

Introduction to the JPCC special issue: *Professionalism in the Pandemic*

“Don’t just do something, sit there!” My mother’s advice always sounded strange. Nana, as we call her, was always on the move. She was a doer and shaker. Raising a family of seven kids never kept her from creating initiatives in her neighborhood and parish to build community and care for the marginalized. If anything, she embodied the antithesis of this saying. I always think of it as a weak attempt to encapsulate Buddhist meditation in a pithy manner, but for some reason Nana was fond of it. Perhaps she thought that encouraging us kids to pause, to reflect, might help temper our tendencies toward acting impulsively, uncritically and thus imprudently. Yet as I introduce this special issue of the Journal of Professional Capital and Community, *Professionalism in the Pandemic*, I find myself pondering Nana’s dictum and reflecting on a kernel of wisdom therein. I realize this sounds absurd. Allow me to explain.

This spring, educators at all levels – from classroom teachers to building principals to district administrators – have been overwhelmed by the enormity of the urgent pressure to *act*. Adapting to remote learning demanded that educators make rapid decisions amid abundant uncertainties. Teachers abruptly left the known routines of face-to-face classroom life for the wild frontier of distance learning. Principals abandoned tried and true practices of influencing organizational learning – interacting among classrooms, meeting with parents, engaging in faculty meetings. They were forced to resort to a seemingly never-ending slew of video calls and email chains to exert any persuasion, encouragement and scaffolding. And for district administrators, data-driven analyses and strategic planning went out the window. They found themselves concocting impromptu policies on the fly, attempting to protect health and safety and simultaneously maintain a semblance of teaching and learning.

This summer, as COVID-19 cases wane in some communities and wax in others, educators continue moving ahead: planning and implementing reopening. Though the shocking spring is in the rearview mirror, the pressures of the current moment only intensify. Nobody has time to just sit there. Everybody feels compelled to do *something*. In this context, “Don’t just do something, sit there!” might sound at best naïve and at worst irresponsible. Yet I submit that this time of crisis and chaos, of uncomfortable uncertainty and of angst, this counsel is, ironically, *wise*.

A foundational virtue guiding professionalism in education is practical wisdom. Practical wisdom, which dates back to the philosophy of Aristotle, involves doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason. Practical wisdom drives ethical behavior by guiding the decisions we make in our daily professional practice. In schools – as in many organizations – we often rely on a combination of rules and incentives to motivate ethical behavior. Rules are important, but blind adherence to them can lead to unintended consequences. Incentives are useful, but relying on them too heavily can be counterproductive. Practical wisdom goes beyond a dogmatic drive to follow rules (heeding the stick) or a hunger to chase incentives (seeking the carrot). Instead, it seeks to cultivate both moral will and skill. Moral will is the commitment to doing the right thing, and moral skill is figuring out what doing the right thing means. Ethical behavior calls for this combination – the moral skill to improvise and the moral will to make difficult choices in the face of ambiguity. Practical wisdom involves knowing when to bend rules, to improvise, to be flexible in applying guidelines – and to do so in service of the common good.

The virtue of practical wisdom is inherently important in a range of professions (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010), including education (Halverson, 2004). And the discombobulation of the



COVID-19 pandemic heightens this need. Educators exhibit professionalism in the pandemic by enacting practical wisdom. They need the moral skill to discern the right thing, at this particular time, and the moral will to do so. Acting with practical wisdom requires navigating situations of ambiguity, deliberating on how to balance competing aims, how to frame and reframe situations, to empathize. The pandemic we are facing is the epitome of such situations.

Educators grow their capacities to enact practical wisdom in many ways. Direct experiences are the best teacher, as we learn through navigating complex dilemmas we face. Vicarious experiences, however, can also be powerful. And this is where we return to the advice to not just do something, but to sit there. By this, I do not mean to encourage sitting in silent meditation – although this is a practice that I admire and respect. Instead, I am encouraging sitting to reflect on and engage with the experiences and perspectives of others. As a practitioner or a policymaker, you are facing unprecedented pressure to act with practical wisdom. To do so demands *reflection*. Don't just do something – like try to get your classroom back to normal, or try to put your old curriculum online, or fixate on how to create a hybridized schooling that mirrors the face-to-face model of last fall. Instead, take some time to ponder: How might you act with practical wisdom at this point in time?

The authors contributing to this special issue, *Professionalism in the Pandemic*, provide fodder for this. Over the next eight weeks, we will publish a series of essays from scholars around the world reflecting on professionalism in the pandemic. These are not “how-to” guides. They do not purport to present silver bullets. Instead, they pose thoughtful perspectives, insights and questions for practitioners and policymakers who are seeking to not simply adapt to meet the crisis at hand but also to step back and consider the longer implications and to act with practical wisdom.

Clearly the COVID-19 pandemic is wreaking havoc on our health, economic and social systems across the world. While we feel the urgency to act, failure to pause can be perilous. So do not just “do something.” Take some time to reflect, even just a few moments, so when you do act, you do so with practical wisdom.

Video content available

To support and supplement this special themed issue you can watch Martin Scanlan, Editor-in-chief of the Journal of Capital and Community, talk with experts Alma Harris, Pak Tee Ng, and Pasi Sahlberg about professionalism in the pandemic. Click here for the full 32 minute video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1wzdmP8wIM> Click here for the shorter 9 minute video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pt3eolV4kE>

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