

2

SPIRIT WORK

Spirit work may sound like an odd phrase at first. Why not be content with *moral purpose* or *moral imperative*—titles of Fullan’s earlier books? Moral imperative is something to be embraced; where does spirit take us? Spirit, as we said in the preface, extends and is part and parcel of being human. In another sense, it seems larger than life, but it is more like humans at their evolutionary best. If we take a simple notion of who humans are, we can include *genes* (how we have changed and adapted to the universe in ways that affect who we become biologically without our knowledge), *culture* (ways of acting and relating that the group values), and *consciousness* (what we say we believe and know). Only one of these, the latter, is part of our knowing self (Campero, 2019). The other two are subconscious. We will see in this chapter how our evolution and who we have become is largely beyond our deliberate control, has occurred without our consent, has increasingly taken on a supernatural status, and is still something that we want to claim as human. The more we delve into spirit work, the more we want to improve ourselves and others, even though we might not fully understand it. What we see happening in spirit work is the emergence of leaders who believe that individuals and groups either have no limits or are not close to reaching them. In education, this means that leaders love their students in a way that potentially becomes an open-ended concept. This is the line of thought we take in these next two chapters, and into the subsequent three chapters with the eight districts. Let’s go back a bit earlier.

In October 2003, Dalton McGuinty (and his Liberal Party) was elected as Premier of the Province of Ontario. The previous party, the Conservatives, had been in power for eight years.

As of 2003, high school graduation in its 900 secondary schools was stuck at 68%; literacy and numeracy (using Ontario's high standard) were mired at about 55% for Year 3 and Year 6 in the province's 4,000 elementary schools. One of us (Fullan) was appointed as McGuinty's Chief Policy Advisor. We immediately set three goals:

1. Raise the bar substantially in literacy, numeracy, and secondary school graduation.
2. Close the gap between high and low performers (with respect to socioeconomic status and considering English language learners [ELLs] and special education students).
3. Increase the public's confidence in the public education system (where 95% of all students attended).

This is not the place to examine the strategies used (see Fullan, 2010), but let's consider the results: steadily and over the next decade, scores increased substantially in literacy, unevenly in math, and significantly in high school graduation. Relative to the latter, the percentage of secondary school graduates (the 900 schools) climbed from 68% (2004–2005) to 86% (2016–2017). Put another way, there were over 200,000 students who would not have succeeded had the rate of graduation remained at its 2003 level. Moreover, the gap between ELL students and those born in Canada was almost eliminated after three or four years as a very large group of new immigrants arrived.

These accomplishments were impressive and exciting, but they were not spirit work in action. Instead, it was good strong moral purpose for what we called "raising the bar and closing the gap for all students regardless of background." It was suitable to the first decade of the 21st century (and, to a certain extent, still is; see Fullan, 2010). Much has changed in the decade since, mostly for the worse: climate deterioration threatens the planet, inequality gaps have galloped with the top 10% scooping the lion's share of financial gains at the expense of the middle and working classes, anxiety and

mental illness at all ages have climbed, social trust has plummeted, the majority of students in secondary schools find little purpose in schooling, and even the seemingly successful (graduates) are not well off.

As we concluded earlier, COVID-19 and the accompanying pandemic have made matters worse in the short run, but it also exposed deep problems already in existence. The larger agenda is to transform the public education system over the next decade. But what can we make of the existing system? Despite horrendous and ever-worsening conditions, some school districts are bucking the trend. Indeed, they are succeeding *because* of the very challenges they are facing. It is here where we find spirit work evident—a powerful concept that we can admire under the current system, and leverage on a large scale for the future.

In summary, what we did in Ontario in the first decade of the 21st century was impressive but was carried out under conditions that were far less challenging and less complex than is the case twenty years later. We call the new developments *spirit work* because the leaders in question, as well as the others within the eight systems examined, seem to rise to the occasion. The questions become *What did they do that was so special, and why and what are the implications for the next phase of reform (the 2020s)?* We will return to these matters in the final chapter.

SPIRIT WORK

Spirit is the essence of character—what it means to be human. We will contend that new seemingly larger-than-life actions are essentially extending the boundaries of what it means to be human. It is the valuing and love of all things that are alive. It is the desire for oneself and others to thrive and prosper in ever-complex situations. It is embracing how we relate to and help others be the best versions of themselves.

