

Learning in the time of COVID-19: capitalizing on the opportunity presented by the pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper addresses the current disruption in the educational status quo ante that has been caused by the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19. Its purpose is to suggest how practicing educators, their professional associations and the university-based researchers with whom they partner might capitalize on the unanticipated opportunity to impact education policy that the pandemic presents.

Design/methodology/approach – The author draws upon his own preparation and experiences – first as a long-time practitioner in the elementary and secondary school setting, then as a university professor – to offer insights and suggestions to practicing educators, their professional associations and the university-based researchers with whom they partner.

Findings – Despite the unexpected challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented to educators – challenges to which educators around the globe have risen admirably – the current crisis also affords practicing educators, their professional associations and the university-based researchers with whom they partner to change the status quo ante for the better.

Originality/value – The particular value of this piece is twofold: its analysis of the impact of this unanticipated crisis upon education by an author who has served both in the elementary/secondary setting and at the university level, and its assertion that educators must avail themselves of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to change the educational status quo ante for the better.

Keywords Collaboration, Community, Professional judgment

Paper type Viewpoint

As impossible as it is to prepare for every eventuality, let alone a ruthlessly efficient, fearsomely lethal virus such as now confronts us, the present pandemic has demonstrated precisely how crucial it is that those who hold positions of authority be thoughtful, forthright and collaborative.

“Chance,” Louis Pasteur famously expressed, “favours the prepared mind.” Dwight D. Eisenhower, as Supreme Allied Commander during a different kind of global crisis than the one that we now face, remarked that, while individual plans sometimes come to naught, the practice and process of planning are “everything.”

While no specific plan could possibly have proved equal to the task of stopping COVID-19 immediately in its tracks, citizens of jurisdictions whose leaders have discarded painstakingly formulated plans, disavowed the need to prepare for contingencies and/or dismissed as overreaction the counsel of experts, are now paying an awful price for those officials’ shortsightedness and misplaced self-confidence.

As they routinely do when conditions change unexpectedly, educators have risen to the current challenge. They have adapted their instruction and engagement of students from the classroom to virtual spaces, responding to the sudden need for physical separation. The COVID-19 crisis highlights long-standing healthcare disparities between individuals and families from different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Similarly, it underscores substantially unequal access to reliable Internet service and devices for Internet use among different students, families and communities. This has further prompted educators to do whatever they have found necessary to reach individual youngsters and families.



All who are committed to equity and justice – a group that includes but is certainly not limited to educators – must capitalize on the opportunity presented by this pandemic to advocate for and insist upon change. Policymakers must be made aware of the readiness and creativity with which educators have shifted gears on behalf of their students. They must act on that knowledge to craft policies that support and maximize, rather than squander, educators’ professionalism. Policymakers must also craft policies addressing the social injustices that have been continuously ignored, allowing them to spread and intensify like the pandemic we now all suffer through together. For far too long, our political leaders have “educationalized” our nation’s most insidious social problems, placing responsibility on our schools and educators and holding them solely accountable when they fall short of impossible tasks.

An ounce of prevention

As my colleagues in the school district where I had the honor of serving for sixteen years, and the dozens of educators whom I since have been privileged to help prepare for roles as school leaders, have heard me say countless times: effective educators – whether at the district, building or classroom levels – approach each day as if they might be struck down by an out-of-service bus while walking home from school. While lacking the elegance of Pasteur’s formulation or the sober simplicity of Eisenhower’s, my sentiment is no less earnest: thoroughgoing preparation is as crucial to safeguarding the learning of the young – and, closely related, to maintaining educators’ own peace of mind – as it is to unlocking the mysteries of nature and to commanding armed forces in theaters of war.

Teachers are loath to be absent from their classrooms, appreciating that no substitute instructor – however skilled – could know their students as well as they have come to know them, or would facilitate their learning as intentionally as they would do. These professionals may derive some comfort, though, in knowing that their students have internalized and thrived under well-established classroom norms and routines. Likewise, they should take confidence in knowing that learning objectives – and activities and resources they designed or selected to help students achieve them – are clearly delineated in the unit and lesson plans they have prepared.

Principals and other school leaders may take pride in having helped to foster cultures in which faculty members genuinely share in the leadership of the school. They should also be proud that their students value and take ownership of their own learning, know that their educators care for them and help one another to live up to schoolwide expectations. While meetings and other obligations require principals and other school leaders occasionally to be away from their students and faculty colleagues, they may be assured that teaching and learning will continue uninterrupted during their absence.

All educators who invest time, energy and love early on in building genuine relationships with students and their families may be confident that any challenges that emerge during the course of a youngster’s school experience will be far more readily resolved than they otherwise would have been – because of the respect that such relationships inspire ([Gorski, 2012](#); [Lareau, 2011](#); [Robinson and Harris, 2014](#)).

