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# Pracademics in the pandemic: pedagogies and professionalism

Pracademics in  
the pandemic

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This thinking piece examines, from the viewpoint of two Canadian pracademics in the pandemic, the role of pedagogy and professionalism in crisis teaching and learning. The purpose of the paper is to highlight some of the tensions that have emerged and offer possible considerations to disrupt the status quo and catalyze transformation in public education during the pandemic and beyond.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper considers the current context of COVID-19 and education and uses the professional capital framework (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) to examine pandemic pedagogies and professionalism.

**Findings** – The COVID-19 pandemic has catapulted educational systems into emergency remote teaching and learning. This rapid shift to crisis schooling has massive implications for pedagogy and professionalism during the pandemic and beyond. Despite the significant challenges for educators, policymakers, school leaders, students and families, the pandemic is a critical opportunity to rethink the future of schooling. A key to transformational change will be for schools and school systems to focus on their professional capital and find ways to develop teachers' individual knowledge and skills, support effective collaborative networks that include parents and the larger school community and, ultimately, trust and include educators in the decision-making and communication process.

**Originality/value** – This thinking piece offers the perspective of two Canadian pracademics who do not wish for a return to “normal” public education, which has never serve all children well or equitably. Instead, they believe the pandemic is an opportunity to disrupt the status quo and build the education system back better. Using the professional capital framework, they argue that it will be educators' professionalism and pandemic pedagogies that will be required to catalyze meaningful transformational change.

**Keywords** Educational change, Professionalism, Transformational change, Professional capital, Collaborative professionalism, Pandemic pedagogies

**Paper type** Viewpoint

The COVID-19 pandemic has catapulted educational systems into unknown territory. It has challenged and disrupted the work of educators, the daily learning experiences of students and even the concept of schooling. At its peak, school closures impacted approximately 1.6bn students (almost 91%) and over 63m teachers in 193 countries across the globe ([Education International, 2020](#); [UNESCO, 2020](#)). In Canada, where education is territorially and provincially organized, all schools were closed by the end of March, and the majority of students were learning at home. This rapid shift to crisis schooling has had massive implications for pedagogy and professionalism during the pandemic and beyond.

Emergency remote teaching and learning or “agile distance learning” ([Doucet et al., 2020](#)) has been described as the biggest global experiment in educational reform and distance learning in history ([Berry et al., 2020](#); [Kamenetz, 2020](#)). As such, this moment of crisis offers international educational systems a chance to learn from and with one another on a global scale. Without minimizing the significant hardships and devastating loss of life due to COVID-19, there is also an emerging sense of optimism in the field of education that the pandemic is a critical opportunity to disrupt the status quo and catalyze transformation in public education ([Winthrop, 2020a](#)). Certainly, we have not all been impacted in equal or equivalent measures and the crisis has shone a much-needed light on these differences,



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inequalities and inequities (Berry *et al.*, 2020). Although there is certainly a yearning by some for a return to “normal,” we are reminded that “normal” public education did not serve all children well or equitably (Datnow, 2020). In fact, the forced closure of schools has sparked greater awareness and dialogue around important issues such as access, inclusion, food insecurity, safety and well-being. Now is the time to actively confront the education policies that continue to perpetuate existing social inequalities, usually along racial and poverty lines (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Valencia, 2015; Zhao, 2016). It is our hope that going forward, school systems will retain their focus on the whole child and work collaboratively with key stakeholders to find better ways to support the academic, social, emotional and physical health of all students.

Worldwide school closures have led to teachers and students working remotely, increased parent and community engagement in student learning, substantial adjustments to the required number of instructional hours, the cancellation of standardized testing and examinations and significant changes to evaluation, reporting and the postsecondary admission process. In fact, it’s as if we have realized Schwab’s (2015) prediction that human society is “on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another” (qtd in Zhao, 2016, p. 726). With these staggering changes, it feels as if the pandemic has propelled us into a future time where what was once impossible is now thinkable. As stated by Doucet *et al.* (2020), “The crisis is a horrible opportunity to hit the reset button, change the rules and fix once and for all the inequities that make inclusive education impossible” (p. 7). Ultimately, the pandemic is rewriting our imaginations (Robinson, 2020) and compelling us to rethink the future of schooling (Osmond-Johnson *et al.*, 2020).

