

The Five New Imperatives for Educational Change

Opportunities and Challenges to Shape Our Future

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A Tipping Point for Educational Change

After decades of churn, a more promising future for educational change is opening up. In the US, the passage in 2015 of the Every Student Succeeds Act repudiated the prescriptiveness of the No Child Left Behind Act. Declining achievement results in other nations with similar policies are causing leaders to rethink their assumptions. Student wellbeing, and not just student test scores, is given priority by parents, the public and policy makers in many countries now. Digital technologies are giving students access to new worlds of knowledge that were previously beyond the reach of even the most specialized experts – and reformers are coming to realize that the impact on students' learning is greater when these technologies complement good teachers and teaching instead of replacing teachers completely.

We are poised on the verge of a global educational renaissance, unlike anything ever achieved in history. The Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations, endorsed by governments around the world, aspire to eliminate extreme poverty, provide universal primary and secondary education, expand access to health care, and to check and reverse climate change by 2030. Technological innovation, population mobility, climate change, and economic globalization are compelling all countries to recognize that their fates are inextricably intertwined with one another.

It is time for the world's educators to play a positive role in facing and overcoming the challenges that confront us. And many of them are more than ready. But we only can meet these challenges if we free the education profession from powerful distractors that have diverted and dissipated the precious energy of its members. These distractors have taken the form of 5 imperatives that once seemed promising but now are increasingly anachronistic. The 5 old imperatives are:

1. An **ideological imperative** that emphasized market competition, testing, and standardization as levers to improve schools – despite the absence of evidence to support these directions;
2. An **imperial imperative** that projected this ideology onto other schools and systems as the best way to move forward, even when those other systems were already succeeding by employing different ways to organize their work;
3. A **prescriptive imperative** that mandated the daily work of educators from higher levels of school bureaucracies;
4. An **insular imperative** that overloaded educators with so many policy demands that their ability to learn from other schools and systems has been seriously impeded; and
5. An **instrumental imperative** that defined students and teachers in relation to their economic contributions, with a concomitant disregard for values of compassion, solidarity, or service.

These five old imperatives of educational change directed educators towards attaining only one objective: *testing for fidelity*. Pedagogy, curriculum, and assessments became aligned with one another. Electives, project-based learning, and interdisciplinary programs of study were replaced with mandated curriculum geared to the tests. Teacher education programs and teacher salary schedules were transformed. The old imperatives marketed frontal instruction, standardized curricula, and pervasive test-based competition. As official government policies, the old

imperatives spread like wildfire. But they failed in practice. In the countries most infatuated by the old imperatives, student achievement results remained at lackluster levels or declined. True believers in the old imperatives advocated pushing on harder, but found they had overplayed their hand. A new agenda with new imperatives is now emerging instead.

These 5 new imperatives are driving change forward today and for the years to come.

1

The Evidentiary Imperative

It is time for the old *ideological imperative* that has undergirded too many educational policies for years to be replaced with a new, *evidentiary imperative*. To do so it is necessary to expose the rise and spread of an ideology of educational change that prioritized markets, testing, and standardization. This ideology promised innovation and improved learning results, but the opposite occurred. Results either stalled or declined, in some cases precipitously.

The policies in question belong to an *ideological imperative*. This is a deliberately developed theory of educational change that has been transported across countries by actors and interest groups with similar political commitments. They have been well organized and supported by governments, research institutions, and assorted hangers-on who have built highly successful careers. An objective analysis of the evidence, however, shows that their policies have not worked, at least not for those who are concerned about improving student learning.

2

The Interpretive Imperative

In some countries, the cultural and political influence of the world's dominant nations is so strong that they follow suit almost out of habit. These countries are in the grip of a now-discredited *imperial imperative* that dictates that whatever comes from global leaders in banking and politics must also be right for education. These countries follow along out of sheer force of habit.

But not all countries are so reactive in their policy formation. These countries do not follow the *imperial imperative* by simply implementing the latest strategies from abroad. Rather, the policy makers of these countries adopt a more nuanced *interpretive imperative*. They think long and hard about what they want their schools to achieve. They adopt some reforms from abroad, but with a light touch. They preserved keep their schools under the control of their local democratic authorities rather than passing them off to for-profit providers. They build up the schools' infrastructure from within rather than launching a frontal assault on them from without. Their reform strategies have led to substantial improvements and provide examples of change leadership we all can learn from.

Policies that engage the profession and the public work better than a shock-and-awe approach. School improvement doesn't have to be disruptive. It can be constructive instead. So let's help our educators to be true professionals who are skilled at a new *interpretive imperative*: who are free to think for themselves to come up with solutions based on their collective craft wisdom.

The Professional Imperative

Teachers' professionalism is played out in different settings with distinct accents that emanate from their local contexts. In the city-state of Singapore, *systemic professional capital* unites all of the diverse strands of the educational sector into a powerful synthesis. Teacher preparation, curriculum development, and assessment policies are linked to one another in mutually supportive ways. This produces a system in which the whole is more than the sum of the parts, and in which the parts all reinforce one another so that peak learning and optimal performance is foundational to the entire system.