Learning in the time of COVID-19

The present crisis, characterized by uncertainty about the future and sobering daily updates on the virus’ course, requires educators at the district, building and classroom levels to be physically separated from their students and colleagues. Our sudden, shared isolation underscores the benefits of being forward-thinking, reflective and collaborative. While no teacher or school leader could have anticipated or adequately prepared their schools to be

shut down for a huge portion (in most locations, even the remainder) of the 2019/2020 academic year, educators' instructional preparedness, fluency with learning objectives and familiarity with their individual students should serve those youngsters and their families well during this challenging time. My hope is that it will also provide some consolation to these same professionals who, while unable to do all that they would like for the youngsters entrusted to them, will nevertheless have set them up for as much success as these atypical circumstances allow.

Irrespective of whether policymakers at the state, provincial or national levels issue statements that are at all levels encouraging, or offer guidance that is in any way practicable, educators at the local level must exercise their professional judgment to a degree that, in too many jurisdictions, they are seldom invited or permitted to do. Educators must continue to marry their familiarity with individual students and their families, their acquaintance with those families' access to resources, and their knowledge of grade-level and subject-specific learning objectives to further students' social, emotional and academic development throughout the current academic year and into the summer months. While these aspects of the educators' craft, commitment and compassion have been disregarded, even disrespected, by two decades' worth of neoliberal education policy, they are precisely those that will assist students and families through this crisis.

While it is regrettable that it has taken a pandemic for educators to be afforded this opportunity to use their professional judgment, it would be still more unfortunate if educators failed to seize this chance to demonstrate to policymakers that things ought never to return, once the immediate threat has passed, to what for too long has passed as normal. Accountability policies have shown themselves time and again not only ineffective but detrimental to educators and the students and families whom they serve. They privilege assessments over the students whose academic attainment they ostensibly measure, and that value metrics above professionals' content area expertise and relationships with students and families. And they assign to schools almost exclusive responsibility for helping students overcome the straitened circumstances of their families and communities.

The COVID-19 crisis affords educators from the classroom level to the superintendent's office the opportunity to identify for policymakers the harm caused by existing legislation and to illustrate the passion, creativity and skill that educators are eager and able to deploy if given the chance. As I regularly remind my graduate students, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.

Anti-status quo ante

Counterproductive, if well-intended, accountability measures have governed education policy in many jurisdictions for the better part of the last two decades. With their overemphasis on the results of annual standardized tests, these regimes have effectively shifted onto educators accountability for policymakers' perennial failure to remedy long-standing societal injustice (Anyon, 2010; Berliner, 2013; Gorski, 2012). Moreover, these policies have served to narrow the curriculum to only those subjects that are formally tested and to denude teaching and learning – not least, in the tested subjects – of creativity and curiosity for students and teachers alike (Berliner, 2013; MacDonald and Shirley, 2009; Ravitch, 2010; Schneider, 2017).

An unintended but undeniable consequence of so-called accountability measures has been what MacDonald and Shirley (2009) characterize as teachers' alienation from their practice. Seeing no viable alternative but to comply with misguided mandates, educators very often suppress their own notions of how best to meet the needs of their individual students – doing psychic damage to themselves as they recognize the disservice being perpetrated upon the youngsters in their care (MacDonald and Shirley, 2009). Particularly cruel, students whose annual test scores capture the lack of opportunity and resources available in the

neighborhoods in which they live and attend school, and who therefore most require educators who are pedagogically creative, conscientious and culturally sustaining, are instead taught by educators who – precisely because of the high stakes associated with such testing – face the harshest sanctions for exercising their own professional judgment or operating outside the four corners of (often very prescriptive) central office-issued unit and lesson plans (Anyon, 2010; Berliner, 2013; Garcia and Weiss, 2017; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2014; Ravitch, 2010; Sahlberg, 2010; Schneider, 2017; Tienken *et al.*, 2017; Tienken and Orlich, 2013).

Being the change

In Finland – a country policymakers in other jurisdictions routinely hail for its enviable educational outcomes and in which, not coincidentally, no large-scale testing regime exists – educators are expected to employ and are supported in employing their own creativity and discernment (Berliner, 2013; Fullan and Hargreaves, 2016; Sahlberg, 2010). Far from practicing in isolation, though, educators in Finland and in other academically high-achieving nations engage in ongoing collaboration to share, analyze and further refine their individual instructional practices (Crow, 2009; Elmore, 2004; Fullan and Hargreaves, 2016). Fullan and Hargreaves (2016) explain that such cultures of “collaborative professionalism” cultivate educators’ individuality, promoting the professional judgment of individual educators and entire faculties. Equally important, such cultures ensure that information about methods and approaches that individual educators find especially effective (or not) are shared with their colleagues so that all students benefit from the purposeful experimentation and thoughtful reflection of their schools’ professional educators.

