

Professional capital after the pandemic: revisiting and revising classic understandings of teachers' work

Professional capital after the pandemic

Andy Hargreaves

Lynch School of Education, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, USA, and

Michael Fullan

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Canada

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Abstract

Purpose – This article revisits three classic findings from Dan Lortie's 1975 book *Schoolteacher*, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic and its possible aftermaths. These findings are that teachers and others base their ideas about teaching on the long apprenticeship of observation as students; they derive their satisfaction from the psychic rewards of teaching – the emotional satisfaction and feedback that teachers got from students; and they work in conservative cultures of individualism.

Design/methodology/approach – The article appraises Lortie's foundational text in relation to contemporary public domain surveys and op-ed articles about the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning.

Findings – COVID-19 created conditions that undermined traditional psychic rewards, weakened the tenuous student–teacher relationship as more students found schooling less engaging, began to give parents distorted observations of teaching online and made teacher collaboration more difficult.

Research limitations/implications – Due to the current nature of the pandemic and the shortage of just-in-time original data, the research relies on rapid responses and op-ed perceptions rather than on an established body of literature and database.

Practical implications – The postpandemic agenda holds out three ways to modernize Lortie's agenda in ways that advance the presence and impact of professional capital. These ways comprise new psychic rewards for students and not just teachers, a more open professionalism that is actively inclusive of parents and collaborative professionalism that has greater strength and depth.

Social implications – Educational reform in the postpandemic age must be transformational and not seek to return to normal.

Originality/value – The paper gives new meaning to Lortie's original ideas on COVID-19 circumstances

Keywords Collaboration, Professional capital, Coronavirus, Pandemic

Paper type Research paper

On May 5th and May 6th, 2020, within 24 h of each other, two apparently unrelated events in education occurred that have hugely contrasting relevance for ideas about the culture of teaching and how to change it.

May 5th marked the death of a scholar in his 90s, who had written an immensely influential book on teaching. It portrayed teachers as people who were unwilling to change because they were trapped in workplace cultures of individualism that shielded them from the knowledge and expertise of their peers. His name was Dan Lortie, and his 1975 book, *Schoolteacher*, became the most cited book on teaching in his lifetime (Lortie, 1975).

One day later, on May 6th, a billionaire philanthropist – one who had invested a fortune in several failed systemic reforms in which data and technology had figured large – in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, proposed using technology to “re-imagine” public education. His name is Bill Gates and he signed a deal with New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a



notorious advocate of charter schools, to put an end, in Cuomo's words, to "the old model of everybody goes and sits in the classroom, and the teacher is in front of that classroom and teaches that class, and you do that all across the city, all across the state, all these buildings, all these physical classrooms". "Why", Cuomo wondered aloud, "with all the technology you have?" (Strauss, 2020).

One man claimed teaching and learning would never change. The other proclaimed, as he had before, that he could totally transform them through technology. He had obviously not read and, therefore, not heeded the warning near the end of Lortie's book against reforms that are "developed by people whose orientations are different from classroom teachers" (Lortie, 1975, p. 220) and are driven by "a growing movement . . . toward accountability" (p. 223). In particular, Lortie presciently highlighted what might happen to educators and educational systems with the advent of "computer-assisted instruction". "Will they be able, as has medicine, to absorb new technologies?" he wondered. "Or will they find themselves 'encroached' upon by people with widely different orientations and commitments"(p. 220)?

So what has a global pandemic taught us about the culture of teaching? How hard has it been to change, through the single dramatic experiment of stopping all teaching and learning, as we have always known them, and sending 90% of all children – 1.6bn of them in total, in 195 countries – home for months on end (UNESCO, 2020)?

The responses of teachers and school systems to the coronavirus pandemic, and to designing learning at home, have been literally as well as figuratively all over the map. In Queensland, Australia, isolated farms and cattle stations have had USBs of curriculum materials delivered by drones (Fishburn, 2020). The Toronto Board of Education ordered and dispatched Chromebooks to every student possible (Malloy, 2020). Nova Scotia, with more than 30% of its school population without Wi-Fi or compatible devices, adopted the low-tech–no-tech strategy of using a flyer advertisement distributor to deliver printed curriculum materials to every family, irrespective of their technological capability (ASCD, 2020). Meanwhile, the nation of Uruguay, which has provided all students with laptops and Internet access since 2007, saw its platform usage increase 1200% within days of students being sent home (ARC Education Project, 2020).

