

Leaders grown from stresses



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Section: Comment

Let's put the worries about our new curriculum into perspective. We live in an increasingly challenging, complex, inter-connected and unpredictable world beset by a range of seemingly insoluble problems.

This is the view of Thomas Homer-Dixon (pictured), an expert in peace and conflict studies, who believes these problems arise from "tectonic stresses". He identifies five: population stress, energy stress, environmental stress, climate stress and economic stress (the ever-widening gap between rich and poor people).

I came across Homer-Dixon's *The Upside of Down* through a reference by Michael Fullan, the best respected voice on change in education. I was catching up with Fullan's recent thoughts because someone suggested that the Education Secretary consult him on the implementation of *A Curriculum for Excellence*. It would be an even bolder move than her decision to address all Scotland's heads face-to-face, particularly if she hired him over a period of time rather than simply to be a speaker at yet another one-off event.

Fullan claims we have an increasing understanding of how to tackle complex change. But this involves developing a new kind of leader who recognises what is needed to bring about deep and lasting changes in living systems at all levels. He suggests these leaders need "a deep understanding of what motivates us as human beings and how we tap into and influence other people's self-motivation".

Education has a crucial role in growing the next generation of leaders at all levels. But Fullan notes that governments across the world have recognised for some time that education systems are no longer fit for this purpose. They don't equip young people to live in the kind of world described by Homer-Dixon, let alone help to change it.

Over the past 20 years, our education system has not encouraged teachers to be curriculum leaders. Now, suddenly, it is doing so, but without the necessary support.

What school would be confident to take the outcomes and use them to design a curriculum around Homer-Dixon's five stresses? Think how challenging and motivating that could be. It would be the opposite of dumbing-down - and the exams could be designed to suit.

Before I get carried away, I need to reflect that most teachers and students find change difficult. Most of us want simple answers to complex questions, not "it depends". We find it hard to accept that the classroom and the world as a whole have become too complex for any theory to have certainty.

We need teachers to be curriculum leaders, but also leaders in one of the world's most complex

environments: the classroom. That's why we need teachers who are skilled in assessment strategies but who also, to paraphrase Fullan, have a deep understanding of what motivates pupils as human beings and how we tap into and influence their self-motivation in the classroom.

Fullan is clear about the importance of teachers in the change process. In his recent book, *The Six Secrets of Change*: what the best leaders do to help their organisations survive and thrive, the first and most important secret is "love your employees". It would be interesting to see him help us to apply that idea to education in Scotland.

He would argue that it's about moving away from prescription towards greater autonomy; fostering teacher ownership of change, development and improvement; promoting deep learning on the job; and rekindling the deep moral purpose and passion that brings so many people into teaching. You cannot hope to do all that through one-off workshops or a couple of extra training days a year.

Ian Smith is founder of Learning Unlimited.

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