panorama

Richard Gerver is a recognized educator, communicator and expert in educational innovation, leadership and organizational change. He has been a teacher, educator and director of schools. His research is related to the development of human potential, educational innovation and the vital role that educational leaders play as a mechanism for social and cultural transformation. He regularly advises major corporations around the world: Google, UK Sport, Visa, Microsoft, among others. His books include "Education: A Manifesto for Change".

"What teachers have achieved this year has been truly remarkable."

by Ana Moreno

INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD GERVER

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It has been barely a year since your last book, Manifesto for Change. However, the world has changed a lot since then. The pandemic has changed our lives and our future. The world has changed its priorities and relevant things have become urgent. Would you modify anything in your Manifesto?
It's a really interesting question. No, I don't think I would change what I wrote; I think part of the purpose of writing the book was to get people to understand that the world was moving into an increasing level of change and uncertainty. And when I wrote the book, I used the example of the global financial crisis in 2007-2008, because if you think about it, that had a massive impact on us: the workplace, our children, the global economy, etc. and in a way, that was an example of what I was arguing about, that change in uncertainty was growing and growing.

And then we move into the crisis, and we have Covid and Covid has taken it to a whole another level. But in many ways, all it's done is amplify the challenge that I've been talking about. The fact that even before Covid, our children were going to be inheriting from us some really big global challenges. They were going to be taking on an environmental crisis that could threaten our planet, an economic crisis, socio ethnic strife that would be causing problems, the issues of globalization and health care right now, etc. In a way, what the pandemic has done is just show us how urgent it is that we help prepare our children differently.

One of the core themes of the book was to argue that education had traditionally prepared children for certainty. And what Covid has taught us is there's no such thing anymore as certainty. And it means we need to be prepared not to just survive but thrive in a world of uncertainty, of constant change and transformation.

And that means we can't simply run education systems where we teach children certain knowledge in certain ways, and we then push them out into the world to seek out jobs that match their knowledge and understanding. I think the book is perhaps more relevant now than it was when it was published a year ago.

We have been trying to change the educational system worldwide for a long time, but the countries that are taking the risk of change are still very few. In your book, you often talk about creating a culture of excellence, security and collaboration. These seem vital pieces of this change. So, how to go from the current situation to a position with favourable conditions for growth?
Where we are seeing innovation in the world in education are in countries which would be considered less traditionally strong economic countries. So, developing countries. For example, in Latin America, there's a huge amount of innovation going on. In countries like Colombia, where there is no tradition that they're fighting against. In countries like Spain

and the UK and the US, we have very traditional methodologies that have been developed over hundreds of years.

So, in order to create change in traditional organizations, you're fighting against a culture of tradition before you can break through and create innovation. One of the reasons why we see innovation in developing countries is because they don't have to fight tradition. So it's new. They're like a start-up business in new technology. They have the freedom and opportunity to think differently. What's really interesting about the problem with the traditional systems of education is that they are built on an assumption of incompetence.

This is where my comparison in the book comes from. So in other words, policymakers and politicians believe- because it's a very traditional methodology, that people will only do their best work if they manage to do their best work, that nobody will do their best just because they want to. And in education, this is a real problem because policymakers think that schools and educators will only do their best if they're made to do their best, if they're managed all the time, managed top-down.

Now, what that does, which is really interesting: removes teachers' feelings of professionalism. They don't feel like professionals anymore because all of the control is taken away from them and they feel more like robots where they're just told what to do. And if they believe the people above them don't trust them, then that's how they behave. But even more tragically. The same thing is true of the way we regard children. People think children are lazy and they will only learn if they're made to learn, and they're over-managed.

So, what happens is we create a culture where children are over-ruled, where teachers are overregulated, and therefore you can't have a culture of innovation because people are so suppressed by the system that they are delivering on. And what we need to do is we need to create a culture of greater trust. When I talk about the assumption of excellence, that's from what I've seen in really dynamic and exciting, innovative organizations outside of education that I've had the privilege to spend time in the last 14 or 15 years.

And all of those organizations are founded on a culture of absolute trust. They trust their employees to deliver excellence. So what they do is, rather than focusing on managing everybody, they create an environment where people are able to express their professional understanding, their skill, their knowledge, their ability, their instincts. And what that creates is a really

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dynamic, inclusive and collaborative culture of learning.

In your trajectory, you repeat that the people are the key and not the resources or structures. We need teachers who do not need management, with vision and leadership. To paraphrase Gandhi, "they should be the change they want to see in the world". So if you were leading a school today, what skills would you ask your teachers to have, for example, in times of pandemic so they could build a better future?
I think this is a really important and powerful question. I did run a school, which was a long time ago now, but I don't think things have changed that much actually in the system. I think what was really important for me to do was to generate a culture of collective vision with my teachers. So what was really important was the teachers didn't feel that they were just delivering what somebody else told them to, that they felt an ownership of the vision for the school, the values for the school that they had co-created. That vision and those values meant that actually, they felt

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really part of engaging in the process of turning those visions and values into practice.

Also, what was really important by working that way with teachers was you develop a culture of trust.