What has the coronavirus pandemic and learning at home taught us about teachers' professional capital and community? How has this unprecedented disruption lifted the lid off teaching, and what has it revealed? And what can we all learn from what we have seen that might make teaching and learning better once the pandemic is eventually over?

This paper addresses three of Lortie's fundamental contributions from his interviews with 94 teachers in the Greater Boston metropolitan area and asks what new light *learning at home* has cast on them at present.

- (1) First is the *apprenticeship of observation* by which most people learn what they believe teaching looks like in the days that they are students, from "the other side of the desk." What has teaching looked like in the pandemic, how has it changed people's opinions about it and how can we develop ways to see teaching differently in the future?
- (2) Second is what Lortie called the *psychic rewards* of emotional satisfaction and feedback that teachers get from teaching, often through their interactions with individuals. What has learning at home done to these psychic rewards, and how might that affect how we think about expansions of digital and online learning in the future?
- (3) Last, after decades of deliberate efforts to combat what Lortie described as *cultures of individualism*, have been efforts to build cultures of collaboration that are now widespread in public education. How have they played out during the pandemic, how

well or poorly has that collaboration fared online and how can we go deeper with collaboration afterwards?

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Open professionalism and the “apprenticeship of observation”

One of Dan Lortie’s memorable arguments, and turns of phrase, was about how teachers learned to teach through what they witnessed as students. Students spent 13,000 h – it would be more now – watching teachers from “the other side of the desk” (Lortie, 1975, p. 61). Through imitation and intuition, this is how they learned what teaching was basically about. They took on the role of the teacher in their own heads. This phenomenon, Lortie concluded, shaped all students’ views of teachers and teaching, “whatever their occupational intentions” (p. 62). This, of course, includes all future parents.

Few parents ever watch their children’s teachers teach. Schools do not encourage it, unless parents offer to be “helpers,” and most parents are too busy working to spend time observing their children’s classes. So parents rely on little shreds of evidence to evaluate what kind of education their children are getting. These include a couple of parent–teacher evenings each year when everyone is on their best behavior, periodic report cards in somewhat anaesthetized *educationese* derived from precoded computer options and rubrics of progress, stories that children bring home that usually range from “just playing” to “nothing much” and then, of course, standardized test scores that often arrive too late to be useful as data that can guide interventions (Hargreaves, 2000). When parents want to know what their children’s teachers are like, these sources of information are usually the sum of their slim pickings. So they often fall back, in an intuitive rather than analytical way, on what they think they remember from when they were in school and judge the school on whether it matches up.

All this has changed with COVID-19. While many elite private school teachers just taught their usual classes online, confident in the knowledge that their students had access to the necessary technology, that the students’ home environments would be supportive and that the sizes of classes they had to manage on a digital platform were small, the results elsewhere were a lot more mixed. Public school teachers and districts scrambled to get resources out to young people and their families.

Some teachers, like those in California, where the teachers’ union, the California Teachers’ Association, had previously made professional capital one of its three strategic priorities, were trusted by their states to use their professional judgment and contact their families within a couple of days. Others had to wait up to four weeks before their district and state leaders, worried about students with inequitable access to resources, or fearful about being sued by parents of children with special educational needs, would permit them to get started. Some teachers tried to do at least part of their teaching online. In Queensland, Australia, for example, teachers had to go to school where they taught their students at home, using virtual platforms. However, unable to see their students face to face, or respond to their intellectual and emotional struggles in real time, teaching online was far from easy.

Other districts, like the Ottawa Catholic School Board, that were already into deep learning were more prepared and acted quickly to support home learning by building relationships with individual students and by addressing student engagement in flexible ways. Associate Director Tom D’Amico noted students across many of his district’s 83 schools “naturally gravitated to human connections and desire to help others during the pandemic; the removal of traditional school hours provided more opportunity for students to focus on their own passions including finding ways to help others” (personal communication; see [Ottawa Catholic School Board, 2020](#)).

