Ensure equity and align resources with needs.

• Co-design a robust digital learning infrastructure with teachers and stakeholders.

Going forward, we need to use these same principles with regard to education technology.

When COVID-19 came, no education system was fully prepared for this challenge. Millions of teachers adapted to distance practice, the vast majority without the tools, training or time, but persistently taking the lead to keep education going for millions of students.

EI surveyed our member organisations around the world. They reported little to no effort by education systems to coordinate digital technology introduction or assessment with teachers, inadequate training, and deep divides between rich and poor, urban and rural.

We learned important lessons under intense pressure.

The entire world learned that schools are at the centre of our communities. Just ask parents now if they think schools can be replaced by remote learning.

The answer is that schools are the fundamental driver of students' social and emotional learning and their optimism for the future.

Schools are the essential hub of the communities that surround them.

But education technology is here to stay. There is no question. The only question is how it will be used in the classroom. The technology shouldn't lead us. We should be leading technology.

Our biggest job ahead on the international scene is the biggest job on the planet. That is, the business of war and peace.

Our hearts break for the Ukrainians displaced by war; sent to their deaths or bombed out of their homes by the senseless aggression of the Russian leadership.

Less than a decade ago, another senseless aggression came to an official end. Led by the United States and including Australia, the invasion of Iraq resulted in as many as a million deaths and three times that in refugees.

To speak truth to power with voices loud and strong enough to make a difference, we need to confront hypocrisy now and from now on in solidarity with the rest of the world.

We have that opportunity immediately regarding the Afghani refugees held in limbo by our government for more than two decades.

It's too late for the people of Afghanistan who worked with our military and for the US military for years and years. We left them and the world left them.

If there is a way to learn from this moment, the lesson will come from committed and brave teachers backed by their colleagues and their unions confronting the racism embedded, not only in the policies of our governments, but abetted by too many of our people.

If we are ever going to reconnect our students and our societies to a foundation of peace and justice and hope, we must also make it our business to connect people without regard to race or class.

In the entrance to the AEU office, there is a mural with a quote by Charlotte Bronte on the wall I see every day: "Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilised by education."

For years, I walked by that beautiful mural and those poetic words confident that I understood the importance of our profession, the elevated mission that set us apart.

Now, I am no artist or phrasemaker, but I see that poetic metaphor in a more prosaic light.

Our work certainly can prepare individuals for growth and openness and by extension foster communities of tolerance and peace.

But that's not the full story of who we are.

We are also unionists; active, trusted and influential members of our communities. And we are organised in hundreds of thousands of communities in the world.

We are more than the knowledge of our profession. We combine that with the strength of our trade union movement and the conviction of our social justice ideals.

We not only bear witness to the outrages and accomplishments around us, we also help students and societies make sense of the complexity.

We teach the truth. We defend the truth.

Collectively, we seek a better, more just bargain for our societies, our schools and our students.

Together, we are the enemies of authoritarians who want the future to be less democratic, less politically literate and more privately owned and controlled.

The sustainable future we want may be over our horizon, but the road ahead is well travelled and we have the wheel – to organise, to mobilise, and to rebuild and reconnect solidarity across our countries and around the world.

The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and do not wholly or necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of EI, the SSTUWA or AEU.

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