

Friends, colleagues,

World Teachers' Day in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic is a strange celebration, but one worthy of special attention. We ARE to celebrate teachers who are struggling to provide quality education under very difficult circumstances.

In most countries schools and education institutions have been closed or crippled. To keep in contact with their students, teachers used on-line platforms, at least where that technology was available, or used radio, television and other means.

But a survey conducted by EI on the impact of COVID-19 on education in Africa, which was launched today, reveals that no meaningful learning took place during school closures on the Continent. The digital divide meant greater exclusion, leaving children from poor families further behind. There are similar problems in other parts of the world. Even in most developed economies, learning gaps have grown. Unfortunately, with rare exceptions, the pandemic economic response has short-changed education.

In some countries educators have shown a phenomenal creative and innovative capacity. They were able to respond swiftly with on-line teaching and learning programs. But even in those situations, distance education and dependence on technology, although better than nothing, can never replace in-person education. As John Dewey taught us a century ago: "The reality of education is found in the personal and face-to-face contact of teacher and child". I know that parents with lock down experience will not disagree. Yes, teaching is a profession.

Ladies and gentlemen, healthcare workers and teachers are in the forefront of helping societies deal with the pandemic. Yet, we have found that educators in precarious situations, including those on short-term contracts and in private schools, are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, many not being paid or losing their jobs.

ONE lesson we have learned is that countries with strong public school systems are doing much better in coping with the crisis than countries where schooling has been outsourced to the private sector. Like health care, education is a vital public good that should not be placed at the mercy of markets.

Governments need to take full responsibility and, where possible, ensure a safe return to in-school learning. We call upon them to adhere to WHO, UNESCO and our own recommendations on school reopening. And we know that in continuous dialogue with teachers through their unions, plans can be developed that are fair, safe and workable.

Today, Education International is hosting a massive 24-hour celebration spanning the globe. Teacher representatives will come together to share experience, tools, and innovative solutions. (1) Ensuring free quality education for all, (2) defending education from austerity and (3) making sure teachers are heard, will be the main topics. Please do not hesitate to join that global conversation at ei-ie.org after our celebration here at UNESCO.

We are very grateful to our friends at UNESCO, ILO and UNICEF for celebrating our profession today. We continue counting on your support.

Thank you so much!