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The Three Keys:
Picking Up
the Pieces

If we can use the metaphor of picking up the pieces, we will find that a lot of the pieces were not worth saving. This chapter starts with a brief account of the three new keys for maximizing positive impact on learning and well-being. I then double back and consider what the pandemic debris signifies for worse and for better. From there, I proceed to whether we have grounds for optimism and provide advice for those principals who want to stay and lead (and indeed those who might want to move into the principalship to play such a breakthrough role). Chapters 2, 3, and 4 will focus on each of the three keys using specific examples from school principals in action with whom we work.

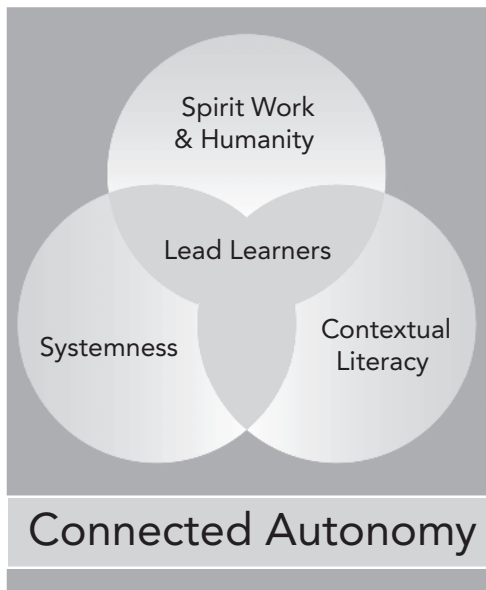
Three New Keys for Maximizing Impact

The original three keys—leading learning, being a district and system player, and becoming a change agent—based on current practice about a decade ago were helpful and were grounded in our knowledge of working with schools and school systems. Things have changed dramatically since 2014. It is a different world now—more ragged, more inventive, more volatile for better or worse. New ideas are crystallizing; some of them are deadly worrying, others exciting. Our team has been close to these ideas, and as usual we are learning from being at the scene of action. We are trying to identify and help those who want to make the best of the situation, indeed learning with those who are working on breakthrough solutions. We present here at the outset the emerging, tentative conclusions about this empirical (and we would say theoretical) work. I portray this work in this

section and spend the rest of the book tracking it down and capturing it. The basic framework is portrayed in Figure 1.1.

Lead learners is a democratic concept. It encompasses all leaders from the 6-year-old climate activist to the 100-year-old pot stirrer. Lead learner means two things: being a role model for all others who come within your sphere and helping others to learn especially in interaction with groups focusing on a cause. Put sharply, your job as a leader is to work with others to bring about desirable change *while* enabling the leadership skills of others who can carry on perhaps better than you after you depart. The three new keys will come alive in the chapters

Figure 1.1 Lead Learners



where the examples are presented. They include new exciting breakthroughs around the concept of *spirit work* (Fullan & Edwards, 2022); the powerful *contextual literacy* that nuance uncovered as we followed Leonardo da Vinci's lead to get into the weeds of local culture (Fullan, 2019); and the elusive *systemness* for 30 years, and more following Peter Senge's *Fifth Discipline* (1990). We will also uncover the new dynamic concept, *connected autonomy* (Fullan, Spillane, & Fullan, 2022). As we shall see connected autonomy captures the dynamic equilibrium of being simultaneously autonomous from and connected to others.

But first, we have to address the pieces caused by the world and society going off-kilter in the last 100 years, but particularly the last decade. We will find peril and promise among the innovations, societal developments, remnants, and other spinoffs of the wild period in which we live. What better place to start than the pandemic that has blindsided us in the past four years (has it really been only that long)?

Pandemic Debris

The single best summary I have seen about the pandemic fallout for education comes from my colleague Valerie Hannon and her coauthor of the recent book *FutureSchools* (Hannon & Temperley, 2022). They call their list The Pandemic Shock. They identified 10 "shocks" (one of which pertained to higher education, omitted here). Their list is contained in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 The Pandemic Shock

