Learning and the pandemic: What's next?

Michael Fullan[1]

Abstract This article highlights key points with respect to each of the following: 1) School systems around the world were stagnant before Covid-19 and had been for some time; 2) Therefore there was considerable pent-up energy to make some changes. Covid-19 has both exposed and exacerbated what was wrong with the system, but has also provided opportunities to make changes amidst the confusion; 3) Change does not get more complex than it is right now. The complexity facing us changes and becomes more convoluted every day; and 4) Change *will* happen. We just do not know what it will look like. We have on our hands "the battle of the decade" with respect to public education systems.

Keywords learning · pandemic · crisis · education systems

School systems stalled

In his 2018 book, *World class,* Andreas Schleicher of PISA/OECD drew the following conclusion: "Over the past decade there has been virtually no improvement in the learning outcomes of students in the Western World, even though expenditure on schooling rose by almost 20% during this period" (Schleicher 2018, p. 13).

Numerous studies show that there is a dramatic loss of interest in schooling by students as they transition to higher grades, with barely 20 per cent showing a sense of purpose by the time they are in grades 11 and 12 (Malin 2018). Other studies reveal that anxiety and stress have been steadily increasing over the past decade. Even countries that have been performing at the top of the world rankings, such as Singapore, South Korea, and the city of Shanghai, have been reporting higher and higher rates of distress, including higher suicide rates.

✉ Michael Fullan

1   Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6, Canada

Without question, education systems were in a state of stagnation before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was clear that schools increasingly were not serving the needs of most students and they were not preparing them for the 21st century. Alongside this, other issues were worsening, the most prominent being climate change, and extreme and galloping inequity across the world (Fullan and Gallagher 2020, chapter 1).

Pent-up energy

Given the lack of change (for decades actually) within systems, frustration has been steadily mounting. Covid-19 and its associated pandemic exposed more explicitly great inequities such as access to devices, platforms, and/or places to do schoolwork outside schools in education systems. Some students and families found the shutdown liberating, as they had the time to pursue other interests. Our group teamed up with Microsoft and UNESCO to take stock in a report called "Education re-imagined: The future of learning" (NPDL, Microsoft, and UNESCO 2020). The report identified three stages of responding to the abrupt changes caused by the pandemic: "disruption, transition, and re-imagining" and offered ideas and tools to address each stage.

When I first thought of pent-up ideas coming to the surface, I was thinking about "positive innovations", as in "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste". But as the pandemic became prolonged, I began to see that the disruption was also an opportunity for what I would call "negative change", such as proliferation of technology without good pedagogy, or the move to privatize public education systems. It could be referred to as a "free for all" with a range of change makers in the mix. As of now (August 2020), the situation is certainly in a state of flux.

Change does not get more complex than the present

In the early stages of the pandemic (March to May), many of us assumed that a transition phase would occur for several months leading to the re-opening of schools in September 2020. It is now obvious that such re-opening is incredibly multi-faceted and dynamic. It is not possible within the scope of this article to summarize the issues, but they affect virtually every part of the world, and every aspect of complex life in the 21st century. The situation is chaotic *within* any given country and is off the chart when considered globally. It is beyond complexity theory, and even out of reach of chaos thinking. In my book *Nuance* (Fullan 2019) – pre-Covid-19 – I concluded that "nuance" leaders are experts at understanding "context". They are especially skilled at getting below the surface to understand the cultures within which they lead. I also observed that when leaders change jobs and enter a new context, they become to a certain extent "de-skilled" (in relation to the new context). Likewise, the pandemic brings a new context to us virtually every week. Thus, we are all de-skilled in this prolonged period of non-linear ambiguity. We are in a more complex world compared to any time in the past. From a change perspective, there is nothing so complex to solve than the situation we have at present times, and there is no indication that conditions will get better.

Change will happen and will settle down

The change transition – pandemic and beyond – will play itself out over the next decade. We see this period as unique for education because of the stability and stagnation of education over what some people have observed has been some 125 years. You do not have to be a change expert to know that at certain epochs transition is inevitable. The next decade or so is one of those times. This will be a period during which the new system will be formed. Our team has been developing a deep and system-wide solution since 2015 which we call "New Pedagogies for Deep Learning" (NPDL 2020; see also Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen 2018; and Quinn, McEachen, Fullan, Gardner, and Drummy 2020). The model focuses on six global competencies (citizenship, character, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking); four learning design aspects (partnerships, pedagogical practices, learning environments, leveraging digital), and three levels of the system (school culture, regional or district, and state or policy). NPDL has been tested in numerous schools and systems across eight countries, although it is not widespread. It is the kind of solution that fits well with the argument that I have been developing in this short article.

Conclusion

For a period of time after the Second World War, education served society as an agent of change, mobility, and development. Since the 1980s, education has become part of a system of stagnation. The proposition now should be how can education once again become a transformation agent of society. It is true that there are problems beyond education (climate and extreme inequality, to name two), but it seems evident that education must now become an essential feature of the solution as an agent of both individual and social development. My view is that the world will get better or worse – there is no middle ground. The guiding principle, in my opinion, is to build equitable public school systems that become the lifeblood of thriving societies that benefit individuals and collectivities.

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Michael Fullan   is the Global Leadership Director, New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL.global), and a worldwide authority on educational reform with a mandate of helping to achieve the moral purpose of all children learning. A former Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto, Michael advises policymakers and local leaders around the world to provide leadership in education. Michael received the Order of Canada in December 2012. He holds honorary doctorates from several universities in North America and abroad.