More generally, many teachers were definitely feeling the strain. Some found ways to reach their kids; others couldn’t. A survey the Alberta Teachers Association conducted in

June, with a random stratified sample of around 2,500 teachers and administrators, found that 76.8% were clearly missing the usual *psychic rewards* of teaching about which Lortie spoke. They reported that they did not feel the same emotional connection to their students compared to before the pandemic ([Alberta Teachers Association, 2020](#)). Over 60% were worried about students' technology access and about the lack of support for learning at home. In total, 70% felt exhausted by the end of the day.

In this survey, educators made comments including the following: "Many of my students are not engaged. They have family responsibilities with varying expectations and are experiencing a lot of stress" (p. 13). "I feel disconnected with my students. I wonder what's going on with students and parents that I'm getting no response and feedback from" (p. 13). One teacher reported "feeling unmotivated to teach through a distance when more than 50% of my class is not participating and parents are taking out their frustrations on me. It makes me feel like I am not good at my job when I am trying my best and battling my own feelings of depression and anxiety from this situation" (p. 15).

Some school districts purchased digital tablets in bulk and transported them out to all their families. Others turned on the Wi-Fi in their empty schools so people could drive their kids to school parking lots to download materials onto their devices, which they could work on back home. Some school districts had teachers deliver learning resources in plastic or wooden boxes on families' doorsteps. They used school buses to drop off stashes of materials and, as we indicated earlier in the case of Nova Scotia, adopted other low-tech/no-tech solutions as well ([ASCD, 2020](#)).

Teachers turned into contortionists as they strove to support their students in any way they could, no matter how unusual. They emailed, texted, did video chats and conferencing and communicated the old-fashioned way: by telephone. But now parents had glimpsed what they thought their teachers were and were not doing, and some of them did not hold back from airing their frustrations.

On March 24th, two parents who were also professors in Ottawa, Canada, received messages from the Ministry about online learning and website links but "nothing about teachers teaching or facilitating real dialogue between teachers and students" ([Diamond and Jenkins, 2020](#)). "Public educators are not on vacation. If school staff are being paid to work full-time, they should do so, working from home like so many others," they insisted. Why were teachers not contacting families individually? Why were they not teaching entire classes online? Their child's elementary teacher was being paid over \$100,000. Why wasn't she doing her job and why wasn't her schooling letting her?

But if some parents wondered whether teachers were doing enough, others were worried that they were doing too much. Shiri Kenigsberg [Levi \(2020\)](#), a mother of four in Israel, delivered a rant that went viral on YouTube. "Listen. It's not working, this distance-learning thing," she said. "Seriously, it's impossible! It's crazy!" With four kids, she went on, "just imagine how many WhatsApps, how many teachers for each child, how many subjects per child." There were only two computers in her house. "All morning they're fighting over the computers," she despaired.

Writing in the *Washington Post*, an Iowa parent was aghast that in the middle of a pandemic, a school could think it was appropriate to give her Grade 3 child a C minus! ([Lenz, 2020](#)) Like a volcanic ring of fire, parent-teacher frustrations erupted everywhere. On the one hand, all of those who had asserted that schools had had their day, that they were relics of the industrial age and that learning could be delivered in flexible, personalized ways, in online environments, often at home, were suddenly having to eat massive portions of humble pie. If you didn't like your child's school, try teaching them yourself at home instead and then see what it feels like. In this way, many teachers earned new respect overnight.

COVID-19 has given many parents and families a glimpse into teaching at present beyond the other side of the desk as they remember it. But the mirror that the pandemic has held up to

teaching has been a distorted one. Parents have sometimes, but not always, seen teachers at work. But even in the case of Andy's own young grandchildren's class, for example, kids lay across laps, parents and siblings walked by with prompts for their own children like a Greek chorus, and some kids just did not want to participate at all in this pale replica of their actual classes. The image that parents have had of teaching from the other side of the screen has been no less distorted than their memories of it from the other side of the desk.

