

Long Term Occasional Teaching and Mindfulness within the Pandemic

Sarah Schouten¹, Thomas Ryan²



Abstract

This reflection focuses upon entry into the Ontario (Canada) teaching profession as a Long-Term Occasional (LTO) teacher who is a substitute for a permanent teacher on leave. The experiences within a grade four class during the Coronavirus pandemic are detailed herein. By implementing mindfulness into the curriculum, continuity and stability emerged for students, to reset every day during the Pandemic. In supporting the well-being of the whole student (which was initially sparked by COVID-19), its importance throughout all parts of learning was prominent. Navigating the role as an LTO (substitute) teacher during a Pandemic stimulated teachers and students, as learning how to teach in remote and in-person environments required a flexible and aware educator who was mindful. Support for the whole learner during a time was unprecedented and worrisome for many. As a result, mindfulness sessions supported students' overall well-being and ensured that they were beginning their day with a clear, calm, and open mindset. This research has been cathartic and further developed a teaching philosophy that aligns itself with the needs for TFCL (Twenty-First Century Learners).

Keywords: *Long-Term Occasional Teaching, Mindfulness, Pandemic*

1. Introduction

There have close to 7 million Coronavirus related deaths worldwide and over 47,000 are in Canada (Elflein, 2022, para. 1). Based on these statistics the term Pandemic has been applied globally for what has unfolded over the past few years. Looking back the World Health Organization (WHO), on December 31st, 2019, reported that the ninth most populated city in China, Wuhan, consisting of 8.37 million people, claimed a dramatic surge in what was speculated to be pneumonia (Ryan, 2020; Textor, 2022). The WHO acted quickly to report the outbreak once China shared that they were struggling to contain the spread (WHO, 2020, para. 7). As many were working hard to investigate the situation, it was on January 11th, that the Chinese media reported their first death due to the

¹ M.Educ., Graduate Student, Nipissing University, Canada
Email seschouten266@my.nipissingu.ca

² Professor, Faculty of Education, Graduate Studies, Nipissing University, Canada
Email thomasr@nipissingu.ca

emerging virus (WHO, 2020, para. 11). A short time later, France reported to the WHO that three cases were also found there, all by people who had just travelled from Wuhan (WHO, 2020, para. 23). WHO suggested, that due to globalization, the virus would spread (WHO, 2020).

On February 11th, 2020, the WHO announced that the disease caused by the coronavirus would be named COVID-19 (WHO, 2020, para. 36). In a joint discussion between China and the WHO in late February 2020, they feared that the rest of the world would not be prepared for the steps that would need to be carried out in order to contain the spread of the virus (Ryan, 2020). Namely, they announced that physical distancing, face masks, and sanitization would be mandatory. On March 7th, WHO announced there were over 100,000 cases confirmed globally, which led to the issue statement on March 11th, 2020 that COVID-19 would be classified as a pandemic (WHO, 2020, para. 52).

For Ontario education, this would mean that school doors would be closed, and learning would transition online. But what implications would rise, if any, for modern-day learners? Using the experiences of teaching and pivoting learning between online and in-person, effort was directed to ensure that the needs of Twenty-First Century Learners (TFCL) were met, while taking note of teaching change.

In late 2019 to early 2020, the Ontario educational system that guides students, families, and staff rapidly transformed when the virus outbreak surfaced. Several priorities in the educational system shifted putting health and safety as the utmost concern for all people walking in and out of schools across Ontario (Ontario newsroom, 2022a). Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, students learned in an in-person school environment where they could collaborate and manipulate the learning with their classmates (Reuell, 2019). This approach required “inquiry-based learning where students were active participants in discovering their own acquired knowledge through exploration in a predominately self-directed learning process” (Pedaste et al., 2015, p. 48). However, due to the pandemic, facets of learning were put to the way-side in an attempt to reduce the spread of the virus by limiting human contact, thus remote schooling was quickly implemented (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021).

