
Preface

We hope this book is as interesting to read as it was to write. We use the term *system change* to recognize that key elements in a social system are related to each other and have nonlinear ramifications upon ramifications that affect the performance of the overall system. System transformation means fundamentally altering the way we think about how systems operate and how they could function and evolve in the face of powerful challenges that threaten human existence. We see education as crucial to this transformation—a role that it currently does not play. Our book is about how to rethink the system in terms of its three levels—local, middle, and top—so that each level could make a contribution individually and in combination with the other levels in order to transform the system dramatically for the better. We call this *connected autonomy*. The focus of this work is to develop equity, excellence, and well-being in concert across the whole system.

SCOPE AND PURPOSE

In this book we take up the looming danger that inequity poses for all members of society, obstacles to system change, the need to treat equity, excellence, and well-being as a set, and the independent and connected power of the local, middle, and top. When excellence, equity, and well-being converge in individuals or groups, the outcome is people and groups who become “good at life.” We feature vignettes of examples of success and ideas for how those in the local, middle, and top can take proactive steps to begin this journey. We will highlight key actions, ideas, and strategies throughout the book. We think we have insights into how the *culture of learning* can be transformed to achieve greater equity and excellence. Beyond the scope of our book (although we will acknowledge it from time to time) is how the *culture of inequity* can be addressed in schools and society.

What about this curious phrase “the devil is in the details”? When people say “the devil is in the details,” they usually mean unforeseen things inevitably happen—things that thwart the best-laid plans. The answer cannot be to try to anticipate all contingencies—a clear impossibility because, in addition to complexity, some things are “caused” later arising from the circumstances. Contexts are where the details reside. Therefore, understanding one’s own context and those of others is essential to contending with the details that matter. When we are oblivious to contextual situations, details have their way for better or, more likely, for worse. When we reframe system transformation as the process of increasing our knowledge of various contexts and acting on this knowledge to improve things, we have a chance to progress. Success occurs when more and more of us learn to *understand context*. We learn to influence the details that matter.

Details are not a matter of micromanaging. Think of it this way: Two systems can each produce all of the right foundational documents (annual improvement plans, SMART goals, literacy strategies, even deep learning strategies). They can believe in and provide professional development for teachers and express trust in their school staff, but one gets results and sustainable change and the other, actually most, do not. In our view, it is in the details that the difference is made. It is found in details such as the ways in which trust is built, the degree to which the implementation is nimble and flexes as it needs to in response to what is happening in the situation. Both the content and tone of the communications from leaders should be inspiring people to do the work, reminding them of the deep moral purpose and their students’ futures as well as their own progress and competencies. This is similar to Fullan’s (2019) concept of *nuance*. Focus on details that make a difference and turn them to your advantage.

It is revealing to note that the original expression in the 19th century appears to have been “God is in the detail” (later pluralized to details) to stress that details are key and may be for the good as well as the bad. Presumably after a century or so of neglecting details, the expression was revised to more accurately portray reality—there are more devilish details than godly ones that end up thwarting us rather than helping. In this book we are reclaiming the virtuous, efficacious notion of detail. The trick is to get at and grasp the right details that make a difference. System thinking will help us accomplish this breakthrough.

We will argue that the world is heading into the jaws of mass extinction or radical decline of human existence. Whether it will take 20 or 100 years remains to be seen. We need a new moral imperative *and* a system transformation strategy that goes along with it to have any chance of surviving for the better. The moral imperative with the help of education is “to become better at learning and better at life,” which we will spell out in subsequent chapters. This moral imperative will need to be both an individual and a collective phenomenon. In essence this means that whatever level of the system you are at you will need:

- a. To understand your own level and that of your peers.
- b. To gain greater understanding of each of the other two levels.
- c. And to work accordingly toward greater equity, excellence, and well-being that in turn favors becoming “good at life.”

For the past 20 years and more, we have been students and promoters of system change in education. We have helped to lead change in direct attempts to achieve whole system improvement. In Ontario, Canada, Michael Fullan was policy adviser to two successive premiers from 2003 to 2018. Within that same period (2008–2015), Mary Jean Gallagher was assistant deputy minister in the province charged with leading the learning transformation in the 4,900 schools and 72 districts involving two million students in the province. If you like, Fullan was the external change agent and Gallagher the internal change agent. For the past six years we have worked on two other whole system change initiatives: California in the United States with its 10,700 schools, 1,009 districts, 58 counties, and over six million students; and the state of Victoria in Australia (1,560 schools). All three cases involved deliberate, successful-to-a-point policies and action intended to improve the whole system (two of the three, California and Victoria, are continuing to evolve the policies that they began with; Ontario has stalled due to a change in government in 2018).

At the same time, we have consulted with or studied numerous other systems around the world as well as immersed ourselves in the research and practice literature on educational change. As we consider system change for 2020 and beyond, we have the sense that we are at a particular time

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in history where dramatic change is in the cards—for better or for worse. More and more of us, including some policy makers, have concluded that the approaches used over the past two decades have increasingly failed to work; that the world is in a crisis not encountered for hundreds and maybe thousands of years; that there are glimpses of what should be done; and that young people are our greatest hope. Is it possible to liberate the system while maintaining focus? This book will take you on such a journey.

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