With testing suspended in many jurisdictions for the current academic year, educators are being afforded a rare opportunity to deploy their abundant expertise, wisdom and love, which for too long have gone underappreciated – even disallowed – by policymakers. Educators must take full advantage of this opening, systematically document the impacts of their efforts, both favorable and otherwise, and share that information broadly.

We must remember that policymakers are compelled to write new rules or legislation, or to amend existing measures, only when they are cognizant of new issues that arise, or of longstanding ones that have been unresolved or even exacerbated by earlier policy approaches (Conaway, 2019; Trombly and Griffith, 2020). Given the decentralized nature of education, and the fact that schools are nested within broader communities that profoundly impact them, it is challenging for policymakers to observe, still less to appreciate, the day-to-day realities of either educators or the students and families whom they work to serve (Elmore, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; Schneider, 2017; Trombly, 2014).

While it is the responsibility of elected representatives to solicit input from those they represent, including practicing educators, rather than simply yielding to the ideological assertions of high-paid, conveniently situated lobbyists, it is nevertheless incumbent upon educators, their professional associations and partnering university-based researchers to ensure policymakers at all levels are apprised of circumstances at the local level (Conaway, 2019; McDonnell, 2009; Trombly and Griffith, 2020). Apropos of how educators in so many jurisdictions are now being required to work with their students remotely, it is crucial that policymakers be fully aware – through both qualitative and quantitative data – of how educators, with little if any forewarning, have risen to the occasion, and are working creatively with individual youngsters and families to ensure that student learning continues apace.

District- and building-level leaders are well-positioned to observe the efforts and experiences of students, families, teachers and other educators, and to share that information with policymakers. Indeed, research has shown policymakers regard school principals in particular as “honest brokers” whose input is both trustworthy and valuable (Trombly and Griffith, 2020).

Beginning with the end in mind

For the duration of the present crisis (and, ideally, long thereafter), educators must remind themselves that they do their students no great service by working themselves to exhaustion. After all, as I used to remind my faculty colleagues when I served as school principal, it is for good reason flight crews remind passengers before every takeoff to don their own oxygen masks (should that become necessary) before attempting to assist others.

Certainly, educators must do their best with and for their students. District- and building-level leaders must provide teachers, counselors and other specialists with the resources, the support and the ongoing professional learning experiences that they require in order to do their best work with students and families. Teachers need to design educational experiences meticulously and continuously reflect upon their efforts to identify practices warranting reiteration, refinement or reconsideration. Though, like the “good enough” parents about whom the pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott wrote so cogently half a century ago, educators need to trust that they possess “sound instincts” (Winnicott, 1973) and need to refrain from self-flagellation – especially now, when even more than usual is out of their control. Equally important, they should celebrate and be celebrated for their many successes with the youngsters in their care, both in shared physical and virtual learning environments.

During these atypical times (and later, as they eventually resume some semblance of routine), educators should keep paramount their schools’ core values, vision and mission. Just as these ideals ought to guide schoolwide curricular, personnel-related and budgetary decisions, they should also underlie educators’ daily pedagogical choices. Schools’ collectively articulated core ideals exist to help educators prioritize their efforts, either when (as is typically the case) they are buffeted by competing demands, or when (as now) they endeavor to lead student learning when resources such as time, instructional tools or technology are inadequate or inconsistently available.

Of course, educators must also engage their students in teaching and learning rooted in the curriculum standards for their subject areas and grade levels. With testing suspended, along with the counterproductively high stakes that have accompanied them, curriculum standards should be recognized as the useful guides for planning instruction that they were always intended to be. While the notion of standards has left a bad taste in many educators’ mouths, as a result of the assessments based upon them, their purpose is to assist educators, providing clarity amid the many distractions and countless demands of school life (Trombly, 2014).

Such prioritization is especially necessary now, when time is scarce and educators’ ability to interact directly with their students is scarcer still. Educators may wish to help all of their students meet all of the standards in all of their richness; yet necessity dictates that they will not be able to achieve the comprehensiveness for which they ordinarily strive. Educators should therefore employ the heuristic that Wiggins and McTighe (1998) offered when popularizing the backward-design approach to developing curriculum. They should distinguish content about which learners need to develop an “enduring understanding” (and must therefore be given top priority) from that which is “important to know and do” (and should be emphasized somewhat less) and from that with which it is merely worth being familiar.