My trust came from the fact that I looked at my teachers with trust; they were incredibly experienced with huge amounts of knowledge and skill and also a passion. The one thing we know about teachers anywhere in the world is people choose to be teachers because they're passionate about children and making a difference for young people. So for me, it was about creating conditions to tap into those passions and that experience and that knowledge by creating a sense of collaborative ownership so that everybody in the school felt they had a stake in the development of the

school and that I trusted them.

And also that they stopped waiting for me to tell them what to do or to give them the answers. And what that's about is telling teachers themselves to find responses and find solutions. Also, it's about creating a culture where you want teachers themselves to have space and time to research and explore the world around them and their own profession.

So they have an ability and opportunity to develop their professional skills, knowledge and experience. For me, it's about inclusivity, it's about collaboration, and it's about trust.

As you say, educating optimism opens up infinite opportunities for the future. We think that's what we

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need most at this time. Could you share your optimistic ideas with us?
First of all, I think we're conducting this interview at a really interesting and challenging time for the whole of the global society and actually a huge challenge for educators and schools. We have to acknowledge that what they've lived through in the last seven or eight months and what they continue to live through for possibly a year more, and the way they've coped with what they've done, the way they've kept a focus on their children and the children's well-being and learning has been inspirational.

One of the things that's really important right now in the middle of this tsunami, is to allow teachers to take a step back and realize what they've accomplished; all too often

teachers spend too much time worrying about what they've not achieved rather than what they have. And I think it's really important that we all acknowledge right now that what teachers have achieved this year has been truly remarkable and is a testament actually to their courage, their ability and their commitment.

But in a bigger sense, I think what's really important to think about in terms of optimism is this. In many ways, the Covid pandemic is the final point of what I think has been a very dark few years in global history. These are very dark times. And I think they've ended really with Covid, this global pandemic, almost like a biblical flood. But I think we need to remember a couple of important things. Firstly, educators have to be optimistic because it's our job to help

prepare the world for the future. The future begins in our classrooms, in our schools and our lessons. The current leaders of the world, the current inventors, the current artistic guides of the world, were created in our schools 20 or 30 years ago.

And I think we need to remember that our role is significant and we have to be optimists. But here's the thing that I think should make us most optimistic. When you look at human history, every period of human history, every dark period in human history, every awful moment in human history; has been followed by an explosion in creativity, in human innovation, a renaissance, every period of darkness has been followed by a human renaissance. And I believe that the generations in our schools right now will be the generations which lead the next great human renaissance, the great, great explosion in human capacity and creativity and innovation, in scientific discovery, in a recalibration of the global socioeconomic position, in a new form of politics, in a kinder world.

And I think what's really exciting, and I say this to my daughter, who, by the way, is a teacher now; is that I
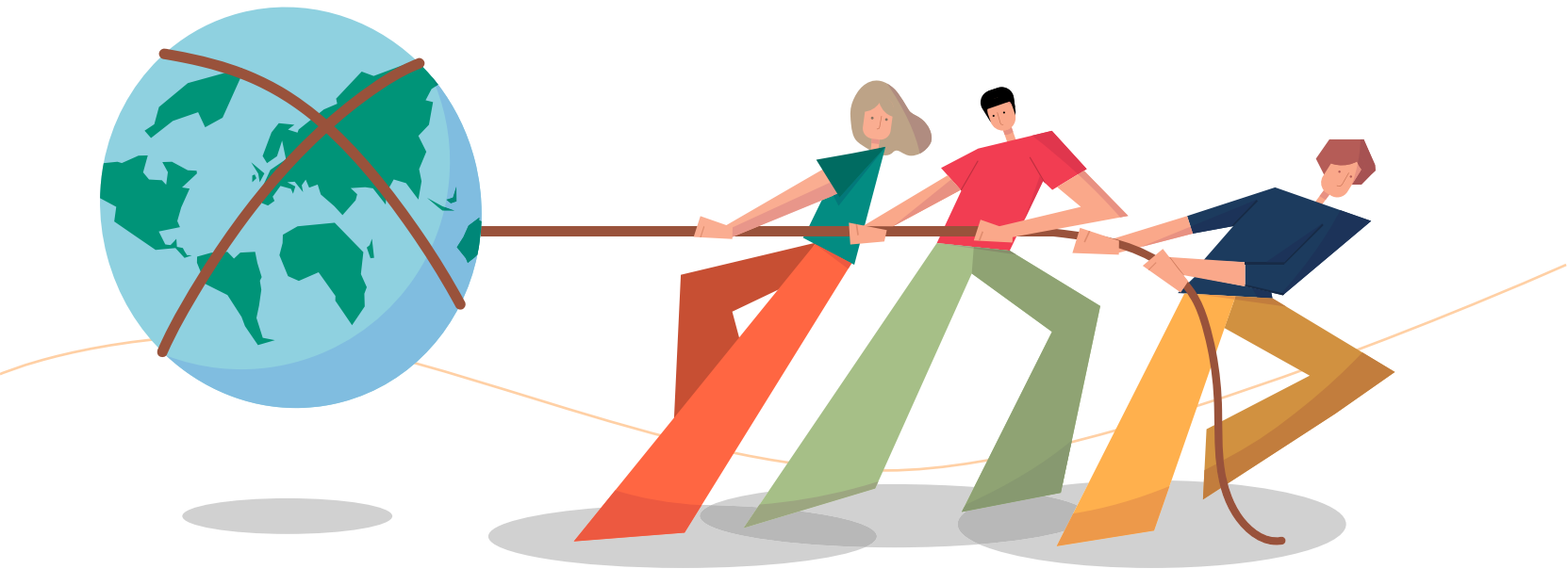
envy her because as a young teacher leading that generation, now is the time to create the next great special moment in human history. And that's what I say to all teachers right now. You are in the place to create the next great renaissance in human history.