With Ontario’s course of learning transitioning, crucial aspects of Twenty-First Century Skills (TFCS) were not being tended to in the same way that they were in the face-to-face classroom. While teaching online student participation dramatically decreased, as well, a lack of enthusiasm to engage and/or collaborate with others surfaced. Students did not seem motivated to participate in the online learning and found it difficult to be creative in this unfamiliar context with so many new distractions. The outcome, students’ energy

and excitement for learning was lessening and their needs were not being met. They were struggling to navigate a new digital landscape (environment) where they were expected to learn in similar ways that they had in the physical classroom. This transition caused self-questioning and reexamination of strategies that could be used to ensure that students continued to develop TFCS while being able to support their overall well-being in a digital learning space that could also be applied in the physical classroom.

An Ontario LTO teacher is a non-permanent teacher who completes a contract while teaching in Ontario schools. The LTO educator must be flexible, adaptive and be able to teach in the assigned learning environment. During this time, significant differences between teaching face-to-face and teaching remotely was noted. In face-to-face learning, even with COVID-19 protocols in place, learning was progressive (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). While teaching virtually, the school day was disconnected and somewhat disordered. During this Pandemic the educational role and responsibility to learners metamorphized. The focus was not as much on the academics per se, but more on creating an engaging online environment where the students would want to participate. A key shift in dedication of teaching time and refining TFCS unfolded aspects such as communicating, collaborating, creativity, critical thinking (4Cs) throughout the learning increased.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the transition to remote learning via the lens of an LTO educator.
2. To reflect upon the transition to remote learning and the many challenges for students such as engagement and perseverance.
3. To revisit the evolution of Pandemic efforts within the educational efforts of a LTO Ontario educator.

1.2 Research Questions

Following research questions have guided the study:

1. How does pivoting between online and in-person learning impact a LTO teacher?
2. How does LTO teaching and mindfulness within the Pandemic impact students and educators?
3. To what extent does perspective of teaching transform during an LTO contract due to the pandemic?
4. What skills are necessary for TFCL?
5. How does dedicating time for mindfulness support the well-being of students?

6. How does a LTO teacher navigate and transform their approach to teaching during a pandemic?

2. Literature Review

There is a pertinent need for schools to teach students in a way that is responsive to real-world (authentic) contexts as Kay and Greenhill (2011) suggest,

We need to act accordingly: Every aspect of our education system – standards, assessments, professional development, curriculum, and instruction, and learning environments – must be aligned to prepare citizens with the 21st century skills needed to succeed in work and life. Skills like critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation should be integrated more explicitly into every child’s education in this nation (p. 42). Technology has buoyed a dramatic change in how societies have previously functioned (Ryan, 2020).

Though there is a plethora of TFCS that are desired of candidates, and those skills may vary from job to job, there are a few which are applicable to several professions. Given the economic and cultural shift that our world has seen over the past several decades the 4Cs have remained vital pillars when it comes to student success and the likelihood of being prepared for their future careers (Ahonen & Kinnunen, 2015; Larson & Miller, 2011). Therefore, when it comes to the role of the educator, their goal is to prepare their students for success by weaving the 4Cs through the curriculum (Khoiri et al., 2021). Henceforth, to prime students for 21st century jobs, today’s classrooms should reflect opportunities for learners to demonstrate their learning through authentic, engaging, and student-centered learning opportunities (Kaufman, 2013). The following sections will be dedicated to outlining the importance of the 4Cs.

Creativity is a valued skill when it comes to the creation of jobs (something that will be pertinent as we approach 2030) since “many of the fastest growing jobs and emerging industries rely on workers’ creativity capacity – the ability to think unconventionally, question the herd, imagine new scenarios, and produce astonishing work” (Kay & Greenhill, 2011, p. 46). Students should be willing to take risks in their education to explore new findings and potential opportunities as this may likely be a skill to be called upon in the future (Ryan, 2020).

When educators encourage their students to explore their topic, find ways to relate it to real-world contexts and provide them the freedom to present their findings on their preferred platform, it supports creativity and self-ownership (Kaufman, 2013). Additionally, providing opportunities for students

to “learn through hands-on activities is another way for students to see how learning can be cross-curricular and applied to other life contexts” (Kaufman, 2013, p. 80). Fostering creativity is essential for TFCL as it is a valued TFCS in the economic, civic, and global spheres as innovations are what spark new avenues to be explored and motivate others around them to investigate further findings (Kaufman, 2013).