When everyone returns to school, we need to rethink, or in the terminology of the time: reimagine, what professional capital means for parent–teacher relations. The old normal of report cards, euphemistic rubrics, infrequent meetings and standardized test scores is not good enough. But nor is using online learning as a new kind of classroom observation process for parents – a spyglass on awkwardly delivered instruction devoid of all the psychic rewards for students and teachers alike.

Professional capital is about teachers having more independence from bureaucracies, but more interdependence with parents and each other. It's about open and collaborative professionalism, not individually autonomous professionalism. This might mean parents occasionally getting a chance to see teachers at work, like in the examples of lesson study where parents and others can visit prepared classes in groups and get engaged in interaction about what they see. But in the end, open professionalism is more about trust and relationships than transparency. UK parent–school relations expert, Janet Goodall (2018), says the point is not so much about “getting parents in” but about actively supporting parents in developing the skills to help their own kids learn.

During COVID-19, while lots of hard and soft copy materials were delivered to most families, these families rarely got what they needed most: online instruction about how best to use them. In a project with ten schools, for example, Goodall describes simple but successful initiatives such as bringing dads to breakfast with their kids and encouraging them to stay on afterward to read to them. Other successful practices include shared parents' nights that include the children discussing their portfolios of work with parents and their teachers, sending pictures of works-in-progress home with smartphones in real time and so on. In other words, this is about making open professionalism less like a series of occasional meetings and observational events and more like an ongoing relationship focused on learning and well-being. And if the child also participates in these, it might create a *new apprenticeship of observation* that children will carry forward when they become parents too.

The new psychic rewards of teaching and learning

Lortie showed that teachers' intrinsic rewards in self-contained conservative classrooms arose from the individual success of students, often on the spot. But sometimes it also arose ten or more years later, when by chance they met former students who thanked them for believing in them and planting the seeds for their later success. Overall, for teachers with several years of experience, there was an overall satisfaction that they were making a difference.

These psychic rewards are an indicator of student engagement as much as a sign of student achievement. But during COVID-19, stuck at home with little support sometimes, especially in poorer, overworked families with little available space, keeping students engaged has been exceedingly difficult. The US magazine, *Education Week*, for example, surveyed 908 teachers and district leaders in the first week of May 2020, about their perceptions regarding the effects of learning at home (Yetick and Kurtz, 2020). In total, 42% of teachers said student engagement was much lower than it had been before the coronavirus – worse than a month previously. In total, 60% of educators said there had been a drop-off in engagement over the preceding two weeks.

However, we should beware of idealizing the schools we temporarily left behind. Teachers are scarcely going to say to national survey takers that their kids are more engaged at home than in the teachers' own classes. What would that say about the teachers' professionalism and their abilities to capture and keep their students' interests?

Writing in *The New York Times*, 8th Grade student Veronique Mintz (2020) informed her readers that she was grateful to be learning online, at her own pace, away from her school. She decried her classmates, who were always "Talking out of turn. Destroying classroom materials. Disrespecting teachers. Blurting out answers during tests. Students pushing, kicking, hitting one another and even rolling on the ground. This is what happens in my school every single day," she wrote.

University of Ottawa professor, Jess Whitley (2020), has drawn attention to how the families of students with special needs were coping with the pandemic. Some missed out on and couldn't fathom how to use the assistive technologies the schools had been using to help their kids access and express their learning. Others were distraught that they couldn't explain to their children why they just couldn't go to school, be with their friends and enjoy their regular routines any more. But many parents felt their children with special needs had become liberated at home because they could wiggle around and go outside to let off steam whenever they wanted instead of having to sit still all the time. And children's play advocates, Lauren McNamara and Sahlberg (2020), have pointed out that many children have had more chances to play outside and enjoy its benefits to their well-being during the pandemic, rather than being trapped indoors doing endless hours of test preparation with which many systems in the global North would normally be preoccupied during March, April and May.