So, what does professionalism in the pandemic mean and how might it fuel systemic reform? What are the pedagogical implications of pandemic teaching and learning now and in the future? And what role, if any, might pracademics or educators who live in both the world of scholarship and practice play in this time of crisis and beyond? As educational systems begin to move from triage to transformation, these are the questions we grapple with in this thinking piece. While we know there is no one-size-fits-all model that will work for all school contexts, we aim to highlight some of the tensions and possibilities that have emerged through an examination of pandemic pedagogies and professionalism.

### **Pracademics in a pandemic**

Pracademia has been gaining traction in a number of fields, including education. According to Powell *et al.* (2018), the term pracademic has a 30-years history, yet its original coining remains unclear. Its most recent popularization is credited to Posner (2009), who used it in the scholarly journal *Public Budgeting and Finance*. Essentially, a pracademic is someone who “spans the ethereal world of academia as a scholar and the pragmatic world of practice” (Walker, 2010, p. 1). As boundary spanners, pracademics work at the interface of research and practice, yet exclusively to neither (Panda, 2014). They can generate knowledge to inform educational policy, test it in practice and also report on the experience and outcomes. Thus, pracademics in the pandemic offer unique critical insight and powerful potential as advocates for educators and school leaders. With the pandemic being a critical opportunity to disrupt the public education paradigm and “build it back better” (Winthrop, 2020a, b), it will be educators’ pedagogies and professionalism during and after the pandemic that will drive transformational change. Pracademics are well-positioned to support and champion this process.

### **Pandemic pedagogies**

As we consider pedagogy in a time of crisis, it is important to highlight the unusual context into which educators have been catapulted. With little training and even fewer resources,

they have had to rapidly pivot from face-to-face interaction to working entirely at a distance. This was done often with little guidance from school and system leaders who were equally as unprepared to lead during a pandemic (Munby, 2020). Additionally, the crisis has revealed the vast inequity that has always been present in public education but can no longer be ignored in this time of crisis. It has been inspiring to see how quickly schools and districts have found innovative ways to deliver food, social services support, technology and mobile hotspot devices to students as well as curricular content using online, radio, television and printed methods (Hollweck and Janes, 2020; Kamenetz, 2020). Critically, the pandemic has shone a public light on the important role schools and school staff play beyond academics in supporting students and families.

Remote emergency teaching and learning are not the same as homeschooling, e-learning or online learning (see Doucet *et al.*, 2020; Berry *et al.*, 2020). Whereas these educational approaches offer useful insights, they cannot be replicated in an emergency context. Although initial educational policy decisions were right to follow public health advice, it is also important to remember that there is a useful body of knowledge available on schooling during prolonged crises in the field of “education in emergencies” (see the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, INEE, 2004; Winthrop, 2020a, b; UNICEF, 2020). During the coronavirus pandemic, there was little time for design thinking or reflection as school systems transitioned quickly from “bricks and mortar” schooling to agile learning from a distance. With no clear end date to pandemic restrictions, teachers and school leaders have also had to respond to often vague and conflicting ministerial directives while simultaneously navigating varied opinions and expectations offered by parents and educational thought leaders (see Diamond and Jenkins, 2020; Hargreaves, 2020; Sahlberg, 2020; Westheimer, 2020). According to Winthrop (2020b), many jurisdictions have missed a critical opportunity to use school staff as first responders to gather and deliver key information to students, families and communities. Instead, government and education department leadership have focused on a tightly controlled top-down communication structure and have not included educators, principals and school district leaders in the decision-making process. Thus, these key educational stakeholders often learn of ministerial directives and policies at the same time as parents and community members by listening to the public press conferences (see Hinkson, 2020), which leaves school districts and schools scrambling to respond quickly. This has led to widespread frustration and a general lack of clarity of the policies across and within schools.