Critical thinking means being able to decipher through information and decide whether it is relevant to what a student is doing, its credibility and a learner’s ability to evaluate it and relate it something else is a valued TFCS (Kay & Greenhill, 2011; Ryan, 2020). Accessing information and applying it to other contexts is a skill students should be learning and building upon. Providing learners with opportunities to find a solution to a problem is a great way for them to extend their thinking and then test it out (Kaufman, 2013). An extension that teachers can provide to their students is to prompt them finding an alternative way to come to the same answer, which can be done individually or collaboratively. By asking students open-ended questions, it allows them to look at the problem from various perspectives and provides them with the ownership of how they want to go about solving it. By providing opportunities for students to explore and test their theories they are actively practicing TFCS. The other C’s, namely Communicating and Collaborating emerge via creative and critical thinking within a student-centred, problem-based instructional orientation. Communication intensifies, deepens, and drives learning as the Socratic means of instruction takes hold.

The Socratic teaching method is a flexible approach that educators can experiment with in both their remote and physical classrooms as it touches on all 4Cs. Rather than turning to a traditional style of learning that is lecture-based, the Socratic approach is a student-centered and student-led methodology (Walser, 2008). For this to be successful, students are instructed to lead their own discussions based on a shared media with their classmates (e.g., book, documentary, topic etc.) that they all have individually familiarized themselves with. The teacher’s role is to give marks based on the quality of student participation in the dialogue. Using this method, students are encouraged to respectfully challenge other’s ideas, make comments, refer to other references and experiences that they have gathered to build on the developing conversation (Walser, 2008). By incorporating this into classrooms, teachers are actively using the curriculum to teach TFCS to students. The Socratic method encourages students to communicate with others, collaborate and extend their thinking, are critical in how they connect one resource with another, or an experience and can be creative in how they deliver and find their research.

Like TFCS, ‘mindfulness’ is not a new concept, “rather it is a practice that originated nearly 2,600 years ago but has surged in popularity within the last decade” (Davis & Hayes, 2012, p.198). Combining mindfulness with online learning seems prudent since students between 8-12 years old spend approximately five and a half hours of their day on social media and it increases to just over eight hours through their teens (a platform that takes away individuals connecting with their innermost selves) (Dixon, 2022). Student well-being, which for educators, is essential when nurturing their students can elevate achievement online and in face-to-face classrooms. Therefore, dedicating increased time to practices that support the well-being of their students through practices such as mindfulness encourages learners to be ‘present’ and aware of one’s surroundings.

Mindfulness can be defined as a way of ‘being’, as it practices on creating an awareness of the interconnectedness of the mind, body and emotion within ourselves (Ager et al., 2015). Mindfulness focuses on putting our attention to the present moment allowing learners to observe what is rising and falling in their lives (Behan, 2020). Further, mindfulness in classrooms has increased exponentially as studies showed that with its implementation it could increase student’s overall well-being (Parker et al., 2014). By co-creating environments with students, teachers are more comfortable trying out various mindfulness strategies with their students to support their learning journey with the hope that they will pull on these exercises in their futures in times where they need to re-center and calm their minds.

Meditation is one form of “mindfulness as it invites learners to focus on the interconnectedness of the body and breathing” (Behan, 2020, p. 256). Paying attention to one’s breathing can calm the mind and relax the body encouraging a free-flowing energy to pass through the body and allow an individual to have a clearer understanding of the moving parts around them (Rosenberg, 2004). Mindfulness activities are versatile enough to be used both in remote and physical classrooms and still be as effective for students (Ager et al., 2015). A quick and thoughtful exercise, referred to as ‘Time In’, asks learners to check in with themselves, refocus and pay attention to their surroundings, this is a great strategy that could be utilized after a transition period in school (Ager et al., 2015). Additionally, asking students to quiet down and listen to a 30 second clip of a sound (e.g., waves, rain, wind) can relax the mind and body and help refocus their attention before moving on to another topic (Ager et al., 2015). Finally, another practice that was alluded to previously, meditation, could be implemented into classrooms to support student well-being and transitions within the learning (Ager et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2014). As such, mindfulness can be

incorporated into the classroom in a variety of different ways, all supporting student's overall well-being. And since there are so many mindfulness strategies, teachers can experiment with many to find ones that resonate with their students and the classroom environment.