Then there are Andy's twin granddaughters. When he asked his three grandchildren to draw what they missed about school, none of them drew things that depicted their learning or even their teachers. His grandson drew a picture of digging up worms with his friends. One of the twins drew a slide out in the yard. Then the other one drew herself with two figures that represented what she was *not* missing at school. "Who are they?" Andy asked. "My two enemies," she said. Life in school isn't always all it's supposed to be.

Before the pandemic, surveys across the world by organizations such as the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) indicated that between 20% and a third of children are disengaged from, dissatisfied with or unhappy in school (OECD, 2000). Is it right that teachers get psychic rewards with individuals if such large proportions of students are getting no psychic rewards themselves?

Over the years, say from 1975 to the present, things have changed to disturb the quiet psychic kingdom of teachers behind the classroom door. One of those changes was that curriculum and pedagogy became less and less connected to the diverse needs of students – diverse because many of the students *were* different; diverse because educators got better at *diagnosing* those differences, especially in the case of special educational needs and ethnocultural diversity; and diverse because the world was changing rapidly and presenting very different needs and challenges for education and the role of future citizens. Students became less and less engaged and more and more alienated from the classroom.

Thus, students in 2020 find schooling less and less relevant and interesting compared to previous generations. Even those that graduated did so mainly for extrinsic reasons – to go to a good university, get a high-paying job and so on. Levels of engagement also declined as young people got older. Comparisons of engagement among Grade 3 students and Grade 11 students, for example, revealed dramatic differences, with engagement plummeting from 74 to 34% (Poll, 2019). A study by Heather Malin (2018), Director of the Youth Center at Stanford University, showed that barely more than one in five grade 11–12 students had any sense of purpose about life and their place in society.

Under these evolving conditions, the odds of experiencing psychic rewards dwindled for teachers and students alike. One of the most recent Gallup Polls (2017) showed only 30% of

teachers report they are engaged in their work – with 57% disengaged and 13% actively disengaged. The challenges of teaching and learning are increasing and the supports are not always there to help teachers cope.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unscrambled the status quo. Systems that had a good degree of focused, high-trust collaboration were able to adapt to the chaotic fallout and create more opportunities for deeper engagement. They have indeed welcomed the suspension of high-stakes tests and the frantic rush through curriculum content, while beginning to develop high-tech and low-tech innovations more suited to the present and future. These developments represent a greater chance to yield psychic rewards not just with occasional individuals but also with and among whole collectivities.

Cultures of individualism and collaboration

After Dan Lortie had highlighted the culture of individualism, large-scale empirical studies began to demonstrate the overall superior impact of collaboration on student achievement. These preceded four decades of efforts, such as designing professional learning communities, to develop effective collaboration in schools and whole systems.

Our own research and development work has formed part of those efforts for several decades (e.g. Fullan and Hargreaves, 1991; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Yet, collaboration *per se* is not a magic answer to all our educational ills. There are several reasons for this.

First, there are just as many bad or superficial examples of collaboration as good ones: vague network discussions about visions and philosophies with no clear outcome that waste teachers' time, forced marches through data and spreadsheets to attempt quick fixes that never get to the underlying problems, collaboration that's too weak or collegiality that's too contrived.

Second, we embrace individuality of style and judgment as much as we do collaboration. Our own formulations of *collaborative professionalism* and *connected autonomy* have equal parts of autonomy and collaboration. Not all teaching can and should take place collaboratively. Most teachers will still spend a lot of time teaching their classes on their own. But if teachers collaborate effectively with others, the ideas and strategies they pick up will mean they become better when they are on their own.

Third, we recognize that effective collaboration needs both precision of focus and high trust in relationships; what Andy, with Michael O'Connor, calls *solidity* of practices and protocols, combined with *solidarity* of relationships and mutual support (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018).

Fourth, we do not see effective collaboration as only an intraschool phenomenon. Rather, it should be a normative feature of the entire system (school, community, district, state). Indeed, our comprehensive solution is *professional capital*, which includes equal and interactive parts of human, social and decisional capitals across entire systems (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

However, we still do not see many whole school systems that have developed embedded cultures of professional capital. The question is whether COVID-19 has arrived at a time when it can inadvertently become a catalyst for deepening professional capital. Some recent trends favor this direction. Prior to COVID-19, the OECD's (2020) TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey) results across over 60 countries showed that over 90% of teachers reported that they came to teaching with the moral purpose of helping individual students, and 88% wanted to contribute to bettering society (Schleicher, 2019). Contrary to Lortie's time, most teachers also reported that they valued collaboration and feedback from colleagues.