Sometimes promising changes occur in settings that are not acknowledged by policy makers or transnational organizations. In rural Mexico, a "Learning Communities Project" has enacted *social movement professional capital*. This enables educators to share pedagogies based on tutorial relations with one another and to keep a powerful network evolving even when government funding is cut from one year to another. The Mexico example shows that when teachers are able to spread good instructional practices from one school to another that design features from social movements can be brought into the education sector so that learning can continue even under adverse conditions.

In the US state of Arizona, principles taken from research on reflective judgment have been taken up by the state's educators to promote *mindful teacher leadership* as a distinct form of professional capital. An innovative "Teacher Solutions Team" based in the Arizona K-12 Center show that professionalism can balance content knowledge, peer networks, and autonomy in responsible and accountable forms even when state and federal policies impose limitations on what can and should be done.

The *professional imperative* acknowledges teachers' many challenges and calls upon policy makers and school leaders to support the teaching profession in ways large and small. The era of prescriptive interventions and intrusions is giving way to a greater curiosity and openness about the myriad forms that teaching can take in diverse settings while promoting achievement with integrity. We are entering a new era of professional rejuvenation and life-long learning, with educators proudly taking their positions in the front lines of the renewal of schools and society.

The Global Imperative

For all of the discussion about data-driven decision-making that has gone on for years now, an *insular imperative* has characterized many nations. They have persisted with strategies that have not lifted student achievement. Such policy makers have failed to learn from nations that have performed better, even when they share geographical proximity, a common language, and cultural similarities.

What is the answer to this breakdown in policy learning? It can't just be to place top-level policy makers in contact with one another to force policies from another country onto their recalcitrant teachers and students. Instead, we need a new *global imperative*, animated by the

profession itself, to study and circulate learning from one jurisdiction to another. We need all nations to sign onto and to uphold the International Declaration of the Rights of the Child for our young people to have high-quality public education that spreads from early childhood to the end of secondary schools. We need all educators to join their professional associations to support learning not only within our national boundaries but betwixt and between them. Only then can we meet the ambitious aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goals and the challenges posed by our new millennium.

5

The Existential Imperative

Happiness—what psychologists call “subjective wellbeing” is a byproduct of the quality of one’s relationships. To establish intimacy and trust, individuals need to be able to risk vulnerability. They have to demonstrate to others that they can be relied upon in good times and bad. These virtues cannot be acquired rapidly. They need to be earned over time. They require that students have opportunities to get to know themselves and to overcome adversity so that they acquire a strong personal identity.

Schools can play a part in either developing or neglecting students’ subjective wellbeing. They cannot do so, however, when they are locked into an instrumental mindset that views students exclusively in terms of their ability to produce a good return on society’s investment in them. Children and adolescents are not raw material to be hammered into profits. They have their own interests that they want to pursue and their own personalities to develop. Caring educators respect and nourish this spirited independence. When adults treat children only or mainly as human capital adults lose their moral bearings. The school can, however, be a place in which educators and their students bring their whole selves to encounter one another with dignity and respect. This is the *existential imperative* of educational change.

Educators everywhere know that they and their students want to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Gripping examples taken from real schools teaching real students show that if the quest for meaning is linked with the academic dimensions of schools, students flourish in ways that reach far beyond their test score results taken alone.

The Promise of the Present Moment

Educators are standing on the brink of an enormous precipice today. The profession has higher academic content standards and more assessment data than ever. While inequities persist, the speed of globalization is providing us with opportunities to overcome the barriers to greater cooperation and towards greater social harmony and freedom. We are inheritors of noble intellectual traditions and an international canon of philosophies and religions that we can draw on as we lead our profession in the years ahead.

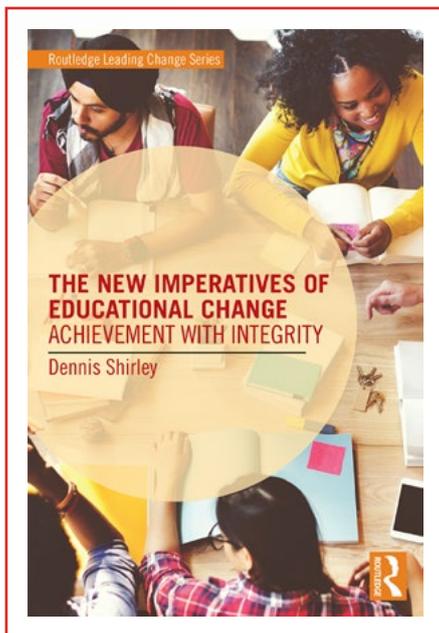
Educators now are being given new opportunities to shape the future of our profession. Will we have the courage to step up and to take charge? Will we develop collective professional integrity in which educators hold one another to the highest standards? How the profession

reacts or leads will speak volumes about who we are and what we stand for. Our students and the public will be watching.

The spirit of our times places certain obligations or “imperatives” upon all educators. The very term “imperative” may be disconcerting to those who privilege choice. But choice should not be its own end. It should serve higher purposes.

Choice is easy. Imperatives are hard. But the greatest educators have never ducked the challenges of their age. They have confronted them with courage and fortitude.

We know what we need to do in schools and society: We need to attain achievement and to do so with integrity. *The New Imperatives of Educational Change* provides us all with a roadmap on how to get there.



For more on the five imperatives of educational change, get a copy of Dennis Shirley's new book *The New Imperatives of Educational Change*, available [here](#) at 20% off!