1

The Real Reform Agenda

The real reform agenda is societal development. Not in an abstract sense, but empirically. Not in broad strokes, but through identifying precise themes and their consequences for better or for worse. Let us give the chapters one-word names, so that we can quickly and clearly see the flow of the argument. Chapter One is the Society Chapter. We will see the dynamics of what makes societies healthy or sick, and then insert the role of education. Sick education systems mirror sick societies, not only because they directly affect one another but also because the internal dynamics of diseased systems are similar.

The Turnaround Chapter is Chapter Two. Here we see played out in the education system many of the same processes that make societies sick. We identify some positive things that turnaround schools do to get off the critical list, going from bedridden to barely standing; and we identify what is needed for schools to become healthier all or most of the time.

Chapter Three is the Change Chapter. What motivates people in large numbers to change? It turns out that the answer is not so obvious. It is not a compelling, clear argument of long-term dire consequences that moves people to action. Environmentalists and early childhood educators have long argued in vain for immediate action in order to head off or reverse predictable and costly negative outcomes. Not even palpable, undesirable, gut-wrenching conditions of

human misery attract forceful action, AIDS in Africa being a prime example. We need instead to draw more perceptively on what motivates people to engage in change, and what mechanisms and dynamics represent change forces commensurate with the transformation required.

The final chapter is the System Chapter. Turning a system around builds on the ideas of the first three chapters in defining a way forward. When all is said and done, *Turnaround Schools* is about getting off the road to perdition, and on the road to precision. The road to precision is not one of prescription. It is a matter of being best equipped with capacities that increase the chances of being dynamically precise in the face of problems that are unpredictable in their timing and nature, largely because they arise from human motivation and interaction. The System Chapter focuses on the role of leadership, not the leader who can come into town and save a single school (temporarily) but leaders whose very actions change the systems they work in. System thinkers in action, as I call them, are conscious of the fact that they are changing contexts as they help solve problems within them. So, society, turnaround, change, and systems: a unified set for addressing today's real reform agenda.

What Makes Societies Tick

Richard Wilkinson starts his book *The Impact of Inequality* with these words: "Within each of the developed countries, including the United States, average life expectancy is five, ten or even fifteen years shorter for people living in the poorest areas compared to those living in the richest" (2005, p. 1). I draw heavily here on Wilkinson's impressive synthesis of research on the impact of the gap between the poor and the rich. Interestingly, some of the deepest reasons for greater ill health among the poor in developed countries are not the obvious ones (such as exposure to physically unhealthy circumstances; but see later my discussion of Berliner's analysis [2005]). Wilkinson found that the main reasons, like many aspects

of change, are sociopsychological, arising from not so much the circumstances in which we find ourselves but how we experience or perceive our daily lives in such circumstances. As Wilkinson describes:

> The biology of how psychological factors affect health seems to hinge predominantly on the extent to which they cause frequent or recurrent stress. Chronic stress affects numerous physiological systems, including the cardiovascular and immune systems, increasing our vulnerability to a very wide range of diseases and health conditions. . . .
>
> Because psychological factors influence health through stress, the main psychosocial factors identified by research are also likely to be the most important sources and symptoms of chronic stress in modern societies. They include depression, anxiety, helplessness, hostility, insecurity, and lack of a sense of control—not to mention the pressures that lead people to dependency on prescribed or recreational drugs. . . .
>
> On the positive side, feeling happy and in control of life, having friends, and enjoying good relationships all seem highly beneficial to health [2005, pp. 12–13].

In other words, the social meaning of people's circumstances have profound consequences: "Inequality promotes strategies that are more self-interested, less affiliative, often highly antisocial, more stressful, and likely to give rise to higher levels of violence, poorer community relations, and worse health. In contrast, the less unequal societies tend to be much more affiliative, less violent, more supportive and inclusive, and marked by better health" (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 23).

Wilkinson demonstrates that the core problem in most developed countries is not low material living conditions per se but rather low social status, which has corrosive social consequences "such as

feeling looked down on, having an inferior position in the social hierarchy, and subordination (and therefore also a reduced ability to control one's circumstances and work)" (p. 25).

Thus the quality of social relations is better in more equal societies, where "people are much more likely to trust each other, [and] measures of social capital and social cohesion show that community life is stronger, and homicide rates and levels of violence are consistently lower" (p. 33).

