A simple solution for education

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We celebrated the International Day of Education on 24 January.

In these unprecedented times, beginning year three of this pandemic, I am grateful to be a teacher. I am grateful that I have a job that I love and that I make a positive impact on my students' lives every day.

Also, I am aware that I do not have a "right" to a job and that not everyone has been able to work, or to work consistently.

I am also aware that not everyone has a job that they are passionate about. It is not everyone's experience. Apart from the big tech/businesses and large bulk/ grocery chains stores, I cannot think of one age group, one profession, or one socio-economic group that has not been negatively affected by COVID-19.

This new wave is exasperating even the most resilient of us. Some are struggling with grieving. Some are struggling just to make a living. Some are struggling to get through a day. Some are struggling to breathe.

Navigating heightened expectations

The teaching life is no exception. The demands pushed on our profession have been overwhelming. Teacher expectations and workloads have dramatically increased.

We are trying to find a balance between educating, with engaging lessons, and protecting our students, ourselves and our families.

We are listening to the media for information about our students, our classrooms, our workloads and health protocols, all without the courtesy of being included in the planning and decision making that will impact our students, classrooms and schools.

These added stressors have led to an increase in teacher burnouts, which have resulted in an increase in supply teacher shortages which resulted in education departments redefining what a "supply" teacher really is.

Yes, I do know that teaching is not the only front-line profession that has been forced to make sacrifices and we are not the only ones seeing a mass exodus out of our profession because of these impossible expectations and guidelines.

The expectations on teachers have gotten out of control and it is out of pride, understanding, fear, or sense of duty, we have stayed relatively silent.

Pride because we believe that no matter a situation, we can help our students and communities. Understanding because we know everyone is struggling in some way, many worse than we are, so we decide to lead through our actions. Fear because we don't feel comfortable speaking out of line, we don't want to be seen as not being "team players".

Sense of duty because we are there for our students and our communities in the hope that we can build a better future that is inclusive, equitable and sustainable.

What we can't deal with and shouldn't have to deal with, is the surprise at every turn, every changing guideline, every data collecting initiative that impacts our teaching and kids' learning.

These surprises, which are typically introduced at a press conference, directly impact how, when and where we do our job. And that these changes are decided by people who do not understand the first thing about being a schoolteacher is particularly galling.

We are struggling to trust our politicians and system leaders in many jurisdictions which means credibility is in short supply.

Sadly, political leaders like the Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern, seem to be the exception not the rule these days. She cancelled her wedding plans after announcing the latest COVID-19 lockdown, and I do believe that she will do it.

Compare her to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, who enjoyed garden parties and his birthday party while he imposed a lockdown on the people.

That one made me extremely mad, furious actually, when I think of the number of children that have not been able to celebrate milestones with anyone far too many times, or have to give up their sports, music, social time, or people grieving without being able to see their loved ones one last time. No wonder people are frustrated.

Teachers have a strong sense of duty. We have a duty to model the traits like inclusiveness, equity, integrity and honesty that we want to see our students develop.

We understand the importance of demonstrating such character to the little eyes watching us everyday.

Those students have names, needs, hopes and dreams. So, we quietly go to work, sacrificing our own health, as well as our relationships because we all understand that following the health protocols/guidelines means we and our students are in contact with far too many people.

Distancing is impossible in full classes, having 100 per cent of our students wear masks 100 per cent of the time is unrealistic and again demonstrates a complete lack of understanding.

Children rely on routine, rituals and structure. They rely on classrooms to have guidelines and rules that they can navigate, test and live with.

In normal times, classroom protocols are created and developed collectively with the students, within the school's structure. We do this with our students because it is a good lesson in civics, and we know that buy-in from our students is crucial to the smooth running of our classrooms.

We create a classroom culture, but now we are often found trying to make excuses for decisions that we did not make and that sometimes, have no rhyme or reason.

You would have thought we would have figured it out by the fifth wave that actions matter, words matter, our social contract matters.

A journey towards leadership and empowerment

As we celebrate the fourth International Day of Education, I believe that we do have a solution. A solution so simple that it almost doesn't seem plausible or possible.

Just as teachers communicate and empower students by involving them in the development of classroom culture and protocols by giving voice, choice, and autonomy so too should government involve teachers in all elements related to education.

When I say communication, I mean truly transparent communication, without hidden agendas (i.e. honesty).

And by empowerment, I mean treating us like the educated, professional workforce that we are and trust that we know best how do to our jobs without the need for constant data-driven accountability management measures and policies.

Teachers work hard to develop the citizens of today and tomorrow. We take that responsibility to heart.

We trust that our goals for an inclusive, equitable education system that prepares children to move into and manage a democratic and sustainable world are shared by government.

Government and teachers must pull (or push) together, in one direction, if we are to achieve this. We cannot allow this to become a Sisyphean task. And communication is key.