One of the key areas that lacks a unified understanding for key stakeholders is what effective pandemic teaching and learning look like. The method and practice of teaching in a crisis, often referred to as pandemic pedagogies, are certainly not as straightforward as repositioning a course or class onto a video conference website or a learning management system (LMS). Additionally, the pandemic should not be viewed as an extended holiday from schooling, especially as restrictions linger. Rather, pandemic pedagogies require more powerful instructional innovations, as well as a shift to a more critical thinking, student-led, personalized and competency-based approach to curricular content. Student self-pacing guides, timing for self-reflection, clear and accessible lessons and learning activity instructions, as well as multiple and meaningful opportunities for formative feedback will need to be embedded in the learning experience. Finally, pandemic pedagogies must prioritize student health and well-being through more relational, culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches.

In international educational circles, there has long been a call for “Maslow before Bloom” (Doucet *et al.*, 2020), which argues that students’ basic needs must be met before academic learning can be fully embraced. However, as Sahlberg (2020) notes, pandemic pedagogies that focus on relationships, social and emotional learning, student and teacher well-being, authentic assessments, direct instruction and creative play are more important than ever.

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This shift to effective crisis teaching seems to have been easier for some educators rather than others, and it is likely connected to what they were doing in classrooms prior to COVID-19 (Berry *et al.*, 2020; Hargreaves, 2020). Of course, much depends on the context of the school community and even the most successful teachers have faced challenges with student engagement, accessibility, well-being and motivation. That said, however, it does seem that teachers and leaders who were engaging in student-centered approaches using relational pedagogies, building robust communication channels with parents and families and using digital technologies and growth-oriented assessment practices have managed the transition more effectively. Ultimately, we believe it is these educators who should thus be tapped to lead the system forward. This view is echoed by Sahlberg (2020), who argues, “If we really want to transform our schools, we should expect less from policy-driven reforms and more from the visionary leadership of principals, professional wisdom of the teachers, and passionate engagement of students as change-makers.” We need to honor the professionalism of our teachers, school staff and leaders and facilitate ways to unleash their potential.

### **Professionalism in the pandemic**

So, how do we define professionalism in the pandemic? First, it is useful to start with a clear definition. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, professionalism is defined as “the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person.” However, what it means to be a “professional,” engage in “professional” behaviors and act “professionally” is ill-defined in the international educational context and often means different things to different people (Mizzi, 2016). There is also a difference between being a professional and being professional (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Whereas being a professional is more about how other people see you and how you see yourself, being professional is about what you do and how you behave. Across Canada, jurisdictions and governing bodies, such as the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), have developed professional standards to help teachers with the latter, which aim to convey a collective vision of professionalism that can guide the daily practice of members. Unfortunately, there is no clearly defined section on what professionalism looks like during a pandemic and there are differing perspectives about what teachers should be doing at this time that are emerging across stakeholder groups.

In Ontario, one of the biggest tensions between educators, unions, families and policymakers is whether students should have more synchronous live instruction and one-on-one virtual support while learning at home. With no clear and specific professional behavioral guidelines initially provided by the government or system leaders, the onus fell to educators to interpret what pandemic professionalism looked like. When it comes to online communication with students, the OCT Professional Standards document states that “Teachers need to be intentional in their efforts to negotiate and establish professional boundaries with students such that they can connect with and demonstrate care towards students, while protecting both themselves and their students” (p. 5). With professional boundaries never static or neatly defined, teachers will likely have different comfort levels with virtual schooling and online communication. Across Ontario, recent parent surveys revealed an inconsistent use when it came to teachers using live, virtual platforms, video-recording lessons and engaging in one-on-one online communication with students, and there was a clear call for more direct virtual contact with students and synchronous instruction (see Rushoway, 2020). In response, the Minister of Education weighed in and instructed teachers to “embrace more live video conferencing.” However, the debate continues as unions raise concerns about privacy, online security, students’ lack of access to tech devices, Internet and/or bandwidth and whether younger students had the home capacity to support live, virtual meetings. They