Wilkinson presents data indicating that the United States trails behind most developed countries in life expectancy despite its wealth and high expenditure on medicine. The reason: "U.S. income differences are the widest of any of the rich developed market democracies" (p. 40). This inverse relationship between income inequality and life expectancy holds for all main developed countries, with Japan and Sweden at the higher end of the scale and the United States at the lower end. Canada is closer to Japan and Sweden.

In examining income differences across countries, Wilkinson shows that living standards figure only when they are too low to furnish such basics as clean water and adequate nutrition. This is no longer the case for the vast majority of people in developed countries: "As countries get richer and fewer people go without basic necessities, the relationship between measures of average living standards (such as gross domestic product per capital) and health progressively weakens" (p. 67).

Among the richest countries "we find no relationship whatsoever between GDP and average life expectancy." Citing numerous studies, Wilkinson shows time and again that "low social cohesion and income inequality [as distinct from average income] are at the top of the list of explanations for the decline of life expectancy" (p. 118).

The smaller the income gap, the greater the social capital or cohesion, and vice versa. In examining economic trends in several countries over time as they relate to incidents of violence, Wilkinson concludes: "There can be no doubt of the direction of causality,

namely, that as economic disruption and dislocation widens, income differences lead to the deterioration of the social fabric and the rise of violence" (p. 207).

The lack of social cohesion in the more unequal societies has multifaceted negative consequences, notably the tendency in "societies with bigger inequalities to show more discrimination against vulnerable groups, whether women, religious or ethnic minorities" (p. 28), which "is part of a wider process of downward discrimination in which people who feel humiliated try to repair their sense of selfhood by demonstrating their superiority over more vulnerable groups" (p. 219). When inequality is high, anxiety and insecurity take their toll even if one is not aware of them. (The biological pathways in which recurrent stress affects health are hidden from one's conscious self.)

Wilkinson's main conclusion is that getting richer, whether as an individual or as measured by average country income (as with GDP), has little to do with happiness. He quotes Frank (1999, p. 111): "Study after careful study shows that beyond some point, the average happiness within a country is completely unaffected by increases in its average income level."

In pursuing self-interested economic development, Wilkinson predicts that we will create (indeed, we are creating) "a misunderstood and unhappy version of the humanity we plan for" (p. 263). Wilkinson then concludes that we "fail to recognize that what really matters to us, the source of our real satisfaction or dissatisfaction, just like the main sources of our stress and unhappiness, is to be found in the quality of social relations" (p. 263).

So why should the rich care? This is a complex question to answer, and some of the exploration must be speculative, because the very rich of course do not overtly discriminate (who was it that said, "What I like about snobs is that they leave you alone"?). Wilkinson's analysis was not based just on the rich and poor ends of the social scale; rather, his argument is that inequality negatively affects the entire distribution across the whole scale.

It seems to me that there are three main reasons we should all care about the solution, which is to raise the economic bar as we close the income gap. It is possible for individuals to hold any two or all three reasons (being multimotivated is not unusual). The reasons are social justice, health and well-being, and economic development. No one reason is likely to carry the day, but a deeper insight into how all three function in concert may have broad appeal.

The social injustice or moral purpose argument is palpable. Its major appeal is not just because of the obvious visible suffering and misery caused by inequality but how Wilkinson's analysis helps us see the mechanisms through which stress and deterioration versus happiness and growth operate. It is not just the social justice value we can endorse: we can actually envisage new processes through which major societal development (with multifaceted benefits) can occur. Social justice has always been a motivator for some. We must find a place for social justice where many can be attracted to the value of making society more beneficial to the vast majority of citizens.

Health and well-being, as we have seen through Wilkinson's analysis, is another reason for concern. The social costs for everyone in societies that are unequal are seriously on the rise. Remember: we are not talking only about historically poor countries, but also about how the richer an unequal society gets the worse off it becomes. There is a limit to this trend. Perhaps the relatively richer also have or will have lower life expectancy in unequal societies than their counterparts in more equal ones because of the prolonged stress of living in a society with ever less social cohesion. It is not hard to imagine that in the long run the growing social tensions in progressively unequal societies will challenge democracy itself. In short, a political case—that is, to maintain the legitimacy of the people—can be made for being concerned with a growing income gap within a given country.