Though mindfulness is one avenue that can support student well-being, criticisms follow, arguing that it can be a hindrance on learners development (Pillay, 2018). Some research suggests that although it can provide benefits to some, for others it can be confusing and disorientating because it separates them from the world that is ongoing (Pillay, 2018). Interestingly and contrary to previously explored research on TFCS, mindfulness could lead to less creativity as it does not support the mind being free to explore innovation as it demands becoming in tune with the present self (Pillay, 2018). Additionally, dedicating time for meditation which is not outlined in Ontario's curriculum could pose as a deviant to what educators are supposed to be teaching. Recognizing that there are drawbacks of implementing mindfulness in learning, the benefits largely outweigh the cons as more research stands behind how it benefits today's learners.

Because students spend half of their waking hours at, or in school online, which is socially interactive, it seems reasonable that this environment can positively or negatively impact their well-being (Graham et al., 2016). Consequently, educators are aware of this and aim to be proactive in their approach to foster student learning and the overall development of their learners' selves (Graham et al., 2016). TFCL need to acquire tools that they can pull on in future situations so that they can thrive in their everyday lives (Parker et al., 2014). By fostering student well-being and creating opportunities for them to develop strategies in times of stress, will increase their likelihood of being better prepared and well-rounded entering the 21st century.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Case study was chosen as a means of investigation which allowed the researcher to document experiences in a qualitative mode. It was believed that case study would complement education in Ontario during the pandemic, as education was transitioning between remote and in-person learning (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). Due to the back-and-forth nature of the pandemic learning environment, much of the learning called for teaching praxes to be universal regarding how they would be applied in either environment. This prompted taking a neutral perspective and inferring the teaching was meeting student needs while also providing an effective and flexible learning experience. While maintaining that the delivery of the curriculum is the priority, ensuring various

ways to incorporate TFCS was also necessary to meet the needs of modern-day learners. Turning to resources such as mindfulness and evaluating its effectiveness on student well-being was integral throughout the study. This reflective account provides an overview of the qualitative-narrative approach utilized (Riessman, 2011).

3.2 Participants

The grade four class was comprised of 21 students: 12 girls and 9 boys.

3.3 Data Collection

In this case study the educator reflected daily and research questions were addressed in a qualitative mode via journaling and interpretation of experience at the conclusion of each week. The data were collected during the period as a grade four teacher from January to June 2021. The only resources needed for this study were personal reflection notes.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Throughout the six-month period journaling permitted the tracking of observations and interpretation of conversations. This journal had two separate sections that were dedicated to three research questions. Below is a summary of analysis and reflections that directly relate to learning and navigation as an LTO teacher during the pandemic.

4.1 Skills for TFCL

Throughout the process of gathering information and evaluating it, there were four pertinent TFCS that were integral for modern-day learners, the 4Cs. Moving from in-person to remote learning made the learning dynamic, so in response to that, it was a great opportunity for the students and teachers to learn how to integrate the 4Cs and apply them.

For activities that called on communication and collaboration, students often asked to have a separate space so that they could concentrate on the task at hand while also maintaining an appropriate degree of privacy. Their collective reasoning behind this was to share their work when it was “presentation ready”. Students exercised these two TFCS best when instructions were clear, and everyone understood the role they had to play in group work.

Student’s enthusiasm towards opportunities they were able to create increased. Discussion at length concerning the importance of innovation and how it should be reflected in aspects of daily learning unfolded. In multiple activities where students were encouraged to communicate their ideas, choice boards were available. Choice boards gave them various ways in which they could demonstrate their learning (e.g., writing piece, presentation, voice note, infographic etc.). Some of these opportunities were executed on their own, with a

partner, or a small group for three to four students. Students enjoyed having a variety of options as to how they wanted to express their thinking and share with the class.