also argue that asynchronous learning offers teachers more flexibility, especially considering many educators may not have quiet or private spaces in their homes and/or are also balancing having their children at home. In the end, although professional standards and boundaries are both necessary and useful, people generally govern and regulate themselves and the work of others, according to their own interpretation of professionalism (Mizzi, 2016). With some elements of virtual schooling suspected to continue even when schools restart in the fall, it is likely that teacher professionalism in the pandemic will remain fodder for public debate.

For us, professionalism in the pandemic is about educators being anchored in the principles of ethics and sound judgment and doing the best they can for students in their care. It means reflecting on and thinking critically about one's teaching practice, being accountable for one's actions and seeking out expertise, resources and research when needed. In this next section, we use Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) professional capital framework to examine pandemic pedagogies and professionalism, highlight some of the emerging tensions and offer possible considerations for moving forward. Essentially, professional capital results when a teacher's individual knowledge, skills and moral orientation to education (human capital) are supported by effective collaborative networks and relationships with colleagues, parents and others in the larger school community (social capital) and when they are actively trusted and respected to practice collaborative and collegial decision-making (decisional capital). We believe developing professional capital across schools and systems will be the key to transforming public education.

### *Human capital*

When it comes to human capital or individual expertise, it is no secret that the move to remote and virtual teaching and learning has challenged teachers across the globe. The reality that more parents and families are involved in student learning has also meant that there is both greater transparency and public scrutiny when it comes to teachers' work. While a significant number of teachers have been engaging in innovative and effective pandemic pedagogies, as parents ourselves, it is also fair to say that there are notable discrepancies between different teachers' commitment and competency in virtual schooling within schools and across jurisdictions. With competency defined as "the ability to act effectively by mobilizing a range of resources," (QEP, 2001, p. 11), when discussing human capital, it is helpful to consider whether individual teachers have the necessary knowledge (do they know what to do and how to do it?), capacity (are they able to do it?) and desire (do they want to do it?) to act effectively.

When it comes to teachers' knowledge and skills using educational technology, the pandemic has revealed just how many teachers were unprepared for this shift from traditional "bricks and mortar" schooling to virtual schooling. While digital learning was growing before COVID-19, educational technology has struggled to gain wider acceptance across systems. One of the key reasons has been attributed to teachers' lack of training during and beyond their formal initial teacher education (OECD, 2018). Another issue, as noted earlier, is a lack of coherence and clarity across and within jurisdictions when it comes to privacy concerns, tech and connectivity access and partnerships with private providers. Teachers have also been shown to have a healthy skepticism about the pedagogical and ethical implications of "ed-tech," especially when there appears to be a gap between evidence-based cognitive science and the fancy gadgets and fads that are often being promoted (Christodoulou, 2020).

In order to support teachers in their transition to virtual teaching, there have been a plethora of excellent free professional learning offerings from the start of the pandemic, such as webinars, podcasts and websites with curated resources. In fact, the pandemic has

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provided rare opportunities for some teachers to access resources that they might not have before due to cost and/or travel constraints. With no one magical digital solution, however, what has emerged as a tension for teachers is how to navigate the sheer number of options and possibly opportunistic recommendations from private companies and edu-tech celebrities. Since pandemic pedagogies are about using the right tool, resource, approach or strategy at the right time for the right student, effective professional learning at this time must help teachers make these pedagogical decisions and prioritize student well-being and learning.