The economic argument is the trickiest. The United States has become incredibly wealthy as a nation while becoming more unequal. But again, there is a limit. The debt in the United States is now in

the trillions of dollars. In the long run, a healthier economy depends on the labor productivity of all its citizens, not just some. There is no question that the social consequences embedded in Wilkinson's analysis will have a growing adverse effect on the economy.

We are now nudging closer to the education system. Labor productivity is related to level of education. In a recent analysis by the C. D. Howe Institute of Canada, Coulombe and Tremblay (2005) drew this powerful conclusion: "A country's literacy scores rising by 1 percent relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 percent relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5 percent rise in GDP per head. These effects are three times as great as for investment in physical capital. Moreover, the results indicate that raising literacy and numeracy scores for people at the bottom of the skills distribution is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates" (p. 8).

The authors go on to say that "making the overall labour force more productive" generates greater economic payoff, "as opposed to developing highly talented individuals who may, among other things, have a positive impact on growth through their contribution to innovation and technological progress" (p. 10). The point is not that one has to choose between the two but rather that investment in the former, making the overall labor force more productive, is essential. If we link Coulombe and Tremblay's finding to Wilkinson's deeper analysis of the sociopsychological links to stress and well-being, the payoff for individuals and for society becomes manifold. Reducing the gap as you raise the economic bar makes economic sense.

In sum, the real reform agenda is raising the income bar while closing the gap between the richest and the poorest. Social justice, health and well-being, and economic development all figure in the individual and societal benefits for the vast majority of societal members, not just the poor.

In this book, we are concerned with the contribution of education to gap closing. Other social policy areas such as inequality in

the workplace, investment in housing and welfare, investment in skill development of adults, and combating racism are beyond our scope. Rothstein (2002), for example, argues that "any reasonable strategy to enhance economic well-being must include a balanced focus on schools as well as other institutions" (for example, fiscal, monetary, trade, and labor market policies; p. 1; see also Rothstein, 2004).

Wilkinson's findings are reinforced by another economist, James Heckman, in his analysis (2006) of the consequences of failing to invest in the development of disadvantaged preschool children. From examining a range of data he draws this conclusion: "Early interventions for disadvantaged children promote schooling, raise the quality of the workforce, enhance the productivity of schools, and reduce crime, teenage pregnancy, and welfare dependency. They raise earnings and promote social attachment. Focusing only on earnings gains, return to dollars invested is as high as 15–17 percent" (p. 2).

We are talking about hard-nosed economists who are essentially saying that improving education for all from day one, and raising the bar and closing the gap, has a double payoff for society, namely, economic prosperity and social cohesion. Heckman presents his argument in a nutshell:

1. Life cycle formation is a dynamic process where early inputs greatly affect the productivity of later inputs in the life cycle of children. Skill begets skill; motivation begets motivation. Early failure begets later failure.
2. Major economic and social problems can be traced to low levels of ability in the population.
3. Much public policy focuses on cognitive ability, and especially IQ.
4. Noncognitive skills are also important for success in life.
5. Motivation, perseverance, and tenacity feed into performance in society at large and even affect scores on achievement tests.

6. Early family environment is a major predictor of both cognitive and noncognitive abilities.
7. The previous point is a major source of concern because the family environment in the United States has deteriorated in the past forty years.
8. Early interventions promote schooling, reduce crime, enhance workforce productivity, and reduce teenage pregnancy.
9. These benefits have high benefit-cost ratios and rates of return.
10. Early interventions targeted toward disadvantaged children have much higher returns than later interventions such as reduced pupil-teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programs, tuition subsidies, or expenditure on police [adapted from Heckman, 2006, pp. 3–4].

Heckman offers reams of evidence to back up his conclusions. Thus the first main point I have tried to establish is that we must view educational improvement in the larger context of its contribution to society. This is not, as we have seen, an abstract argument. There are specific mechanisms and consequences at work, and to understand them is to go far beyond the turnaround school problem.

The larger agenda is to tackle raising the bar and closing the gap in income and social status in society. Failure to address this as the core goal results in greater violence. Even in Toronto, with its reputation as "the good and the clean" city embracing ethnic diversity, a spate of gun violence has erupted recently. Toronto has the greatest income differential of any city in Canada.