In general, COVID-19 has both weakened and strengthened these collaborative relationships. On the one hand, like never before, we have seen educators work together under high pressure to engage in agile and urgent problem-solving – delivering USBs

containing curriculum materials by drones to isolated homesteads in Australia, combining student cooperation with social distancing by teaching students outside whenever possible in Scandinavia or signing contracts with local restaurants to provide families meals in Nova Scotia, which also kept local restaurants in business.

The [Alberta Teachers' Association \(2020\)](#) survey, in a jurisdiction noted for its high international performance and strong tradition of teacher collaboration, shows, if anything, that where collaborative professionalism already exists, the COVID crisis has accelerated it even more. So 57.7% responded "my teaching, resourcing and planning have become much more collaborative with (their) colleagues," almost 93% felt they "have positive relationships with (their) teaching colleagues," and almost 90% felt they "have positive relationships with (their) school leadership." This is all probably related to the fact that over 90% of teachers' experience "a great deal of professional autonomy" with how to teach their students "during the pandemic." However, systems like those of many states in the United States that are more bureaucratically hierarchical and less collaborative and that have been less willing to trust their teachers' professional judgment – making their teachers wait two weeks or more before they were allowed to make their own contacts with anxious families and vulnerable children, for example, – will have likely produced opposite trends.

Collegial meetings on Zoom or other platforms are often poor substitutes for face-to-face ones. However, where online interactions can be flexibly scheduled to suit varying needs and circumstances in teachers' own families, where relationships and trust already exist, professional collaborations can be strengthened further. For example, Andy has codirected a project with six states in the US Pacific Northwest to build professional capital across teachers in isolated rural schools in high-poverty communities, to increase student engagement. Over seven years, Andy and his team cocreated a network with these educators that focused on collaborative curriculum planning among teachers with similar job roles and specializations (kindergarten, mathematics, special education and so on) using two annual face-to-face meetings that developed trust, as well as online platforms that sustained their interactions and impact over time. As this transformational project progressed, not only did teachers develop more innovative and engaging materials, the students also started to collaborate across large distances, sharing time-lapse videos of their communities and providing feedback on peers' writing ([Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018](#)).

Meanwhile, in Michael and his colleagues' work in *deep learning*, there are increasing examples across eight countries where teachers and students are learning together, integrating student learning that serves the individual students, groups of students and whole communities ([Fullan et al., 2018](#)). These processes already use digital technologies to enhance collaborative interactions. In Uruguay, where large numbers of schools are part of Michael's network, and which is also part of Andy's international collaboratory (ARC) of seven nations, Ministers and professional association leaders are committed to advancing broad excellence, equity, inclusion, well-being, democracy and human rights. Uruguay's systemic commitment to innovation meant that when COVID-19 happened, its existing digital system was already in place for all the nation's teachers to use.

The social capital aspect of professional capital has been both a precondition of how well teachers have been able to respond to COVID-19 and an outcome of collaborative relationships that have sometimes been strengthened further by the availability and necessity of digital platforms when almost everyone has had to work from home.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has created undeniable chaos. At the same time, it has unleashed a wealth of energy in innovative, collaborative and laser-focused problem-solving. In province

after province, in Canada, governments and teacher unions have set aside their differences and reached bargaining agreements that had stalled for months to engage in solidarity in support of their students. We believe that when Lortie's ideas such as psychic rewards are modernized to apply to teachers, parents and students learning together in a spirit of *open professionalism*, and when educators who are more autonomous from bureaucratic micromanagement can use digital opportunities to enhance existing *professional capital and community*, we will have the chance of a lifetime to transform learning for the better. This movement will take place in the public education system and beyond, not just in segmented classrooms and isolated schools, but in systems and entire countries around the world.

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Corresponding author

Andy Hargreaves can be contacted at: hargrean@bc.edu