When It Comes to the Teacher Shortage, Who's Abandoning Whom?

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Teacher resignations are common knowledge these days. It's like COVID itself. Nearly everyone personally knows a teacher or knows of teachers who have left in the past year—often abruptly. These days, students often have different teachers, unqualified substitutes—more and more schools are stress zones. It seems like no one wants to be a teacher anymore.

Some see the current situation as a function of the carpet-bombing effects of the pandemic that have been visited upon schools. Relentless, unbearable, ever-worsening pressures make it impossible, some say, for even the most dedicated teachers to remain. What if we were to say that the structural cracks had been there for some time. Like a Florida condominium or London's Grenfell Tower collapse was inevitable—just a matter of time and additional stress that became the last straw.

Most teachers—from the days of the one-room schoolhouse to the larger contemporary schools—came into teaching to connect with, inspire, and guide students through their

growth and development. Over the years, schools became less and less valued by students, while the mandated 'fixes' demoralized teachers. Schooling became more boring or alienating for the majority of students as they moved up the grade levels.

The system was held together by external props—standardized tests, fixed requirements about when and where teaching should occur, and micromanagement of everyone. Shaming, naming, and blaming may garner compliance but does nothing to assist learning. Judgment and fear are consistently used as motivators. While some schools did manage, the system as a whole became less and less effective.

Prior to the pandemic, most students and teachers had already become less and less enthusiastic about their daily fare. All along, system actions tended to be one-offs. Leaders overlooked making the system itself more supportive. Now that the system is creaking badly, and blame is being cast in all directions, people at all levels are being forced to go beyond healthy limits.

The pandemic has helped to reveal fundamental weaknesses about the failure of schooling. One way or another, change is inevitable. We see two possible pathways. One is to allow societal forces to run their course. If we do this, it is almost certain that artificial intelligence or machine learning will dominate. Andy Hargreaves and I called this the *Business Capital* model wherein technological innovation and capital investments drive what happens. Teachers are there, but they are fewer in number and are in service of the machines and those who develop them. No one has to "cause" this model to dominate. It is already embedded into our economy and its investments. To the extent that there is a driver, it is big business.

The alternative pathway is to change the system—not to tinker but to transform it. We call this path the *Humanity-Based* model in which all students become "good at learning and good at life"; where "belonging, purpose, individual and collective problem solving" is fostered; and "where students know that improving society for themselves and others is essential to well-being and indeed to the future of humanity." The "human condition" is the focus of this model.

In the meantime, if quality teaching is lacking, if students are insufficiently motivated, if inequality continually worsens, are individual teachers and students to blame or is the existing system the problem? Who is abandoning whom? Our conclusion is that the old, deeply flawed system has de facto abandoned the teachers, not the other way around. We continue to try to patch up a flawed system with segmented ideas. The calls for greater diversity, increased teacher pay, better teacher preparation and professional development (while needed and necessary) won't amount to much in a bad system. We need to shift our understanding and energy to developing a new system where both new learning and technology develop in tandem.

The business-capital model with its digital ubiquity is the most likely outcome because it operates as a kind of "invisible hand" in a society that does not have counter forces favoring an alternative. We believe that most people do not want digital domination. While teachers and their students are bearing the brunt of our current outdated system,

there are people across the system who want what we have called humanity-based learning.

The good news is that we might know more about how to do this than we realize. Ironically, the answer may be found in those educators *who decided to stay.* What are these remaining teachers who are connected with students doing? What are the teachers who are feeling balanced and not burnt out doing? Chances are, that it's humanity-based.

When a system is wrong, it's wrong all over. School districts complain about compliance overload, which of course redounds to schools. Equity gets siloed, local initiative restricted, and intrinsic motivation lessens. The more anxious central leaders become and the more money they have, the more they lay on a cornucopia of distractors that become fatal for coherent system transformation.

By contrast, a humanity-based model facilitates transformation as schools and communities experience greater local autonomy and lateral learning and gain capacity to be influential upward. In the present model, schools are not in a position to benefit from the growing knowledge of innovations and effective practices that can be found in some other schools and districts and in research and innovation such as SoLD (the Science of Learning Development) and in our own New Pedagogies for Deep Learning.

So, how do we get there? If we know anything about complex change, it is that it must be addressed through *joint determination* by those in authority and those in the situation where the problems lie. Many leaders would say they believe in getting input and they foster participation in decisions. But their actions in a hierarchical leadership structure are a far cry from actually working together on the solutions.

This brings us to those educators who decided to stay despite or maybe even because of the pandemic. They may represent the first building blocks of a new system. Yes, upon returning this year, they may be more adamant about what they are not going to do. Perhaps they will not be as willing to sub or voluntarily serve on committees outside of paid hours. They may choose to use all of their personal time, prefer virtual meetings, and want to work flexibly with their students. But we also detect, more than ever, a strong child-advocate theme. Teachers are concerned about the world that students are experiencing and feel called to be positive and protective on their behalf. Teachers have abandoned the *old system*, but the truth is that they never left their calling.

A just released study from Australia analyzed 65,000 news articles about teachers covering the last 25 years. The headline: "No wonder no one wants to be a teacher." The author drew three conclusions: "We are fixated on teacher quality," "teacher work is made out to be simple (it's not)," and "teacher bashing is the norm."

Our future, our very survival as a species, depends on human and social development. We need machines, and they are ever more powerful. But they are not powerful enough to save our planet. We need the ingenuity, hope, and drive of humans—groups and collectives.

You can't fix what you don't understand. Most people don't understand how the current system is at fault. Decide to create a new, different, better system. Put it in motion. Do it in partnership with teachers, parents, communities, and students. When students and teachers come to feel that they are a big part of the solution, no one will feel abandoned!