The solutions are not simple, but my argument is straightforward. First, focus on the societal problem of income differential and employ direct community-based short-term and long-term strategies. Second, conceive of education as playing a role in gap closing, especially as we shall see by working intensely on the three basics

of literacy, numeracy, and what I will call the well-being of students (a term that encompasses emotional intelligence, character education, and safe schools).

What Makes Education Tick

It should come as no surprise that the size of the gap in education performance parallels the income gap country by country. That is, countries with larger education gaps are also those with higher income differentials. We are talking here only about developed countries. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) monitors the performance of economic and social indicators over time for its thirty-two member countries, the richest countries in the world. One of OECD's main ongoing projects is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA 2001 tests in literacy were given to more than 250,000 fifteen-year-old students in the thirty-two countries. As examples, in terms of mean or average literacy scores Finland performed best, Canada was near the top, the United States smack in the middle, and Mexico and Brazil at the bottom.

PISA also examined the reading scores of the 25 percent of the students with the lowest-ranked parental occupations as compared to the 25 percent with the highest-ranked occupations (this is a proxy measure for the size of the economic differences in the country). When this analysis was done, the United States, which had ranked fifteenth in the mean score comparison, dropped to twenty-third. In other words, the greater the economic differential the greater the gap in reading scores. Similar detailed analysis is now being conducted on the 2003 math assessment, which no doubt will show similar patterns.

We find further confirmatory evidence of the patterns being discussed here in Doug Willms's national longitudinal study in Canada of "vulnerable children" (2003). Willms and his colleagues devel-

oped an index of vulnerability based on the degree of emotional and behavioral disorders evident in young children. It was already known that children with such characteristics have a statistically reduced chance of leading healthy and productive lives.

One of the surprising findings in Willms's study is that the relationship between childhood vulnerability and family income was not as strong as previously believed. True, the percentage of vulnerable children in the lowest quartile (measured by family income) was a high 37 percent, but the other three quartiles were also high (28 percent, 25 percent, and 24 percent respectively for lower-middle, upper-middle, and highest quartiles). This is another reason society and schools should be concerned with improvement for all.

A second important finding concerns what Willms calls "the hypothesis of double jeopardy":

> This hypothesis holds that children in low SES [socioeconomic status] families are more likely to be vulnerable, but children from low SES families who also live in low SES communities are especially vulnerable. . . .
>
> A number of studies have found that children with average SES tend to have better outcomes if they attend a school with high average SES. Thus, the "context" of the school has an effect on a child's outcomes, over and above the effects associated with the child's individual family background. The contextual effect—the benefit associated with attending a high SES school—is generally attributed to positive peer interactions, parental involvement, high expectations of school staff and parents, and a positive disciplinary climate in the school. Moreover, there is some indication that this effect is particularly pronounced for children from low SES families, and thus we refer to this hypothesis as the hypothesis of double jeopardy [2003, p. 32].

The temporary point for our purposes is not that we should shuffle children around on the basis of SES, but that the quality of relations constitute the core characteristics of success. You do not get such quality in highly unequal societies.

David Berliner's brilliant analysis (2005) of the deadly impact of poverty in the United States makes a compelling case for why we must put school reform in societal context. Berliner first shows that the United States has the highest rate of children living in poverty among twenty-six developed countries, with only Mexico having a higher rate. He also supplies evidence clearly showing that not only does the United States have the highest rate among industrialized countries of those who are "permanently poor" (14.5 percent, compared for example to Canada's 8.9 percent or France's 6.6 percent), but even more alarmingly it has the highest rate of people staying poor if they become suddenly poor. With respect to the latter, one study identified people "who have become impoverished once in a three-year time period, say through illness, divorce, child-birth or job loss" (p. 8). Several countries had high rates of temporary poorness, but these numbers receded more rapidly than in the United States. Says Berliner (2005, p. 9), "Unlike other wealthy countries, we have few mechanisms to get people out of poverty once they fall into it."

