

PART I

**THE CHALLENGE OF
THE CENTURY**

Transforming Learning

1

THE PROSPECTS FOR RADICAL CHANGE

There are three major reasons why a new purpose for public education is needed. One is that the world is rapidly deteriorating and needs citizens with greater capacities and a sense of civic duty. The second is that the current system is not serving the needs of the majority of students. The third is that new knowledge, skills, and ideas are now available for what powerful learning should look like.

RAPIDLY DECLINING GLOBAL TRENDS

Much of the evidence on the first point has been summarized in Fullan and Gallagher's *The Devil Is in the Details* (2020, Chapter 1) and Fullan's *The Right Drivers for Whole System Success* (2021). There are four interlocking and mutually reinforcing negative trends that are now causing a rapid downturn in the prospects for our planet surviving in the next 50 years. We list them in Figure 1.1 with nicknames (unflattering as they are).

Wallace-Wells, in *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019), documents in excruciating detail how just about all aspects of the earth's ecosystem are decaying in a mutually interacting death spiral (heat, hunger, water, wildfire, oceans, unbreathable air, plagues, climate—you name it; all going bad). Inequality has been in a downward fall for at least the last 40 years. New analysis by a new breed of economists (mostly women, as it turns out) documents in detail how the lion's share of gross domestic product (GDP) goes to the top narrow percent of owners and shareholders, while the wages of middle and lower

1.1 Global Trends 2021+

1

Climate Collapse
(*disintegrating*)

2

Inequality
(*galloping*)

3

Social Trust
(*plummeting*)

4

Mental Health
(*staggering*)

classes have barely moved over the four decades (Boushey, 2019; Mazucatto, 2018). Social mobility (the idea of doing better than your parents) has stagnated since the late 1970s (see Fullan, 2021). Social trust is plummeting. Putnam and Garrett's (2020) sweeping and well-documented trends in the United States since the 1870s show clearly that trends of "I-ness" (self-centeredness) have become increasingly strong since late 1970. Among other negative effects, perceptions of social trust declined from 58% in 1960 to 33% in 2010 (and, we would speculate, even lower in 2021). Numerous surveys—local and global, of all ages, including the very young, rich, and poor—show increasingly greater anxiety, stress, and ill health (all of this before COVID-19).

Each of the four elements in Figure 1.1 causes the other three to worsen, thereby intensifying and greatly accelerating the trends.

SCHOOLING

When it comes to fundamentals, schooling hasn't changed much in the past 200 years. The basic "grammar of schooling," as it is sometimes called, has remained essentially the same over the years. These characteristics include

- ▶ An approach to teaching as the transmission of existing knowledge (teacher to student).
- ▶ A system of batching of students by age, grade, and subject.
- ▶ Egg-crate classrooms led by individual teachers.

- ▶ Uniform scheduling.
- ▶ Testing by grade and/or subject coupled with accountability.
- ▶ An ignoring or miscasting of the inequity problem.
- ▶ Custodial and sorting roles of schools.
- ▶ Separation of parents/communities from schools. (Fullan, 2020b)

In a recent issue of the *American Journal of Education*, guest editors Jal Mehta and Amanda Datnow put out a call for research papers that focused on the “long-lasting and core elements of schooling” (2020). Five papers were eventually approved for publication. The editors asked Larry Cuban of Stanford and Michael Fullan to comment on the papers. What we found in the published papers was a collection of partial and basically in-vain attempts to alter how schooling was experienced by students. All four of us as commentators drew the same conclusion: there was little that was new in terms of providing engaging and meaningful learning for students as they face a new and complex world (Fullan, 2020b). This is less a criticism of schools as it is a recognition of a deeply entrenched system.

The consequences for students (and teachers) are monumental. Various surveys and studies show that a greater and greater percentage of students either tune out or mechanically do the work to get the grades. Heather Malin, Director of Research at Stanford University, concluded after several studies that only about 24% of senior high school students (i.e., those who were succeeding in the system) “have identified and are pursuing a purpose for life” (Malin, 2018, p. 1). Various other studies have found mounting disengagement as students go through the grades, as well as increased anxiety across socioeconomic status groups.