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1. How enormously important the social function of schools was. On every survey about what (if anything) students missed about school the item that came top was—friends and people.
 2. That, notwithstanding decades of expectation that digital technology would transform learning. When it came to it, almost all schools were woefully unprepared. Technology had not been brought into the DNA of schools, and the removal of face-to-face connection revealed how primitive the majority of use was.
 3. That although some schools knew and understood their communities, it was revealed how many did not. The home circumstances and real-life conditions of their families came as a revelation to many schools.
 4. How the flexibility of *release* from attendance at school had been enjoyed by students, especially those for whom the rigidities of factory-style school routines did not fit.
 5. It was revealed how the functioning of economies depended on the safe custody of children to free up parents to work. While homeschooling was revealed as a viable and attractive option for some (a tiny minority), most parents needed others, elsewhere, to look after their children, even as working from home became normalized.
 6. It was revealed how the standardized assessment industry consumes time, energy, and money. And for what?
 7. Leadership is a key determinant. Whether of countries, cities, or the local primary school, leadership can make the difference: between optimism and hope; vitality or despair; and in the case of the health security of nations, literally between life and death.
 8. The equity gap, which was already grotesque, is now unconscionable and unsustainable. Social safety nets were seen to be eroded or nonexistent. Poverty and race were revealed to be preexisting conditions for vulnerability—to viral infection and many other ills. Contrasts could not be ignored in the life circumstances of children—some of whom enjoyed rich, varied, and enjoyable learning experiences during lockdown while others had a full stop to their learning. Some endured increased levels of domestic violence toward both women and children.
 9. The occasion of COVID-19 gave many people cause to reflect upon their values—what *really* mattered. Care became priceless; oil became worthless. Nature blossomed and gave solace. Relationships were understood to be at the very essence of a good life.
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Source: Hannon and Temperley, *FutureSchool* (2022).

Shock 1: The social value of schools was what students and teachers missed the most. Very few apparently missed learning. (Restoring learning to its proper place linked to well-being is one reason good principals would want to stay or new ones to join.)

Shock 2: In the future, digital technology will play a larger role, but in the absence of good teaching and good leadership it will be disastrous for the future of society. This is a double-edged sword. Now we have the opportunity to use new technology to team up with students and teachers in the driver's seat.

Shock 3: Understanding communities again represents a double message: many communities have desperately poor resources to bring to learning, yet launching a new "Community Schools" strategy as California is doing (our team is part of this) represents a huge new opportunity for school leaders.

Shock 4: Many students enjoyed the escape from the rigidities of factory-style routines. All we need now is the flip side: enjoy the excitement of deep learning. This is another creative outlet for the new principalship.

Shock 5: Safe custody of children is key (and in my mind another aspect of the new community schools arrangement).

Shock 6: The negative yield of the standardized assessment industry is a finding that serves up the power of new assessments focusing on global competencies, which our group and others are now developing.

Shock 7: Leadership is a key determinant that can make the difference between optimism and hope, vitality or despair. New principal where art thou?

Shock 8: The equity gap is grotesque, unconscionable, and unsustainable. Do new principals want to be part of reducing equity, not as a silo proposition as is the current case but as part of an emerging movement to transform society?

Shock 9: Relationships were understood to be at the very essence of a good life. More clarion calls for the good leader.

All this is found in the ashes of the pandemic. Our NPDL team wrote a similar account in a short piece called *Defying Pandemic Gravity*, which contains seven powerful elements: advice to dignify, gratify, simplify, clarify, identify, diversify, and amplify (<https://www.deep-learning.global/>).

In February 2022, I wrote an op-ed published in *Ed Week* titled “Six Reasons To Be Optimistic About Learning in 2022”:

1. Escaping a bad system
2. Recognizing and working with our best allies (students, teachers, parents, principals)
3. Well-being and learning are joining forces
4. New, more powerful forms of learning on the rise
5. Diverse leadership will grow and present new benefits
6. Systems will begin to change

This represents a positive agenda to be sure. Many of the problems were evident before the pandemic, which piled on more grievances. It also unearthed rotten foundations

that were previously hidden. And it exposed what many had suspected—that we have the wrong *system*—a matter that Joanna Rizzotto and I took up in another op-ed titled “Whose Abandoning Whom?” Could it be that the system is on the brink of a breakdown, with principals, teachers, and students being collateral damage? We should have seen earlier signs. Time and again when people are asked what they value most at work or in life it is one’s peers, good leaders, friends. When they are asked what is most important in life, it is: a sense of belonging, purpose, doing something worthwhile, and making a contribution. The pandemic magnified these shortcomings in the present system and provides an opportunity to take them up as the new agenda as part and parcel of well-being and learning for all (see Fullan & Quinn, forthcoming).

If we pick up the pieces, examine them, identify good pieces from the past, toss away the bad ones, and then contemplate what is needed for the future, we come very close to imagining a better future that would be wanted by the vast majority of society. It is what most students, teachers, parents, and principals would want as well. *Principal 2.0* may be the job description many people find appealing. This positive portrayal is indeed the “three new keys for maximizing impact”! This is the substance of the rest of the book.

A hint about where we are going. The new role for the principal is developer of the internal system. The internal system is the students, parents, teachers, community vis-à-vis the external system—the hierarchy of policies and requirements coming from the system—the state, and regional authorities.