Berliner proceeds to interrelate poverty, race, and student achievement using, among several sources, the well-designed PISA studies assessing the performance of fifteen-year-olds in literacy, mathematics, and science. Overall, U.S. students are about at the average for all OECD countries. But the gap between highest and lowest is among the largest of all countries. In a revealing subanalysis, Berliner displays the literacy scores by country but disaggregates the U.S. score into four categories: U.S. average, average for white students, average for Hispanics, and average for African Americans. The U.S. average, as I have said, is in the middle (a score of 499 on OECD's standardized measure). But for white students the score was 538, third only to Korea and Japan; Hispanics and African Americans scored at 449 and 445 respectively, which

was ahead of only Luxembourg and Mexico among the twenty-seven countries compared. These comparisons were not based directly on poverty (except insofar as race and poverty are so closely linked), so the differences would be even more pronounced were poverty the main basis for comparison.

Berliner then takes us into territory explored by Wilkinson, as we saw earlier, except he applies it directly to education achievement. He asked how poverty affects achievement. In a word, the impact is multifold and pernicious. Citing a series of studies, Berliner presents the compelling case that poor environmental conditions suppress the normal development of academic intelligence. Poverty, and all that it entails, has direct health and indirect physiological and psychological consequences that inhibit the capacity to learn. Among these consequences are health issues, neighborhood deprivation (as when communities lack mentors), and other aspects of collective efficacy necessary to help those in difficulty.

All of this is to say that we must work with turnaround schools with a greater understanding of the social context and its consequences on mental and physical well-being. This is not a book on community and economic development, but the connection is clear. We need to work on simultaneously reducing the income gap and the education gap. Each can influence the other. We know that when poor people somehow beat the odds and achieve educationally, they do better on almost all the aspects we have been discussing. Berliner presents a series of studies showing that a rise in family income positively affects achievement. He sums up the point in these words: "As poor families went from poor to a lot less poor, for whatever reasons, their children's performance began to resemble that of the never poor children with whom they were matched" (Berliner, 2005, p. 25). So direct policies to raise income along with a better understanding of the context and dynamics of turnaround situations need to be combined.

Berliner does not talk directly about the function of gaps per se. He does note that families once poor whose family income increases

"have more dignity and hope . . . than do families in more dire straits, where anxiety and despair are more common emotional reactions" (p. 28). We know from Wilkinson that the latter deals a double blow: it is directly harmful to be poor, and feeling looked down on adds insult to injury.

When it comes to schools themselves, it is interesting to speculate whether the kind of sociopsychological phenomena that occur when there is a high-income differential also operate in highly unequal education systems. What this means is that schools in highly unequal education systems experience a similar double whammy. First, there is the direct negative consequence of being in a low-performing school, where conditions are not conducive to achievement. Second, if Wilkinson is right there would be the indirect psychological consequences associated with (to quote Wilkinson again) "corrosive social consequences such as feeling looked down on, having an inferior position in the social hierarchy, and subordination" (2005, p. 25). Indeed, there is evidence from the turnaround schools research I cite in Chapter Two that indicates this is the case.

Attending a poor school in a school system with great disparity between the poorest and richest schools would compound any vulnerabilities that the child brings to the school in the first place (Berliner, 2005). There are also psychological effects of being perceived as, or feeling, inferior. Certainly one can imagine this for children and their parents, but I am suggesting that teachers in poor schools also suffer the same downtrodden consequences. We will see in Chapter Two that the negative emotional effects of being in a failing school mimic those discussed by Wilkinson for people in highly unequal societies who feel disrespected and unworthy.

There is one more disturbing parallel in education to Wilkinson's analysis. In the same way that once the basic necessities of life are met further increases in income are not associated with greater health, what if achieving literacy for all by age eleven was considered a basic necessity? Put another way, achieving literacy for all students

is just a start from adequate to good, if you like. Much more would have to be done to ensure that raising the bar and closing the gap progresses through high school in all key areas of learning.

We have, then, many reasons for addressing inequality in schools. The goal is to raise the bar and close the gap. Closing the gap is crucial in the context of overall improvement for the system as a whole. We would do well to compare ourselves with countries that improved steadily in education performance while at the same time reducing the disparity between the lowest quartile of students or schools and the highest quartile.

As we have seen, this is not just a matter of education policy and practice but also of social and economic policies, all devoted to the same end: improving the social environment as the route to greater prosperity, economically as well as for our health and well-being. This puts education reform in perspective and allows us to start with turning around schools, not as an end in itself but rather as part of a more fundamental reform agenda.