“Beginning with the end in mind” – the operating principle behind the backward-design approach to planning curriculum and instruction – requires educators first to identify what students should understand and be able to do by the end of a given period of instruction. Educators must then determine methods to assess students’ understanding and skill and, finally, select methods and means to engage students in learning the material (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998).

Effective educators routinely employ the principles of universal design when creating or selecting assessments to gauge students’ understanding and skill and when choosing how to engage students’ learning (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2011). The concept of

‘universal design’ is crucial to those who engage large numbers of students with a vast array of learning profiles in meaningful learning experiences. It calls for educators to employ multiple means of representing material with students. It allows them multiple means of ‘action and expression’ in order to honor and accommodate students’ varied levels of physical ability, expression and communication, and executive function. And it provides students multiple means of engagement to inspire their interest, effort and persistence, and to promote their self-regulation (CAST, 2011). While the COVID-19 crisis certainly has proved challenging for everyone, it is likely that educators who create assessment and instructional strategies using universal design routinely have experienced a gentler learning curve since school buildings were shuttered and remote instruction was required.

Most important when planning curricula and instruction, especially during this time of ad hoc remote teaching and learning, educators must make full use of what they know about individual learners and their families, including their interests, skill levels and cultural backgrounds. They should be familiar with their access to such resources as literature, reference materials and reliable Internet service, and the proximity of their homes to woodlands, ponds, beaches, parks or other opportunities to enjoy the natural world. Such information is immeasurably helpful to educators when they plan learning experiences for their students.

The end to keep in mind

Two colleagues and I began our work with school counselors from a mid-sized school district who wished to function as an authentic professional learning community by asking each to reflect on why they had become a school counselor in the first place (Trombly *et al.*, 2017). We then asked them to list their core values and to formulate their vision and mission as a nascent school counseling professional learning community. Because schools are enormously busy places comprising many individuals, each with their own wants and needs, school counselors and other educators must regularly reorient themselves. They must remind themselves of the purpose of their work, lest they be sidetracked by demands that do not actually serve that purpose.

Albert Einstein (1931) once told a gathering of educators about children he knew “who preferred schooltime to vacation” (p. 3). That remark, while brief, encapsulates the purpose of all educators: to indulge each student’s innate curiosity and foster their self-confidence to take appropriate risks, even when initial attempts are unsuccessful, and to inspire in each an inexhaustible inquisitiveness. For far too long, and to their regret, too many educators have been kept from fully satisfying this purpose by policymakers’ misguided approach to education reform. These reforms, which prioritize students’ scores on tests over their genuine learning, have also had the effect of devaluing the benefits to be gained from educators’ relationships with students’ families (Lareau, 2011; Robinson and Harris, 2014).

Whatever the intentions behind them, the neoliberal accountability policies that have proliferated for the past two decades have served to alienate educators from their own professional practices, as well as from the families of the students they serve (Apple, 2015; Cochran-Smith, 2015; MacDonald and Shirley, 2009; Mehta, 2013). These policies have compelled educators to focus on compliance at the expense of students’ authentic learning, demanding accountability for meeting unreasonable expectations of ever higher test scores, irrespective of the very real disadvantages many students and families face, and enforcing those expectations with increasingly draconian sanctions.

Recognizing that many lay people are unversed and even uncomfortable with science, the famed entomologist Wilson (2002) offered this advice to other scientists seeking to explain their work to nonscientists: “Break the big questions down into stories, little dramas, that

expose the trial and error process of science and the ideas that animate and move it forward” (Wilson, 2002, p. 11). During the current crisis, we have been fortunate to hear directly from epidemiologists and other experts who have done exactly that. They have clearly conveyed complicated, sometimes frightening information to the general public about the course of the virus and the efforts being made to contain it.

While many lay people certainly find it a more accessible topic of conversation than, say, theoretical physics, nanobiotechnology or virology, education is nevertheless far more complex than is recognized. With children now having to learn from home, families are afforded the opportunity to experience and appreciate this to a degree to which they have not previously.

Conclusion

Although undeniably tragic, the COVID-19 pandemic affords educators an opportunity to strengthen relationships with families and increase their knowledge of learning goals and instructional and assessment approaches. Educators can (temporarily) refocus their instruction from meeting standardized testing targets to reigniting and indulging students’ innate curiosity about the world around them. They can reconnect with colleagues with whom they are too seldom able to collaborate, given the many demands on their time within the bureaucracy of a school. They can record the results of their efforts, and they can share that information with policymakers. Finally, and of equal importance, they can reflect on their reasons for joining their noble profession and, hopefully, enjoy some renewed energy to walk with their students down the long road ahead.

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