Innovative people are needed to generate innovative results; it is clear that leadership and culture of innovation are decisive to transformation. But change is not easy and even less so if you have to move a whole system. What would be the keys to change the system for you? And how can the current situation help?
I think the first thing is that the current situation, the crisis around

the pandemic, has changed everything in a way that we would never have achieved without it.

It's an awful thing to say because this thing has created such misery, such poverty, such suffering in incalculable ways around the world. But I mentioned before, almost half joking, this is almost like Noah's flood in the Bible. Because we were so busy running just to try and keep up that the world would never have stopped for a pause for long enough to be able to take a breath, look around it and say; What needs to change and how do we change it? So I think we're in a really interesting space and place now to do that. I think we have time now to ask big questions, which is what we need to do. For so many years, the education system has been

hampered, and has been blocked really from development because of our constant focus on efficiency. How do we get better exam results? How do we climb the international league tables? How do we get better at doing what we've always done? How can we be more efficient? And as a result, and I don't blame the profession for that, they've been running so hard just to keep up that now what we've got in this pause is it time to say: is efficiency really the answer? And I think in so many ways, not just education, what we've realized is actually that efficiency isn't the answer. And this constant belief that if we just do everything we've always done as hard as we can, things will get better is simply not the case. How do we stop another pandemic? Well, it's not from just delivering medicine the way we've always delivered medicine.

It's about systemically changing the way we see the world and particularly how we interact with the natural world. So people have been talking about it for years, but now we have an opportunity to really make a difference. And the same is

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true of education. If what we do is we continue to prepare our children for a world that simply doesn't exist, we're going to continue to see a fragmented planet where people become less and less happy with the world they're living in because they don't find a way to control it. So we have to move away from this idea that the future is about control and about efficiency. And we have to move into a space where we ask the big questions and the big questions start with: what do we need our children to look like as human beings if they're not just to survive, but thrive in the future?

We need them to be deeply collaborative. We need them to be creative and innovative. We need them to be capable of self-leadership and self-management. We need them to be able to be lifelong learners. We need them to have the tools to understand how to access learning, not just during their time in formal education, but through their lives because the nature of the world of work and the social environments in which they live are going to change faster and faster.

So that's what we need to do. We need to take a step back from focusing on efficiency and really start looking at evolution.

We believe that the idea of leaving a legacy, living with purpose and educating for life with meaning are great ideals that would fill the future of humanity with hope. But to do this, we need to promote understanding of the world that will be used as a motor for this hope, opportunity and optimism. What would you say to those responsible for educational policy in different countries to understand that change pays off for all of us?
When you look at the evolution of humankind, human desire and human success has been founded and built on our deep desire to be curious, to explore, to look for the new and the different, to embrace change, to see the world and grow the world and be in the world in new ways and new forms, constantly. On drive through evolution from early man through to industrialization, through to advanced technologies and artificial intelligence, the pursuit of knowledge, through religion and then through science and through the arts and culture.

These are the things that define humanity and human beings. And therefore, what we need are policy makers and politicians and people in control of education to do is to realize that education has to reflect that human dream, that human desire, the things that define us. And we need to stop believing that education should only be defined over a three, four or five-year political term. We need to have a deeper, bigger, broader vision for it.

And secondly, that we need to look far, far deeper than just making sure the system in its current form works. We need to be explorers. We need to be adventurers. We need to be able to set the agenda and change the world rather than just reacting to the world. If there was one great lesson we have to learn from the Covid crisis is that the countries that have dealt with the crisis best are the countries that were innovating around the potential solutions for pandemics before the pandemic hit.

Countries like the UK, Spain, most of Europe, the US are so far behind because we've never lived in a public policy culture where we try to get ahead of the curve. We spend our lives reacting to circumstances; and with education, if we continue to do nothing more than react to the world we're currently living in, we will never be able to prepare our children for the world they will be living in. And more than anything, I ask politicians and policy makers to be cognizant of what I've already talked about.

Our children face one of the most challenging legacies in human history. How do we protect and preserve the natural world and the environment? How do we develop a sustainable global economy? How do we make sure we bring humanity back together across the diverse cultures of the planet we live in?

And how do we ensure that the world is capable of living a healthier, happier existence? Those should be the conversations that policymakers and politicians are having now in order to create a system that's worthy of our children and worthy of our future.

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