In terms of critical thinking, any opportunity that students had to take the learning and apply it somewhere else was very beneficial and engaging for them. Based on responses, more open-ended questions were used, and all were encouraged to relate their finding to themselves, other texts, and the world. By promoting this learning, students were analyzing and evaluating information more and it allowed them to see how the learning could be related to their lives within the community. An activity that incorporated many of the 4Cs was a project where students were investigating the amount of plastic in the ocean and inventing a device of how they could clean up the waste.

Through this analysis it was determined that when providing various opportunities for students to engage with TFCS, they were enthusiastic towards the learning and motivated to find connections that went beyond the initial explanations. Students enjoyed participating in group work and found it stimulated new ideas through their conversations. Additionally, students enjoyed looking for ways to connect the learning to their lives and real-world contexts (authenticity) as it allowed them to see it applied outside the classroom. In sum, students' excitement increased when they were given options to demonstrate their thinking.

4.2 Does mindfulness support the well-being of students?

Early into the transition to learning online, students were having a difficult time adapting to the new school routine and an unfamiliar learning environment. Reflecting on conversations it was realized that learning from home provided a different distraction for students as it was missing a physical barrier that separated school from home. Often students had their cameras off and did not respond to prompts when called upon, as students had stepped away from online class. During recess most students did not go outside, nor did they leave their computer screens (but rather played online games). This behaviour was not fostering their overall well-being as learners need to take time for themselves during transitions.

There was a lack of excitement and engagement from some learners, in comparison to how much conversation was usual in-person. There was a need to find ways to build a stronger sense of community and routine that could exist in both online and in-school. Nurturing the well-being of the self, as well as its history was a necessary topic at this point. We began with a 'WebQuest' allowing students to explore individually how mindfulness can be connected to real-world contexts. Then, with a partner, students were to take that information,

and other resources they found online, and create an infographic about why it should be implemented in schools. After we had developed a thorough understanding of the importance and background of mindfulness, students were eager to try it.

We started off by slowly integrating it into the learning once a week, we coined it, “Mindfulness Mondays”. During this time, students found a comfortable spot, closed their eyes, and focused on their breathing. After a few minutes, a mindfulness session began; encouraging visualization and relaxation. Over the course of a few weeks’ students were more at ease and open to learning compared to other weekdays. In particular, the following hour there was a calmness in the classroom, as more were willing to participate in group work and it wasn’t as loud as in the classroom.

From interpretations from our whole-group discussions I gathered that beginning our day with a mindfulness session would invoke a healthy morning routine, while setting up students for success for the remainder of the day. Through practice and routine, I noticed the class building stamina in our mindfulness sessions, where we had begun with five minutes, we had worked our way up to 20 minutes after a few months. In addition, I observed that the calm and quiet transferred to the silent reading that we did in our afternoon block of the day. This transcendence was complementary to the beginning part of the day and allowed students to refocus their energy for the learning that would come afterwards.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on case-study observations and interpretations of communications within the learning environment there was overwhelming success when it came to the implementation of the 4Cs and mindfulness into the learning, and the flexibility made it effective within both learning environments. Students were more engaged and motivated when the learning was reflective of their interests and promoted the 4Cs. Further, students were more relaxed and open to learning directly after mindfulness sessions in the morning and their eagerness to have this a part of the everyday schedule was undeniable.

For this qualitative research project, it was difficult to obtain clear and unbiased results from within the personal narrative, as data collection and analysis were based on self-observations and interpretations of communications throughout the learning. Reliability is wanting since students were transitioning from in-person to online learning, creating data in each mode. To this point, data collected pertaining to TFCS was gathered from individual, pair and/or group work and they collaborated with others in a multitude of varying configurations throughout the study. Additionally, the validity of the data and analysis that was

extracted from the mindfulness sessions was difficult to interpret because there were days when we were not able to do it due to interruptions such as a field trip, virtual assembly, or meetings. Therefore, data reflects a narrative point of view that considers the ‘human factor’ whereby acknowledging some of the drawbacks that are evident throughout the research. Generalizability is limited (Atkinson, 2009).