In our deep learning work, we define progress as helping people to live effectively in the increasingly complex universe of the 21st century. More specifically, we define flourishing as a “process of becoming and the outcome of being” with respect to purpose, identity, belonging, contribution (to others and the world), and self-efficacy (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2018). More directly, for this book we define *spirit work* as the actions and accomplishments that leaders and members of school districts undertake to help their members cope and develop under the complex and adverse conditions of contemporary society. Put bluntly, it is what leaders do when they value spirit but are facing massive odds and obstacles in the course of their daily work. Spirit work is how we characterize the core attributes and work of the leaders and other members of the eight districts featured in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.

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We have been true believers about the ultimate importance of culture and relationships as key drivers for student and teacher success for many years. The advent of the pandemic, social justice issues, and numerous other related challenges has spurred deep thinking about what is needed for public education to survive, evolve, and ultimately thrive. We have seen significant indications that we should focus on two main foundational elements to build upon. The first we refer to as *spirit work*—we believe that understanding how culture, relationships, and shared beliefs interweave with productivity and happiness is essential for students and teachers to thrive. Connecting daily work with the understanding of how creating a spirit force field undergirds all efforts will propel individuals and teams to learn and grow together. Developing spirit in schools and school systems means that everyone is respected

and counted on to be an integral contributor to creating, maintaining, and growing the spirit. Students need to know and believe that they can be part of creating a better place by sharing and creating spirit that can lift, sustain, enrich, and energize teaching and learning.

If you will allow one meta-comment from evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson in *The Origins of Creativity*:

Science owns the warrant to explore everything deemed factual and possible, but the humanities borne aloft by both past and fantasy have the power of everything not only possible but conceivable. (2017, p. 70)

Wilson is saying that science has limits (which indeed are expansive), but the human mind does not have any logical limits. What was once superhuman is no longer thought to be (such as spirit work where virtually *all children* learn how to thrive in a super complex universe).

In the rest of this chapter, we indicate various elements of spirit in order to give a sense of its dimensions in action, which we flesh out later in the case examples.

SPIRIT CONSTRUCTION

No school or school district just happens to have high levels of spirit work in action. We believe that it's not just about cognizance and working on spirit elements, but about creating the flow of daily life that includes and reinforces the elements of strong spirit: trust, faith, hope, conversations, happiness, and love. Students, teachers, and all school employees can contribute to the spirit and benefit from the lift, of being part of a family of spirit learners. It's like everyone is building this force field that gives everyone a big lift the minute they walk in the door. Students, teachers, administrators, and parents will testify to the very real effect this force field of spirit can have. They all say the same thing: "You can feel it!" By sharing

in the construction of ubiquitous spirit, everyone shares the responsibility and the benefits at the same time. Doing this work together, through conversations and daily endeavors, creates a fuel of synergy and mutual forward motion. Shared purpose, connecting people to their work together, for, and with each other, is a powerful force.

TRUST

It takes time to build trust when everyone is needed and vital to creating it. How do you build trust? Consistency is at the heart of trust. Teachers and students must know that every day they work in a caring, loving, and supportive environment and that they are responsible for creating their mutual trust. Respect for others and embracing shared responsibility for trust-building is central to this element. Students and teachers don't just go to school; it's where they live a lot of their lives. Students spend half their lives in schools, and living in a place where people are connected and feel appreciated is important beyond words.

Working through tough stuff is a sure way of building trust. When students and teachers know that if they are struggling, someone will be there to help them get through it, it lights the flame of endurance. Students who understand that they are not just recipients, but are architects of learning, become leaders for each other. Teachers need to trust that principals are consistent in their leadership. Trust dies with inconsistency and a failure to provide support for students and teachers to get through tough times.

CONVERSATION

It makes sense for everyone to understand and to be a part of what's going on, but it is important to know that it takes effort to build coherence. Students and teachers need to engage in constant dialogue about what they are doing and how they are doing. Learning how to lead and inculcate productive conversations with students and with each other is

essential work for teachers. Principals who are in constant dialogue with teachers and students about the work they are doing are creating coherence through conversations. Students learn from instructional conversations with each other and not just the curriculum of the content area, but the curriculum of life. Conversations light the path of learning together and lead everyone to a broader insight into a problem or how to solve the problem. Learning to listen together creates connections for learning and growing with each other. Listening to each other is a loud message of respect. One of the most vital skills for student readiness in life is to be conversant. Having the confidence and the capacity to engage and work well with others requires daily practice and experience in talking and listening together.

FAITH

Trust can lead to faith, and parents want badly to trust and have faith in their children's schools. Students want and need to have faith in their teachers, and teachers need to have faith in their principal. When students hear teachers tell them "I have faith in you," it is hugely important. Every great teacher we have ever known understands how to establish trust and faith with students. Being fair, consistent, thoughtful, and supportive are daily messages that, over time, can translate to faith. Great faculties build on trust to create faith in each other. Teachers who show daily kindness, persistent expectations, major patience, and converse with students establish foundational faith in the value of the organization.

