

Why We Can't Escape the Status Quo in Education

200 years of doing the same thing just won't cut it

By Michael Fullan — January 09, 2023 3 min read



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This is Part I in a two-part series by Michael Fullan.

The first mystery of system change in education is why has the 200-year-old current system in Western societies not transformed when the majority of people have known for at least 50 years that it does not work?

The second mystery is why “the system,” aside from using technology more frequently, is likely to revert to the status quo even when a pandemic has presented the opportunity to make fundamental change?

The general reason is that inertia is powerful—things keep on doing what they are already doing. Under stress, the brain does not like uncertainty; we “flock” to what we know best, the old patterns of being. The second reason is that COVID and its related forces have given society an individual and collective nervous breakdown. There is little energy to fight back. Yet there are huge resources being poured into some notion of “build back better.” The current system is based on “academic obsession,” which serves only a few (and even many of them don’t do so well). Today, there is more sensitivity to well-being, and questioning of traditional assessment practices, but no concerted effort to change the purpose and nature of learning.

The questions are:

What shall we focus on?

How can we make change more likely?

The moment for serious change will be fleeting unless there is action that provides early and continuing energy to change practice. The new purpose should be to help young people cope and thrive in an increasingly complex world, including developing the competencies to do well under circumstances never before experienced. A big part of making this successful is to figure out how to make individual and group (small and large) interests and actions fuse or at least work together. System change is a collective matter. But here is my worry—my mystery if you like—even when change is badly needed, hidden forces pull us back to pockets of the status quo or worse.

The content of the strategy

We need a few of our basic change assumptions to guide our early action: Employ triage (urgency of need); “go slow to go fast”; seek specificity without imposition; and engage in joint determination (those with the problem must have a hand in shaping the action, assessing how it is going, and what corrections to make).

The foundation of the new strategy is *well-being AND learning*. However, we need two other terms—relationships and pedagogy—that are easy to remember in the educational context, grounded in practice, possible to judge whether they are evident, and above all, can work in tandem. Well-being has always been part of the learning lexicon, but until COVID, it took a back seat to learning. In fact, its earlier manifestation was more concerned with ill-being—those students who didn’t have the conditions to learn normally or at all. Later, when COVID ill-being became front and center, stress, anxiety, and dysfunction became everyone’s affliction—young and old alike. At the same time, within a very short time period (2020 to the present), some of us began to see *well-being* as associated with thriving—with what we call *deep learning: the ability to learn how to learn, know oneself, and care about “the other” and the environment*.

Neuroscience and our common sense told us that ill-being is part and parcel of extreme stress. But we lucked into the flip side of the equation: well-being (sense of purpose, belonging, the plight of humanity, engagement, making a contribution, and so on) led us to realize that well-being and learning *together* was what education should have been about in the first place. This science also supports the notion that education must recognize the role of emotion in learning, “I feel, therefore I learn.”

The 6Cs—character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking—combined with “deep-learning pedagogy” (neuroscience again) was the key to transforming education. There is also evidence that this combination, well-being and learning, could be one of the keys to equity and equality.

Maybe 200 years of doing the same thing is enough, and it’s time to focus our efforts somewhere else?