When it comes to teachers' capacity and their ability to provide effective crisis teaching, it is likely a situational rather than a generational issue (Abrams and Von Frank, 2013). Whereas connectivity and student engagement should always remain at the fore, challenges emerge for teachers who are also caretakers, parents of young children and/or have limited access to resources such as technology, Internet and/or a functional workspace. As noted earlier, these factors influence teachers' abilities to follow regular school schedules and/or offer synchronous live lessons. However, in Canada where teachers continue to receive their full salary throughout the pandemic, there is a public expectation for sustained teacher engagement and high-quality teaching and learning until schools reopen. Whereas there are numerous examples of incredible educational experiences facilitated by teachers, there is definitely room for improvement. However, in any discussion around struggling teachers and their desire to teach, it is also important to consider teacher well-being prior to and as a result of the coronavirus. For teachers who were already exhibiting stress and burnout, transitioning to remote teaching and learning has been an insurmountable challenge. For many others, the pandemic and physical distancing measures have had a detrimental impact on their mental health. With teacher well-being inextricably linked to student learning and well-being, ways to check in and prioritize well-being for both students and teachers must be a priority (Collie and Martin, 2020; Hollweck, 2020; Shirley *et al.*, 2020). As will be discussed in more detail in the following section, since collaborative structures such as mentor coaching and professional learning networks have been shown to both support teacher well-being and build individual teacher knowledge, capacity and desire, they should be strongly considered by educational systems as we move forward (Hollweck, 2019; Hollweck and Smokorowski, 2020; Schnellert, 2020).

### *Social capital*

As highlighted earlier, a key component of professionalism in the pandemic is that teachers inquire into and improve their practice as we transition from traditional face-to-face schooling to remote and virtual teaching. For Osmond-Johnson *et al.* (2020), while webinars and online learning certainly can help teachers build their pandemic pedagogies, high-quality teacher learning must be varied in both form and function. In fact, they argue that "If there was ever a time for teacher organizations to draw on the talents and strengths of their members while harnessing collective leadership capacity, it is now." (Thoughts for Teacher Organizations). Internationally, the growing collaboration among professionals in schools has been shown to lead to increased individual teacher effectiveness (OECD, 2018). However, we also know that not all professional collaboration is equally useful or effective (Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018). Additionally, with "zoom fatigue" (Skylar, 2020) a real affliction, finding innovative structures to support effective remote, collaborative professional learning is more important than ever. In the end, it will be whether (or not) schools are able to cultivate meaningful professional collaboration during this time that will be key for transformational change.

While the current disparity in pandemic pedagogies is evident between teachers and across schools, it has become clear that not all schools have paid attention to and invested in their social capital before the pandemic. Social capital is derived from and created by the

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relationships that teachers create among themselves, with their students and with members of the larger school community (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Building rich and meaningful collaborative professional cultures is what Campbell (2019) describes as “intentional work.” While collaborative cultures do require attention in terms of structures and formal organization, “their underlying sources of strength are informal in relationships, conversation, expressions of interest, provisions of support, and ultimately the mobilization of collective expertise and commitment to improve the lives and life chances of students” (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012, p. 114).

Although it is understandable that systems have prioritized equity and want all students to receive the same quality of educational experience at this time, we know some teachers have more expertise than others when it comes to educational technology and pandemic pedagogies. Rather than hold these experts back, they should be celebrated and encouraged to help others by facilitating professional learning and acting as mentors and coaches. It will be teacher leadership and opportunities for teachers to work meaningfully together that will not only build school capacity but also help staff develop a much needed sense of what Donohoo (2016) describes as “collective efficacy,” whereby teachers believe the work they do together matters and makes a difference for learners in their care (Campbell *et al.*, 2016; Fullan and Hargreaves, 2016; Hollweck, 2020). For Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018), this type of collaborative professionalism requires the solidarity of safe, supportive and trusting relationships combined with the solidity of robust and rigorous content, focus and structure. Importantly, as teachers begin to lean on one another for both professional and personal support, their collaborative work can also become a supportive structure for improved teacher well-being (see Hollweck, 2019).

