

Professor Lynn Davies on UNA-UK's Sir Brian Urquhart Award – 23 October 2014

First of all I want to say how honoured and privileged I feel to be given this award. It came as a complete surprise – and became even more remarkable as I looked at the distinguished previous recipients. I am delighted to be among their company.

I am also pleased because the award links my work to the UN. I am a passionate believer in the UN and all its various bodies. I have supported the efforts of UNA-UK over the years as UK has been in and out of UNESCO. Colleagues and I at Birmingham conducted a global review of UNESCO's Associated Schools after 50 years of their existence and I can vouchsafe for the innovative work that went on across 172 countries as they tried to fulfill the ideals of UNESCO in democracy, rights and sustainable development. I chaired the Steering Committee of the UK Associated Schools network for a number of years and watched that grow.

But it is perhaps the work of UNICEF that has touched me most. I've seen the work of UNICEF in their child-friendly schools in a number of countries in conflict – Angola, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal - and admire the diplomatic way they ensure not just access for girls or for marginal groups, but also make the schools non violent and safe places to learn. I spent 6 years on the Board of UNICEF UK, and carry on supporting them on their Rights Respecting Schools – which continues to be the most cutting edge initiative in UK schools today.

It is probably the UN conventions on human rights which underpin so much of my work in education – whether the UN Convention on Human Rights or the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In a plural, multicultural society, it is vital to have a value system which cuts across all religions or cultures, and rights is the best we have. In school, it can be used to discuss with students what to tolerate and what not to tolerate – i.e. that not all practice done in the name of religion or culture is to be tolerated when it violates the right to life, to dignity, to freedom from harm, to freedom of speech. When young people and their teachers know what is and is not a right they can make judgments about challenging injustice, and this is the first step in being an active citizen.

This links to my specific work in education and extremism, with violent extremism being the crucial international concern in a time of Islamic State, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram and others. I examine the role of schools in preventing violent extremism and also in deradicalisation. Colleagues and I in an organization called ConnectJustice are currently doing a project on the family background of former extremists, interviewing both far right and AQ extremists about their journeys. What often emerges in their leaving extremist groups is their self-education – many did a lot of reading and found that the messages they had been given by the radicalisers were wrong or distorted. Some are now working with schools to warn students of the dangers – with perhaps the most powerful arguments being that they have wasted their youth. My crusade now is for schools to engage in more prevention work – not moral messages which many kids will ignore like they do warning on smoking, drugs and safe sex, but instead giving skills in analyzing

messages on the internet and elsewhere as well as encouraging political skills in forming networks for counter-messaging and for peaceful change. There are increasing inspiring examples of young people across borders doing just that.

So it is for me very significant that UNA-UK have chosen to give this year's award to an educationist. Going back to the surprise factor, much of my work is controversial, in that I reveal schools as contributing heavily to conflict as well as sometimes to peace, and also in that I promote secularism as the only solution to religious conflict. But UNA-UK clearly recognize the power of education in fulfilling the UN mission and the need to reform and reshape education to meet current imperatives around violence and peace. I am delighted to be part of that movement and delighted to accept this award.