

THE PRINCIPALSHIP HAS CHANGED

2020 Here We Come!

By **Michael Fullan**

Social institutions often evolve slowly over time, and then seemingly suddenly new patterns crystalize. The 2016-2019 period is one of those periods for leadership within schools. As pressures for change build, new sprouts begin to appear. At some point the breakthroughs gain momentum, take on clearer forms and appear more frequently. Akin to a social movement the new forms become more prominent. In an evolutionary sense this process has an inevitable quality, but in the end it is always shaped and confirmed by humans.

We have always been able to depend on the dynamics of evolution to end up for the better at the end of a struggle. For the past 20,000 years, broadly speaking each generation has ended up better than the previous in terms of resources and the quality of society. This time I am not so sure. Climate change is much more ominous; the future of jobs and the intermingling of robots is much more unpredictable; humankind's ability to work out problems and to ultimately get along is much more precarious. While

literacy is at an all time high so is anxiety and stress engulfing the very young and old alike.

Education has a special role to play in anticipating and linking the present to the future in real time. No other institution has a more critical role in saving society from a disintegrating future. Indeed, education needs to be the light at the end of the tunnel by positively and proactively developing alternatives in real time. Which bring us to the point of this article. Leadership of a special kind will be required.

Sure it is a big ask, but when has courage been judged on practical grounds? I just finished writing a book called *Nuance: Why some leaders succeed and others fail*. This article will serve as a precursor to my book.

There are three interrelated ways in which the principalship has been changing over the past five years. I predict that the dimensions of this role will become solidified in the next three years.

The three ways are:

First, as heretical as it might sound the focus will still include, but will move beyond, literacy, numeracy and high school graduation. I will call this leadership ***Living in the real, real world.***

Second, schools will become places where school principals mobilize students, teachers and communities to learn about and change the world. This we can label: ***Mobilizing the masses to engage the world.***

Third, we can no longer depend for policy makers or leaders at the middle to get it right, especially during times of crisis or transition. Thus we need school leaders (which means schools and communities) who proactively contend with policies and societal dynamics. This I will call, *Leading outward and upward*.

Perhaps some current principals may feel that they did not sign on for this galloping assignment. But it is definitely one of the most critical roles imaginable for society at this juncture in our evolution. As the title of this article says, *2020 Here We Come!*

1. Living in the real, real world

Today, one is not enabled greatly in the real world by being literate, numerate and having a high school diploma or a university degree. These are necessary, but not sufficient. Rather, students must acquire certain “Global Competencies.” We have documented these as the 6Cs: character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking (Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen, 2018).

On one side, I have the sense that the pre-occupation with literacy and numeracy, especially if educators are unduly focused on test scores, is crowding out attention to the more fundamental global competencies. On the other side, and this is where the finesse of leadership comes into play, it is essential for school systems to turn their attention to global competencies as explicit goals, as they continue to make the linkage to literacy and numeracy. A very good example of doing this successfully is the Ottawa Catholic District Board with all of its 83 schools (see the case study in Fullan, 2018). The bottom line is that school principals must focus on global competencies.

2. Mobilizing the masses

One of the main findings we have in our deep learning work is about ‘leadership in the middle’ (at the district and/or school levels). The key principle is liberate downward as you mobilize sideways and upwards. This means that you mobilize ‘groups’ or ‘teams’ (and hence is built on focused collaboration). The content of this work is to ‘engage the world’, in order to study it, learn about it, and begin to help change it (locally and beyond) for the better.

This is a huge motivator for students and teachers. People like to learn about meaningful things, and to influence the world around them. We have encountered two major, positive surprises in this work. The first we call ‘the equity hypothesis,’ whereby students who are most

disconnected by conventional schooling are especially motivated by this new, more relevant, team-based learning. Second, we have unleashed new ‘change agents’ en masse that pursue learning and making a difference in tandem. In this respect the new leadership for principals is to *participate as a learner* with teachers, students and communities to achieve greater and deeper learning that makes a difference. The role of the principal is to help develop students and teachers as learned change agents, both individually and collectively.

3. Leading outward and upward

Policies are in flux: the basics or global competencies; explicit sex education or not; widespread standard testing or not; diversity through immigration and LBGTQ, or not. All of these issues are contentious with no obvious correct answer. School principals should be neither passive implementers of the latest policies nor subversive rejecters of key policies and directives. Rather they should encourage engagement with the outside local community and larger forums of debate. They need to lead a process whereby schools and communities are learning about and participating in deliberations about the key issues of the day. And it may mean taking a stand that differs from the official hierarchical view in the midst of given controversies.

The school principalship of the present and future will require both participating in the hierarchy (such as the district), with one’s peers (other school leaders), and outside community groups and networks.

Conclusion

The principalship has changed in gradual ways over the past five years and it is about to land in a new place. Such a place will encompass the three dimensions that I identified here. Together these dimensions feed on each other. They make the principalship more complex, more daunting, but so much more critical for society. Principal as co-learner has arrived! [↗](#)

Michael Fullan, O.C., is the Global Leadership Director, New Pedagogies for Deep Learning and a worldwide authority on educational reform with a mandate of helping to achieve the moral purpose of all children learning.



Developing Humanity: bit.ly/2OB01cn

Michael Fullan website: michaelfullan.ca