As of November 19th, 2022, there have been over 6.6 million deaths worldwide due to the Coronavirus and over 47,000 are accounted for in Canada (Elflein, 2022, para. 1). Based on these statistics, little doubt that loss has been experienced by students around the globe and the impact the virus has had on families and day-to-day living is undeniable and lasting. Much of the discussion surrounding COVID-19 is negative, and understandably so, as many people have lost loved ones, have concerns regarding underlying health conditions, battle with mental health while being forced to alter their daily routines. Not one age cohort was immune to the virus which was especially troubling for our youth who may not have the mental capacity to grasp what our world has gone through and their inherently “not me” attitude.

In a very short amount of time, reconsidering teaching and redefining teacher skills online while meeting the needs of the students within a pandemic (Coronavirus) was challenging and stressful. New and/or short-term teachers undertaking a teaching position while navigating the educational landscape during a pandemic, keeping students engaged was perplexing. Quick adaptations were required to prioritize health and safety measures and forgo some of the experiential and social teaching strategies that would have been incorporated into the face-to-face classroom.

In review, this experience permitted experiments with teaching practices that were not anticipated, specifically, being the 4Cs and mindfulness, as they were needed in the classroom. The primary motivation as an educator, is to provide a learning environment that engages learners and reflects learning that is responsive to their interests while also challenging them. Through this mindset and an alteration in teaching pedagogy, it was realized that the components of the 4Cs were crucial in delivery as they were skills that were necessary for TFCL and could be applied in either learning environment. The variability of transitioning between in-person and remote learning caused students to become adaptive to navigate how to learn in either setting, and therefore in many ways it urged them to become resilient learners.

By implementing mindfulness into the classroom, continuity and stability emerged for students so that we had an opportunity to reset at the beginning of each week, which then increased too every day. In supporting the well-being of

the whole student (which was initially sparked by COVID-19), its importance throughout all parts of learning was noted.

These experiences entering the teaching profession were unique, based on circumstances regarding the pandemic and the context in which education was experienced. Navigating the role as an LTO teacher during a pandemic can be invaluable as learning how to teach in remote and in-person environments required a flexible and aware educator. Support for the whole learner during a time was unprecedented and worrisome for many. As a result, mindfulness sessions supported students' overall well-being and ensured that they were beginning their day with a clear, calm, and open mindset. This research has been cathartic and further developed a teaching philosophy that aligns itself with the needs for TFCL.

6. Recommendations

The literature that was explored throughout this study reflected relevant topics that pertained to my experiences as a new LTO teacher. The focus of the research paper was identifying TFCS that are pertinent to modern-day learners, as well as practices that support the well-being of the whole student. The following recommendations are geared towards future considerations surrounding LTO growth and the themes that have been addressed in this research paper.

The first recommendation is to distinguish what environment the study will focus on (e.g., online and/or in person) and ensure that the data being collected is sorted into the appropriate category. In doing this, it will allow the researcher and the audience to have a well-rounded understanding of how the topic was delivered and how it was implemented in each environment. This ensures that the analysis part will have two separate conclusions that can be further explored based on similarities and differences that the study explored in the differing environments.

A second recommendation is to survey the responses from students based on which mindfulness practice and TFCS they are utilizing in each respective learning environment (online and in-person). By asking the students questions on how they feel towards mindfulness as part of their everyday routine and their likes/dislikes and/or challenges of TFCS in the classroom, would strengthen the qualitative analysis. Rather than relying on observations of one individual and using interpretations from conversations to drive their data collection, the researcher would be able to gather primary information from the students and use that to interpret the results. Additionally, more research could be done in this area which focuses on LTOs and how the implementation of these exercises can relate to their growth as educators.

A final recommendation is to consider another perspective in the study perspective from another teacher implementing the same practices throughout the learning, and/or perhaps study the responses from another class. By having two teachers co-plan and incorporate the same activities into their classrooms allows the qualitative data acquired to be more meaningful and representative of how students and teachers respond to its implementation and effectiveness. In extension, the two educators could be at different positions in their careers (e.g., LTO and a seasoned contract teacher), and could potentially highlight the difference approaches that they would have based on their teaching experience.

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