CONVICTIONS

We have observed teachers who have deep convictions about each student. This goes beyond commitment to a deeper and firmer sense of belief. Over the years, we have seen teachers and faculties that demonstrate what we would call "extreme efficacy" for each student. Students feel it and know when their teachers have that kind of conviction for them. We're-in-this-together dispositions provide assurance and vital

emotional support. When a new teacher joins a faculty and is met with big spirit collegiality, they become part of the shared conviction—part of a force field for success.

LOVE

Children learn better in a loving environment. Teachers teach better in a loving environment. Everyone who works in a school system works better in a loving environment. Over the years, we have heard teachers say, “I love our students” and you can see in the eyes of the students how important that statement is. Affirmation of each other, and of each other together, creates a gentle breeze of comfort and well-being that does immeasurable good.

LAUGHTER AND HUMOR

Children need to laugh and want to laugh, and they love laughing together. If you find a school with students who are happy, you are likely to find more learning going on. Students need to see their teachers smile. This is big stuff. Real big!

LIGHT AND HOPE

Spirit is a force field that creates the light for the path ahead and gives hope to students and teachers. Spirit work creates the conditions and the relationships that maximize learning and growing. We need each other more than ever before. We need everybody’s creativity and caring and open hearts to find our way through. We can help one another by trusting. A hopeful future is possible. As we take up in the next chapter, on the science of collaboration, we can’t get there alone—we can’t get there without each other.

What we are saying is that the 21st century commenced with some difficult problems in the development of the basics (for example, in literacy, numeracy, high school graduation). Second, we observe that the situation has become rapidly much more complex and compounded by other new

developments (climate change, social and economic deterioration, the pandemic) that have radically and increasingly changed *the context* for schooling—making it much more complex, which in turn is feeding on itself to become ever more challenging. The districts that we have identified, on the one hand, can be thought of as being caught in the middle yet still rose to the occasion, so to speak. Further, these districts may contain lessons that enable us to consider implications for the next phase of education, which we do in the final chapter.

CONCLUSION

We are not able to explore the full human potential of spirit-embedded living in this book. We are extremely grateful that Dr. Margaret Wheatley has developed some of these connections in the foreword. We would all do well to learn from and with First Nations and Indigenous cultures. We believe and hope that this will be the next phase of human development.

We will see in the eight case examples in this book that learning and caring are based on deep spirit and loving. Everyone counts; the leaders in our cases have a transcendent stance when it comes to negative environments. Despite more than 20 years of a system that crushed many a sense of spirit through a narrow curriculum, and a regime of narrow testing, the districts and the leaders we feature in this book, against huge odds, *made spirit prevail*. It seems that spirit leaders can transcend negative environments (and eventually could be part of a movement to spread it more widely). Our case examples show the depth and power of spirit in the human condition: you can suppress it, but you cannot keep it down.

A core part of new spirit work is *well-being for all*. Well-being should have been a core part of learning all along, but in modern times it has given way to academic learning. As the latter gained prominence (and ironically, we would say) there has been the rise of ill-being—stress and anxiety among students, parents, and teachers. Fullan (2021) documents in detail how

academic obsession has dehumanized learning to the detriment of learning itself and of well-being (the wounded winners who pay the price through deteriorating mental health).

Spirit work helps to restore and establish grander scenarios. One of Fullan's team members, Dr. Jean Clinton, is a child psychiatrist and neuroscientist at McMaster University just west of Toronto (the kids call her "Dr. Jean"). As we got closer to our work on deep learning and the global competencies (the 6 Cs that we will talk about later), we asked Dr. Jean to define what it means to become "good at life" (our way of getting at *well-being*). Here is her response:

People become good at life when they feel safe and valued and have a sense of purpose and meaning. There is a need to be engaged in meaningful activities that contribute to the well-being of others. In the face of adversity, being able to navigate to the resources that you need to get out of the situation—known as *resilience*—is an essential component. To get there, one needs to identify values, goals, and needs as well as personal strengths. The competencies you need to achieve these, I think, are the 6Cs [character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking] as long as compassion and empathy are emphasized. (personal communication, 2020)

This is spirit work in action: helping to get all young people ready for an increasingly complex world. In Chapter 3, we revisit Dr. Jean and neuroscience to learn more about the science of collaboration, the complementary twin of spirit work. Once we explain and underpin system change with spirit and collaboration, we will examine the dynamics of real change in the eight districts in the three chapters of Part II.