Mehta and Datnow characterized the state of affairs as the “yawning gap” between how schools are organized and how

youth learn. They describe five attributes that youth need for positive development:

- Strong connections to adults and peers
- To be viewed in asset-based ways
- For their identities to be valued
- The opportunity to contribute to the world
- Opportunities to do work that has purpose and meaning (Mehta & Datnow, 2020, p. 492)

What is clear is that there is a major mismatch between what students need and what many of them want and how schools are organized and function. It has become a crisis for learning and for society.

In a recent report, *The Right Drivers for Whole System Success*, Fullan (2021) documents how academic obsession and the accompanying narrow curriculum have alienated the majority of students including what one researcher called “the wounded winners”—those who were technically successful but stressed out and/or doing things that had little interest for them.

Fullan also showed how social intelligence (the equivalent of the science of collaboration) was poorly developed—a point to which we return in Chapter 3. No matter how you cut it, existing schooling does not serve or interest the majority of students, nor of course their teachers. Aligning the daily work and experience in schools with what students need to be ready for their future requires significant change. Students need to understand what is relevant to their futures and their needs as human beings, and they are innately connected to the vital need of changing how we teach and how we learn. Last, the future no longer seems like it is distant. It increasingly feels like the present and the future are happening on the same day!

COVID-19 entered this bleak picture in early 2020 and, in a word, has discombobulated the world everywhere and in every way. The Fullan and Quinn Deep Learning team completed an assessment that it released in June 2020, *Education Reimagined* (Fullan et al., 2020). Sticking with our theme that education is in need of big change, note that COVID-19 has exposed numerous flaws in the current system, including access to technology and opportunity to learn, along with creating enormous strain on virtually everyone and every aspect of learning. It has also got people thinking: *Could we take the opportunity to alter learning? Can students play a more active role in shaping their own learning? Can parents and communities become more active partners with schools? Now that standardized tests have been suspended, can we take the occasion to replace them with better alternatives? As well-being has become an essential priority, could we move to balance or integrate well-being and learning? One thing seems certain: schooling will never be the same, but how should the new system be fashioned?* These questions favor the themes in this book: a chance to transform learning in a significant way, a chance to identify and foster spirit work and the science of collaboration.

The idea is not just to survive COVID-19, but to end up much better than was the case, for example, in 2019. Our book takes on new meaning because of the crossroads at which we find ourselves. The challenges are so enormous that it would be easy to slip into familiar paths of routine learning: more technology, hybrid learning with students as passive learners, large-scale commercial learning, schooling as custodial places for the young, and so on.

Or we could take the opportunity to significantly revamp learning and schools. The cases we present—with their foundational components of spirit and collaboration—could be early examples of what might be needed to leverage the pandemic experience into transformational change. We also know that schools and districts that had strong spirit and focused collaborative cultures did much better in dealing with the disruption. A small-scale example of this phenomenon can be found

in the work that Fullan does with Michelle Pinchot, a school principal in Garden Grove Unified School District in Anaheim, California. In the first instance, Fullan linked with Pinchot when she was moving from one principalship to another—a school called Heritage Elementary—in Garden Grove in 2017. The proposition was whether a principal who had developed a highly successful collaborative school (a version of our science of collaboration) could also do so in another school that had low degrees of joint work. The answer is a resounding yes, which we documented in our article “The Fast Track to Sustainable Turnaround” (Fullan & Pinchot, 2018).