Teachers need to be empowered to do our job properly. With the tools and resources to do our job, we can personalise and contextualise our students' education.

The truth of the matter is that even before this pandemic began, communication was done to teachers, to students, to school leaders, to schools.

Our job was to check off the boxes. This has created a data-driven system with the perception, when all the boxes are checked off, that it is working, and that learning has happened.

It is not reflective of our students' realities or of the communities in which they live or the holistic learning happening within our classrooms.

UNESCO's Futures of Education Commission came out with their report in November of 2021,*Reimagining our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education,* in which they say:
"Too often, decisions about what happens within schools or classrooms are made by those far outside of them, with little dialogue, interaction, or meaningful feedback loops. For the futures of education, this will need to change, and teachers must be welcomed as leaders and vital informants in public debate, policy and dialogue on our futures of education. Teacher engagement in these areas needs to be embedded in shared understandings that this constitutes a core function of what it means to be a teacher; they must be seen as key participants in forging a new social contract for education."

I wondered if we had turned a corner at the start of COVID-19 pandemic, and that governments around the world were finally willing to work with teachers to build a better today and tomorrow.

But I was for the most part wrong. Only in a few jurisdictions are we seeing true willingness to work and collaborate.

Moving away from status quo as we re-build

In the spring of 2020, teachers were doing what they are good at like parking their fears, protecting their classrooms from outside obstacles/challenges and focusing on the students in front of them.

It led to a flourish of professional development, online sharing, innovative ideas to bridge these school closures until we could get back into our classrooms. A fire had been lit.

But education was finally facing itself in the mirror and it wasn't pretty. It became apparent that our system was built on the goodwill of teachers to go above and beyond, who were made to feel guilty if they could not be superhuman at every turn.

Online learning revealed that inequity was a massive problem in our schools and that teaching was, in fact, a very complex job. The world realised how out of touch some education systems were for local schools.

The house of cards, built on the collective goodwill of so many selfless people, was crumbling. This was a shock to many, but not teachers or school leaders.

I foolishly believed that the first lockdown of 2020 was going to give us time to reset. I hoped we would realign, reach kids differently, particularly when we had students all over the globe asking, "Why am I doing this if there is no test?"

They weren't engaged for the right reason because the system was built on sorting through standardised testing.

Not understanding that education and learning can be more, should be more, they had fallen into a system that rewards only a few.

We need to rebuild our social contract with our students and communities everywhere.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, I think we will face three crises.

The first is an identity and directional crisis within all our education jurisdictions. This has been a long time coming, but we will be facing this crisis head-on, whether we want to or not.

This will demand us to rethink the purpose of education, strong public education that is inclusive and equitable for all versus private education for the few, as well as make decisions about what role digital technologies will play.

The second is a mental health crisis in both teachers, children and communities, the true impact of which won't be felt for years to come.

The third is a mass exodus of teachers and lack of ability to recruit new teachers because of the unrealistic expectations and the lack of control over the design and implementation of these expectations.

This will lead to many jurisdictions putting in half-hearted measures to get warm bodies in front of kids instead of the professionals they need.

Sadly, it will be our most dedicated, creative and innovative teachers who will leave.

I wonder if our leaders truly understand these repercussions. Do they even care? Do they see education as an investment in our future or as an expense that they can get rid of in exchange for votes?

Or worse, will they privatise education to make their friends money without looking at the impact that will have on our communities and democracies?

Every day, I must interact with many people, its unavoidable. The guilt that I felt trying to respect a bubble system, which was not unattainable in the first place, still haunts me and haunts my colleagues around the world.

When it came to schools, guidelines were there mostly for the public's perception of safety and nothing else.

We see how that has played out in the USA and elsewhere with many schools now needing to close because they do not have the staff to keep them open.

None of us wanted to be the one to catch COVID-19 and pass it on to the people we love, our parents, kids, partners, friends and/or students.

But at the same time, we didn't want to leave our students alone facing the new challenges without anyone to listen to their fears.

Every teacher has, at some point over the last two years, been caught between this rock and this hard place and has had to make the tough decisions about how to proceed.

This is also true of every school leader, parent, frontline worker and healthcare worker.

We need more than a mere acknowledgement of the unique pressures faced by teachers. We need a true collaboration and communication between our leaders and the members of this profession.

Yet, we are seeing a return to the status quo, with more data collection to show how great their decisions are working and how well they are keeping our kids safe.

Incidentally, I think that online learning is an oxymoron, worse it has become the panacea, the magic bullet, to which governments all too quickly turn. It is increasing the divide between the haves and have-nots.

Radical and transformative changes need to be made in how we make decisions in education, how teachers are led and how the profession is perceived if we are to do our very best for our students, our communities and our future.

This will not happen if honest communication and teacher empowerment are only illusions.

This article was first published on the Education International (EI) website. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the SSTUWA, AEU or EI.

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