

Chapter 3

Becoming the Force for Innovation: How Educators Can Harness the Impact of COVID–19 to Transform Education

Lori B. McEwen

McEwen Education Consulting, USA

Julie A. Foss

Advanced Learning Partnerships, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors, former school and district leaders, submit that COVID-19 is a force that has caused collective sight and accelerated momentum relative to shifts we have always known we needed to make in education but haven't yet made at scale. Those shifts, manifested in instructional practice, equitable systems, and the strategic integration of technology, represent an urgency COVID-19 has revealed as an absolute. The authors argue that too often we have hidden behind readiness as a barrier to translating urgency to the lived experience of learners. COVID-19 has shown us our readiness matters little in a global pandemic. Ready or not, educators will respond in the face of unprecedented circumstances. How then, might educators become the force COVID-19 has been to ensure continued momentum?

INTRODUCTION

Educational reform has been a hot-button issue since the authors began their respective careers. It has been driven by clear inequities among groups of students and influenced by economic and social-political realities. In recent years, the authors have collectively come to understand that their vision of success and pathways toward success require significant shifts. Technology has emerged as a valuable avenue to support those shifts.

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Despite these shared understandings, our systems and structures have been slow to adapt. The authors, educational consultants with extensive experience in schools and districts, have faced varied levels of urgency around change. A common refrain from leaders is that they cannot push for too much change too soon as neither teachers nor students are ready to move beyond their comfort zones.

The authors, too, had been operating under the assumption that urgency and readiness were essential conditions to move people and work forward. In fact, Covid-19 has shown that urgency is not a condition but an absolute. Waiting for readiness is no more than false idolatry.

Lessons from physics offer insight into whether Covid-19 will be a true catalyst for change or another cosmetic fix to the educational facade. Newton's first two laws of motion explain that an object at rest or in motion will stay at rest or in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. In addition, the greater the force, the greater the acceleration (BYJU's, n.d.). As an outside force, Covid-19 shone a holistic light on the importance of our previous dabbling with change. It laid bare the extent to which individual districts could accelerate innovative practice or change course toward more student-centered systems and pedagogies.

This chapter argues that Covid-19 may have been the force needed to cause a sense of urgency and movement toward blended and personalized learning via instruction, equitable systems, and technology. The "forced" nature (whether perceived or actual) of innovation that accompanied Covid-19 has the authors reconsidering their beliefs around urgency and readiness, inspiring them to consider alternative postpandemic recommendations for educational leaders.

WHY INNOVATE?

According to a quote popularly attributed to philosopher and education reformer John Dewey, "If we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow." If this was true for Dewey and his like-minded contemporaries almost 100 years ago, it is certainly true today when our rapid advances in technology ensure that many of today's jobs and careers will not exist in the future.

Our world's rapid evolution is artfully, or perhaps alarmingly, illustrated in the viral "Shift Happens" video by Scott McLeod and colleagues (McLeod & Fisch, 2007). The presentation's statistics jolt the viewer into a realization about differences in our students' futures. One of the final slides notes, "We are currently preparing students for jobs and technologies that don't yet exist ... in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet."

If McLeod's video (and eventual series of spin-offs) clarified *why* education needed to change, educators like Harvard Professor Tony Wagner showed us *what* students would need to be successful. In *The Global Achievement Gap*, Wagner (2008) identified seven survival skills that children will need for future success. Wagner's skills are echoed by the World Economic Forum's (WEF, 2020) top 10 skills for 2025 found in *The Future of Jobs Report 2020*.

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