With COVID-19 we faced a new question: Could a strong collaborative school not only withstand but even thrive in the face of the onslaught of a deeply disruptive pandemic? Again, the answer is a strong affirmative. Immediately upon the shutdown in March 2020, the school launched into collective action as follows:

1. Working in teams remotely: the school created socio-emotional learning lessons, daily schedules, identified student needs (academic/social), developed interventions, formulated remote expectations, established collaboration schedules, had check in-checkout (CICO) systems for at-risk students, organized mentoring and student recognition systems, and created tech support and tech collaborations.
2. Working in teams to support virtual learning: organizing home visits, books, materials, food distributions, troubleshooting technical problems, and having back-up counseling.
3. Meeting twice a week to reinforce a single focus, celebrate success, set goals, review student needs, stay connected and continue to grow current leadership teams, monitor progress, reflect, and re-design. (Pinchot & Fullan, 2021)

The lesson here is that strong collaborative organizations are better equipped to confront crises, and indeed to thrive in them (we called our article “Testing Sustainability”). By contrast, individualistic cultures are not equipped to

respond to threat (or, for that matter, to seek out innovations). Of course, in *Heritage*, we are only talking about one school, while in this book we are examining hundreds of schools in eight different districts. But the principle is the same: the science of collaboration is a generative capacity.

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INNOVATION AND NEW IDEAS

We might say then that our third reason why a deeper purpose for education could be in the cards is what we call “the taste of change.” In complex, chaotic times, organizations that rise to the occasion paradoxically become even more ambitious than they were pre-crisis. The new themes of spirit and collaboration are inspiring some schools and districts to be dramatically more proactive relative to the immediate future. Recall Kuhn and his scientific revolutions in which he noted that unequivocal failure is not sufficient to unseat the existing model. The positive examples we studied have additional significance as possible ideas for a new future—ideas that could help unseat the old outdated model of schooling.

Thus, we need examples of new models that contain the elements and themes of success. Both of us, in separate work over the past five years, have begun to notice and, in some cases, enable exceptions to the negative trends. Fullan and the team found promising new trends around 2014 when they began a partnership with clusters of schools in different countries around the theme of “New Pedagogies for Deep Learning” (Fullan et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2020). This deep learning focused on global competencies rather than standard tests, on new learning designs distinct from the old grammar of schooling, and on changes in the culture of collaboration

within and across the infrastructure of schools, districts, and the center (policies and structure).

Parallel to Fullan's experience, Edwards began to see districts that were on a different trajectory. Despite the barriers (or maybe because of them, in a rise-to-the-occasion sense), these districts were on the move when they should have been faltering. As we connected with the idea of producing this book, we found greater impetus from the experiences in the pandemic—a now-or-never commitment to go deep and go long.

It seems, then, an ideal time to pull together these emerging ideas to build better education systems. New factors—some negative, some positive—have become evident. Here are eight themes that are more prominent in the past 18 months:

1. Well-being
2. Parents and community
3. Technology
4. Innovation
5. Leadership or lack of leadership
6. Deadly inequality
7. Students as agents of learning and change
8. System transformation

Together, they provide the seeds of transformation.

As a list, they are not strong enough to unseat the existing paradigm. The four faces of global implosion (climate collapse, gross inequality, reeling social distrust, and deteriorating mental health) as a set represent a powerful negative reason to take action. Similarly, but less directly, widespread dissatisfaction with schools represents another source of pushing for

better futures. Then the more positive lighthouse trends of new possibilities that we document in this book become a welcome part of the mix.

CONCLUSION

We can now turn to examine in more depth the two prominent new trends that we see emerging in school districts that are attempting to break through to new possibilities—spirit work and the science of collaboration. In some ways, it is a mystery as to why and how they would emerge at this particular time. In a real sense, we see this as part of evolution. When things become complex, when dire problems erupt and spread, and when consciousness and subconscious evolve, chances are that new ways of thinking and feeling emerge and, as such, become cultivated through the complexities of our fascinating humanity. In another way, who cares how new trends come about? The fact is that we may have new opportunities to reverse the course of our recent bad history and to revitalize learning as a force for improving our future. Finally, as we shall show, if you have a sense of the new neuroscience of learning, you will know that a greater sense of spirit will generate a propensity for deeper collaboration and vice versa. Spirit and collaboration become fused. This is the human odyssey that Meg Wheatley writes about. Are we able to accomplish radical change in learning in this decade? On a large scale, we feel that the prospects are touch and go. Read this book with an eye and a heart to what you can do individually and together to work with young people and others to usher in, barge in, or whatever it takes, to change learning, thereby changing society.

Time to start the journey!