Another key source of social capital that is often missed when speaking about professional collaboration is when school leaders and teachers deepen their relationships with students, their parents, families and the broader school community. Certainly, during the pandemic, teachers have had to rely on parents and families more than ever before. In many ways, teachers and parents have been thrust into the role of pedagogical collaborators. Whereas calls for greater partnerships between all education stakeholders were present before the pandemic, they are now proving to be absolutely necessary (Doucet, 2019). However, it is important to remember that not all parents know the material the school is trying to teach or have the time, capacity and commitment to be deeply involved in their children’s education at this time (Levine, 2020). In order to capitalize on this rare, multilateral partnership opportunity, coherent and consistent communication protocols are critical, and educators will need to be clear about curricular expectations and their pandemic pedagogical process.

### *Decisional capital*

The final ingredient for Hargreaves and Fullan’s (2012) professional capital framework is whether educators as individuals and a collective are respected and trusted to exercise sound professional judgment and make informed decisions often in complex situations (decisional capital). As noted earlier, whereas a top-down and managerial approach was both needed and necessary at the start of the pandemic, teachers and school leaders should now feel that decisions are being made with them rather than to them. Despite the increased evidence in educational change research showing the important role teachers and school leaders play in improving education systems, it still seems teachers in many Canadian and international jurisdictions are being treated as workers who simply receive decisions rather than help shape them (Ewing, 2020). Since educators often best understand individual students’ needs and contexts, they should be included as experts with valuable insight in pandemic decision-making and beyond. When we do not value educator expertise, we stop expecting it, and that would be a terrible loss, especially in a time of crisis.



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The absence of teachers in policy decisions is not a new phenomenon (Rose, 2019). Specifically, according to the OECD (2018) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), not only did only 14% of teachers report that policymakers in their country/region valued their views, but only 24% believed they could influence the education policy. Now, more than ever, as the discussion turns to restarting schools, teachers and school leaders should be respected enough as professionals to be consulted in policymaking decisions and considered an integral part of the communication structure. If we hope to disrupt the current educational paradigm and create meaningful transformational change, a more “centralized decentralization” approach (Zhao, 2016) is needed. Schools must be given the flexibility to develop their own pedagogical and assessment approaches, as long as they align with the general intent of the ministerial vision and adhere to system coherence and quality principles. We believe the pandemic offers schools a rare opportunity to fight for greater autonomy from government, increased teacher leadership (Harris, 2003) and more collaboration and engagement with key stakeholders such as students, families and the wider school community.

### **The future of schooling**

Until there is a vaccine readily available, the future of schooling in Canada and across the globe remains uncertain. Now is the time to reflect on what has been learned from the biggest global experiment in educational reform and distance learning in history and consider what might be possible in the future. We believe there will not be – nor should there be – a return to “normal” any time soon. Instead, now is the time to disrupt the status quo and build the public education system back better. Schools will likely need to prepare for a future of hybrid or blended models that will mix face-to-face interaction with virtual and distance learning approaches. Pandemic pedagogies and educator professionalism are foundations for this new model of teaching and learning. Teachers, system leaders, school staff, unions, professional associations, policymakers, as well as students, parents and the wider school community, will all need to work together to find short-, medium- and long-term strategies and evaluate which pandemic approaches are worth continuing, which need further developing and which we should leave behind. We believe pracademics who engage in both scholarship and practice are well positioned to support and champion this process. As Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue: “This means rethinking how teachers work with, support, and also challenge their colleagues. It means recasting teacher unions not only to become sources of outraged opposition to negative, imposed changes that narrow learning and/or harm students, and create burnout among classroom teachers, but also to become active and inspirational agents of changes that serve students, especially the most disadvantaged, improve quality among the teaching force, and put their teachers in the vanguard of large-scale change.” (p. 23). We believe developing professional capital across schools and systems will drive meaningful and effective transformational change during the pandemic and beyond. With an unknown path ahead and parents and community members as pedagogical partners, we have a rare opportunity to do better for all students in public education. Let’s not miss it.

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